

Elders

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[0 : 00] Wanted.

A dynamic and experienced leader with a strategic focus, strong commercial acumen, and sophisticated communication skills. You will join a strong team as CEO, and you will have a track record of innovation, diversity, and delivery of sustainable growth.

You will have a minimum of a master's degree from a recognized university in the relevant field.

Well, there's a job advertisement that I've come across recently.

Now, what are job ads for? Yes, they are there to inform you about a new job opening and give you particular information about that specific role. But the way a job advertisement is written will also tell you what the organization values.

They'll tell you what they think is important and crucial for the organization to succeed at its mission, whether that's an entrepreneurial spirit or the ability to talk.

[1 : 15] And we all know very well that in any organization or institution, leadership is important.

We know that a good prime minister is good for the country.

A good headmaster is good for the school. A good director is good for the movie. And the reverse is also true. Bad PM, bad for the country.

Bad headmaster, bad for the school. Bad PM, bad for the school. Bad PM, bad for the school. Bad PM, bad for the school. And so that's why the HR experts will tell you that it's important how you craft a job advertisement because you want to attract the right candidates and not the wrong ones. Well, this Sunday and next Sunday, we're going to take some time to examine a couple of the Bible's job advertisements. We're starting a mini-series entitled Elders, Deacons, and God's Household today.

And over these few weeks, we're going to look at the roles of people whom God has appointed as leaders of the church. And that is elders and deacons.

[2 : 26] As you know, if you're a regular, and I mentioned this already, our nomination processes for elders kick off today. And so it seemed like a good time in our church life to turn to our Bibles, and especially to 1 Timothy chapter 3, to make sure that we know what God is looking for in our leaders.

For as the pastor John MacArthur, who has over 40 years of experience in pastoral ministry, once said, and this quote is on your handout, Whatever the leaders are, the people become.

As Hosea said, like people, like priests. Jesus said, everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher.

Biblical history demonstrates that people will seldom rise above the spiritual level of their leadership. And so who we choose as elders and deacons is not a matter of indifference.

It affects the spiritual health of a church. And so that's why it's essential that we choose the right leaders. But the question is, what is God looking for?

[3 : 40] Who are the right candidates? Are they people like the CEO I mentioned at the beginning? People who are especially entrepreneurial, who look smooth and shiny on the outside?

Or something else? What does God value? Well, let's open our Bibles, if you'll close them, and look at God's job advertisement for elders today.

And next week, we'll look at deacons. But before we dive into 1 Timothy 3, let me just make one preliminary comment about how elders and pastors fit together.

You will notice that in verse 1, Paul is talking about overseers, that is, elders. What about pastors?

Where do they fit in?

Well, biblically speaking, elders and pastors are functionally the same. Let me repeat that again.

Biblically speaking, elders and pastors are functionally the same.

[4 : 46] So in the New Testament, elders, pastors, and overseers refer to the same grouping of people. Pastors are elders and elders, pastor.

Now, that might be a surprise to those of you who grew up in churches where there was a sharp distinction made between elders and pastors, as if the two are completely different kinds of people. But that kind of sharp distinction is not found in the Bible. Let me just give you two examples. Turn with me to Acts chapter 20.

And actually, it will be on the screen as well. So, Acts 20, and in verse 17, where we discover here, Paul is addressing the elders of the church.

So now he's about to address the elders. And so he goes on to talk to them for a few verses. And then down in verse 28, he says this to them, Keep watch over yourself and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

[5 : 52] So notice he calls the elders overseers. So elders and overseers, they are the same thing. And then, he continues on in verse 28, Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

And the word shepherd there is the same word in Greek for pastor, since that's what pastors are, shepherds. Now come with me again to 1 Peter chapter 5, verse 1 and 2, where we find these words interchangeably used again.

So this is Peter writing. He's writing, he says, To the elders among you, so he's addressing the elders, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's suffering, who also will share in the glory to be revealed.

Be shepherds, be pastors of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them. In other words, overseeing them, not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be, not pursuing this honest gain, but eager to serve.

And so you can see that pastors, elders, and overseers are functionally the same. Elders are pastors, and pastors are elders. Now later on, I will nuance this a little bit, for I think 1 Timothy chapter 5 gives us room for some differentiation between elders.

[7 : 23] But essentially, we must not draw sharp distinctions between elders and pastors. They are functionally the same. So what kind of pastor elders, then, should we be looking for?

Well, we're back to our big question, and we are now ready to jump into 1 Timothy chapter 3. And here's point number one. Elders are people who aspire to godliness.

Elders are people who aspire to godliness. verse 1. Here is a trustworthy saying, whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task.

Now, it's a bit strange for Paul to begin this way, don't you think? To talk about aspiring to a position sounds distasteful, arrogant even.

It feels like someone walking into your office and proclaiming, look guys, let me be clear about my intentions. I intend to be your boss one day.

[8 : 34] And doesn't Paul talk elsewhere about doing nothing out of selfish ambition? And it's true that some people may want to be elders simply because they view it as a stepping stone to power and status.

And such men, by such aspirations, are clearly not fit to be elders. But that's not what Paul has in view here. Now, let's think about why aspiring to be an elder is actually a noble task.

We'll have a look in more detail at all the qualities that are mentioned in verses 2 to 7 in a moment. But if you were to just scan it now, you know, you just scan through the list, you would soon realize one thing.

Almost all of them are things all Christians, not just elders, should aspire to. For example, in verse 2, it says, elders should be self-controlled.

Well, does that mean all other Christians don't need to be self-controlled? Of course not. In verse 3, an elder must not be violent. Does that mean everyone else in the congregation are free to throw chairs at one another?

[9 : 56] Of course not. These are all things that all Christians, not just elders, should be seeking to grow in. So, if to qualify as an elder means putting on all these characteristics, and if all these characteristics are what all Christians should be growing in anyway, then it shouldn't be surprising that to want to be an elder is actually noble.

For at its heart, aspiring to be an elder is simply aspiring to godliness. And all Christians, by definition, are to aspire to that.

So yes, there will be men who aspire to be elders for the wrong reasons. But more often than not, there's the opposite problem. There are men who clearly are fit for the office, they love Jesus, and they want to be like him.

But they think, therefore, that means they should not aspire to be elders since that must be equivalent to pride. Or, they think they are not suitable because they've confused godliness with perfect standards that only Jesus can attain.

And so, they do not step up. And that's a pity because God actually intends for them to walk in such a way with Christ that the natural next step for them is actually to be equipped and recognized as elders.

[11 : 45] So all potential elders should aspire to be Christ-like. It's a noble thing. But, if all Christians are to aspire to this anyway, then how can we tell who should specifically be set aside as elders?

Well, here's a key differentiating factor. While all Christians should and must aspire to godliness, and especially the characteristics mentioned in verse 2 onwards, not all Christians display these characteristics.

All Christians are to be gentle, for instance, but not all Christians are gentle. But elders and potential elders need to be exhibiting such characteristics.

Again, not perfectly, we only have one perfect Messiah. but there should be a consistency in the way that they reflect this. And so that brings us to point number two.

Elders are people who model godliness. Elders are people who model godliness. They set the example. They are the model for the entire congregation to follow.

[13 : 08] Now, this week, I heard somebody say that their godliness should be wide and deep and long, which is quite a nice way to put it. It's wide in the sense that they exhibit godliness in every sphere of life.

It's deep in that it's rooted in Jesus himself, in knowing his love and loving him, as we saw from John 21 last week. And it's long in that it's godliness with a track record.

It's something that we can see over years. And so let's examine some of these godly characteristics. And I'll try to group them into a few categories, although inevitably they will overlap with one another.

So don't take these categories rigidly. Firstly, their model godliness in their overall conduct. Now come down with me halfway through verse 2, where it says an overseer should be temperate.

That means someone who is clear headed. Someone who is able to make sound and balanced judgments and not be eccentric in their assessment of things.

[14 : 29] You want someone who can look at the situation pastorally, take stock of what might be good and what might be bad, and seek to do what is good for God's people. Next, he has to be self-controlled.

That means he isn't easily provoked. He's more interested in self-mastery rather than self-expression. He isn't overcome immediately by his own desires, self-fulfilling.

He is able to resist doing something that he shouldn't. That's important, isn't it, to ensure that our leadership is not guided entirely by impulse.

That admittedly is something that we young men in particular can struggle with. Next, he is to be respectable. He is someone who is dignified and decent.

It's not someone who thinks that everything is a joke. And then jump to verse 3, to the second characteristic mentioned.

[15 : 37] He is to be a gentle person. Now, leadership and gentleness are not often associated together. But just look at Jesus last week, for example.

Think of the way he tenderly but skillfully restored Peter and freed him from his burdens in John 21. And as a result, Peter is now able to serve Jesus fully.

And so what we're doing is we're watching the chief shepherd at work, exhibiting gentleness in service of the kingdom. And towards the end of verse 3, you notice that an elder is someone who should not be quarrelsome.

Now, we have to be clear here. To be not quarrelsome does not mean that he never takes a stand on issues or never confronts people.

After all, in 1 Timothy chapter 1 verse 3, that is exactly why Paul has written to Timothy. Paul has told Timothy that he needs to take a stand and confront some false teachers.

[16 : 56] And we'll see later that this is actually an essential part of the elder's job. But he's not the type who loves to argue for the sake of arguing or who goes looking for controversy.

Secondly, they model godliness in having rightly ordered loves. So that is their love is for the right things and not for the wrong things.

In verse 2, the overseer must love his wife by showing his faithfulness to her. Now immediately that raises the question, does that mean one must be married to be an elder?

The short answer is no. If it was a yes, Jesus himself and Paul would have been disqualified. And furthermore, it doesn't fit with Paul's words in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 where he sets forth singleness as something positive for ministry.

And actually, literally, in the Greek, verse 2 says, an elder must be a one-woman man. And so, the emphasis is not on his marital status, but on his marital faithfulness.

[18 : 22] An elder, if he is married, must be faithful to his wife. He must also not have an excessive love of alcohol, verse 3.

He must not be given to drunkenness. Now, how we treat our alcohol consumption is a good test of how much we love godliness.

Because when we are drunk, we can't be self-controlled, we cannot be gentle, but we can be violent, we cannot be temperate and make sound judgments, and sometimes, while under the influence, we could even do things that jeopardize our marital relationship.

Drunkenness is a pathway to ungodliness. Now, of course, the Bible here is not advocating for total abstinence. 1 Timothy chapter 4 makes clear that God has created things such as these as gifts that can be legitimately enjoyed.

And yet, the elder must ensure that he is watching his drink. Being godly is his biggest concern. He must also not be a lover of money and of history.

[19 : 49] Again, in 1 Timothy chapter 6, we discover that this is a typical hallmark of the false teacher. If you were to turn there, Paul writes, they are greedy for gain.

That's their characteristic. And unfortunately, in this world, there are plenty of people who lead big churches, who manipulate their followers so that they can gain material wealth and enjoy luxurious lifestyles personally.

but that's not what we are called to be. And then, back to verse 2, he should be hospitable.

So there is a gentle love for people present, such that he is willing to open his house where needed. For as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

And the elder should be the first in following that instruction. Thirdly, they model godliness in their family lives.

[21 : 07] In verse 4, an elder must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him. Again, this doesn't mean that an elder must be married and have children.

Paul is simply addressing what would have been the norm for most of the men in his time. They would be married and have children. And so he must lead his family in such a way that his children are generally respectful and obedient.

Again, this is not asking for perfect kids. For if we are all sinners, how can that standard be met? But there should be evidence that they are fathers looking to instruct their kids in the ways of the Lord and point them to the gospel.

Nor is this verse asking for all the kids to have necessarily turned out Christian. Again, the conversion of an individual is ultimately up to the Lord and not us.

Christians. But if a person has three kids and none of them are now Christians, then maybe that's a sign that we need to ask more questions and be slow to lay our hands on him.

[22 : 30] For as verse 5 asks, if anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church? Fourthly, they model godliness with a track record.

They should, verse 2, be above reproach. So he should have integrity to be committed to living life consistently in line with God's will as best as he can, in private and in public.

And if he does so, verse 7, he would have a good reputation with outsiders. Again, this doesn't mean that he needs to be universally popular, since being gospel-minded by definition means that sometimes you have to make decisions that non-Christians cannot understand and even dislike.

But it's to have a life where no one can deny your character, not even outsiders. I remember a long time ago, someone once talking about a person's disgraceful conduct at work, and then at the end

saying this, oh, I can't believe he's an elder at his church.

Ouch. And so that's probably why he should not be a recent convert, verse 6. Godliness with a track record can only be observable over time.

[24 : 07] The question, of course, is what counts as a recent convert? Well, this seems to depend on context. In some places, like Ephesus, where Timothy was, where the church was pretty established, it might be wise to wait a little longer.

in other places, like Crete, where Titus was, where everybody was more or less a young Christian, well, you probably can't wait for somebody to be a Christian five years before you appoint him to be an elder.

There's no one in that pool. And so, an elder is clearly a person who models godliness that's deep and wide, and long.

He's an example of what all Christians should aspire to. In one sense, 1 Timothy chapter 3 is less a job description and more a character reference.

But there is one more thing on the list that I have yet to mention. And it's an especially crucial one. It's actually distinctive to the elder position.

[25 : 24] next week when we look at the deacons, we'll notice that godliness is what dominates the list as well, just as with the elders. But there is one thing that is mentioned specifically of elders that is not mentioned of deacons.

What is it? Well, it's right there at the end of verse 2. So point 3. An elder is a person who must be able to teach.

An elder is a person who is able to teach. What does that mean? Well, I think it means three things. Firstly, it presupposes the elder should know what to teach and what not to teach.

We can see this from the wider context of 1 Timothy chapter 1 again. In 1 Timothy chapter 1, the elder should not be teaching false doctrines that end up in controversial speculation or meaningless talk like the false teachers were doing, who, if we read between the lines, could potentially have been former elders.

Rather, he must have a firm grasp of the gospel and how the gospel applies to all of life. He should teach in a way that promotes love, a pure heart, a good conscience, a sincere faith.

[27 : 01] And he must teach this way because later on in 1 Timothy chapter 4 verse 16, watching his doctrine and his life closely will result in him being able to bring his hearers to salvation.

Secondly, being able to teach means being able to stand firm and hold on to gospel teaching even when he is under pressure to abandon it.

Just look at Titus 1 verse 9, for example, Titus 1 also has a list of qualifications for the elders, and at the end of that list in verse 9, we read this, he must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

So it's not so much about having a theology PhD to become an elder, but rather it is about being able to persist in right teaching, to hold on to the right doctrine even when others say that it's unimportant or even unloving.

And it's also about discernment, knowing how to tell when something is wrong, even when the teaching on the face of it sounds okay, when the flock says, oh, nothing wrong with it, ma.

[28 : 29] And that is knowing how to show it's wrong, to protect the flock. And thirdly, it does presuppose some ability to communicate right teaching.

Now, I don't think that means again that we all have to be Jack Gurus of the Year, but it does mean that when this person teaches, people come away with more understanding, not more confusion. People come away being built up or challenged, not torn down or complacent. only in this way can a church grow in Christ.

A person who has the right teaching or right knowledge, but is absolutely 100% terrible at being able to convey it to others, unfortunately will not be effective as an elder.

And so this is very important. A person can be a very fine, very godly Christian. But if he is not able to teach at all, then he shouldn't be an elder.

[29 : 41] And there's no shame in that. Now let me just expand on this a bit further because it might still raise some questions in your mind. Does being able to teach mean that the elder must do pulpit ministry?

No, I don't think so. That is too narrow a view of teaching. Now they might indeed be gifted to do this, but it could be that their ability to teach comes through more in maybe leading Bible studies, or

teaching a seminar, or in one-to-one conversations where they are able to consistently shine light on what the Bible says and how it applies to a particular situation a person is facing.

elders do not have to do regular public preaching to qualify as an elder. Paul does not specify the arena in which being able to teach happens.

And in 1 Timothy chapter 5 verse 17, it does seem like Paul does have some flexibility for some differentiation between elders. It's not on the screen, so if you can just turn to it and let me read it.

1 Timothy chapter 5 verse 17. The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.

[31 : 18] Now, all elders must be able to teach. There's no doubt about that from 1 Timothy chapter 3. So you cannot differentiate between elders who can teach and elders who cannot teach.

That's going too far. But it does seem from 1 Timothy chapter 5 verse 17 that some elders might be especially gifted for that work. Now, in today's terms, these are normally the elders whom we nowadays refer simply to as pastor.

They will be the main teaching elders. And 1 Timothy chapter 5 verse 17 could also possibly be drawing a distinction between elders based on time.

So there were elders who are in full-time paid gospel ministry and who especially concentrate on the ministry of the word. And then there are elders who serve in a voluntary capacity in the sense that they also engage in a full-time vocation alongside their eldering work.

So again, the former is what we normally call today pastor. And the latter is what we normally just call today elders in our terminology. Or to put it another way, as of today, I belong to the former category.

[32 : 36] And people like Dr. Kenny and Dr. Day and so on belong to the latter category. And that seems to fit with the immediate context. Since in verse 18, Paul says that the former category, what we call pastors today, should receive adequate financial support.

So there is some differentiation, but again, it's important to see that such differentiation is not absolute. All elders oversee and all elders are able to teach.

It's just that some of them might spend a bit more time on one side than the other. So, in a nutshell, what kind of people are we looking for to be an elder?

Well, let me try to summarise it in one sentence. God's people need elders who teach and exemplify godliness.

God's people need elders who teach and exemplify godliness. for that is what God values.

[33 : 52] Remember the job description I read at the beginning and how I said they reveal about what the organisation values? Well, this is what God values for his church.

Not how big they can become or how influential they can be, but godliness. God has.

Hence, they need elders who value not size or fleshiness or any of those sort of things, but who value what God values. And so that's what we need to value as we choose elders.

elders. And so let me just spend a short time before we finish then, just reviewing some common mistakes churches make in choosing elders to help us avoid doing the same.

And this is not on your handout. Mistake number one, picking somebody solely based on his status in the world. Picking somebody solely based on his status in the world.

[34 : 57] So often, especially in Asian contexts, a church might look at somebody and say, wow, he's a neurologist, and so he's very highly educated, and someone whom the world looks up to.

Or, wow, he's a successful businessman and a community leader. And we say, oh, he will make a good elder. But that's not how God thinks.

The point is not his status in the world. The point is whether he fits the criteria of 1 Timothy chapter 3. So if a person is a neurologist, but who has not managed his home well, has not shown any skill at handling God's word, and there's another person who is a plumber, but is temperate, hospitable, and actually has shown himself to be a very good Bible study leader, who's the better candidate?

God says it's the second person. Now, if the neurologist also happens to be a faithful preacher, self-controlled, and so on, then praise God you have two good candidates.

But the point is, we are looking for godliness and ability to teach, not worldly status. Mistake number two, picking somebody by virtue of their niceness and longevity in church.

[36 : 27] Picking somebody by virtue of their niceness and longevity in church. So sometimes we might think, oh, so-and-so has been in the church for 25 years. He's a nice guy, and he knows the people in this church very well, and everyone likes him.

So maybe it's his turn. He should be rewarded. But again, that's not the point. Niceness is not in the criteria of 1 Timothy 3.

Indeed, it's not even a fruit of the Spirit. And sometimes, if an elder has to protect sound doctrine or make hard decisions, well, niceness is not going to serve him well.

He'll have to face some disgruntled people. And it's actually being above reproach and being gentle, not quarrelsome, that will serve him well.

Mistake number three. Picking elders to act only like a corporate board of directors. Picking elders to act only like a corporate board of directors.

[37 : 34] So in other words, some churches might expect elders to act like our representatives at fundraising dinners, or to rubber-stem financial decisions, and pick people who like to do that sort of thing.

Now, elders do lead and oversee the affairs of the church. But their character is meant to be fundamentally one of shepherds. Their chief concern is actually that the church grow in godliness and maturity, not that the church can run well-managed programs or social activities.

Now, of course, the latter can serve the former. A good program can be a help in Christian growth. But growth in godliness is the goal.

And running programs are only a means to that end. And so God wants elders who are clear on that, not just good event managers. Now, does this sound hard?

Yes, it does. So let me just end this morning by turning to something Paul wrote elsewhere in Ephesians 3, verse 7-8.

[38 : 43] It should appear on the screen. Let's read it. In Ephesians, Paul describes himself as a servant of the gospel.

And he knows it's very hard work. And in verse 8, he calls himself the less than the least of all the Lord's people. That's a good translation since it literally says something like he's the leastest, although that's not good English, I know.

He knows he is not worthy. And Paul is certainly far from your first choice to be an apostle when you look at it.

But that's the point. His ministry is a gift of God's grace, exercise in God's power. And so is the ministry of eldership.

In one sense, no one is worthy. And yet, it's all of God's grace. And not everyone is called to be an elder. But if you are, you can be sure that God is with you.

[40 : 21] As we saw last week, he qualified Peter, who denied him. And so he can qualify you if that's what you are called to do.

And so church, let's pray this morning that God will give us good elders. Whoever gets appointed, pray for them regularly. Because as you can see, it's not easy.

And let's make sure that we have the right mindset and expectations regarding them. If you want to explore more, there's a book in our church library called Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons.

That might be of help to you. But let's turn to God now in prayer as we commit our elders, both present and future, to him. Heavenly Father, thank you again that the Lord Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

And thank you that he is the Chief Shepherd who leads his church, who leads KEC in his ways, and who makes sure that all things will be done according to his plan.

[41 : 36] We thank you that the Lord Jesus is the one who has brought this body with his very own blood. And so Lord, we just want to comment to you today, elders, present and future, we pray that you will give them much grace, that you will empower them and fill them with your Holy Spirit, to be able to do the work that you have called them to.

Lord, in the moments when they find it difficult, they want to give up their discouragement, they're disheartened, they know their own sin, bring them back to the Lord Jesus, and help them to keep on going to serve you.

And Lord, may you be so kind to grant KEC here, and indeed all churches in Kuching everywhere, good leaders, good elders, who would be able to teach people the right thing, to hold on to the right teaching, to refute the wrong doctrine, so that we might grow in godliness.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. and amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Even amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.