**Directions for worship- overseers** 14/7/24 dkm sg, md pm

Read:1Timothy 3, Hebrews 13

Text: 1Timothy 3:1-7

Psalms: 121, 25:1-7, 119:129-136, 134

Next to the college in India where I taught was a seminary, a theologically liberal seminary. One morning the principal was found lying in the gutter of the road beside the seminary. We heard that he was drunk and didn’t quite make it home. The leader of a mega church in our city was found in the hotel room of a woman who was not his wife. Moreover, some priests have been convicted of paedophilia. No wonder the reputation of leaders in the church is at a low ebb in our society! When sound doctrine is abandoned, so is sound conduct. Yet it remains for the church to be wise and obedient to the instructions given in the Bible when electing and appointing leaders in the church.

The office of elder is not inherited, nor is it a position to be bought. While elders are to be respected and given honour (5:17), they are not to seek this office for self-glory. At the ordination and induction of a minister it was said to him, ‘There are not many revs in being a reverend’!

Politicians are elected to serve the people they are chosen to represent, even if some forget this at times! But let not elders who are elected and appointed in the church forget they are to serve the people of God. Christ, the head of the church said that he came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45). Elders are to shepherd the flock as under-shepherds. The church wants shepherds not wolves! False teachers in Ephesus were like wolves scattering he flock. Paul instructs Timothy to remain in Ephesus to protect and feed the flock of God (Acts 20:28). The shepherd or elder has a great responsibility in the church which is why the apostle gives detailed instructions regarding the election and appointment of such men.

Regarding worship, Paul firstly urged prayer for all people. He then said, ‘I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority’ (2:12). His next instruction is introduced as a ‘faithful saying’ (3:1). This is not a new teaching. Paul appointed elders in all the churches he established, often on his second visit. He did so with prayer and fasting and the laying on of hands (4:14, Acts 14:23). Isarel had elders, along with priests (Mark 8:1).

The office of elder was needed in the church after the apostles had gone, which is why Paul gives detailed instructions, and why he says this is a ‘good work’, a work to be ‘desired’ by men in the church. The elder had a ‘noble task’, but a difficult and often dangerous task. Church leaders were the target of opposition and oppression; still today, such men are beaten and thrown into prison by enemies of the church. As the young minister was told, ‘There are not many revs in being a reverend!

The apostle outlines the qualifications of an overseer or bishop or elders here in 1Timothy and also in Titus. The lists overlap but the list here in this letter is longer. The list in Titus includes two extra qualifications, that of being holy and righteous or just (Tit 1:8). We note that the word translated ‘overseer’ or ‘bishop’ is ‘*episkopos*’, and the word for ‘elder’ is ‘*presbuteros*’, but they have the same basic meaning (Tit 1:5,7).

The qualifications focus on the man being blameless or above reproach. He is not sinless of course, but must be above public criticism, criticism from within the church, or from outside. This qualification is listed at the beginning and end of the passage so is like a summary of the other features listed (3:2,7). The qualifications relate to the man and his conduct, the man and his family if he has one, and the man’s abilities. No one in the church can see into a man’s heart; we must rely on his words and his conduct, his proven conduct.

**1. Man and his conduct**

The list begins with the man being ‘the husband of one wife’- we will deal with this shortly. It then refers to him being ‘temperate, sober-minded and of good behaviour’ (3:2). These are positive qualities that we will look at before the negative ‘qualities’. Temperate, self-controlled, and respectable; the word temperate is related to wine and not being affected by alcohol. We know how excessive alcohol affects a person’s behaviour; a drunk person loses self-control. But a man can lose self-control without the help of alcohol. We know men who are trouble-makers in the church, men who are bullies and out to get their own way all the time, men who bring disunity rather than unity. But a man who has been given the Holy Spirit must show the fruits of the Spirit, self-control being among these fruits, along with gentleness, goodness, and kindness. Let the man being elected as an elder demonstrate good conduct in every aspect of his life.

The list of negatives with regard to the qualifications of an elder is rather long. The first is that he is not addicted to wine or alcohol, not one who ‘lingers long at wine’ (3:3, Prov 23:30). Paul prescribed Timothy, ‘a little wine for your stomachs sake’ (5:23), not that he could ‘hit the bottle as he pleased’. Drunkenness is the opposite of temperance, and is a sin because it leads to loss of self-control and even to violence. Love of wine or ‘the bottle’ was a feature of society in Paul’s’ day, just as it is in our day. In fact, it is conduct that goes way back to the time of Noah (Gen 9:21). But it must not be a feature of men in the church, and certainly not of elders. Our society is plagued by domestic violence, one cause of which is drunken violence; marriage breakdown is the biggest cause. If drunkenness and violence were rampant in Ephesus, it was not to be so in the church. The church must be guided by the commands of Christ not the conditions of society!

A quarrelsome man must not become an elder (3:3). An elder must be a peacemaker, a gentle, slow-to-anger man. He must not be set on winning an argument at the cost of losing a brother. He does not compromise on matters of truth, but is willing to yield when it comes to his own rights (1Cor 6:7).

While some men desire power and prestige, others are more focused on money. An elder must not be a lover of money or covetous in any way. Some elders get tempted to help themselves to church funds and property. A pastor in India ‘borrowed’ from church funds to pay for his daughter’s wedding. Others have cleverly put their name to property titles. Some churches have a lot of money, and some men like to get their hands on this money, so leaders must be chosen carefully. In some churches the pastor handles the money, but not in ours! At the same time, pastors in Presbyterian churches should be paid generously and equally (5:18); elders are not full-time and are not paid. A lover of wine and/or money must not be made an elder in the church of God.

**2.Man and his family**

If the man is married, as was generally the case in the early church, he must be ‘the husband of one wife’ or literally a ‘one woman man’ (3:2). Paul himself was not married of course, and at times discouraged marriage (1Cor 7:26). People argue about a man with a second wife, either by death or divorce, but the question is, ‘Is he a one-woman-man’- some married men are not a one-woman-man! Adultery was common in Paul’s day, as in our day, and polygamy is practiced in some societies. A man engaging in sex outside of a monogamous marriage is not to be made an elder in the church of God (Heb 13:4).

The man who is married and is faithful to his one wife will most likely have children. The apostle does not stipulate that an elder must have children, but he does stipulate that children must respect their father and be in submission to him. The fifth commandment states that children are to honour their father and mother, so Paul is not giving a new command. What he is saying is that the father is responsible for teaching this commandment to his children, making sure they obey, at least and especially when they are young (Eph 6:1-4). ‘Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it’ (Prov 22:6).

A man whose children can be accused of being wild and disobedient is not suitable to be an elder (Tit 1:6). Why? Well, as we have just indicated, such a man is failing to obey the command of God, but more than this, how can he take care of, or rule in, the house of God if he cannot rule in his own house (3:5). A pastor or elder with unruly or disobedient children brings the church into disrepute, but more than this, can hardly be called upon to rule in the church. No believer, not even an elder, can make his child believe; a child may and often does, wander from the truth, but they remain a covenant child and the subject of prayer. What the father has to consider, and the church has to consider, is the father’s faithfulness to his promises at baptism, and his ability to rule in the house of God.

**3.Man and his abilities**

With regard to abilities, the elder must be ‘able to teach’ (3:2). To be able to teach he must first be teachable, a man willing to learn. A know-it-all man will not be a good elder. And elder must be willing to sit in the congregation and listen to the preaching and teaching of the word. I recall a preacher saying this to an aspiring young elder; but I also observed this preacher never sat and listened to another preacher! Whether an aspiring elder or a present elder, do not think you have nothing to learn from someone else.

Does and elder have to be able to preach? The word in the text is ‘teach’, not ‘preach’; moreover, the word for preaching is not restricted to standing in a pulpit- it means to proclaim or evangelise. All believers should be able to give a defence of the gospel, but some have the gift of teaching and preaching, and indeed of pastoring (Eph 4:11). An elder must be a student of the Bible and must be able to teach others in the church and outside the church. He must ‘hold fast the faithful word he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict’ (Tit 1:9). Sound teaching is essential to unity and growth in the church.

Paul says the elder must be hospitable, as well as able to teach. While being hospitable seems more of a character trait belonging to all Christians (Rom 12:13), it is at the same time a gift given to some (Rom 12:8); the word is literally, ‘love of strangers’. The home of the elder should be a place of refuge for strangers and other needy people (Heb 13:2). In ancient times travellers would stay in the town square until taken in by a local family. It was bit like this in India where we were expected to give visitors a meal and a bed. We considered this part of our ministry. We invited the visitor to family prayers and to church if it was Sunday. We had many students visit our home, not only for hospitality but to observe life in a Christian home. I say ‘we’ because hospitality involves the elder’s wife and family; children often gave up their bed for the visitor. So being hospitable is part character, part ability, and part family.

**4. Not a novice**

With God-given wisdom, the apostle’s next qualification for an elder is that he is not a recent convert. An elder is not necessarily an old man but if a young man he must not be a recent convert. Why? Well, he needs to know the word and be able to teach this word, and this takes time. But the main reason is that he may ‘fall into the same condemnation as the devil’, or ‘the trap of the devil’ (3:6,7). The first of these refers to pride that is followed by a fall, as seen with Satan himself (Isa 14:12, Luke 10:18, Rev 12:9f).

A new convert may be on fire for the Lord but sometimes there is more smoke than fire! The word puffed up is literally, ‘wrapped in smoke or mist’. The smoke is the puff of pride (3:6), which is what led to the judgment and downfall of the devil. We should let the smoke clear before we consider a new believer! For a novice, the status of elder may lead to pride and even abuse of power within the church. Too many pastors and elders have become bullies rather than shepherds in the church! We are told of deacons, ‘Let these first be tested’; we could say the same about elders (3:10).

In his closing command the apostle comes back to the matter of being blameless or above reproach, this time in the eyes of outsiders. We mentioned with sadness at the outset, and do so again as we close, the damage done in churches and to the wider church in recent times by leaders who fail to meet these qualifications. Elders in the church will be attacked by the devil and his agents. Already false teachers had arisen in the church at Ephesus, and they continue to arise in the church today. We must pray for our pastors and elders, but we must also be careful and prayerful in appointing men to this high office or this noble task. We are given guidelines to follow here in the Bible. Moreover, let all elders and aspiring elders listen to the apostle instructing Timothy: ‘Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine’ (4:16).