

Qualifications for Elders

By Philip G. Ryken, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church

1 Timothy 3:1-7

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

A minister who preached from this passage borrowed his title from one of its key phrases. The sermon was supposed to be called “Above Reproach: The Qualifications of Elders.” When the bulletin came back from the printer, however, it stated that elders were “Above Approach,” not “Above Reproach.”

“Above Approach”—the phrase reflects the way Christians sometimes feel about their spiritual leaders. Few things cause greater fear than meeting with the elders of the church. I remember how I felt, as a youngster, when I waited to give my testimony of faith in Jesus Christ to the Session. There I sat in the church hallway, rubbing sweaty palms on my good trousers and trying desperately to remember my salvation verse. The feeling returned with greater force every time I appeared before presbytery to be examined for the pastoral ministry.

The officers of the church have not always made Christians nervous. Back in the 19th century a churchman from Edinburgh named David Dickson wrote:

Our people know well the necessity and usefulness of the office of the eldership. All over Scotland there is a *happy prejudice* in favor of an elder's visit. No elder could ever say that they did not welcome his visits. The houses and hearts of the people are ever open to those whom they have called to the office.¹

This is how elders ought to be treated: with affection.

A Noble Task

Elders should also be treated with respect, for the Bible holds their office in high esteem. *Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task* (v. 1).

This is the second time the apostle has taken a popular saying and given it divine approval. Walter Lock offers a clever paraphrase to give it the flavor of a proverb: “He who would play a leader's part, On noble task has set his heart.”²

The word for *overseer* is *episkopos*, which is sometimes translated as “bishop.” *Episkopos* is the word that gives the Episcopal Church its name. It is synonymous with the biblical word *presbuteros*, which means “elder” and gives the Presbyterian Church its name. In the New Testament—in Acts 20:17-38, for example—the words for pastor (*poimen*), elder (*presbuteros*) and bishop (*episkopos*) are used interchangeably (see also 1 Pet. 5:1-2; Titus 1:5-7). This is true in 1 Timothy as well, since Paul later calls the overseers “presbyters” (5:17).

We are bound to conclude that there is no difference in rank among the elders of the church. Hierarchical forms of church government go beyond the teaching of Scripture. They did not develop

¹ David Dickson, *The Elder and His Work* (Philadelphia, 1883; repr. Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage, 1990), 4.

² Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles (I & II Timothy and Titus)* International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1924), 34.

until after the close of the New Testament, especially in the ministry of Ignatius (d. 117), bishop of Antioch.

The biblical pattern for the church is spiritual government by a plurality of elders. All overseers are brothers. As we shall see (5:17), there is a difference between teaching elders (sometimes known as pastors or ministers) and ruling elders. But the difference lies only in their function, not in their authority. A pastor is not superior to a ruling elder.

The point of Paul's trustworthy saying is that the work of an overseer is honorable. It has a long and rich tradition among the people of God. The first elders were appointed by Moses to teach and to judge the children of Israel (Exod. 18). Throughout the Old Testament, God's people were represented and governed by elders who sat in the city gates and taught in the synagogues.

The same was true in the New Testament. When the first Christians sent a gift to the poor people of Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas brought it to the elders of the church (Acts 11:30). On their missionary journeys they appointed elders in all the churches (14:23). So by the time Paul wrote to Timothy, the elder was a well-established officer in the church.

The work of an overseer is good work. As the word suggests, it involves the oversight (*epi-skepos* = "over-look") of God's people. By ruling and teaching, elders supervise the spiritual life of the church. They look after things on God's behalf.

If oversight is good work, then it is also good for men to seek it. I say "men" because the Spirit has already stated that women are not to exercise teaching authority in the church (2:12). The phrase *sets his heart on being an overseer* is probably an over-translation, since the "heart" is not mentioned. But the word *oregetai* means to "reach out" for something, to stretch for it. The Scripture speaks further of desire (*epithumei*). So some men should strive to become elders in the church.

This is true for ruling elders as well as teaching elders. Too many young men desire to become ministers; too few aspire to become elders. At the same time we pray for our children to become evangelists, missionaries and Sunday School teachers, we should pray that some of our sons will undertake the noble task of oversight.

This does not mean that eldership should be an ambition. Elders do not campaign for the office. Far from it. No one ever decides to become a minister on his own. That is for the church to decide, led by the Holy Spirit, following the guidelines set forth in this passage (see also 1 Pet. 5:1-4; Titus 1:5-9).

Yet the outward call of the church is always matched by the inward call of the man. The great Puritan preacher William Perkins (1558-1602) asked, "How can you know for yourself whether God wants you to go [into the ministry] or not?" His answer was, "You must ask both your own conscience and the church . . . Your conscience must judge of your willingness and the church of your ability."³ Serving as a pastor can be a worthy aspiration without becoming a blind ambition.

Why does the Bible bother to say that an overseer does good work? Possibly because the task is so daunting. Calvin comments,

It is no light matter to represent God's Son, in such a great task as erecting and extending God's Kingdom, in caring for the salvation of souls whom the Lord Himself has deigned to purchase with His own blood, and in ruling the Church, which is God's inheritance.⁴

³ William Perkins, *The Art of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), 188-9.

⁴ John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. by T. A. Smail, Calvin's Commentaries (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1964), 222.

Or perhaps the value of elders is stressed because the job is so dangerous. Ministers often become martyrs. In the early church, and many times since, elders have been the first to give their lives for the sake of the gospel. Nevertheless, it is good work, because it has God's blessing in life and God's reward in death.

The Elder's Morals

Oversight is good work not, "if you can get it," but only if you are qualified for it. What are God's minimum requirements? What is the character of a gospel elder?

The first qualification encompasses all the others: *the overseer must be above reproach* (v. 2). Not that any mere man could ever be sinless, of course, but he must be blameless in his outward, observable conduct. He must be free from scandalous sin. David Dickson wrote,

The office and work being spiritual, it is necessary that elders should be spiritual men. It is not necessary that they be men of great gifts or worldly position, of wealth or high education; but it is indispensably necessary that they be *men of God*, at peace with him, new creatures in Christ Jesus.⁵

The integrity of a gospel elder must be beyond question. Once there was an elder who was charged with an offense. It was the duty of his brothers to take the charges seriously and to look into the matter, which they did. But the elder who was accused was a man of such grace and godliness that the charge sounded preposterous from the very beginning. He was a man above reproach.

To be above reproach, an elder must be *the husband of but one wife* (v. 2). This does not rule out bachelor elders. Commonly, elders will be married, but remember that Paul himself was single and commended singleness to others (1 Cor. 7:7; 9:5). Some suggest that the phrase means "married only once." This would disqualify widowers and men who have been through a divorce. If this is what Paul meant, however, one might expect him to be more explicit.

The point of the phrase is probably more general: elders must be sexually accountable. The Greeks and the Romans of the day tolerated gross sexual sin. Polygamy was practiced by both Greeks and Jews.⁶ "There is abundant evidence that marriage was at this time being undermined by frequent divorce, widespread adultery and homosexuality."⁷ The words of Demosthenes show the scope of the problem: "Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children."⁸

How should the church take its stand against sexual immorality? Some of the false teachers in Ephesus went so far as to forbid people to marry (4:3). As if that would help!

God's plan is quite different. He wants the leaders of the church to be living examples of biblical marriage: one man and one woman in a love covenant until death. In the words of Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428), a man who has but one wife is "a man who having contracted a monogamous marriage is faithful to his marriage vows."⁹ Being faithful to marriage vows includes avoiding intimate relationships with other women. Wise pastors and elders do not counsel women alone or in private.

The next several qualifications have to do with an elder's judgment. He must be *temperate, self-controlled, respectable*.

⁵ Dickson, 5.

⁶ George Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 158.

⁷ Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1989), 141.

⁸ Demosthenes, "Against Neaera," *Private Orations*, trans. by A. T. Murray, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), Vol. VI, Oration 59:122 (pp. 445, 447).

⁹ Quoted in Knight, 158-9.

The King James Version translates *temperate* (*nephalion*) as “vigilant.” A temperate man is “free from every form of excess, passion, or rashness.”¹⁰ He is wary, circumspect, even cautious. The word *temperate* describes the way a person walks late at night in the city: not paranoid, necessarily, but alert. This is necessary for the protection of the church. A vigilant elder notices spiritual needs and warns of spiritual dangers.

Next comes *self-control*. The word *sophrona* has to do with decision-making. It means to be sensible. Men who make vital decisions about the ministry of the church must be prudent. They must have balanced judgment. When elders (especially pastors) do not weigh their decisions carefully, the church is vulnerable to all the latest trends in ministry and theology.

Self-control also refers also to the ability to control one’s appetites. The French writer Rabelais (c. 1493-1553) posed a question every elder should ask himself: “How shall I be able to rule over others if I have not full power and command of myself?”¹¹

Then elders are to be *respectable* (*kosmion*). They are to be orderly and well-mannered. Among other things, this applies to their drinking habits. Although he need not be a teetotaler, a respectable elder is *not given to drunkenness*. An alcoholic cannot serve as an overseer because a drunkard is incapable of sober judgment.

The Greek philosophers used the word drunkenness (*paroinon*) to refer to violence, like a drunken rage. What comes next, therefore, is not surprising, especially in the pagan environment of Ephesus: an elder is *not violent but gentle*. Bullies are not eligible for ordination. An elder is not a browbeater. Men who are verbally or physically abusive cannot be trusted to tend God’s sheep.

Instead, elders must be gentle (*pleketen*). Matthew Arnold called this “sweet reasonableness.” E. K. Simpson says it means “gracious, kindly, forbearing, considerate, magnanimous, genial.”¹² Elders must be peaceable, which is the exact opposite of being violent.

The true strength of a man lies in gentleness. Of course, an elder must be firm when he rebukes sin. When overseers lack the courage to confront, the church loses its conviction. But an elder must be gentle. He must live among God’s people like a tender shepherd. He must be sympathetic with the weak and compassionate to the wounded.

Furthermore, an elder must not be *quarrelsome*. Very likely, Paul had the false teachers in mind when he wrote this. They were starting to become belligerent. Their disputes resulted in *envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind* (6:4b-5a).

From time to time, visitors stop by the church or telephone with theological questions. Some of them want to be instructed; others just want to argue. In that case, I suggest that we agree to disagree and then I politely send them on their way. The church is not a debating society.

Few things are more distracting to God’s work than quarrelsome leaders. David Dickson observed the same problem in Edinburgh more than a century ago:

Men of points and pugnacity are very annoying in a session or congregation, and they may rise to the terror of presbyteries and other church courts. They may love the truth at heart -- and we believe they often do -- but they love fighting too. . . A carping, censorious spirit is to be

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 81.

¹¹ François Rabelais, *Works*, trans. by D. M. Frame (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), Ch. 52.

¹² Quoted in Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1957), 81.

watched and prayed against in all of us: it is often the precursor or companion of backsliding in doctrine or life.¹³

An argumentative man is the worst kind of man to have on a Board of Elders. When overseers discuss the ministry of the church, they need to express their opinions because the best decisions emerge from lively discussions. On occasion, it is even appropriate for objections to be raised. But this must never be done with a contentious spirit.

Nor must an elder be *a lover of money*. Avarice, as the sin is called, comes up often in Paul's first letter to Timothy. Most of chapter 6 is taken up with issues of wealth and poverty.

It also comes up often in the history of the church. Since the days of the apostles, some men have tried to use the ministry for financial gain (cf. 6:5). Greed led to the corruption of the medieval church. Closer to our own times, the love of money contributed to the decline of many large churches in American cities. Televangelists are so obsessed with it that Christians have become infamous for asking for money. The day I write this, there is a story in the newspapers about the leaders of a so-called Christian ministry who have vanished with a large sum of cash.

It is a grave mistake to consider wealth a credential for spiritual leadership. Being rich does not disqualify a man from the eldership, but it does not recommend him for it, either. What matters is how he uses his money, especially how much affection he has for it. An overseer must not be a money-lover.

The same vice is mentioned in Hebrews 13, along with the contrasting virtue: *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have* (Heb. 13:5a). The antidote for greed is contentment. People who are greedy are always thinking about what they lack. Those who are content lack nothing. In a way, since they have everything they need, they are as wealthy as if they possessed the entire world. Because elders are content, when it comes to money, they can take it or leave it.

The Duties of an Elder

Most of the qualifications on this list explain who elders *are* rather than what they *do*. This is because "the usefulness of an elder will depend in the long run more on his character than on his *gifts and knowledge*."¹⁴

We have passed over two requirements that show the duties of an elder. The first is that they show hospitality. Overseers are to have open homes as well as open hearts. Literally, they are to show "love for strangers" (*philoxenon*).

Hospitality has always been among the highest Christian virtues. Anyone who welcomes a stranger is like Abraham, who entertained angels (Gen. 18; Heb. 13:2). All Christians are to be good hosts.

In the days of the early church, however, hospitality was necessary for the spread of the gospel. "For in those days there were no hotels comparable to those we are familiar with, and roadside inns were scarce, dirty, unsafe and unsavoury."¹⁵ Naturally, people involved in Christian work needed a good place to stay. This verse "points beyond the normal hospitality [an elder] should display as head of a household to the hospitality he should extend on behalf of the church."¹⁶

¹³ Dickson, 7.

¹⁴ Dickson, 8-9.

¹⁵ John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 95.

¹⁶ Jouette M. Bassler, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 67.

Hospitality remains useful for Christian work to this day. As they have opportunity, elders should entertain missionaries. The underlying principle is that elders must make a personal commitment to the world-wide work of the gospel.

There are other important reasons for contemporary Christians to practice hospitality. One is for evangelism. The dinner table is one of the best places to talk about spiritual things with non-Christian friends.

Hospitality is also necessary for the well-being of God's family. One of the great evils of this postmodern culture is the fragmentation of the family. As Christians, we need to find our primary identity as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Rodney Clapp makes a persuasive case for this attitude in his book *Families at the Crossroads*. "With the coming of the kingdom," Clapp writes, "Jesus creates a new family. It is the new first family, a family of his followers that now demands primary allegiance."¹⁷

One of the best places to establish family ties is around the dinner table. On one occasion I invited a Christian brother to join our family for Christmas dinner. He was cautious because he did not want to intrude on any "family time." That was thoughtful; families do need to spend time together. But if we are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, then any time we are together is "family time." Elders, especially, need to make sure we spend quality time together as a family.

This brings us to the qualification which lies at the heart of an overseer's work. He must be *able to teach*; literally, he must be "didactic" (*didaktikon*). He must be "qualified by education and moral power to impart the sound Christian teaching in opposition to the many false teachers."¹⁸ An elder must have wisdom, says Calvin, "in knowing how to apply God's word to the profit of the people."¹⁹

Presbyterian churches follow 1 Timothy 5:17 in making a distinction between teaching and ruling elders: *The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching*. All the elders direct the affairs of the church; some concentrate on teaching and preaching.

The principal work of the minister is to teach the Word of God. A minister may do many other things as well. He may administer. He may lead worship. He may disciple. He may counsel. He may set the vision for the church. But first and foremost, the minister is a Bible teacher.

Ministers are not the only ones who must be able to teach, however. This qualification is for ruling elders as well. Their teaching takes place in a variety of contexts. They teach Sunday School classes and home Bible studies. They teach whenever they disciple, evangelize or make pastoral visits. For all these duties, ruling elders must be able to teach.

The Elder's Family

A man does not become an overseer overnight. Eldership is one of those jobs that requires prior experience. The place for an elder to get experience is at home. *He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect* (v. 4). The family life of an elder must be exemplary.

The word for managing (*proistamenon*) has two meanings. One is to supervise or *direct the affairs*, as it is later translated (5:17). The other meaning is to nurture or to be concerned. Fatherhood brings both aspects together. The father is the leader. He governs the household. The way he does so is by caring for the needs of each family member. This is exactly what elders do. They exercise their spiritual authority both by governing and by caring.

¹⁷ Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 76-7.

¹⁸ William M. Ramsay, *Historical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ed. by Mark Wilson (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1996), 71.

¹⁹ Calvin, 79.

What does it mean for the overseer to *see that his children obey him*? It almost sounds as if the man is supposed to rule his family by force. But of course obedience can never be coerced because it is a matter of the heart. All the verse actually says is “having children in obedience.”

How do children become obedient? Paul gives a hint: *with proper respect*. Respect means dignity or reverence. It may refer to the way the children treat their father. Parents have the right to demand respect from their children. But it also describes the way the father relates to his children. He treats them like human beings. Therefore, their relationship is one of mutual respect.

The way to grow obedient children is not to control or manipulate them, but to respect them. This means being fair, consistent, sympathetic and merciful. A father who treats his children respectfully will earn their respect.

To turn this around, a man whose children respect him must be a good father, which is exactly what the church is looking for. A man who cares for his own children well is ready to care for all God’s children. He already knows how to instruct, nurture, discipline and deal patiently with rebellion.

The Puritans loved to say that the family is a little church. This was especially true in the days of the first Christians, when most congregations met in people’s homes. But it always will be true. The *Book of Common Prayer* poses this question to ordinands: “Will you be diligent to frame and fashion your own selves, and your families, according to the doctrine of Christ, and to make both yourselves and them, as much as in you lieth, wholesome examples and patterns to the flock of Christ?”²⁰

The importance of an elder’s family life is obvious. *If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?* (v. 5). The question is rhetorical. Obviously, a man has to have his in own house in order before he can keep God’s house in order. Sadly, most Christians know teaching and ruling elders who do not know how to manage their families. But many other fathers do know how, and they make the best elders and pastors.

The word *take care of* (*epimeleomai*) is rich in its practical implications. It appears one other time in the New Testament. Jesus used it when he told how a man on his way to Jericho was mugged and left for dead.

*“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and **took care of him**” (Luke 10:33-34).*

The Samaritan is a beautiful example for fathers and elders. Taking care of people always demands sacrifice. It includes pity, healing and embrace. Doubtless the Samaritan had his own busy schedule with a long list of things he needed to get done. But good neighbors—like good fathers and good elders—are willing to be inconvenienced by other people’s problems.

The Elder’s Experience

The last two qualifications are not just for the good of the church, but also for the good of the elder himself. *He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil* (v. 6). This qualification has to do with spiritual maturity. Paul calls a newly baptized Christian a *neophyte*, which means literally “new growth,” or “newly planted.”

One summer the groundskeepers at Wheaton College made a terrible mistake. After leveling the soccer field, they sowed new grass seed improperly and it all washed away. By the end of August the soccer pitch was still a dirt patch. New seed was planted and sprang up immediately. All through the autumn

²⁰ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Protestant Episcopal Church, 1945), 542-3.

the grass grew lush and green. It looked beautiful, but it was not ready to be played on. If it had been used in a soccer match, giant chunks of turf would have come up with every kick. The grass needed to weather the storms of winter.

In the same way, a new Christian is not ready to oversee the church. He has not yet endured the winter of spiritual difficulty. The eldership is no place for beginners. As Paul will later say, *do not be hasty in the laying on of hands* (5:22). It is much better to be short an elder or two than to have a novice on the Session.

In examining a man for eldership, a church should count his spiritual age, not his biological age. While I was still in my twenties, I was interviewed for a position as a senior pastor. The question of my tender years naturally came up. However, a young woman from the church rightly pointed out that since I had known the Lord from childhood, I had been a Christian for decades. I was not a recent convert.

When Dallas Cowboys' star Deion Sanders became a professing Christian in 1997, he wanted to get up and start preaching right away. But first he vowed to take a month to study the Bible, "or however long it takes." Mr. Sanders underestimated how difficult it is to master the Bible, but he had the right instinct. Although a new convert is full of zeal, he is not ready to be a pastor.

The word for conceit (*tuphotheis*) is actually a word for being filled with smoke. It is sometimes taken to mean "puffed up." New converts grow so fast in the Christian life that they are tempted to look down on others. Yet pride is the most dangerous of character traits in a minister, who must be the servant of all.

There is another way to understand the reference to smoke, however. The danger may be that a new convert will become clouded in his judgment.²¹ The smoke of false doctrine can be blinding. Very likely, one of the problems with the false teachers in Ephesus was that they were new believers. A church governed by neophytes will probably end up in a theological fog.

The Elder's Reputation

The last thing requirement for an elder is that *he must also have a good reputation with outsiders* (v. 7). This is a reminder that the church is in the world. In the ordination of overseers, some consideration must be given to the non-Christian public. This may explain why so many of the overseer's qualifications represent the highest virtues of pagan culture. An elder must have excellent references outside as well as inside the church.

People's impressions of who Christ is are partly based on who his ministers are. Ministers have a public role in the community. Unless their lives speak for themselves, no one will ever listen to what they have to say. If people do not think highly of a church's leaders, they will not think highly of the church. The church has enough critics and detractors already without putting scandalous men into the pastorate.

Chrysostom, the great preacher of Constantinople, makes an excellent observation about this verse. He points out that although Paul and the Apostles were often persecuted, they were never brought up on morals-charges. Quite the opposite.

They were slandered as deceivers and impostors, on account of their preaching, and this because they could not attack their moral characters and lives. For why did not one say of the Apostles,

²¹ Bassler, 68.

that they were fornicators, unclean, or covetous persons, but that they were deceivers, which relates to their preaching only? Must it not be that their lives were irreproachable?²²

The way the apostles lived made the message—not the messenger—the issue.

This is an example for every believer. How easy it would be to win the world for Christ if every believer behaved like a Christian. As it is, we find ourselves having to defend the followers of the gospel as often as we defend the gospel itself.

Beware the Devil

These qualifications end on an ominous note. Paul twice refers to God's archenemy, Satan. If new converts are rushed into office, they may *fall under the same judgment as the devil* (v. 6). Or an elder with a bad reputation *will fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap* (v. 7).

When the church makes a poor choice of elders, there is always the danger of them falling into devilish behavior. Like Satan, an elder may become proud. Then, like Satan, he would be subject to God's curse on the arrogant and rebellious. Or an elder may fall into a trap set by Satan. Like an unwary bird, he may wander into the fowler's snare.

We are led to an obvious conclusion: Satan is out to get the elders of the church. This is basic military strategy. Truly, it is oldest trick in the book. Satan has been using it since the days of Adam. The best way to defeat an army is to attack its command and control. What better way to frustrate God's plans for the church of Jesus Christ than to overthrow the elders he has appointed to lead it?

Consider how effective Satan has been in recent years at damaging the office of elder. First, many ministers have fallen into grievous sin. When a minister is disgraced, his ministry is disgraced. Indeed, the entire church of Jesus Christ is brought into disrepute whenever a minister commits a scandalous sin.

Second, the eldership has become a battleground for gender rights. The effect of this—besides bringing division—has been to distract the church from the ministry of the Word.

Third, many Christians feel they have the right to complain about their elders. Too often, Christians grumble that their elders ought to be doing this or are not doing that. If a teaching or ruling elder is guilty of sin, he is to be disciplined according to the instructions Paul gives in chapter 5. If his ministry can be improved, then pray for him, or, better yet, volunteer to help him with some duty. Complaining about spiritual leaders is what Satan wants people to do. Be careful not to do it!

These mentions of the devil are a reminder to overseers to be on their guard. Watch out for temptation. Live above reproach. Use good judgment. Practice hospitality. Defend sound doctrine. Be peaceable. Take care of your family. *Resist the devil, and he will flee from you* (Jas. 4:7b).

This is also a reminder to every Christian to pray urgently for the elders of the church. They are subject to the most intense spiritual warfare of all.

I will never forget the way one mature Christian described how he prays for me. He said, "I want you to know I pray for you every day. I feel as if I must do this so that the chain will remain unbroken. I don't have the same sense of urgency with anyone else, but I feel as if we have to gather around you in prayer to protect you from Satan's attacks."

Those are the words of a man who understands what the devil is up to, and what the elders of the church are up against. Pray accordingly.

²² John Chrysostom, "Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon," trans. and ed. by Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, 14 vols (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 13: 439.