

# *“Elders: Where Do We Go From Here?”*

TITUS 1:5-11; 1 TIMOTHY 3:1

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If you have been with us over the past three weeks, then you know that we have been studying what the Bible teaches on the subject of elders. We started by looking at the three basic words that refer to the office of elder. We learned that an **ELDER** is a man who is respected because of his wisdom and experience in the church, we learned that an elder has the responsibility of **OVERSEEING** the souls in the congregation, and we also learned that he is a **SHEPHERD** who feeds and protects the flock, the local congregation. We learned that these three terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament—all three terms refer to the same office.

And then over the past two weeks, we continued by looking at the various qualifications for elders that are found in the Bible—primarily in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. We learned how important it is that we take the Bible as our only guide. In a time when many around us are dismissing the Scriptures, it is especially important that we as a congregation realize that the Scriptures are, in fact, relevant to our cultural situation today. And so as a congregation, we can say with confidence that elders must meet certain qualifications. We can say with confidence that Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 apply to all congregations, for all time, regardless of how the culture may change around us. And then as we studied, we also learned that virtually all of the qualifications for elders also apply (at least in some way) to all Christians. Elders, though, need to have those qualifications to the level that they can lead the rest of us.

This morning, as we close this brief series on the subject of elders, I would like for us to go back to something we studied at the beginning, a real problem. A real concern is the fact that a majority of our young people are growing up in congregations without elders. In fact, a number of children here this morning have never even been to a church that is overseen by an eldership. I would add to that that even a number of adults here this morning have never been members of a congregation with elders. There is a terrible danger, then, that we may grow accustomed to things the way they are. As a church, then, we must rededicate ourselves to keeping this issue at the forefront, to making ourselves familiar with what the Bible teaches on the subject of elders.

This morning, then, as we close our brief series, I would like to wrap things up by asking: Where do we go from here? We have done a brief overview of the terms involved, we have looked at the qualifications, and so the question is: Now what? As we think back over what we have learned, I would like to use the next few minutes to make several suggestions, several observations, based on what we have seen in the word of God over the past few weeks.

I. **First of all, as we look back over what we have learned, I would suggest that we allow ourselves to be impressed by the fact that THERE IS A GREAT NEED FOR ELDERS IN GOD'S CHURCH.**

When we look at the Scriptures, we find that the custom of the early church was to have a group of qualified men serving as elders over each congregation. This is God's plan. This is how God designed the church. And so, as Paul traveled, one of his priorities as a missionary was to appoint elders in every church (Acts 14:23). And then, even as Paul wrote to various congregations, his plan was for elders to be appointed in all of those places as well. As an example, I would encourage us to look together again at what Paul wrote to the preacher Titus in Titus 1:5 (p. 1865). And I would encourage you to turn there with me, because we need to see this for ourselves, in our own copy of the Scriptures. And then, in just a moment, we will look at a couple of other verses in this chapter. But for now, let us notice what Paul wrote to Titus. He opened the letter with the standard greeting, *"I Paul"* write this letter to you *"Titus,"* and so on, and then at the very beginning of the actual letter, we come to verse 5. The apostle Paul does not dance around the issue, but he hits it head on, ***"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."*** So here we find that this is not something that Titus is hearing for the first time; but rather, Paul is saying: I have told you once, and now I am telling you again – this is the reason why I left you on the island of Crete – it is that important, ***"Set in order what remains and appoint elders in ever city."*** God's plan, therefore, is for each congregation to be overseen by an eldership. This is how God's church was designed!

And yet, as I was doing the research for this series of lessons, I kept on running into articles on various ways of taking care of business in a congregation without elders – some methods were scriptural, and others were not. Some articles addressed the men's business meeting system, others pointed out the importance of having committees, some pointed out the importance of having various "ministry leaders," others pointed out the importance of having congregational meetings, others suggested that the church simply appoint a "Leadership Committee" to avoid the need for elders altogether. All of the articles, though, were concerned with making sure that the church ran smoothly in the absence of elders. In reality, however, the Lord's church was not DESIGNED to run smoothly without elders – it's not in the plan. And speaking to the men of this congregation: We already know this, don't we? In the absence of elders, there really isn't a substitute form of church government that works well at all. Under our current system, for example, it is very difficult to discuss problems that members of the congregation might be having. In a business meeting, it can be uncomfortable making a decision about benevolence for one of our own with a group of 15-20 men. As most of us know from personal experience, church discipline can be awkward and time-consuming at best. When one of our own faces some kind of spiritual struggle, or marriage issue, or maybe is facing some kind of special temptation, it can be nearly impossible to handle those concerns in a business meeting format. As I look at decisions we have made over the past 12 years or so, most of our decisions have been financial in nature. We discuss the budget, we decide whether to buy a church building, we decide what kind of water heater to purchase. By nature, the business meeting system deals primarily with the business aspect of running a congregation. But there is so much more that needs to be handled that is (quite honestly) either overlooked or ignored by doing things the way they are currently being done.

My point in bringing up these concerns is simply to remind us that God has a better way. As Patsy said in our adult Bible class this morning (concerning the period of the Judges), "In the absence of strong leadership, chaos reigns." That is exactly right, and we know it. In the absence of elders, there is no alternative that really works anywhere near as well as an eldership. Let us not get discouraged by this, but let this dysfunction serve as a reminder of the way things need to be in the future. For our men: If you have given up on attending business meetings, I would encourage you to jump back in. Go to those meetings and let those meetings motivate us to strive for the appointment of elders.

With elders, I envision qualified men being assisted by deacons (or servants). The elders are the managers of the congregation. The elders are the shepherds of the congregation. And when the elders get together, they should not be spending their time discussing refinishing the wood floor in here, but rather, they would turn to the deacon responsible for the building and grounds, and they would say, "Let's deal with this thing. We want you to handle this. Come back to us next month with a plan," or whatever. Do not appoint a committee, but rather, assign the task to a deacon (God's way of dealing with things). And in the meantime, the elders would go back to shepherding, to caring for the sheep in their care. The church, therefore, was designed to operate as God intended under a group of faithful and qualified men serving as elders, overseers, and shepherds.

As we continue to think about the need, I would invite you to look a little further in Titus 1, to the end of the qualifications. Right at the end of the paragraph (in verse 9), as Paul wraps up the list of qualifications, he says that these men must be capable of, ***"...holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching,"*** Why? ***"...so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict."*** And then Paul continues with the reason for having such men as elders, ***"For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain."*** Paul, then, is saying: You need elders to feed and take care of each congregation, because it is a dangerous world out there! Spiritually speaking, Satan is determined to destroy this congregation, and the best way to defend against that is to have faithful men serving as elders – shepherds who will protect and defend the flock. If you can picture a flock of sheep out in the wilderness on their own, that is the situation we are in as a congregation right now. And yet as we know, sheep are not wild animals. On our way up to the singing in Spencer yesterday, we noticed a huge flock of sheep in a field over on one side of the road, and it was obvious that those sheep were not out there fending for themselves. But instead, you could tell that someone was responsible for feeding those animals. They were gathered around some kind of enclosure where food had been provided. Even as city-dwellers, we know that sheep do not do very well out there in the wilderness on their own. Until we develop qualified men and appoint those men as shepherds, we are in a very dangerous situation. Let us never get comfortable with things the way they have always been here, but let us always remember that there is a tremendous NEED for us to organized under an eldership.

**II. There is a second basic idea I would like for us to consider based on what we have studied over the past few weeks, and that is, Paul presents us with A BIG "IF" in Titus 1:6.**

Yes, we need elders! However, let us look again at what Paul said (and I hope you are still with me in Titus 1). Right after Paul reminded Titus that he was dropped off on the island of Crete for the purpose of appointing elders, Paul went on to say in Titus 1:6 that he is to do this, ***"...namely, IF any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife,"*** and so on. That is a big ***"if."*** Titus was to appoint elders in every city ***"if"*** he could find men who were qualified. So, elders were not required in every congregation, but rather, only in those congregations with men who met the qualifications.

And when we look at the Scriptures, we do find several congregations functioning without elders. We are not told HOW, and we are not told that they functioned WELL, but there were some congregations that did function for at least some period of time in the absence of elders. I am thinking specifically about what happened on Paul's First Missionary Journey. On that journey, Paul and Barnabas were sent out to preach in the opening verses of Acts 13. They preached in Cyprus, and Antioch of Pisidia, and Iconium, and Lystra, and Derbe, and they established several congregations. And then the Bible explains that when they got to Derbe, they turned around and basically retraced their steps on the way home. Concerning that journey home, I would like to point out something very interesting that happened on their way back through those cities. They

went in and established churches, and on the way out, the Bible says (in Acts 14:23), ***“When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”*** When we piece it all together, we discover that the entire First Missionary Journey took place from roughly 47-48 AD. If we are generous, let’s just say the entire journey took three years. They went in, they preached, they established congregations, and within three years (on their way back home), they appointed elders in each of those congregations. So, yes, some congregations in Bible times were able to function without elders, there is the big ***“IF”*** involved, but based on the Scriptures, we know that elderships were developed rather quickly.

But the main emphasis here is on the ***“IF.”*** I have heard it said that it is better to be Scripturally unorganized than it is to be unscripturally organized, and I believe that is a true statement: It is better to be Scripturally unorganized than it is to be unscripturally organized. In other words, it is better to be a church without elders than to be a church with elders who are not qualified. And that is what we are talking about here with the ***“if.”***

**III. There is a third concept we need to consider this morning, and that is: As Christians, as members of this congregation, EACH OF US HERE THIS MORNING MUST MAKE THIS A GOAL.**

The appointment of elders needs to be in our prayers, it needs to be in our thoughts, and it is something that all of us need to work toward in some way or another. And as we discuss the idea of keeping this as a goal, I would like to go back to a verse that we have intentionally overlooked over the past two weeks – 1 Timothy 3:1 (p. 1856). So many times, verse 1 is included in the list of qualifications, and yet when we consider it carefully, it really is not; but rather, it is more of an introduction, it is more of an encouragement as he gets into the actual qualifications. Let us then look very carefully at 1 Timothy 3:1, where Paul says, ***“It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.”*** And then verse 2, ***“An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife,”*** and so on. Let us just note here at the beginning that “desiring the office” is not necessarily one of the qualifications; but rather, it seems as if Paul is saying: If you want to be an elder, that’s great! He is introducing the subject by pointing out that there is a value to having this as a goal in life. In fact, the word ***“aspire”*** (in verse 1) is a word that refers to stretching or reaching to grab something. The second word, ***“desire,”*** is a word that refers to craving, or coveting, or putting our heart on something. The word is sometimes translated as “lust.” With that in mind, one man has paraphrased the verse in this way, “If a man stretches himself out so as to reach the point at which he can serve as an elder, then he has set his heart upon a good work.” And that seems to be the point of this – not that a man must desire the office in order to be qualified for it; but rather, that this is something that a Christian man should be working toward.

Not that we will ever force a man to be an elder against his will, though! We are not going to ambush some guy and drag him in a back room and beat on him until he becomes an elder. As we read in our Scripture reading this morning, elders are to serve ***“willingly”*** (1 Peter 5:1-5). But on the other extreme, let us not say to ourselves, “Well, I appear to be qualified in every way, but I do not really WANT to serve as an elder; therefore, this is something that I don’t really need to worry about.” I would rather not be in that category either! Imagine showing up on the Day of Judgment, and God says, “Well, it appears that you were qualified to serve as an elder, and yet you never stepped forward, and the small church where you worshiped was never able to appoint elders. What’s up with that?” I would hate to be the one who needs to explain that to God, “Oh, well, Lord, I did not ‘desire the office,’ therefore I was not really qualified, so I am off the hook.” That is not good at all.

I am reminded of the attitude of George Washington at the end of the Revolutionary War. General Washington was basically a legend. In fact, there were many Americans (including many officers under his command) who thought that General Washington should have immediately taken control of the nation as a kind of dictator. And many scholars agree that if he had wanted to do so, he could have done it with the support of the majority. But, he refused to do so. He disbanded the Continental Army, and he retired. He told his officers that they did not fight a war to rid themselves of one king, only to replace him with another. So, he pulled himself out of public life, until he was called upon to serve as the first president of the United States, without even campaigning for the job. Washington wanted to lead the nation, but he did not want to be a dictator – he wanted to lead for all of the right reasons. He had at least some level of desire. He was not like, “Oh man, I really want to do this,” but he had a desire to do the right thing. He had some level of duty, some level of responsibility, and so he willingly stepped forward when the time was right. We might say the same thing about other responsibilities we see around us. How many people really enjoy cleaning this church building? How many people truly enjoy coming over here in the worst of weather to shovel the sidewalks? Very few love those responsibilities, and yet those things get done because we see the need, and we step forward.

Even in the Bible, we find that some of God’s greatest leaders were rather reluctant, to say the least. Think about Moses. Did Moses *“desire”* to be a leader among God’s people? If you know the book of Exodus, then you know that Moses offered excuse after excuse. Moses was perfectly qualified – the son of a Hebrew, but raised in Pharaoh’s household. He had the experience, he was ready to lead, but he certainly wasn’t out there, “Choose me! Choose me!” Moses was not out there campaigning for the office. But rather, he stepped in and filled a void. He stepped in to fill a need. We could say the same thing about Gideon in the book of Judges. Right after Gideon led the 300 men into battle and had a great victory, the people wanted to make Gideon their very first king. In Judges 8:22, the people said, ***“Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son’s son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.”*** But Gideon said to them, ***“I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you.”*** Gideon went on to serve for forty years, and the people continued in peace with Midian. So, like Moses, we might say that Gideon was a reluctant leader. We could say something very similar concerning the apostle Paul. Like Moses and Gideon, Paul was also uniquely qualified to lead God’s people as an apostle, but God had to shake Paul up a little bit. We might say that Paul needed some convincing. The point of this is simply that *“desire”* is not technically a qualification, but if a man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a good work that he desires to do. And yes, it is a ***“work.”*** It is a difficult job with a great deal of responsibility; and yet I would suggest that a man can be motivated by responsibility. A man can be motivated by a sense of duty. A man can be motivated by seeing the great need for elders. We might say, then, that *“desire”* is a bonus. We might say that *“desire”* has a way of getting us to the point of being qualified. We might say that *“desire”* is something that can and should be developed.

As we close this series, then, let us consider where we go from here. As men, the easy answer is to say, “Well, we do not have anyone qualified.” The hard answer, the Biblical answer, is to say, “As men of this congregation, we may not have qualified men YET. However, from this point on, we will pattern our lives after these two passages in 1 Timothy and Titus, and WE WILL DO IT.” Maybe you have heard the old saying that the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, and the second best time to plant a tree is now. As men, then, even if we are not qualified right now, let us look at 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and let us start to make some adjustments. Let us examine ourselves, and let us do what we can to start correcting any deficiencies. If we are not hospitable, then let us get hospitable. If our tempers are not under control, then let us get ourselves under control. If we are addicted to wine, then let us reach out for help in conquering that addiction. If our children are not faithful (even as adults), then let us make that a priority. If our children are still very young and out of control, then let us give those kids some structure. Men with young families need to guide their

families in a way that they will stay close to God over a lifetime. If we are not able to teach, then let us step up and get some experience teaching a class. Do some of what elders do – start reaching out to rescue those souls who are drifting away, visit the widows, travel to other congregations to see what’s going on out there, learn, get involved.

For those who are not quite old enough to get married, keep this in mind. Young men, only marry someone who will help you be qualified to serve as an elder someday. Young women, only marry someone who you could see serving as an elder someday. An elder must be married, and as we discovered last week, he must be a **“one woman man”** (if you’re not a one woman man, then get that way – let us love our wives, and let us be faithful). Men, therefore, must have a good relationship with their wives.

And even for those of you who are still kids, you also have a part in this! A man cannot serve as an elder without having children who believe, not wild or rebellious. As you grow in your faith, as you obey the Lord, you help get this congregation closer to appointing elders. As kids, you can ask your dad, “So, have you thought about serving as an elder?” That might put your dad on the spot a little bit, but you have my permission! Even children have a part in this.

And, of course, there is something that all of us can do equally. All of us can pray. We can pray continually for the day when elders are appointed here. We can pray around the dinner table. We can pray for it at bedtime with our children. We can pray for it when we get together with our friends from church. We can pray for it as a congregation, in our public worship assemblies. The point of all of this is that we keep this as a goal. Our prayer and our goal is that faithful, qualified men would be appointed as elders over this congregation at some point in the future.

### **Conclusion:**

As we come to the end of this series, I would like for us to imagine this congregation being overseen by a group of spiritually mature Christian men, men who understand our struggles, men we can lean on in times of trouble, men who can feed us spiritually, men who can defend us from Satan’s attacks. Let us imagine, and then let us pray for and work for the day when we can appoint elders here at this congregation.

Again, I am thankful for your kind comments, for your feedback, and for your good questions over the past few weeks. I have tried to incorporate those comments into these studies, but (as always) if there is something that we have overlooked, then I would be more than happy to study it further.

The Bible teaches that God sent His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. We accept that sacrifice by turning to God in faithful obedience. We turn away from sin, and then we allow ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of sins. At that point, we are born into God’s family. If you have any questions, let’s talk. But, if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [foullakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:foullakeschurch@gmail.com)