

A Charge  
Titus 1:5-9

It is customary to give a charge to a pastor when he is installed in a new pulpit - that certainly happened when the Presbytery of Mississippi installed me here in November of 1997, and again when the Central South Presbytery had another service welcoming us into the EPC.

Moreover, the EPC Book of Order says that when Ruling Elders are installed in their respective offices, "It is appropriate that a charge be given to the new officers and to the congregation suitable for the occasion."

But before a charge can be given to these ruling elders, we must all remember what they are supposed to do. Verse 7 says that an elder is called to be the steward of God. And since deacons are primarily responsible for a congregation's fiscal concerns, this means that elders are somehow to be the stewards of the congregation's spiritual resources.

So, what does that mean elders should be doing from day to day? Verse 9 breaks it down for us. Elders should hold fast the faithful Word of God as they have been taught. Holding something fast involves not only believing it but valuing it and obeying it. An elder's first job is therefore to do what everyone in the congregation should do – to believe the Scriptures, to cherish the words of the Lord Jesus and His apostles and His prophets, and to do what these messengers of God have told us to do.

But elders are not just supposed to believe God's Word and to practice God's Word. They are supposed to teach God's Word. Verse 9 says that elders should be able to exhort other believers by sound doctrine, explaining what God's Word says. In such a way, elders should constantly be encouraging other believers to be better followers of Christ.

But isn't that what pastors are supposed to do? Yes, but ruling elders also do this in an individualized way. Teaching God's Word is indeed the primary job of the teaching elder, the pastor. But all the elders are responsible to help the members of the Church apply the Word, to their daily lives.

And because ruling elders have different life experiences, they can help different Christians learn how to apply God's Word in different ways. For example, I might be able to explain what the Bible says about bringing up children, but all these ruling elders who have actually done it can give parents much more practical advice. I can sketch out the broad Scriptural principles necessary for a successful marriage, but ruling elders who are married can give you many more tips on how to get along with your husband or wife every day.

So, that's the sort of exhortation in sound doctrine that elders are supposed to do – to help individual church members put the teachings of the Scriptures into practice, to help all of us learn how to live according to God's Word in our everyday lives.

But there's another important thing that elders need to do. They need to take the sound doctrine they have learned and convince the gainsayers. This means elders need to correct those whose teaching is not in accordance with sound doctrine. Sometimes, that means elders need to rebuke those who speak against the teaching of the Scriptures. Sometimes, elders need to bring the sin in our lives to our attention – for we are all capable of self-deception, aren't we? But it certainly means elders are called to participate in meetings of the session and the presbytery, correcting those whose teaching is not in accordance with God's Word, confronting error whenever and wherever they find it, especially within the Church but also in the culture as a whole.

But this is not to say that ruling elders should behave like bulls in the proverbial china shop. For this reason, Paul gives Titus some advice on the sorts of people who make good elders. The overarching concern, which is repeated in verses 6 and 7, is for elders to be blameless. This means an elder should not bring scandal upon the congregation in the eyes of the outside world. For how could an elder with a bad reputation expect a non-believer to accept his correction or rebuke? An elder should also have a good reputation among the members of the congregation. For how could a disgraced elder expect the members of the congregation to follow his advice? A good reputation is essential for an elder to be able both to exhort the believers and to convince the gainsayers.

But what does such a good reputation look like? Paul first gives us some negative examples. Perhaps most importantly, an elder should not be self-willed. This means he shouldn't be stubborn or arrogant. And he should not soon become angry – this means he is not quick-tempered. After all, you wouldn't come to an arrogant know-it-all for spiritual advice about a personal sin problem if you thought he would blow up at you, right? In the same way, if a hot-tempered person were to confront you about something you believed that was wrong, wouldn't you just dismiss him as some blow-hard letting off steam?

Paul also says an elder should not be given to wine. It should go without saying that you wouldn't approach a known drunkard for spiritual advice. Moreover an elder should not be a striker – not pugnacious, not a bully. There's no way a non-Christian would accept correction from someone who is always pushing people around. And we Christians want our elders to set a good example for us and to encourage us – we aren't looking for leaders who will try to bully us into

better behavior. An elder has to shoot straight and speak the truth, but always in a context of genuine love for others.

Paul says that an elder should not be given to filthy lucre. That means he should not be greedy for gain, not avaricious. After all, why should you listen to what a greedy man says about Jesus if his own heart is focused on other things? And wouldn't you also wonder if his advice to you were colored in some way by what he could get out of the deal?

But Paul doesn't just tell us what elders should not do. He also goes on to give us some positive individual characteristics of elders. An elder should be hospitable, but this doesn't just mean someone who puts on dinner parties. It points to a welcoming spirit – someone who is approachable, someone with whom you feel at home, someone who is interested in the well-being of those around him. Hospitality implies generosity in all areas of life.

An elder should also be a lover of good men. This can also mean he should be a lover of good things in general. You can tell a lot about someone by looking at his friends and his interests, can't you? Don't we want to be around people who value quality? Wouldn't we value their opinion more if we know that they don't give out praise easily, and if we know that their priorities are in the right place?

An elder should be sober. Now, this is not just the opposite of being drunken. This word describes someone who is sober-minded: prudent, thoughtful, self-controlled, sensible. And an elder should be just. A just person is righteous in the sight of God, living in according with God's law. Why would anyone, Christian or non-Christian, listen to the words of an obvious hypocrite? If he's not walking the walk, he shouldn't be talking the talk.

An elder should be holy. This describes someone who is pious or devout, someone who is pleasing to God, someone who draws close to the God Who is holy every day. Someone who spends a lot of time with God and in God's Word is someone equipped to give good spiritual advice to Christian and non-Christian alike.

Finally, an elder should be temperate. This word describes someone who is disciplined, who demonstrates self-control. Coming at the end of this list, this term would thus apply not only to an elder's emotions, but to his devotions. Is he disciplined in his seeking after God? Is he the sort of person who can model good spiritual disciplines for the rest of the church?

And in verse 6, Paul says that elders should display this sort of character in their families, being faithful to their wives and bringing up faithful children. As he says in a similar letter to Timothy: "For if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?"

But why is an elder's family life any of the church's business? It's not only a measure of how well he does his job. It's also because many of the problems Christians have revolve around their families. If elders are those who are supposed to set a good example for us, and if elders are those who are supposed to help us apply Biblical truths to our everyday lives, surely we would want elders who have faithfully applied God's Word to their own family life, right? Likewise, if elders are supposed to confront the prevailing culture about marriage and family issues, no one will listen to them if they aren't managing their own families according to the Biblical model.

Wow. That's quite a charge for all of us elders. So, as we struggle to live up to such high expectations, I hope we can count on the members of this congregation praying for us – for there's no way anyone can so clearly demonstrate the character of Christ without having the Spirit of Christ living inside us. So I urge you to pray to that end, that God will pour out His grace on all the elders of this congregation, making us fit to serve Him and you.

But no matter how wise and good and patient and loving your ruling elders may be, none of this will matter unless you are willing to treat your elders as elders. No, if you don't try to follow their good example, if you don't seek their advice and take advantage of their Biblical knowledge to help you learn how to be more consistent Christians, it won't matter how closely any of them fit Paul's description.

So in this New Year, of course I charge all of us elders to seek more consistently to live up to Paul's words, to God's expectations of us. But I also charge this congregation that you will let us do our job of stewardship, of example, of exhortation, and of conviction, so that, by God's grace, all of us will grow more and more into the image of Christ.