

## **God's View of Church Leaders**

### **Titus 1:5-9**

When you want someone to be Prime Minister, what do you look for?

- Someone who presents well in the media spotlight.
- Someone who can make tough decisions.
- Someone who stands firm and isn't swayed back and forth by every lobby group that comes along.
- Someone who looks sincere and sounds like they know what they're talking about.
- Someone who can hold together political factions.

Does their private life have any relevance for their appointment to public office? There was a time when people thought it did. Nowadays, we're not so sure. As long as they get the job done, most people don't seem to care too much about what they do in their private lives. And besides, we're so vague on issues of morality these days, that it's hard to make judgment calls. There are exceptions, of course – child pornography, taking bribes in public office, lying to the parliament – but something like failing to keep your vows to your spouse doesn't seem to matter too much these days.

When you want someone to be head of a company, what do you look for?

- Someone who knows the business of the company.
- Someone who can get the team working together in the same direction.
- Someone who can make tough decisions firmly.
- Someone who's ruthless in cutting costs.
- Someone who can out-think the opposition.

Does their private life have any relevance for their appointment to the board? Some of it does. You want

someone who's loyal – at least, for as long as they're on your payroll. You want someone of integrity – at least in relation to their internal dealings with the company. But what they do at home? That's their business – so long as they don't embroil the company in some public scandal that sends the share price plummeting.

When you want someone to be an elder in a church, what do you look for? At one level, there are some similarities. We're appointing these people as leaders. They do have to provide some leadership and direction for the organisation – the church. But the nature of the organisation and the whole purpose of the church are so different from a country or a company, that it's quite likely the required qualifications for leaders will also be significantly different.

### **The Importance of Appointing Elders**

Paul begins his letter proper by reminding Titus:

*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.*

Paul and Titus and perhaps some others did some evangelistic work on the island of Crete. They preached the good news about Jesus and His death for their sins. And people responded to the message. They became Christians. This happened at various places throughout the island.

Paul's gone off somewhere else – presumably to preach the good news of Jesus to some other people. He's left Titus behind on the island of Crete. Titus has the job of organising these young Christians into young churches. A very important part of that task is appointing good

leadership. That's what Paul left him to do. That's what Paul reminds him of at the outset of this letter.

Why does Paul tell Titus this? Presumably Titus already knew. Presumably Titus also already knew the list of qualifications Paul's about to write. Titus wasn't new to this church planting task. I think the reason probably has to do with letting the new Christians on Crete hear about the importance of this task. When you get right to the end of the letter, Paul closes with

*Grace be with you all.*

The rest of the letter's in the singular – addressed to Titus as an individual. But this final greeting's in the plural. So, it seems there's probably some expectation this letter will be read to each of the congregations. It's not just that Paul wanted to remind Titus this is an important task. He also wanted to let the new Christians know this is important.

Why? Several reasons spring to mind – although none of them is explicit in the text itself.

- First, it lets them know what they should expect their leaders to do and what they should expect their leaders to be like. We all like to grumble about leaders – and what they don't do for us and how they don't measure up. This lets them know what the right things to grumble about are – and what the wrong things are.
- Secondly, some of them may aspire to become leaders in the church in the future. This lets them know what sort of qualities they should develop.
- Thirdly, some of them – or maybe even all of them – may be involved in appointing church leaders at some time in the future – perhaps after Titus leaves.

This lets them know what sort of qualities are important in choosing Christian leaders.

- Fourthly, and most importantly, this lets them know what should be going on in their own lives. This is a partial description of what godliness looks like – the godliness that results from faith and knowledge of the truth. It's not that we've got two different classes of Christian – the average Christ-ian and the Christian leader. All Christians pursue godliness. It's not an area where you can pick and choose. I'll try for this bit of godliness in relation to not stealing, but I'm not interested in getting rid of my greed so I won't bother trying for godliness there. That's not how godliness works.

Thus, as you're listening to these qualifications for church leaders – sure, think about how they apply to me and the other elders at BEC – but also think about how they apply to you. You can't simply say:

Oh, that's what the leaders have to be like. I'm just an ordinary Christian. I don't have to bother about that sort of stuff.

If this is a description of godliness, it's just as relevant to you – because your faith and your knowledge of the truth are supposed to lead to godliness in your life.

### **The Qualifications for Elders**

So what is it that elders should look like? What should you look like? Paul begins with a summary term:

*An elder must be blameless ...*

It's repeated at the beginning of verse 7:

*Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless ...*

Everyone's quick to point out it doesn't mean perfect –

otherwise we'd have no elders. It's the idea of being above reproach. There are no public scandals. There's no ongoing evidence of bad character. The person's reputation in the church and community isn't smeared by ungodly behaviour. The shameful embezzlements and sex scandals surrounding the televangelists a couple of decades ago are definitely out of place for elders and other church leaders.

But they're out of place for you as well, aren't they? Do you think God condemns the extra-marital affair of some church leader but thinks it's OK for you – just because you're an ordinary member in the pew? Is it wrong for some church leader to bring dishonour to the church by his behaviour, but it's all right for any of the rest of us to do it simply because we're not church leaders? You too should aim to be blameless.

### Home Life

I've divided the rest of the qualifications into three groups. The first has to do with the elder's home life:

*An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.*

An elder must be faithful to his marriage partner. I don't think it's saying an elder has to be married – that single people somehow don't qualify. Rather, it's saying that married people must be faithful to their spouse. That's a basic essential for Christians in this matter of godliness. It's an area where we differ from our culture. All sorts of sexual immorality seem quite acceptable in our culture – even in our cultural leaders. In some parts of our culture, it's even encouraged. You can't be a real leader unless

you've been unfaithful. Not so with us. We're to be faithful within our marriages. For single people, it means faithfulness to any potential future spouse – which means not sleeping around before you get married.

The elder's children are also to be *faithful*. It could mean two different things. It could refer to children who are Christians – and that's how the NIV has translated it. It could refer to children who are faithful to their father – that is, show him respect, submit to him, obey him. On balance, I think the latter's more likely.

- I think the words that follow describe what Paul meant – faithful in the sense that the children aren't open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.
- And secondly, it corresponds to the idea found in a similar passage in 1 Tim.3:4 – see that his children obey him with proper respect.

If a man can't keep his children appropriately under control, he should work on that responsibility – rather than take on any additional church responsibilities.

### The Negatives

That's the first group. For the church leader, godliness starts in the home – how he relates to his wife, how he relates to his children. Godliness must be seen to be working there first of all. The second group are the negatives – what an elder is not. There are five of them.

- Not overbearing is the first one in the NIV. Not self-willed; not self-pleasing; not arrogant. In other words, not someone who has to always be right, has to always get their own way, has to push themselves forward because they think no one else is better than them or has better ideas. They're not helpful people to have on leadership teams.

- The second is not quick-tempered or not inclined to anger – not someone with a short fuse.
- The third is not given to drunkenness.
- The fourth is not violent – not someone who strikes out at others. Paul probably meant physical violence, but I don't think he'd exclude emotional violence as well.
- The fifth is not pursuing dishonest gain. The translation's probably a bit misleading. The focus is more on those who are greedy for money – rather than the matter of dishonesty.

Think back over that list – and leave out the nots. Aren't they the qualities we often look for in our cultural leaders – our politicians and our business leaders and even our sporting heroes? Aren't they the sort of people who get ahead in our Australian world?

- We want politicians who believe in themselves and their vision for the country and who don't think someone else is better for the job and who'll push forward with all they've got to achieve that great vision and don't mind treading on a few toes to get the job done (as long as they're not our toes).
- We want CEOs who are greedy for the company's bottom line and will make lots of money for the shareholders and insist they're worth the obscene bonuses they've written into their own contracts.
- We live in a culture that, until recently, has promoted heavy drinking as a sign of maturity and strength and even sophistication. Some people are now beginning to see the stupidity of that message. Yet, many parts of our culture still promote that image.

Elders aren't to be like that. In Mark 10:42, Jesus says:

*You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant ...*

Things are different in the church. Leaders are different. But it's not just the leaders – it's everyone – for this is what godliness looks like.

- We don't want elders who lose their temper quickly because we don't want Christians who lose their temper quickly.
- We don't want elders who are heroes at heavy drinking because we don't want Christians who are heroes at heavy drinking.

We react fairly strongly against a Christian leader who's in it for the money – some pastor who abuses his position to fleece the flock for his own personal benefit. So why don't we react just as strongly when we hear of someone calling themselves a Christian who displays pure greed in the so-called secular realm? It's because we get upset at the wrong sin.

- We think when the pastor does it, the problem is he took it at the expense of the flock. He's actually slowed me down in satisfying my greed because I've given my money to him.
- We don't realise that the real offence is greed itself. Our culture's trained us to tolerate an acceptable level of greed.

The gospel's there to change us. Our faith and our knowledge of the truth are to lead to godliness. Godliness means saying "no" to some things that are quite acceptable in our culture.

### The Positives

The third group of qualifications for elders are the positives. Paul lists six of them in verse 8:

*Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.*

Most of those are fairly self-explanatory, but we do well to dwell on them because of their importance.

- Hospitable – someone who's welcoming of others, both friends and strangers. We often think in terms of hospitality, but the word's broader than that.
- Loves what is good – not simply tolerates it or acknowledges it or approves it, but loves it.
- Self-controlled – especially with this word the wise and prudent aspect of self-control, having a sober and sensible judgment, knowing the right time to speak and the time to keep silent.
- Upright – lives in accordance with God's will, law-abiding, living in a righteous way.
- Holy – pious, devout, pleasing to God, set apart for God and for God's service.
- Disciplined – keeps himself under control, like an athlete who develops the body through strict training.

George Knight summarises it for us:

Paul has sketched out with these few well-chosen words the characteristics that must mark an overseer: he must love people and equally love virtue. He must be wise and prudent, must live in accordance with God's law, must be devoted to God and seek to please Him, and must manifest genuine self-control. With this blend of characteristics, the Christian leader is

equipped by God's grace to exercise the kind of oversight that a steward in God's house should exercise.<sup>1</sup>

It's worth pausing to ask whether these are the qualities our neighbours want in our secular leaders. Of course they don't want the stuff that relates to God, but what about the other qualities – hospitable, loves what is good, self-controlled. They're not things they'd object to, but they're also not the priorities. Given the choice between someone who gets the job done and someone who excels in self-control – they'll put up with a lack of self-control for the sake of the bottom line (whether that be the company or the country). They'll overlook the odd occasion of drunkenness, loss of temper, violent outburst, infidelity – as long as they can keep my standard of living going in the right direction. That's not the way it's to be in the church. These qualities take priority over getting the so-called job done – for, if we truly understand the gospel, these qualities are the job.

### **The Function of Elders**

Verse 9 provides a further qualification of elders – one that points to a major function of elders.

*He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.*

The elder must have a sound grasp of the message of Christianity. It's related back to what we saw last week.

Paul taught them:

- the knowledge of the truth;
- the promise of God;
- the preaching entrusted to him.

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<sup>1</sup> George Knight, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (NIGNT) 293.

The elders need to have a firm grasp of this message – not simply so they can boast of their knowledge, but they may do two things.

First, they're to encourage others with sound doctrine. How do people become Christians? How do people grow as Christians? We saw it last week – through faith and knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness. That's always the way. Thus, the church needs leaders who can and will do that – leaders who know the truth and hold firmly to the truth and teach the truth. As the gospel is made known – as you hear God's promise – so you'll grow in godliness.

Secondly, they're to refute those who oppose the truth. Ever since Adam and Eve rebelled against God back in the Garden, untruth has abounded in the world. We're very good at making up reasons for not believing God. We're very good at making those reasons sound sensible and believable and popular. There's a lot of stuff floating around in our culture that opposes God. It's part of the atmosphere we breathed before we became Christians. It remains part of the atmosphere we live in. Moreover, if we're not careful, that untrue thinking finds its way into the church itself in the form of false teaching. We'll see more of that next week. It's important for church leaders to recognise that stuff – whether it's coming from those outside the church or those inside it – and refute it.

These days, many Christians don't seem to like either of these two things.

- Mention the word doctrine and they react negatively in one of two ways. Doctrine's boring. It sends people to sleep. It's too hard on the brain. Or

doctrine's divisive. It splits churches. It starts new denominations. Either way, people don't like doctrine.

- Mention the idea of refuting or false teaching and people also react negatively. These days we want to be strongly affirming, always inclusive, seeking to find common ground, emphasising God's wonderful grace. The idea of false teaching's not popular. The idea of standing up against false teaching is frowned on.

Thus, we've got a problem – because the Bible sees this as an important qualification of elders. At this point, when I say "we've", I'm talking about the Australian church in general, rather than us at BEC in particular. Generally, we rightly see this qualification as important. But the Australian church has a problem if it discourages elders from doing this or if it doesn't think this is very important in what the elder does. The Australian church has a problem if it loads up elders with too many other things so they can't do this or can't do it properly or it gets crowded out. The Australian church has a problem if it criticises elders when they're involved in refuting those who oppose the gospel – whether inside or outside the church.

### **Lessons for us**

So, what conclusions should we draw? Let me suggest two. First, while this is talking about appointing leaders, it really applies to all of us. This is part of what godliness looks like. This is what the gospel's producing in you. So, you can't simply sit back and say:

O, that's for people who want to be leaders. I just want to be an ordinary Christian, so I don't have to worry

about that stuff. They can be godly, I'll just get on with other things.

Godliness is for all of us. We need godly leaders to show the way. We need people demonstrating the reality of the gospel in their lives to lead us – and to exhort us to copy their example. These are qualities you should desire in your life whether or not you're a leader.

Secondly, we need to ask whether this remains our focus when choosing church leaders today. A lot's been written about leadership in recent years. It's one of the growth areas in Christian books – people have been writing about it and presumably people have been buying what's written or the publishers wouldn't be producing this plethora of books. Some of what's written focuses on passages like this. Some of what's written focuses on other stuff.

- Some encourage us to follow the political model – leaders with charisma who use the modern media to advantage. Leaders who know how to draw a huge crowd and motivate people
- Some encourage us to follow the corporate model – leaders with strong personalities that can get the organisation in line and running smoothly. Leaders who can make the tough ministry decisions to keep the church afloat in these economically challenged times.

There are other models as well – based on different aspects of our modern culture.

There may be some value in some of these things. There's nothing wrong with church leaders having charisma. There's nothing wrong with church leaders knowing how to use modern technology. There's nothing wrong with church leaders having administrative skills. But

they're not the main thing. They're not the main focus of this passage. They're not the main focus of the New Testament. And if we focus on these things that are important in our culture and ignore the things the Bible instructs us to focus on – then we'll run into trouble. We won't have church leaders who can do what's important, namely:

- encourage us to godliness with sound doctrine; and
- refute those who oppose the gospel.

We're in the business of making disciples of Jesus – getting people to the point of submitting to Jesus and then growing in their Christian lives – presenting Christ to everyone and presenting everyone mature in Christ. Leaders in the church need to exhibit the product they're selling – not just in the sense that you'd prefer the boss of Ford not to be driving a Holden, but in the sense that they must demonstrate the godliness God offers the world. And so, their private lives are just as relevant as their public lives when being considered for the position of elder.