

Titus 1:5-9

Gospel men are to encourage and protect the church.

Sticking with the idea of gardening... when we decided to grow a garden there was much labor undertaken to prepare the plot in our yard for it. We had to take a layer of dirt and weeds out of that corner of the yard, Stacy applied a lawyer of ground cover that promise to keep grass and weeds at bay, and we covered that with bark so that the raised beds were surrounded by a pristine environment, so that which was planted in them could flourish.

While we would like the garden to take care of itself - just grow and be sustained because of the groundwork that went into it - it actually goes bad if we leave it alone. Someone needs to tend the beds, remove the inevitable weeds and apply strategies to remove pests from ruining blossoms before they become vegetables.

Someone also needs to keep an eye out for other vermin, in our yard it is not bunnies who much on the produce, but cats that find the mushroom farm mulch the perfect litter box (not the fertilizer we prefer).

Someone has to be responsible for pruning for fruitfulness, for knowing the seasons and when to remove plants that have withered. More than just the raised beds though we also have to tend the whole patch, pulling grass and weeds or it will devolve into chaos. Thorn bushes would grow and the garden may persist but will eventually be choked out.

For the garden's good we need to act as guardians protecting it - stewarding it, doing the work of cultivation for fruitfulness.

Maintaining the imagery of the church as an urban garden - a patch of verdant green in the midst of concrete and steel - that which produces the most life not only needs good soil (the gospel) and the expectation of fruitfulness, but those that will put the garden in order, keep watch over it, protect it from those that would ruin it.

For that work Paul urges Titus to appoint elders, to put in order what was unfinished.

Paul's assignment to Titus accords with a threefold pattern we observe in Paul's ministry recorded in Acts. For example, in Acts 14:21–23, Paul

1. makes converts through preaching the gospel,
2. strengthens new believers through discipleship and instruction, and
3. appoints pastors/elders “in every church” to carry on the work after he is gone. (Notice the plural “elders” in every single church, which suggests that each church should welcome a plurality of elders; cf. Acts 20:17, 28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 5:12, 13; 1 Tim. 5:17).¹

The final bit has to happen on Crete. And it is urgent work, appointing elders.

In this letter there is no words of thanksgiving that are common from Paul, but the immediate reminds as to why Titus was left on Crete. Vital for the health and longevity of the church.

“Appoint elders in every town” not just one but a plurality to guard the garden that is the church.

So who then are God's stewards?

Elders are godly, and gospels men.

Godly Men

The increase in knowledge of the gospel accords with godliness, with transformation, the increase in Christlikeness. Elders then are to be those who have experienced this and are to serve as an example for the church.

Right off the bat we want to acknowledge that they are men. Here Paul indicates elders are men.

What we see in the rest of the New Testament and history of the church from Acts onward, follows this.

Why? Elsewhere Paul will tie the role differentiation to the garden and tension resulting from the fall.

I think, as we will hopefully see, it is more tied to the work they are supposed to do, as they image Christ for the church.

This is not a barring of the flourishing of women in the church. Titus will make clear their call to teach, to participate fully in the life of the church. All one in Christ, old distinctions don't apply in the same way.

Christianity is the movement in human history that established the worth of women beyond procreation and pleasure.

And we must be careful to see how radically different Christianity is from what then surrounded it. (View on gender in first century versus a 2023 lens).

Much debate in modernity about who can be elders, but we see just from a plain reading of the relevant texts they are to be men.

1 Timothy 3 - gendered language in standard for elders and deacons, "he" for eldership, "they" for deacons.

(How do women receive this? Do about it?) Would have read the whole letter and we will get there, everyone has a role in the church. And this may require a level of surrender to God's way, what the word indicates is best.

Elders as fathers in the church and there are also mothers for the church as well. Elders are not the only leaders in the church.

"Is male eldership a problem? It can be, but it doesn't have to be. When the church family is led by mature, godly men who act with humility and wisely seek the welfare of the whole body, male eldership is a gift. Through attending to the input and insight of all—young and old, men and women—godly male elders are part of God's beautifully designed community of grace."

Not just male, but godly men.

Men opposite the prevailing posture of the age in Crete. Where leaders were often greedy, promiscuous, self-centered.

“The message of Titus takes shape against a unique social background. Cretan culture was widely regarded as disorderly and rife with dishonesty... Titus needs to appoint strong and godly men as elders because there are religious talkers who are having a bad influence on the church scene. The rhetorical structure, then, is first (a) a solution and then (b) the problem that requires this solution. The logic of the passage is that the elders described by Paul are exactly what is needed to bring the situation into line.”

As the church views them, this list of attributes and their opposites are not meant to be a standard met “perfectly” but the reflection of the fruitfulness of the gospel in their lives.

They are to be, above reproach, blameless.

“Paul’s “above reproach” standard is based upon what others in the church see and observe. It is not so much a standard for one’s own internal assessment (which would be required by a term such as sinless or even good-intentioned) but rather reflects the assessment of external community observation.”

But it is also not just keeping up appearances. There is to be a steadiness to these men that maintains integrity.

They also are to be faithful to their wife. A “one-woman-man.” Not requiring marriage but fidelity to the marriage covenant they are in, or commitment to celibacy otherwise. Starkly different than the culture regularly engaged with prostitutes and mistresses. Instead elders are committed solely to their wives in support, love, intimacy, and life together.

With faithful children, believing, not open to the charge of disobedience. Not perfect children (though they should try!) Less about the kids and more about leading a family. In line with managing the household well since elders will steward the household of God’s people. A man that fails to nurture his family will fail to nurture the church.

Then comes contrast with what seems to be the type of leaders on Crete and among the false teachers. These garden guardians are different.

- Not arrogant or overbearing
- Not quick-tempered
- Not given to drunkenness
- Not violent
- Not greedy for gain (not looking to lead to improve their status)

Instead elders have a godly steadiness about them.

Concern for others is also obvious in the first three positives Paul says should characterize an elder's conduct. An elder should be:

- "Hospitable"—opening home and heart to others, the opposite of the first negative, "arrogant"—"pleasing self."
- "A lover of good"—particularly loving virtue or what promotes good for others.
- "Self-controlled"—controlling drives that lead to impulsive and damaging behavior.

There are three additional positive qualifications:

- "Upright"—living in accord with God's law.
- "Holy"—devout, committed to piety and godliness.
- "Disciplined"—a term probably analogous to the practices of an athlete in training, meaning rigorous application of the Biblical habits, means, and restrictions for growing in godliness.

Can they be an example to the church?

"Although the list as it stands may appear daunting by modern measures, it could have been made far more intimidating. Note that among the Christian leadership qualifications there are no mountains to climb, no alligators to wrestle, no pilgrimages to make, no prophecies to utter, no ancient manuscripts to decode, no visions to conjure, no tortures to endure, and no miracles to perform. The standards for Christian leadership strictly relate to one's example before others."
Bryan Chappell

This is what all believers are called to be, empowered by the Spirit for it.

Not meant to be a punch list requiring a perfect score. There are none without room for transformation. But elders are lead repenters of the church, leaning into the promise of Christ to carry our renewal in them and calling the church to the same. Men with experience pulling the weeds in their own hearts soe they can help others recognize and pull theirs.

More than merely exemplifying these things, elders do work.

Gospeled Men

Titus 1:9 “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” (ESV)

The final, culminating mark of an elder is that he is someone who cherishes “the trustworthy word as taught”—that is, the gospel, with all the “sound doctrine” that unpacks the gospel. Elders are gospel men.

Paul did not merely require church leaders to provide a godly example but also required them to provide a gospel witness.

Elders have had a gospel encounter and are living in light of the truth of Christ and spurring the church onward in the same thing.

“The fundamental work of every elder is bringing the Bible to bear on Christians’ lives and the life of the whole church. An elder leads by exemplifying obedience to God’s word, teaching God’s word, applying God’s word to the struggles and sins of individuals, and, together with the other elders, directing the church’s overall work and mission in accord with God’s word. Exemplify, teach, counsel, lead. Only the last is restricted to the formal exercise of the office.” Bobby Jamieson

This is their work, that they may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine. Teaching, not platitudes or a human-centered spirituality, but the whole counsel of Scripture, truth, the word of Christ.

Not running after silly myths or an emphasis that misses the point. But to “encourage others by sound doctrine.” Giving the church the grace of Christ for all of life.

“As Christian leaders, we are always obligated to exegete our culture as well as the Scriptures to determine what is legitimate for our own conduct. We must ask what struggles face those for whom we are responsible, what our culture is using and abusing, what are common temptations and what leads to them, where we have seen injury and how we might take steps to keep others from going there.”
BC

There is more work though than just encouraging. And this is why I believe elders are to be men. Elders are to rebuke those who contradict the trustworthy word.

Think of scarecrows in the garden. When a scarecrow is present the birds intent on ruin shy away. The best scarecrow is the one that moves... that tends to the garden and is capable of and will to grab a sling and rid the garden of birds of contradiction.

Elders are the ones who take the heat for the church, both in unashamedly preaching sound doctrine and protecting the flock from those that would harm it.

In Crete false teaching is a problem, and goldy men among the cities are needed to guard the church from empty talkers and deceivers.

The elders must then be among the church. Seeing what the people are reading, watching, listening to, not as a way of control but as watchmen aware of the dangers over the horizon. Hearing from the church and leading along with others in the church. Steady examples that always bring the church back to Jesus, ready to refute what is opposed to the gospel.

Not moving an inch off of the gospel. Not blown about by fads of the age, but steady, secure in Jesus.

Even to our own peril.

As Martin Luther, clinging to gospel in the face of death.

“In January 1521, Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X. By mid-April, Luther found himself answering allegations of heresy at the now-famous Diet of Worms, an assembly of princes and prelates overseen by the Holy Roman Emperor, with the strong possibility that the 37-year-old excommunicant would be burned at the stake. Luther was, again, given an opportunity to save himself. All he had to do was “recant,” and all would be forgiven. He responded with these now famous words, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one’s conscience is neither safe nor sound. Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me.”

Gospeled men are to encourage and protect the church.

It is vital work for the health of the church. All of us are called to live like this, but the Lord will only call some to serve as elders.

I am so thankful for our elders. Godly and gospeled me. But not the heroes of the story.

“Our lives should express the power of the gospel, but our lips should express the hope of the gospel. The foundation of this hope is that God loves us not because of our goodness but because of his—not because of our work but because of our Savior’s. Though the church’s leaders live so as to give others the hope that changed lives are possible, they never point to their actions as the basis of God’s acceptance.” BC

Where an example of godliness and a confession of the need for grace come together, there God’s people receive powerful instruction for their own spiritual growth.

The elders Paul has in mind, their lives point to Jesus.

Godly, gospeled, encourage and protect the church. They do so, and you follow them, by seeing and savoring Jesus.

That is who we are meant to see when we see elders.

“The Greek of verse 8 is important to observe, as it relates later to Paul’s description of God in the third chapter. Of the prospective overseer, Paul says he must be “a lover of stranger” (philoksenon) and “a lover of good” (philagathon). In 3:4, Paul describes God’s saving grace in this way: “But when the kindness and love of mankind (philanthrōpia) appeared . . .” Elders, then, are men who have known God’s philanthrōpia in such a real and profound way that their lives are fundamentally altered, so that now such loving-kindness to all characterizes their own lives. Notice again the emphasis Paul places on the connection between profession of truth and tangible godliness. As the fathers of God’s family, elders are to model the gospel by pursuing hospitable, philanthropic, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined lives.” Paul Jeon

Christlikeness.

Jesus... proclaiming truth even when it isn’t well received.

Protecting the least, the sinner and outcast. Rebuking the religious that have missed the grace of God. Welcoming the stranger in... calling you his own and giving you grace.

More than just teaching and modeling a better way, willing to sacrifice himself for you. Taking the “heat” in your place so you can live.

Jesus is the true garden guardian and we live trusting him, becoming more like him, so the garden will grow.

Be Grateful - God has made provision to guard the church. What a gift this is.

Aspire toward this - All of us, elders or not, to live godly, gospels lives for the glory of Christ.

“Scripture expects all Christians to teach and counsel each other. Paul, writing to all the Christians in Rome, says, “I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another” (Rom. 15:14). And to the church in Colossae: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). Finally, Paul exhorts the church in Thessalonica,

“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Thess. 5:14). All these passages exhort all Christians. Every Christian should teach and counsel other Christians.” Bobby Jamieson

Gospeled men are to encourage and protect the church.

A picture of Christ’s care for us, always pointing forward to him for our good. May we never neglect or refuse this gift.