

Sermon on the Eldership for the Church of Christ at Marietta/Reno

By Paul R Blake

Introduction:

A. You have undertaken a great work. It will:

1. Help you to keep the imperative of the Lord for local churches
 - a. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5
 - b. About three years had passed between when the churches were planted and when Paul ordered elders appointed
2. Help you to be scripturally organized - Phil. 1:1
 - a. As opposed to remaining "scripturally unorganized" (H.E. Phillips)
3. Help you to be a peaceful, productive, healthy, loving congregation
4. Help you to minimize the damage caused by grievous wolves from within and without, and will speed your recovery as a congregation
5. Help increase your soundness and strength as a local church - Titus 1:9
6. Will eliminate the need for the business meeting system, not only an inefficient means, but with a high potential for unqualified men to lead the church astray, and an even higher potential for factions and divisions over personalities

B. My background as an elder:

1. I was appointed to serve as an elder at Tomlinson Run in May 2003, to serve along with five other men.
2. I was 43 years old in body and 25 years old at heart. I have served for nearly nine years, I am 51 years old in body and 75 years old at heart
3. I have never undertaken a more difficult work that has taken such a toll on my mind and spirit
4. In my life, I have done many jobs including being a foreman in woodshop that hired ex-cons and have preached for six congregations in 35 years, and I have never done a work more demanding or more important than the work of an elder
5. Nor have I ever done a work, including evangelism, that has been more rewarding spiritually, mentally, and emotionally
6. You will spend yourself for the well-being of disciples who may not be aware of your sacrifices, and some who might not appreciate what you give of yourself even if they knew
7. Short of dying for Christ, you will never perform a higher service for the Lord or the little sheep He places in your care than to serve as an elder

C. I was asked to speak on the following matters:

1. My perspectives on the work of elders
2. Is "desire the office" a qualification?
3. The qualification "blameless"
4. Some things an elder can expect to encounter; matters we normally don't talk about as we study the qualifications but need to be considered as part of the responsibility.

I. IF A MAN DESIRES THE POSITION OF A BISHOP, HE DESIRES A GOOD WORK

A. Desires - Greek "oregomai - to stretch oneself, reach out after, long for, desire" (Strongs)

1. The person desiring the position of elder could have either good or bad intentions. Paul assumes good intentions.
2. What one does voluntarily is more esteemed than what he does when asked - 1Cor. 16:15
3. It ought to be the desire of every Christian man in his youth to develop these qualities as he ages
 - a. 18 of the 22 qualifications listed in the combined lists from Titus 1 and 1Timothy 3 are characteristics ALL Christian men should have, regardless of whether they become elders or not
 - b. Of the remaining four, only one of them has anything to do with talent, "apt to teach," and that one can be cultivated
 - c. While the exigencies of life can impact the two family and one experience qualifications, there is no reason why every young Christian man in this congregation cannot desire and work toward becoming elders starting right now

B. Office - There is no Greek word for "office." The Greek phrase literally translates as the "ministry or service as Bishop."

1. It is not a position of legislative or executive authority; it is a stewardship
 - a. 1Peter 5:2-4; Acts 20:28

C. A good work - The NIV calls this work a "noble task"

1. It is work! You will lose sleep for weeks over church problems
2. It is pressure! You will be constantly aware of the responsibility for the souls placed in your care
3. It is the closest you will come to the sacrifice of our Lord, and you will help your brethren in proportion to your own sacrifice

D. But is it a qualification?

1. No. The qualifications follow. For those who want to be of service to the Lord, you must measure up to those characteristics.
2. It is due to the logical fallacy of false categorical imperative that we include it in the list of qualifications. It appears similar; therefore, it must be the same.
3. Anyone who wants to go to India to preach must: have the ability to preach, have a passport and visa, have enough support, and have a contact in India; desire to go to India is a false categorical imperative.
4. We also include it, because in our time, very few brethren want to do the work, including those who meet the qualifications in verses 2-7.
5. They excuse themselves from it and deflect the pressure from others who ask them to serve by saying they are not qualified because they do not desire the office.
6. They should instead be honest and say: "I am spiritually lazy, or, "I am a moral coward."

II. WITHOUT REPROACH (Blameless - KJV)

- A. To live in a way that charges of wrong doing are not believable as appearing out of ones proven character or cannot be reliably proven.
 - 1. The Holy Spirit does not require that an elder must be above sin, but that he corrects his sins as God instructs - 1John 1:6-10
 - 2. Does not mean sinless; it means without reproach. Has a good name.
 - 3. Blameless - Greek anepilhpton - Literally means "cannot be laid hold of" inculpable, unrebukeable (Strongs)
 - 4. There is nothing in his life that enemy could use against him or ruin his influence. He is not vulnerable to censorship.
 - 5. When anyone has something against him, he goes to that one and resolves the matter in a Christ-like manner - Matt. 5:23-24
- B. Not an accident that this is the first qualifications; many of the following ones hang on it
 - 1. An elder is defined by his integrity that earns for him a great deal of respect; it is something he works for a lifetime; it is not something he can order others to give him
- C. And with this, as with the other qualifications, it is not a matter that can be quantified in an objective way
 - 1. Many people turn the 22 characteristics of elders into 22 disqualifications by setting arbitrary standards
 - a. Apt to teach... at what level? Bob Waldron or Dee Bowman?
 - b. Blameless... will you go back to mistakes of his youth that have long ago been repented and restored?
 - c. Not a novice... how old?
 - d. Hospitable... how often must he have guests?
 - 2. The extent to which every man has these characteristics will vary from one man to another, and from one local church to another
 - a. When I was appointed, I did not have these qualities to the same extent as Carl Parsons, who was 85 and had been an elder for 40 years. Should I have been passed by because I did not measure up to him?
 - b. Do not elevate the standard to the point that no man qualifies. In my experience, most men who do that, do so because they are not qualified themselves and are unwilling to submit to a leadership that does not include them in a business meeting arrangement
 - 3. Beware lest you elevate the qualifications to a standard that would exclude the apostle Peter.
 - 4. Remember, when Paul instructed Timothy and Titus to appoint elders, those congregations had only been in existence for three years. Apparently, honorable Christian men were capable of developing all of these characteristics in three years.

III. APPLICATIONS

- A. Both of these matters are critical in dealing with the work of an elder
 - 1. You must strongly desire to be a servant the Lord and of your brethren in a self-less, sacrificial manner in order to be motivated to do this work
 - 2. You will find a reputation for integrity and honor that attends blamelessness to be your most effective asset in this work
- B. Within six months, the elders had to deal with a neighboring congregation involved in a whisper campaign against the elders because they believed the four recently appointed elders were not qualified.
 - 1. We sat in a room with about 25 men from three different congregations answering charges against us that they had no scriptural business making
 - 2. Being blameless meant that their charges were unfounded
- C. Between 2006 and 2010, one elder passed away, one elder resigned due to age and health, one elder was appointed, and one elder left under unhappy, unpleasant circumstances
 - 1. We went from enjoying the leadership of six elders with a combined 95 years of experience to four men with less than 20 years combined experience
 - 2. When I was asked, "What is the hardest question you have ever faced as an elder?" my answer is: "The next question." It is because elders can seldom anticipate what kind and from what direction problems will come
- D. We have been through a serious, church dividing crisis on a yearly basis
 - 1. Elders who invited disciplined persons to a party attended by many of the members, and who later made a confession of wrong to the church
 - 2. Four men and one woman who confessed to being addicted to porn
 - 3. Two families broken by adultery
 - 4. Six disciplinary actions
 - 5. Three public Internet attacks on the church, the elders and the preacher
 - 6. A neighboring church charging us with stealing sheep
 - 7. On and on, most of which I have tried to forget.
- E. And by the grace of God, we have come through the trials with the church growing in love, faith, and in number
 - 1. The elders consider their service to be the most important work they will ever do
 - 2. The elders love the souls in their charge and are extremely protective of them
 - 3. The elders have resolved to get along regardless of the issue
- F. We could not do this without a strong desire to serve those that we love, nor could we do this without the integrity of character conferred by endeavoring to live, love, and lead without reproach

Flawed Characters

I like anti-heroes... characters who are flawed, reluctant, curmudgeonly. The reason is that I am old enough and have seen enough to know that among men, there are no Sir Galahads or knights in shining armor on white steeds or cow town sheriffs in white hats; every hero wrestles with weaknesses.

A well-known actor commented that he enjoyed playing “flawed” characters in movies because people could relate better to an imperfect character. Most of us would agree that it’s easier for us to understand people who aren’t perfect because we know that we are imperfect.

God included accounts in the Bible of people who were deceitful, weak, unreliable, and angry. Jacob deceived his father so that he would receive a blessing (Gen. 27:1-29). Gideon was so unsure of God that he asked Him twice for proof that He would be faithful to do what He said He would do (Judges 6:39). And then there’s Peter, who for fear of his own safety, denied even knowing the Lord (Mark 14:66-72).

But when we read the rest of their stories, we note that these people worked hard to overcome their shortcomings and ultimately be useful to God. Just like the people who lived thousands of years ago, each of us comes with our own set of weaknesses and flaws. But by God’s grace we can overcome by embracing His “strength [which] is made perfect in weakness” (2Cor. 12:9). It is good to learn of our weakness if it drives us to lean on God’s strength. It is bad to look at the weaknesses of others as a justification for keeping our own.

2Cor. 12:7-10