

The Model Church by G.C. Brewer

CHAPTER II.

The Qualifications of an Elder.

It was shown in the preceding chapter that there were elders in every congregation in the apostolic times, and that it is essential in any well ordered congregation to-day that elders be appointed and duly recognized. Since, then, no congregation is like the New Testament pattern and cannot do the work of the Lord without being thus organized, it is necessary that all Christians be well instructed on all questions pertaining to the organization. What are the qualifications of an elder? How is an elder made? What are the duties of a congregation to her elders. All of these questions are exceedingly important, because if we do not know the teaching of the Lord on these points we can never be what the Lord wants us to be or do what the Lord wants us to do. Again, these questions are important because of a woeful lack of information on these points among church members.

The reader is not unaware, perhaps, that there is some controversy on these questions. But, as in some other cases, the controversy, instead of clearing up the matter, has to some extent complicated it and obscured some plain truths. Brethren have talked and argued so much about how things ought to be done and criticized each other to such an extent that there are some good Christians who, not wishing to take sides in a controversy, have given the question no consideration whatever. They have regarded it as something to be let alone. This has been the attitude of many young preachers. They have shunned the question for fear they would start a controversy or cause factions among some of the churches. But these are scriptural questions, and they vitally concern us; and we cannot, therefore, afford to be ignorant of them. No teacher of God's word is faithful to his trust if he shuns to declare all that God teaches on these and all other questions. Sometimes we hesitate to present what the New Testament teaches relative to the elders and their duties and qualifications because we find our practices clearly out of harmony with it in many instances. This, however, is unworthy of any honest, God-fearing seeker after truth. When the scriptural qualifications of an elder are presented, if any brother who is recognized as an elder finds himself deficient in any of them, let him begin at once to develop the needed grace or condition. If for any reason he finds that it will be impossible for him soon to measure up to the divine standard, let him refuse to be recognized as holding this responsible position among Christians. If he is too sensitive to have his deficiencies pointed out, or if, seeing them, he refuses to get out of the way, *that alone* is certain and sufficient evidence that he is not fit for the place and should be told by the congregation to retire. He should not be allowed to blockade the Lord's work. This painful experience will never be necessary if the Scriptures are followed in selecting and appointing elders. Let every Christian, therefore, learn what the New Testament teaches. Let him forget that there was ever a disputed point in this whole

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subject, and let him study just as if what the Lord says had just recently been spoken to him by the Lord and had never been heard or read by a human being before.

Since some (both) of the qualifications and of the duties of the elders are seen in the words that designate them, it is probably as appropriate to give those words with definitions here as in the chapter on duties. No one can be well informed on the important questions we are studying unless he makes a careful study of these words. For instance, it is sometimes said that an elder is not an officer in the church, and that the place he holds is not to be considered an office. But it will be seen that the word *presbuteros*, which is universally translated "elder," had that signification both among the Hebrews and the Greeks. Elders were common among the Jews. Every synagogue had its bench of elders. They gave counsel and advice, decided questions, and presided over the people. That they were looked upon as holding an office, and not simply as old or elderly men, may be seen from the following: "And Jehovah said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them." (Num. 11:16.) The Hebrew word for "elders" in this passage is *zawkane*, and in the Septuagint the word is *presbuteroi*, which is always "elders" in the English text. An other passage which shows that the word designates an officer is Luke 22:66. It reads: "And as soon as it was day, the assembly of the elders of the people was gathered together, both chief priests and scribes; and they led him away into their council." Here Luke seems to use the word to embrace the whole Jewish court, council, or Sanhedrin. It is true that the expression, "office of a bishop," in 1 Tim. 3:1 is from a single Greek word; and some have contended, therefore, that the word "office" should be eliminated. But the man who objects to the expression as conveying the wrong meaning would have difficulty in translating the sentence so as to omit the objectionable idea. And it devolves upon him to do that very thing. If he objects to the rendering of our standard translations, he is under obligation to give us a better rendering. But can he do it? He might easily omit the word "office," but he cannot properly translate the sentence without retaining the same idea. The Greek word is *episcopos*, the noun in the genitive case, showing that it is something belonging to the bishop, something of the bishop; hence, most naturally, "*office of a bishop*." The noun must be so translated as to show its genitive or possessive nature and at the same time to supply an object for the verb. "If man *desire* the ----- of a bishop, he desireth a good work." Let the reader supply the word--fill in the blank. This noun occurs only four times in the New Testament. It is twice translated "visitation" (Luke 19:44; 1 Pet. 2:12), and once "bishopric" (Acts 1:20, A. V.) or "*office*" (R. V.), and once "office of a bishop" (1 Tim. 3:1). It is plain that it could not be translated "visitation" in the passage in Timothy. It could be translated "bishopric" or "overship," but that would not change the idea or better express the meaning. The eldership is an office, and there is too much evidence to prove it for any one to deny it if he will consider evidence. *Presbuteros* itself is a term

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of rank or office. However unscriptural the hierarchies of present day religious denominations may be, they certainly are unscriptural and even antiscritptural; and however much we may emphasize the blessed doctrine of humility and equality among Christians, it is, nevertheless, a fact that we must not deny that the New Testament churches had men in them holding the office of a bishop--the bishopric or overseership--into which they were inducted by some form of appointment or ordination. And that there was some honor to being thus recognized is shown by the expression, "if a man desire the office of a bishop." This implies that it was something to be aspired to and desired. Again, the precaution against appointing a novice, lest he become inflated with the honor, further illustrates the same point. If we can give people the proper conception of this noble, and honorable work, there will be men to-day who will "desire the office of a bishop," and they will prepare themselves for it.

It should be observed that there are several different words in the New Testament that designate an elder. The words are not synonymous, but they very evidently refer to the same person, each one representing some particular phase of his office, work, or duty. These words in English are "bishop," elder," "presbyter," "pastor" or "shepherd," "overseer," and "ruler" ("those who rule"--Rom. 12:8).

Let us now learn the meaning of these words, for in them we have many of the duties and qualifications of those who are to do the work of a bishop. These words and their definitions are here presented in a form that can be used as a chart if any class so desires to use them. On the left is the Greek word, first in Greek then spelled out in English. Beneath these is the English word by which the Greek word is or may be translated and the reference in which the word is found. On the right the definitions are given in full from Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament. By this method it is hoped that the youngest Bible student may be able to appreciate the lesson from these words.

<p><i>episcopos</i> bishop, overseer (Act 20:28; Tit. 1:7; 1 Tim. 4:1; Phil. 1:1.)</p>	<p>An overseer--a man charged with the duty of seeing that things done by others bishop, overseer are done rightly; any curator, guardian, or superintendent; in the New Testament, a guardian of souls, one who watches over their welfare; the superintendent, head, or overseer of any Christian church.</p>
<p><i>presbuteros</i> presbyter, elder (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 5:1, 17; Tit. 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:1.)</p>	<p>1. Of age--(a) the elder of two; (b) advanced in life--an elder, a senior. 2. A term of rank or office; (a) among the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin; (b) those who preside over the assemblies (or churches). That they did not differ from the (<i>episcopos</i>) bishops is evident from the fact that the two words are used indiscriminately. (Acts 20:17, 28; Tit. 1:5, 7.) The title <i>episcopos</i> denotes the function; <i>presbuteros</i>, the</p>

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	dignity. The former The former was borrowed from Greek institutions; the latter, from the Jewish.
<i>poimeen</i> pastor, shepherd (1 Pet. 2:25; 5:2; Eph. 4:11.)	A herdsman, especially a shepherd; (<i>a</i>)in the parable, he to whose care and control others have committed themselves and whose precepts they follow (John 10:11, 14); (<i>b</i>) metaph, the presiding officer, manager, director of any assembly. So of Christ (1 Pet. 2:25); so of overseers of Christian churches (Eph. 4:11).
<i>proistamenos</i> , to rule. (Rom. 12:8.) "are over you." (1 Thess. 5:12.) "rule well." (1 Tim. 5:17.) ruler, president	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To set or place before, to set over. 2. (<i>a</i>) To be over, superintend; to preside over (1 Tim. 5:17); with the genitive of the person or thing over which one presides (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4); (<i>b</i>) to be a protector or guardian; to give aid to rule (Rom. 12:8, to rule).
<i>hegoumenoi</i> to lead, to rule (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24.)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To lead--i. e., (<i>a</i>) to go before; (<i>b</i>) to be a leader; to rule, command; to have authority over; leading as respects influence, controlling in counsel; so of the overseers or leaders of the Christian churches. (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24).

As it is the duty of a bishop to care for, watch over, rule over, and lead a congregation of Christians, it is certainly no matter of surprise that the Lord has been very minute in telling us just the kind of men to place in this position. It is a hazardous business to ignore or to make void any of God's arrangements. Because men have been honored with the office of a bishop who were unworthy of it, many churches have come lightly to regard the Lord's appointed. Even in some places the elders (so called) are treated with contempt by some members of their flock. This is bringing God's order down very low indeed. Either the man should cease to be recognized as an elder or he should be treated with the respect and deference due an elder.

But the qualifications of a bishop are many, and are such that no man can possess them and not be a power for good wherever he is. No man can possess all these qualities and not be respected and loved by his fellow men, whether he has ever been appointed to the overseership or not. Christians will naturally seek counsel and instruction from such a man. He inspires confidence and elicits the best there is in one. Let us remove the cause of trouble, then, by appointing men who meet the divine requirements. The qualifications mentioned in the third chapter of the First Epistle to Timothy and the first chapter of the letter to Titus are here given in a tabulated form in the hope that they will be duly impressed upon the minds of the readers. These are quoted from the American Revised Version.

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TIMOTHY.

1. Without reproach.
2. Husband of one wife.
3. Temperate.
4. Sober-minded.
5. Orderly.
6. Given to hospitality.
7. Apt to teach.
8. No brawler.
9. No striker.
10. Gentle.
11. Not contentious.
12. No lover of money.
13. Rules well his own house.
14. Not a novice.
15. Good testimony from without.

TITUS.

1. Blameless.
2. Husband of one wife.
3. Having children that believe.
4. Not self-willed.
5. Not soon angry.
6. No brawler.
7. No striker.
8. Not greedy of filthy lucre.
9. Given to hospitality.
10. Lover of good.
11. Sober-minded.
12. Just.
13. Holy.
14. Self-controlled.
15. Sound in the faith.

The first and the second are the same in both Timothy and Titus; the third in Titus is the thirteenth in Timothy; the fifth in Titus seems to correspond with the tenth in Timothy; the sixth and the seventh in Titus are the same as the eighth and ninth in Timothy; the eighth in Titus is the twelfth in Timothy; the ninth in Titus is the sixth in Timothy; the eleventh and the fourth are the same, and the fourteenth in Titus is the third in Timothy. But this leaves five in Titus that are not mentioned in Timothy--namely numbers four, ten, twelve, thirteen, and fifteen. And since they both have an equal number, this, of course, leaves five in Timothy that are not mentioned in Titus. They are numbers five, seven, eleven, fourteen, and fifteen. This, then, gives twenty qualifications that every bishop must possess. But it is claimed by some men that it is not necessary for each elder to possess every one of the qualifications, but that enough men, each one possessing some of the qualifications that another does not possess, be appointed to have all the qualifications in the eldership of each church. This, however, is very obviously wrong. What requirement is it that any elder can afford to be deficient in? Can one be a lover of money provided the others are not? Can one be a brawler if some of the others are not brawlers? Can one be contentious provided the others are not contentious? Can one be unholy, unjust, intemperate, self-willed, soon angry, disorderly, or unmannerly, provided his fellow elders in the same church are the reverse? Considered in this way, the contention appears to be absurd. It was devised, no doubt, to justify some man who had been appointed to the overseership, but who was manifestly not *apt to teach*. It is no unusual thing these times to find a

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man professing to serve in the capacity of an elder who cannot lead a public prayer, much less offer words of instruction to the congregation. Yet he has been appointed by the Holy Spirit (?) to *feed* the flock! This is a travesty on the divine order.

If these requirements appear to be rigid, just take time to consider them and see which one *any* Christian should not possess. Aside from the fact that an elder is not to be a novice--new convert--there is not a thing required in his character that is not also required of every Christian to some degree. The elder is supposed to have these things, developed in his life to a greater degree than the average Christian, because he is older as a Christian than many (not a novice) and because he has (should have) "desired," *stretched forward to*, or prepared himself for the office of a bishop. Every Christian is to be a teacher (Heb. 5:12; Tit. 2:3, 4; Matt. 28:18-20); but a bishop is to be *apt to teach*, gifted as a teacher, capable to teach, qualified to give instruction, and so familiar with the Scriptures that he can convict the gainsayers and put them to silence. He must by sound teaching be able both to exhort and convince. (Tit. 1:9-11.)

In saying that all the qualifications are to be possessed by all Christian men in some degree, it is assumed that the expression, "the husband of one wife," means the husband of but one wife. If a man insists that this requires an elder to be a married man, he would also have to insist that the third qualification mentioned in Titus requires an elder to have children; not only that, but his children must be old enough to be believers. If they are old enough and are not believers, the man is disqualified. It seems that that is an extreme view, but it would be best to have men who are heads of families as elders if they can be had and if they possess the other qualifications. And if a man had children who are grown and are not Christians, it would be well to consider whether or not he is not lacking in some of the qualifications of an elder; for it would seem strange that a man measuring up to this high standard of Christian conduct could have the training of a child from its birth and fail to make a Christian of it. Would he be capable of caring for and training the babes in Christ, or would they, too, go astray under his influence and guidance?

It should not be thought that the word "blameless" means "sinless" or "faultless." No man is faultless. It means that the man should be irreproachable, unblameworthy in any manner of conduct. He is not "blamed" or charged with any misdealing by his fellow men, but is recognized by all as an honest, honorable, upright Christian gentleman.

Each student should get a Bible dictionary and a good commentary, and, with these aids, study carefully every one of the twenty qualifications of an elder.

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Every congregation that has existed for any number of years should have men in it who possess these qualifications and should be training others for the work of a bishop.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. How many words are used in the New Testament to designate an elder?
2. Name these words.
3. Is there any difference in an elder and a bishop? An elder and a pastor?
4. Is the eldership an *office* in the church? If not, what does the appointing, ordination, or consecration do for him?
5. How many qualifications of an elder does Paul mention in Timothy and Titus?
6. Name them.
7. Does *each* elder in every church have to possess all of these?

NOTE.--Besides these qualifications, every elder should possess natural characteristics of sense, judgment, tact, ability to lead, etc. A man may be in every sense a good man and still not have sufficient force or strength of personality to impress his goodness upon others. If a man "rules well his own house," it is pretty fair evidence that he has some ability to lead and govern.

8. What does "apt to teach" mean?
9. What does "orderly" mean?
10. What does "blameless" mean?
11. Should a man be appointed to the eldership who does not possess the qualifications?
12. Where a church does not have "material" for elders, what should it do?

NOTE.--If you cannot agree as to the meaning of all the qualifications, such as "the husband of one wife" take a safe course and do not argue and contend. Strife is deadly; it kills. Contentions are a devil's stew pot, a witch's cauldron.