

The Bishops

by William MacDonald

The sermon emphasizes the importance of spiritual leadership in the church, highlighting the qualifications and duties of bishops and elders.

Scripture: 1 Timothy 3:1

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Qualifications of Elders"

Description

William MacDonald emphasizes the distinction between the New Testament understanding of a bishop and the modern interpretation. In the early church, bishops were mature Christians serving the spiritual needs of their local congregations, rather than appointed dignitaries overseeing multiple churches. MacDonald highlights the qualifications and duties of bishops, stressing that they should be humble servants rather than figures of authority, and that their selection is ultimately guided by the Holy Spirit. He also points out that the church's recognition of elders should be based on their spiritual qualifications rather than worldly success. The sermon concludes with the importance of the church's attitude towards elders, advocating for respect and support for their leadership.

Transcript

First of all, we must distinguish between the New Testament concept of a bishop, and the title as it is used today. In the apostolic church, a bishop was simply one of several mature Christians in a local church who cared for the spiritual welfare of that church. Today, in church systems, a bishop is an appointed dignitary who has many churches under his jurisdiction. Barnes says: "The word bishop in the New Testament never means what is now commonly understood by it--a Prelate. It does not denote here (i.e. in 1 Timothy 3) or anywhere else in the New Testament, one who has charge over a diocese composed of a certain district of country embracing a number of churches with their clergy."

In the New Testament, the bishops were not a class of men, mediating between God and man. Perhaps it was as a rebuke to such pretension as might arise in the future that the Spirit of God listed the bishops second, not first, when Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus . . . with the bishops and deacons."

In the New Testament, the thought of officialism is absent. Instead of a lofty office with magnificent titles, we are pointed to humble service among the people of God. Thus we read, "If any one is eager for oversight, he is desirous of a good work." Overseership is work, not dignity of office.

Finally, we would notice, by way of introduction, that the words, "bishop," "elder," "overseer" and "presbyter" all refer to the same person in the New Testament. This can be demonstrated by the following comparisons of Scripture with Scripture. In Acts 20:17, we find a reference made to the "elders," of the church. The margin of the Revised Version indicates that this word is the same as "presbyters." Then in Acts 20:28, these same "elders" or "presbyters" are called "overseers." Here the word "overseers" is translated "bishops," in the Revised Version. In Titus 1:5, Paul instructs Titus to ordain "elders"; he then immediately (v. 7) proceeds to give the qualifications of a "bishop," indicating again that "elders," are the same as "bishops."

HOW BISHOPS ARE SELECTED?

Now let us consider the question of how elders are selected or appointed. In the final analysis, only the Holy Spirit can make a man an elder (Acts 20:28). A church may meet in solemn session to appoint elders, but their vote does not put within a man the heart of an overseer. The scriptural order would seem to be that God makes men overseers, then as they carry on their work, the church recognizes them as divinely-appointed bishops.

If it be argued that Paul and others appointed bishops (Acts 14: 23; Titus 1:5), we would simply say that this was before the New Testament was available in written form in the churches. In the absence of written instructions as to the qualifications of elders, the churches had to depend on these apostles or apostolic delegates. It should also be noted that Paul never ordained elders on his first visit to a church. Rather he allowed time for those elders whom God had ordained to manifest themselves by their work. Then he singled them out for recognition by the church.

THE QUALIFICATIONS OF A BISHOP

The Scriptures leave us in no doubt as to the qualifications of a true bishop or elder. These are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and in Titus 1:6-9.

First of all, the bishop must be blameless. As to his reputation, he must be above reproach. It does not say he must be sinless, but blameless. If a public accusation can be proved against a man, he should refrain from assuming the duties of an overseer. Secondly, he must be the husband of one wife. Some understand this to mean that he must be a married man. Others see in it a prohibition against a polygamist ever becoming an elder. We can definitely say that the latter is true, but it is hard to be dogmatic on the first. Next, he must be vigilant. The Revised Version tells that this means temperate. He must not be a man given to excess. Some persons find it hard to be moderate. They are always going to extremes. Such men may be in the church, but they may not be overseers. The elder must be sober, or sober-minded. He must evidence by his life that Christianity is not a pleasant pastime, a frivolous trifle. The elder grapples with eternal issues. He must be of good behavior, or a better rendering would be "orderly." Carelessness or slipshod methods are unbecoming to one who would serve in a house of order. Next, we read, "given to hospitality," or "a lover of hospitality." His home should be open to the Lord's people. It should be like the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha in Bethany--a place where Jesus loved to be. The bishop should be apt to teach. Although he might not be an outstandingly gifted teacher, still he should be sufficiently proficient in handling the Scriptures to be able to help the people of God with problems as they arise.

He must not be addicted to wine, or as another translation renders it, he must not be a brawler. The two are closely allied. Any man who cannot control his own appetite surely is not worthy of a place of trust in the church.

He must not be a striker. The literal meaning is that he must not use violence on others. To strike a servant, for instance, would be inconsistent with eldership. He must not be greedy of filthy lucre. The true bishop understands that money is to be used for the Lord and for the advancement of His interests. A grasping, greedy Christian is a paradox. He must be patient. His Master was gentle, and the servant is not above his Master. Meekness and patience may not be virtues in the secular world, but they still are in the Kingdom of God. He must not be a brawler, or contentious. Some are ready to fight and to argue over matters of little consequence. Not so a bishop. Then, again, he must not be covetous. To covet is to want something which God never intended one to have. Covetousness is idolatry, because it puts one's will above the will of God. The elder must rule his own house well, having his children in subjection with all gravity--children who believe, and who are not accused of riot or unruly. The necessity for this requirement is obvious. "For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" (1 Timothy 3:5). He must not be a novice. This is implied in the name "elder." Spiritual maturity is necessary. A man may be old in years, and yet not be qualified for spiritual oversight because of lack of experience as a Christian. The danger is that a novice becomes lifted up with pride, and falls into the condemnation of the devil. He must have a good report of them that are without. The world should know that he is a man of Christian character and integrity. He must not be self-willed, not soon angry, a lover of that which is good. He must be just and holy. Finally, he must hold fast the faithful word; that is, he must be a defender of the faith. To summarize the qualifications of an elder, we might say that he must be able to control himself, he must be able to control his own home, and he must be a contender for the truth of God. Now it should be noted that the Bible does not say the bishop must be an ordained clergyman. It does not say he must have a college degree. It does not say he must be a successful businessman. It is not of importance whether he is prominent in the community. Nothing is said about his personal appearance or the size of his bank balance. He might be a hunch-backed, ungainly, poor, old street-sweeper, and still be an elder in the church of God. Let us ponder this seriously. Doubtless one of the greatest blights on the church today is the recognition of men as elders who do not have the spiritual qualifications. Because a man has been successful in business, he is catapulted into a place of leadership in the church, even though he may have little or no spirituality. The result is an abundance of whatever money will buy and an absence of spiritual power.

THE DUTIES OF A BISHOP

What are the duties of elders? First of all they are to feed the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28). They do this by ministering the Word of God. It does not necessarily imply public ministry, but may be by visitation from house to house.

Secondly, they are to do the work of overseers. "Taking the oversight thereof," Peter writes. What does this mean? The rest of the passage explains what it does not mean, and what it does mean. It does not mean serving by constraint. This must be a willing service. It does not mean working for monetary gain. Not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind. It does not mean fording it over God's heritage. The elder is not a dictator, not a taskmaster, not a boss. But it does mean being an example to the flock. The elder must remember that the Good Shepherd does not drive His sheep--He leads them. Every under-shepherd should do the same. From the human standpoint, it would be much easier to have centralized human authority in the church, so that orders could be issued from headquarters, and obedience would be mandatory. But that is not God's way. The elders oversee the church by being examples to the flock.

In a very real way, the elders set the tone in a church. Where there are elders who are godly men, who put the Lord first in their lives, who radiate the grace of the Lord Jesus, one can expect to find a healthy,

spiritual church; on the other hand, where the elders are engrossed in the affairs of the world, occupied with outside interests, too busy to read the Word or to pray, one can expect to find a coldness and deadness among the flock.

Again, the elders are told to support the weak. "I have showed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He said, It is more blessed to give than to receive,, (Acts 20:35). The context implies that they should be ready to help those who are in need by giving to them. That is an interesting thing. Instead of making a living off the flock, they should share their living with the flock.

Finally, the elders should reprove, rebuke and exhort (2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:13; 2:15). Whatever is contrary to the faith must be rebuked with all authority. Those who will not endure sound doctrine should be reprovved and exhorted. The elder must earnestly contend for the faith.

What attitude should the church take toward elders? It is clear from 1 Timothy 5:17, 18 that some elders are cared for in a financial way by the church. "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, the labourer is worthy of his reward." It is equally clear that others worked for their own support. Paul himself is an outstanding instance of this (1 Corinthians 4:12). In addition, an elder is not to be rebuked, but entreated as a father (1 Timothy 5:1). Christians should not receive an accusation against an elder except before two or three witnesses (1 Timothy 5:19). And then, the bishops should be remembered, recognized and obeyed. "Esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Thessalonians 5:13). "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:7, 8). Finally, we note the rewards of the bishops. "When the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away" (1 Peter 5:4).

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