

“The Government of the Church”
(Part 3)
Selected Texts

- INTRO. - We’re almost through the summer months, and very soon we’ll be returning to our study of the Book of Romans, but we have a couple more weeks on what the Bible has to say about the church, and we have been spending time on the issue of biblical church government.

- I don’t know if you any interest (at all) in this topic, but it is something that is very important in the life of every church. Many problems have been created in the church due to failure to follow God’s pattern in this regard.

- And I believe *strongly* that the pattern that is set forth for the church in the NT, is the pattern of a plurality of God-called, spiritually-mature, godly men providing the leadership in the church.

- The most common term used for these leaders is the term “elder,” but the terms “shepherd,” “pastor,” and “overseer” are also used (interchangeably) to refer to the same person.

- Now, we have looked at this whole issue of biblical church government in three ways: The first week we examined “The *Plea* for Biblical Church Government.” Last week we looked at “The *Pattern* for Biblical Church Government,” and today we will

look at “The *Procedures* for Biblical Church Government.”

- And we’ll *also* take this section in 5 parts (as we have the last two), but we won’t get through all of these 5 today. The first one is so important that we can’t rush through it, so we’ll cover just this *one* today and get the last four next week (which will conclude our series on the church). This morning I want to address:
 - I. THE STANDARDS FOR ELDERS

 - One of the most important aspects of biblical church government, is a clear understanding that the men who serve as elders in the church (as well as those who serve as deacons) are required to be spiritually and morally qualified to lead the church in the role God has called them to.

 - The qualifications for elders are clearly spelled out for us in Scripture. There are 2 *primary* texts (and one *secondary* text) that lay out with the qualifications for elders. The two *primary* texts are 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. The *secondary* passage is 1 Peter 5:1-3.

 - Now, the single, overarching qualification (that summarizes all the others) is that an elder must be “above reproach.” All the rest are simply given to explain what “above reproach” means.

- An elder is to be “above reproach” in his marital life, his social life, his family life, his business life, and his spiritual life.
- The most common mistake made by churches today, that are eager to implement an eldership form of government, is to appoint biblically *unqualified* men.
- Because there always seems to be the need for more shepherds, the temptation is to allow unqualified, unproven men to assume leadership in the church.
- By the way, let me remind you of a point I made earlier. When some people hear about Baptist churches (or Bible churches) that are going to this form of government, they say, “Oh, you’re going to a Presbyterian form of government.”
- But that’s *not* true at all. The Presbyterian form of government has a system of ecclesiastical authority *above* the local church. They see the office of Bishop as being different from a local church elder, but that is *not* biblical. A bishop is the same person as the elder.
- When we talk about elders (or bishops) here at PBC, we’re *not* talking about any authority above the local church. We are talking about biblical elders as clearly delineated in the NT.
- Another distinction between our understanding of the role of elders is that, although Presbyterians *do* have

elders, they are *not* always patterned after the biblical model for elders. They are often viewed as, what we would call “board elders,” but the biblical model is clearly that of spiritual shepherding.

- But getting back to the standards, I believe that one of the most important elements of following the biblical pattern of church government is making sure that the qualifications are consistently followed.
- The overriding concern of the NT (regarding church leadership) is focused on making sure that those who lead, have the abilities and character necessary to lead the household of God.
- It is a very high calling and it requires high standards. The NT is unequivocally emphatic on this point. The office of pastor (or elder or overseer) is *not* just some honorary position bestowed on a senior church member, or one who has faithfully attended church for many years.
- It is *not* a popularity contest, or something that is given over to those who have proven to be successful businessmen. Neither is it something that should be reserved only for those who have a charismatic personality or who have been seminary-trained.
- The offices of elder and deacon are open to all who meet the biblical requirements. Now, let’s begin by

simply reading the three passages that give the biblical standards for elders.

- Let's start with 1 Tim. 3:1-7, "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."
- Alright, now go over to Titus 1:6-9, (Drop back to v. 5 to get the full thought) "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the

teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict."

- And there is one more passage to examine, and that is 1 Peter 5:1-3, "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock."
- Now, if you combine all three of those passages together, you come up with a list of qualifications for elders. And although we are *not* going to have time (today) to go over *all* of these (as thoroughly as I would like), let me at least hit the most important issues here. We won't necessarily be taking these in order.
- By the way, I think it is highly noteworthy that the NT provides more instruction on the *qualifications* for eldership than for any other aspect of eldership. Such qualifications are *not* spelled out for evangelists or other teachers, but they *are* for local elders and deacons.
- Folks, I do *not* believe that we can stress (too much) the importance of requiring biblically qualified men to

serve in these capacities. I believe that this is the *singular* key to this working the way God intended.

- Francis Schaeffer once wrote, “The church has no right to diminish these standards for the officers of the church, nor does it have any right to elevate any other as though they are (then) equal to these which are commanded by God. These and only these stand as absolute.”
- And we need to understand that the NT does *not* have separate standards for the “full-time professionals” and the “lay-elders.” There is no NT distinction. There are *not* 3 Scriptural officers; there are only two. There is nothing in the NT that would even suggest that there are “professional clergy,” “lay-elders,” and then deacons.
- There are only two Scriptural officers: elders and deacons (period). The standards for *all* elders are exactly the same. Now, let me touch on just a few of these qualifications.
- *Most* of the biblical standards relate to a man’s moral and spiritual character. An elder is *not* to be a new convert, but is to be a spiritually mature believer. He is to have an impeccable reputation with those outside the church. That means he is a man of integrity in paying his bills and in his business dealings.
- He must *not* be a person with a quick temper. He must *not* be “pugnacious” (i.e. one who picks fights or is physically abusive). He is *not* to be one who is addicted to alcohol (or any other destructive habit). He is to be one who exhibits self-control.
- Beyond that, he must be a proven teacher of the Word, one who has exhibited good management of his own home and family, and one who is *not* dominated by the love of money.
- By the way, everyone is probably wondering what I am going to do with that phrase “husband of one wife.” That has been interpreted several different ways.
- *Some* have taken that to mean that a *single* man could *not* serve as an elder. Others have taken it to mean that a divorced man could *not* serve as an elder. Others have said that it is only given here to prevent polygamy.
- Well, I will admit that it’s *not* easy to determine the proper meaning of this phrase. Literally, in the Greek, it means “a one-woman man.” It can’t mean simply “a man who is married” or it wouldn’t be a spiritual qualification. There are a lot of men who are married to one woman who are *not* at all spiritually qualified to serve as an elder.

- I think, that in order for this to be a *spiritual* qualification, it has to be referring to the fact that this man's marriage is a *model* of what God intends marriage to be.
- He is loving his wife as he should be. He is living with her in an understandable way. He has a single-minded devotion to her, is *not* "flirtatious," and there is no reason to question his commitment to his marriage vows.
- If you were to ask me if I believe that a single man could serve as an elder, I would have to say "yes" (if he meets all the other qualifications) based on 1 Cor. 7:8-35.
- If you asked me whether I believe that a divorced man can serve as an elder I would say "it depends." The literal rendering of the text does not *necessarily* disqualify a man who has been previously married.
- I think that (many times) we want to make divorce the "unpardonable sin" when it really isn't. The Bible has a lot to say about divorce and remarriage, and that is for another sermon, but this *particular* verse really says *nothing* about marriage or divorce.
- That's *not* the point of this standard. The marital status of a man is *not* the issue. This spiritual qualification is talking about the *purity* of a man morally and sexually (as well as the quality of his marriage). The emphasis is on marital faithfulness.
- And we need to be reminded of the fact that there *are* biblical grounds for remarriage given in Scripture in *some* cases. I do *not* believe that this standard *necessarily* prevents those men from serving as an elder.
- I think where this *really* comes into play is in v. 4, where it says that an elder "...must be one who manages his own household well..."
- If a man is divorced and remarried for *unbiblical* reasons, then it is difficult for him to be able to say to a young person who may be contemplating divorce, "No, you should remain married..." On the other hand, if he has biblical grounds, then he can still admonish that young person to follow biblical principles. (Do you see that?)
- But it is important for us to follow biblical standards in regard to marriage because one of Satan's oldest, most effective strategies for destroying the people of God, is to adulterate the marriages of those who lead God's people. He knows that if he can defile the shepherds' marriages, the sheep will follow suit.
- And I believe it is dangerous to start down the path of allowing for those who do *not* have biblical reasons for remarriage to serve as spiritual leaders, because it

dilutes God's intention for marriage as a commitment for life. The issue has to do with whether or *not* that man can continue to serve as a *model* to other believers.

- But there *are* biblical exceptions. If a man's unbelieving wife left him and he remarried, or there was infidelity on the part of the spouse, or he remarried after his wife died, or he was *not* a Christian when his divorce occurred, *then* it is a different matter. These are the biblical exceptions.
- I agree with John MacArthur though -- that if this *is* a man's situation, it should be so far in the past that he has been able to exhibit *complete* commitment to his current marriage.
- *Never* should a man be considered as a candidate for eldership when there has *not* been adequate time to assess his level of commitment to his marriage and family.
- Well, I know that this is *not* an easy issue to deal with, but I hope that helps you to see, that every situation must be evaluated individually, and (as always) must be handled according to biblical principles. (Let's move on)
- Another important qualification is one that may often be overlooked because it is in the very first verse and is *not* always seen as part of the qualifications. That

is, a man must have the *desire* to shepherd the flock of God.

- Verse 1 says "...if any man *aspires* to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he *desires* to do." Peter also talked about this quality when he said that an elder should "shepherd the flock of God...*not* under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God..."
- Now, the whole point here, is that the shepherding task cannot be done by someone who views his spiritual care as simply an unwanted obligation. It must be a calling and a deep desire of one's heart to shepherd the flock of God.
- By the way, *not only* had it better be a strong desire and calling felt by the *elder*, but it also had better be a desire that is shared by the elder's *wife* or it will *not* work. (expound)
- But elders who serve grudgingly (or under constraint) are incapable of the kind of self-giving, sacrificial love that is required to really care for the flock of God.
- Shepherding God's people through this sin-weary world is far too difficult a task to be entrusted to someone who lacks the will and desire to do the work.
- The responsibility and scope of shepherding the sheep is great. It requires doing things that are *not* easy to

do. It often results in people *not* liking you very much. Some days you want to quit. So it requires that there is a sense of calling and a deep desire to do this work.

- This desire (to shepherd God's people) is something that is God-given. It is a Spirit-generated desire and calling on one's life. It is *not* something a man just decides to do one day. It is something that God lays upon his heart. This is the one aspect of becoming an elder that is subjective.
- But Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that it was the *HS* (and *not* the church or the Apostles) who placed them as overseers in the church to shepherd the flock of God.
- That's what it says in Acts 20:28, "Be on guard for yourselves and for 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."
- In other words, the HS planted that desire in them to serve as shepherds to God's flock. This is an essential part of the over-all process. The first step in the appointment process, is for God to place a burden on a man's heart to serve in this way.
- You don't go out recruiting. You wait for God to call out some men to serve as shepherds over His flock. And God will put it on their hearts to desire this work.

- You don't set a number and say, "We need to find this many men, and then go out and try to persuade some men to serve." No, you follow the biblical pattern of allowing the HS to put the godly desire in the hearts of those men He wants to serve in this capacity.
- And you leave the *number* of elders up to the Lord. But regardless of how many God calls out, we must remember, that it would be better *not* to have *any* than to have the wrong ones!
- That's why the *subjective* element of desiring the office of elder is quickly followed by the *objective* standards of biblical qualifications. It starts off with a *subjective* heart passion to serve in this way, and then moves into an *objective* examination to see if the man is truly qualified.
- Now, in the lists of qualifications, there are *three* that have more to do with the elder's *ability* to perform his task as a spiritual leader. That is, an elder must be able to manage his own household well (to show that he can manage the household of God well), he must be able to teach the Word of God (and defend the faith), and he must be an example to other believers.
- Now, I won't say much more about that *last* one, except to say that if an elder is *not* an example for other believers to follow, then he should *not* serve as an elder, no matter how good a teacher he may be.

- But let me spend a minute or two on those other two. 1 Tim. 3:4-5 says, “He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)”
- The Puritans used to refer to the family as the “little church.” This is exactly what Paul is talking about here. If a man is having difficulty with his own family, (particularly when it comes to properly disciplining his children, so that they exhibit respect and self-control), then there is reason to doubt that he will be effective in managing the household of God well.
- Now, this gets into a real sensitive area (when you start having to make assessments about the way a man manages his household), but this is a necessary part of the evaluation process if we are going to follow God’s design.
- You see, managing the local church is more like managing a *family* than it is managing a *business*. A particular man may be very successful as a businessman, (or as a public official, or as a military officer, etc.) but he may be a terrible father or church leader. There is a difference! The elder must be a good *family* manager.
- And I want to throw in another aspect that I believe belongs in here but is often overlooked. In this part

about managing one’s household well, Paul primarily talks about children, but I believe that a man who would be qualified to serve as an elder must also love his wife the way the NT says we are to love our wives.

- I don’t believe that a man who is hateful or ugly or abusive or unloving to his wife is qualified to serve as an elder. I believe there should be an obvious healthy relationship in his marriage.
- And I believe, that when it comes time for elders to be appointed, that their wives and children should be interviewed to find out if this man is the same man at home as he appears to be at church.
- Now, about this matter of being able to teach, we pointed out last time that the Bible is absolutely clear that an elder has to be able to teach God’s Word and to defend the faith against those who would try to contradict it.
- The concept of a board elder, who is more like “a CEO for God” is a concept that is foreign to the Scripture. As I said last time, part of the shepherd’s responsibility to feed the flock of God involves the teaching of the Word, and there is no such thing as a biblical elder who cannot teach God’s Word.
- This means that a man who would be a candidate for eldership must be thoroughly knowledgeable of the Scripture. An elder who doesn’t know the Bible is like

a shepherd without legs; he can't lead or protect the flock.

- And protecting the flock (through solid biblical teaching) is a critical part of his responsibility. It doesn't matter how eloquent he may be, or how successful he may be in business, or how intelligent he may be.
- If he is *not* firmly committed to the historic, apostolic doctrine delivered once for all to the saints, and if he is *not* able to instruct people in sound doctrine and defend the biblical faith, then he is *not* fit to serve as an undershepherd.
- As Titus 1:9 says, the elder must be "holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict."
- This means that an elder must firmly adhere to the orthodox, historic, biblical teaching. He must reject all other gospels (other than the true gospel that has been revealed through Christ and the Apostles in the NT).
- As one person put it, "Elders must *not* be chosen from among those who have been toying with new doctrines." They must be men who are characterized by doctrinal integrity. An elder must be one who is diligent to present himself "approved to God as a

workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth."

- Well, we got through the first point. We'll come back and finish this next week. I felt strongly that the qualifications for elders be more fully explained and that we should *not* rush through this.

- PRAYER