



## Finding the Elders We Need

We set ourselves at this time of year to finding new office bearers to tend the flock of the Lord. By means of the congregation, under the leadership of the consistory, the Lord is pleased to indicate which brothers he wishes in the offices of elder and deacon in his church.

As the congregation considers what names to mention to the consistory, what criteria should be used? Again, who may consistory nominate for the office? And for which of the candidates nominated by consistory may the congregation vote? In what follows I attempt to supply an answer to these questions. Today we look at the qualifications for the office of elder; next time, the Lord willing, we look at the qualities required of the deacon.

### Scriptural qualifications

Who may serve in the office of elder? Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul answered the question with these words to Timothy:

*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*

(1 Tim 3:1-7; ESV throughout this article)

And to Titus Paul writes:

*This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you - if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*

(Titus 1:5-9)

Any brother who does not meet the standards of 1 Timothy 3 or Titus 1 may not be nominated for the office of elder, nor may any congregation member vote for such a brother. The Lord God simply has not made him available for the office. This is a rule of thumb that consistories and congregations do well to bear in mind.

This does not mean that the Lord cannot use such a brother. But the question now revolves not around what God is able to do, but around our responsibility. If the Lord does not grant per 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 as many brothers in the congregation as we think we need for the office, we shall simply need to acquiesce to the fact that the Lord is pleased to lead his flock through less

elders than we think necessary. And we are responsible to see to it that brothers prepare and/or change themselves to be available according to God's standards.

## **Nature of the work**

To help put into sharper focus which brother(s) should be recommended or nominated or voted, we do well to look further than the matter of scriptural qualifications. For the Lord has also revealed what task he lays upon the elder. So the question arises whether a particular brother has the gifts needed to do this work. The nature of the work the Head of the Church gives his elders to do can possibly best be drawn out by considering the terms used in Scripture for the elder. The following need a mention:

### **Overseer**

In Acts 20:28 Paul instructs the elders of the church at Ephesus, *"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers."* What, we wonder, is an overseer to do? One finds the answer in Acts 15:36, *"After some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing'".* Although our translation uses the word "visit," the Greek original has here the word "oversee." Paul says as it were, *"Let us go back and oversee our brethren."* The apostle's intent, then, is to go and keep his eyes open to learn how the brethren are doing. This clarifies the meaning of the scriptural term "oversee." To oversee is to keep an eye on how things are going.

One also finds the word in Matthew 25:36. Jesus tells the parable of the separation between the sheep and the goats. Christ, the Shepherd, will say to the sheep gathered at his right hand, *"I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me."* Here again, the Greek word is "oversee." In the context of Jesus' parable the purpose of the visit is not simply to see or look at someone. Rather, the visit is an expression of care and genuine interest. So, in their task as overseers, the elders are to visit the members of the congregation out of genuine interest in the members' well-being, to find out what they are up against in life, and seek to stand beside them, to encourage, and if necessary, to admonish.

### **Shepherd**

This title appears repeatedly in John 10 as a description of Jesus. The Lord says in verse 11, *"I am the good shepherd."* The Lord goes on to describe what he as shepherd does for his sheep: *"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* In contrast to this, the Lord describes what the hired hand does: *"He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd ... sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees ... He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep"* (v. 12f). As the good shepherd, Jesus Christ went so far as to lay down his life so that his sheep might live (Heb 13:20).

The task of shepherding was not assigned to the Lord Jesus Christ exclusively, but given also to the elder. In the passage quoted before from Acts 20:28, Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus to *"pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."* The word translated here as "care for" is in the Greek original the word "shepherd" used as a verb. It is the elders' task to shepherd the flock for which Christ has laid down his life. It is in the Lord Jesus as the Good Shepherd that the elder finds his role model.

Over against the way the Good Shepherd carries out his office, there is the way of the hired hand of John 10 who, in the interest of his own well-being, deserts the sheep so that they need to fend for themselves. His conduct is exemplified by the admonition that Ezekiel had to give the shepherds of Israel for the irresponsible manner in which they shepherded the flock of Israel:

*Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves*

*with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts."*

(Ezek 34:2-4)

Here is the example of what elders are not to do.

The elders of Ephesus were to shepherd their flock, following in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd. Paul did not command them to be shepherds in order to build up their own reputation or to make the congregation do what they wanted them to do. The flock was not there for the benefit of the elders, but the elders were appointed for the benefit of the flock. The elders are even to lay down their life for the flock, for that is what the Good Shepherd did. When Paul in Ephesians 4:11 listed the various offices that Christ gave to the church, he used for "elder" the word "pastor" (= shepherd): "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers." Pastor is an apt description for the elder, for it captures well the elder's task of looking after the sheep.

### **Steward**

In his list of qualifications for the elder in Titus 1:5-9, Paul writes in verse 7 that *"an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach."* Luke 12:42 draws for us a picture of what a steward is and does. In his parable concerning the faithful servant and the evil servant Jesus asks, *"Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time?"* Here the task of the steward is captured: this is the person who is responsible for managing a household, a servant appointed to care for the other servants (even providing their food), and who is accountable to his master.

Paul likens the elder to a steward: a person *"over the household"* and yet under God and so accountable to him. For what purpose does God make the elder a reward over his congregation? Not for the elder's own benefit, but rather so that he may give the congregation *"food at the proper time."* The elder, then, serves the congregation with the possessions God has entrusted to him for the benefit of the congregation.

### **Leader**

In Hebrews 13:7, 17, and 24 the apostle gives the following instruction to the Hebrews,

*"Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God to you ... Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give account ... Greet all your leaders and all the saints."*

We understand that the term "leader" describes here the elders of the Hebrews. Characteristic of a leader is that he gives a proper example to those whom he leads; he guides. Again, the elder does not lead for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the congregation (*"they are keeping watch over your souls"*). Given this task of the leaders, the Hebrew saints are instructed to submit to the elders; it is in their best interest to follow the leadership of these men.

### **In sum: Elders must use the Word of God**

In his care for his people, the Lord supplies the gift of elders. These elders are mandated to oversee, shepherd, be stewards over, and lead their congregation for the sole purpose of directing the congregation to God. For that reason God has also given the elders the one resource they need to perform these tasks, and that resource is of course the Word of God. If the elder must shepherd the sheep, feeding them in good pasture, he must feed them in the Word of life. But before an elder can begin to shepherd, or even to lead, oversee, or manage his Master's flock, he himself must be spiritually healthy. To use the words of Titus 1:9, an elder *"must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to*

*rebuke those who contradict it.*" For an elder to be an elder in the scriptural sense of the word, it is imperative that he himself stands by that Word and be *"able to teach"* that Word (1 Tim 3:2).

As we set ourselves to nominating brothers for the office of elder, or voting for those nominated by the consistory, this is material we shall very much need to keep in mind.

Clarence Bouwman

© 2016

[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)