

Caring for God's People

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Date: 17 October 2021

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, Kate, and good morning, everyone. Really good to have you with us, whether you're in the church here or watching us online. Do you know how many churches there are in Edinburgh?

Nor do I. But I thought I'd estimated, and being a numbers geek, I worked out a way I thought I could do it. So I went on to the Oscar the Charities website. I looked for charities based in Edinburgh that have promotion of religion as one of their objectives, and I counted the ones that looked as if they were churches.

There were lots of Christian organisations and so on that clearly aren't churches. I counted those I thought looked like churches. And I got to just over 200. Now I think that's probably a significant underestimate of the number of churches in Edinburgh for various reasons.

But let's say 200 is roughly the number. The question then is, why are you in this church or watching this church this morning, rather than one of the other 200?

And there might be lots of reasons for that. Perhaps you're just visiting. Perhaps you're visiting family or friends, and because it's their church, you come along with them. Perhaps you live very locally in Bruntsford.

[1 : 09] You think, this is my local church. I should go along and be part of it. Perhaps, like me, you've been a member of this church almost all your life. It's where you've been brought up, and you're very rooted in it.

Perhaps you enjoy the worship, or you appreciate the teaching, or you really appreciate the fellowship and the welcome that you get in the church here.

Lots of possible reasons. For some people, and I suspect a relatively small minority, one of the reasons, I'm sure not the most important reason, but one of the reasons why you might come to this church is because of the way it's structured, because of the leadership, because of the organization, and the way the church works.

Now, I suspect some people are thinking that's a really esoteric thing to think of as a reason for coming to church, but actually it does have some importance, because how the church is organized, how it's led, affects the decisions that are made, and also affects the relationships we have with one another, which really is very, very important.

So I thought to begin with this morning, it is relevant to what we're going to be talking about, although a slight digression, it might be worth very quickly looking at how churches are organized.

[2 : 30] And there are three main ways we could divide it. Now, you see the names down the left-hand column. Try not to think denominations in this. This is more how churches work together.

So Episcopalian churches are led by the clergy. So you might have someone who's called a priest, or a vicar, or a minister, or someone like that, who's responsible for the local church, and they report to senior clergy who might be bishops, archbishops, and so on.

Or in some churches, it might just be you have pastors over individual churches, and you have a senior pastor who sits above the pastors of churches. So that's how Episcopalian churches work. It is the individuals who are important in the leadership. Presbyterian churches, the second kind, are led by elders.

So the decisions in the church are made by elders. The care of the church is the responsibility not just of one person, though there may well be a minister or pastor, but it is the responsibility of a group of elders.

[3 : 38] How many Presbyterian churches are grouped together? And if you take the Church of Scotland as an example, you have presbyteries in local areas, and then you have the General Assembly.

And all of these have representatives of the elders of churches, often but not always the ministers, but representatives of churches. So these churches are elder-led, and they work together in making big decisions for their denomination.

And then the final kind of church I've called congregational. It's called congregational because big decisions are made by the congregation. They're in a sense they're quite democratic in the way they work.

So they might quite regularly have votes of the membership on important issues, for instance. Probably also a pastor, minister, maybe even some elders and deacons. But the congregation ultimately makes the decision.

Many congregational churches are independent. They don't belong to a denomination. They are only answerable to their own members, and of course, to the Lord Jesus.

[4 : 43] So maybe at this point you're asking, what is this church? And the answer is internally we are Presbyterian with a small p. And from an external point, if we come under a congregational section in my table, we don't have firm links with other churches, although there are other churches that we very much enjoy fellowship with.

And you find lost churches are a bit like that. They're a bit of a hybrid. But I hope you can see that there are differences in the ways that churches are organized. And you might then be asking, well, which of these is biblical?

Surely there's a biblical way to do church. Which of these is it? And the answer, I think, is all of them. You could, for each of these different groupings of churches, you could go to the Bible and you could find examples of churches being organized in that kind of way.

Examples of individual leaders, examples of groups of elders, examples of where the congregation made decisions. You see, the Bible isn't just, or the New Testament doesn't just have a handbook that says, here is how you organize church.

And very much we have to look at what's there and to deduce things from quite often what churches did, perhaps in the book of Acts, but also more particularly from what Paul and others write about as they write to churches.

[6 : 08] Now, don't get me wrong. I am very much wedded to the style of church that we have here, churches that are led by elders and that are answerable only to the Lord for the decisions that are made.

But we need to recognize that is not the thing that really matters. The thing that really matters in church, according to New Testament, is not the way in which you organize yourselves.

It is the quality of the leadership and the members of the church. Church is a people business. We are here to support and encourage one another in the Lord Jesus, and it is the people who really matter.

And there are big problems that can arise if you get people in leadership positions in churches who aren't consistent with the teaching of the Bible.

So you have a Christian apologist, a well-known evangelical apologist, who after his death is found to have sexually abused a large number of women. You also have a leader, a very high-up leader in one of the churches, who is found to have taken money that was donated by the congregation, invested it dodgily, and then fraudulently tried to hide what had happened.

[7 : 27] And I could give you lots more examples of that, of people in leadership positions of churches who really shouldn't have been there, who weren't living the lives that they should.

I read recently a description of Billy Graham, and Billy Graham was described in this as a 20th century icon of accountability. I like that, a 20th century icon of accountability.

In other words, Billy Graham went to great lengths, some might say extreme lengths, to make sure there could never be any whiff of scandal around him on sexual or monetary things.

Because think, if Billy Graham had got involved in some kind of scandal, what tremendous damage that would have done to the church and to evangelical Christianity. And in a smaller way, we need to make sure that those who are in leadership positions in the church are those who are living lives that are consistent with what the church teaches.

Let's not think that these things only happen to people in high-up positions elsewhere. They could easily happen in our church if we're not careful. And please do pray for the leaders of the church and for our walk with the Lord Jesus.

[8 : 46] So we come now to 1 Timothy 3, and in this section we're looking at this morning, Paul is saying to us, here is how church leaders should be. Not how they should organize themselves, not

how the church should function, but here is the kind of people we should have in leadership in our churches.

Now, in case you think you can switch off at this point, or you can think about all the faults with the leaders of the church, let me just say here that I think the vast majority of things that Paul talks about here are things that should be characteristics of every Christian.

So he's not, although he's specifically talking about leaders here, I think we should all be challenged as we go through and as we think about what Paul is saying. But let's just do a quick overview of the groups that Paul talks about, and then we'll go into a little bit more detail into the qualities that he thinks they should display in their lives.

So there are three groups of people that Paul addresses here. The first is he talks about an overseer. Overseer just means what it sounds like.

It is someone who sees, who oversees, who observes things, and who acts on them. In the church context, it is someone who is taking care of the members of the church, who is aware of things that are going on in their lives, the kind of problems they might be facing, and who is there to help and to encourage them.

[10:16] So it's not just seeing, it's seeing and acting on it, and that applies as well in decisions that are made about the church. There are two other words in the New Testament that are used almost interchangeably with overseeing.

You'll get passages where two or more of these words are used. The second one is elder. In the parallel passage in Titus, Paul talks about elders. And the third one is pastor, or sometimes shepherd.

And these three descriptions between them refer to the people who have been entrusted with the overall leadership of the church. Those who, under the Lord Jesus, are seeking to care for, to pastor, to shepherd, to lead God's people, and to help them to grow in their faith.

So that's the overseers. Second group of people is called deacons. And Paul says in the same way, deacons. Deacons can be best described as those who serve in the church.

That's what the word means. A deacon is someone who serves, or someone who helps, perhaps, in the leadership of the church. Now, it looks in the New Testament as though some churches definitely did have deacons, and some may not have formerly had deacons.

[11:36] So the church in Philippi, which Paul writes to, he writes to the Christians, to the overseers, and to the deacons. But in none of his other letters to churches does he do that.

In Timothy, he talks about overseers and deacons. In Titus, where Titus is in Crete, he talks just about the elders, the overseers. So there may or may not in many churches be those who are formerly recognized as deacons.

But there certainly are people who are doing that role and who are recognized as those who are involved in leadership within the church, but not the kind of overall leadership, overall responsibility. And we have lots of people in this church. We don't formally have deacons in this church. We have lots of people doing that. We tend to call them things like ministry leaders. Then there's a third group, and the third group, in some ways, is the most difficult one to define.

The version of the NIV that we're using now, the edition of the NIV, calls them the woman. That is a very literal translation of what the Greek said. It could also be translated the wives, because the word for woman and wife are the same in Greek.

[12:46] Now, there are two possibilities, two main possibilities of who Paul is writing about here. He might be writing about the wives of deacons and saying here are the requirements of deacons and their wives.

There's also a requirement for them. Now, that makes some sense because it comes in the middle of a passage about deacons. He talks about deacons, then he talks about the woman, then he talks about deacons again. And perhaps we could say that the instructions that are given, the qualities that are required, are appropriate for those who might be the wives of leaders in the church.

So we're talking particularly about how they talk, malicious talkers. And those who are the wives of leaderships in the church and are supporting them in the work they do will know lots of things that perhaps other members of the congregation don't and shouldn't necessarily know.

And they might be tempted to gossip unhelpfully about it. So that would make some sense. There are some difficulties with that view though. And one of these is that Paul seems to have in mind here a different group.

He talks about the overseer. He then talks about the deacons. And then he says, in the same way, the woman. If he was talking about the wives of deacons, why didn't he previously talk about the wives of overseers who have at least as important a role in the church as the wives of deacons? [14:08] He also talks about the woman or the wives. If he was talking about the wives of the deacons, why doesn't he say their wives? And that would leave everything absolutely clear.

So my judgment, and others may disagree, and commentators and Bibles disagree on this, my judgment is that most likely here, Paul is talking about women serving in the church, not specifically the wives of deacons.

In a sense, it doesn't matter. Whether we're married to someone who is one of the leaders in the church, or whether we're serving in the church in our own way, it is very important that we display the kind of qualities that Paul talks about in this passage.

So three groups, overseers, deacons, and I'm going to, as we talk about them, I'm going to put deacons and women and talk about them together. Let's then get into the passage and think about what Paul says.

Now it looks as if there's just a really long list of things, but it doesn't in some ways look very structured the way that Paul writes it. And I'm sure there is a very good reason why he uses the order he does, but the way my mind works, it worked quite well to try and categorize into different areas of a person's life what Paul was saying should be the characteristics.

[15:32] And there's one or two could fit in under more than one heading, but let's not worry too much about that. So we're looking first at the overseers, the elders. And the overriding thing that Paul says here is that they are to be beyond reproach.

They are to be above reproach. And that has an impact on many different areas of their lives. So Paul says those who are in positions of authority in the church, and it applies to those who are just members as well, but specifically in this context, those who are in positions of authority in the church, they need to be temperate.

Now temperate here means kind of even-headed, level-headed, clear-headed, that kind of thing. It's someone who is not prone to going hither and thither and changing their mind all the time, but it's someone who has a good mindset and is able to follow that through in their actions.

They're to be self-controlled. So there's to be someone who is aware of the temptations that we all face in life, the difficulties we face, and has got them under control and through the power of the Holy Spirit is seeking to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord Jesus and avoid the temptations we all face.

They're to be not given to drunkenness. That speaks for itself. Paul's not saying we have to be teetotal, but he is saying it's important that Christians don't regularly get drunk and out of control in their lives.

[17:02] Not a lover of money. Church leaders very often have access to money or are involved in the distribution of money in the things of the church, and they need not to be greedy and not to be looking for gain for themselves.

An awful lot of Christian leaders have fallen because they've tried to get more and more for themselves at the expense of others. And then finally, Paul said, and let's just take a second more to talk about this, it needs to be not a recent convert.

Verse 6, he must not be a recent convert or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. Being a church leader, an overseer, an elder might seem to be quite an attractive position to many people.

It might be one that you would aspire to and say, I want to become an elder quickly. I want to become a leader in the church. If that's your attitude, you're probably unsuitable to be an elder. Because Paul talks at the beginning of what he says about elders, about overseers, that if someone desires to be an overseer, they desire a noble task.

[18:20] Not a noble office, a noble task. And the duty of the overseer, the elder, is not to rule over the congregation and to feel that they're superior to everyone else.

Rather, the overseer is there to care for others and to help them to grow in the Lord Jesus. And if an overseer does the job well, it's hard work.

It's stressful. It involves a lot of sacrifice, including for their wives and families. And yes, it brings respect in the church. It means you've got influence and it can be very fulfilling.

But the reason why we would wish to serve as overseers in the church is so that God's people may be built up and that they may come to know the Lord Jesus better.

Anyone who wants to be an overseer simply for the status it brings is doing it for absolutely the wrong reason. And as a bit of an aside here, let me also say, don't think that the elders of the church are a lot more spiritual than everyone else.

[19 : 31] We're not. I can think of lots of people in the church who I'm absolutely sure are more spiritual than I am. But for various reasons, aren't elders. Elders are there to serve and to be available to the Lord Jesus to help his people to grow.

And Paul says here, coming back to the text, if an elder is a recent convert, there is a danger. They become a bit big headed and they think I'm better than others because I've become an elder and I've only been a Christian for five years or whatever.

So I think that is what's behind what Paul says in that verse. Okay, let's move on. And we've got another difficult group to look at, the elder at home.

So in this edition of the NIV, Paul says that the elder has to be faithful to his wife. And that seems obvious and is certainly absolutely right.

Whether it's wholly what the Bible means or what Paul means when he wrote it, we could have some discussion of it, I think is the principal meaning. But what Paul actually wrote is that the elder has to be the husband of one wife or possibly the man of one woman.

[20 : 43] And that raises issues of, can you be an elder if you're not married? Can you be an elder if you've been married and you've been widowed? And a number of others like that. I don't think that is what Paul is addressing here.

And I certainly wouldn't have any problem with a non-eyed person or someone who'd been widowed and married again, being an elder of the church. I think Paul is talking about someone who is faithful in their marriage, who people can look at and they say in their marriage relationship, they model what a Christian should be like.

And it's so important, not just for elders, I've said for everybody, that we have strong married relationships, that we're faithful to those we are married to, that we show them real love and care and we don't get tempted away from our marriage.

Elders have to be faithful to their wives. And then Paul says, elders have to manage their families well. This is another one which people have some difficulty with.

Read the full verse, verse four, he must manage his family well and see that his children obey him and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect.

[22 : 03] If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church? I think we get the analogy, that's fairly straightforward. Paul is saying, if you've got an elder and their home is chaotic and they're not really looking after the family the way they should, how can they then be entrusted with the care of the church?

But it does create an issue if you've got an elder and their children have chosen not to follow them in their faith. Does that then disqualify them from being an elder?

I think no. We, all of us, have no, ultimately, no power to make our children become believers in the Lord Jesus.

That is the work of the Holy Spirit. And all of us who are parents, we should be praying for our children, we should be encouraging them and teaching them and training them in the right way and introducing them to the Lord Jesus.

Ultimately, they have to make their decisions as the Spirit leads them to follow and trust the Lord Jesus. So I think if an elder's family life is clearly chaotic and they're not bringing up their children well, that is an indication that they shouldn't be in leadership in the church.

[23 : 24] But the fact that children have chosen not to follow the Lord Jesus, particularly adult children, doesn't, I think, disqualify them. I think we've finished all the controversial bits of the passage, so hopefully downhill from now on.

What about the elder in the church? And the three here that I highly think are being relevant to the church. The elder has to be hospitable, says Paul. Hospitable literally means a lover of strangers. And this is something that was particularly relevant in the early church. A lot of Christians might travel around and to stay in inns or whatever the equivalent of hotels were in those days what was dangerous and could create all sorts of issues.

So it was important if I'm a Christian and I'm visiting another town, particularly if I'm visiting in Christian service, that those who are in the church there are hospitable and receive me and welcome me and provide accommodation.

Directly, that is probably not quite so relevant today. Most people, if you go to visit another town, you either go and visit a friend or you find somewhere to stay, a hotel or a guest house.

[24 : 32] But it's still relevant that we need to be hospitable in our dealings with one another. We need to be welcoming those in the church and those coming to the church and showing them the love and the care of the Lord Jesus.

To that extent, an elder still needs to be someone who is hospitable, has people in their home and shows real concern for others. Able to teach.

This is the one thing that is clear as a difference between elders and deacons in the passage.

Elders have to be able to teach. Deacons have to have a grasp of the truth but not necessarily able to teach others.

So to be an elder, one of the requirements is that you can teach others the Christian faith. Now that doesn't mean teaching from front. It includes it, obviously, but it doesn't just mean preaching, teaching from the front.

We've had and we have elders who don't regularly preach from the front but have a very strong ministry in teaching others. For some, it is through one-to-one meetings and talking with people and building them up in their faith.

[25 : 45] Or it can be in a small group, in the home groups that we have, being able to teach them and encourage the group in their faith in a way that people might not feel so comfortable doing from the front.

Some of us are better speaking from the front and not so good at other things. But one way or another, elders must be those who understand God's word, who are applying it in their own lives, and who are able to pass it on to others.

And then the final thing that's related to elders, I think, in the church is that they're not to be quarrelsome. They're not to be troublemakers, always objecting to things as they come up and picking verbal fights with others.

And it's clear that someone in that kind of position could cause quite big problems in church leadership. And then finally, for elders in the world, we're to be respectable.

Respectable, in a sense, is the outward form of self-control. We've got to be people who present ourselves well and to give a good testimony for the Lord Jesus.

[26 : 50] Not violent, but gentle, that's obvious. And a good reputation is very important that those outside the church can see that we love the Lord Jesus, that we are serving him, and our lives are consistent with what we believe.

There's a huge number of things there. I look at them and I think, well, some of these I'm reasonably comfortable about. Some of them I think I'm particularly weak on. But as I said, these are the things that elders should display.

And as I said, really most church, all church members should be seeking most of these. Very quickly, maybe we're going to talk about something else to finish. Deacons, the helpers, the people who serve in the church.

A similar kind of list to elders with one or two differences. So I'll just, the ones that are similar, I put in italics, we won't talk about them again. The other ones, deaconists should be sincere.

They've got to be genuine in their faith and desire to serve the Lord Jesus. They've got to hold the deep truth and not necessarily be good teachers, but certainly understand God's word and believe it and be firm in wanting to hold to it.

[28 : 00] They need, if we move to the church and the world section, need to be tested. So you don't just have someone who comes in the door of the church and says, I want to serve, I want to lead a small group, something like that. You can't just put someone into that straight away.

They need to be tested. Particularly with the woman, it was not malicious talkers, which we talked about a little bit earlier, and they need to be trustworthy. So again, a challenging list of things which those who are in positions of serving in the church, those particularly who are recognized as leading activities in the church, should match up to and should be tested against.

But really, as we look at it, it's very easy to go down the list and to treat it as a checklist. And that's probably, in some ways, it's something we need to do, in other ways, it's not the most helpful way to

look at it.

The real issue is do I, do you, love the Lord Jesus and love the Lord's people? And if we do, then these things, to some extent, will come along with it.

As we develop the character of the Lord Jesus, so we will develop the fruits of the Spirit and the kind of qualities that are talked about here.

[29 : 20] So I don't think we should be spending all our time going through these lists. We should be aware of them. But the real question is for all of us, do I love the Lord? Am I walking closely with the Lord?

And is that evident to others? Because what we can see here is what is visible to others to some extent or another.

But to finish with, I want to talk about our example. And this, as in everything, our example is the Lord Jesus. So let me just put up two verses from the Gospels, or one from the Gospel, one from 1 Peter.

Peter says, you were like sheep going astray. That's a quotation in the book of Isaiah. But now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

So those of us who are overseers, who are elders, pastors, shepherds, call it what you will, our job is to follow the example of the Lord Jesus.

[30 : 20] He is the ultimate overseer. And I think a very significant little phrase, overseer of your souls. As overseers in the church, we can see what is visible.

We can see how people act and behave to an extent that we know them well enough. But we only see what's on the outside. And we do have a concern and a responsibility for the souls of the members of the church in that we need to get alongside them and find out where their issues are and try to help them.

But the Lord Jesus is the one who can see the inside. The one who knows everything about us. And ultimately, he is the one that we need to look for, for guidance and for strength.

Not humans, not fallible humans as we all are. But to recognize the Lord Jesus is the one who is the overseer of our souls. And then the quotation from Mark's Gospel, there's a similar verse in Matthew.

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Elsewhere, the Lord Jesus says that he comes among us as one who serves.

[31 : 36] The word really is he comes to us as a deacon. That is the same word that's used here. And so in our service, if we are serving the Lord Jesus, our example that we should be following and seeking to imitate is the Lord Jesus.

Jesus. And to recognize that the extent that we serve in the church or elsewhere is only a tiny fraction of the way in which he served perfectly.

He served in his life, but particularly served as he gave his death, as he died and gave his life for our salvation. And as in everything, we don't look at ourselves or we don't even look at those round about us, although they can be very good examples that we can learn from.

But we look to the Lord Jesus and say, here is the one who is the perfect overseer, who is the perfect deacon, the one who served, and we should look to him and to imitate him in our lives.

And of course, we need to make sure before we can do that, that we have a living relationship with him, that we know him as the saviour, as the shepherd who died for the sheep, who gave his life for us so that we could be forgiven for our sins.

[32 : 53] So there's 1 Timothy 3. I'm sorry, quite a technical message this morning. That's the nature of the passage. But if you take nothing else away, take away these two verses. The example of the Lord Jesus as the one who cares for us, as the one who serves us, and as the one who gave his life for us.

Let's join together in prayer. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the Lord Jesus, for the way in which he, as in everything, gives us the perfect example. We pray that those of us who are in positions of leadership in the church, whether it's as overseers, as elders, whether it's in kind of roles that deacons would have in serving the church, that we may, as far as we can, live up to the standards that Paul sets for us, that we may seek to live lives that are transparent and that are pleasing to the Lord Jesus.

But help us particularly to have a love for the Lord and a love for his people, that the church may be built up as we care for one another, as we serve together. We pray that all of us may know the Lord

as Saviour and may seek to follow him as the one who is the perfect leader and the one who knows every aspect of our lives.
We give you thanks for our time together. We commit ourselves to you now in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.