

What Elders Are For

Titus 1:5-9

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*The Lord's Day Morning
November 28, 2004*

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Titus, chapter one. We're continuing to work through these three small letters called the Pastoral Epistles, First and Second Timothy and Titus; letters written from an apostle, evangelist, pastor and theologian—Paul—to two young men who were church planters and local church pastors.

We're working through these books...not canonically— that is, not in the order that they're found in your Bibles: First and Second Timothy come together, and then Titus after them—we're working through them chronologically. We're working from I Timothy to Titus, and then to

II Timothy. Second Timothy was the last book that Paul wrote, and so perhaps this gives us some sense of flow in his own thinking about life in the local congregation, because we said all along that Paul's great concern in the pastoral letters is to explain, not only to Timothy and Titus, but to us how we are to live and minister together in the local congregation.

Now, last time we were together in Titus 1:1-4, we said that there was a particular challenge that this congregation had, and that challenge was that it was in the midst of a very immoral culture. Sound familiar? And we noted that Paul had made a fairly unflattering reference from one of the Cretans' own poets—you'll see it, by the way, down in verse twelve of chapter one—speaking of the rampant immorality of the Cretans.

The Cretans were apparently not held in particularly high esteem for their moral standards, and Paul is concerned that the moral standards of Cretans in general may well be having a negative impact upon the Christians in this congregation. And so we said from the very beginning Paul was concerned to promote godliness in this Christian congregation. He wanted these Christians in these various churches, in these various cities on this little island of Crete, to adorn the gospel of God their Savior with the way that they lived. In other words, instead of simply claiming to be Christians, he wanted them to live as Christians.

Now, if your job as a minister was to speak to a younger minister who was

pastoring churches filled with people that you had initially evangelized, what would be some of the things that you would say to that minister in order to cultivate godliness in those recent Christian converts? My guess is you wouldn't say the first thing that Paul says in this passage. The very first thing he says to Timothy after saying "hello" in verses 1-4 is "appoint elders." That's Paul's frontline strategy for promoting godliness in these local congregations filled with young Christian believers: appoint elders.

Strange, isn't it? No, it's really not at all. I think you're going to see three things in this passage that stand out.

What are elders for? Why would Paul say first off, without even pausing to thank God as he often did in his other letters, "Timothy, appoint elders." Well, because elders are for discipleship; and because those elders are for direction, or for an example to the people of God; and because those elders are for doctrine. And Paul intends to build up, to see those local congregations grow in grace through discipleship, through the good example of those elders who were giving them direction, and through sound doctrine that those elders foster in the local congregation. And those are the three things that we're going to look at in this passage today.

Before we read God's word and hear it proclaimed let's look to Him in prayer and ask for His help and blessing.

Our Lord and our God, we acknowledge that this is your word, and even though You wrote it and spoke it almost two thousand years ago to another group of Christians in a very different culture and time of civilizations and place, yet these words are just as applicable, they're just as practical, they're just as relevant to us today as they were then. Even the situation, even the context of these letters is so, so similar to our own we hardly need to translate at all. We recognize, O God, the tug of an immoral culture. We need Your grace to resist it. Give us heavenly wisdom from Your word. Help us to receive Your word for what it is: the very word of God; and by Your Spirit to respond to it in faith and obedience. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear God's word.

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it.

If God's people are going to adorn the gospel of God their Savior in all things, then they need godly elders, those who will by their example and teaching show them what it means to live a life in which we glorify and enjoy God forever. That's why Paul doesn't pause to say thank you, but dives right into the business of this letter. He is concerned for these Cretan Christians to grow in grace, to be disciplined, to become mature in the faith, to resist the worldliness and the dissipation and the immorality of the culture around them, to be distinct, to be in the world but not of it, and so the very first thing he says to Titus is, 'Now, Titus, you and I evangelized these folks. We went around from city to city preaching the gospel. Many, many people came to faith in Jesus Christ. Now they need to be disciplined. Now they need to grow in grace, and here's what I want you to do. I want you to go to every city where there's a church and appoint elders.'

Isn't that interesting? And why does he do that? What are these elders for? They're for discipleship, they're for an example, and they're for doctrine; and you see that in this passage in three parts. In verse 5 he speaks of appointing elders. The reason that he does is very obvious: it's for discipleship. We'll explain why that is in just a moment.

Then, if you look at verses 6-8 he makes it clear that these elders are to be an example in at least two ways: first, in their home life, and secondly, in their personal character. And then thirdly, in verse 9 he makes it clear that elders are for doctrine. They're both here in order to promote sound teaching and to refute false teaching. Well, let's look at these three things together today.

I. What are elders for? Elders are for discipleship.

First of all, what are elders for? They're for discipleship. Look at verse 5.

"For this reason I left you in Crete that you would set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you...."

Paul is saying to Titus, 'Now go back to each of those cities in Crete where we went and preached and gathered a congregation, and make sure that elders are appointed or ordained in each of those churches in each of those cities, because, you see, elders are necessary for the display of God's glory in the church.' Paul sees them as necessary for the spiritual well being of the church. They're there for the welfare of the church. Paul had evangelized; people had embraced Christ, they had responded to the gospel, but there's no discipleship structure.

Now what had Jesus said the discipleship structure of the church was going to

be? Well, do you remember His Great Commission? “Go, make disciples...baptizing them....” In other words, the local church where baptism and the means of grace are administered was to be the locus, the place, the context for Christian discipleship. Jesus wasn't interested in His disciples going out and making ‘Lone Ranger’ Christians, He wanted them to be involved in local communities where they would be mutually accountable, where they would hold one another accountable, where they would sharpen iron with iron, where they would motivate one another to love and good deeds, where they would hear the word of God proclaimed, where they would live out that word, where they would show practical expressions of love to one another.

And so, the local church was Jesus’ design for the place for discipleship. Paul's talked about that in I Timothy, chapter three, and he's at it again, because as he tells Titus to appoint elders, the obvious reason for this, in the context of a church surrounded by an immoral culture, is that this is going to be the way that discipleship is structured and fostered in the life of this local congregation.

Christian discipleship happens in the local church, and it involves the careful ministry not simply of a pastor, not simply one elder or shepherd, but *elders*. Notice what it says: “Appoint elders in every city....” Every city where there was a gathering of Christians who had responded to Paul's preaching, they were to have elders *plural*, not just one shepherd, not just one pastor, not just one elder, but *elders*, a plurality of godly leaders living and ministering in their midst promoting the discipleship of Christians. And Paul is just emphasizing again the wisdom of God's way of discipleship: that He has appointed shepherds over His flock.

In Ephesians 4, Paul tells us that one of the ways that Jesus manifests His rule over the church is when He gives His church officers, pastors, teachers, shepherds. It's one of the ways that He manifests His rule and His care for the church, and Paul is saying to Titus, ‘Titus, here's the first thing we need to do. We want to promote godliness in these churches, we want to grow people in grace, want to see people mature, see people disciplined. Well, appoint elders, because elders are for discipleship.

II. What are elders for? Elders are for an example.

Secondly, if you look at verses 6-8 it's also clear that elders are for an example. These are Christians that are tempted to be like the world around them. They are tempted to engage in all the kinds of common vices in their own culture, and you'll see some of those vices listed in verse eleven: lying, evil, laziness...all those things are common in the Cretan culture...various types of dissipation as well, so what are we going to do? Well, Paul says appoint elders. And this is what those elders are to be like: they are to be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. So,

they are to be an example. In this case, in verse 6 they are to be examples in the home. They are to be fostering godliness in their home. Remember? These elders are here for the purpose of fostering godliness in the church, and Paul is saying if these elders are going to do a good job of fostering godliness in the church, the best way to see that they will be able to foster godliness in the church is to look at how they foster godliness in the home. And so, he goes right to the marital relationship and to the parenting responsibility of these elders.

First, (verse 6) they are to be faithful husbands, the husband of one wife. In other words, these men are to be men characterized by marital and sexual fidelity.

Secondly, they're to be good parents whose children are well behaved. Look at these words: "They have children who believe...." By the way, that word *believe* could be translated *who are faithful*. It's the same word; it's translated in different ways. Many of the older commentators translate the passage "children who believe." Many of the more recent translators translate the passage "children who are faithful." Whatever the case is, it's clear what is being gotten at in the very next phrase; they are children who are "not accused of dissipation or rebellion." These children are not partaking of the drunkenness and the vices and the various other kinds of immorality as their peers around them. These elders have obedient, faithful children. This obviously assumes that the children are still under their roof, they're still under their authority, and these children are faithful. They are obedient; they are responsive to the direction of the elder.

You see, if God wants homes in this congregation to be characterized by godliness and not by dissipation, it makes sense that the elders' homes should be characterized by faithfulness and obedience, and not by dissipation and vice and drunkenness. And so God says here, those elders who are to promote godliness in the congregation, they should be promoting godliness in their own homes.

Furthermore, if you look at verses 7 and 8, he goes on to speak about the example of their character. Elders by their own character are to foster godliness in the church, and so a list of five vices and six virtues are mentioned.

In verse 7, five vices that are not to be gripping the life of the elder are mentioned, and then there is a list of six virtues that are to be present in the life of the elder listed in verse 8. This elder, notice again, is above reproach as God's steward. That's the second time that that phrase has been used. What in the world does it mean to be "above reproach"? It certainly doesn't mean to be sinlessly perfected, or there would be no elders. So what does it mean to be above reproach? It means to be not open to a justified attack or criticism in terms of the Christian life, and particularly in these areas that Paul lists. This is a man who has not been gripped and controlled by these various sins of self. Look at verse 7. He's not been gripped and controlled by pride and anger, or by the desire for drink, or the desire for dominance, or the desire for wealth.

And, he is above reproach in these positive virtues. He's hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout and self-controlled. In other words, he's a friend to strangers, to those in need. He shows them hospitality. He's a virtuous man. He loves the good, he aims for what is good and right. He is a sane, or discreet, man of sound mind. He's sensible. He's a fair man in his dealings. He's just. He's a holy, or godly, or pious man. He's a devout man. He's self-controlled. He's a man who evidences some degree of self-mastery, and these are the virtues or the characteristics of one who is a shepherd.

You see, God is giving this local congregation and every local congregation real-life examples of His truth lived out in the elders' lives, in order to encourage and move us as a congregation to grow in grace.

Now, this reality does two things for us, at least. First of all, it presses us, doesn't it, to pray for our elders. And you've got to know how every elder feels when you read a passage like I Timothy 3 or Titus 1. It's one of the most humbling things in the world to be an elder in a congregation when these passages are read out. Nothing will shrink you to the size of Atom Ant more quickly than having this passage read out in front of people who know you. It's a very humbling thing, and that presses us to pray for them: to pray that they would long to emulate these standards and that they would really emulate them to every possible degree in the life of their homes and in their own personal character.

But it also reminds us that the character qualities that Paul speaks of as being required in elders and the kind of family life that Paul says is required for elders is, in fact, what he is shooting for everybody in the congregation. The reason that these are required of the elders is because this is what Paul wants to see the whole congregation looking like! So before you start to point the finger, remember Paul wants to see this in your home.

It is interesting, and I want to pause and say this. It would be inappropriate for me not to say this. It is interesting to me to see how concerned Paul is that young people not emulate the world; that young people in the Christian church look like Christians. There are many young people in this congregation who have made a profession of faith. They've come before the congregation and said, yes, I am a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I want to ask you: The measure, the value of that profession of faith...how does it show on Friday nights? And on Saturday nights? And when you're away from church? And when you're in school, or when you're in your extra-curricular activities? Or when you're alone with your friends? What is the value of that profession when you're in Starkville or Oxford or Hattiesburg, or away on a road trip, or out with your friends on Friday night?

Paul is deeply concerned that our profession is adorned by our life, and he's so concerned that he's willing to say that elders can lose their jobs if that reality is not reflected in their families. We have an elder who told his own children, "You

can have my job if you want it.” In other words, your behavior will directly impinge upon my continuation as an elder. That is a heady thing to think about, young people. And yet it is Paul's desire that the families, every family, in the congregation will represent these kinds of standards in an immoral culture. I cannot imagine something more relevant for us today. It doesn't even need to be articulated or translated from the first century. We are facing just this kind of thing today. The world is in the church and the church is like the world, and Paul is saying, ‘No, young people, be in the world, but do not be like it.’

III. What are Elders for? Elders are for conveying the truth and confronting error.

One last thing: these elders are for doctrine. They're not only for discipleship and for a good example; they're for doctrine. What are elders for? Well, he tells you in verse 9 they're for conveying the truth, and they're for confronting elders. Elders are to be orthodox. They are to be able to teach and to defend the faith. They are to be sound teachers.

Listen to what he says: “...holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict.” This elder is zealous for the truth. He doesn't simply assent to the truth, his heart is wrapped up in the truth. He holds fast to the faithful word of biblical teaching, and he teaches in accordance with that word. He's able to exhort in sound doctrine. He has an ability to incline faithful Christians to belief and obedience, and he's able to refute those who contradict the gospel. He's able to defend the faith.

Notice the big picture here when you pull back? Paul says elders want to see people grow. And elders demonstrate fidelity and spiritual leadership in their family and in their character. They're for an example.

And elders are zealous. They're devoted to sound doctrine. They're for discipleship, for an example, and for doctrine. They love people. They love people, and so they want to see them grow. They're hospitable, and so they're kind to people. They display virtue. They love what is good, and what is good is displayed in the way that they live, and they love truth. They love people, they love virtue, they love truth.

And Paul says, ‘Timothy, by placing godly shepherds, leaders like this in the congregation, it is my desire to see the whole congregation cultivated in Christian growth, in a love for one another, in expression of Christian morality, Christ-likeness, and in a love for the truth of God's word. That's what elders are for.’

Now, if that's what elders are for, we've got a new thing to pray for regularly. To pray for our elders to be what God has called them to be, to realize how vital they

are to the health of our spiritual experience in this congregation. This congregation will not rise above the spiritual attainments of the elders of this church, and that is an awesome thought. But it is within the very designs of Christ's own appointment of shepherds over His church to serve as His undershepherds, His caretakers while He is away, to foster growth in grace in His people.

May God continue to raise up men in our own congregation with these spiritual qualifications. May He continue to help those who already are elders in our congregation to live this particular truth and calling, and may He grow us all in grace. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your wisdom in the way You structured the church. We pray that You would make our own church to be more and more like Christ and less and less like the world; to be in the world, to be sure; to love those who are in the world, to care for their souls, to be good neighbors to them; to be caught up in a conspiracy of love towards them, and yet, at the same time, O God, not to be captive to the attitudes and the opinions and the behavior of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds according to God's word, being conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you, O God, that You've appointed elders in the church to foster just this, and we pray that by Your Spirit these things would become more and more reality in our lives as individuals, as families, and as a congregation. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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