



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.

Who, now, may be nominated for the office? And for which of the candidates nominated by Consistory may we 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? Our thoughts go directly to Paul's words to Timothy and Titus. To Timothy Paul was moved by the Holy Spirit to write as follows:

"This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."

(1 Timothy 3:1-7)

To Titus Paul writes these words on the matter:

"For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you - if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict."

(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. For 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. The Almighty certainly can. But the question now revolves around our responsibility. Would the Lord have consistories nominate and members vote for a brother in the congregation who does not meet the qualifications of Scripture? The answer is clear: neither consistories nor congregation members may do that. If that means that there are not 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.

Nature of the work

As it is, though, we can approach the question of who may be an office-bearer also from another side. Not only is there the angle of the Scriptural qualifications; there is also the angle of the task description God has given to the elder. As we seek to nominate and vote, we do well to ask what work God would lay upon the chosen brother. Has he the gifts to do this work? The work given by the Head of the Church to His elders can possibly be best drawn out by considering the terms used in Scripture for the elder. The following need a mention:

Overseer

In Acts 20:28 one reads of the term 'overseer' (Greek: *episkopos*) in connection with the office of elder. Says Paul to the "elders" (Acts 20:17) of the church at Ephesus, *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers...."* What, we wonder, is an overseer to do? One finds the answer in Acts 15:36, *"Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached 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 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"* (Greek: *poimen*). The Lord goes on to describe what He as shepherd does for His sheep: *"The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep."* In contrast to this, the Lord describes what the hireling does: *"... he who is a hireling and not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep"* (vs. 12). The shepherd cares for his sheep, and so he does what he can to defend and protect them, even going so far as laying down his life for the sheep. Hebrews 13:20 also describes the Lord Jesus as *"... that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant."* Jesus, the Good Shepherd, shed His blood so that His sheep might live. In 1 Peter 2:25 likewise, one reads of Jesus the Shepherd: *"For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."*

The task of shepherding is not the task of our Lord Jesus Christ exclusively. In Scripture one reads how the role of shepherd is also assigned to the office of elder. In Acts 20:28 Paul says to the elders of the church at Ephesus, *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."* Here the word 'shepherd' appears 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, the Good Shepherd as He is described in John 10, that the elder finds his role model.

The Old Testament too uses the term 'shepherd' in relation to the Lord, and in so doing expounds further the elder's task of shepherding according to the model of the Good Shepherd. The psalmist confesses in Psalm 23 that *"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."* Why shall he not want? Because the Lord, shepherd that He is

"makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk

through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over."

(Psalm 23:2-5)

Over against the way the Good Shepherd carries out His office, there is the way of the hireling of John 10 who, in the interest of his own well-being, leaves the sheep to fend for themselves in the face of danger. 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:

"Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: 'Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the failings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them.'"

(Ezekiel 34:2-6)

Here is the example of what the 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. In order to preserve the life of their sheep the elders are to *"feed them in good pasture... (to) seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick"* (Ezekiel 34:14-16). Paul, listing in Ephesians 4:11 the various offices that Christ gave to the church, uses for 'elder' the word 'pastor' (=shepherd): *"And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers."* Pastor is an apt description for the elder, for it captures well the elder's task of shepherding, feeding the sheep.

Steward

In Titus 1:5-9 Paul enumerates the qualifications of elders. Paul writes to Timothy, *"For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you."* In this quote (vs. 5) Paul uses the word 'elder' (Greek: *presbyter*), but in verse 7 he uses for 'elder' the word 'overseer' (or 'bishop': Greek: *episkopos*). Then he says concerning the bishops or elders that he *"must be blameless, as a steward of God..."* (Greek: *oikonomos*). 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 that faithful and wise steward, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them their food in due season?"* 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 steward over His congregation? Not for the elder's own benefit, but rather so that he may give the congregation *"food in due season."* 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 those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct... Obey those who rule over you, and be

submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account... Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints."

The word translated here as 'rule' (Greek: *hegoumonos*) is properly the word 'lead', and the term is used here in relation to the elders. 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 ("*for they watch out for 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 their elders.

In summary: elders must use the Word of God

Elders must 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] fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.*" 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 Timothy 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.

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