

1 Timothy 3:1-7 - the Qualifications of the Elder

Introduction: We are continuing on with our series on our mission statement, specifically the section: "BHPC desires to glorify God through biblical worship, strengthening individuals and covenant families..." This morning we begin by looking at the Qualifications of the Elder from 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Next Sunday morning we will look at the Work of the Elder (probably in two sermons) from Titus 1:5-2:10.

The apostle Peter made the following charge to the elders of churches. 1 Peter 5:1-4 The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: [2] Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; [3] nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; [4] and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

⇒ This is truly at the heart of the reason for elders - that the sheep of Christ would have *examples to follow*.

⇒ For every man serving as an elder, it is always convicting to read through the list of qualifications. No one meets them perfectly, but the overall thrust of the life of a qualified man *will generally* meet them.

1. **Does it matter how we govern our churches?**
2. **What is a bishop? - v1**
3. **What he must be - v2**
4. **What his testimony must be among outsiders - v7**

1. Does it matter how we govern our churches? In 1856, Thomas Witherow - a minister in Northern Ireland - a man who, after 20 years of preaching spent the remainder of his life as a professor of church history, wrote an excellent little book called: "The Apostolic Church: Which is it?" In it he points out that there are basically 3 types of church government that exist today (there are variations, but all can be put under these three categories).

1. **Prelacy** – that form of Church government which is administered by archbishops, bishops, deans, archdeacons, and other ecclesiastical officebearers depending on that hierarchy; and is such as we see exemplified in the Greek Church, the Church of Rome, and the Church of England.
2. **Independency** – that form of Church government whose distinctive principle is, that each separate congregation is under Christ subject to no external jurisdiction whatever, but has within itself – in its office-bearers and members – all the materials of government; and is such as is at present in practical operation among Congregationalists and Baptists.
3. **Presbytery** – that form of Church government which is dispensed by presbyters or elders, met in Session, Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly; and is such as is presented in the several Presbyterian Churches of Ireland, Scotland, England, and America.

What Witherow does in his study of Scripture is identify 6 marks of biblical church government:

1. **In the Apostolic Church, the office-bearers were chosen by the people. Also known as "Popular Election."** (Acts 1:13-26, Acts 14:23, Acts 6:5-6)

2. In the Apostolic Church, the offices of bishop and elder were identical. (Philippians 1:1, 5:4; Titus 1:5-7, 2 John 1, 1 Peter 5:1, Acts 20:17-28)
3. In the Apostolic Church, in each individual church there was a plurality of elders. (Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17)
4. In the Apostolic Church, ordination was the act of the presbytery – of a plurality of elders. (Acts 8:17, 19:6, Mark 16:18, Acts 9:17; 28:8, Acts 6:6, 13:1-3; 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22; Titus 1:5)
5. In the Apostolic Church, the privilege of appeal to the assembly of elders, and the right of government exercised by them in their corporate character. (Acts 16:4, Acts 15)
6. In the Apostolic Church, the only head of the Church was the Lord Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:1, Mark 12:17, 1 Peter 5:3, 2 Corinthians 1:24, Galatians 2:11, Ephesians 1:20-23, Ephesians 5:23, Colossians 1:18)

Here's the scorecard on the three basic forms of church government when measured by the way the church in the NT was governed:

1. Prelacy - 0 out of 6.
2. Independency - 3 (sometimes 4) out of 6.
3. Presbyterianism - 6 out of 6.

The entirety of Witherow's book is on-line - and I've linked to it at our church's blog at bridwellheightspca.org if you'd like to read it. My paperback version is 60 pages long, so it's a quick read - and one I highly recommend.

2. What is a bishop? - v1

[1] This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work.

Point: It is critical to note that there are two offices in Christ's church **today** - that of elder and that of deacon. Within the office of elder, we make a distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders.

1 Tim. 5:17 "Let the elders who rule (ruling elders) well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine."

1 Cor. 12:28 "And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues."

Point 2: During the age of the apostles, there were what theologians refer to as *extraordinary* offices - that of apostle, evangelist, and prophet. I'd like to read to you a few questions and answers from what I believe is one of the best resources on the topic of church government ever written: "An Ecclesiastical Catechism of the Presbyterian Church" by Thomas Smythe (published in 1843). *Every question about church government you ever could think of and some you probably didn't think of are answered in this catechism and all the passages needed are cited.* **336 questions and answers.** But it is a marvelous - almost devotional resource.

My reasons for reading this short section of it to you now: There is a lot of confusion about church government in our time and the church is suffering tremendously because of it. There is also a great deal of confusion about what offices in Christ's church are still legitimate because of the rise of the Charismatic movement and cults that are unique to the American religious landscape. Here's Dr. Smyth's words:

Q75: How many kinds of office-bearers did Christ appoint in His church?

Two kinds: extraordinary and ordinary officers.

Q76: What do you mean by extraordinary officers of the church?

The extraordinary officers of the church were persons endowed with supernatural gifts and extraordinary authority; of which kind were apostles, evangelists, and prophets.

Q77: For what purpose were they appointed?

Christianity, requiring a series of miracles to attest its divine origin and inspiration to reveal all necessary truth, these officers were appointed to make known authoritatively the will of Christ; settle the constitution of the church; and commit the administration of it to ordinary and permanent officers.

Q78: Did they have any successors in their character and duties, as extraordinary officers?

None that we read of in the word of God; neither are we there told that any should succeed them as apostles, evangelists, or prophets.

Titus 1:5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint **elders** in every city as I commanded you--

Acts 14:23 So when they (i.e. Paul and Barnabas) had appointed **elders** in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Q79: What was necessary to constitute an apostle?

It was necessary that the apostles should have personally seen the Lord Jesus Christ; have obtained their commission immediately from Christ; be endowed with the gift of working miracles; be able to communicate miraculous powers to others; and possess authority over all the churches in every part of the world.

Q80: Who were evangelists?

Evangelists were extraordinary officers, suited to the infant state of the church, who were commissioned to travel under the direction and control of the apostles, that they might ordain ministers, and settle congregations, according to the system laid down by Christ and his apostles. **[mention 8.6 - evangelist - for missions in destitute places or foreign countries - authority to ordain elders and establish churches]**

Q81: Who were prophets?

They were persons, who, under the direction and extraordinary influence of the Holy Spirit, explained the Scripture, enforced its doctrines, publicly addressed the church, and foretold events.

Q84: Who are the ordinary officers of the Christian church?

Presbyters or elders, ruling elders, and deacons. **[by “presbyter” they mean what we call “teaching elder”]**

Q85: Is there any distinction amongst those who are called elders?

Yes; elders are divided into the teaching elders or pastors, and the ruling elders or helps.

This brings us back to the point here in v1 - the office of bishop is a “good work.”

Remember, “bishop” and “elder” are *exactly the same office in Scripture*.

Illustration of this fact: **Titus 1:5-7** For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint **elders** in every city as I commanded you-- [6] if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. [7] For a **bishop** must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money,

Notice also that there must be “elders” in every church. There must be a plurality of elders in each local congregation to govern. There must always be more than one.

From BOCCO 12.1 - “When a church has no pastor and there are five or more ruling elders, three shall constitute a quorum; if there are less than five ruling elders, two shall constitute a quorum; if there is only one ruling elder, he does not constitute a session...

There must always be more than 1 - no one man is capable of running a church, no matter how gifted, brilliant, or spiritually mature he may be.

Illustration: So many times I came to session meetings absolutely sure that if they'd all just listen to me, all would be fixed and well... but then one of my fellow elders would say something *I had just never thought of before*.

Application: God is a God of order and He has set a government and an order in his church.

3. What he must be - v2

[2] A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; [3] not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; [4] one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence [5] (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); [6] not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil.

Point: In part 2 of this 2 part series on the qualifications of elders, we will cover each of the attributes listed here in detail, but for this morning's sermon we'll take a quick look at the overall thrust of this passage.

Point 2: If you boil all of these things down, there are basically 3 things an elder must be:

1. He must be a long-term example of godliness in his personal life - v6 - "not a novice..."
He cannot be a new convert.

Illustration: So often, zealous new believers are immediately thrust into positions of leadership. Or is a celebrity makes a profession of faith, they are constantly in the limelight - *in direct opposition to this passage*.

Application / illustration: Let's say someone with a dramatic testimony at the age of 35 becomes a Christian here in our church and they are a gifted writer and speaker. And they are absolutely on fire for Christ - they're witnessing to all their friends - they start up a website and are writing articles about Jesus - and lots of people start following them, etc. *And this is only, let's say, 1 or 2 years into their new life in Christ. Then*, someone in their church, seeing their zeal and love for the Lord, nominates them for elders. Here would be my counsel to such a man:

My advice: First, you need to go through a period of discipleship and catechesis with a pastor or elder and work through the Westminster Standards. You need to make you sure you establish a pattern of *daily* family worship in your home. You need to read these books - and meet regularly with you pastors and an elder or two. *Don't be a victim of those who would want to immediately thrust you into a position of leadership - you need to become grounded in the Word of God first. And you need to demonstrate your calling and election and make them sure:*

Application passage: Luke 8:11-14 "Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. 12 "Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. 13 "But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy: and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. 14 "Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity." **He must be a long-term example of godliness in his personal life.**

2. He must be able to teach - the man must be much more than a really nice and godly man - he must be able to teach. Before a man can ever even be considered for the office of elder, they must prove that they have this "ability" to a local church. The people must look at him and say, without question, this is a man who can open the Word of God and teach it to people. This a man who knows and understands our doctrinal standards backwards and forwards.

Illustration: We must not let someone run for elder or become an elder if they just woke up one day saying: "I feel called to be an elder." Now, if a man desires that office, that is a "good work" as our passage says. But the elder *must generally* meet these qualification - and that means he must be catechized and well-taught in the doctrines of truth and godliness.

Illustration 2: Let's say you find out you suddenly that you need serious heart surgery - a quadruple by-pass. And you get to the hospital and meet your surgeon and you ask him: "So, where did you go to school to become a doctor?" and his response is: "Oh, I didn't go to school, I just felt called by God last week to start doing heart surgery - and I just let the Spirit lead me." How would you feel about that?

Application: Much more so, men who teach in Christ's church as elders must know the Bible well, know the doctrines of our confession and catechisms well, and understand church government well.

3. He must manage his family well - [4] one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence [5] (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?).

Point: Godly family life is an absolute prerequisite for being a leader in a local church family. Notice the reasoning of v5.

Application: Therefore, inquiries must be made into a man's marriage and relationship with his children before he runs for or is elected as an elder.

4. What his testimony must be among outsiders - v7

[7] Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Calvin's comments: This appears to be very difficult, that a religious man should have, as witnesses of his integrity, infidels themselves, who are furiously mad to tell lies against us. But the apostle means, that, so far as relates to external behavior, even unbelievers themselves shall be constrained to acknowledge him to be a good man; for, although they groundlessly slander all the children of God, yet they cannot pronounce him to be a wicked man, who leads a good and inoffensive life amongst them.

Application: What is being sought out by the Lord here is actually very simple: *consistency of character* - he is the same man out in the world among "the infidels" as Calvin calls them as *he is in the church of Christ*.

Application 2: Everyone knows how to "play the part" of a Christian in certain contexts - but true godliness will exhibit itself everywhere in a man's life - he is the same man in his workplace as he is at home as he is at church.

Illustration: Ravi Zacharias tells the story of giving a series of lectures on Christianity at a secular university and an anti-Christian philosophy professor there was asked by one of his Christian students: "What did you think of Dr. Zacharias' lectures?" And the professors said: "I thought they were very persuasive. I wonder what he is like in his private life."

1. Does it matter how we govern our churches?

2. What is a bishop? - v1

3. What he must be - v2

1. He must be a *long-term example of godliness in his personal life*
2. He must be able to teach
3. He must manage his family well

4. What his testimony must be among outsiders - v7

Next Sunday - will be Family and friends Sunday, but **the following Sunday** we will walk through each of the attributes of the elder in detail and look at the high standard God has for those who would shepherd His blood-purchase sheep.