

## **SERVANTS OF THE GREAT KING – Part 2 (November 16, 1997)**

The following is what a contemporary consultant might have written to our Lord concerning His selection of disciples.

TO: Jesus, Son of Joseph, Woodcrafter's Carpenter Shop, Nazareth 25922.

FROM: Jordan management Consultants, Jerusalem 26544.

Dear Sir,

Thank you for submitting the resumes of the twelve men you have picked for management positions in your new organisation.

All have now taken our battery of tests; and we have not only run the results through our computer, but we also arranged personal interviews for each with our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultant.

The profiles of all the tests are included and you will want to study each of them carefully.

As part of our service for your guidance, we make some general comments, much as an auditor will include some general statements. This is given as a result of staff consultation and comes without any additional fee.

It is the staff opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and is given to fits of temper.

Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership.

The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interests above company loyalty.

Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale.

We feel that it is our duty to tell you that Matthew has been black-listed by the greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau.

James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, definitely have radical leanings, and they both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale.

One of the candidates, however, shows some great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious and responsible.

We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man. All the other profiles are self explanatory.

We wish you every success in your new venture.

Sincerely yours,

Jordan Management Consultants.

Truly man's "wisdom" would probably exclude most of us from God's service. But, God delights in confounding man's "wisdom" and chooses the weak things to confound the mighty.

If we were to follow the wisdom of the world in choosing the men to lead the church of Jesus Christ then the qualifications for church leadership would be these:

An overseer then must be able to win friends and influence people, have the skills of compromise and conflict resolution, be entrepreneurially wise, have the ability to market the church, be proficient at vision statements and have the gift to keep the masses entertained and happy.

However, those are *not* the qualifications which the Lord has decreed should identify the men He requires to lead His church. The Lord has not chosen the skills of business, government or worldly leadership. Instead he has chosen men with hearts after the Lord's own to nurture His flock. There is a vast chasm between worldly leadership and biblical leadership.

Last week we searched the Scriptures to find that these men who are to lead the church are known as elders or overseers. Today we want to begin an examination of three passages which provide detailed directions to enable the church to discern which men the Lord has chosen as His under-shepherds on earth.

Let me read those three passages to you and then we will work our way through them.

The first is 1 Timothy 3:1-7:

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Very similar is 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, namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. 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, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

Finally, we have 1 Peter 5:1-3:

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

As you read through these qualifications, a few things strike you. The first is that the standard set is incredibly high. The shepherds of the flock are to be choice servants – the most Christlike men in the congregation. But another thing that staggers me each time I review these lists is the fact that church after church has compromised on these qualifications.

In 1987 I was at a conference for pastors in Queensland. I was a young doctor who had only been a Christian a few years and felt out of place among forty of the best men Queensland had in the ministry. When the topic turned to qualifications for elders and these qualifications were reviewed, one man stood to his feet. He said that to actually hold these qualifications up as a standard was an unobtainable ideal. He went on to say that he did not meet those qualifications. Most of the men in that room did not meet those qualifications and he did not know any church in Queensland where all the elders actually met the qualifications.

He then asked these questions, "What should we do? If we don't have men that truly meet these qualifications should we just close each church? Surely all we can do is to find the best men available?"

I put it to you today that so many of the problems in the churches in our land are because the leaders of those churches are the 'best men available.' The standard for leaders in the church has been reduced from the Lord's standard to what **we** deem is an acceptable compromise.

The church has compromised in so many areas, but surely the most tragic compromise is in allowing men who do not meet the standard into positions of leadership.

- **If** elders are to be an example to the flock.
- **If** elders are to hold fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that they will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.
- **If** elders are not to become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.
- **If** elders are to shepherd the flock of God, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to their charge.

**Then** we cannot compromise.

Compromise will lead to tragedy. Men who are merely the best available rather than those the Lord has decreed must lead the church – these men **will** compromise in some area of their oversight.

- They will compromise doctrinally and allow error into the church.
- They will compromise practically and allow practices that do not honour the Lord to arise.
- They will compromise morally and set an example for the church which is unacceptable.
- They will compromise by becoming tyrants who follow their own desires not the will of the Lord.
- They will compromise and not make the hard decisions which give glory to the Lord.

The Hosea 4:9 principle is very apt:

Like people, like priest.

The people will not rise to any greater spiritual heights than the men who lead them.

Listen to these words of J. Oswald Sanders in his wonderful book *Spiritual Leadership*:

The young man of leadership calibre will work while others waste time, study while others sleep, pray while others play. There will be no place for loose or slovenly habits in word or thought, deed or dress. He will observe a soldierly discipline in diet and deportment so that he might wage a good warfare. He will without reluctance undertake the unpleasant task that others evade because it evokes no applause or wins no appreciation. A Spirit-filled leader will not shrink from facing up to difficult persons or from grasping the nettle when that is necessary. He will kindly and courageously administer rebuke when that is called for, or he will exercise necessary discipline when the interests of the Lord's work demand it. He will not procrastinate in writing the difficult letter. His letter basket will not conceal the evidences of his failure to grapple with urgent problems. His prayer will be:

God harden me against myself,  
The coward with pathetic voice  
Who craves for ease and rest and joy.

Myself, arch-traitor to myself,  
My hollowest friend,  
My deadliest foe,  
My clog, whatever road I go.<sup>1</sup>

These are the men who must lead the flock. If we want a strong vibrant church that can be a brand in this dark land, then we need men touched by the Spirit of God leading it. The task is too great, the hurdles too high, the enemy too strong, our sin too robust. Nothing less will suffice.

George Liddell expressed this in a heart felt cry:

Give me a man of God – one man,  
Whose faith is master of his mind,  
And I will right all wrongs,  
And bless the name of all mankind.

Give me a man of God – one man,  
Whose tongue is touched with heaven's fire,  
And I will flame the darkest hearts,  
With high resolve and clean desire.

Give me a man of God – one man,  
One mighty prophet of the Lord,  
And I will give you peace on earth,  
Bought with a prayer and not a sword.

Give me a man of God – one man,  
True to the vision that he sees,  
And I will build your broken shrines,  
And bring the nations to their knees.<sup>2</sup>

My prayer, my plea, my demand for this church, is that we determine to only allow as elders, men who truly meet the requirements found in the Scriptures.

At the outset, I want to make one point. Most of you will never be elders. Ladies you will not be elders. Many of you men will not be elders. **But**, don't think that the only application of this message for you is in ensuring that godly men fill the leadership of this church. These qualifications we will look at today and next week are in the main moral qualifications. They are a picture of Christlikeness. Every Christian – male and female, elder and non-elder – should strive to see every one of these qualifications in their life. These qualifications are a picture of the state of the heart that every one of us should desire to be conformed to. *But*, they are a picture that every elder **must** be conformed to.

While none of the lists of qualifications expressly list it, surely the first qualification of an elder must be salvation. Many might wonder that I would list it, yet from Judas until

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<sup>1</sup> J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) p.73.

<sup>2</sup> George Liddell - Cited in J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, 1980 Moody, Chicago IL, pp. 17-18.

this present day men have been in positions of leadership who have not drunk from the living waters of eternal life.

Some are men who are attracted by the authority of the position, the adulation of men or the wealth that can be garnered from leadership. These men are easy to spot.

Others are more subtle. They are those who believe they are saved and truly desire to serve the church. They are those who will cry out on that final day, "Lord, Lord!" only to hear, "I never knew you. Depart from me you who practice lawlessness."

These men will not have the holiness, the desire for God despite every exigency of life, the perseverance that marks out the true saint. These men do not have the sanctifying power of the Spirit to truly meet the qualifications listed in the Scriptures.

Richard Baxter the great Puritan saint, had these words of warning for those who might aspire to leadership:

See that the work of saving grace be thoroughly wrought in your own souls. Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to that effectual working of the gospel which you preach; and lest, while you proclaim to the world the necessity of a Saviour, your own hearts should neglect Him, and you should miss of an interest in Him and His saving benefits. Take heed to yourselves, lest you perish, while you call upon others to take heed of perishing; and lest you famish yourselves while you prepare food for them. Though there is a promise of shining as the stars, to those who 'turn many to righteousness,' that is but on supposition that they are first turned to it themselves. Their own sincerity in the faith is the condition of their glory, simply considered, though their great ministerial labours may be a condition of the promise of their greater glory. Many have warned others that they come not to a place of torment, while yet they hastened to it themselves: many a preacher is now in hell, who hath a hundred times called upon his hearers to use the utmost care and diligence to escape it. Can any reasonable man imagine that God should save men for offering salvation to others, while they refuse it themselves; and for telling others those truths which they themselves neglect and abuse?<sup>3</sup>

In a similar vein, Charles Spurgeon added these sobering words:

The possession of salvation is not a thing to be taken for granted by any man, for there is the great possibility of our being mistaken as to whether we are converted or not. Believe me, it is no child's play to "make your calling and election sure." The world is full of counterfeits, and swarms with panderers to carnal self-conceit, who gather around a minister as vultures around a carcass. Our own hearts are deceitful, so that the truth lies not on the surface, but must be drawn up from the deepest well. We must search ourselves very anxiously and very thoroughly, lest by any means after having preached to others we ourselves should be castaways.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989 reprint), p. 53.

How horrible to be a preacher of the gospel and yet to be unconverted! Let each man here whisper to his own soul, “What a dreadful thing it will be for me if I should be ignorant of the power of the truth which I am preparing to proclaim!”<sup>4</sup>

Let us have no men ignorant of the true grace of Christ occupying positions of leadership in this church.

Turning now to the qualifications explicitly found in the Word, Paul begins in 1 Timothy 3:1:

If any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work that he desires to do.

Leadership of the church is for men. The indefinite pronoun □□□ used here is masculine and is rightly translated – *If any **man** aspires to the office of overseer.*

The first qualification is that a man has a God-given desire to serve the Lord as a shepherd of the flock. No conscripts here. No badgering someone until they cave in and say yes.

Many men have struggled with Paul’s words here. The words *aspire* and *desire* seem to connote ambition and an appetite for this office.

However, the connotation of Paul’s advice depends on what the aspiration is. If a man is seeking the office of overseer for personal advancement, pride or greed – then yes, his aspirations are base and to be condemned. But, if his desire is to be a servant of Christ, willing to sacrifice all, suffer pain and deprivation in order that the church is pure and giving glory to God – then the connotation is not negative.

We must remember that at the time when Paul wrote these words and throughout most of church history and in most countries – to lead the true church meant persecution and often death. Being a leader in the church cost a great deal – time, money, prestige and it was dangerous. Being a church leader was not a great career move.

J. Oswald Sanders said this:

True Greatness, true leadership, is achieved not by reducing men to one’s service but in giving oneself in selfless service to them. And that is never done without cost.

When John and James approached Jesus to ask for positions of greatness in His kingdom, His reply had two parts. Listen to His reply from Mark 10.

*First* we find that leadership comes at a cost – suffering and persecution. Verse 38:

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), p. 9)

But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?”

The cost of leadership would be to suffer similar persecution and suffering that Christ would suffer.

And *second* true leadership is not a place of prestige, but a place of being the servant of all. Verses 42 to 45:

Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognised as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

When a man aspires to lead the church not for personal gain but at personal cost. When he desires not adulation but servanthood. When he does this cheerfully because it will give God glory – then it is a holy aspiration.

We need to understand that this aspiration has two parts – a human part and a divine part. An overseer has within his heart a desire to serve God in the capacity of under-shepherd. He desires to minister as the servant of all. But, that desire was placed there by the Lord. In Acts 20:28, Paul tells the Ephesian elders that it is the Holy Spirit who made them overseers. An elder will feel unworthy and unequal to the task, but the Spirit of God places a burden in his heart. He knows he is inadequate, but he has to obey and serve, because the Lord has called him to it.

Charles Spurgeon gave this advice for those who would be leaders:

Never allow yourself to feel equal to your work. If you ever find that spirit growing on you – BE AFRAID!

If you think you are up to the task – you are not the man for the job. If you know you are insufficient for the task – the Lord has just the kind of material He delights in moulding to His purposes.

If any man has a desire to help God out – BE AFRAID! God doesn’t need you! If the aspiration is to be an unworthy servant doing only what we ought for the glory of the Lord – *then* the aspiration is acceptable.

Samuel Logan Brengle, one of the early leaders of the Salvation Army spoke of *how* that aspiration to serve arises in a man’s heart:

[Spiritual Leadership] is not won by promotion, but by many prayers and tears. It is attained by confessions of sin, and much heartsearching and humbling before God; by surrender, a courageous sacrifice of every idol, a bold, deathless, uncompromising and uncomplaining embracing of the cross, and by an eternal, unfaltering looking unto Jesus crucified. It is not gained by seeking



great things for ourselves, but rather, like Paul, by counting those things that are gain to us as loss for Christ. That is a great price, but it must be unflinchingly paid by him who would not be merely a nominal but a real spiritual leader of men, a leader whose power is recognised and felt in heaven, on earth and in hell.<sup>5</sup>

God places a desire to serve Him sacrificially and at a great cost in the hearts of humble, contrite, godly men. Only a man with this type of God-given desire can perform the task entrusted to his care. Only a man who knows he is inadequate will continually draw on the strength of the Lord.

The church is beset by many sins, temptations and errors. Satan is ever vigilant to attack the work of God. We need men with a God-given desire to persevere in the work.

The English reformer Hugh Latimer was burned at the stake for his faith. This man wrote a blistering attack on the passionless, lazy, self-promoting leadership in the church of his day. He entitled it *The Sermon of the Plough*. In it he said this:

And now I would ask you a strange question: who is the most diligent bishop and prelate in all England; that passes all the rest in doing his office? I can tell, for I know who it is; I know him well. But now I think I see you listening and hearkening that I should name him. There is one that passes all the others, and is the most diligent prelate and preacher in all England. And will ye know who it is? I will tell you – it is the Devil. He is the most diligent preacher of all others; he is never out of his diocese; he is never away from his cure; you shall never find him unoccupied; he is ever in his parish; he keeps residence at all times; you shall never find him out of the way; call for him when you will; he is ever at home. He is the most diligent preacher in all the realm; he is ever at his plough; nor lording or loitering can hinder him; he is ever applying his business; you shall never find him idle, I warrant you. ... Where the devil is resident, and has his plough going, there away with books and up with candles; away with Bibles and up with beads; away with the light of the gospel and up with the light of candles, yea at noonday; ... up with man's traditions and his laws, down with God's traditions and His most holy Word. ... Oh that our prelates would be as diligent to sow the corn of good doctrine as Satan is to sow cockle and darnell! ... There never was such a preacher in England as he is.

The prelates are lords ... and no labourers; but the devil is diligent at his plough. His is no unpreaching prelate; he is no lordly loiterer from his cure; but a busy ploughman. ... Therefore, ye unpreaching prelates, learn of the devil: to be diligent in doing of your office. ... If you will not learn of God, nor good men, to be diligent in your office, learn of the devil.<sup>6</sup>

Satan is ever occupied with aspiring to destroy the work of God. We need men who aspire to ever serve in the shepherding of the work of God. Vigilant men called to this task.

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Logan Brengle, *The Soul Winner's Secret*, 1918 The Salvation Army, London, p. 22

<sup>6</sup> Cited in John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 1982 Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, pp. 27-28

While there is a great cost associated with serving as an elder, for any man who aspires to this office, it is a fine work he desires to do. If you are called and gifted to serve as an elder in the church of Jesus Christ, it is a wonderful way to serve your king and give Him glory.

Yet, we have to ask with the Apostle Paul, “And who is adequate for these things?” The answer is no one. No one.

George Whitefield made this telling observation in a letter to John Wesley:

Go where thou wilt, though thou shouldst be in the purest society under Heaven, thou wilt find that the best of men are but men at best.<sup>7</sup>

*The best of men are but men at best.* The worthiest of men are sinners. The worthiest of men deserve not leadership but to be instantly cast into the lake of fire for all eternity.

Richard Baxter agreed:

I now see more good and more evil in all men than heretofore I did. I see that good men are not so good as I once thought they were but have more imperfections, and that nearer approach and fuller trial doth make the best appear more weak and faulty than their admirers at a distance think. ... It is a grand pernicious error to think that the same men’s judgements must be followed in every case. And it is of grand importance to know how to value and vary our guides, as the cases vary.<sup>8</sup>

But, the great mystery is that the Lord has given the responsibility to lead His people to men such as this. But, these are to be men – plural. A plurality of men are more likely to have the checks and balances to hold each other accountable. And these men are to be those with the greatest manifestations of Christlikeness to be found among the fallible, sinful race of Adam.

Appointing any other men is to trifle with the sinfulness of sin.

Having described the subjective element of the call to eldership, Paul then moved on to discuss the *objective* element. A man may feel himself called and believe himself ready to shepherd the flock. *But*, that subjective call must be backed by the *objective qualifications* found in verses 2 to 7 of 1 Timothy 3, verses 6 to 9 of Titus 1 and verses 2 and 3 of 1 Peter 5. It is these qualifications that the church has the responsibility to use in screening those who would assume the office of elder.

The prime qualification is found in 1 Timothy 3:2:

An overseer, then, must be above reproach.

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<sup>7</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, (London: The Wakeman Trust, 1990), pp. 159-160

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Ian H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000) p. 308.

Many men have provided their lists of the qualifications that fit a man to be a leader in the church of Jesus Christ. One of the better lists was provided by John R. Mott a leader of the Christian student movement earlier this century. He said:

Does he do little things well? Has he learned the meaning of priorities? How does he use his leisure? Has he learned to take advantage of momentum? Has he the power of growth? What is his attitude towards discouragements? How does he face impossible situations? What are his weakest points?<sup>9</sup>

Yet, every list can be done away with and replaced by this one qualification – An overseer, then, must be above reproach.

In a letter to a friend in 1840, Robert Murray M'Cheyne said this:

How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sabre clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember, you are God's sword,—His instrument,—I trust a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness of Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.<sup>10</sup>

Great likeness to Christ. Holiness. Nothing less will do.

Above reproach translates the Greek Word ἀκατακατά which means, 'not able to be held.' Originally it meant that a man was not able to be held as a criminal. There was no proof of any wrongdoing by which to hold him in custody. It then came to refer to one whose character was unassailable or beyond the accusation of reproach.

The word in Titus 1:6 which is also translated 'above reproach' is a different Greek word. There it is ἀκατάκατος which literally means 'not able to be called to account.' It means that there is no accusation of impropriety against this man.

What does this mean? Let me begin by saying what it does *not* mean. It does not mean sinless perfection. The elder boards of churches would be vacated overnight. All sin is heinous in the sight of God – true. But in terms of the way the church views a man there is a difference between a non-habitual, repented of slip and a sin that calls into question a man's virtue and godliness.

Churches know their leaders have feet of clay. There may be times when anger or selfishness or pride or some other sin will surface in an elder during times of stress or tiredness. This is not to excuse sin – but this type of sin is not the warp and woof of the man. The sin is recognised, confessed and mortified. Above reproach refers to a man's general character, not to occasional indiscretions.

Also, there are occasional indiscretions which committed even once will bring a man into disrepute – adultery, embezzling, violent acts and the like.

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<sup>9</sup> Basil Matthews, *John R. Mott: World Citizen*, 1934 S.C.M. Press, London, pp. 332-398

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Bonar, *Memoirs and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1844) p. 282

Where do you draw the line between these? If a man has a moral character flaw or has committed an indiscretion that prevents the church from seeing him as anything but a model of the moral and spiritual standard believers are called to then he must not be appointed as an elder.

If the subjective impression of the church is that this man is 'not above reproach' then he does not have the trust of the church to serve as an elder.

Can such a man ever become an elder if that area of his life is dealt with? That depends on the nature of the sin. The sin might be such that to *ever* appoint such a man as a leader would taint the witness and trust of the church. Once trust is violated it is often near impossible to earn back.

However, *if* time has passed, *if* the man has been a model of virtue and most importantly, *if* the church can look at him as a man of righteousness, a man who is above reproach, *then* I believe that such a man should be considered as an elder. The question is – does the church as a whole absolutely trust him to be an example to the flock? Is his character now above reproach?

Basically, what I am saying is this – can the church can look at the men on their elder board without concern over their moral integrity. Not sinless perfection, but overall integrity. The members must be able to trust those men to lead them.

This is the overarching moral characteristic of a man who would be an elder. It is with this qualification in mind that Richard Baxter the English Puritan of the seventeenth-century wrote this to church leaders:

Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine, and lest you lay such stumbling-blocks before the blind, as may be the occasion of their ruin; lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues; and be the greatest hinderers of the success of your own labours. ... One proud, surly, lordly word, one needless contention, one covetous action, may cut the throat of many a sermon, and blast the fruit of all that you have been doing.

Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins which you preach against in others, and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn. Will you make it your work to magnify God, and, when you have done, dishonour Him as much as others? Will you proclaim Christ's governing power, and yet condemn it, and rebel yourselves? Will you preach His laws, and wilfully break them? If sin be evil, why do you live in it? If it be not, why do you dissuade men from it? If it be dangerous, how dare you venture on it? If it be not, why do you tell men so? If God's threatenings be true, why do you not fear them? If they be false, why do you needlessly trouble men with them, and put them into such frights without cause? Do you 'know the judgment of God, that they who commit such things are worthy of death;' and yet will you do them? 'Thou that teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery,' or be drunk, or covetous, art thou such thyself? 'Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God?' What! shall the same tongue speak evil that speakest against evil? Shall those lips censure,

and slander, and backbite your neighbour, that cry down these and the like things in others? Take heed to yourselves, lest you cry down sin, and yet do not overcome it; lest while you seek to bring it down in others, you bow to it, and become its slaves yourselves: 'For of whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey, whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness.' O brethren! it is easier to chide at sin, that to overcome it.<sup>11</sup>

I know that every man who is an elder in this church reads such words and in his own heart knows he is totally unworthy and inadequate to accept the task of overseer. We know the sin in our own hearts better than anyone save the Lord. I know that not only myself, but each of the elders has felt this task is absolutely beyond our capacities. We are just men.

Yet, we strive and endeavour as much as our sin will allow to walk in the paths of righteousness. We walk daily knowing our responsibility and our sinfulness. We are not perfect. But, while the church and our consciences will allow us to serve others we will do so. But when the church or our consciences declare that we are not above reproach, that our character bears any blight that would harm the good name of our Lord, it is time to step down.

In a sense, all of the other qualifications for elders flesh out this over-arching characteristic of the man.

The next qualification listed in both Timothy and Titus is that:

An overseer, then, must be ... the husband of one wife.

There are two qualifications of elders that have caused untold dissent and disagreement among godly men through the ages. This is one of them.

Let me begin by dismissing a few of the views that men have espoused concerning this qualification:

- Some believe that this qualification forbids men who have never married from being elders. They believe that experience as head of a family is needed before one can lead a church.

However, marriage does not elevate a man's spiritual and moral demeanour. Christ was never married. Paul was not married at the time he ministered as Apostle to the Gentiles. Timothy was most likely not married. As Paul pointed out in 1 Corinthians 7:32-35, single men can serve the Lord in an undistracted way. Being single is not an impairment to ministry.

Also, by the same logic, the qualification in Titus 1:6, "having children who believe" would exclude any man who is unable to have children or whose children are killed.

This cannot be what Paul is saying here.

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989 reprint), pp. 63, 67, 68

- Another view that has many supporters in church history, is that a man whose wife has died and who has remarried is excluded from the eldership. In this view an elder can only be married once. If his wife dies he can still be an elder, but if he remarries he is excluded.

The support for this view comes from a number of areas. Paul allowed remarriage after the death of a spouse, but he had remained unmarried after the death of his wife and in 1 Corinthians 7:8 he recommended this for others.

In this view, the reason for this qualification is twofold. Remarriage after the death of one's spouse was held in disrepute by some of the cultures of Paul's day and he would not want to bring the leadership into disrepute. Also, elders are to be disciplined, self-controlled men. The need to remarry shows a distinct lack of such discipline and would be viewed as a sign of weakness which would render a man not above reproach.

This view has the support of most of the church fathers and many of the church councils.

However, it is to be rejected for a number of reasons. Throughout the Old and New Testaments remarriage is clearly allowed for any whose spouse dies. Nowhere is there a hint of censure for this. When Jesus discussed the hypothetical case of the woman with seven husbands, there is no hint of rebuke. In 1 Timothy 5:14, Paul says that he wants "Younger widows to get married." Remarriage after the death of a spouse is not a tainted marriage in the Bible.

The ideas of asceticism and a low view of marriage that prevailed among the church fathers are foreign to the Scriptures and only developed some time after the first century.

As well, the morality of the Scriptures is meant to transform pagan society, not to have the church pander to the mistaken sensibilities of a very small number of communities.

But the deathblow to this view comes in 1 Timothy 5. In verse 9, Paul says that one of the qualifications for a widow to be placed on the official church list is that she has been the wife of one man. This is the same Greek term as 1 Timothy 3:2, but reversed. Then in verse 14, Paul says, "I want younger widows to get married." In this view, Paul is advising younger widows to take a step that is not the highest spiritual step and a step that would bar them from ever qualifying for the official church list of widows if their second husband were to die. That is ludicrous.

So this view is rejected.

- Some believe that Paul is barring polygamists from eldership. They content that some Jews and some Gentiles still practiced polygamy. Because this opposes the one man, one woman structure of marriage, a polygamist could not be an elder.

However, all of the evidence suggests that polygamy was a rare and disreputable practice in the first century. In Greek and Roman culture it was not sanctioned and was considered vile. Polygamy would have been scandalous in Paul's day. There was no need to include it as a disqualification of an elder. Like adultery, homosexuality, idolatry and the like these were obvious disqualifying factors and the qualification of 'above reproach' covered these points.

As well, the corresponding phrase in 1 Timothy 5:9 speaking of widows, denies this view. Polyandry, having multiple husbands was unheard of in Jewish, Greek or Roman culture. Paul was not saying don't put a widow on the list who has had multiple husbands and managed to outlive them all.

So reject this view.

- An interpretation that has gained much support in recent years suggests that this qualification should be translated, "An overseer, then, must be ... *a one woman kind of man.*" The idea is that if the elder is married, he is to be devoted to the woman he is presently married to. His desires and passions are directed to this one woman. He does not lust after other women or flirt with them or desire to move on to a younger, sexier wife.

In this view, the qualification Paul gives refers mainly to the quality of the elder's relationship to his *present* wife.

In this understanding, a man who is remarried after a supposedly biblical divorce is allowed to be an elder if he is devoted to the wife he presently has.

Let me say that I would wholeheartedly affirm that absolute devotion to one's wife is to be a qualification for an elder. But, I would deny that this is the main point of the phrase □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ - husband of one wife.

Grammatical and Scriptural evidence denies that this was Paul's major concern here.

The grammatical evidence comes from the way this phrase is written in the Greek. □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□— 'one woman' is in the *emphatic* position not □□□□□□ – 'man.' The emphasis is on – one woman and *only one woman*, not on the type of relationship the man has.

This means that this phrase is not a descriptive genitive telling us what type of man he is – a one-woman kind of man. It means the phrase is a possessive genitive – *he is a man who belongs to one woman and one woman only.*

The Scriptural evidence against seeing this as a one-woman kind of man is of two kinds.

*First*, the parallel phrase in 1 Timothy 5:9 that says a widow on the church list must have been the wife of only one man. She is a widow – her husband is dead. This qualification must refer to her married life *prior* to this time. It cannot refer to her present devotion to her husband, because he is dead.

*Second*, Scripture is emphatic – remarriage is acceptable *only* after the death of one's spouse. Therefore, remarriage after divorce leaves one in a permanent state of adultery.

This is made crystal clear in Mark 10:11-12:

And He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery."

Both of these verbs used for 'committing adultery' are in the *present* tense. This tense speaks of habituality. A man who has remarried after divorcing his wife is presently and continuously committing adultery against her. The adultery is ongoing because the bond to his first wife still exists. This is the repeated cry of Scripture.

- Thus the view of this qualification that we accept here is that Paul's main concern here is excluding from eldership a man who has divorced and remarried. He does this because his present marriage causes him to be committing adultery and thus he does not belong to one woman and one woman only.

Scripture makes it clear that that this also refers to defacto marriages. Scripturally, if a man and a woman made a serious commitment to each other to live as man and wife and then consummated that marriage, a marriage bond was formed. This idea of marriage by commitment and consummation is reflected in the law of this country. A man and woman can be deemed to be man and wife through a defacto marriage.

The question then arises, is a man who divorced prior to his salvation still excluded from eldership? Surely since he is a new creation what happened prior to salvation is irrelevant?

True – all sins were forgiven at salvation. But, some of our pre-salvation sins still have consequences for us in this life. A number of verses make it clear that only death ends a marriage bond. Salvation does not wipe away the one-flesh bond that was formed.

Listen to two of those verses.

Romans 7:2-3:

For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man.

1 Corinthians 7:39:

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.



Divorce does not end a marriage bond. That is why in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 Paul says:

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

After divorce or separation, the marriage bond is still intact. That is why they must remain unmarried or else reconcile. If they remarry someone else it causes adultery which is ongoing. This is why such a man should not be placed in a position of church leadership.

However, let me say that in no way is divorce and remarriage the unforgivable sin. Like all sin, remarriage after divorce is forgiven and washed away by the blood of Christ. But, the unique nature of the marriage bond; its durability until death; means that remarriage while you still have a living spouse causes an ongoing offence.

The Scriptures place such a premium on an elder being above reproach that a man in such a position should not be an elder.

But, that is the only restriction on a Christian in this situation. Anyone who comes to this church having remarried after divorce will never be treated differently. They are welcome as members and able to participate fully in the life of the church.

But, just as these qualifications for elders exclude most of those in the church from leadership, so their marital history excludes them.

God sets high standards. We might argue and wish to set other standards but we cannot. The Lord has determined what standards He desires. Ours is to find those that match His standards not any other standard we think is reasonable. He is Lord of the church. His will be done.

Affirming as elders those the Lord desires is of crucial importance. We must not allow our human wisdom or emotion to allow us to compromise at any point in these qualifications. To help us understand why this is so important, I want to close with the words of the seventeenth-century American Puritan Cotton Mather. When we understand the magnitude of the task, we might better understand the necessity of the qualifications:

The office of the Christian ministry, rightly understood, is the most honourable, and important, that any man in the whole world can ever sustain; and it will be one of the wonders and employments of eternity to consider the reasons why the wisdom and goodness of God assigned this office to imperfect and guilty man! ... The great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher are to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men; to display in the most lively colours, and proclaim in the clearest language, the wonderful perfections, offices and grace of the Son of God; and to attract the souls of men into a state of everlasting friendship with Him. ... It is a work which an angel

might wish for, as an honour to his character; yea, an office which every angel in heaven might covet to be employed in for a thousand years to come. It is such an honourable, important and useful office, that if a man be put into it by God, and made faithful and successful through life, he may look down with disdain upon a crown, and shed a tear of pity on the brightest monarch on earth.<sup>12</sup>

Amen!

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 1982 Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, pp. 27-28