

Elders for the Church

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[0 : 0 0] everyone playing their different roles. The church is something that we all participate in, but it is the leadership of the church that our passage this morning deals with. Verse 5, you see it there, Paul says to Titus, this is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order and appoint elders in every town as I directed you. Paul's instruction that we see there that there should be elders, plural, appointed in every town, that each local town would have its local church and local elders to lead it. And so as a Presbyterian structure of church as we are, we have as our leadership what is called a plurality of elders, basically a number of elders, four of us at the moment who are involved in the leadership of the church. Why do we have that? Well, because it seems to be the fairly clear and the fairly consistent teaching of the Bible about how the church is led. It seems to be that that is building according to God's plan, that the maker's instructions for the church given in passages like this. So that is our pattern as a church. And yet we're going to see this morning that that is far from the end of the story. The important thing, the thing that Paul majors on here and that we're going to spend our time thinking about here is really threefold. It's who these elders should be, what their roles should be, and why that is so important. Simply having elders isn't a kind of a magical formula that means the church will end up operating in the right way. Who should they be? What should they be doing? That's what we're going to dig into this morning. Okay. And now one kind of hot potato, so to speak, before we get right into these verses. Now, this isn't the main focus of what we're looking at, but you will notice in this passage that it consistently speaks of these elders as male. So the verses we've read, it speaks of them as a husband. It says, he must be like this. It says, he must not be like that. Now, there's other places in the Bible that would better explain why that would be the case. But it is worth me just kind of stating from the start and putting this out in the open, and we'd be really happy to speak more about this if anyone has any questions on it, because this is a very counter-cultural thing in the 21st century. But as a church, we believe fully in the equality of male and female, both equally made in the image of God, but we also believe the Bible teaches that distinction, that God gives different roles for male and female in the home and in the church, and that eldership, and the elders includes the minister, that that role is one the Bible says is for men, is for males. So there you go. That's our position as a church. It's not what we're going to be talking about this morning, but it's good that you know that. It's always good to kind of start with something controversial. Do feel free to come and kind of ask me any questions about that, or grill me about that if that shocks you, or offends you, or if you're just not quite sure why that would be the case. We could look at what else the Bible has to say about that. But that's really just to kind of clear the decks there so we can focus on what this passage is focusing on regarding elders, and you'll understand why I'm using those kind of male descriptions as we look through these verses as the passage does. But these are verses, remember, which Paul wants the whole church to hear. Male, female, elders, not elders, young, old. Paul wants everyone to hear this, and so we're going to work our way through together and see why. Three headings. We'll look at the character of elders, the task of elders, and the need for elders. Really the who, the what, and the why. So let's get stuck in. Firstly, the who. What kind of person does Paul tell Titus

to appoint as elders? What is the selection criteria, we might call it? And it's perhaps an interesting exercise to think, if we hadn't just heard that passage read, if we didn't have it open in front of us, what criteria might we suggest? What kind of leaders would we look for? Perhaps words like dynamic might come to mind. Perhaps we'd want someone who is a visionary. Perhaps we'd want someone who is really kind of intellectually gifted, the reverent doctor who has written various books.

Perhaps we'd be tempted to look at the kind of world of business and industry and take our model of strong and successful leadership from that, that that is the kind of person we want, a CEO for the church. And yet it's really important to see, and actually incredibly obvious when we look at this passage, that what Paul lays out first and foremost are issues of character. We've called this first section the character of elders because it is matters of character which are the first and foremost criteria for Paul and therefore for Jesus and therefore for the church wherever it is found.

Character is the primary qualification for the role of elder. And as a whole list of these kind of characteristics in these verses, we're not going to dig into each one in detail, but we do want to see what the general picture is that they paint. And we see that picture really painted in two areas. And the first one is in the home. So verse six, if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife and his children are believers, or that can also be translated are faithful and are not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. The focus first are on family life, on the home. Now, most people would agree this doesn't mean that elders have to be married or that they have to have children, but it's saying that where they do, that is an area of life where godliness and godly leadership should be shown.

And so are they a one woman man, which is that the literal translation of what Paul writes here, showing faithfulness in that marriage relationship. Now, by extension, I think we can see whatever their marital status, are they showing purity in that incredibly significant area of sex and sexuality and relationships. And so the guy who's building an incredibly successful business and perhaps incredibly eloquent and savvy, a kind of a leader in his community, and yet his marriage is falling apart and who's refusing to kind of put in the hard work and the commitment in that area. Well, it doesn't really matter, Paul says, how impressive a guy he might seem in various other spheres of life. That's not the man for eldership in the church, is Paul's teaching. Similarly, if his children, and the term here used for children is particularly referring to those who are still within the home, within the household, still under the parents' authority, if those children are off the rails, and I think here we're not just talking about if they're a bit lively. Plenty of you will have seen Will or three-year-olds marauding about. I don't think he has yet disqualified me from ministry. And yet, if children kind of grow up with no discipline, no correction, no authority over them at all, leading to that kind of complete and overt refusal to behave and to respect their parents or anyone else, that kind of debauched behavior that has no respect for others. Well, Paul says, if a man can't lead and disciple his own household, then that's not the guy to be responsible for leading and discipling the household of God. Part of that character is taking responsibility and leading at home. And so we see that this picture of the character of an elder painted in his home life. Secondly, we see it in verses 7 and 8 as well, shown in his personal life.

[8 : 36] Perhaps it sounds a bit vague, but really just the type of person he is. And I deliberately say in his personal life rather than private life, because actually there's an emphasis here on how they are seen living by others. Verse 7, it says there, for an overseer as God's steward must be above reproach.

Now, above reproach, and it says that in verse 6 as well, that doesn't mean perfect. Otherwise, we and every other church in the world would have zero elders and you'd have to be particularly suspicious of anyone who did have elders. But it's really more above reproach what these people are known for. Now, what is the reputation that they have among others? So have a look down with me at verse 7.

It's not those who think they are above everyone else, not those who are arrogant, not those who are very snappy when things don't go their way and they don't quite get what they want. It's not the guy who's known to kind of drink a bit too much on a Friday night, but that's okay because everyone does it. I was just out with the guys from work. It's not the person who is harsh toward others, impatient, the person you don't dare give kind of bad news to or correct in any way.

It's not the person who's looking to say, you know, what can I get out of this? How can I gain when it comes to having that responsibility? But instead, it's people who are known in that wonderful list in verse 8, hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.

And so the question that comes to us, are those the things that we are looking for in our leaders? Is someone being holy and really striving after that, is that something that we appreciate?

[10 : 41] Or do we actually think maybe that's a little bit too keen, that's a bit over the top, that makes us uncomfortable when they make those tough decisions? But when it comes to eldership, that character is key. The character of elders is Paul's first concern, that character shown in the home and shown in personal life as well. So that's our first section. And I just want you to kind of hold on to that, what we said for a little bit. We're going to come back after the second section and kind of apply this a bit more all together to see why this is something Paul wants the whole church to be aware of. We're going to do that in just a moment because really this first section rolls into the second section that we're looking at. We've seen the character of elders and now here we see the task of elders. What is it that elders are to do? Well, we see this in verse 9, he must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it. Now, okay, so see how all this then fits together. We spoke last week and James reminded us already this morning how a big emphasis of Paul's letter to Titus is that the gospel leads to godliness. That gospel doctrine, we might say, brings gospel behavior.

The truth which accords with godliness, as Paul wrote in verse 1. So why is the character of elders so important? Why is that where Paul starts, over and above their skills or anything else that we might look at? It's because that character is the litmus test of those people holding fast to the gospel. How do we know if people are holding firm to the trustworthy word as taught, as Paul says in verse 9? Well, obviously part of that is that they speak the truth. They're not saying kind of off-the-wall things about God that we know is different from what the Bible says. But actually, we know that that gospel truth is in their hearts as well as just their heads because it is seen in their homes and in their personal lives. So we see how this all fits into this pattern of this letter. Elders are to be people of godly character as that demonstrates that people holding on to gospel truth, which is then of central importance because the task of the elder is, end of verse 9, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it. And so the role of the elder, first and foremost, is a teaching role, teaching sound doctrine, as Paul says, both positively, here is what the Bible says, here is how it applies to your life, that we're growing as God's people in our faith and knowledge of the truth. Elders positively teaching that truth, but also teaching what we might call, I don't know, negatively or correctively, also to rebuke those who contradict it, Paul says. Correcting people where they've gone astray, being willing to say, actually, that is not what the Bible says about the gospel. That is not what the Bible teaches in that area. That is not how the Bible calls us to live or what the Bible says is acceptable.

And I can say in my experience, this bit is much harder. And yet again, that is part of the role of an elder, teaching both positively, but also correctively. The heart, the task of an elder is teaching the word, teaching sound doctrine, which is ultimately, again, that wonderful truth about Jesus and all that he has done for us in the gospel. That is the best bit for me about being a minister, which is just a form of elder, that it's ultimately about pointing people back to Jesus and what he has done and how he transforms our lives time and time again. So the elder's task is to teach sound doctrine, to protect and to share the truth. To be able to do that, he must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught to what the Bible says. And the evidence of that is shown as we've seen in his character, seen in his home, seen in his behavior. We see how this all kind of holds together as one piece. So let's take a minute to think, as we said, about all that we have spoken of so far.

What does this mean for us as a church? Remember, Titus is a letter written to a church leader, so we would expect it to be applicable directly to church leaders. But remember, too, the final verse of this letter, chapter 3, verse 15, grace be with you all, Paul signs off this letter.

The whole church is invited to kind of listen into this, which is exactly what we're doing together now, isn't it? So how do we apply this as a church? I think the first thing is that it's important that as a church with elders, these elders do keep coming back to passages like this and being honest and open about what it is that we need to be doing and making sure the church as a whole understands that. To stand here at the front, and perhaps for Lars and Ewan and Barry here as well this morning, it's going to feel a little bit awkward, you know, kind of standing up and saying, you know, this is the kind of people that we're trying to be. This is what you guys deserve from us to hold us accountable to. It can be easier to not talk about that. But it's important that the church is aware of that, and it's important for us to keep holding ourselves to this biblical pattern.

[16 : 45] And so one of the things we do at each elders meeting to begin with is that one of us will answer a number of kind of personal questions based on passages like this one in Titus. You know, how is home life going? How is our personal walk with God going? How are we carrying out our role of eldership, our teaching responsibilities in the church, whether that's preaching or small groups or individual conversations? So there is that kind of direct application for elders and those we pray would become elders in the future, that this is what's important. This is what we need to stay focused on. And we want the whole church to kind of understand that role so that we're all pulling in the same direction so that you guys understand what we're about, that you can encourage us in that as we keep on striving forward in that. So there's one application. But it's also important for the whole of us as a church, really for our understanding of what the church is. So the church is not this place where kind of charismatic individuals are given a platform to show off all their gifts.

It's not a place that grows through applying the latest business management techniques or leadership books, which isn't to say there might not be really helpful insight and wisdom there.

But above all, above all, the church is a place that prioritizes faithfulness and character throughout the church. The church is a place of what is often considered perhaps a bit kind of so what in the world, you know, showing hospitality, being upright, being holy. These aren't necessarily the people, the things that people aspire to in the world, but where actually these things are held in high esteem so that all of us together can grow in that godliness, which Paul emphasizes.

And we see here that that happens through the teaching of the gospel, which is the central concern, the key task of elders in the very heart of the church. And that doesn't mean, and again, we'll see this really clearly next week, that this is the sole reserve of elders. In fact, it's vital that everyone is sharing in that responsibility of sharing the word, sharing Jesus with one another. But we see here that that is important because elders particularly take on that kind of burden or act as a catalyst for that teaching so it can spread throughout the church.

There are a million things that could be done in any church, in this church. I've got a Trello board for church. I don't know if anyone uses Trello. It's kind of an online to-do list where your list of jobs just gets longer and longer and longer, far faster than you're able to kind of drag them into the done pile. And loads of the things on those lists, I hope all of the things on that list would be really good things to do, really great things to be able to do as a church. But we're not going to be able to do all of them. The thing that can never make way, the thing that can never end up not on the agenda, is a teaching of the Bible that is at the heart of the church and at the elders' role. Because that is what the church is all about, the message of Jesus. We are not going to organize people into the kingdom of God, although organization is a good thing. It's not going to be structures or programs that grow us as God's people, that change our hearts and grow us more in love for him, although these can be great tools. But ultimately, it has to be keeping on coming back to Jesus, the one who loves us, the one who gives his life for us, the one in whom forgiveness, sanctification, redemption are found. Ultimately, it is all about Jesus. The elder's role is to know that, to live that, to teach that, so that together we can love God more and in our church bring him the glory that he deserves. So there is the character of elders, the task of elders. This passage here then finishes with the need for elders. Why is it important to have this sort of leadership in the local church?

[21 : 17] And this is really from verse 10 downwards, but we'll move through quite quickly. But it begins by saying this. Why is this important? Well, verse 10 says, Paul is saying here that you will have teachers, you will have leaders, you will have those who influence you, who bring a church along. The question is not, should we have church leadership? The question is, who will that leadership be? Will it be those committed to the gospel, to living it out, to teaching it in accordance with the Bible, to keeping people on the right path, even when that is hard or awkward? Or will it be those teaching other things? Empty talkers and deceivers, Paul says. Those teaching for their own personal benefit, teaching for shameful gain, to see what it is that they can get out of it.

That was the situation in Crete. Those desperate people, they're desperate to lead, to teach. And yet with no love for God or those they're teaching. Those looking actually to lead away from the truth.

Those teaching as Paul speaks about, kind of religious myths rather than the truth anchored in the Bible or man-made religion and rules and regulations rather than the gospel truth of Jesus Christ. And doing this all while sounding very pious, I'm sure. Verse 16, at the end there, they profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. And again, there's that big theme in Titus, that the true gospel and godliness go hand in hand. How is it made clear that people who are not to follow, well, it's not always obvious because they profess to know God, as it says. I'm sure plenty of them in Crete spoke very confidently, skillfully, eloquently. But it's back to that litmus test that Paul begins the section speaking about, but they deny him by their works. And there's the need for elders to lead the church in gospel godliness because there are always people wanting to lead the church in other directions. And so I suppose let me finish this morning with a case for the local church with local elders being that the primary home of

Christians in the primary place of discipleship, the local church, which can often feel a little bit outdated, perhaps in a world where we are so connected. The internet offers us teaching on any subject from any number of people who profess to know God. And you can watch it at any time. It's incredibly convenient. And yet, on the whole, we don't know these people. And the local church has this advantage, this key characteristic which makes it part of God's timeless wisdom and means it will never be supplanted. That the local church has local leadership, elders who you see and who you know.

And the last thing on earth I'm saying is don't listen to anyone else as if, you know, we're the only true church or as if we've got everything sorted. Absolutely not. I love to read good books. I love to listen to sermons online. I have kind of podcasts I subscribe to, other churches that we visit when we're away. The vast majority from people or led by people who I don't know, who I'll never meet.

[25 : 01] I think reading and making use of these things is a great way to grow as a Christian. The last thing I'm saying is to kind of cut ourselves off from that wisdom. But actually, as we grow and as we invest in those things, we're going to keep our roots in the local church. To have our home as the local church. The local church where we see kind of, you know, warts and all. The local leadership who strive imperfectly but after godliness because they're holding fast to the gospel in their own lives. And I've been given that role from God to teach others in that too. The need for elders is that actually we live in a world where there is plenty of stuff claiming to be spiritual, claiming to be truth but isn't, and is actually leading people away from the true gospel.

And we all need to be aware of that. That just because something says Christian on the label doesn't mean it has the gospel at its heart. And so God in his wisdom has given the local church, local elders to teach the incredible, universal, eternal gospel of Jesus Christ. We want to build according to that plan. Okay, three kind of sentences as we finish to kind of tie all this together. Number one, in response to all of this, please do pray for us as elders. This passage really shows how kind of high the bar is and also how real the opposition is. So please pray for our godliness as elders that we would hold on to and teach the gospel well in those various different settings.

Number two, please do come to us as elders. Please do have the local church as the place where you bring your worries, your struggles, your questions. Please come to the church before Google in kind of spiritual matters. Please don't ever feel that that is a burden or that's kind of imposing on the church. No, because that is what elders are here for. That is what we want to do and are committed to. And number three, in saying that, in saying that, please do come to us.

I want to make it really clear that we're not saying you can only come to us in the church. Point number three, if this week has emphasized a slightly kind of what feels perhaps like a kind of top-down view of the church, then please do make sure that you're here again next week where the weight is on kind of the whole body of the church, how we build up one another, the whole family of the church as it plays its role and lives out the gospel, sharing with one another the truth of Jesus Christ for the glory of God, living together in the church which he's established, seeking to build according to his plans, which he, in his wisdom and grace, has given to us in his word so that we can be strengthened as his people and built up as his church.

Let's pray together.