

The Need For Godly Elders

by Ron R. Ritchie

I have recently been thinking through my spiritual odyssey. I don't know what it is about becoming 50, but one pauses to think about the past, and how many more years one has to live on earth. (The Scriptures say I may live to be 70, maybe even 80.) Regardless, it has been a fascinating journey in many, many ways, especially when I think of how the Lord has been involved in my life through all these years.

I began my spiritual odyssey as a Catholic. I was baptized in SSs Peter & Paul Cathedral, Philadelphia, and attended a parochial school there. Somewhere along the line my mother came to know the Lord through a Pentecostal shoemaker from Poland, named Michael. As a result, we attended a Pentecostal church. Then we were involved in a Baptist church, followed by several years in a fundamentalist church.

At 19 I joined the army and was sent to Waco, Texas, where for nine months I participated in a Southern Baptist church. Then I was sent to French Morocco, in North Africa, and I participated in the Church of Christ (without musical instruments!). Then I got involved again in a Baptist church. When I returned home to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, I attended a fundamentalist church. From there I went to Philadelphia and participated for three years in the Tenth Presbyterian Church, under the teaching of Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse. Later I went to Dallas, Texas, where I participated in several Bible churches. Then I came to California, where I became a pastor at Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church for some three-and-a-half years. For the past 14 years I have been a pastor here at Peninsula Bible Church.

During all those years when I had the privilege to learn the Scriptures (and to eventually accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior), my heart was filled with the desire to serve. The Lord opened up a teaching ministry, and for the last 20 years I have had the privilege of teaching in churches throughout the United States, the Far East, Europe, Africa and South America. I am a very privileged man who has had a rich variety of experiences.

One of the things that I slowly became aware of during those years was that not many people understood how the church was designed to function. Each church in which I participated had a struggle in understanding the office and the function of elders. But then, as I studied church history, I discovered that this has been a 2,000-year struggle in the church. Some churches I attended appointed as elders men who were successful in business. Other churches appointed elders because they had financial status, they were well accepted in the community, they were popular, because they loved people, because they were faithful in their service, etc. I have been in some churches that are buying the current, popular theology of appointing women elders; some have even appointed practicing homosexuals as elders.

Not only is there confusion over the office of eldership, but over the function of elders in the body of Christ. Should elders rule with an iron fist in a velvet glove? Are elders lords or servants? Should they listen to the voice of the people or to the voice of God? Should they rule by majority or by unanimous vote? Should they dare to discipline when they might be sued as a result? How should they deal with immoral political leaders in the community? How should they deal with political issues? What should they do with false prophets and heretics? These are not easy questions to answer, but they must be answered, and answered correctly, if we are to have a spiritually healthy church through which our Lord Jesus Christ can continue his plan of redemption until he comes again.

Through 20 centuries of church history, godly men who have sought to be faithful to the will of God have been driven back to the Word of God, especially to the apostle Paul's letters to Timothy and to Titus, the Pastoral Epistles. Over the years these three letters have become a handbook for godly men who sought to walk in the way of Christ, to discern his mind and heart, and to understand how his church was to function.

Let us therefore study the book of Titus together, remembering that ours will not be the last word on this subject.

There is confusion over the office of eldership

Background

Paul wrote three Pastoral Letters during the years 63-67 A.D. to two of his spiritual sons, Timothy and Titus. These two men, whom Paul led to Christ, represented Paul and the apostles in different churches. They collected offerings for the stewing in Judea during the famine; they were peacemakers to the churches; they carried letters; they gave instructions to the churches from the apostles. The apostle instructed Timothy to appoint elders in Ephesus, and Titus to appoint elders in Crete. Paul had three basic ideas in mind when he wrote these letters: first, he instructed these men to guard the faith; secondly, to guard the flock by teaching them sound doctrine; and thirdly, to guard against false prophets.

There is debate over the sequence of events that led up to the apostle's writing of these Pastoral Epistles. It may, however, have been as follows. After Paul was released from his four-year imprisonment in Rome, he was arrested in Jerusalem for speaking out against the Jewish tradition, the law of Moses and the customs. He was taken to Caesarea, in Palestine, and put in a Roman prison for two years (60-61 A.D.). From there he was taken to Rome, placed under house arrest from 61 to 62 A.D., and then released because none of the Jews showed up to press the charges against him. There is some indication that he then went to Spain and to England. (Before he went to Spain he sent Timothy to Philippi.) Clement of Rome wrote in 96-97 A.D.:

Paul . . . having taught righteousness to the whole world, having gone to the limits of the West, having given testimony before the rulers thus passed from the world and was taken up in the Holy Place, having become the outstanding model of endurance.

"Having gone to the limits of the West," probably means Spain, even England, perhaps. Then Paul returned to Philippi, where Timothy joined him and they went on to Ephesus together. Paul left Ephesus, went back to Macedonia and wrote to Timothy the letter we now call I Timothy. Next, Paul went to Macedonia in northern Greece), with Titus, his other spiritual son, and travelled down to the island of Crete to minister there for a short period of time. Paul left Titus there, returned to Philippi, from where he wrote the letter to Titus.

Later Paul went to Asia Minor, where he was arrested. (It seems he had to leave quickly because, according to 2 Timothy, he asked Timothy to bring his parchments and his cloak.) Paul was among a group of Christians accused by Nero of burning down the city of Rome. The apostle was taken from Troas to Rome, and placed in a dungeon. During that imprisonment he wrote 2 Timothy, asking Timothy to join him. Very soon after he wrote that letter, Paul was taken outside the city of Rome and was beheaded.

In his letter to Titus, Paul lays out instructions for elders in that day and for all the centuries since

1. Paul Sets The Example--Titus 1 :1-4

Paul, a bond-servant of God, an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago, but at the proper time manifested, even His word, in the proclamation with which I was entrusted according to the commandment of God our Savior; to Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

I suspect one of the greatest joys of the Christian life is when we thoroughly understand who we are in the sight of God, what are our spiritual gifts, and what is the message which we proclaim to the world. Then we have spiritual rest and contentment. There is also a sense of maturity, of wholeness and worth for those who continue to seek the mind of God. Such was Paul's experience at this time.

Paul is laying out his credentials. He calls himself "a bond-servant of God." He is saying, in effect, "I am a

slave of the God who created the universe. I'm held captive by him. I once was held captive by Satan, by sin, shame and guilt, but I have been set free by Jesus Christ, transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light so that I'm free to serve the Living God. "

I have a friend who tells me occasionally, "I don't mind being called a servant of God; I just don't like being treated like one!" Bob Dylan's song, "You Gotta Serve Somebody," says,

You may be an ambassador to England or France,
You may like to gamble, you may like to dance.
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world,
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.
But you're gonna serve somebody,
You're gonna serve somebody.
It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord,
But you're gonna serve somebody.

That sums up the reality of life. God has called us to serve him, and if we do not choose to do that we will end up serving the devil.

Then Paul goes on to say, "Not only am I a servant of God, held captive by the love, the mercy and the grace of God; not only am I wrapped up in the will of Another; not only am I one who understands that his life is no longer his own but I am bought with a price, but I am also an apostle of Jesus Christ. My life is not my own, and my message is not my own. I have been sent by God to tell the world that his Son has loved the world from the beginning and that he has come to forgive the sins of mankind and to make of us children of God. I have been given a message that has so affected my life I cannot stop talking about it, and I want it to affect you too. I am an apostle of Jesus Christ, constrained by God to tell everybody that my ministry is to build the spiritual kingdom of the body of Christ by the power of the Spirit, through the message of the Word." (The reason Paul refers to himself as "an apostle of Jesus Christ" in this personal letter to Titus is because Titus could demonstrate to others that it was not his idea but Paul's to appoint elders in the churches in Crete.)

Having shared who he is, Paul now goes on to share his purpose, and that is, first, "for the faith of those chosen of God" (verse 1). Speaking of Paul the Lord had said, "He is a chosen vessel of mine to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel . . . and to suffer much." (Acts 9). Paul understood that he was chosen of God, first, to salvation, then to apostleship, and that his message was to be given to both Jews and Gentiles because God was calling out a people for his namesake. Paul knew in God's sight he was a sweet aroma, a fragrance to those who were in the process of being saved. Paul understood that he was chosen, and that he was chosen to go and to work among those who were also chosen.

To be chosen of God should create in our hearts a sense of security, gratitude, and well-being; it should create in our hearts a sense of humility and a sense of responsibility. The sovereignty of God and the free will of men is a mystery, and it will remain a mystery until we sit at the very feet of Christ.

So Paul's first purpose is evangelism. His second is teaching: "for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness." Paul wanted people to come to the full knowledge of who God is, to not only get the facts but to fully experience the very life of Christ who was living in them. I am amazed at how many people know these truths and refuse to apply them to their lives, how many people have full knowledge of everything God wants for them and yet say, "I really don't know if God loves me, that my sins are forgiven, that I've been empowered by the Holy Spirit, that I have a choice. I really don't know if I can get over my jealousy and hatred, my bitterness." But Paul wants us to know that we can experience all of this because the Spirit, who lives in us, is empowering us to cope with reality.

Paul goes on to explain the basis for his own life of faith and obedience, his apostleship, and how that should motivate the Christ-like lifestyle in his readers. He is saying, in effect, "If I give you understanding, and then you experience the truth that will change your life so that when men and women are with you they will think they have been with Christ, that truth will result in Christ-likeness towards God and towards each other. " The motivating factor, Paul says, is the fact that we have "hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie,

promised long ages ago."

Paul is saying that our motivating factor is that once Christ came into our lives he gave us the hope that we will have the fullness of eternal life. I am experiencing eternal life right now. Every one of you who has accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is experiencing eternal life too. "This is eternal life, that you believe in God and his Son Jesus Christ." (John 17:3) "This is" _present tense. You are already paused on the edge of forever. At death you are simply experiencing the fullness of your new body, a body that can handle forever.

Paul says this promise is based on God's Word--and, unlike the Cretans, God does not lie. God made this promise before sundials, watches or calendars were made. This was all in God's plan long before there was a sequence of Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, January, February, March, or 1982,1983,1984. He thought about it before we came into time and space--"long ages ago." In his love and mercy God chose us "before the foundation of the world"; there was a kingdom ready for us "before the foundation of the world"; Christ died for us "before the foundation of the world." There is much more going on than we can even comprehend, yet we are all caught up in trivialities; we see life from a wrong point of view. We should be looking at life as God sees it in his Word. We have to start living like that. That should be our motivation. We are going somewhere; we are being trained and equipped now to function in eternity.

Then, Paul says, his message of hope is this: "But at the proper time manifested, even his word, in the proclamation with which I was entrusted according to the commandment of God our Savior" (verse 3). The message is, "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

So we see that Paul understands who he is. He shares with us his credentials and his purpose. He has been entrusted to share with all who will listen that he is part of God's whole plan of redemption.

Paul addresses Titus as "my true child in the faith.", Titus, a Gentile, apparently was led to the Lord by Paul in Antioch, Syria, early in Paul's ministry with Barnabus. Titus was one of Paul's representatives who went around from church to church with the word of the apostle. He was an encourager, a peacemaker; he collected offerings for the church in Jerusalem. Titus was a very important person at the Jerusalem Council when the issue, "Should Gentile Christians be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses?" was debated. The Council decided that Titus did not have to be circumcised." In other passages, Paul calls Titus, "My brother, my partner, my fellow worker, my true child." "Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior," is Paul's greeting to Titus. "Grace" is that form of love expressed by God in sending his Son; "peace" is the result of our reconciliation with God through Christ. Christ came into the world to save sinners, to provide grace, reconciliation, forgiveness and peace.

2. Titus Sets In Order What Remains--Titus 1:5-9

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. . .

Paul and Titus worked in Crete for a season among the Jews who had accepted the Lord 30 years earlier under the preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost. Other converts were added under their ministry. The churches in Crete grew quickly. They needed order, a sense of direction.

Crete is an island about 75 miles south of Greece. Cretans are descended from the ancient tribes of the Philistines, those people who bothered Saul and David so much. They were great sailors and pirates. "One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said of them, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beast, lazy gluttons.'" (Titus 1:12) Yet God in his love and grace did not avoid them because of all these characteristics. That is who we all were before we came to know Christ.

"Set in order what remains," Paul instructs Titus. Set things straight, make sure things are running right, that things are done correctly, he is saying. Then, "appoint elders in every city as I directed you." Homer said that Crete had one hundred cities. Titus was to go and appoint elders in those cities that had churches, to appoint men who had already been raised up, qualified and gifted by the Holy Spirit, those who had given evidence of this in their lives and their service within the church.

"Elder" has the idea of a senior, one who is mature in wisdom and knowledge. In the Old Testament the grey--beards, the grey-heads, the senior ones headed up the communities, the tribes. In the New Testament was added the idea of the spiritually mature. The concept of elders is evident rather early in the history of Israel. Elders were the leaders of the twelve tribes. After speaking to God at the burning bush, Moses and Aaron gathered all the elders and told them that God was going to deliver the nation from bondage. Moses picked seventy elders to go with him to Mt. Sinai, where he received the law from God. Then Moses picked seventy elders to govern with him when Israel was in the wilderness. After the exile, we find elders functioning in the synagogues. During Jesus' lifetime there were elders in both the synagogue and in the Sanhedrin, the supreme court that ruled the nation under the Roman government. The 3,000 Jews who accepted the Lord at the Day of Pentecost were already accustomed to the principle of eldership. They had an effective form of government that had lasted throughout their history, therefore it was only natural for them to transfer the idea of eldership from the synagogue into the New Testament church. Early in the Book of Acts the apostles were the elders who dealt with a dispute involving the Hellenistic widows. Elders are also mentioned in Acts 14 and 15. So eldership was a clear concept in New Testament times.

What are the functions of the elders in New Testament times? It is important to see that "elder" is the office, while its function is overseer, or bishop. The function of overseers, then, according to Acts 20:28-31, is this: they are chosen by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by spiritual men in the community; they are to function by guarding themselves and the flock of God locally by overseeing, looking out for, watching over, being shepherds and pastors who feed and guide the sheep. They are responsible to God for the care of his flock; they are to be alert for wolves and false prophets. They are to do all of this voluntarily, according to the will of God. They are to do it with eagerness, but not to make money. They are not to lord over anyone but to try and set examples for people to follow. They are to know that they have been delegated authority from the Chief Shepherd, who will one day come and make an account. (I Peter 1:1-4)

What are the qualifications for eldership? Paul lists some 18 qualifications here and adds five more in 1 Timothy 3:1-8. Keep in mind that the Holy Spirit is not looking for perfect men--there aren't any--but he appoints men who are willing to depend on him for these characteristics.

A. Responsibilities Toward His Family

Titus 1:6

Namely, if any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who bet/eve, not accuses of riotous living or rebellion.

The first thing Paul says is, "If any man." Note that elders are to be men, that they are to function as men called by God, to continue their role of headship as designed by God in creation. All the elders throughout the history of Israel were men. Even though he was surrounded by godly women, Jesus appointed 12 men as apostles. Though the apostles in turn were surrounded by godly women, they appointed only men. The issue is function, not equality of person hood. This is the way God wants his church to function--by choosing men to be elders.

An elder is to be "above reproach"; i.e., he is to be blameless. And he is to be the husband of one wife. The Roman, Greek and Jewish cultures of the day were falling apart. There were religious prostitutes, concubines and polygamy on every side. Here Paul is going back to God's original plan of one man and one woman for life. That is how an elder should live in the midst of a corrupt society. Through 20 centuries the church fathers have fought over the meaning of this phrase, "the husband of one wife." I think what Paul is talking about here is a "holistic" marriage: that an elder love his wife physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Then an elder is to have "children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion." Paul is referring to a lifestyle, not an isolated incident. We all have children who rebel from time to time, but not as a lifestyle. Elders are to have children who are under the hand of God and under the hand of their father.

I have been amazed that many elders here at PBC will come to their brothers and ask, "Should I resign

because of my child's activity?" One elder who took a year off to get his family squared away, came back and was well received. I know that I have held him in high esteem for his honesty ever since.

So Paul talks about the responsibility of the elder to his own family first, and then he goes on to deal with the responsibility of an elder toward the spiritual family of Christ.

B. Responsibilities Toward His Spiritual Family,

Titus 1:7-9

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.

An elder is to be above reproach, blameless, for he is God's steward. He is not to be self-willed, but Christ-centered. He is not to be quick tempered but patient, to have a long fuse toward people. He should not be addicted to wine but to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. to be sober in his spirit. He should not be quarrelsome but to be a peacemaker. He is not to use his eldership to make money, but he is to be generous, hospitable, a lover of strangers. He is to love what is good toward his fellow man and toward God. He should be sensible, that is, a sound mind toward life. He is to be just toward all, devout, and responsible in fulfilling moral obligations to God and man. He must be self-controlled, that is, he is to have restrained reactions in any given situation. He is to hold fast to the faithful word, cleaving to the Word of God as the final authority in his life and the life of the church.

An elder should be able to exhort in sound doctrine and to encourage people. He should refute those who contradict the message and seek to win them to his point of view. 1 Timothy 3:1-8 gives five more characteristics of an elder. He is to be sober in spirit; he must not be a new convert; he has to be able to teach the Word of God, to be gentle, and to have a good reputation within the community. The Cretan churches needed godly elders to bring order to their churches, to bring sound doctrine to believers, and to encourage holy living in an unholy society. Through the centuries God has appointed godly men in each generation to keep his church spiritual healthy and give out the message of his love and grace.

In this year of 1983 guess where you are? Before the foundation of the world, God planned for you and I to be at PBC where he has appointed godly elders to lead us, feed us and watch over us. We need to know who they are, to pray for them on a consistent basis. I will read their names for you, together with their years of service. (Eldership at PBC is a lifetime office.) I want to mention the years they have served this church so you can see how faithful these men have been. We have thirteen elders at this time: Don Broesamle (2); Barney Brogan (10); Bruce Cairns (6); Craig Duncan (4); Don Gruelle (1); Bill Hyatt (5); Charlie Luce (28); Eff Martin (5), Jim Wolfe (10)- Bob Roe (25); Ray Stedman (20); Paul Winslow (10); Steve Zeisler (8 years)

Do you realize how blessed we are? Do you have any idea how often these men Bather to pray for our souls, to lead us in righteousness, to care about us, to encourage us, to develop our spiritual gifts, to teach us, to guard us against false prophets, to guard us against heretics? Let us be faithful to pray for them.

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Titus 1:1-9

First Message

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