

Armagh Baptist Church – 16th May 2010
The Life and Times of Timothy 6
1 Timothy 3:1-7
A Word to the Overseers

Introduction

The subject of Elders in a local church is a very important matter indeed. The appointment of Elders is not something that a church should rush into. Paul told Timothy to stop the false teaching of the Elders who had gone off the rails in Ephesus. These were Elders that Paul himself had appointed during his 3 year stay in that city when the church had first been planted. I believe that is why with the wisdom of hindsight, Paul now says to Timothy in 1 Tim 5:22-25...

“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sin of others. Keep yourself pure. The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgement ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them. In the same way good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden.”

He was telling Timothy from his own painful experience, not to rush into laying hands on new Elders too quickly, because it is so hard to judge character. And mature Christian character is what an Elder needs more than anything else.

The Constitution of Armagh Baptist Church has a 5 year rule contained in it, as far as the appointment of new elders is concerned. In other words you have to be in membership for at least 5 years before you can be considered as an elder. That is long enough for us to get to know someone reasonably well. And it is because we are told *‘not to be hasty in the laying on of hands’* that it is important to take our time in the process of selecting/appointing new elders.

So this morning I am simply dealing with what the Bible has to say about the qualities to look for in a prospective Elder from 1 Timothy ch.3:1-6. Although we would like to add to the number of elders in this church, we will not be rushing into the matter, but as a church let’s be thinking and praying about this matter in the months to come. For now, we can take this as *‘a word to the existing overseers’* this morning. We need to be reminded of it regularly.

1. The Office-bearers of a Local Church

There are two offices in the local church as far as the NT is concerned:
Elders (which includes the Pastor) and,
Deacons (See 1 Timothy 3:1,8 and Philippians 1:1).

The Authorised Version’s translation of “episkopos” in 1 Timothy 3:1 as “Bishop” instead of “Overseer” was an unfortunate mistranslation insisted on

by King James, more to preserve his Episcopalian Church Tradition than to be accurate with the original text of Scripture! (There are no perfect translations).

However Titus 1:5 and 7 show us that the office of “Elder” (presbuteros) is the same office as that of “Overseer” (episkopos) if you compare the two verses. So an Elder is the same as an Overseer. It means ‘to look over’ the flock.

Elders are responsible for the spiritual oversight of the members of the church and for the spiritual direction of the church. Ideally there should be a plurality of Elders in the local church, since the word usually appears in the plural in the New Testament (e.g. Philippians 1:1 and Titus 1:5.)

From Acts ch.14:21-23, we see that it was Paul’s practice never to leave a newly-planted church without first having appointed Elders in that church to go on looking after the flock after his departure. In fact it can be shown that Apostles were the forerunners of Elders. After the generation of Apostles died out, local churches were cared for by the Eldership. Acts ch.20 is a clear example of an Apostle handing over responsibility for a church to Elders, because he knew he would never visit that church again. That was the church in Ephesus: the same church that Paul is now writing about here in 1 Timothy.

The sad fact was that some of the elders who had been appointed back then, had proved to be unreliable, and by the writing of 1 Timothy, some 5 years later, some of these Elders were now preaching false doctrine. Timothy had to remove them, and he was charged by Paul to appoint new, suitably qualified men to the office.

It is of the utmost importance that the right men are chosen to serve as Elders. The wrong choice can seriously damage the witness and effectiveness of a local church. The process of choosing Elders therefore demands the prayerful consideration of the whole church over a reasonable period of time.

This brings us then to look at the qualities of an Elder in 1 Timothy Ch.3.

2. The Qualifications for an Elder (1 Timothy 3:1-6 and Titus 1:6-9)

Q. Do the prospective candidates desire the office at all? (1 Tim 3:1).
That seems like a strange question to ask, but of course it is possible to desire position in church life for all the wrong reasons. This verse tells us that the task itself, of being an elder or overseer, is an honourable, respectable and noble task. But prospective candidates need to ask themselves whether they desire it for the sake of God’s Work, or for the sake of personal power?

N.B. An Elder can never be a woman. (See 1 Timothy 2:12).

According to this verse, a woman is not permitted to **teach** or to have **authority** over men, as far as God's Church is concerned. Yet an Elder will be required to perform both of these roles: He must be "*able to teach*" (1 Tim 3:2 and Titus 1:9). And Elders are "*those who rule over you.*" (Hebrews 13:7,17, 24). Therefore this rules out the option of having women elders, or pastors, in a local church which is guided by the clear teaching of the New Testament.

(i) What about the Elder's personal life? (1 Tim.3:2-3; Titus 1:6-8).

Does he fall seriously short in any of the following areas:-

** Above reproach / blameless.*

There should be nothing in his life that Satan or the unsaved can take hold of, in order to criticise or attack the church with.

** Temperate / not quick tempered.*

Is he able to keep his head in all situations, or does he tend to fly off the handle too quickly and react, rather than respond, to criticism or pressure?

** Self-controlled / sober-minded.*

This doesn't mean he shouldn't have a sense of humour (in fact it helps if you have!) but it does mean that an elder should know how to be serious and that the testimony of the church can so easily be harmed by foolish behaviour.

** Respectable / of good behaviour.*

An elder must be someone whose everyday behaviour is not likely to bring the church into disrepute. "Orderly" or "modest" also translate this word.

** Hospitable / given to hospitality.*

(This literally means "loving the stranger"). Will this man be good at making outsiders feel welcome when they turn up at our meetings? Will his home be open to provide hospitality for visitors or new-comers to the church? This therefore means that the elder's wife should be open to using their home for hospitality too!

** See that his children obey him with proper respect. (v.4)*

** A man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. (Titus 1:6)*

If a man doesn't have to be married to be an Elder, it obviously follows that he doesn't have to have children to be an Elder either.

But if he does have children, does he know how to discipline them?

Because if he doesn't know how to discipline his own flesh and blood, how is he going to discipline unruly or misbehaving members in the church?

If his children are of an age that they can understand the way of salvation, do

they at least respect their father's faith, even if they have not yet come to a personal knowledge of Christ as Saviour themselves?

If the Elder's children ever get to the point that they blatantly oppose and rebel against the Gospel of their parents, and by their behaviour openly bring their parents shame, then the Elder himself would be better to stand down from office until the matter is sorted out. Then if the church sees fit and the situation has changed he could then stand again as an Elder. At all times what is to be protected is the testimony of the church, and more importantly of the Gospel, in the eyes of the watching world.

Why all this emphasis on an Elder's home-life?

"For if a man does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Tim.3:5).

Also, he must not be...

** Given to wine / drunkenness.*

Total abstinence was not demanded of the believers in the New Testament. (e.g. 1 Tim.5:23), but if a man is to hold the office of an Elder he is supposed to set an example to the flock (1 Peter 5:3). It would be *advisable* for him to use drink very sparingly, or perhaps even to abstain completely, rather than being the cause of a weaker brother to stumble (Romans 14:19-21).

** Not violent, but gentle.*

Literally, "not contentious, not looking for a fight."

Spurgeon told his Bible College students, "*Don't go about the world with your fist doubled up for fighting, carrying a theological revolver in the leg of your trousers!*" An Elder will have to deal with enough contentious people in the church, so he wouldn't need to be one himself!

** Likewise, Not quarrelsome or overbearing.*

Always demanding his own way, and trying to get *his* will done in the church, not necessarily God's Will!

** Not greedy for money, or covetous / Not a lover of money.*

The way for a man to combat these things is to be content with what he has, and to trust the Lord for what he needs. The Pastor is normally the only full-time paid Elder, which he is entitled to according to 1 Timothy 5:17-18. Other Elders usually have their own jobs outside the church, and their church-work is done on a voluntary basis. But in his business or working life, his financial affairs must be totally above board, otherwise the devil has a foothold to bring him down.

** Titus also says he is to be Upright, Holy and Disciplined.*

(ii) What about the Elder's home-life? (1 Timothy 3:4-5; Titus 1:6).

* *The husband of but one wife.* (1 Tim.3:2)

An Elder doesn't have to be married, but if he is, he is to be absolutely faithful to his wife. Faithful to her alone. To become an Elder will place this man's marriage under a certain amount of strain, but even here he is to set an example to the flock.

* *He must rule/manage his own family/household well* (v.4)

This is where he must prove himself. If he's doing a good job in his own home, he has some ability to look after a church. But if he is failing in his own home, it would be ludicrous to give him extra responsibility in the church.

Under God, an Elder is as responsible for his own family's spiritual well-being as he is for the church's. His family is part of his flock.

Gordon Brown said in his final speech as he left 10 Downing Street last week: *'As I give up the second most important job I could ever have, it is with a renewed appreciation and commitment to the most important job I could ever have – that of being a husband and a father.'* He was absolutely right!

(iii) What about the Elder's spiritual life?

What sort of a soldier would you choose for a battle with Satan?

A novice? Or someone who has already proved himself in battle?

* *How long has this man been a Christian*, and how well has he matured in that time? (1 Tim.3:6)

* *Has he got a good testimony with the outside world?* (1 Tim.3:7)

If he is weak in either of these areas, the devil will know!

* *Has he got a good grasp of sound doctrine* and is he **able to teach** and to refute others? (1 Tim.3:2 and Titus 1:9).

Really this is what sets an Elder apart from a Deacon. Many of the other qualities are similar, but the Elder specifically must be **"Able to Teach."** He must have a good grasp of Biblical doctrine himself, he must be able to explain it to others on a one-to-one basis as well as in a public speaking situation. And as well as that, he must be able to identify error or false teaching in others and to be able to correct them gently from God's Word, not just from his own ideas.

Whoever we might consider as Elders, the question is, do they fit these criteria? If they really don't measure up to these qualifications, then we shouldn't appoint them just for the sake of it.

3. The Work of an Elder (Acts 20; 1 Peter 5)

So far we have seen the Biblical pattern of the plurality of Elders in a local church (Acts 20:17), and that Paul never left a newly planted church without first appointing elders and transferring the spiritual responsibility of the work onto their shoulders. (Acts 14:21-23; Acts 20:17-38).

We know that the Elders are responsible for the spiritual well-being of the church, but what does that mean in practical terms? i.e. What will they do?

Elders should be able to do most, if not all, of the following duties:

(i) Develop his own personal walk with the Lord (Acts 20:28; 1Tim.4:16).

"Take heed to yourself!" – How's he doing spiritually? Elders are expected to give out spiritually in order to help others, but if he's not taking in for the benefit of his own soul, the well will soon run dry! He'll soon be running on empty, and be no use to himself or to anyone else, spiritually speaking.

(ii) Look after the spiritual needs of his own family (1 Tim.3:5).

They are part of his flock too. If he can't minister to their needs, how do you know he'll be able to minister to yours?

(iii) Shepherd the flock of God (Acts 20:28).

"All the flock"- it says - not just the easy people!

"Which God purchased with His own blood"

- treating the sheep as God's precious possessions.

"Among which the Holy Spirit has made you an overseer."

- Is he conscious that God has called and equipped him for the task?

An "Overseer" or "Shepherd":-

will look out for the spiritual well-being of the people under his care.

will feed the sheep with the best of food.

will care for the sheep with tenderness.

will lead the sheep from the front, not drive them from behind.

will lift up those who fall by the wayside.

will protect the sheep from danger.

will always want the best for the sheep, not just what's best for him.

(iv) Be an Example to the flock (1 Peter 5:2,3).

Is he someone you can look up to? Is his Christian lifestyle something you want to copy? Does he practice what he preaches? If not, you'll very quickly regard him as a hypocrite and no longer respect him.

(v) Give the Church Spiritual Direction (Acts 20:28).

A Church needs clear leadership. Elders need to work in harmony and co-operation together with the Pastor to give a clear lead as to the direction the church needs to go. e.g. In terms of mission, evangelism, and discipleship, or in terms of particular issues facing the church as a whole at any given time.

(vi) Minister God's Word (1 Tim.3:2b, Titus 1:9, Acts 20:20).

Elders have to be able to teach God's Word (1 Tim.3:2). Why? (Titus 1:9) - So that they can teach believers the truths of the faith, and so that they can identify and refute false doctrine (or false cults), showing from God's Word why they are wrong. (See also Acts 20:29-32 and Titus 1:9-16).

In Acts 20:20,27 Paul makes very clear that a preacher is not just to stick to the well-worn passages of Scripture, but he should teach *'the whole Counsel of God'* - including the difficult passages, and indeed unpopular teaching. All elders need to be able and prepared to do that.

(vii) Pastoral visitation (Acts 20:20).

It's not just the Pastor who should do this. All Elders should be able, available, and actively visiting the members and adherents of the church in their own homes. This verse tells us that as well as being able to teach God's Word publicly, the Elder also ought to be able to do it one-to-one, from house to house. An Elder's visit is not just a social call; it is to be of spiritual benefit. Would you like a pastoral visit from one of your Elders? Could you talk to them about your spiritual or personal problems? They should be able to answer you with Biblical counsel? This is why God has given elders to the church today.

(viii) Prayer ministry in the local church (James 5:13-16).

If someone in the church is sick, according to these verses they are supposed to call for the Elders of the church (as representatives of the church) to come and pray with them and for them, and if necessary to anoint them with oil. And if it is God's Will, the prayers of the church will be heard and answered, and the sick person will be healed. N.B. This is a ministry of prayer, not necessarily a ministry of healing. Ours is to do the praying, it's God's prerogative to do the healing, as He wills.

Elders must be able to function as Elders – otherwise we just have Elders in name only – and if that is the case, then the church just stumbles along, not really functioning as God intended it to.

Conclusion

So we need to bear in mind the Biblical requirements we have looked at this morning. In the months and years ahead let's regularly pray about this matter and observe the men in our church, to see who God has gifted and prepared

for this task. If we believe God has raised up such men, then we need to recognise them, appoint them, and give them our support to carry out their God-given roles within the church.

As a result of the right men being chosen and appointed as Elders, God's work in Armagh Baptist Church can continue and be strengthened in the days to come. I hope we can experience what the early church experienced in Acts 6:7 whenever spiritual men were allowed to get on with the spiritual work of handling the Word of God and giving themselves to Prayer.

There we read that,

"The Word of God spread. The number of disciples increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."

May God grant us such blessing too.

And may we all give our prayerful support and backing to those who have already been set apart as elders in this church in the days that lie ahead. Elders can only lead, if the flock is prepared to follow. May we work together hand in hand in this place in the days that lie ahead. Amen.

© *Ian Grant*