



The elder and his family

1. Introduction

One of the most important human factors in Church life is the standard of her eldership. Humanly speaking, the elders can "make or break" a Church. In view of that fact, it is going to be very important for our Churches that we have the right criteria for elder-selection. On the one hand, if our standards are too low, there may be disastrous consequences for the Church; on the other hand, if our standards are too high – that is, if we have requirements that go above and beyond those of the Scriptures – then we might have trouble finding **any** elders. My aim in writing this article is to help keep things in perspective, between these two extremes. Now one of the most important of the criteria used to assess a man's suitability for office, is his family-life. That is bound to be so, for the Christian family is the building-block of the covenant-community, the Church in microcosm. Both the strengths and the weaknesses that show up in the elder's family, will likely show up in the Church as well.

This is, by the way, an incentive for building a strong marriage, and strong family-life. It's also an added incentive to Sessions to help the families in their charge to become strong in the Lord. For it is a great tragedy when a man otherwise qualified for office, is unable to serve because he has sabotaged himself at home.

This article will therefore explore some aspects of family life, the man's relationship with his wife and children, to see what we look for, and what would rule a man out, for the office of elder. Of course all of the criteria listed in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus 1 can be looked for in the man's home. It is not my intention to deal with each of those characteristics as they surface in the home life. Rather, we will look at the criteria that apply narrowly to the home (1 Timothy 3:2, 4-5; Titus 1:6), being above reproach; the husband of one wife; managing the household well; keeping the children under control with all dignity; having children who believe.

2. Elders are people too

It might seem strange to contend for it, but I want to begin by stating that elders are people, too. I say this because there is a danger of raising our expectations too high. Elders are not "Superchristians". They are sinners, earthen vessels, like all the rest of us. One way in which Paul brings out that truth is that the qualifications he lists for elder are essentially the same as those for deacon; and for the "ordinary", everyday, common, household variety Christian. It is not only the elder that teaches; not only the elder that must be sober and self-controlled; not only the elder that must manage his household well, and so on. If you doubt that, read on in 1 Timothy 3 for the qualifications of deacons, or Titus 2 for the requirements for all believers. Nor is it necessarily true that the elder must have, in each of these areas, a better "score" than everybody else in the congregation. If so, we would probably have trouble finding any elders. In fact, what we can expect to find is that each elder will be stronger in some areas, and weaker in others. Some will be wiser, some gentler, some more dignified, some better teachers, some with better-managed households – and others less so. It is not the case that the elder must have **double** these characteristics; but that the Church must be **doubly sure** that the elder has these characteristics. In other words, all the listed characteristics must be visible to some degree. They must be visible to a degree that enables the Church to have confidence that this man will be able to carry out his duties as an elder. They must be visible to a degree that when the whole mix is considered, people will see the man as mature, rather than immature.

Thus, when we examine the elder's family life, we are not demanding perfection. We are not demanding that his family will be free of problems. Nor do we insist that in this one area he must

be a "cut above" others in the congregation. But we do look for evidence of the operation of the Holy Spirit in the man's family-life; and we look for a degree of maturity.

3. Being beyond reproach

One of the chief tests of the maturity of the elder is that he must be "*beyond reproach*". This criterion is mentioned by Paul in both 1 Timothy 3:2, 7 and Titus 1:6, 7. It is also required of deacons (1 Timothy 3:10), of young men in regard to their speech (Titus 2:8), of widows (1 Timothy 5:7, 14), and of believers in general (Philippians 2:15). As I said, the requirements for elders are pretty much the same as those for believers in general. It appears, however, that being beyond reproach is not just one criterion among many. Here it is the chief criterion for the elder. The structure of the Greek places this command in the forefront: appoint elders who are beyond approach. An overseer must be above reproach. Everything else that is said about the elder serves to outline the specific areas in which he must be "beyond reproach".

That applies also to everything that is said about the elder's family life. Being the husband of one wife, ruling the household well, having the children under control etc., all of those other qualifications serve the main thought: be above reproach. What does it mean, then, to be "above reproach"? If we are not careful in defining what it means, we shall again risk ending up with no elders. For everyone can be "reproached" for something, if we just look hard enough. If we understand irreproachability in perfectionist terms, we make a giant headache for ourselves. There are, in fact, two different Greek words used for "reproach" in these verses. But both words boil down to the same, basic idea: the idea of being open to official, legal accusation, for which formal charges and witnesses are required (Deuteronomy 19:15, 1 Timothy 5:19). The person who is beyond reproach is a person who is not able to be (justly) disciplined. It refers to someone who cannot be arraigned before the ecclesiastical or the civil courts.

In other words, the basic requirement in considering a man for the office of elder, is not perfection; it is that he first be mature enough that you will not expect him to be charged in the ecclesiastical or civil courts. Such a thing would be devastating to the Church, and bring the Lord's Name into disrepute. Beyond that, the Church will, of course, look for someone who is mature in their family-life. But with this term "beyond reproach" the **minimum** standard of maturity is fixed. Two areas of irreproachability, which pertain to family-life, are then spelled out: the man's marital status; and his relationship with his children. But note that in both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 there are many other "negative" characteristics (eg. "*not addicted to wine*") which must be avoided in order to remain "beyond reproach". There are also "positive" characteristics (eg. temperance, prudence) which are the opposite of being reproachable. In Titus 1:7, Paul explains the reverse of reproachability in terms of stewardship. The good steward must be beyond reproach, so as not to bring shame upon his Master, or to harm his Master's business. Verses 6 and 7 list all the "negative" characteristics, the "reproaches" that would undermine good stewardship. Verses 8 and 9 then list the "positive" characteristics of the good steward.

In 1 Timothy 3, the division between the "negative" and "positive" is not so clearly marked as in Titus - verses 2 and 3 both mix the "positive" and the "negative". Nor is reproach placed over against stewardship. Otherwise, the two passages contain the same basic ingredients.

4. One wife or two?

The question of the elder's marital status is one that has bothered many a young man. At one extreme we find the Roman Catholics, who claim that the priests must be **single**. At the other extreme – and this is found in our own circles at times – there is the view that the elder must be **married**. It is that view which we shall discuss here. First of all, there is an exegetical argument. Paul says that the elder – also the deacon – must be "*The husband of one wife*" (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). Does that mean that the elder must be the husband of (numerically) **one** wife, as opposed to two or more? Or does it mean that the elder must be married to **a** wife, as opposed to none? Well, as far as the Greek is concerned, there is no doubt about it. The Greek language has a number of ways of saying "*The husband of a wife*", or "*The man must be married*". But in this case, Paul uses a word that means **numerically** one. In other words, he is forbidding polygamy. There is no command here that the elder must be married, as opposed to single.

A second, and far more subtle argument, is that the elder must be married because otherwise he cannot show that he manages his own household and his children well (cf. 1 Timothy 3:4; Titus 1:6 and 1 Timothy 3:12 regarding deacons). In answer to that I would firstly mention in passing that this kind of argumentation also means that the elder must not only be married, but have children as well. All elders and deacons must be married, **and** have children. That is the logic of the position. Secondly, as has often been pointed out, on this basis both Paul and the Lord Jesus would be barred from office today.

The apostolate was, however, an exceptional office, and the apostles were specially appointed by the Lord Himself. These criteria were not necessarily set in place when Paul was first commissioned by the Lord, or when the disciples selected Judas' replacement in Acts 1. Still, given the strong overlap between the duties of the apostles and the elders – both ruling and managing the household of faith – it would seem strange that the single Paul would, without further comment, command that all other officebearers be married and have children, so that their suitability for ruling and managing could be proven. You would think that he would give some explanation of the irregularity, especially in view of Paul's expressed desire that *"All men were even as I myself am"* (1 Corinthians 7:7) – a desire which could depopulate the Church of elders, if officebearers must be married. But that is an argument from silence, and as such has a somewhat limited value. Far more significant is the structure of these verses in 1 Timothy and Titus. The structure involves a basic command to appoint men who are beyond reproach, followed by a list of areas to check to see if they **are** beyond reproach. That is not quite the same as a command for the elder to **have** a family, followed by another command to rule it well, and so on.

That structure allows us to understand the sense as follows: choose only from men who are beyond reproach. What does it mean to be beyond reproach? Well, it means, for example, that if the man is married, he will have only one wife (not two or more); if the man has children, they will be under control etc. For if men are polygamous, or unable to manage their children, they are not beyond reproach. Those are some of the "negative" characteristics that must be avoided in order to remain beyond reproach. There are, however, the "positive" characteristics that demonstrate a man's suitability as a steward. That is the flip-side of being beyond reproach. The man must also demonstrate that he is actually able to manage the Church (1 Timothy 3:5).

Can this gift of management only be demonstrated if the man has a family? No doubt it is most easily gauged when a man is married and has children. But households, especially in NT times, varied considerably in size and composition. A single man, for example, might have a number of slaves. Other members of the extended family might also shelter under his roof. His skills of management would then be seen in the way he treated those who were not members of his immediate family.

In fact, a single man may even demonstrate his gift of management in a household of one. The Church may evaluate how well he disciplines himself, how organized he is at home and at work. It is not so easy to evaluate such things in a household of one, but it is not impossible. The conclusion I have reached is that it is not essential to be married in order to serve as elder. A single man is beyond reproach with regard to polygamy, just as much as a monogamous man. A single man may also demonstrate his ability to manage the Church, just as much as a married man. But it is easier for the Church to discern the gift of management or ruling, if the man is married and has children. That simply means that the Church may have to look more closely at the single man, in order to determine his suitability for office.

5. Children beyond reproach

When we consider the elder's relationship with his children, we will once again wish to avoid perfectionism. That is rather hard to avoid if we understand these passages to lay down a flat command – all children (living at home or away) must be believers and under their father's control. If that is the way to take these verses, then we will be left with very few elders or deacons. The argument that an extreme interpretation leaves us with insufficient elders is, however, a pragmatic argument. If Paul's intention is to set the boundary as high as it can go, then so be it!

But is that what he is teaching? I do not believe so. In line with the structure I indicated for Titus 1:6f and 1 Timothy 3:2-5, I believe we must set the requirements for the elder's children in the

context of the command about being beyond reproach. In other words, the elder must not be open to charges because of his children. He may be open to criticism, to advice, to improvement. The way he runs his family may be better than other Christians, or it may be about the same. Family management may be his strongest gift, or it may be his weakest. But if it opens him up to justified charges, to civil or ecclesiastical discipline, then he is unsuitable as an elder.

One of the chief ways of judging whether the father is suitable, or whether he is open to reproach, is whether the children themselves are "beyond reproach". Not whether they are above criticism etc., but above legal accusation and discipline. That is the point of the explanatory comment in Titus 1:6, "*Not accused of dissipation or rebellion*". Throughout these verses Paul is using technical, legal words to make his point. Of course, in our present context, legal accusation against children is relatively uncommon. But Paul's "*dissipation*" (debauchery) and "*rebellion*" (refusal to bow to authority) have an OT context behind them. In the OT we find that there is rebellion, and there is rebelliousness. Every time the rod was used, for example, we could say that there was a degree of rebelliousness. But that was a degree that was expected, even in "normal" believing families, as they went about their task of restraining sin and training children in righteousness. The presence of a degree of rebelliousness did not, in itself, indicate a problem with the father.

When rebelliousness reached a certain point, however, it was a different matter. Then it became a "chargeable" offence: striking or cursing a parent (Exodus 21:15, 17) enticing others to unbelief and idolatry (Deuteronomy 13:6-11) stubbornness and rebellion – a refusal to listen to parents even after corrective measures had been applied (Deuteronomy 21:18-21) and gluttony and drunkenness (i.e., dissipation), even after parental discipline had been applied (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). The age of the child is not specified, but the penalty for such things was death. Note that in these OT cases, the child was put to death only if he refused to listen to correction. That is what brought the charges: hardness of heart.

Even in these extreme cases, wickedness on the child's part did not necessarily indicate a problem with the father. But the father had to be administering the proper corrective discipline. If not, he did become implicated in the child's sins, and in the penalty. He became "reproachable".

Eli is a classic example (1 Samuel 2-4). Eli became chargeable, disciplinable, arraignable, reproachable, because he refused to correct his sons for their wicked behaviour. In a sense, he became their accomplice. As a result, Eli was removed from office, along with his sons!

That, I believe, is the thrust of Paul's instructions about the elder and his children. The words he uses bear too close a resemblance to these OT cases to be ignored. If a man's children become openly and stubbornly rebellious, openly hostile to the Christian faith, or openly immoral and he has failed to attempt proper correction, then he and his children are open to reproach. The father becomes implicated in the sins of his children. He is not, then, suitable for office.

It is a different matter, however, if the father has done his duty in setting and maintaining Christian standards in the home. If the children have rebelled despite good training and discipline, then I cannot see that the father is necessarily ruled out. To be ruled out, he has to be "arraignable", or demonstrate that he is a bad steward.

A parallel situation exists with Sessions and Church discipline. After all, Sessions do not always obtain the desired repentance from those placed under discipline. Though a Session's discipline is never perfect, the failure to obtain repentance does not, in itself, prove that the elders are all failures. So long as the discipline has been conducted in a proper manner, we can only leave it to the Lord to soften the heart of the sinner. The same is true of fathers dealing with their sinful children. There is one more difficulty with which we must deal. Titus 1:6 says that the elder must have "*children who believe*". Here I would like to suggest that the word "believe" may mean simply "trustworthy", "reliable", rather than "converted". The same word is used that way elsewhere in the pastoral epistles, for example where Paul talks about "*reliable sayings*" (cf. 1 Timothy 3:11; 2 Timothy 2:13).

If that interpretation is correct, then "reliable" contrasts dissolute, wicked and rebellious. The clause, "*not accused of dissipation or rebellion*" would then explain the word, "believe". The point would not be that the children must be converted, but that they must not be openly wicked. Along similar lines, "believe" may simply refer to the fact that the baptized member of the covenant is part

of the body of believers, of the faithful, until such time as the child's wickedness causes charges to be laid, and official action taken – though we tend to take a less formal approach with baptized members than with communicant members.

In my view, the word "believe" is not to be understood to mean "converted", but refers to outward behaviour. For the father, the crucial point is his response to outwardly wicked behaviour in his own home. Lack of saving faith in some children is not the issue. Behaviour of children living away from home, and outside of the father's control, is not the issue. The basic issue is how the father manages the children who live under his roof. He cannot manage their hearts, but he can manage their behaviour.

That emphasis is reinforced by 1 Timothy 3:3-4. There, the main idea is that of managing (leading, ruling, governing) the household well. Management, and its counterpart submission, is the main theme – not the conversion of the children. The father must be teaching and ruling with gravity, with dignity. Dignity means seriousness, reverence for God in doctrine and life. The counterpart of the father's "dignity" is the child's "honour" of his father (Deuteronomy 5:16), his recognition of the weightiness of the things of God as taught and lived by his father. The result of such a rule should be a household "under control" i.e. not tolerating the stubborn, rebellious, disobedient, gluttonous, drunken, dissolute, those who incite others to unbelief etc. The child being "under control" (submitting, honouring) is the counterpart of the father's "managing" (ruling). That is not quite the same thing as having children who are converted: obedience, not conversion, is the counterpart of ruling.

The strong parallel between 1 Timothy and Titus leads me to the conclusion that both passages have the same reason for stressing the submission of the children. Both are concerned primarily about the father's ability to lead the Church. If the father is not making it clear to his children, that the things of God are weighty – by his teaching, by his example, and by his disciplining and correcting – then how can there be any confidence that the man will make these things clear in the Church? If the father is soft on wickedness in his own home, then how can there be any confidence that he will be firm with wickedness in the Church? On the other hand, lack of saving faith on the part of the children does not necessarily indicate bad management on the part of the father. Having unconverted children is no more a slight on the father than unconverted members of a congregation is a slight on the Session.

Neither is the wicked behaviour on the part of children who have left home necessarily a slight upon the father. It no more indicates unsuitability for office than the wicked behaviour of someone excommunicated from the Church indicates unsuitability of the Session. But a man who tolerates evil under his own roof, he proves himself to be unsuitable for the office of elder. An ungodly example set by the father; a refusal by the father to correct sinful behaviour in his children; these are blameworthy things, things that make the father "arraignable", and disqualify him from office. Of course, a man whose children go astray - especially if most of his children apostatize – such a man may lose the confidence of his congregation. He may become ineffective in his work as elder, for the practical reason that people simply do not respect him.

The implication of this study, however, is that congregations should look at the overall situation, at the overall mix of qualities in the man. We should be careful not to judge a man too harshly. It is not a question of whether the man has one or more children who are unconverted. It is not a matter of the behaviour of children who are no longer under his control. It is a matter of whether or not the man gives evidence that he will help to manage the Church in a godly and righteous manner. It is the answer to that question that should determine the level of confidence the Church should place in those who are considered for the office of elder.

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