

Leading in Church

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Date: 18 May 2014

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[0 : 0 0] I like for a little while this morning to return to 1 Timothy chapter 3. As I mentioned before, we're going to look a little bit at the biblical qualifications for elders and deacons.

It's not all that the Bible has to say, but there are some important things. And what I want to say, what I really want to do this morning is guide our thoughts towards Jesus Christ in all that we do.

And I don't want this to be seen as a kind of technical sermon where we are thinking of and testing our spiritual lives in a technical sense or in a church order sense, how significant these may be.

It is simply a reminder to us of what God's word says about his family, what he says about his structures that he's left us to consider and think about.

Sometimes these are difficult to understand. Sometimes we wonder what it's about. Sometimes our experiences of what church is like is very different so that we struggle with the whole concept, the whole idea of a kind of, as it were, an institution for want of a better word.

[1 : 2 3] But what I want us to do today is, although the focus is on the particular roles and the characteristics that are encouraged and the lives that are expressed in this chapter, I think the reminder to us is that the characteristics are ones that are good for all of us as Christians.

Because we're all asked to be Christ-like. It's not like elders and deacons have a kind of separate set of qualifications to reach to in terms of their role.

But we should all be looking for these characteristics of Christ-likeness. And not because that will somehow earn us favour with God or make us closer to God because He will favour us because of that, because the core of our Gospel, of course, is, isn't it, that we need Jesus Christ to be made right and clean inside.

We need Him to take our hearts and mould them and do something absolutely miraculous to take them from being hard and stony and difficult spiritually to being soft and tender towards Him.

And that's His work. And so we're looking post this work. We're not saying that any of these things make us right with God, but we're looking post what Jesus has done in our lives.

[2 : 5 0] And it's a focus for our thinking about what the church is about, because the church is a reflection of the community that we're going to enjoy forever in heaven.

So always when we talk about the church, we should be thinking forward to heaven. It should help. Even when we meet, when we come to church, as we call it, churches, we gather together, although that's not all that church is, it reflects the community of God's people, which is pointing forward to heaven.

So when we gather together, there should be some kind of taste of heavenly fellowship and of what the future is going to be like, because we should be worshiping Jesus.

We should be King of Kings and Lord of Lords in our worship, not just in an outward verbal way, but in a spiritual way in our hearts as we come and offer the sacrifice of praise for hearts that have been, are submitted to Jesus as Lord and Savior.

So that the outward expression, which will be our gathering and our worship and our coming under God's word and our prayers and our singing, is all a reflection of this kingdom to which we belong and ought to be.

[4 : 13] So that that is significant for us, even when we're thinking about something, maybe what we think is a little bit more technical today. It is something that we should be reminded of today of the beauty of Jesus and the challenge of Jesus for us in our own lives.

Which should I hope encourages us to think and pray carefully about the nominations that the curksession, the elders have recommended and that we will pray for unity and a sense of family and a sense of belonging and a sense of togetherness.

I'm only going to pick out one or two things here from this chapter about the kind of characteristic roles of elders and deacons within the church and then look a little bit more towards the end of the chapter.

So the elders are the spiritual overseers of the church and I know you know that. They are those who are part of a team of leaders that have specific gifts for leadership and specific qualities and characteristics who are appointed and ordained by the will of the people but we believe through prayer also ordained under God to be part of the structure of overseeing the church of God.

Under shepherds to overseeing but under shepherds reflecting Jesus Christ. It's a kind of example of what it is to be a Christ-like leader.

[5 : 52] Our leadership as elders and deacons should point people not towards ourselves, God forbid, but should point people towards our great shepherd and his great example of being a servant, of laying down his life for the sheep, of washing the disciples feet and that is the role of the eldership is to have this servant-spirited leadership.

We have a responsibility to love you, to pastor and care for you, to pray for you, to be involved in your spiritual training because we need spiritual training ourselves to correct, rebuke and courage in all righteousness through relationships and through closeness and gentleness and trust and courage and strength.

Similarly to how Christ led his own disciples but obviously recognising our great dependence on the Spirit and on his wisdom and grace.

And that role is a really significant role. It doesn't make leaders any more important than anyone else. It doesn't give us an undue privilege with God in any sense, but it is a significant role and involves commitment, vision, organisation, strategic thinking, teamwork, spiritual dynamism, sacrifice.

Because as the chapter here reminds us, it's a noble task, it's a spiritual task of great nobility and it is one that God has ordained and we hopefully recognise that and I hope we pray for each other.

[7 : 56] I can assure you that the spiritual leaders of the church pray for you and I hope and believe absolutely and know that you pray for us.

But please remember one thing and James chapter 3 speaks about teachers and elders and says to them, not many of you should presume to be teachers my brothers because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Please remember that. Please remember the weight of responsibility and the seriousness, the solemnity of the task of leadership.

Please don't see it as a, what's the word I'm looking for, promotion maybe in the Christian life or a reward in the Christian life.

It's far from that. It's neither of these things, it ought never to be. It's never to be based on our standing in the community as a respectable people or anything like that.

[8 : 58] Well, I'll explain what I mean by that later on. But it is a solemn responsibility. That's how God given one and we will stand before God for you, for to take account of how we shepherd at you and that is a solemn and sobering in the right sense of that word, reality.

Deacons also are to be spiritual leaders of the congregation. I think on the sheet that I put in with the nomination form, there's a nice description of the difference between deacons and elders and it is that elders serve through leadership and deacons lead through service.

See, there's a different emphasis. It's the elders, I got it right. Yeah, you know what I mean?

That the elders lead, no, serve through leading. Their service is that they lead the congregation. That's their active service.

But deacons lead by serving. There's a different emphasis. Do you get, you all look really blank, say, what is he speaking about? Do you get it? Do you get what I'm trying to say? Yeah, there's a difference.

[10 : 25] And I'm not convinced. I know, I understand it. I thought that's a great example. I must use that and everyone will get what the difference is and you know, can I look at what planets he from?

Is it the glasses that are doing that? Anyway, so, but there's this whole idea that the deaconite is more of a serving role in a kind of overt way and an obvious way.

They have a task biblically right from the beginning of serve helping the elders to fulfill the role and helping with some of the practical work in the church to free up the spiritual leaders, the pastors and the elders to do their spiritual work, to be praying and teaching and leading the people spiritually.

They've got this great practical emphasis of putting into place the grace and the care and love of Christ to people and being involved in that and serving in an obvious leadership way that shows the practical love of Christ.

But it's also a spiritual role and I think sometimes we forget that. I'm not going into any detail about these roles. I think there are maybe slightly more detail in some of the information that has been handed out.

[11 : 43] I'm not available to all of you, but today I just want to look at one or two things in terms of the qualifications because there are spiritual areas that are very common to the characteristics that God sets out in this chapter for them.

But I do say, can I say again there, please don't switch off because you thought, well, I'm not going to be an elder or a deacon and this isn't for me. I think all of us are to aspire to these characteristics in our Christian lives is that there's this recognition that those who are in spiritual leadership have a mature self-control in their lives, that they are strong spiritually in faith and that comes across in many of the different characteristics that they are to show the self-control of God's Holy Spirit.

Sometimes we think it's crazy idea that the Holy Spirit is simply allows us to do things randomly or spontaneously. He's a spirit of self-control and much of this is about the spirit of self-control over alcohol, over money, over temper, over our tongue, so that those who are in leadership should show that control in their lives in these areas and in other areas also because these are important.

But that's not an exclusive expression of Christian faith for leadership, is it? The Bible makes clear that's our responsibility for all of us. As we are filled with the spirit of sober judgment and of self-control and of discipline that we all show that, that we all recognize that we have desires that need to be tamed.

Come back this evening because we're on the bit, I shouldn't say the best of all commandments but it's the commandment that underpins so many of the rest. It's the last one which is about coveting and desire.

[13 : 31] I'm not going to start speaking about that because that's tonight's. But it's all about, that isn't it, about controlling by God's grace and by His strength the sins that so easily beset us and by recognizing that we are in this battle to become matured in our Christian lives and to change and mould our desires so that they become like Christ.

So this mature self-control is part of the qualifications. This is a good family life chapter 3 speaks about that in different places.

He must manage his own family well versus fore and see his children who pay him with proper respect and so the same goes with deacons. Now it's a recognition that where that is relevant, where the deacon or elder is married and his children, that this is to be an outworking of their Christian leadership and their Christian character and their Christian responsibility.

In other words, the people that the elders and deacons, the leaders of the church are closest to, that's where their Christian maturity should first be reflected.

Sometimes the cases being that elders and deacons and leaders of the church have acted in a certain way in public and in the church and in positions of leadership but it hasn't been reflected with a life of grace and maturity and gentle and humble leadership in the home or among those closest to them.

[15 : 01] You see the whole emphasis of this chapter is that the church of God is like a family, it's like an extension of your family and so there's this image of being a spiritual leader, reflecting if you are a leader and a spiritually mature and holy in your life at home then that will be something that will be reflective of how you will be able to lead in church.

Faithfulness, self-control, gentleness, strength, courage as a husband, as a father, as a son in all of these areas, respect, love, discipline, leadership.

Does that not apply to us all? How we act at home? Where's the easiest place to not act as a Christian?

When the curtains are shut, the doors closed or nobody else sees us? That's where we act because Christ is in our heart and that's where we show the genuineness of a change.

It's all against this kind of simply outward formal Christian living that sometimes we are tempted by, which again we'll see tonight, good family, good relations with others, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money and all of these things that are spoken of here, are spoken within the context of the church.

[16 : 41] They're encouraged to have an open home to be hospitable. Now we've seen and we've spoken a lot here about the link between having an open home and an open heart because where do you see your life most clearly reflected is in our home, isn't it?

And as we open our home to people, we're opening them into our lives in a much more personal way and there's to be this sense of teamwork within the home, supportive wife where that is possible, servants but where shepherding is done in the church in a way that is respectful and Christ centred.

You see as sinners, leaders can often abuse their position, can't they? In church or in the home or in the workplace even and we'll come to that.

We can lord over people, we can not listen, we can be dictatorial, we can choose not to share leadership, share leadership wisdom with others in the congregation, share leadership requests and the need for guidance from others who know better, men, women, boys, girls, children, whoever in the congregation, we can think we have all the answers.

We are kidding ourselves and we're kidding God if we don't allow our leadership to be one that is learning and growing in good relationship with others where we trust one another, knowing and developing together.

[18 : 23] Good relationship with others in the church is important as is a good reputation with outsiders. Hema, it's a very important qualification, must have good reputation with outsiders so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Esteemed, well in the workplace, in the neighbourhood, in the wider family, good reputation.

I do wonder sometimes whether as a leadership team we should take references from potential elders employers. Do they have a good reputation?

Are they known for honesty? Are they humble? Are they respectful? How do they share their faith in the public arena?

How do they live? What would you say about them if we were to say that we were asking them to become leaders in the church? Do you think they have leadership potential? Now obviously it's only going to be a pointer but the Bible tells us that those who are in leadership in the church should have good reputations.

[19 : 36] Isn't it terrible? Now, does that just apply to leaders? I don't think so. Do we act in a way in public that is a contradictory to what we believe on a Sunday or what we believe spiritually?

Do we think there's no connection? Are we not to have a respect with those who are not Christians that we rub shoulders with every day?

If people ask for a reference for you or for me in the workplace about our Christian faith and about our standing and about our character and about our morality and about our honesty and about our greed or lack of it or about our use of time or about how we speak or how we deal with other people, what would they say?

It's all under the same umbrella, isn't it? This isn't just a, this is a hard one for the elders. It's for us all because we all come under that biblical teaching here and in other places.

Good reputation, but also a strong faith there to have a maturity and an ability, as we're told in this chapter, that they are to be able to teach, that they must be able to hold the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience or to be mature at that level and have a strong faith.

[21 : 03] A good knowledge, share it and apply it and live it in our lives. And that's elders and deacons in this church, that's what we are to do.

That's our role. We are to teach, we are to share our faith, we are to encourage, we are to build up, we are to have, we've got that, we're appointed to that role.

It's like, you know, if you go, if you go to the doctor, you go to the doctor because the doctor's qualified and you talk about health matters, don't you? You generally, you might have a little chit chat, but you're not going to there to talk about the football or the results from yesterday or how you're getting on at work.

Generally speaking, you go there because you've got a malady. You've got something wrong with it, it's not a good word, malady. Something wrong. You go there and you expect the doctor to deal with that.

Well, there's the same freedom that leaders have with the people and the people with leaders. You should be open and able to speak with one another. You shouldn't be embarrassed or ashamed that your elder comes up to you and says, look, how are you getting on spiritually?

[22 : 05] What are you struggling with? What are the issues? Can I pray for anything? Will you pray for me in this area? And have an honest and open and spiritual relationship with one another that is accountable and that is genuine and that is real.

These are important aspects, both. Not only again for elders and deacons at one level, although it's kind of heightened, but for one another.

Do you pray for one another? We always, I'm always banging on about that here, haven't I? Do we pray for one another? Do we speak spiritually to one another? In our conversations with one another as Christians, how often do we speak about Jesus?

How excited are we by Jesus? How much do we want to learn about Jesus? Not just in church, not just in the formal meetings, but in our gatherings together. Can I learn from a fellow Christian who's struggling?

You know here sometimes, how often have we heard here when someone's given their testimony or someone shared their faith? That was so beneficial. I didn't realise other people were struggling in their Christian faith.

[23 : 05] I didn't realise that they have same temptations as I have. I didn't realise this about Jesus would come into my life in this way and it helps and encourages one another. We're able to do that.

We're filled with the Spirit. We've got that privilege. It's not just the elders. I always, I can't do this slightly digression, but I always still laugh with people sometimes and it happened occasionally in the previous church.

When I would go and visit someone in the church, I think I've told you this before, and it was a visit from the minister then, and this Christian in the church had their neighbouring and when I came in they said, oh great, here's the minister.

Now minister, Derek, you go and tell them about Jesus. You're the professional, you go and do it. He said, no, you do it. You're their friend. You're the one that loves them.

You're the one that knows them. It's not my professional job. I'll happily tell them about Jesus, but it's all our role to do that. It's all our task to share Christ and to do it.

[24 : 04] Elders and leaders have that position simply to encourage and enthuse that in our lives. So we have there one or two very brief overview of the role of the elder and deacon.

There's probably more detail and more biblical passages to go through that are referenced that you may take time to do so. But can I just in closing speak very briefly about the nature of the church as it's given here a couple of things?

Because so often when we talk about something like this, you're thinking about institution. You're thinking about man-made rules and regulations.

Maybe in your conversation about the church, you'll talk about someone else's church, not mine. You'll not sense ownership with it. You maybe keep it at arm's length.

You maybe have bad experiences in church and you think church is rubbish. I just want to climb the hills and worship God because that's much more pure. Church is full of sinners and hypocrites and failures.

[25 : 06] And it's Victorian and it's structures and everything that it does and it's too demanding and it's uncaring and it's all about control. You may have all these different levels, considerations of the church.

Good experiences are bad experiences or in different experiences you need to drift along but it really doesn't have any part in your life because you see it as something you come to on a Sunday that within these four walls and then you go from and that's it.

And it doesn't affect you anymore for the rest of the week. But here we've got a picture of the church in two different ways very, very briefly. The first is in verse 15, God's, if I'm delayed you will know how people ought to conduct themselves.

In God's household which is the church of the living God. So it's the church is God's household.

He's the Father and it's his family. And when we belong to St. Columbus here as part of the church that you know the physical church that we belong to.

[26 : 10] We're part of God's family. We're God's children and our identity is belonging to Christ. Not belonging to St. Columbus, not belonging to the free church, not belonging to a denomination that is conservative, reformed, evangelical.

However much these things have developed and are important. We belong to God's family. God is our Father and we belong genetically by grace.

We belong and we're part of his family because we have come to faith in Jesus Christ if we indeed have. God is our Father and we have the security and whatever bad experiences of earthly families we might have.

In Christ we have a security, learning, loving, protective environment that reaches on into eternity where we are encouraged in the already but not yet to forgive, to be self-controlled, to learn, to grow, to understand, to be compassionate, to be intimate, to develop and mature within God's family.

Can I ask you not to keep God's family here? With all your reservations of church or institution or denomination or whatever else you might think church is, not to stay at arm's length because of past experience or because of a misunderstanding of what church is.

[27 : 45] It's a place where at least metaphorically we have fallen to our knees and said, I need rescued.

I'm out of your family. I'm in spiritual darkness. I'm lost eternally. And we come to faith and we who were once not a people become a people and we belong with all our idiosyncrasies and stupidities and mistakes as leaders and as failures and all that goes with that.

We are hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, behind our great high priest and the great overseer of our souls, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And within that we're just coming together with His structure behind us, seeking to follow Him in God's... You know, in any house there's got to be structure, isn't there?

In any household. Can I ask any parent here? Ask any child who's grown up in a home. Without any kind of structure, without any kind of leadership, without any kind of decision making, without any kind of care and protection.

[28 : 57] It's just anarchy, isn't it? We don't have anarchy in our homes. We might all have different ideas about how to structure family, but we all have structure within that, within relationships, within the workplace and the church of God is no different.

Particularly as we grow, you know, there's that need for a degree of order and structure. God's household, but it's also what's described here, finally, as the pillar and foundation of the truth.

That's what the church is. The church doesn't have a right to make up its own mind about what the truth is. The truth is there.

It's our foundation. You know, we're working, it's great. We don't have to come together every year and say, hey, what are we all about? What's the truth we're going to believe this year? How do we express ourselves differently?

We've got the truth. It's a found, we're founded on historical redemptive reality. It's both our foundation and it's the pillar that works right through this spiritual building that we are.

[30 : 00] I have said this hundreds of times here, but we stand on Castle Rock here. Strong, strong, strong granite volcanic rock and these pillars go all the way through down to the hall and through the cheese shop on Victoria Street and as founded on Castle Rock.

And that's a good image, isn't it? At one level of the spiritual strength of Christ our Redeemer, Christ our Rock, his unchanging truth because it's rescued and redeemed us from real need and real death and real separation from him.

And it's absolutely important. It's not insignificant. It's not about institutions. It's not about just keeping something going. The church of Christ has to be and recognise itself as the pillar and foundation of the truth.

Recognising that Christ is at the very centre of the mystery of godliness that is the truth incarnate in him and also the truth incarnate in our lives as we follow him by faith and come to him for rescue.

He appeared. This may be an early declaration of the truth for the church. He appeared and the body was vindicated by the spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed in the world, was taken up in glory.

[31 : 34] It's a great early creed, isn't it? It's all about Christ. Leadership is about Christ. Nominations, the structures, the way we're thinking, the submission we have to one another, both as leaders and people, the prayers that we make, the unity that we share, the sacrifices that we give, the forgiveness that we offer, the gentleness with which we speak about and to one another, the sacrifice that we give in our lives, all of these things are because of Christ because He's worth it.

He's worth belonging to His house. There's no other house that will stand. Christ is the one who in the storms of life, but more probably significantly as we get older in the storms of death, His is the foundation and we will be the house that will stand.

So, you know, He's important. And I hope that we will make our decisions and move forward, not with a critical spirit, but with a judgmental spirit.

And I don't think you have for a moment that, but I'm aware of it in my own heart, in the church and in the life of the church generally.

It's easy for us to do that. And we're asked to be submissive and spiritual and united and Christ-centered in our lives and may that be what we do.

[33 : 19] Again, can I just please make a plea to you if you are, if you love the church, it's people. If you love the congregation, if you belong to the congregation, but you don't know Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

Can I plead with you again today to recognize that it's all about Him? And on that last great day, our involvement in the church and the responsibility.

Elders as we read in James have a great responsibility, but so do people who have heard the truth, particularly if you've heard it a lot, to respond to that truth and to be rescued and to recognize that Jesus Christ is someone you need desperately today.

Amen. Let's spur our heads and pray. Father God, help us to recognize who you are. Help us to be those who submit to your living Word.

We thank you that you are living God. This is your living Word. We thank you that it is once for all been revealed to the saints.

[34 : 42] We thank you that it is unchanging and it's truth. And may we hold firmly to that doctrine which has passed down to us.

Not from a dogged or disinterested way, but in recognition that it is living truth.

It is ever relevant. It is truth that has transformed our lives. And may grace be at the very center of everything we are and everything we do.

Forgive our mistakes. Please Lord, will you forgive our mistakes as elders, as leaders? Sometimes our pride, sometimes our abusive power, sometimes our stupidity.

Sometimes our prayerlessness, sometimes our reliance on ourselves and on our own wisdom. Sometimes our lack of care and compassion, our lack of insight and our inability to learn from others and all the things that sometimes we are guilty of and can be a temptation in positions of leadership.

[35 : 58] And help us we pray to follow and serve you with humility and grace, but with courage and dignity and strength and nobility. For we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.