

Christ-Like Elders

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I don't know how much you may have read or had training, perhaps, in the area of leadership. If you ever have gone looking for a guide to leadership, it can be quite overwhelming.

I typed in the word leadership into Amazon, and even just in the category of books, it returned over 70,000 results.

Where to begin? Well, here are a few of the titles. I can't vouch for any of these books. I've not read them, not even the blurb. Here's a few of the titles. The Leadership Challenge, The New Psychology of Leadership, Leadership Wizard, Leadership 3.0, and last but I'm sure not least, Leadership, Plain and Simple.

And I think what that whole range of titles and the 70,000 others really illustrates is that our world as a whole is actually at a loss about leadership.

There is no definitive book, no obvious answer that our world has produced on this question, what makes a good leader? Whatever the title of that book might claim, there is nothing plain and simple about it, is there?

[1 : 1 7] Even if we were just to look back on the past year, we can see that, can't we? However we feel about it, our former Prime Minister was removed from office this year after losing the confidence of his colleagues over a lack of integrity.

Across the pond in the States, our cousins are still clearing up the mess that was caused by the departure of their former president from office.

And these are, of course, two highly developed democracies. This is to say nothing about the state, the quality of leadership in Russia, in China, or across the whole surface of the world where there is so much corruption and greed and violence that goes unreported and unchallenged.

Secular commentators would tell us, wouldn't they, that we are, as humanity, as a world on a path of progress. Look back, they say 4,000 years or 2,000 years or 500 years, and you can see we're on a steady upward climb into a better state of living.

Well, eventually we will reach utopia. But actually, look at our leaders, and it seems much clearer that as a whole, humanity is as confused and leaderless, so to speak, as we have ever been.

[2 : 4 5] And so if we are not naturally getting better at leadership, well, where does good leadership come from? Now, the historian Tom Holland, who I've quoted before, he actually says, in the whole of world history, there has only been one unique standout vision for how power and authority can be used.

In the history of the world, he says, it's the cross of Christ that has taught us how to manage, how to handle leadership, power, authority differently than the rest of world history.

Outside of the shadow of the cross, he says, all leadership has ever been to do with power, with strength, with domination. In a word, might is right.

But 2,000 years ago, a man who claims to be the king sent from God into the world poured out his strength and used his power not to dominate, but to die.

He was crowned with thorns. He was lifted high on a cross. And to all the world, it looked like failure, powerless and weak.

[3 : 5 7] But after three days, he was proclaimed victorious as he rose from the dead. And in the 2,000 years since then, his kingdom has come to spread throughout the world.

And wherever people follow him, says Tom Holland, the way that power and authority and leadership have been used has been turned upside down and rather been seen not in domination, but in self-giving, self-sacrificing service.

And all of that helps us, I think, as we get into our passage in 1 Timothy tonight. Where do we look for leadership in the church? What makes a good leader?

What kind of leaders should we look for as a church? Well, Paul says we see good leadership in leaders who are not self-seeking, not violent, not domineering, not greedy, not argumentative, but men of integrity, gentle, hospitable, generous, servant-hearted.

In short, good leaders are Christ-like leaders. Now, this might be a really familiar idea to you if you have spent a lot of time in the church, but if we think that this list that we read is anything kind of dull or ordinary or boring, well, as I say, we clearly haven't been keeping up with the news recently.

[5 : 29] This, I think, is one of the most exciting things that we could read about leadership because it gives us a wonderful, a beautiful outline of what leadership can be.

And Paul is saying that this is not something that we see kind of once in a generation, but that we can find in our everyday, ordinary churches, our local churches.

So, as a church, we're in the flow of Paul's letter on instructions how the church is to operate and to live together. And tonight, we have two questions to help us with our passage about church leadership.

First, what is a church leader? And then secondly, the question Paul gives much more time to, who is a church leader? Firstly, then, what is a church leader?

Now, you'll notice there in verse one, the word that Paul uses is overseer. Now, the original word in Greek for that is episkopos, from which we get the word episcopalian, which means ruled by bishops.

[6 : 36] Now, if you are worried or anxious that this is my kind of Englishness bursting through the cracks, okay, don't worry.

I'm not going to give you a sermon on bishops. Why am I not going to give you a sermon about bishops? Well, there are three words used for church leaders in the New Testament.

Overseers, as we have here, elders, and undershepherds, or sometimes translated pastors. And actually, when you compare the qualifications and the roles, descriptions of these titles, you find really these three words are speaking about one and the same office.

So, in the New Testament, to be an overseer is to be an elder, is to be an undershepherd. They're one inseparable role within the church.

Now, in the free church that we are part of, and in Presbyterian churches across the world, we call this role simply being an elder, I guess.

[7 : 39] And this is really just, you know, my thinking. If you want to go away and read up on this and tell me, I'd be delighted for you to do so. I guess because overseer and undershepherd sort of describe the type of service that come with this role.

You can oversee a church, and you can pastor a church, but you can't elder a church. Elder is a title that comes with those role descriptions.

The Greek word for elder is presbyteros, where we get the word presbyterian, meaning ruled by elders. Now, perhaps you are just visiting this evening.

Perhaps you are finding a new church, and your church at home is organized differently from this. One thing to say is that being Presbyterian is not the main thing to know about this church, about Bon Accord.

The main thing to know is that we love the Lord Jesus, and we want to glorify and worship and follow and serve him. So if I could put it like this, we are a Presbyterian church, but we're not a church for Presbyterians.

[8 : 54] We're a church for anyone who loves the Lord Jesus and anyone who wants to know who he is and seek him. So that's who we are. But if you're checking us out, it does help to know why the setup that we have is what it is.

The reason why we have elders as a church isn't because, okay, we got a whiteboard out, and we wrote pros and cons for all the different types of church leadership, of setting up and organizing a church, and decided that on balance, we felt that we wanted to be Presbyterians best.

Rather, it is because we read the Bible, and in Scripture we see that this one office God gives us for church leadership is being an elder, which involves overseeing and under-shepherding the church.

The Bible is our authority for how the church is to be and to run, how God wants his household to be managed. And so here at Bon Accord, we have 10 elders who meet once a month.

If you're wondering what you call a group of elders, well, it's one of those strange collective nouns. You get a gaggle of geese, a murder of crows, a parliament of owls, and a Kirk session of elders.

[10:19] I'll leave it to you to decide which of those groupings describes our elders best. The Kirk session meets to make decisions about the overall direction and pastoral care of the congregation.

And of course, our elders serve in lots of different ways throughout the week and on a Sunday, but particularly in prayer, teaching, and pastoring.

So you'll see our elders up at the front leading a prayer in our services. Each of our life groups is led by an elder with the help of others.

And our aim is to have an elder or elders involved at some level in every area of the life of our church. But the specific angle that Paul chooses to highlight here, what is a leader, is the elder's role as overseers.

Now, what does it mean to have oversight? I guess, generally, it means knowing what's going on and providing a degree of overall direction and vision for the church.

[11:28] Think for an example of an architect. Architects provide plans and blueprints that the builders kind of work off of.

And it goes a long way, doesn't it, if the architects can be on site to help to work through parts of the plan, or even to go back and to redraft parts of the plan depending on what is going on on the ground.

The architect's oversight of the work. It gives a sense of overall direction and holding the project together. To stretch the analogy even further, I guess some building projects take years.

There are multiple stages to the construction that need to be planned out on a timeline several years in advance. And so even if the work isn't happening right now, the architects kind of keep an eye on what's coming up and what we're working towards.

Now, that isn't a perfect illustration. Of course, as elders, we receive much of our plans and blueprints from God in Scripture.

[12:37] We're not drafting things fresh on a blank piece of paper. And of course, as elders, we can misread and miscalculate the plans and the timeline.

One of the best descriptions I heard a minister give of the work of elders was hanging on to God's coattails desperately sometimes, seeing what God is doing in the church and following him there. So as elders, we rely completely on God for the plans, for the wisdom, to know how, when to carry these out, the grace to work through those plans with the church family.

And so from beginning to end, if you like, we are, as elders, the junior draftsmen slash bricklayers of the building project that is God's church, of which he is the chief architect, the great builder.

But recognizing and owning our limits as elders doesn't absolve us of the responsibility for oversight. Verse 1 begins, Here's a trustworthy saying, Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task.

[13:50] It's a high calling, a noble task, which demands then high and noble service. It's not as if Paul expects the elders to say, Well, God's in charge.

Christ is the head of the church. So let's just let go and let God get on with it. No, it's Christ's church. But Christ expects his elders to keep watch and to have oversight of it, not to be omniscient or kind of all-seeing, but that the elders of the session should know what is going on in the life of the church, of its people, and be able to provide faithful and loving direction.

Again, not in a heavy-handed, a bossy or domineering way, but in the humble and sobering recognition that in our role as overseers, the session is responsible before God for everything that is done and everything that is taught in the name of this church.

That is a really sobering responsibility. And let me say that our elders here take that responsibility really seriously. I have loved working with them this past year, getting to know them.

They are men of integrity. They take their calling seriously. They serve our church in countless ways, as so many of you do, seen and unseen. But I also think I speak for all of us as elders when I say that oversight is something that I think we know we need to get better at.

[15:32] There have been times when oversight hasn't happened, sometimes because as a session we haven't kind of reached out or put structures in place. That's our responsibility.

Sometimes I think the pandemic wiped out a lot of the capacity for that that we might have had before that just needs building back up again.

Sometimes oversight hasn't happened because the session hasn't been informed or included in discussions. And so this idea of oversight is important not just for elders, but for everyone, our whole church family, to know that part of God's design for his church is that the elders oversee the

life of the church.

If the elders do not have oversight, we can't serve the church in the way that God has called us to serve the church. We can't carry out our responsibility before God that we have.

Now, I do think we're getting better at this. It's an ongoing work. And so I don't say this at all in any way as a rebuke or to shame anyone or anything in this congregation or the session, but simply to acknowledge as we read it in God's word and stand accountable before him, that this is something we need to keep working on together as we build up God's church.

[16:56] Okay, the elders are guys you can trust. Please come and talk to us. We love speaking with you. We want to hear from you. Sometimes there's kind of processes in place to do that for different things.

If you're not sure, just come and ask. Send me an email. Come and speak to me on a Sunday. We would love, love to work with you, to hear from you, to speak to you.

So that is in part then, in part what a church leader is, an elder, an overseer, someone with oversight. But still more importantly and pressingly, who is a leader?

Who is a church leader? And by who, I mean not which specific people, but what kind of person?

Now briefly to touch on this, partly to just shift it out of the way, I take it as given that Paul's speaking here about men.

We read about being a faithful husband, a one-woman man. I take it as given that what he has in mind is male elders. If you want to hear more about that, listen to the sermon from last week, or come and ask me, I'm happy to talk about this.

[18:13] But having said that, we would be really foolish as elders not to partner with women and not to work with women in carrying out this responsibility.

So this is part of our vision for the pastoral care team, for example, that we've spoken about. As elders, we are keen to work alongside the women of our church in pastoring, in caring in that way. There's other examples that we could speak about. There's more work to do on this. But simply to say that simply because we're speaking about male eldership, doesn't in any way relegate or anything at the role of women in this.

But I only mention that in passing because Paul's focus here really is character, isn't it? If we were to put together a list of qualities that we think makes for a good leader in the church, well, I wonder what we would have on it.

Some of the words that I hear in these sorts of conversations are, for example, bold, visionary, entrepreneurial, words that in most spheres of life would describe exactly the sort of leader that works, that we want.

[19:31] But does that idea of leadership carry over into the life of the church? Now, no doubt there are things, aren't there, that we can learn about leadership from some of those books on Amazon.

There's a lot of common grace in this area. There have been good non-Christian leaders in world history. We thank God for the degree of wisdom and grace that he has given people to lead throughout world history.

And so it's not to say that there's nothing we can learn about qualities of leadership from the world outside. But the misstep I think we often make is not in kind of borrowing skills from the outside world, but in imagining totally the wrong type or the wrong kind of leader that we should want in the church.

We can say quite easily, can't we, we want a good godly leader. But in the back of our mind, think big leader, strong leader, charismatic leader.

We can say quite easily, can't we, we want a king after God's own heart, but really want a king like the other nations have. If you're not sure that this is a problem in the church, you might want to take some time to listen to the rise and fall of Mars Hill.

[20:53] Some of you have. It's quite distressing listening. It's not for everyone, let me say that. If you don't know, it's a podcast by Christianity Today that charts the kind of meteoric rise of Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill Church in Seattle and how it came crashing down as a result of a worldly and ungodly pattern of leadership.

But this is one of the big questions that comes out of that case study, is what sort of leader do churches ask for? And are we asking for the right kind of leader for our churches?

Now, it's not just a problem in America or in one kind of church or denomination. This crops up in all different kinds of churches and all across the world, and sometimes, sometimes closer to home than we would dare to imagine.

Now, how can I be so sure about that claim? Well, because this was a problem, wasn't it, in the New Testament church? Isn't this exactly the problem that the church in Ephesus is facing? As Paul writes this letter, the church has gone off and followed angry, divisive, argumentative, self-promoting leaders.

[22 : 14] So that is what is so striking, isn't it, about what kind of person Paul says church leaders should be, because it is so, so very different to what the false teachers in Ephesus were.

It is the opposite of them. You just have a look at this list of qualities Paul gives us for a good church leader. Now, the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

Notice that Paul's list of qualifications isn't a list of skills. It's not a list of gifts. Rather, it is a list of moral qualities that he expects to run through every sphere of a church leader's life.

And he begins, doesn't he, with above reproach. Now, that doesn't mean sinless. That should be obvious to us. There's only one sinless human being ever, and in reality, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the head of the church.

But when it comes to leadership, Paul is non-compromising, isn't he? He says our lives must be very, very close to him in these ways.

[23 : 40] Our character should be such that nobody is able to point to an obvious deficiency in these areas, which, while not being sinless, is still a very high standard, isn't it?

In some ways, it's obvious, but worth saying, that the standard for being an elder is higher than that of being a church member. Every Christian should be a member of a church, as they are, whatever their sins, whatever their struggles, in whatever ways they have failed the Lord or continue to do so and repent in obedience to Christ.

The church is a home for sinful and broken people to come to know a savior in the Lord Jesus. But not every Christian will necessarily meet God's standard for being a leader in his household.

And so the church shouldn't try and kind of lower the bar lower than God has set it. Rather, actually, Paul says, every Christian should aspire to share these qualities that he lists.

Paul says it's a good thing to want. Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task, not for the position or the responsibility that comes out of it or the desire to be recognized, but a desire to grow in Christ-likeness and in service and have an opportunity to serve as Christ served.

[25 : 12] So in what ways, then, should elders be above reproach? Well, firstly, in faithfulness to their wives, the phrase is literally a one-woman man.

Now, that is interesting, isn't it? Because it doesn't necessarily say that elders must be married, as in the husband of one wife, as if it was a quantitative condition.

But clearly, Paul is talking about a qualitative condition. In marriage, elders must have white eyes for his wife only. Or as Brian Chappell puts it, a man can be unmarried and wholly faithful in his dealings with the women in his life.

Whereas a man can be married to only one woman his whole life, and yet not in practice be a one-woman man. Again, he's dealing here, isn't he, primarily with character.

Maybe secondarily to do with life circumstances. The next three come together, in some ways, temperate, self-controlled, respectable.

[26 : 23] I guess the idea is an elder must have a handle on his temper, must be able to control his emotions. And now, perhaps this is saying a bit more about me than it is about the passage, but I actually think that this is the hardest, the hardest one, partly because it is in the unseen realm of the heart when one is on one's own.

Brothers, we talked about anger, didn't we, last week? It's obvious the leaders of the church in Ephesus struggled in this way and failed at it. But it can be less obvious, can't it, in our hearts when we're on our own, when our temper is fraying, in the car, for example, or at home on our own, stewing over something.

Well, Paul is saying that we must have our bodies and our hearts under Christ's control and be able to hold our emotions under his lordship when they are bubbling and boiling.

We must be respectable, temperate, self-controlled. Next, hospitable. People should be welcome and at home in our homes.

There again, the wall we often build perhaps between public and private service and life breaks down, doesn't it, when the church is not only welcomed but invited into our private space.

[27 : 47] I'm just running through these, you'll notice, able to teach. Now I had a fascinating conversation, actually, with another church leader the other week and he says, you know, often this is seen as the only thing that an elder needs to do to be an elder, able to teach a competence.

But he said, well, what if able to teach is also, in Paul's list, more about who you are than what you can do? That would make more sense, wouldn't it, in the context of this list?

And in that case, Paul's saying what in fact he's already said in this letter. Which is that being able to teach is a case of staying faithful to God's teaching. What he says in his word rather than twisting it, distorting it, mishandling it for selfish causes to build your own platform or to gain a following. Now certainly, there's an expectation that an elder will be able to understand and to teach and explain the Bible certainly privately, one-to-one or in a group setting.

Our elders here are actually very, very able and very, very willing to do that in a life group setting, for example. Or if you were to just ask them and pick their brain about something, I'm sure that they would be more than willing to speak to you about anything that you would like to talk about.

[29 : 12] But that ability to teach surely stems from a heart that loves God's word above their own standing and reputation. It's not a glamorous thing to teach the Bible.

You end up saying things in public that you might never have to say in public, things people don't want to hear all the time. So being able to say these things that God says and in the right way is surely as much about character as it is about competence.

Moving on, not given to drunkenness. That's an obvious one in some ways but still needs to be said. Not violent but gentle.

Again, who would have put gentle on their list of qualities that a church leader needs to lead?

Interesting that God has gentle on his list.

Not quarrelsome. Hard to hold the church together I imagine if you are always picking a fight with someone. And not a lover of money similar to what Paul said I think about being a one woman man.

[30 : 25] You don't need a wife to be a one woman man or you don't need money to be a lover of money. You can have not very much money but be bent on getting more and more.

It's certainly a risk isn't it that comes with having money but not having much and craving it is still a love of money that Paul says is not fitting for a church leader.

Now there's plenty plenty more that could be said there isn't there? It's a full it's an incredibly counter-cultural and challenging list of qualities a leader must have in God's church.

But as we close the two things I want to finish on are these. Number one the thing that holds all of these qualities together is integrity.

Notice Paul goes on in verses 4 to 7 that a church leader must have a track record of these qualities throughout his whole life. In his family verse 4 he must manage his own family well.

[31 : 29] In the church verse 6 not be a recent convert and in the world verse 7 have a good reputation with outsiders. In short for an elder there is no area of life where a lower standard than this applies.

This life isn't just in church but at home at work in the gym at the pub because this again is not what an elder does but who an elder is.

On my first day at ETS our seminary in Edinburgh a certain professor who was once a student in this congregation many moons ago said unforgettably that the thing that we could not do without as we began our studies was not hard work nor was it intelligence but integrity integrity integrity integrity he said and that was unforgettable partly because it was coming from a man of such integrity a man who had lived a lifetime of ministry above reproach and I guess this is the point isn't it that having this Christ-like character throughout your life qualifies you in some way to speak to lead with authority into the lives of others to point the church to the kind of life that Christ himself helps and enables us to live as leaders by his grace so this list isn't so much really as a set of boxes for us to kind of tick off on the way to leadership rather is a character profile that church leaders must have and that we should all want to share because it is the character of Christ our head a life of integrity and so one obvious application from this is please please pray for your elders please pray that we would have integrity this isn't a static thing is it our hearts are always churning we are

always growing and developing please pray that your elders would be growing in Christ-likeness as we do for every member of our church but the thing to finish with is this we started by holding up the example of Christ he used his power not to dominate but to serve to die that we might live and this character that Paul calls church leaders to is a reflection of his character it is Christ-like leadership so there is no better place for us to finish and land on than him that he is gentle that he is faithful that he is welcoming that he is slow to anger that he is holy and that he is the same yesterday today and forever he is the same in this service of worship as he will be when you get home brothers and sisters and when you wake up tomorrow and when you go to bed and this is a call for Christian leaders in particular but for all of us together to follow him in heart and in life to find rest in this type of leadership which is his type of leadership we do this because he is the head of this church he is our pastor our shepherd and to quote another lecture of mine we cannot do Jesus work in non-Jesus ways listen to Jesus as we finish the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them he said not so with you instead whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all for even the son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many friends that is who Christ is that is how he leads and that is how he calls those who are over his church to lead to serve to be gentle to be faithful to give rest and so let us pray that for our church together now as we finish let's pray so let's pray and just you