

Christ Design for His Church - Part III - Elders

Over the last couple of weeks we spent time exploring Christ's relationship with His church, the church's relationship with leadership and leadership's relationship with both Christ and the church. This morning we come to verses 2 and 3 of 1st Timothy chapter 3, that gives 11 requirements that need to be met by an overseer or elder or pastor. It is an eye-opening list because shepherding Christ's church requires not just leadership skills, as does leadership in secular business world, but leading a church also requires moral and spiritual leadership. This list was convicting for me as I studied, prayed and worked through this morning's message. I asked often where I need improvement to be above reproach. Paul says, "Therefore an overseer must be above reproach." The structure of this part of the first sentence and the word "must" gives the meaning that this is an absolute requirement. A life of leadership in Christ's Church means living in such a way that neither the church nor the unsaved world are given reason to blame the leader for living in any way that dishonors Christ.

It really is no wonder that the unsaved world believes Christians are hypocrites when the media relishes the fall of leaders in the Christian church. The standards God wants is high and it takes work and care to meet these. I find it interesting that Paul begins his list of character requirements with the "husband of one wife" and ends his list with "not a lover of money." It is in these two areas that pastors fail in most often. It is moral failure in their marriage or sexual impurity and becoming a lover of money that tends to be a weakness for many. It is also interesting that these two moral failures often happen hand-in-hand or as we say, they go together. A pastor is to avoid these and set boundaries so that he may be above reproach.

Above Reproach

A man that is “above reproach” not only cannot be blamed because there is no evidence but in addition there is not a hint of impropriety to use as a reason to begin questioning a pastor’s behavior. All Christian men are redeemed sinners and still have weaknesses. Therefore, a wise man puts people in his life who have the right to hold him accountable and sets boundaries to keep him above reproach. I know of one long-term ministry that has accomplished this.

Billy Graham has served in ministry for almost 70 years and never has experienced any serious scandal. Why? In 1948, the 31-year-old Billy Graham was coming off a successful stint as a Youth for Christ evangelist and entering a period of independent ministry that would last almost 6 decades. Temptations loomed. To guard against allegations or the actual abuse of money, sex, and power that had plagued previous evangelists, the Graham team decided to take concrete steps to avoid the slightest trace of controversy.

The team gathered in a hotel room in Modesto, California. They drew up a compact that became known as the “Modesto Manifesto.” The manifesto included provisions for distributing money raised by offerings, avoiding criticism of local churches, working with churches that supported cooperative evangelism, and using official estimates of crowd sizes to avoid exaggeration. These policies would help Graham’s ministry and his team avoid any charges of financial exploitation.

But nothing loomed larger in Graham’s mind than the potential for sexual scandal. The most famous provision of the manifesto called for each man on the Graham team never to be alone with a woman other than his wife. Graham, from that day forward, pledged not to eat, travel, or meet with a woman other than his wife, Ruth unless other people were present. This pledge guaranteed Graham’s sexual purity and enabled him to avoid accusations that have waylaid evangelists and pastors

before and since.

Here at Canyon Bible Church we follow much of the same type of rules. **As your pastor, I do not handle money and have no direct access to the church's fund.** Our Deacon David has set up procedures for the accepting and accounting of money so that no one person has private control and there are checks and balances. Cheryl keeps such a great set of books there will never be a problem for any person or government agency that examines our books or any reason to question the church's accounting. Where some pastors feel this minimizes their authority concerning money, I find it freeing. How fortunate Canyon Bible is to have such a great Board that has high standards. In addition, **I do not meet with women in private but in public or with their father, husband or Joyce.** Every man and woman at Canyon Bible should follow these protocols concerning money and interacting with the opposite sex guaranteeing each person and our church community will remain free of sin and scandal.

Setting up good standards does not mean an overseer or pastor never commits a sin for they are redeemed sinners like everyone else, but what it does mean is that his life is not marred by sins of character that would disqualify him from leading. Pastors must take great effort to remain above reproach for a number of reasons. First, as under-shepherds of Christ they are prime targets of Satan. **If Satan can tempt a pastor to fall it not only hurts the pastor but also the church and Christ's reputation.** Satan often attacks a pastor at his most tender point and that is through his wife and children. This is why it is so important for a pastor to work to cover his family with spiritual protection. Those on the frontline of the spiritual battle will be engaged in spiritual warfare and often face the brunt of Satan's opposition to Christ's gospel message. If I am not facing at least some spiritual attack I wonder, "am I doing my job and am I a threat to Satan?" Secondly, as I have already stated the fall of a pastor does greater harm to the church and Christ's reputation than other

individuals. Sadly, when there is moral failure of a pastor, some people leave the church never to return and in all this tragedy the fallen world rejoices.

Third, a pastor's greater knowledge of the truth of God that comes from the study of His Word and the accountability to live by this knowledge brings greater judgment when they sin. Fourth, when an elder or pastor sins they are more hypocritical because they preach against the very sins they commit. So, it is for these reasons pastors need an abundance of God's grace, they need the prayers of the saints and they need the power of the Holy Spirit, a loving and supportive wife, like Joyce. Paul wrote in the next chapter of his letter advising Timothy, "for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed." (1 Timothy 4:5-6) A pastor must be continually trained and nourished by the "words of the faith" or scripture. The psalmist wrote, "With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! ¹¹I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. ¹²Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes!" (Psalm 119:10-12) A pastor must continually expose their heart and mind to the light of God's Word. Time in the Scriptures is not just study but also meditation and prayer.

Church, my beloved, it is your responsibility to measure the pastor by the standard of the Scriptures as what "above reproach" means. My beloved that means you have the reasonability to hold me accountable. When a pastor fails and brings shame upon the church and Christ often the church bears some responsibility for not dealing biblically with sin. If a pastor is confronted when he takes that first step off of the true path, correction can happen and restoration is easy instead of waiting until the pastor has traveled down the broad road to destruction. It is too common today that a church does not lovingly confront a pastor when a problem first appears and then when the problem is full blown they quickly forgive the pastor of his sin

and restore him to his ministry. The church should follow God's example and not hesitate to forgive when there is true repentance. However, to immediately or quickly restore a pastor back to his position of ministry lowers the standard that God expects pastors to adhere to, they are then a poor example to the flock, and this lowers the standard of the church. This can become a downward spiral ending in a shallow moral standard found in many churches today.

What then are the standards a pastor should maintain and be an example to the church? What does Paul say being "above reproach" means?

The Husband Of One Wife

First, a pastor must be above reproach in his relationships with women. Being "the husband of one wife" in Greek means literally "a one-woman man." The issue at hand is the pastor's moral and sexual behavior. It does not mean if a man is single he cannot serve as an elder or pastor. After all it appears that both Paul and Timothy were single. Although, a single man in ministry is at greater risk of temptation than one who is married and this was a concern of Paul for Timothy. Just because a man has only one wife does not automatically mean he is faithful either.

Some would argue that this is the standard against polygamy, which was common in some societies at the time of Paul, but was not common in the Roman society or in Ephesus. One reason polygamy was not common in Roman society was because sexual relations outside of marriage was not a problem. Polygamy was not allowed in Jewish society and the Christian church grew out of Jewish Old Testament scripture. Because of these restrictions a polygamist would not have been allowed to be a member of the church. So this argument falls flat.

Some argue against remarriage and maintain a pastor can only be married once in his lifetime. However, the scriptures permit and honor second marriages under the

proper circumstances. Paul encourages younger widows to remarry and in 1 Corinthians Paul wrote, “A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 7:39) Remarriage after the death of a spouse is honorable.

A one-woman man is a man who is devoted in his heart and mind to the woman who is his wife. He loves, desires and thinks of only her. He maintains sexual purity in both his thoughts and his behavior. Canyon Bible Church has a position statement concerning “the husband of one wife” that defines our position in detail with the scriptural foundation for our position. It is available for anyone who desires to read it.

If a pastor violates being a one-woman man and commits adultery it is serious beyond words. Let me be clear of how God sees adultery, “He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself. ³³ He will get wounds and dishonor, and his disgrace will not be wiped away.” (Proverbs 6:32-33) In times past society agreed with God’s standards. Divorce and adultery destroyed a person’s character and reputation. Of course this is no longer true in a society that says almost anything is permissible. The church is to be God’s beacon of holy light in a dark world. We are to hold fast to God’s standards found in His Word.

Sober-Minded

The second character trait listed is that an overseer is to be “sober-minded” or as other translations say, “temperate” or “restrained”. A leader of Christ’s church must be a man that thinks clearly. Indulging in drinking to the point of intoxication dulls one’s senses and at that point one is not “sober-minded” and cannot make sound decisions. The scriptures teach moderation in most areas of one’s life. If one cannot be moderate and gives way to excess then this is not a temperate life and one’s life will not be lived with the ability to make prudent decisions. First and

foremost a pastor is to be concerned about spiritual matters and not imbibing in “spirits” to the point that his judgment is affected. There are many warnings in the scriptures about “wine” and its effects. We know what happened when Noah got off the ark for shore leave and drank. Also, King David’s son Absalom waited 2 years after Amnon his half brother raped their sister Tamar to have him murdered which was enabled because Amnon became drunk.

However, there is no prohibition in the New Testament scriptures about drinking wine. Remember Jesus went to Cana with His mother and disciples. The wedding ran out of wine and Mary asked Jesus to resolve the problem so the groom’s family would not suffer embarrassment. Reading from the 2nd chapter of John, “Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to the servants, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ And he said to them, ‘Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.’ So they took it. ⁹ When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom ¹⁰ and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ ¹¹ This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.” (John 2:6-11) The scripture does not say Jesus or any with Him became drunk. However, they were at the wedding to celebrate, enjoy God’s blessing of this couple in marriage and to fellowship. Certainly no one can rightly accuse Jesus of not being “sober-minded” or not being temperate, but it also would be a stretch to think He did not partake of the wine.

Self-Controlled

A leader of the church must be self-controlled or prudent. A self-controlled man knows how to prioritize his life and the serious spiritual things always have priority before him. This certainly does not mean he is a man with no sense of humor or does not enjoy life, but he is focused and sees the world as God sees it. Paul wrote in the closing of his letter to the Christians in Philippi, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

(Philippians 4:8-9) A man living with these goals as his priorities in life is a man of good repute and Jesus will reign in his life.

Respectable

The word “respectable” implies an ordered life in which a well-disciplined man accomplishes his plans. His life would not be marked by chaos and unfinished plans, but it would be a life focused on life as God purposes. Jesus told the parable, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:16-21) If a man does not have order in his life and work with the right priorities how will he be able to lead God’s church? We are to plan wisely for the future and live expecting Christ’s immediate return.

Hospitable

In the Greek the compound word translated as “hospitable” means “to love strangers.” Paul wrote of the “Marks of a True Christian”, he said, “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.” (Romans 12:9-13) Here we see hospitality is a mark of true Christian behavior towards fellow believers. The writer of Hebrews wrote, “Let brotherly love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” (Hebrews 13:1-2) Thus, we see that showing hospitality towards strangers is another mark of a true Christian. The pastor should be an example of this behavior to the saints. A Pastor’s home is always one of welcome and warmth to all.

Able To Teach

The ability to teach is the only qualification in this list that relates to the pastor’s giftedness and function. An elder is to be a skilled teacher who works hard in his studies and the proclamation of God’s Word. This is also the only qualification that sets an elder apart from the office of Deacon. Since the primary role of an elder is to preach and teach God’s Word then this gifting is critical. Why did Paul list this gifting with the character traits found here? The answer is simple; to be a gifted and faithful teacher what one teaches is interwoven into and dependent upon the character of a man. As Paul wrote, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1 Timothy 4:16) What are the qualities of sound teaching? First, as I already said, a pastor must have a gift to teach. Secondly, a preacher must have a

sound understanding of doctrine that comes from both the study of God's Word and wisdom imparted by the Holy Spirit. Third, a skilled teacher must have an attitude of humility. To be arrogant in one's teaching would only undermine the very things they teach. Fourth, a teacher of the Word is to strive to live a life of holiness. As Paul instructed, "... train yourself for godliness; ⁸ for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." (1 Timothy 4:7-8) The teacher must be pursuing the holiness that he teaches and instructs others to endeavor to reach in their lives. This is the very process of sanctification. Fifth, the teacher must himself be a dedicated student of God's Word. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15) Finally, a pastor and teacher must be strong in his convictions and have courage. He must never abandon God's truth to please men.

Not A Drunkard

This 8th character trait of not being a drunkard is closely related to number 3 that an overseer or elder should be sober-minded. Obviously, if a man has a tendency to get drunk he is not sober-minded, or a person of self-control or respectable. So he would disqualify himself to lead on several character traits in this passage Paul listed in these two verses. The world I was raised in applauded getting drunk for that was a man's right and in some ways almost his duty. It may be the right of those who are lost but not those who Christ has called to set an example to the lost.

Not Violent But Gentle

A pastor is not to be a man who strikes back at people. Different translations use a variety of words trying to express the same thing, words like pugnacious, no striker and no brawler. The literal translation of the Greek is "giver of blows" or "one who

strikes.” A pastor is not to be violent, but his is to be gentle, which means he is a person that is considerate, forbearing and gracious. He is a person who thinks the best of others, remembers their good traits and not their bad. He does not hold grudges but wants everyone to be made whole through repentance and forgiveness. Because the church is made up of people who are redeemed saints, there will be times when things can become stressful between the saints and the pastor must respond with calm and cool headedness.

Not Quarrelsome

This means the pastor is a man of peace and reluctant to fight. There are things I will fight for; my God, the Holy Scripture and my family, but the first effort is for unity and for peace. Fighting is the last avenue of action. God calls leaders to be men of peace. Jesus said, **“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”** (John 16:33) I saw God’s infusion of peace into me in our difficult times overseas as missionaries. My natural state is no one of seeking peace; it is only God’s power in me that helps make me a man of peace. The closer I grow to God in my daily study and prayer life the more of a man of peace I become.

Not A Lover Of Money

Finally, we come to the last character trait. A leader must be free from the love of money. If you observe those you see on TV it is easy to see who has a love of money. We may need to ask God to open the eyes of our heart to God’s truth for it is not always present in TV evangelists. It is the love of money that motivates most false teachers. True godly leaders can say, **“For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness.”** (1 Thessalonians 2:5) I don’t know about you but I was raised in a family that how much money you made and your title was the benchmark of your success in life.

Materialism was at the heart of much of what I was taught by my parents. My family could not believe I walked away from my career, position and money to serve in the mission field. I instantly went from the family hero, having had the largest income, to the family failure.

Leaders must set the example for being generous and not being stingy and financially ambitious. This is not to say being successful is wrong, but that it is a heart issue. If you do not freely give of your resources to God then I will venture to say you give little and only with strings attached. This is not what God commands us to do. Giving freely has spiritual ramifications that are for our benefit.

To bring us to a close and bring the big picture into focus, **if a man aspires to be an overseer, it is a noble desire. He is to be measured against the 11 traits found in 1 Timothy 3:2-3.** This is to be done before he is ordained. It is the church's responsibility to ensure godly leadership. It is the church's responsibility to hold leaders to the standard of the Bible. My prayer this morning is that God will raise up morally and spiritually qualified men to lead His church through the dark times we now find ourselves in.

God, I pray to You, my Lord. God I pray for strong men of faith to heed Your call to ministry and leadership. I pray for those men here in our church to lead well, first, in their homes and then in their church and also in their workplace. God I cry out for men to be the leaders You desire, please strengthen them. I cry out for Your strength and mercy in my own life that I may grow into the leader You desire and that I may love richly Your children. Father, help us men to be the spiritual leaders you teach that we should be in Your holy Word. Without You we are lost, please help us show the lost world Christ's light of salvation. Amen!