

THE LORD'S LEADERS

by Ray C. Stedman

There is a wide spectrum of titles used for leaders of churches in this country. The Baptists have deacons; the Presbyterians have elders; the Methodists have stewards, bishops; Episcopalians have rectors and vicars (whatever they are); and the Catholics say that priests ought to be in charge. Many denominations refer to their leaders as ministers. As I was thinking of that, I wondered whatever became of the word *parson*? It has been a long time since I heard anybody called a parson, although that used to be common in this country. (That is where the word "parsonage" -- the house the parson lives in -- comes from.)

Regardless of what title may be given, when you turn to the Scriptures you discover that the whole subject is very simple, because there were only two designated leaders in the early churches -- elders and deacons. This passage out of the third chapter of Paul's first letter to Timothy deals with that subject of leadership and sets before us these special leaders.

Elders are called "overseers," or, as it is translated in the passage, "bishops." But these are not bishops in the ordinary, accepted sense of the word, i.e., men with mitered crowns and robes, etc., who are denominational managers of many churches over widespread areas. That concept of a bishop is never found in the New Testament. There, bishops were elders, overseers, appointed to watch over the congregation. As such, the apostle here instructs Timothy on how to recognize these men by giving job descriptions of bishops and of deacons. Chapter 3, Verse 1:

The saying is sure: If any one aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task.
{1 Tim 3:1 RSV}

The striking thing in this paragraph is that the very first emphasis the apostle wants Timothy to make at Ephesus about this subject is that the office of an overseer or an elder is a very important and significant role, not to be taken lightly at all. Paul calls it, "a noble task."

There are several reasons why Paul calls it that:

First, the appointment of elders in a local church is the Lord Jesus' own provision for leadership in the church. This is not an invention of man. Too many churches today are being operated like business corporations, or country clubs, run for the benefit of their members, electing their own leaders according to democratic procedures. But in the New Testament you never find that at all. There you see that it was Jesus himself who set up the structure of leadership. He is the Head of the church. As such, he has designated the kind of leaders and the function of leaders within the church.

In the New Testament it is clear that the church began with our Lord himself. The church was born out of the blood and the death of Jesus; out of his wounded side was given to us the opportunity to become a part of his life. So the first thing about the church that marks it as distinctive, beyond everything else, is that it shares the life of Christ. Every member born by the Spirit into the church is filled with the Spirit of Christ. If you share the life of Jesus, you have a distinct kind of human life that is not available from any other source or in any other way than by faith in the Lord Jesus. So the church emerges from Christ, born of his blood, filled with his Spirit.

When our Lord, after his resurrection, sent the disciples out as apostles, he instructed them to lay the foundation of the church. Paul refers to himself in First Corinthians as a "wise master builder [who] laid the foundation," (1 Cor 3:10). That foundation was the teaching concerning the work and the person of Jesus. "Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ," (1 Cor 3:11 {KJV}). It was the apostle's task to proclaim these radical and distinctive doctrines about Jesus which define and guide the church in its development. That is why the Scriptures came into being. The Scriptures are the apostolic

testimony of what Jesus Christ was like and is like in the midst of his church today.

When you read in the book of Acts about the early church in Jerusalem, you discover that the apostles were the elders, the first human leaders of the church. Early in that book we are told that there arose a problem in the church (Acts 6). This matter was brought to the apostles, who urged the church to appoint seven men to serve as a solution to the problem of distributing the food to the widows. But the apostles said on that occasion that their own task was two-fold: "We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" {Acts 6:4 KJV}, i.e., to discover the mind of the Lord.

As the church began to spread, at first the apostles tried to keep up with it. Churches began in other places -- in Judea, in Samaria, and a great awakening broke out in the pagan city of Antioch, in Syria. The apostles traveled to these places to see if they could set the churches in order, direct their expansion, etc. But they soon discovered that the church was growing faster than they could ever travel around. So, led by the Lord Jesus himself, they began to appoint elders in every church. These were appointed, oftentimes, out of congregations that were made up of brand-new converts, people who had come to Christ out of a pagan background. But after a year or so of watching them, the apostles would return and appoint elders. They did not have the congregation elect them. The apostles appointed elders or they sent representatives, such as Timothy and Titus, to appoint them.

The task of these elders was, basically, one primary thing: Like the apostles in the church at Jerusalem, their whole task, as they conceived it, was through the ministry of the Word -- teaching, preaching, studying, learning the Word of God -- and, through prayer, they were to discover the will of the Lord Jesus who was Head of the church, who was present in every church and ready to direct its activities through the Spirit of Christ.

When Jesus sent the disciples out into the world in what is called "the Great Commission," he said, "Go into all the world, preach the gospel to every creature, {Mark 16:15 KJV}; "and, lo, I am with you ..., even unto the end of the age," {cf, Matt 28:20b KJV}. That is the great and exciting fact that the churches of our day have largely forgotten. In church after church that I visit, I detect very little consciousness that people think of Christ as being a living Lord in their midst; that Christ is still in his church, ready to direct its activities which will challenge the culture of the day and explore the great possibilities that arise as the changing circumstances of men's lives create hunger for deliverance from bondage, slavery, degradation, heartache and misery. It takes a living Lord in the midst of his people to direct the activities of the church, and the elders are the human instruments for the divine direction of the church. They are the means, the channels, through which these innovative, surprising approaches to life, which the Lord in his church knows about, are carried out and brought into being through the body of Christians who meet together.

I hope it is clear to all of you that every Christian is in the ministry. The moment you became a member of the body of Christ you are in the ministry, and you are given gifts for ministry. It is not the elders who are to do the work of the ministry: You are!

You are directly related to the Lord Jesus so that he can say to you at any time, "I have opened up a door here in your neighborhood for you. I want you to reach these people." That is the way the Lord works.

Elders are to be watching for this. That is what the word for elder, *episkopos*, means -- "looking over." Elders are to be looking to see what the Lord is doing with his people, and utilizing the opportunities that arise on every hand. They are to be instructed in what the Lord has said in his Word so as to be able to guide this new and exciting thing that is coming into being, correcting it if need be. That is the work of elders. So it is a "noble task," as Paul says.

To be an elder is to be, in a sense, at the control board of the most dramatic and exciting thing going on in any day, at any time, because the church, in God's estimation, is the most important body in the world. God has set the church at the center of life. He has given us the opportunity to control the level of morality around us, the openness of people to hear and respond to his Word. To be given a position as one of those leaders through whom the mind of Christ is revealed and who is able to encourage and train the people of God to fulfill the ministry Christ has given them is surely a very exciting and noble task.

Elders, as individuals, have no special authority. No elder can be a "boss" in a church. Churches that allow pastors to become tyrants and dictators fail to fulfill the New Testament pattern. No pastor or elder is to be alone, individually, given any kind of authority. Elders are ordinary Christians, just like everyone else. They are brothers; they are not in command. But they, corporately, as a body of elders, are to meet together to seek the mind of the Lord. They know they have succeeded when, in the most remarkable way which only God could bring about, they agree together about what the Lord wants done. It is the Lord's task to so lead them through all the problems and difficulties and personal resistances of their own individual personalities to a sense of harmony and union, of unanimous agreement together. Then they have found the mind of the Lord for that church -- not for other churches -- only for theirs.

That is what makes churches exciting bodies to be in, because the living, innovative Christ who holds society in the control of his hand, who opens doors and shuts others, is directing the activity of that body of people and is in their midst. That is what a church is. So surely, eldership is indeed a noble task.

Only the Lord can bring about that kind of unanimity. I have often thought of that passage in Isaiah 11:6, where the prophet predicts a time to come, when "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, ... the cow and the bear shall feed together, and a little child shall lead them," in reference to our Board of Elders. We have a man on the board who is like a lion -- bold and powerful and very confrontational. People are a little afraid of him at times. We have another one who is like a bear. He is very powerful; he seems to engulf you. We have another one who is like a wolf; (In fact, that is his name -- Jim Wolfe.) We have one who is like a leopard -- slinky -- he pounces on you suddenly. And here I am, an innocent lamb in the midst of all these! Only the Lord can make the lion lie down with the lamb and the cow and the bear feed together. This happens in a wonderful way. As we share, talk, pray, think, study, and observe together what God is doing, and evaluate it according to his Word, we discover a quiet unanimity appearing, as the Lord leads us together. That is what eldership should be.

I tell you, that is exciting work! There is nothing I covet more than the work of serving as an elder in a church like this, where the culture is rapidly slipping into decay, bondage, hurt, and misery. Our church, with others, is set here with the possibility of freeing people by the mighty power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What a noble task!

The apostle goes on to give us the guidelines in two areas for that task:

First, he gives us the certain character qualities by which you can tell who the men are whom the Holy Spirit is selecting. The congregation does not select elders; the Holy Spirit does. He chooses men in every congregation and develops within them the character qualities needed, leading them through various experiences to train them. The job of the other elders is to keep alert and see who it is the Holy Spirit is putting his hand on. First, there are these qualities of character necessary (Verse 2):

Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money. {1 Tim 3:2-3 RSV}

Those are the things you look for:

- ❑ First, an elder's reputation. He is to be above reproach. That does not mean he must never have had anything gone wrong. If that were so none of us would make it. It means that when something did go wrong he had handled it rightly, he dealt with it openly, giving every indication of desiring to be a godly, righteous man, above reproach.
- ❑ Second, he is to be a "one-woman man," literally. It says, "the husband of one wife." This sounds like he is to have been married only once. Many have struggled over this passage because sometimes elders' wives die and elders remarry, or elders are divorced for some reason and remarry. This has given rise to a lot of controversy. But the word basically means that an elder is to be a one-woman man, i.e., not a philanderer, not attracted to every skirt that walks down the street, not constantly

eyeing somebody or someone else's wife. It is to be very evident that an elder is committed to one woman, his wife, whom he loves.

- A third requirement is that an elder be known for a number of good habits he has formed:
 - First, he is to be "temperate." Basically, that means to be calm. He is not to be flighty or nervous, constantly jumping from one thing to another.
 - He is to be "sensible." (The basic root there is self-control.) Again, a kind of inner peace governs him; a discipline of life keeps him level and steady.
 - An elder is to be "dignified." The word really means "orderly," to have an orderly life, not to have everything going helter-skelter, unable to lay his hands on anything and not knowing what is happening.
 - He is to be "hospitable." His home is to be open to strangers and to the people of the church.
 - An elder must be able to teach. That is a very important requirement. There are many godly men in a congregation who fulfill these character requirements but they may not have the gift of teaching. But an elder must teach. He must be able to expound the Scriptures, to correct those who are misusing them and recognize error when it appears -- "confute those that are antagonists," as Paul wrote to Titus {cf, Tit 1:9b RSV}.
 - An elder is not to be a "drunkard." The word is, "not given to much wine." That answers all the strange stories you hear among Christians these days claiming that the wine of the New Testament was nothing but grape juice. If a man were only drinking grape juice why would the apostle be concerned that he "be not given to much grape juice"? The grape juice he was drinking was obviously able to be intoxicative if used too liberally. The fact that our Lord and the disciples did drink wine was a common experience in that day. But it was not to be over-indulged; there was to be no reproach in this area.
 - Another requirement is that an elder be "not violent," i.e., not a contentious, angry man who is always attacking others. That disqualifies a man for eldership.
 - Then he must not be "quarrelsome." The word really is "stubborn," not insisting on his own point of view at all costs.
 - Finally, he must not be in it for what he can get (not a "money lover"). He must not be out to keep up with the Joneses, but must maintain a simple lifestyle, without undue affluence evident.

Then an elder has to have a certain record of accomplishment in three specific areas.

First,

He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church? {1 Tim 3:4-5 RSV}

The first thing you look for is whether the man has a well-managed family. Look at his children. Are they obedient, or are they the scandal of the church, nobody can control them? I know that pastors' and elders' children are under more inspection than others. (They get that way from playing with the children of the other members of the church!) But his children are to be obedient and courteous in their responses, learning how to address life. This does not necessarily govern the children after they have grown up and left home. The word used here is "small children." This is a test of a man.

This does not mean he is not to have any problems ever come in his family, Nobody can be free of problems. It is the devil's job to put us in trouble and give us problems. What this urges us to observe is how he handles those problems. Does he evade them by busying himself in his business, or does he tackle those problems? The text says that this is excellent practice for being an elder in a church. An elder must not run from problems or refuse to face them. He must learn how to deal with them, and how to work things out in love and grace.

The second thing the apostle mentions is that an elder,

... must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. {1 Tim 3:6 RSV}

The trouble with a recent convert is that, though he may be very earnest in his new-found life and desirous of following the Lord with all his heart -- and oftentimes the new convert is beautiful in the dedication he manifests, his willingness to walk with the Lord as best he knows, etc., -- yet there is one thing wrong with him: He has not yet learned the effect of the cross upon his self-life, his ego. He is still reckoning upon human resources to bring him to success; he is still counting largely upon his personality, his magnetism, his good education, his good looks or his keen, sharply-trained mind in order to achieve what he thinks God wants. He has not yet learned that great word of Jesus: "that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God," {Luke 16:15b KJV}. He has not learned that God says he wants to work with people of a humble and a contrite heart, who have learned not to exalt themselves. A new convert means well, but he cannot be trusted because he has not yet learned to put down self and to trust in Christ. If he is put in office, the sudden exposure to public leadership will puff him up and make him proud, arrogant, and conceited. He will fall into what Paul calls "the condemnation of the devil," i.e., the very condemnation the devil himself has achieved by his pride and arrogance.

If I was not aware of the totally malicious nature of the devil, I confess there are times I would feel sorry for him because he is always losing at the last minute. He gets everything looking like it is going to work, and then everything falls apart, and he is left with dust and ashes. The cross is a good example. The devil thought he had beaten God when Jesus of Nazareth was dead, that by the power of death he had defeated the purposes of God to redeem a lost race, but by the resurrection all of that fell apart. The devil learned that what appeared to him to be his greatest victory was, in fact, his most terrible defeat. This is what happens with a new convert when you put him in a public position too soon. Suddenly, all of what looks like hard work and promotion that he has brought together to accomplish something will all fall apart because God will not use the flesh to bring about success in his kingdom.

Then the last area:

... moreover he must be well thought of by outsiders, or he may fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. {1 Tim 3:7 RSV}

An elder must have a good reputation in the eyes of others. I remember years ago visiting a druggist here on the Peninsula. I mentioned to him a man who was attending this church, and the druggist spoke very disparagingly of him. "Why do you say that about him?" I asked. He replied, "I know that man. He goes to your church, but I know more about him than you do. He has owed me money for six months and he has never paid a dime. I've got no use for him." I was a young pastor and I did not know quite how to handle that, so I just watched. Within a few weeks, that man who apparently had a position of respect among us suddenly fell apart. We discovered that he had fallen into a very serious moral problem. He fell into the "snare of the devil," the trap of the devil, because he had no respect in the eyes of the community. Thus, he was opened up to the devil's clever wiles.

This is what accounts for many of the leaders of today who are falling into moral difficulties, falling into the trap of the devil, because they have allowed their consciences to be offended and have not dealt honestly with the world around.

Last week we were treated to the humiliating spectacle of a former Secretary of Agriculture standing before a judge and confessing that he had misused funds and evaded taxes. I do not know whether he is a Christian or

not, but here is an example of the type of thing that can happen when our reputation in the eyes of the world is not what it ought to be.

There we have the qualifications for the leaders of the church. What a task it is, for the church of Jesus Christ is the most exciting body on earth! To be in the center of leadership in the church of Jesus Christ as the human channel by which the mind of the living Lord in our midst is revealed to a body of people about what they can do and how they are to proceed is indeed an exciting relationship, a noble task.

Let us pray for our elders; let us keep them before the Lord. They are under great attack because the devil (twice mentioned in this passage) is very much out to get elders. If he can destroy their faith, and break up their homes, the whole church will be affected. God's program, God's counter-revolutionary movement, as a result, will be weak.

Prayer

Our Father, grant to us that we may be faithful to obey and heed what you have set before us; to walk in ways that are pleasing to you and to honor you for the designation you make of certain men as leaders among us. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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