

The task of choosing new elders is very important. Elders provide important leadership for the congregation and the Bible has some clear words about leadership in the church and the qualities which elders in the church must possess.

In 1 Timothy 3 the key phrase in verse 2 is *"above reproach"*. We should not make the mistake of thinking that a person needs to be perfect before they can become an elder. But neither should we make the mistake of thinking that the eldership is for any well-meaning person who is willing to serve. The qualifications for the eldership are considerable. And the majority of people do not qualify.

Paul specifies three areas where an elder should be above reproach:

1. An elder must be above reproach in their life at home.

Verses 4 and 5 say: *"He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of Christ's church?)"*

Paul's logic is clear and powerful here. If a person can't cope with the lesser, how he is going to cope with the greater? If a person has difficulty managing their own family, will they really be capable of managing the church? Paul is saying that in the home and the church the same principles apply. The church is like a family that needs loving and compassionate leadership.

He also says that the home of an elder must be a hospitable home. That was very important in biblical times when there weren't many restaurants or hotels, and when visitors and travellers had to be entertained. But hospitality doesn't just mean an open door. It means an open heart. It means a generosity, a desire to

be practical in one's Christian love for others. An elder is someone whose home and whose heart is open to others. The evidence that a person has these qualities to use in the service of Christ and the church is seen primarily in the home and among their own family.

2. An elder must be above reproach in their commitment to Christ and to the church.

Verse 6: *"He must not be a recent convert or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil."*

An elder must be a committed follower of Jesus Christ and must have given evidence of that commitment. In other words, an elder must not be a new Christian or someone who is spiritually immature. They must have a track record of Christian discipleship and give evidence of Christian maturity.

But when a person is ordained to the eldership, they must answer a number of searching questions with regard to their faith and belief. An elder must subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms and acknowledge that their teaching is "founded upon and agreeable to the Word of God". That demands maturity, thoughtfulness and understanding. Elders must not only be Presbyterians in terms of their church membership, but also in terms of their basic beliefs and convictions.

Elders must not only be committed to the doctrines of the church; they must be committed to the life of the church. You are looking for people whose primary field of Christian service will be the life and witness of your congregation. There are many organisations that people may be involved in which are excellent and good. But for a person who is an elder in the church, their first love,

their primary commitment, will be their work in their own congregation. That is why those whom you should consider for the eldership should already be giving some leadership in the congregation. In electing elders you should aim at building a team, a team that will work together and will support one another.

3. An elder is to be above reproach in their life before the world.

Verse 7: *"He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap."*

At first sight verse 7 seems strange. What does the outside world know about Christian maturity and spiritual gifts? You might say "Absolutely nothing!" Yet the world outside is not totally blind or stupid. They recognise a person of principle and integrity when they see one. They soon discover who is to be trusted and who is to be respected. The people you choose need to be people who are known outside of the church for the consistency of their lives, for their Christian commitment and for their grace, moderation and self-control.

In the second half of verses 6 and 7 Paul gives us reasons for urging caution in the choice of elders. He talks about falling into disgrace and the devil's trap. In choosing elders a door is opened for the devil to enter the affairs of the church and to throw it into confusion. When that happens, Satan wins and the church loses. The church may put the wrong person in the wrong position and the results may be devastating for the person concerned. When leaders in the church behave inconsistently and in a way that denies their calling, damage is caused outside the church as well as inside. People on the outside will be drawn to the church, or repelled from the church, on the basis of how elders live and behave. That's why you need to choose good people.

Perhaps you are thinking, "What an impossible task! How can I ever decide who to select?" It's important to remember that these biblical qualifications are God's requirements for leadership. Christ is the Lord and King of the church. Our goal in selecting elders is to bring honour, glory and praise to Jesus Christ. Leaders, like the members of the congregation, must be people who rely totally on the grace and mercy of Christ. They can't do it in their own strength. They need God's grace. So, be careful, be wise and be prayerful as you make your choice.

Here is the section from the Code of our church that outlines the qualifications and duties of ruling elders:

"The duty of ruling elders as members of Kirk Session is to work together with the minister in the oversight and government of the congregation, for the upbuilding of God's people in spiritual fruitfulness and holy concord, and for the extension of Christ's kingdom among men. Ruling elders, by their calling, share equally with ministers in responsibility for practical witness both within the congregation and in the wider world. In the discharge of his duties each elder should be assigned a district or special responsibilities within the congregation in which he may more particularly represent the Kirk Session by visitation, private counsel and report.

"To be chosen for the office of the eldership in a congregation a person must be a voting member of that congregation and a regular attender on its ordinances. He should be circumspect and exemplary in his conduct, both in the Church and in the world, of acknowledged piety, endeavouring to maintain the worship of God in his family and held in esteem by the people. Women shall be eligible for election on the same conditions as men."

Questions to consider as you make your choice:

- Is this person a committed Christian?
- Have they a track record of Christian discipleship?
- Do they do a good job in managing and leading their own family?
- Are they actively involved in some form of leadership in the congregation?
- Do they have a good reputation in the local community?

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