

# Who leads the church? (II — Elders)

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[ 0 : 00 ] I wonder how you assess what you think a leader ought to look like. How do you choose who to vote for as your MP or who you would like to see as the Prime Minister or First Minister?

What makes a good leader at work or a good teacher at school or a good leader of whatever group it might be?

Whatever criteria we use, they will be, I'm sure, quite varied between different people. We will have different standards of what we are looking for.

And often, I think, we tend to focus on what somebody says they're going to do. That's often our main focus when we're looking at MPs and so on.

Or we look at somebody who has shown that they have the dynamism, that they have the ability to drive things forward, who has that kind of charismatic leadership style, the person who people will want to follow.

[ 1 : 11 ] I think those are often our criteria, but I'm not sure they are necessarily the criteria that Paul presents here. They may be reasonable as criteria in other areas, but it doesn't seem that that's how Paul thinks we should choose when it comes to the leadership of the church.

We began last week to look at this theme of who should lead the church, but we didn't really have all that many criteria for that question last week.

Basically, we only had one point for who should lead the church last week, and that was not women. Now, unfortunately, that's not enough of an answer.

We do need a little bit more than that. So, let's have a look at these verses together. We're going to look this evening at verses 1 through 7, the qualifications that Paul is giving for an overseer, and then we'll come on in the future to deacons from verse 8 onwards.

You might remember that back at the start of this series, when we were thinking about the purpose of this letter, why Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, why he writes to Timothy in his role there.

[ 2 : 30 ] When we were thinking about that purpose, we identified the end of this passage that we've just read as a key statement for that. Verse 14, Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

Hence the title for this series, A Blueprint for Church Life. In the providence of God, we have this letter in which Paul sets out how people should conduct themselves in God's household.

He's speaking with particular reference to that situation in Ephesus, but his instructions have a broader applicability. And I think this purpose statement here in those couple of verses, I think that is in many ways the purpose of the whole letter, but he puts it in the middle.

It's not at the beginning telling them up front why he's writing. It's not at the end telling them what's just happened, but it's here in the middle of the letter. And that suggests to me that he's particularly thinking about these verses as meeting this need of equipping them to know how they ought to conduct themselves in God's household.

It seems that that goal of kind of church order conduct in the church, that a defining step in that is to set the leadership in order.

[ 4 : 02 ] Some have said that a church will never rise above its leaders. There may be something to that, but I don't think it can be entirely true, certainly given the dramatic falls of far too many church leaders.

I hope it is not true that churches never rise above their leaders. It's very sad if that is the case. But nevertheless, it is clear that the leadership of the church does have a massive impact on the life of the whole church.

Now, Paul is writing these things to Timothy specifically, Timothy as his delegate there in Ephesus, the one who's gone with apostolic authority to set things right, the one who's going to use that authority to remove and to appoint overseers in the church.

But other parts of Scripture do seem to point towards the norm being that the congregation has a definite role in the appointment of their leaders. Certainly that's the model that our denomination, that the free church embraces.

Elders and deacons are appointed by congregational vote. So what that means is that these verses aren't only relevant to elders who ought to examine themselves and see how we measure up, but also to the whole church, who ought to consider both whether your current overseers meet these requirements, and also consider how you are to judge others who might aspire to such office.

[ 5 : 31 ] So as we come to these few verses, I want to approach them in three areas, three headings. We're going to start by seeing how Paul introduces his criteria in verse 1 and the beginning of verse 2.

Then we're going to kind of take an overview of the list, how it all hangs together, a few kind of themes of what's going on. And then thirdly, we'll just work our way through and pick out a few implications of one or two specifics.

We're not going to dive in detail into all 14, I think it is, criteria, but we will draw out a few specifics. So how does Paul begin?

In this opening section, there's a few different things to notice. And first up, we have this introductory formula. Here is a trustworthy saying.

We came across that same phrasing back in verse 15 of chapter 1. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.

[ 6 : 41 ] Now it's easy to see why that would be identified as a key point, as a trustworthy saying. Perhaps it's not as immediately obvious to us why this is quite so important.

But I think just as there, the purpose of using this introduction, that this is a trustworthy saying, the point is to add solemnity, to add weight to what is going to follow.

I think Paul is emphasizing the importance of what he is about to say for the good of the church. I think in Paul's mind, what will follow about the character of the elders and the deacons is vital to the health of the church.

Second introductory point, the task of the overseer is a noble one. It's an interesting statement, isn't it? Because remember that the false teachers in Ephesus had risen from within the ranks of the overseers.

The false teaching is coming from within the leadership of the church. Those who are functioning as overseers are teaching error. Now that's a big part of what's going on in this passage.

[ 7 : 51 ] That's a big part of what Paul wants Timothy and the church to see, what he wants these men themselves to see, that they should not be leading the church. And it would have been easy at that point, wouldn't it, to look at the situation and respond by saying, well, let's just ditch having elders.

You go and do it all yourself, Timothy. That would be better. Or to abandon this kind of leadership, because clearly leaders can't be trusted. Wouldn't it be better if we all just sat down and read the scriptures for ourselves?

It would have been quite easy at that point to take that kind of throw the baby out with the bathwater approach. But Paul doesn't do that. Paul says exactly the opposite, in fact.

Paul affirms that the role of overseer is a noble task to which men ought rightly to aspire. And we very much are, I think, in the same situation today.

Because we could look around this country and we can see that those who are tasked with leading the church are leading her into error. We can look around even our own denomination and we can see men with failings every bit as serious as these false teachers in Ephesus.

[ 9 : 04 ] We can see people whose wrong beliefs are seen not only in their teaching, but in their conduct as well. We could very easily look at the leadership of the church and think, I don't want to go anywhere near that.

I don't want to be thought of in the same breath as those men. I don't want to be tarred with the brush that says all church leaders are hypocrites. It would be very easy, wouldn't it, to respond to this by having nothing to do with the leadership of the church.

Just keep your head down and get on with things or go looking for a church with less formal leadership, fewer figureheads to end up coming crashing down. Equally, in the face of this kind of false teaching, they could be thinking, well, I don't want to have to be brought into conflict with men like that.

I don't want to have to go and deal with false teaching. Who would want to be a leader in a situation where the first thing you're going to have to do is go and confront the existing leaders and say, you are wrong.

You shouldn't be a leader in this church. And yet, Paul says, whoever desires to be an overseer desires a noble task.

[10:16] He affirms the value of this role. Thirdly, in the introduction, as we move into the beginning of verse 2, given that this is a noble task, given that this is vital to the health of the church, what should these men be like?

The first statement there in verse 2, the overseer is to be above reproach. I think this statement, this functions as something of a heading overarching what follows.

The remainder of these verses kind of flesh out what it looks like to be above reproach. Paul's presumably chosen examples in the following verses that particularly apply to that situation in Ephesus, but this is the guiding, overarching principle.

The overseer should be above reproach. The idea is very similar in verse 7 at the other end of the list. Above reproach, having a good reputation with outsiders.

Because part of Paul's concern here is that the current leadership of the church has brought the church into disrepute, has given it a bad reputation among outsiders. And that is a big problem because it doesn't only reflect on these false teachers as individuals, but that reflects on the whole of the church because these people are in some ways its appointed representatives.

[11:39] It reflects on the whole church and so it reflects on Jesus Christ himself. Because Jesus has joined himself so closely to the church, he has made her his bride.

And so her behavior reflects on him. The false teaching, the immoral behavior of these improper overseers in Ephesus is besmirching the name of Jesus.

The church must appoint men who are above reproach because by such will the world judge the validity of the gospel. So that's the introduction and overview of this list.

Firstly, as we look down through this list, I hope the thing that stands out to you is that this is about character and not about their CV. A couple of points do touch on what the overseer ought to be able to do, teaching in verse 2 and managing and caring in verse 5, but the vast majority of these points are to do with his attitude, to do with his character, to do with the general approach in which he goes about life and leadership.

So this is about moral qualifications, not degree qualifications. Perhaps these points fall into two different areas. There are those that focus on personal self-discipline and maturity, and others are on relating well to other people and teaching and caring for them.

[13:12] Two themes in the things that follow. So clearly, there are things which the leaders in the church are to do. It's described as a task in verse 1, and there are hints towards the nature of that task in these verses, but proven competence at tasks is not the key criterion.

If all that we had in these verses were an instruction that overseers must be able to teach. If that were all that were there, well, we'd just go ahead and turn to the teachers, turn to the people with experience giving presentations at work, turn to the good writers, turn to the inspiring motivational speakers, turn perhaps even to the stand-up comics, and whoever has that proven ability to convey information from them to the church.

Now, that's something they do need to be able to do, but that's not all we have, is it? Teaching isn't even at the top of the list, never mind the only thing. What is the overseer to be? Faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable.

There can be this attitude in our society, can't there, that the personal lives of our leaders don't really matter, or at least we try to convince ourselves that they don't matter often. It doesn't matter about their personality, it doesn't matter about their character, the only thing we need to worry about with an MP or a prime minister is their policies.

You know, we don't dare judge them on the basis of their private lives, we ought to be prying into that. All we need to know is what they have officially said that they will do. I think this was perhaps a particularly notable attitude in the last US presidential elections, that, you know, we shouldn't be worrying about their character, we shouldn't be worrying about their behavior, but about what they

have said they will do.

[15:05] But Paul says that cannot, that must not be our attitude when it comes to the leaders of the church. I think there are probably some implications here for national leadership as well, but that isn't our concern right now.

But what we must say, we cannot afford to say of those who we are setting up as leaders in the church, we can't afford to say, well, well, he's a bit bad-tempered in person, but when he preaches, it's just wonderful, I could listen to him all day.

We cannot say that. We can't say, oh, look, this guy's got a PhD, let's invite him. We can't say that, that can't be our key criterion.

We can't choose our leaders because of their level of education. Our criteria must be the criteria that God has given us, and that means character, not just competence.

Our inclination today to appoint the rich, the well-known people into leadership positions was just as much of a problem in Timothy's day as it is now.

[16:12] That cannot be our criteria. Second thing on the list in overview, heading 2.2, if you want, these things, these things are hardly earth-shattering, are they?

I mean, pretty much all of these things should be true of every Christian, shouldn't they? Aren't all men to be faithful to their wives and wives to their husbands for that matter?

Shouldn't all of us be temperate and self-controlled? Surely it's no more okay for the people in the seats to be lovers of money or to be violent than it is for the person standing at the front.

Now, this is an important thing to recognize that it isn't some completely different standard when we come to talking about the elders. It isn't that having achieved a model Christian life, you then add on top of that a list of other attainments and then once you've done that, then you can be rewarded with the high rank of elder.

No. This is, in many ways, this is ordinary, everyday Christian faith and life. I mean, if that's true though, why say these things at all?

[17:27] I think the answer to that is because we don't all achieve them, do we? In fact, none of us achieve them in full. We deal with the reality that we continue to be dragged down by our sinful hearts.

All Christians should be these things, but failing in them doesn't mean you're no longer a Christian, but it does mean you shouldn't be an elder. If you are regularly or dramatically failing to live a life which is above reproach, then the role of elder is not for you.

Why is that? Because, well, because elders should be able to join Paul in the words of 1 Corinthians 11 verse 1, imitate me as I also imitate Christ.

Elders should be people who can be held up as, albeit imperfect, held up as examples of what it is to lead the Christian life.

So these are not earth-shattering things, and yet, often, they are all too rare. One commentator says, fidelity to one spouse, sobriety, and hospitality may seem trivial virtues to those who identify authentic faith with momentary conversion or a single spasm of heroism, but to those who have lived longer and who recognize how the administration of a community can erode even the strongest of characters and the best of intentions.

[19:02] Finding a leader who truly is a lover of peace and not a lover of money can be downright exciting. It should be exciting to find people who match up to these standards because the reality is they are all too rare.

A third and final thing are on the list as a whole, and that is that these are observable traits, aren't they? These are things that can be seen to at least some degree.

It's possible to observe whether somebody tends towards violence or towards gentleness. We can look at people and see something of their attitude towards money and so on.

Now, that's not to say that the externally visible is necessarily the most important. We know we have a God who looks on the heart, but the purpose of this letter is to equip Timothy to actually go and take action, to go and do something about it, and so the emphasis has to be on observable traits, has to be on things that he can actually see.

Now, that's not to say it wouldn't be good for prospective leaders to consider whether or not they may be above reproach. They can have a fuller picture of whether or not they are than anyone outside can judge, but the purpose of this list is to let the church judge its leadership.

[ 20 : 30 ] And given its presence in this context, given that it's being written into addressing false teaching, presumably this list is designed to be held up against the false teachers, against the current leadership in Ephesus, and show, visibly, that they are falling short, that they are not doing what they ought.

So the fact that we can't see perfectly into the heart does not mean that we never make judgments about one another. The purpose of this list is to call one another to account.

So, friends, when you are choosing elders, when you come to choose your next minister, you are supposed to look at those who desire this noble task and see whether or not they measure up. And, friends, you should look at your current leaders and you should consider whether or not we measure up. And if you think not in one area or more, well, Matthew 18 and verse 15 lays out your action plan.

Step one, tell the person in question. If they don't listen, take someone else along. In the case of an elder who you want to challenge and correct, probably the other person to take along is going to be one of your other elders at this point.

[ 21 : 52 ] If that doesn't work, step three, tell it to the church. That doesn't mean make it a matter of gossip. We have, in our systems in the free church at least, we have kind of formal ways of doing that, taking it to the church step, that you speak to the session as a whole and if necessary you get the presbytery involved who have authority over us as your leaders here.

See, friends, the reality of false teaching in the church at Ephesus should make us aware that it could happen to us too. If a church that was set up by Paul himself could fall within his lifetime into terrible false teaching, if that could happen to them, then it could happen to us.

And you need to know that it is your responsibility to act. Okay. Heading number three.

I want to run through a few of the things in this list and I want to draw out one or two implications of them. As I say, we won't examine them all in detail. Much of this is quite straightforward.

You know, we know what it means to be temperate and self-controlled. At least, we know what it is. Not always easy to do, but, you know, we know what we mean. But there are a few things that I do want to draw out.

[ 23 : 16 ] So, in verse 2, above reproach is a heading for all of it, the first point, the first item on the list is that the overseer is to be faithful to his wife.

A few interpretations of this verse have been proposed, but it seems pretty clear from the attitude of the rest of the Bible that Paul isn't here intending to exclude single men, nor is this intended to be a barrier to somebody remarried after the death of their spouse, or remarried after a biblically legitimate divorce.

The point that is helpfully drawn out in the NIV here with this translation, faithful to his wife, the point is faithfulness. So, it would seem that in Ephesus, it would seem that marriage, that family life was under attack with a considerable degree of license being proposed.

marital infidelity was every bit as common in that day as it is now, and in that light, Paul says the overseers are to be above such things, and this is sadly all too relevant a criterion today as well. Friends, please pray for your elders that we might resist the devil's snares. second one I want to draw out in the middle of verse 2 there, elders, overseers are to be hospitable.

[ 24 : 43 ] I take this to mean, elders, that our interactions with the rest of the church should not be limited only to the contexts when we are gathered all together, and also not limited to the context when we kind of officially go around and visit the people on our lists once or twice a year or however we do that.

I don't think that's quite what hospitality looks like. I don't think it just means the official dinner invitation either. There's a book I've seen some good reviews of and that I'm hoping to get around to reading at some point.

The book's called *The Gospel Comes With a House Key, Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World*. The Gospel Comes With a House Key.

Hospitality is not the formal invitation. Hospitality isn't about the official invitations, is it? It's about the everyday. *The Gospel Comes With a House Key*. It's about popping in because you were passing.

It's about getting caught up talking for so long over lunch that you end up staying for dinner. It's about inviting people into the messiness of life, not just that little compartmentalized box where you've managed to get the house looking perfectly neat and you've got the three-course dinner all

planned out.

[ 26 : 04 ] It's more about the quick pasta bake that you have before everybody then rushes off in different directions to their different clubs, not just the roast dinner and that afternoon of civilized conversation.

It's about inviting people into life, not about creating some version of what you wish life were and presenting that to people. And by the way, this isn't just elders, the rest of you aren't off the hook either.

Remember I said most of this list should be true of all Christians? Romans 12 13, Hebrews 13 2, all of us are to be hospitable. There's much, much more that could be said about what this looks like, but we'll not dive into that too deeply right now.

What is worth saying though is, why is this a key thing for elders specifically? Why does this belong in this list? Why do we need this of our elders? Because those who would teach others, those who wish to take care of and intend to exercise oversight over others must be open and loving to them. How dare we presume to care for people who we do not know? How dare we presume to teach those whom we do not love? One of the metaphors that the Bible uses for elders is that of shepherds and it has been rightly said, shepherds should smell like the sheep.

[ 27 : 34 ] They should be in the midst of it. Elders are not some separate category off over there. Elders lead from in amongst. Elders lead from a position of love and true gospel hospitality.

Next up, able to teach. This one's the most skill-oriented item in the list, isn't it?

And it does seem to tie into a key aspect of what the role of the overseer is. The overseers, the elders, are those who are primarily tasked with guarding the gospel in the church.

The caring role of the overseer isn't only offering some kind of theoretical vacuous comfort. It isn't only the arm around the shoulder, but it is also offering true, deep, and lasting comfort from the words of Scripture.

The overseer should be able to teach in order to rebuke and correct error. The overseer should be able to teach because it is his job to equip the saints. So yes, all Christians ought to be able to present the gospel to those who might ask, ask, but more is expected of the overseer.

[ 28 : 49 ] He is to be able to teach in a more comprehensive sense. And I'm also convinced that this doesn't appear in this list only in the sense that elders are to be those who have demonstrated that ability to convey information, but also that what they are teaching, the content of their teaching, is to be right and true.

true. Because this letter is contrasting true teaching against false teaching. This requirement, I think, is in some ways parallel to the one down in verse 9 when he moves on to talking about deacons.

In verse 9, deacons must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. So deacons aren't told that they need to be able to teach, and we'll come back to that next week. But they are told to hold the deep truths, to hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Paul certainly cannot be expecting less than that from the overseers, can it?

It must be the true gospel which they are to be able to teach. Next up, verses 4 and 5, the overseer should be able to manage his family in order to show you that he will stand some chance of being able to manage, of being able to take care of the church.

[ 30 : 13 ] This argument here says if you can't even do the smaller thing, why be trusted with the larger? This is the same principle as the parable of the talents that Jesus told, isn't it? Matthew 25, 21, well done, good and faithful servant.

You have been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness. You prove in the smaller arena competence that qualifies you for the larger.

But a couple of cautions here in the nature of what it means to manage the household. Because the verb here talking about management is not one of dictatorial and autocratic rule.

The idea here is certainly not of a despotic father, one who has things in order, but who does so in a manner worthy of respect, who does so in a manner that shows his care for his family.

The idea behind the word well there in verse 4, it's not so much efficiency, it's not so much the effective results, it's not only that the family looks orderly and respectable, but rather that this has been achieved by managing well, by going about things in the proper manner.

[ 31 : 38 ] One commentator suggests that the idea here in these verses, with this clause at the end of verse 4, worthy of full respect, that the idea is of an overseer who can manage their family with unruffled dignity.

Now I think that's a fair definition, so long as we don't imagine that that unruffled state is achieved either by having the family so cowed, so terrified that they dare not step out of line, or that that unruffled state is achieved by delegating the management of the family to his wife or to a nanny for that matter.

That is not the picture here, is it? The picture here is of a father who is engaged with his family, who genuinely cares for them, and who thereby shows that he has a fair shot at meaningfully caring for the church.

Last one to draw out from this list. Verse 6 tells us that overseers ought not to be recent converts. Straightforward enough, but what I want you to notice there is the reason why.

Because the danger here is that the recent converts, might become conceited. There is a very real possibility that being invited to take up this position of responsibility, this role in the church, could result in big headedness, in a sense of self importance, and so on.

[ 33 : 07 ] And therefore, Paul says they ought not to be recent converts. Now it seems to me that yes, that temptation is probably particularly acute for the new convert, that perhaps he will be more inclined to look at it and see, they were desperately waiting for me to come along, and now it's going to be okay.

But let's not kill ourselves, the temptation is still there for the rest of us too, isn't it? I think what Paul's saying in this caution is that a more mature believer ought to be better placed to resist that temptation, not that the temptation towards conceit and big headedness isn't there.

So once again, will you please pray for your elders? Pray for us, because the devil has schemes and traps and snares set out.

1 Peter 5 talks about Satan as a roaring lion looking for somebody to devour, and he particularly likes to ensnare the leaders of the church, doesn't he?

I think because if he can get his claws in there, if he can get into the leadership, then others will often follow. And so pray for your leaders, for our good, and for your own as well.

[ 34 : 32 ] So, what do we end up with? Well, we have this picture of what it is for the elder to be above reproach, that the overseer is this exemplary instance of what Christians in general ought to be, plus one or two particular characteristics.

What do we do with this? Well, men, this is an office to which some of you ought to aspire. It's there in verse one, isn't it? Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task.

So ask yourself where on this list you fall short. Whether you are ever an elder in Christ's church or not to develop your character in these areas will surely bring great profit.

Secondly, elders, have the honesty to look at this list and evaluate yourselves. Are we setting a visible example of self-control and so on?

Which, for you, of these areas is weakest and most in need of your focused attention. And thirdly, all of you, I have said it a few times, please pray.

[ 35 : 49 ] This list is on one level nothing earth-shattering and on another level it is a daunting standard. Pray for us. Pray that we may not fall into the devil's traps.

Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you that you set out your standards clearly for us.

We thank you that you care about who leads your church. You care about setting things up right.

That you care about providing good, godly men of the right character to lead your church.

Lord, we do pray that you will provide more leaders for your church here in this place and that you might guide and equip those whom we have that we might be better servants of you and better servants of your people here.

Lord, guard all of our hearts and our minds. That these might be our standards for those who will serve you in this way. Amen.

[ 37 : 08 ] Maybe it's just me, but after that list I find myself wanting to be reminded of God's grace. And so let's stand and sing together. Only by grace can we enter.

Only by grace can we stand. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. And now may the living God.