

The Role of Elders

Titus 1:1-9

This morning we begin a six-week sermon series entitled “A Healthy Church.” We’ll be teaching from Paul’s letter to Titus. 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are known as the “pastoral epistles” because they were written to pastors (Timothy in Ephesus and Titus on the island of Crete). Paul was writing personally and specifically to Titus, but he also assumed that the entire church at Crete would be hearing what he wrote (see 3:15 - “Grace be with you all.”).

Paul’s primary concern was the health of the churches on the island of Crete. A healthy church is characterized by: spiritually mature elders (ch. 1), ability and willingness to address false teaching (ch. 1), honoring God in every stage of life - whether young or old, male or female (ch. 2), living in light of Christ’s return (ch. 2), clarity on the gospel (ch. 3), being zealous for good deeds (ch. 3), and willingness to confront those who are divisive (ch. 3).

Given Paul’s purpose in writing Titus, this sermon series will stress what needs to be true of us if we want to be a healthy church. I’m struck by how relevant Titus is to Faith E Free. Even though it was written in the context of a completely different culture almost 2,000 years ago, Paul surfaces issues that are equally relevant for us and he gives directives that are equally wise for us. I’ve been praying that God will use these messages to renew our vision for our health and vitality as a church.

Today we’ll briefly consider Paul’s greeting to Titus. Then we’ll look at his discussion concerning elders.

The priority of faith and truth (vv. 1-4) Paul begins his letter to Titus using his common form of identifying himself, identifying the person to whom he was writing, and giving a greeting. How Paul describes himself and his mission is significant; it will set the tone for the rest of the book.

1 Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness,

Paul was a “bond-servant of God”; he took his orders from God and served at His pleasure. As an “apostle of Jesus Christ,” Paul was sent out by Jesus to represent Him in word and deed.

Paul says here that his calling as a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ was **for** the faith of those chosen of God and their knowledge of the truth. In other words, his ministry was focused upon the spiritual health of those whom God has chosen to be His own. Paul didn’t have some abstract commitment to disseminating the truth; Paul was committed to seeing faith and truth manifested in the lives of individual people. This priority will come through loud and clear throughout this letter to Titus.

Paul continues to express what he wants others to experience in verses 2 and 3. Faith in Jesus and knowledge of the truth allows people to experience life:

2 in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago, 3 but at the proper time manifested, *even* His word, in the proclamation with which I was entrusted according to the commandment of God our Savior,

Paul understood that he had the privilege of announcing that the eternal life which God had promised centuries earlier had arrived. His letter to Titus was written because a healthy local church can have a profound influence in the way believers experience eternal life; conversely, an unhealthy local church can make it harder for believers to experience eternal life. So there is a lot at stake in what Paul writes to Titus.

4 To Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

Paul had led Titus to embrace the same faith that he had, so he calls him “my true child in a common faith.” He wants for Titus what every Christian father wants for his children: grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

The first topic Paul addresses in his letter to Titus is appointing elders in each of the cities where there were believers. ***A healthy church needs qualified elders who give oversight in life and doctrine. (1:5-9)***

In verses 5 through 9 Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders in each city and then reminds him of the type of person who would serve well as an elder. The churches wouldn’t thrive unless both elders ***and*** the rest of the congregation were on the same page about the qualifications and role of elders. This is just as true today as it was then. Unless those of us who serve as elders understand our role, we won’t shepherd well. Unless the rest of the church understands the role of elders, you won’t welcome and receive our ministry. The result is that the church will be much less than God wants it to be. It’s essential that we have consensus on the role and qualifications of elders.

Verse 5 reflects Paul’s normal pattern of appointing elders in the churches he planted.

5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,

Allow me to give a brief overview of the role of elders as described in the NT. The book of Acts records how Paul established churches across Asia Minor. When he first came to a city, he would share the gospel about how Jesus died on the cross to pay for sin and how people could enter into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus. At some later date Paul would return to each city to “strengthen and encourage” the believers and to appoint elders (e.g., Acts 14:21-23). Paul always envisioned elders (plural) giving spiritual oversight; he never intended for one person to be ***the*** leader. Elders serving as a team can sharpen and encourage each other, as well as correct each other

when necessary. These elders provided the foundational spiritual leadership in the churches. Elders are pastors who look out for the well-being of the rest of the church.

Paul also used the term “overseer” (as in verse 7) to describe the ministry of elders: they take their eyes off of themselves and look out for the spiritual health of the entire church. Everyone in the church should pursue spiritual maturity, but some have the capacity and the will to look beyond “me and mine” and pay attention to the spiritual condition of the entire church. Elders aren’t the only ones who do this (especially in a larger church); but elders intentionally and systematically do this.

In 1 Peter 5 Peter explained how elders “shepherd the flock of God” under the guidance of Jesus who is the “chief Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:1-4). In this role as shepherds, elders are to lead the church to nourishment, protect the church from threats/dangers, and provide a tangible example of what it looks like to walk with God in everyday life. Remember that Paul’s passion was “faith” and “knowledge of the truth” - the spiritual health of individual believers and the church as a whole. This is to be the passion of elders also. Elders should love people and should love the church.

Paul reminds Titus that appointing elders as the foundational spiritual leadership in the churches in Crete was the thing that remained to be done. He then goes on to describe the essential qualities needed in these elders. Without these qualities Paul describes, elders won’t be able to carry out their ministry in a way that can be received by others in the church.

I’ll make a few brief comments on each category of qualities that Paul mentions. The first category involves having ***a healthy family life*** (v. 6)

6 *namely*, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion.

“Above reproach” is an overarching term that is sometime translated “blameless” or “without accusation.” It’s not that an elder has to be perfect, but he shouldn’t have a cloud of suspicion hanging over his head - either morally or doctrinally. When Paul mentions “the husband of one wife,” he’s not requiring that an elder be married any more than “having children (plural)” requires that he have at least two offspring. The term is sometimes translated, “being a one-woman man”; in other words, if he is married there’s no hint of infidelity. Elders need to be an example in the area of marriage and parenting.

If he has children, they should be “children who believe” or (as it’s sometimes translated) “children who are faithful” (trustworthy toward their parents). He adds that an elder’s children should “not accused of dissipation or rebellion”; their lives don’t contradict the message of Christ.

It’s a tricky thing to evaluate a man based on how his children behave. Children “have a mind of their own” (as they say). Before I was a parent, I was a lot more willing to judge others’ parenting skills by the way their children act. Obviously parents affect their

children's behavior. But a man isn't **necessarily** a bad father if his children are wild and rebellious; he **may** be, but not necessarily. Whatever the case, Paul is saying that his children's life and behavior affect whether the father can serve as an elder (at least at that time). You might think that's terribly unfair, but being an elder isn't an inalienable "right"; it's only one calling in the body of Christ. In 1 Timothy 3:5 Paul made the statement, "but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?" Shepherding your own family is something of a proving ground for shepherding the family of God. There are many similarities between spiritual leadership in the home and in the church.

The second category involves **avoiding certain sins/vices (v. 7)** Here Paul uses the other primary term for elder: "overseer" - one who watches over others.

7 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,

Paul repeats the quality of being "above reproach" in the context of being "God's steward." A steward is one who is given the responsibility of managing someone else's household. Here the overseer/elder is a steward over "the household of God" (1 Timothy 3:15). Elders are supposed to represent God Himself, faithfully saying and doing the things that their Master wants said and done.

Certain attitudes and actions are incompatible with being a steward over the household of God. An elder should not be "self-willed" - sometimes translated as stubborn or arrogant. Instead of being self-willed, he should have a humble devotion to the will of God. An elder should not be "quick-tempered" - or angry. A quick-tempered, angry person is ruled by the flesh instead of the Spirit. And since "the anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God" (James 1:20), an elder must be full of peace and kindness.

An elder should not be "addicted to wine" - controlled by alcohol. An elder should not be "pugnacious"; he's not a bully and he doesn't "like a good fight." An elder should not be "fond of sordid gain" - not greedy. An elder serves God, not money.

Paul is painting the picture of someone who is controlled by the Spirit, not by arrogance, anger, wine, power, or money. Avoiding these vices are important for every believer; avoiding them is especially important for those in spiritual leadership because they poison the spirit of a church. By contrast, Paul mentions six virtues in verse 8 that should characterize elders.

The third category involves **the presence of certain virtues (v. 8)** An overseer must be. . . .

8 but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled,

It's interesting that "hospitable" made Paul's list (both here and in 1 Timothy 3:2). You might wonder what hospitality has to do with being an elder. The word for hospitality is

made up of two words: love and stranger (*philos* and *zenos*). A hospitable person has a “love for strangers/foreigners.” Elders should be hospitable because the mission of the church involves welcoming people into the presence of God. If an elder gives off the vibe (through words or actions or attitude), “I could care less whether or not you’re here,” then the church won’t be able to carry out its mission.

“Loving what is good” is a basic virtue (over against loving what is bad/evil). “Sensible” can also be translated as moderate or thoughtful (as opposed to being rash and extreme). “Just” is the common word for righteous, here meaning “upright.” “Devout” refers to how dedicated an elder should be in his relationship with God. “Self-controlled” rounds out the list. Elders find themselves in all sorts of situations that demand self-control. An elder needs to be able to control his words and actions so that he doesn’t make difficult situations worse. [1 Timothy 3 has additional virtues.]

The fourth category of qualities needed in elders involves ***maintaining sound doctrine so that they can encourage the same in others (v. 9)***

9 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.

The elder’s own personal commitment to “sound doctrine” is the basis of his teaching ministry in the lives of others. Paul writes that elders need to “hold fast” (or cling to) the sound teaching they had received. If their lives are being shaped and formed by sound doctrine, elders are equipped to help others experience the same. The presupposition here is that the teachings of Scripture are foundational for a life well-lived.

Sound doctrine allows an elder to speak into the lives of others in two ways. First, they are “able to exhort in sound doctrine.” They urge/encourage others to believe and experience sound doctrine. This isn’t some abstract treatment of theology. In everyday situations, elders are to help others experience the truths of Scripture. Here at Faith this commonly happens in the context of Life Groups; our elders often lead and participate in Life Groups (which are the primary place to connect and grow with others in the church). As well, sound doctrine is communicated in the context of ongoing relationships.

Second, they “refute those who contradict.” In the life of every church, there will be times when bad doctrine and/or false teaching surfaces. Elders have the responsibility to address such errors. Paul will expand on the last point in the rest of the chapter (our text for next week). This responsibility to “refute those who contradict” sound doctrine highlights the wisdom of the qualities mentioned earlier. For example, you don’t want an elder who is pugnacious (who “loves a good fight”) to “refute people who contradict.” You don’t want to exacerbate an already-tough situation by turning it into a fight. You want an elder who loves peace to correct someone with “grace and truth” (John 1). Even when he says things that are difficult to hear, he’ll speak in an inviting, hospitable way. We’ll talk more about this next week.

To summarize, Paul tells Titus that a healthy church needs ***qualified elders who give oversight in life and doctrine***. Here at Faith we take Paul's instructions here and in 1 Timothy 3 very seriously. We have these instructions before us when we select elders, and we remind each other of these instructions as we serve as elders. As a senior pastor I am so thankful for those whom God has raised up to serve as elders here at Faith. As long as I've been here I've served alongside other elders who love God just as much as I do and who are just as committed to the health of this church as I am.

We certainly don't get everything right, but I can assure you that our elders seek God concerning the direction of this church. Our elders enter into situations that in many churches are delegated to "paid staff" - situations involving doctrine, individuals, and families. As a senior pastor I've never felt "alone at the top" as is often the case; I serve alongside a team of men who genuinely seek to shepherd the flock of God.

In case you don't know, Brian and I are permanently on the elder board. At any given time five or six others serve as elders for two-year terms. Those currently serving on the elder board are listed on the back of your bulletin. After serving two terms (four years) they take at least a year off in order to give them a break from the "official role" of elder and in order to allow new leadership on the elder team. This doesn't mean that those who roll off the elder board are no longer elders; they continue to care for people and provide oversight because of who they are, not because they're serving a term. There are around fifteen men who are elders at Faith.

I need to make one final note that's not mentioned here in Titus 1. It is implicit here, but it's explicit in other places (such as 1 Peter 5:5, 1 Thessalonians 5:12, and Hebrews 13:17). ***A healthy church welcomes and receives the ministry of elders.***

It's a little bit awkward for me (as an elder) to make this point, but who else is gonna make it, right? The point is that a healthy church understands the role of elders and makes it as easy as possible for them to carry out their God-given role. This doesn't mean that the church is passive or that the church doesn't give feedback and input. But it does mean that the church welcomes and receives the ministry of elders. Listen to Hebrews 13:17. This verse doesn't mention the term "elders" but it clearly describes the ministry of elders when it says:

17 Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

The perspective is that if there is a team of elders who are investing time and energy in the church that they could be investing elsewhere, you do whatever you can to make it a joyful experience for them. This verse mentions that they "will give an account"; they are accountable to God for how they serve. For your part, follow their lead in such a way that makes it a joy to serve. Elders deal with all sorts of painful and difficult situations simply because they deal with real people living real lives. Don't cause them all sorts of "grief" by what you say and do and how you say and do it. That would be unprofitable for you; that would be like cutting off your nose to spite your face. We're

part of the same body and we all have the same mission of helping people come to faith in Christ and then experience God in all of life.