

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 21, 1968, at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

THE SELECTION OF ELDERS AND DEACONS

From time to time we speak of the "Restoration Principle." This idea is at the same time both simple and profound. It means that we are endeavoring to return to the church pictured in the New Testament. We want to speak where the scriptures speak, and to be silent where the scriptures are silent. We want to have a "Thus saith the Lord," for everything we do in faith and practice. In this movement to restore, our objective is the unity of all believers in Christ. Our basis is the New Testament. Our method is restoration.

This restoration must include the means by which men enter the church, or become Christians, for we must teach on this point just what the apostles taught in the long ago. This restoration must include the work of the church, for we must engage in the same Christian works as the early disciples. This restoration must include the worship of the church, for we have authority only to worship God through the same avenues that the early Christians used. This restoration must also include the organization of the church, for the church must be governed in the same manner as in the first century. Our efforts are directed toward a restoring of the New Testament church, according to the blueprint given us by the Lord in the scriptures.

The pattern of church organization in the New Testament, after the death of the apostles, was this: Each congregation was autonomous, working side by side with other churches of the Lord, but independent of them. In all congregations Christ was the head, with the holy scriptures serving as guide in all matters. The scriptures might be called the constitution by which the church was directed. In each congregation elders were to rule. Deacons were to serve. Evangelists were to preach. Teachers were to teach.

QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP

In the New Testament, there are three Greek words which refer to the group of men who are given authority to guide the church. The word "episcopos" can be translated into the English either as bishop or overseer. The Greek word "presbuteros" can be translated as presbyter or elder. The Greek word "poimen" can be translated as pastor or shepherd. In the scriptures the three Greek words are used interchangeably to refer to the group of men who were given the responsibility of directing the affairs of the church. Hence, bishops, overseers, presbyters, elders, pastors and shepherds, are terms which refer to the same group of leaders in the church. It was only in later times that there began to be distinctions of rank and title attached to these words.

One of the most important factors in the growth of any organization is the quality of its leadership. The same is true in the church. The elders of the church occupy a crucially important position. By their knowledge of God's Word, their vision, their zeal, and their consecration to the Lord, they will largely determine the future growth and development of the church. The work of being an elder is one of the most important and most difficult of all works known to man. The responsibilities and the obligations are heavy; the opportunities and privileges are great. To be qualified to be an elder and to be appointed to that work is the greatest honor within the church and thus becomes the greatest honor which Christians can receive.

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SCRIPTURE QUALIFICATIONS

At three different places in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit guided the writer to set down the qualifications which are required for elders or bishops. Let us notice each of these passages:

I Peter 5:1-4 - "The elders therefore among you I exhort, who am a fellow-elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, who am also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not of constraint, but willingly, according to the will of God; nor yet for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory that fadeth not away."

Titus 1:5-9 - "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that were wanting, and appoint elders in every city, as I gave thee charge; if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having children that believe, or who are not accused of riot or unruly. For the bishop must be blameless, as God's steward; not self-willed, not soon angry, no brawler, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but given to hospitality, a lover of good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled; holding to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayers."

I Timothy 3:1-7 - "Faithful is the saying, If a man seeketh the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. The bishop therefore must be without reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, orderly, given to hospitality, apt to teach; no brawler, no striker; but gentle, not contentious, no lover of money; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (but if a man knoweth not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) not a novice, lest being puffed up he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have good testimony from them that are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."

GROUPS OF QUALIFICATIONS

The three passages just read mention a number of qualifications, which fall into three groups: positive, negative and special. Notice first the positive qualifications: "Blameless," "without reproach." One so armed with righteousness that the barbs of criticism can find no weak places in his armor. One who cannot be justly accused of wrong-doing. "Vigilant." This means to be alert and watchful. Such a person is always working energetically for the success of the church. Dead leaders mean a dead church. Fighting sin and Satan demands alertness. "Sober," "sober-minded," "one having a sound mind." First, there must be effective self-control before there can be successful direction of others. "Of good behavior," "orderly." Respectable and decent in both outward action and in mind are suggested. The clownish and loud man is definitely disqualified. So is the cold and austere man. There must be great dignity and warm friendliness in the leaders of God's people. "Given to hospitality" suggests neighborliness even to strangers. Hospitality and Christian fellowship have largely disappeared from Christian people. In these impersonal times, warm Christian hospitality has been replaced by commercial comfort. The elders must be generous especially to those in need.

"Patient," "Gentle." These suggest that contentious and quarrelsome leaders are to be avoided, for these will inevitably wreck a congregation. "One that ruleth

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well his own house" is a requirement, for if a brother cannot gain the respect of and the control over the small, intimate circle of his own family, it would seem impossible for him to obtain the respect of the entire congregation. Overseers must first oversee their own homes. "Good report," "good testimony from them that are without." The outside world will respect the church to whatever degree it is able to respect its leaders. It is a tragedy for a congregation to have leaders who are lacking in honesty and business integrity. A person whose life has been under a cloud should not be put into the leadership of the church; certainly not until he has proved himself over a long period of time. "Temperate," suggests self-control and self-denial. The elder must not be given to extreme habits. In administering justice there must be mercy. "Just." An elder must never be unfair, partial or prejudiced in making decisions relating to the work of the church. "Holy." He must be pure in heart.

Next we turn to negative qualifications. "Not given to wine." All intoxicating drinks are meant. The Greek word here not only signifies the actual drinking, but also includes the man who is insolent or abusive, whether under the influence of wine or not. "Not a striker." This word has completely changed its meaning since the translation of the scriptures. In our times, it means one who quits his job because of dissatisfaction. Here it means quarrelsome, one who strikes back at any time at anyone who dares to disagree or who displeases him, one who lashes out at all who refuse to cater to him. "Not greedy of filthy lucre," "no lover of money." Men who desire the office of a bishop as a personal means of profit are unworthy. Men whose main interests are on material things are unworthy. "Not a brawler," "not contentious." The elder must not be a lover of strife, nor a trouble-maker. "Not covetous" suggests that elders must not covet any profits or advantages that the work of a bishop might bring. The service rendered should be the only reward desired. "Not soon angry" requires that hot-tempered leaders not be chosen. Elders should be deliberate and take action only after much consideration. "Not self-willed" indicates that the elder must not decide every issue in his own way. He must be uncompromising in matters of faith, but not be headstrong and unyielding in matters of judgment. Both the positive and negative qualities mentioned should be cultivated by all Christians. They are especially demanded in the lives of those who would serve as elders.

Finally, let us notice some special qualifications: "Husband of one wife, having believing children." This means that the elder must not be a polygamist. This would forbid a divorced and remarried person serving as an elder. It does not prohibit a brother whose wife is dead. Elders should be married. Taking everything into consideration, the appointment to the eldership of sober, reliable, older men, with one wife and faithful children, along with the other qualifications, would certainly be a safe, scriptural course for any congregation to pursue.

"Apt to teach," "holding to the faithful word ... able to exhort in the sound doctrine." Teaching is a process by which the person taught learns something that he did not know or becomes something which he was not. The elder must be able to teach or influence others. This does not require a fluent speaker. Elders should be more capable than just the average member in teaching the message of Christ. "Not a novice." The elder must not be a new convert, or a person with little practical experience.

Some of these requirements are matters of degree and growth. For example, "apt to teach" may be held in different degrees. The elders should hold each of these qualities in a significant degree. Other of the qualifications are definite. One either has the qualification or he does not, one hundred per cent. "Husband of one wife" is such a qualification. He either is or he is not the husband of one wife.

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The work of elders is the general oversight of the local congregation. Such passages as Acts 20:17-28, I Peter 5:1-4; I Timothy 5:17-20; I Thessalonians 5:12, and Acts 11:29 show various facets of the responsibilities of elders. Elders are to serve as a bulwark against false teaching, as indicated in Acts 20:29-32 and Titus 1:9. They also are to serve as examples to the flock, as mentioned in I Peter 5:3. Hebrews 13:17 speaks of the primary work of elders, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them: for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account; that they may do this with joy, and not with grief: for this were unprofitable for you."

QUALIFICATIONS OF DEACONS

I Timothy 3:8-13 - "Deacons in like manner must be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them serve as deacons, if they be blameless. Women in like manner must be grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have served well as deacons gain to themselves a good standing, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus."

Notice the significance of each of these requirements. "Grave" suggests that the deacon must not be giddy and light-minded, but must be of serious mind. "Not double-tongued" means that he must be frank and straight-forward in speaking, that he must not be two-faced nor changeable. "Not given to much wine" means that he is not to be the kind of man whose life is sometimes dominated by drink. "Not greedy of filthy lucre" suggests that the deacon's heart must not be set on money and material things, but rather on spiritual matters. "Holding the faith in a pure conscience" means that he must be truly converted to Christ and fully taught. "Proved" suggests that he must not be selected quickly, but after adequate observation. "Blameless" means that the deacon must be worthy of no special condemnation. He must be guilty of no nameable sin. "Even so must their wives," "Women in like manner" are phrases which suggest, by the context in which we find them, that deacons' wives must be grace, not gossipers, temperate and faithful. "Husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their homes well" means simply that they must be heads of Christian families.

OUR ELDERS SUGGEST

The elders of the Hillsboro Church have asked that I set before you the following names which they would like to present as prospective elders and deacons to serve this congregation. After weeks of prayerful discussion, our elders believe that the following three men are qualified to serve, along with themselves, as elders of this congregation: Harold Buchi, Tom McMeen and Roy Shaub. To serve as additional deacons, our elders suggest the following names: Tom Batey, Paul Carman, John Hall, J. O. Hardison, James Loden, G. A. Maddux, and Harold Mitchell. Our elders ask that if any member of the congregation knows a scriptural reason why any one of these men should not be appointed to serve in the designated capacity, he send to the elders a letter setting forth the reason and sign his name. The letter and the signature will be kept confidential and the objection will be carefully considered. If there are no scriptural objections lodged within the interval of two weeks from today, on Sunday, May 5, 1968, the above men will be appointed to serve as elders and deacons. There would then be twelve elders serving the congregation, along with 32 deacons.

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This is a vitally important step in the life of the Hillsboro church. Prayerfully consider the request of our elders and make known to them any scriptural reason why any one of these men is not qualified to serve. If there are no such reasons, then let all of us accept these men as our leaders and work for Christ under their direction. If no scriptural reasons are found to indicate that these men should not serve, let us then loyally follow them as they follow our Lord. Pray for these men and their families, pray for the ongoing of this congregation. We are taking steps today, together, to choose leaders in the New Testament manner to further carry out our intention of restoring the New Testament church in worship, work, organization and all other of its aspects.

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