

## 1 TIMOTHY 3:1-2

### INTRODUCTION

I sometimes wish that others could come and preach sermons like this one today because I am going to preach about myself. But at least it's not just about me; for it is talking about the role of elders within this church and every church. One of the beauties of preaching systematically through books of the bible is that you cannot escape passages that left to myself I would never preach. We have come to such a passage today.

As we have seen from the beginning of this letter the biggest problem at Ephesus was its leadership. Some false teachers arose out of the leadership to teach false doctrines (1:3 4:1-3) as Paul had predicted in his farewell speech to the Ephesian Elders (Acts 20:17-20). The existing leadership at Ephesus had turned aside to fruitless discussion (1:6); they misused the law and misunderstood the gospel (1:7-11).

It seems from what we said last week that some of the elders were woman (2:12) and others were clearly sinning and needed to be publicly rebuked (5:20-24).

So as Paul writes to the church he sets out the desirability of the role of leadership and the qualifications needed for leadership. It is true that if a church is going to be effective and remain true to the Lord then it needs good leadership. Of course there will always be individual exceptions but I think it is generally true, that if the leadership of a church is strong then the church will be strong. If the leadership is word centred then the church will be word centred, if it is missionary minded then so will the church, if the leadership is sincere the church will be sincere and so on. However if the leadership is unloving, ungracious and stingy, then the church will be unloving, ungracious and stingy. So for the next couple of weeks we are going to have a look at what Paul says about the role of leadership within the church.

### 1. ITS A NOBLE CALLING (V 1)

Paul gives his second of five trustworthy sayings that you will find in the Pastoral Epistles (1:5; 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:9; Titus 3:8). Each time it is used, it states a basic truth of great importance and familiarity among believers. It states an obvious, self-evident truth that needs no proof. All the other trustworthy sayings refer to doctrinal matters, whereas this one refers to the practical issue of leadership. This just highlights the importance that was placed upon the role of leadership within the early church. The word that is translated as "noble" means, "honourable," "excellent", "high quality" or as one commentator translated it "beautiful." It is a most worthy and glorious calling. But what is the role of leadership that Paul calls noble? It is the task of an overseer.

This word is translated in the older versions of the Bible as Bishop, but our idea of Bishops today is so far removed from the biblical idea that the word overseer is a much better translation. The role of overseers in the Bible is the role of the elder for the role of elder is called, by a number of different names that simply describe his work. I prefer to see the task of an elder as a role rather than an office, for fundamentally in the Bible elders and deacons were called to fulfil certain roles in the church not to simply fulfil an office. An elder oversees the work of God in the church. He also pastors God's flock so a Pastor is also an elder.

Paul has to tell the church at Ephesus that the task of an overseer is a noble task because the false teachers had brought the role of elder into disrepute. Perhaps there were people in Ephesus who were certainly qualified to be an elder but who did not desire to be one, because they had lost confidence in the current eldership because some were teaching false doctrines. There was another problem with seeking the role of elder in the church and that was one of persecution.

The first century church didn't get it as easy as we do, but they had to face persecution from the authorities and from within Judaism as well. One of the ways that the authorities tried to make a maximum impact was to persecute the leaders of the church. They worked on the principle that if you strike the shepherd then the sheep will scatter. Therefore anyone who set his heart on being an elder was in fact also setting his heart on being persecuted. This probably put people off, yet Paul knew that if the church was going to be cared for, as it needed to be, if its doctrine was going to be kept pure then elders needed to be found.

But that raised another danger, and that was making sure that the church just didn't choose anyone to be an elder in order that they could fulfil this role. They had to choose the right calibre of men, which is why Paul gives a list of qualifications for the eldership, which we will look at next time. I want you to notice that there is nothing wrong with desiring such a responsibility. The word 'desire' is a rare word and it means "to reach out after" or "to stretch out oneself to grasp something." It describes the external act rather than inner motives, and no doubt Paul is thinking about someone who is taking the appropriate steps towards eldership.

The word 'set his heart on' means a passionate compulsion. It refers to inward feeling of desire. Both terms taken together describe a man who outwardly prepares himself for the responsibility of eldership because he is being driven by an inner compulsion.

It is true that people can seek the responsibility of leadership within the church for all the wrong reasons (power, prominence, and prestige) but that does not rule out the fact that when one's motives are right and when one has this driving inner compulsion placed there by the Holy Spirit then that man is right to prepare himself for this task. That might mean training and a period of intense study at a Bible college, or it might mean doing further study through correspondence courses or it might simply mean meeting with the existing eldership in order to be better trained and equipped as the elders pass on their experience to others.

When I think of the role of overseer I am not only thinking about the Pastorate for I believe that leadership ought to be a team ministry and all the elders have responsibility for overseeing the work of the church. But let me just for a moment apply this to the need for more Pastors. There is a need today within Britain for Pastors, there are many churches that have no pastor or have a pastor who is due to retire in a few years and it appears that there is a real shortage of men who are being trained to take their place.

We ought to make this a matter for prayer; that God will work in the heart of young men particularly and give them an inner compulsion to take up this task of overseers in God's church. People are being put off the role of Pastor and elder simply because it is no longer seen as a noble task. Perhaps this is because in some churches Pastors and elders have behaved so badly towards the congregation that people see it as a task for people to show off their power, rather than caring for the church. It may be that people have treated their Pastor and elders so badly that people are put off, and shy away from this role because for them; it is a role so that some Christians can have a pot shot at someone. We all need to make sure that the way the Pastor and elders treat its members and the way the members treat their elders is in line with giving the impression that the responsibility of eldership is a noble or beautiful task.

## 2. WHAT IS THIS TASK (vs. 2 & 5)?

The task that is noble is described as taking care of God's church (v 5). That is a perfect description of the task of the eldership; the elders are people who under God are under shepherds with the task of pasturing God's sheep. But this raises a question in my mind, how do they do it? What methods do they use in order to take care of God's church? Well by far the primary and most important method is teaching (v 2).

It is very interesting that the only gift that Paul lists here as necessary for the role of eldership is the one of teaching. All the other qualifications as we will see are character requirements but teaching is a gift. This is because if the elders are going to take care of God's church the main way to do it, is teaching. This means that the bulk of the time that elders give to the care of the church must be given in preparation to teach and then in actually teaching. The main task of the Pastor and the elders is to teach, they are not the general dogsbodies of the church. I have to say that because sadly over recent years some churches seem to think that because they have a Pastor or a group of elders that they can do everything, after all is that not what we pay the Pastor for? I don't need to tell you but the answer is No! The church pays its Pastor to allow him the time to prepare and pray so that he can preach and teach the church. There is no higher task in God's church than teaching God's people (1 Timothy 5:17).

Therefore it seems that if teaching is the priority of the eldership then it is clear that most of the work of the Pastor will be teaching. It might be formally like this setting, or it might be informally in Pastoral visitation, it could be on the doors, in schools, at children's clubs and a host of other situations. Word ministry is central to caring for God's people. In fact in the New Testament it is the elders or Pastor who teaches in order to equip the church to do the works of service so that the church might be built up (Ephesians 4:11-12).

This has implications for us all. If we are ever tempted to think that I won't be involved in that aspect of the church's work because I will leave it for the Pastor or the elder then you fail to understand the task of the Pastor and eldership. Let me put some flesh on the bones for you.

Next Sunday we will have leaflets that have to be given out in order to invite people to our harvest thanksgiving services. I have noticed that since we started to give these out in both Scotton and Leyburn over the last few years, less people are doing so. If we all don't get involved in this work, then it means that fewer people have to spend more time doing so.

One of the consequences is that if the leadership are spending more time than they should giving out leaflets they are spending less time doing what they ought to be doing which is preaching and teaching. Don't get me wrong I do not believe that the Pastor should spend every hour of his day in the study; I do think and believe that the leadership ought to set the example in this task like every other task. However I do think that one way to support the eldership of the church is to do the tasks that you can do, so that the leadership can do the task for which they are called and to which in all likelihood most of you cannot do.

This is not only true of the example I have given you, but for the leadership to fulfil its role, then the rest of the members have to fulfil their role within the church, and as you fulfil your role, then the elders are able to fulfil their role and together we as a church will function as we ought to function.

Finally let us remember that the elders are only the under shepherds in the church, they are not the head; the head of the church is Christ. He is the one who gave his life for us; he is the one that the elders must look to for direction. He is the one that the members of this church must seek to serve and follow; after all your Pastor and Elder will let you down. They will disappoint you and at times frustrate you. But Christ who is our Shepherd will never let us down, disappoint us or frustrate us.

Amen