

Sermon to the Saints of God assembled at Topeka, KS: Sunday, October 29, 2023

Elder / Bishop (Overseer) / Pastor / Teacher
Part 1: Qualifications

My friends, we find ourselves on the precipice of the triumphant return of Christ Jesus, the manifestation and glorification of His sons, and the promised purging and perfecting of the house of Israel. The very creation is indeed groaning and travailing to bring forth that day.

Romans 8:19-25 *“19 For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. 20 For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, 21 Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. 23 And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. 24 For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? 25 But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.”*

Indeed, we must seek the Lord to give us the patient endurance and consistency of the laboring ox during these tumultuous days. We must keep our scriptural, practical duty before our eyes, and be careful to continue in it, lest we be subject to every wind of strange doctrine and practice that will assuredly arise while the murderous deceiver and accuser of the brethren desperately sows lies and discord because he hears the thundering of Christ’s retinue approaching.

Matthew 24:22-24 *“22 And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened. 23 Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. 24 For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.”*

One of the major ways that false doctrine has been crafted and maintained is by the corruption of the structure and practice of the Church of Jesus Christ. 2000 years of false teachers creating human institutions that usurp the role of the Holy Spirit, while the people applaud: *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”* **(2Timothy 4:3,4)**

We are not left to the never ending confusion of man made religion. We have a more sure word of prophecy. Christ established that His people would be locally assembled together – in their lives, not just their meetings – their substance and affections dedicated to ministering to one another as they occupy as strangers in a hostile, foreign land. (Sermons: 10/23/22; 7/30/23) That assembly – His Church – is a living, spiritual body. He promised to be the head of that body; the husband to His bride. He left us with the continual presence, comfort, and instruction of the Holy Spirit – a help and gift that we cannot hope to benefit from if we make ourselves aloof from the bride. He left us with a commission and authority to execute upon it. (Sermon: 5/7/2017) He left us with simple ordinances to indicate our belief and our communion with Him. (Sermons: 9/4/2016, 11/10/2013) Among many gifts, He left the body with a role that the scriptures variously refer to as pastor, teacher, elder, and overseer (bishop), and with men who are fitly framed to fill that role for the body. It is the nature of that role that I want to focus on today, and in my next sermon, Lord willing.

Ephesians 4:8-16 “8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. 9 (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) 11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: 14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; 15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: 16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.”

You see that Paul mentions four roles in this passage: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors/teachers. The first three are what many refer to as “extraordinary” roles; these are roles that were appointed for a short time and a particular purpose. These extraordinary roles existed for the purpose of laying the foundation of the Church: “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” (***Ephesians 2:19-22***) On the other hand, the

role of a pastor is perpetual until the New Testament Church gives way to the return of Christ.

This is not a topic that has been preached about a lot from this pulpit; it's been 10 years since we considered it in detail. Frankly, it is uncomfortable for me to talk about, because 1) humans despise authority of every kind, and 2) in a great slander against Christ, men have abused scriptural authority and scriptural roles in such grotesque ways over the years / centuries, that there is a stink attached to many of these words and concepts. Those reasons make it all the more critical that we are clear about what this role is, and how it ought to be rightly employed for the benefit of the body. We don't want to be operating from a position of apology for authority that God has appointed – thereby lightly esteeming His gifts; we want to operate from a position of grateful confidence that God has given us clarity and straight paths to tread through this treacherous, deadly wilderness.

We will consider this matter as follows:

- What are the qualifications of an elder? (Part 1)
- What are the duties of an elder? (Part 2)
- What are the duties of the members toward elders? (Part 2)

As we proceed today, I will be using elder, pastor, bishop, and teacher interchangeably, because they are merely descriptors of the same role. I will more fully demonstrate the scriptural truth of that proposition in Part 2 of this sermon, when we discuss the duties of the office.

What are the qualifications of an elder?

Acts 14:21-23 *“21 And when they [Paul and Barnabas] had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, 22 Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”*

- Notice that there are multiple elders per church. This doesn't necessarily dictate multiple elders per church, but it certainly shows that it is appropriate and useful. Multiple elders help to share the load; they also create mutual accountability.
- The word “ordain” means to “stretch out the hand”. Paul and Barnabas explained to these people the needfulness and use of the role, and helped them to choose qualified men from among themselves. The church “ordaining” them simply meant that they chose them by vote, raising their hand in affirmation. Implicit here, is that these are

men chosen from the midst of the flock. A shepherd knows the flock, and must reside with the sheep. This highlights the great folly of the man-made seminary machine that produces pastors without a flock, trained up in pride and marketing strategies, and then turned loose as deadly wolves stalking a flock to lay claim upon.

There are particular qualifications of gifts, character, and behavior that a man must possess to be considered for the role of an elder. Paul spells these qualifications out to Titus and Timothy, who were charged with helping fledgling churches to understand their practical duty (pastoral epistles).

- **1 Timothy 3:1-16** *“1 ¶ This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. 2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; 3 Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; 4 One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; 5 (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) 6 Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. 8 ¶ Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; 9 Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. 10 And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. 11 Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. 12 Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. 13 For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus. 14 ¶ These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: 15 But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. 16 And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.”*

- The opening qualification is that there must be a desire to take on this work. Combining this passage with Acts 14, we see that a mutual desire is required between the elder and the body. It must be a desire that arises from a person who believes they have the requisite gifts, and therefore feel compelled to offer those gifts in service to God. It cannot be a covetous desire to have some perceived status or power. This is an office to desire with great care. First and foremost, it is the work of a servant, and it carries with it an accountability to God.

- **1Corinthians 12:27-31** *“27 Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. 28 And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? 30 Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret? 31 But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.”*
 - **James 3:1** *“My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.”*
 - Both bishop and deacon are to be husbands of one wife. This same requirement is found in Titus 1 as well.
 - **One wife, not many wives:** Many preachers treat this like it is only forbidding polygamy. It certainly does prohibit polygamy amongst elders, but if that were the primary import, then it implies that some amount of polygamy would otherwise be allowed. Another argument is that it means that an elder can't be divorced and remarried. Again, that would imply that the members of the church can be. Those arguments fall flat in the light of the rest of scripture. We can certainly agree that this requirement means that elders cannot have multiple wives (polygamy), and they cannot be divorced and remarried. But I think the meaning goes further than that.
 - **One wife, not zero wives:** I believe the context of the other requirements make clear that the requirement is for an elder to be married and to have raised children. *“For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?”* The issue here is that he is proven by experience before trying to take on the oversight of the entire church. He is experienced with exercising spiritual authority over others, and with the issues of life associated to both genders and to various ages. I read an expositor who tries to overcome this requirement by arguing that this would mean a man who is performing the duties of the office would then be disqualified if his wife died. First, if that were the pattern God left, then we don't need to wrestle against it. However, the point of the requirement is that he is proven in his understanding and ability to rule his house well. His wife dying would not change that.
 - His children are to be in subjection with all gravity:
 - He must require obedience from his children, and provide them with appropriate discipline to achieve it. This does not mean that he needs to be extra severe toward his children, but rather that he makes it his business to know their individual frames and to ensure that that they receive both nurture and admonition consistent with that knowledge. As

any parent here well knows, that implies that his wife is aligned with him as she performs her duty to guide the house. The word translated as “gravity” indicates a reverence that should show itself with children that treat their father with honor and respect, and therefore behave themselves in a manner consistent with his instruction.

- Clearly this is not a requirement that his children are perfect little angels. If that were the case, then the job would be permanently vacant. The requirement is that this is generally the case with his family, and that when foolishness rears its head, he takes appropriate and effective action to remedy that situation. What this requirement expressly forbids is the behavior of Eli, who would not restrain his sons. (**1Samuel 3:13**)
- We have often been accused of failing this standard when a child comes to years and throws off the authority of their father in pursuit of the world. My friends, we do not own souls or salvation. Our job is to teach our children what God requires of them, and to require obedience for the few days that they are under our direct earthly authority. If they come to years and throw off our authority, then the form of our duty to God shifts: we must show our own obedience by keeping no company with them for as long as they sinfully depart from Christ. In this case, the only thing that would disqualify an elder is if they decided to try to force light to have communion with darkness by chasing after a humanistic relationship with a departed child, based upon a faulty notion of family, or works-righteous duty.
- Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil:
 - He cannot be a generally inexperienced man, and specifically he cannot be an inexperienced Christian. Most of us can probably testify to the prideful folly that results from someone being prematurely thrust into a leadership role in the business world; so it is in the church as well. Newly converted Christians often tend toward 1) zeal, and 2) a view of themselves that is myopic and self-righteous. Add those two things together with a heaping dose of authority, and you have a circumstance that is ripe for the devil’s mischief. The Lord appoints circumstances in our lives that humble us; our senses are exercised by reason of use, such that these fleshly tendencies are tempered.
- He must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.
 - *Calvin: “This appears to be very difficult, that a religious man should have, as witnesses of his integrity, infidels themselves, who are furiously mad to tell lies against us. But the apostle means, that, so far as relates to external*

behavior, even unbelievers themselves shall be constrained to acknowledge him to be a good man; for, although they groundlessly slander all the children of God, yet they cannot pronounce him to be a wicked man, who leads a good and inoffensive life amongst them."

- Deacons:
 - The scriptures provide for an additional role in the church: deacons. The Greek word is "diakoneo", which simply means "servant". It is a role that the apostles appointed at the church in Jerusalem (**Acts 6**). There is not a lot said about deacons in the scriptures. What is said leads us to understand that deacons are not required in a church, but that they are employed at the church's will, and in relief of the elders. Their duties are a subset of the elders duties, and executed in conjunction with the elders. Clearly the qualifications for a deacon are very similar to those of an elder, except there isn't a focus on gifts related to teaching, because that is not a part of their duties.
- Their wives [must] be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things:
 - At first glance, this looks to be in reference to the wives of deacons. Looking closer, it may be directly referencing both bishops and deacons; notice that the next verse reestablishes deacons as the specific subject. Either way, the work and qualification of deacons is a subset of that of bishops, so these same requirements would certainly apply to both.
 - This requirement of our wives is important. They hold no office in the body, and have no special privilege, and yet they are held to a high standard. They must be grave and sober – being intentional with their words and actions, recognizing the impact that they have on those around them, and upon their husband's office. They must not be slanderers. Slandering, back-biting, gossiping, and every other form of undisciplined tongue wagging is damaging and sinful behavior in every context. These are common sins of the flesh that we are all guilty of, even when we don't intend harm.
 - If an elder's wife is particularly prone to this sin, then it would speak ill of him, and his ability to rule his house well. Furthermore, there is a particular need for sobriety and discretion with the wives of elders; a need to be extremely circumspect and careful, so that she doesn't do damage in the body. Consider that a wife is one flesh with her husband, and a faithful wife is a continual help and counselor to him, and so an elder's wife will naturally be aware of sensitive matters and must employ the utmost care and discretion. If she is carelessly gossiping about matters that her husband has confided in her, then she does him and the

body great damage. Therefore, if a wife cannot be trusted to govern her tongue, then her husband cannot be a good steward in the house of God.

- **Titus 1:5-16** *“5 For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: 6 If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. 7 For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; 8 But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; 9 Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. 10 For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: 11 Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake. 12 One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cretians are alway liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. 13 This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith; 14 Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth. 15 Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled. 16 They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.”*
 - From this passage we clearly see that Paul is using the terms elder and bishop to describe the same role.
 - Blameless:
 - This clearly cannot mean that an elder must be sinless, as no man (aside from Christ Jesus) can escape the corruption of sin while walking in this flesh. What this means is that he must not have gross, stubborn sin that makes his oversight hypocritical, and his teaching hollow; sin that gives occasion to the adversary to speak ill of Christ.
 - Not selfwilled:
 - The duty of an overseer is to govern in the house of God by the law of the Master of the house. It is not our job to create a law unto ourselves, based upon our own personal views and preferences. We cannot create our own standards and then force the body to bow to those standards. A selfwilled man is proud, haughty, stubborn, and conceited in his own righteousness.
 - Not given to filthy lucre:
 - He must demonstrate that he is content with whatever means the Lord provides him, and that he is a good steward that will not look to his own personal benefit ahead of providing the needs of the body. He could spend all of his efforts chasing his own personal advancement in the world, therefore neglecting the body. Alternatively, he could use his authority and opportunity to leverage the body’s resources to feather his own nest.

If a person shows these kinds of tendencies, then he cannot be a steward in the house of God.

- Just:
 - Colossians 4:1 “Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven.”
 - Any man that will govern in the house of God must demonstrate that he is able to rise above his natural biases. He cannot be a respecter of persons, or have partiality amongst the members of the body. He cannot judge a matter that he hasn’t heard; the truth of a matter must be paramount. He cannot have a spirit of personal vengeance, nor can he allow others to act in personal vengeance.
 - If a father is to rule his own house well, he must be just. He has to watch, and search out truth. He cannot allow emotions, or emotional manipulation to turn him away from being just. He cannot allow someone to trump his judgment with fits of rage, threatening, accusation, ego stroking, or any other strategy of the flesh. So it must be for one who governs in the house of God.
- Verses 10-16 show us that even though there must be gifts and attributes that show patience, temperance, kindness, etc., the work of these men includes a careful watching for false doctrine and unruly behavior that they then must address with no hesitation. This is not shy and retiring work; it is not work to be done with timidity and fear of men, but rather with boldness in Christ. We will delve further into the duties of elders in the next part of this sermon.

Colossians 2:4-8 *“4 And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words. 5 For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the stedfastness of your faith in Christ. 6 As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: 7 Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. 8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”*

I love you all. Amen.