

# The Good Elders



I LEARNED EARLY IN MINISTRY, and with some pain, to be very careful in respect to the character of those appointed to church leadership. By my mid-thirties, after a little more than a decade in the ministry, I had “seen it all” as to the duplicity and hypocrisy and immense evil that can exist in church leaders. I knew a man who was prominent in his denomination and community, a married man with a family, who was discovered to be a practicing homosexual and regularly consorted with several of his male employees. In another instance the church treasurer appeared in the church narthex on a Sunday morning dead drunk, glass in hand, wildly whispering that he was leaving his wife and family—was departing that day on a private jet for the Middle East! I have known pious, Bible-quoting, “soul-winning” murderers. And over the years, while speaking at pastors’ conferences, my wife and I have had pastors’ trembling wives seek us out and reveal abuse and perversion by their publicly straight-laced husbands—tales that sound as if they were scripted by Flannery O’Connor!

I have said in times of despair that you have never been “had” until you have been “had” by a fellow born-again Christian who calls you “brother.” Am I too cynical? I do not think so. I am a realist who also believes in the power of the gospel to deliver believing, humble, repentant sinners from their sins and instill a nobility of character that the angels admire.

Church leadership can attract people with mixed and sometimes outrightly sinful motives. The seeming prestige of spiritual leadership attracts some. The lure of power draws others. The spiritual directing of others’ lives can be heady stuff. Some, I think, like the idea of having access to the supposed mysterious inner workings of the church. All these motives are empty pursuits, but that does not reduce the lure for some.

I say all this to emphasize that Christian ministry and leadership is without question a matter of character. One’s authentic spirituality and Christian character is everything in church leadership. It is a sober fact that as goes the leadership, so goes the church. With some commonsense qualifications, it is an axiom that what we are as leaders in microcosm, the congregation will become in macrocosm as the years go by. Of course, there are always individual exceptions. But it is generally true that if the leadership is Word-centered, the church will be Word-centered. If the leadership is mission-minded, the church will be mission-minded. If the leadership is sincere, the people will be sincere. If the leadership is kind, the church will be kind. This is also true negatively—exponentially! Unloving, narrow, stingy leaders beget an unloving, narrow, stingy church.

This concern for one’s character and the resultant lifestyle looms large in 1 Timothy and peaks here in the third chapter. Paul’s stated purpose in writing, as he explained it to Timothy, was that “you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (3:15). First Timothy is about church order and conduct. But there was also a deeper purpose—namely, world evangelization and mission as stated at the beginning of chapter 2 where Paul

describes God as “our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (vv. 3, 4).

It was this divine saving desire that informed and energized Paul’s instruction about lifestyle in verses 1–10—that believers must lead quiet lives and pray without disputing, and that women dress modestly. And in verses 11–15 that desire likewise informed his teaching about women’s roles in living out the creation order. And now in 3:1–7 it animates his directives about the necessary character and characteristics of Christian leaders.

All of this has to do with gospel and mission, because if the church is what it ought to be, it will pursue God’s desire for “all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2:4). As J. A. Hort, the celebrated Greek scholar, said: “To St. Paul the representative character of those who had oversight in the Ecclesia, their conspicuous embodiment of what the Ecclesia itself was meant to show, was more important than any acts or teachings by which their oversight could be exercised.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul wanted the church to have leaders whose lives would grace the church and adorn the gospel before a needy world. As followers of Christ we cannot settle for anything less.

#### A Noble Aspiration (v. 1)

Paul begins by first affirming leadership as a noble aspiration: “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” The apostle hopes that certain men will aspire to leadership. The literal sense of oversight being “a beautiful task” may convey even more of Paul’s feeling. Such aspiration in a man is a lovely thing. How beautiful it is when a man sets his heart on the virtues essential to spiritual leadership.

He who would play a leader’s part  
On a noble task has set his heart.

I hope some young men who read this study will set their hearts on spiritual leadership. It is an excellent pursuit.

At the same time, an overweening desire for position is reason for automatic disqualification. Such ambition indicates that a man does not understand either the job or what will be required personally and professionally.

#### Noble Qualifications (vv. 2–7)

This said, Paul now lists the noble qualifications for spiritual leaders—here called “overseers” (*episkopoi*, from which we get the word *bishop*). The word is interchangeable with another Greek word, *presbyteroi* (“elders”)—Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7 indicate they are synonymous. Thus the *episkopoi* here are church elders.<sup>2</sup> The following characteristics are not exhaustive but represent the bare minimum for elders if they are to grace both the church and the world.

*His reputation.* Paul begins with a general charge as to the elder’s reputation—“an overseer must be above reproach” (v. 2). This refers to his *observable conduct*.<sup>3</sup> This apparently summarizes all the following qualifications, for we see that the final qualification is also about reputation: “Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil” (v. 7). Such should be his reputation that if the elder’s name were posted for comment, no one would be able to bring a substantiated charge against him in respect to *anything* in the following list. High qualifications indeed!

*His marriage.* First place is given to the elder’s marriage—“the husband of one wife” (v. 2)—literally, a “one-woman/wife man.” Winston Churchill once attended a formal banquet in London, where the dignitaries were asked the question, “If you could not be who you are, who would you like to be?” Naturally everyone was curious as to what Churchill, who was seated next to his beloved Clemmie,

would say. When it was finally his turn, the old man, the last respondent to the question, rose and gave his answer. “If I could not be who I am, I would most like to be”—and here he paused to take his wife’s hand—“Lady Churchill’s second husband.”<sup>4</sup> Churchill was a very clever man. He was also a most devoted man—a “one-woman man”—despite his other proclivities.

The standard here for elders is extraordinarily high. But not in the way it is so often misinterpreted. The common misinterpretation is *quantitative*—that he can have had only one wife. Thus, if he had been divorced or widowed and remarried he could not be an elder. The moral loophole in this quantitative interpretation is that a man can be married to only one woman his whole life and not be a one-woman man. It allows moral rationalization—such as we see on the nightly news, sometimes even from the highest office in our nation.

The correct sense here is not quantitative but *qualitative*. The man is truly a one-woman man.<sup>5</sup> There are no other women in his life. He is totally faithful. He does not flirt. There are no dalliances. As George Knight says, he is “a man who having contracted a monogamous marriage is faithful to his wedding vows.”<sup>6</sup> As the *New Living Translation* has it, “He must be faithful to his wife.” So the bar is set high. And no cleverness, no ancient or postmodern verbal sleight of hand can get around it!

*His self-mastery.*<sup>7</sup> The next three qualities, “sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable” (v. 2), group well under the heading of self-mastery. King David, who had sinned so grievously in respect to marital fidelity, ironically became an example of self-mastery amid the misery and rebellion that followed his sin and repentance. His remarkable self-control occurred during Absalom’s rebellion when, as David fled from Jerusalem, one of Saul’s descendants, Shimei, followed alongside David pelting him with stones and tossing dirt on him as he shouted curses. Only a word and one of David’s soldiers would have dispatched him.

But with immense self-mastery David saw that Shimei’s cursings were not unexpected for the situation and left vengeance to God. The episode concludes, “So David and his men went on the road, while Shimei went along on the hillside opposite him and cursed as he went and threw stones at him and flung dust. And the king, and all the people who were with him, arrived weary at the Jordan. And there he refreshed himself” (2 Samuel 16:13, 14).

Here in 1 Timothy’s triad of self-mastery, “sober-minded” means “clear-headed,” and David was that. “Self-controlled” means exactly what it says, and David was that too. “Respectable” refers to how people saw David. In this situation David was at his greatest! “Better . . . [is] he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city” (Proverbs 16:32).

This “sober-minded, self-controlled” respectability is a must for every leader. Titus likewise says it is a necessity for leadership (Titus 1:8). And it is possible, with God’s help: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22, 23). It is a self-mastery that comes from God.<sup>8</sup> The elder must be mastered by God.

*His ministry.* Then there is the matter of his ministry, which is given a twofold description—“hospitable, able to teach” (v. 2). As a young man the missionary statesman-to-be E. Stanley Jones experienced the ultimate in hospitality when he was preaching his first evangelistic service among the poor mountaineers of Kentucky. The meetings were held in the schoolhouse. Says Dr. Jones:

At the schoolhouse I was invited to stay with a man and his wife, and when I arrived I saw there was one bed. The husband said, “You take the far side.” Then he got in, and then his wife. In the morning we reversed the process. I turned my face to the wall as they dressed, and they stepped out while I dressed. That was real hospitality! I have slept in palaces, but the hospitality of that one-bed-home is the most memorable and the most appreciated.<sup>9</sup>

Hospitality (*philazenos*, “love of strangers”) is a telltale virtue of the people of God. Paul told the Roman church to “contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality” (Romans 12:13). “Seek to show” means “pursue” or “chase” and sometimes means “strenuous pursuit.” Christians, and especially leaders, are not simply to wait for opportunities for hospitality but are to pursue them. They are to do it “without grumbling,” as Peter says (1 Peter 4:9).

Today’s elder must be a joyous host. He must invite people to his table. His home must be open. Hospitality is all over the New Testament. And the writer of Hebrews offers an enchanting motivation: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (13:2). These are God’s thoughts on hospitality!

Hospitality is paired with “able to teach” as the other elder ministry distinctive. Paul gives it fuller expression in Titus: “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). This demands that the elder be a student of the Word, a man who compares Scripture with Scripture and can communicate it and, when necessary, defend the faith.

*His temperance.* Next there is the demand for the elder’s temperance—“not a drunkard” (v. 3)—literally, “not lingering beside wine.” Anyone who longs for the halcyon days of the apostolic church longs for an illusion. It was rough and tumble. Drunkenness was an ancient blight. In Corinth some Christians were even in the habit of getting drunk at the Lord’s Supper (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:21)! Paul repeats this warning to deacons in verse 8 (“not addicted to much wine”) and again to elders in Titus 1:7.

This must be taken to heart today by church leaders in a culture that romanticizes drinking—*In vino veritas* (“there is truth in wine”). That may provide a convenient conceit for a play like *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* But the real truth is, alcohol is a destroyer of truth, and its abuse is a spiritual flamethrower.

*His temperament.* Temperance is logically followed by a prescription for a particular temperament in the elder—“not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome” (v. 3). Churchgoers in Fyaras, Sweden, dragged furious choir director Sven-Aake Fagerkrantz away from sour-singing Erica Bengtsson as he whacked her back and legs with his cane. His explanation? “I just went wild because she kept singing off-key. . . . She was tone deaf and I begged her for years not to sing so loud!” Whatever could be said about Mr. Fagerkrantz, he definitely was not elder material!

The Greek translated “not violent” is literally “not a giver of blows”<sup>10</sup> and is metaphorical for a pugnaciousness that corresponds to quarrelsomeness. These are elder no-no’s. Gentleness is the elder’s approved style. This was Jesus’ style as well—he was “gentle and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29). It is also a fruit of the Spirit (cf. Galatians 5:22, 23). Paul describes this requirement fully in his second letter to Timothy: “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 2:24, 25).

*His money.* Money—specifically, one’s attitude toward it—plays a big role in elders’ qualifications—“not a lover of money” (v. 3). In the last century Orestes Brownson spoke of ministers who pay more attention to “the fleece than to the flock,”<sup>11</sup> and that is true enough. But Os Guinness was more to the point: “If a man is drunk on wine, you’ll throw him out. But if he is drunk on money, you’ll make him a deacon.”<sup>12</sup>

It is all so American! If a man has lots of money, that means God has blessed him (never mind what the Bible says about the situation); it means he’s smart (well, maybe); it means he’s a good manager, a practical man; that he has power; it means he can lead. Oh really? Paul speaks so explicitly to the contrary in the Pastorals. “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced

themselves with many pangs” (1 Timothy 6:9, 10). And again in Titus 1:7, “For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain.”

The point is not whether one is rich or poor. The disqualification, out of hand, for church leadership is to be “a lover of money.” Some of the richest men I know are not lovers of money. But the truth is, it is hard to have a lot of money and not love it. It is also hard to be poor and not love money. Whatever the case, one cannot love money and be qualified for church leadership.

*His family.* As Paul details the last three qualifications, he becomes more descriptive. Regarding the elder’s home he says, “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (vv. 4, 5). This principle was especially cited because churches in those days met in homes—and very often the elders’ homes. Also the word translated “household” here is *oikos* (literally, “house”) and is the same word used in verse 15 as a metaphor for the church. Thus, the man who fails at the family *oikos* is thereby disqualified from the other *oikos*, the *church*.<sup>13</sup> The commonsense application is straightforward, and its disregard has brought great trouble to God’s people over the centuries—beginning with Eli of old (cf. 1 Samuel 3:13).

*His maturity.* The logic of the next qualification is evident: “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (v. 6). The language here is so expressive—“become puffed up” means “filled with smoke,” full of hot air, we might say—a la-la land of self-centered fantasy that would leave them open to the same judgment passed on the errant elders for their pride, mentioned earlier in the letter.<sup>14</sup> Humility seasoned by experience is an indispensable qualification for eldership.

*His reputation again!* The final qualification takes us full circle back to the matter of one’s reputation, which is where we began—“Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil” (v. 7). “Well thought of ” is literally “beautiful witness”—“He must have a beautiful witness with outsiders.” And indeed he will if *his reputation* is “above reproach,” if *his self-mastery* is evidenced by his being “sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable,” if in *his ministry* he is “hospitable, able to teach,” if *his temperance* is evidenced by his “not [being] a drunkard,” if *his temperament* is “not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome,” if in respect to *his money* he is “not a lover of money,” if *his family* is in order, if *his maturity* is established. Such a life will have a beautiful symmetry that adorns the gospel.

So much is at stake. What our leadership is in microcosm, the church will become in macrocosm, and what the church is has everything to do with gospel and mission.

Years ago the liberals set aside the Pastoral Epistles as too bourgeois and conventional. As a result some evangelicals lost confidence in the relevancy of the Pastorals. Today those epistles are radically bracing amid postmodern confusion. We need to take their message to heart for the sake of the gospel. We need to raise the bar and hold it there. We need to see leadership as a calling. Church leadership is not a political position to be sought for oneself. It is a burden that some must accept. Leaders are not determined by popularity. They must be the kind of men profiled here by Paul to Timothy. And the church must recognize who they are.

We must see leadership as a calling.

We must determine to prepare and equip such leaders.