

“THE OFFICE OF ELDER: ITS DUTIES AND QUALIFICATIONS”

I. Introduction

- A. First Timothy began with Paul setting a contrast between the activities of the false teachers who were troubling the Ephesian church and the ministry with which Paul and Timothy had been entrusted.
- B. While the things that were being promoted by the false teachers were speculative and self-serving, the task to which Paul and Timothy were called was a matter of stewardship.
- C. A steward is someone who has been entrusted to administer something on behalf of someone else.
- D. This is an apt description of the office of overseer or elder.
- E. We see this idea reflected in the exhortation that Paul issued to the elders in Ephesus when he spoke to them in Acts 20, saying, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28 ESV)
- F. The flock does not belong to the elders, but to God, who purchased them for himself by the blood of his Son.
- G. Our Lord installs overseers in his flock because this is his appointed means for caring for it.
- H. As we study these verses today, we will consider what they tell us about the duties of this office and the qualifications that need to be met by those who aspire to it.

II. A Noble Task

- A. Our text begins with the phrase, “The saying is trustworthy.”

1. And the saying that is being introduced by this phrase is: "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task."
 2. This is one of five "trustworthy sayings" that appear throughout the Pastoral Epistles.
 3. These were proverbial expressions that had become well-known in the early church.
 4. It is significant that Paul would refer to this statement about the office of overseer as a trustworthy saying.
 5. I say this because all of the other "trustworthy sayings" in the Pastoral Epistles have to do with salvation.
 6. This tells us that Paul placed great importance on this office.
 7. He saw it as a necessary component in the outworking of God's plan of redemption.
 8. This should not be a surprise to us in light of what we are told about Paul's ministry in the book of Acts.
 9. In Acts 14, when Paul and Barnabas went back through the cities in which they had previously preached so that they could further strengthen and encourage the new disciples in those cities, Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for God's people in every church and committed them to the Lord in prayer.
 10. The Lord does not leave his flock untended.
 11. Though he is the supreme Shepherd and Overseer, he cares for his church through the ministry of men.
- B. The Greek term that the ESV and most other modern English versions translate as "overseer" is translated as "bishop" by the KJV.
1. While it is true that a hierarchical office of bishop emerged early on in church history, the New Testament offers no support at all for

that practice.

2. In the New Testament, the term “overseer” or “bishop” is used interchangeably with the term “elder.”
3. We see this in Acts 20, where Paul is speaking with men whom Luke refers to as “elders” and tells those men that the Holy Spirit has made them “overseers” in Christ’s church.
4. We see the same thing in Titus 1, where Paul describes the office of elder in the same way that he describes the office of overseer here in 1 Timothy 3, and as he does so he uses both names, elder and overseer, to refer to those who serve in this office.
5. And we also see this in 1 Timothy 5:17, where Paul refers to elders as those who rule or govern in Christ’s church.
6. It is clear that overseer and elder are not two distinct offices in Christ’s church.
7. They are different ways of describing the same office, similar to the way I can be referred to as a minister, or a pastor, or a teaching elder.
8. The name overseer focuses on the work that is carried out by those who serve in this office.
9. They are tasked with having spiritual oversight in Christ’s church.
10. The name elder focuses on the spiritual maturity of those who serve in this office.
11. Notice, by the way, that contrary to the practice of many churches today, the Bible does not teach that the direction of the church’s ministry should be determined by the preferences of the young.
12. The church is not governed by “young-ers” but by elders.

13. It is to be overseen by those who are mature in the faith.
- C. The New Testament office of elder is not something that came out of nowhere.
1. It has its roots in the Old Testament office of elder.
 2. We see this clearly when we read the Gospels and the book of Acts.
 3. In the Gospels and the early chapters of Acts, there are multiple references to those who served as elders in Israel.
 4. Then as Acts progresses, with no explanation, there is a repeated mention of men who serve as elders in local churches.
 5. This tells us that, under apostolic direction, the church inherited this office from Judaism and adapted it for use in the new covenant administration of the covenant of grace.
- D. In our text, Paul tells Timothy that those who aspire to the office of elder desire a noble task.
1. The task is noble because it involves representing Christ, who is the supreme Shepherd and Overseer of his flock.
 2. It is also noble because it is a matter of overseeing the ministry which Christ has entrusted to his church, the ministry by which he gathers and perfects his saints.
 3. Notice also that Paul describes the activity carried out by those who serve in this office as a "task."
 4. There is significant labor involved in being an elder in Christ's church.
 5. It is not an easy job, and it is not always a pleasant job.

6. Yet it fulfills a necessary function in Christ's church, and qualified men are needed for it.
7. It is good for a man to aspire to the office of elder.
8. Of course, he must not desire the office for the wrong reasons,
9. Nor must he think that he will be able to serve in this capacity by virtue of his own strength.
10. As Paul says of himself in 2 Corinthians 3, "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God" (2 Cor 3:5 ESV)

III. Men of Godly Character

- A. Paul's teaching at the end of chapter 2 made it clear that women are not to serve in the office of elder.
 1. This does not mean that the office is open to just any man.
 2. The gravity of the office requires that those who serve in it be well-qualified.
 3. For this reason, in the remainder of our passage, Paul lists fourteen qualities that should characterize those who serve as elders in Christ's church.
- B. The first thing that is mentioned is that an overseer must be above reproach.
 1. This serves as an overall summary of the kind of man he should be.
 2. It obviously does not mean that he has to be without sin.
 3. If that were the case, then no one would qualify for the office, with the exception of Jesus himself.

4. The point being made is that an elder's life should not be marked by anything disgraceful or scandalous.
 5. If the church were to ordain reproachful men as elders, it would bring the name of Christ into disrepute.
- C. The next quality on the list is that an elder must be the husband of one wife.
1. This does not mean that non-married men cannot serve as elders.
 2. Nor does it mean that remarriage after the death of a spouse or even after a divorce disqualifies a man from this office.
 3. Of course, cases involving divorce need to be considered carefully, on a case-by-case basis.
 4. It certainly means that an elder cannot have more than one wife at a time.
 5. This might seem obvious to us, since polygamy is not really a problem in our culture.
 6. But it was still practiced by some back in the first century, and it may be in view here to some extent.
 7. That being said, it seems that the main thing that is meant by the phrase "husband of one wife" is that an elder must not be guilty of marital infidelity.
 8. His character should be that of a one-woman man.
 9. While adultery is not an unforgivable sin, it is of such a serious nature that when a professing Christian is guilty of it, he is disqualified from serving as an officer in the church.
 10. The basic principle here is that if an elder is married, his marriage should be proven, stable, and exemplary.

11. And if he is not married, he should be sexually pure.
- D. Next, Paul says that an elder is to be sober-minded and self-controlled.
1. These are closely related to each other.
 2. Sober-mindedness is the quality of being clear-headed and logical rather than swayed by emotions.
 3. Self-control pertains to being self-disciplined and self-composed in a broader sense.
 4. The reason why these traits are important for an elder is because he is charged with maintaining order in the church.
 5. How will he be able to do that if he is disordered in his thinking and in his life?
- E. The next two qualities in the list are respectable and hospitable.
1. Respectable has to do with how he is viewed by others.
 2. How is he regarded by those in his household, in the church, and in the community?
 3. A man who is not respected by others will not be an effective leader in Christ's church.
 4. Hospitable has to do with how he treats others.
 5. The Greek term that Paul uses here comes from the words for 'love' and 'stranger.'
 6. Elders need to be kind and welcoming towards others, especially towards strangers.
 7. In this way, they exhibit the welcome that Christ himself extends to all who will come to him in faith.

- F. Next, Paul says that an elder needs to be able to teach.
1. Now, it is true that not all elders are called to engage in public teaching and preaching.
 2. Paul makes this clear in chapter 5 of this letter when he says, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” (v. 17)
 3. This is why we distinguish between ministers, or teaching elders, and ruling elders.
 4. All elders rule, but only some labor in preaching and teaching.
 5. Having said that, there is still a sense in which every elder needs to be able to teach.
 6. An elder certainly needs to have sufficient knowledge of the Bible and its doctrines.
 7. If he doesn’t, how will he be able to recognize and refute false teaching?
 8. In addition to that, he needs to be able to teach in the sense of applying God’s Word to the lives of the saints as he carries out his shepherding ministry.
- G. The next four qualifications listed by Paul are specific aspects of self-control.
1. An elder must not be a drunkard.
 2. While he has the freedom to drink alcohol if he so chooses, he must do so in moderation.
 3. An elder must not be violent but gentle.

4. It should be obvious that a man given to physical violence is not fit for office in Christ's church.
 5. The same is true of those who are of a quarrelsome character.
 6. There are many instances in which an elder has to engage in controversies and confrontations and disputes, and he needs to be able to do this in a patient manner.
 7. The other area of self-control in this part of the list is that an elder is not to be a lover of money.
 8. There are a number of senses in which this is important.
 9. At the most basic level, an elder needs to be the kind of man who can be trusted to work closely with the church's finances.
 10. In addition, he must not be the kind of man who makes money the determining factor in everything.
 11. If he is, he will be reluctant to uphold church discipline if there is a situation involving a wealthy member of the church.
 12. He will be afraid of losing that member's financial contributions.
- H. The next quality on the list is that an elder must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive.
1. The reason for this should also be self-evident.
 2. As Paul explains, if a man cannot manage his own household well, then why should we have any confidence that he will be able to manage the church well?
 3. Now, the fact that Paul speaks of the man's ability to keep his children *submissive* makes it clear that what is in view is children who are still under the man's authority in the home.

4. Once his children reach adulthood and leave his household, they assume full responsibility for their conduct.
 5. It would be unreasonable to say that a man has to keep his children in submission when they are no longer under his authority.
- I. Paul also says that an elder must not be a recent convert.
1. This is underscored by the title “elder.”
 2. An elder needs to have been a Christian for a long enough period of time that he has had the opportunity to put down roots in his faith and grow in Christ.
 3. When a man is given too much responsibility too soon, he may become conceited and be liable to the same judgment that came upon the devil for his prideful rebellion against God.
- J. The last quality on the list is that an elder must be well thought of by outsiders.
1. The term “outsiders” refers to those who are outside of the church, to non-Christians.
 2. Obviously, this does not mean that unbelievers will never have anything bad to say about an elder.
 3. After all, the Bible tells us that we are not to be surprised if we are hated by the world.
 4. The point that Paul is making is that there should not be any legitimate complaints about an elder’s character.
 5. The fact that Paul specifically mentions those outside the church is significant.
 6. It tells us that there is to be a consistency in an elder’s character.

7. He is to be the same man in the church, in his home, and in the community.

IV. Conclusion

- A. The basic message of this passage is really quite simple.
- B. Jesus Christ wants his church to be governed by men whose lives are clearly producing the fruit of the Spirit.
- C. When you think of it along those lines, the qualities that are listed here are qualities that every Christian should be cultivating in themselves.
- D. In this way, the church's elders are to be examples of the kind of character towards which all of its members aspire.
- E. And while elders are far from perfect, their godly character reminds us that our supreme governor and Shepherd is perfectly upright and perfectly good.