



## **BECOMING ZEALOUS FOR GOOD WORKS - LEADERSHIP**

**Titus 1:5-16**

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### **Introduction – Good Leadership Begets Zeal for Good Works**

In my files, I have a booklet reviewing the history of Calvary Memorial Church from 1915, when the church was founded, to 1979, when the church moved into this current facility on 931 Lake Street. It was created for the dedication service, where Dr. Billy Graham was the guest speaker. The booklet was aptly entitled, “A History of Great Decisions.”

May I humbly suggest, however, that, in my view, one of the greatest decisions the church ever made came a decade or so later, when under the leadership of my distinguished predecessor, Dr. Ray Pritchard, the church decided to move to a more biblical model of church governance and leadership: that is, away from a church board and to a plurality of elders. That was truly one of the great decisions of the church. Because while, as we learned last week, preaching is the primary way in which God creates a people zealous for good works, the next most important thing in cultivating zeal for good works within the life of a church is leadership.

As we all know, churches are killed by bad leadership. Yet, on the other hand, churches thrive on good and godly leadership. It’s a truism in life, and in the life of the church: as goes the leadership, so goes the people. And it’s certainly true within the church that a congregation will never rise above the spirituality of its leaders. That’s why leadership is so very important.

The main point of this morning’s message is that good leadership begets zeal for good works; and, conversely, bad leadership undermines zeal for good works. That is the gist of this passage in Titus. It’s a passage about elders and the critical role they play within the life of the church.

Now for some, perhaps many of you, you’ve heard this church or other churches talk about elders but, if you’re honest, you really have no idea who they are or what they do or why we need them. In his excellent book on biblical eldership, Alexander Strauch describes arriving at a concert being held at a church and there in the foyer finding, prominently displayed, the picture of the Senior Pastor and, underneath it in the form of a pyramid, the rest of the Pastoral Staff. Then, as he went down the hallway, probably toward the washroom, out of sight and out of mind, he found a glass case housing pictures of the elders of the church. A perfect illustration of how elders are often viewed within the life of a church!<sup>1</sup> Even in churches with elders, they’re often an out-of-sight sort of group. You hardly ever see them or hear from them – except when there’s bad news, and then you get a letter in the mail from “the elders.”

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton: Lewis and Roth, 1995), p. 15.

This is all, of course, very understandable because we have on the whole failed to teach on the role of elders within the life of the church. Today's passage is going to help correct that deficiency at least somewhat. For today's passage presents us with a simple yet important argument about how the church ought to organize itself for effective gospel outreach. And the argument's all about elders. Here's the argument of the passage: first, the church needs elders (v. 5); second, the church needs elders with character and conviction (vv. 6-9); and, third, the church needs godly elders to protect the church from ungodly influences (vv. 10-16).

## **The Church Needs Elders (1:5)**

The first step in the argument of this passage is that *the church needs elders*. We learn this from the first verse, which introduces us to the body of the letter and provides important information about the purpose of Titus and the circumstances in which it was written.

Titus, like Timothy, was one of Paul's most loyal and trusted junior colleagues in the ministry. Titus plays prominently in Paul's ministry in Corinth, as we learn from Paul's second letter to the church in that city (see 2 Cor. 2:13; 7:6, 13-14; 8:6, 16, 23; 12:18; cf. Gal. 2:1-3; 2 Tim. 4:10). Evidently upon release from house arrest in Rome, Paul made his way back to Ephesus by way of the Mediterranean island of Crete. And there, as he says in this opening verse, he left Titus.

But Paul didn't ditch Titus in Crete; he strategically deployed him for gospel purposes. Titus had an important commission on the island of Crete. As Paul reminds him: "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you" (1:5). Titus was to put what remained into order, chief among which was to appoint good and godly leaders, elders, in every town on that island. Paul notes here that he's already given Titus this directive (i.e., "as I directed you"); hence, this letter is a follow-up intended to provide Titus with the further encouragement and authority he needs to get on with it: *to organize the church for effective gospel outreach by appointing good and godly leaders, elders*.

We learn from this opening verse, then, that Paul believed appointing elders was critical for the churches in Crete; we'll explore why as we move through the passage. But for now note that this directive to appoint elders is not unique to the book of Titus, nor was the appointment of elders unique to the churches in Crete. Evidently, this was Paul's common practice. Wherever he planted churches, there he appointed elders. We read in Acts of Paul and Barnabas: "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (14:23; cf. Phil. 1:1).

Yet appointing elders was not unique to Paul. In fact, what we find in the New Testament is that eldership is the consistent pattern of leadership for the local church: whether it was the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2), the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17), or the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (cf. 1 Peter 1:1; 5:1). The common thread in all these churches is a plurality of elders. Elder leadership therefore appears to be one of the only organizational expectations we can glean from the New Testament.

It is good for us to remember, then, that much of what we do organizationally as a church, that is, how we organize ourselves and our ministries, is optional. Optional in that the New Testament simply does not provide clear directives or explicit instruction for much of what we do. This fact alone of course doesn't make any of what we do organizationally bad, or even unwise or unhelpful – just not essential. Biblically speaking, do we need a Nominating Committee? No. Do we need a Pulpit Committee? Do we need to have two congregational meetings a year? No. And at those congregational meetings do we need to observe the latest version of *Robert's Rules of Order*? No. Do we need ushers or greeters or a hospitality team or a choir or custodians or even a building? No, we don't. Of course, we're grateful for each of these things, and they've served the church well and effectively. But we won't be out of step with the New Testament without any of these things. We will, however, if we fail to have elders. For *the church needs elders*.

### **The Church Needs Elders With Character and Conviction (1:6-9)**

But what kind of elders does the church need? Does the church need elders with a particular education or training or credentials. Does an elder need business experience? Does he need to be well-connected, a power-broker within the church? Does he need to be wealthy? Does he always need to see eye-to-eye with the Pastor?

Of course, these and many similar characteristics are thought to be important to the role and work of an elder; but these are just pseudo-qualifications which have really no support in Scripture. As this passage reminds us there are two critical qualifications for an elder: character and conviction. An elder must be a man of irreproachable character, and, second, he must be a man of deep biblical conviction. Hence, our second point and the second step in the argument of this passage: *the church needs elders with character and conviction*.

#### ***Men of irreproachable character (vv. 6-8)***

First, an elder must be *a man of irreproachable character*. Paul makes this point in verses 6-8, where twice he says that an elder must be "above reproach" (vv. 6, 7). This means he must be free from accusation, literally, not able to be reproached, whether from those within or outside the church. Conversely, he must enjoy a good reputation among Christians and non-Christians alike. Being an elder, like being a pastor, is a public role. It's necessary, then, that not only the church, but the community be able to speak well of the character of the leadership of the church. Think about it: how might our church's effort to advance of the gospel in this community suffer if we were to have invested in leadership someone with a notorious reputation in our community? This is also why it is good that the congregation is involved in the selection process: to corroborate publicly the good reputation of any elder that would serve in leadership.

From this passage, we learn an elder must be above reproach in two respects. First, he must be above reproach *in his home life*: "the husband of one wife," Paul insists, "and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination" (v. 6). Now both of these statements have generated quite a bit of discussion and debate over the years, I believe largely because we slip into thinking that Paul is trying here to

make some overly technical point.<sup>2</sup> What I believe he's insisting on here is simply that if a man is married and if he has children, then he must be a faithful husband and a faithful father – that is, he must be faithful at home. Otherwise, we have no reason to believe that he will be faithful in the church.

So, men, if you aspire to lead at all in the church, don't neglect to lead well in the home. For when it comes to leadership, the home is the training ground for the church. Or, as someone has astutely observed, "a good look at the man's home life will tell much about his character and his ability to give leadership to the church."<sup>3</sup>

There's a second respect in which an elder must be above reproach: *in his overall pattern of life*. This comes from the second part of verse 7 and verse 8, where Paul provides a rather general list of five vices and six virtues that together paint a well-balanced portrait of the kind of character that is required of one who would serve in the leadership of the church. "He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined" (1:7b-8).

Interestingly, you should carefully note that there's nothing here that is not expected of *every* Christian. Just because you're not an elder doesn't mean you can be arrogant or hot-headed or drink too much; similarly, every Christian must seek to be hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. It's not that these qualities are only for elders; Christ expects them of every Christian. Yet they are non-negotiable for elders; they are prerequisites.

But why, you may be wondering, is character so critical to leadership? It is, after all, very counter-cultural among all the institutions in modern society for the church of Jesus Christ to insist on certain moral prerequisites before serving in leadership. You won't find anything like this if you serve in leadership in the Rotary Club or the School Board or the Peace Corps, nor even if you run for Governor of the State of Illinois!

The reason why it's so critical that an elder be a man of irreproachable character is because of who an elder is in God's eyes. As the beginning of verse 7 tells us: "For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach." Elders must therefore be good and godly because they are God's stewards and oversee his house, the church. In a word, an elder is a father to a church. And, as we're all aware, a good and godly father is a force of great good within a home, whereas a bad and self-serving father is a force of great harm within a home. So too with elders in the church.

### ***Men of solid biblical conviction (v. 9)***

An elder, then, must be a man of irreproachable character. He also must be a man of *solid biblical conviction*. This is the point of verse 9: "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."

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<sup>2</sup> See Marshall, pp. 155-157, who provides a succinct assessment of the five main interpretations. Part of the difficulty with the expression is that it is only found in the New Testament and not in any extra-biblical sources contemporaneous with the New Testament.

<sup>3</sup> Fee, p. 173.

Elders must first know what Paul refers to here as “the trustworthy word as taught,” that is, they must know and understand the gospel and its inscripturation in the Bible. Elders must therefore be Men of the Book. They must know their Bibles and know them well. But not only must they know the word, they must hold firmly to the word, as Paul says. This means they must have a tight and tenacious grip on biblical truth. So, for example, when it comes to talking about the basic storyline of the Bible or the great doctrinal truths of the Christian faith, elders speak with confidence and conviction; you can tell they’ve got their hands wrapped around this Book. Furthermore, when an elder’s pressed on his commitment to biblical teaching and biblical practice, he’s willing to go the distance in fidelity to the word of God.

Elders need to have a tight and tenacious grip on the word of God because they’ve got a vital twofold teaching task within the life of the church. They must be men of solid biblical conviction so that, as Paul says, they can “give instruction in sound doctrine,” on the one hand, and “rebuke those who contradict it,” on the other.

The great Protestant theologian, John Calvin, talked about the need for elders and pastors to have two voices: one to gather the sheep and feed the flock with biblical instruction; the other to drive away the wolves with words of sharp rebuke and warning.<sup>4</sup> Regrettably, I suspect that in too many churches today only one of these two voices is ever heard: the voice of instruction feeding the sheep. As a result, the sheep inadvertently suffer and are left vulnerable to the subtle and sly attack of wolves. “Beware,” Jesus warned, “of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15).

### **The Church Needs Godly Elders to Protect the Church from Ungodly Influences (1:10-16)**

This stark warning of Jesus leads us on to our third point, and the third step in the argument of this passage: *the church needs godly elders to protect the church from ungodly influences.*

According to the New Testament, an elder has several different responsibilities. First, elders are to *lead*: to govern and direct the affairs of the church. Second, elders are to *feed* the church by teaching the word of God. Third, elders are to care for the spiritual needs of the church: praying for the sick, for example, and anointing them with oil (James 5:14). And, fourth, elders are to shepherd the church: specifically, like a good shepherd, to protect the flock from harm.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the situation in the churches on the island of Crete, Paul felt compelled to elaborate on this fourth responsibility in his letter to Titus. It’s critical that Titus appoint elders in every town (v. 5), elders with both character and conviction (vv. 6-9), because, as Paul goes on to explain, there are many, as he says, who left to themselves would undermine the health and vitality of the church (vv. 10-16). As Paul explains: “For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers” (v. 10a).

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Stott, p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> See Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, pp. 15-34, on pastoral leadership, where he identifies the four critical functions of biblical eldership mentioned here and elaborates on them each in turn.

Now, just in case it's not obvious to you, let me plainly say that people who are insubordinate and who use frivolous words and deception as tools of influence within the life of the church, they kill churches! That's certainly been my experience. And I suspect that's been the experience of some of you as well. It was certainly Paul's experience, as he heard about what was going on in the churches on the island of Crete. The false teachers there were evidently creating quite an uproar: they were, as Paul says in verse 11, "upsetting *whole families* by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach."

Why is it that false teachers can have such a negative impact upon the church? The main reason is because they dupe the unsuspecting within the church with their profession of faith: that is, they sound like Christians, and they may even, at least from a distance, look like Christians. And so they pull the proverbial wool over many eyes and thus are able to masquerade within the church as wolves in sheep's clothing. Furthermore, because they truly love neither God nor the gospel, they focus instead on what *is* important to them: not the gospel, but that which is peripheral to the gospel. Which was precisely what was going on in Crete: the false teachers were "devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth" (v. 14).

So even though they "profess to know God," it's a sham. For there's nothing transformative going on in their heart and thus in their life. While they may talk a big game about God, they inevitably "deny him by their works" (v. 16a). The bottom line on false teachers, then, is that they are morally unfit to lead others to good works. "They are detestable," as Paul says, "disobedient, unfit for any good work" (v. 16b). Which is the thrust of this passage as it relates to godly elders and ungodly influences: godly elders are so critical to the health and vitality of the church because they can shut down ungodly influences that undermine the church's zeal for good works. Godly leadership begets good works in the life of a church; ungodly leadership undermines good works in the life of a church.

This is why Paul doesn't beat around the bush when it comes to how to handle ungodly influences within the church. "They must be silenced," he insists to Titus in verse 11. How? By offering them a sharp rebuke, as he has said in verse 9 and now here in verse 13: "rebuke them sharply." The goal of course is not to humiliate, but to heal, that they would be silenced, yes, but ultimately that they would be "sound in the faith" (v. 13).

Regrettably, however, a sharp rebuke offered in love by elders doesn't always work, which is why Paul circles round at the end of the letter to this issue of how to handle ungodly influences within the church. And there in 3:10-11 he rather bluntly instructs his junior colleague in the ministry: "As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (3:10-11).

Rebuke, rebuke, then disregard. This is the pattern for how to deal with insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers who would seek to take advantage of the unsuspecting within the church. And it's obviously gutsy and difficult work. Hence, the role of an elder is not for the faint-of-heart or the weak-kneed. It's also not for the arrogant or quick-tempered. Instead, the church needs men of character and conviction and, we might now add, courage.

## Conclusion

Our church constitution does a good job defining the role of an elder at this church. It makes a number of important points. The fourth point is this: "Refute Those Who Contradict Truth," and provides the supporting scriptural reference from Titus 1:9. Here's what our constitution says on this point:

Elders are to confront those who teach doctrine contrary to the Articles of Faith or who continue in a pattern of behavior contradictory to Biblical truth. Thus, Elders are to guard against the strategies of Satan, so that the truth of Christ will remain credible to both the congregation and the community.

This is why we need good and godly leaders in the life of this church. This is why we need elders, men of deep personal character and solid biblical conviction. We need elders to guard against the strategies of Satan, and to ensure the credibility of the gospel within the church and in the community. We need elders to help us become zealous for good works.

Next to the ministry of the word through preaching, there is nothing more critical for the life and health of the local church than good and godly leadership. Bad leadership kills churches. Good and godly leadership, on the other hand, is a mighty force for good in helping a people become zealous for good works.

May we as a church continue to enjoy good and godly leadership that we as a people might be all that God calls us to be!

Amen.