

Ian Hamilton Eldership 24-02-2014

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Preacher: Ian Hamilton

[0 : 00] Thank you very much for the invitation and for Paul's always generous and kind welcome.

! I've spent almost as much time wondering how to begin as I have actually preparing! I've spent about the centuries have come to different conclusions about the way the Lord Jesus Christ would have his church to be governed, to be led, to be shepherded.

John Owen, one of my great theological heroes, started out as a Presbyterian but then, reading John Cotton's Keys of the Kingdom, became a convinced Congregationalist.

I can't get my head around it but there it is. And I have very, very fine friends who don't believe that Presbyterianism is what the New Testament teaches.

But for me, I'm a Dei Uri Divino Presbyterian, a divine right Presbyterian. I think everyone should be a Presbyterian. I think that's what the Bible teaches. So, maybe there can be questions relating to that at the end.

[1 : 25] Twenty-two years ago, I visited the USA for the first time. I had a sabbatical break. I was a parish minister in Scotland and studied at Reform Cernary in Jackson. And during my time there with my family, I pastored a small PCA church in the deepest part of the Delta in Mississippi.

It was a church with a reputation. It was noted for a number of things that I won't go into. I loved being there. But one visit that I had, and it has remained with me throughout these past 22 years, explained to me why the church was the way it was.

I visited one of the elders one night. And as we talked, he began to cry. Now, this elder is a typical southerner.

He's an extremely wealthy man. He owned 61 banks. He had business interests all over the place. He was a big man. He didn't like mamby-pamby men.

He liked men that were men. So here he is, weeping. And I thought, what on earth have I done? What cultural faux pas have I transgressed that was so egregious that has caused this big man to cry?

[2 : 59] And I sat there thinking, what do I do? And he looked at me and saw that I was perplexed. And he said this to me. This is my first pastoral visit in 18 years.

And in that one sentence, I realized why the church was the way it was. I was there for some months on sabbatical, but I preached three times a week and visited one person a week.

Now in Scotland, as a parish minister, I visited probably 15 to 24 per week. Now you might think, that's impossible. Well, it's part of the culture. Some visits were very short.

Ten minutes. How are you, Jeannie? I'm a fine minister. I was the parish minister. There was no Baptist church, no Congregational church, no Roman Catholic church. We were the church. Everyone knew who I was.

I didn't know quite everyone, but I took 700 odd funerals during my time there, so I got to know a lot of people. And I'd gone from visiting 15 to 20 people to visiting one.

[4 : 06] And this church in Mississippi almost thought that heaven had arrived with the Hamiltons. Now mainly because they loved my wife, I think. They took to me through my wife.

They had never had a pastor that visited. I found that mind-numbingly bizarre.

I thought, how can you be a pastor, an under-shepherd of Christ, care for the flock of Christ, and not visit people.

Have them into your home. Be in their home. I didn't need persuading before then that visitation was a fundamental part of my calling as an elder in the Church of Jesus Christ.

But it simply confirmed to me that if the Church of God is going to be cared for, it needs to be cared for by men who will invest time and energy in giving themselves to people, getting to know them, understand them, appreciate them, thinking all the while, how can I best help them to grow up into

Christ.

[5 : 37] So that's my basic conviction about how a church is to be cared for by men who have a heart, a shepherd's heart, for the flock of God.

Now here's my caveat before we get into, and what you've got in your hand I'm not going to touch on really. But here's my caveat. The great danger is, and it's more prone in Presbyterianism than anywhere else is, that you end up painting by numbers.

You end up getting all the little bits and pieces right. You have a high ecclesiology. You've got all the components, but you don't have men who have a passion and a heart for the people of God. And it's a bit like painting by numbers. You've got all the right colours and all the right places, but it's dead, it's lifeless. It does nothing for you. Which is why this actually is a boast.

It shouldn't be a boast, and it's not much of a boast. I've never read a book on marriage. I've never read a book on bringing up children. If people want to find out about these things, I direct them to my assistants, and tell them he's learned lots of stuff.

[7 : 05] My great fear is, in the Christian life, especially in terms of shepherding, that we read how-to books, and we end up living the Christian life as if we're painting by numbers.

So when couples come to me for marriage counselling, I say, that's wonderful. They sit down, and I'll say, do you want to live together? Do you want to sleep together?

Love God, and go on with it. And they sit there, and I sit there, and I think, I wonder who will blink first. And I'll say, are you looking for more?

And they say, well, that's not all you're going to say. I say, no, no, I'm going to spend four meetings with you. But that's it. That's it. So that's my caveat.

So, okay. Where to begin? Well, let me just simply say, first of all, although I'm sure I hardly need to say it, that in the New Testament, elder and overseer, or bishop, are not synonymous terms, but they're Siamese twins.

[8 : 20] In Acts 20, Paul calls the elders, the presbyteroi, to himself. And he says to them, oversee, care for, shepherd the flock of God.

So, the word bishop, the elder, the elder, the elder, the elder, the elder, it's not a different office. It simply describes the way the elder is to go about his work in the congregation.

All elders rule. I'm going to just quickly go over one or two things I'm sure are so basic for you. All elders rule. All elders must be able to teach.

Paul says that, 1 Timothy 3. All elders must be able to teach. Some elders, 1 Timothy 5.17, some elders labor in preaching and teaching.

So, all elders teach. But some elders labor. And the word Paul uses, it means to give yourself to holy.

[9 : 27] It will be their life's work. So, some, through divine gifting and human desiring, which I'll touch on in a minute, and are set apart to give themselves wholly to the work of preaching and teaching.

So, let's think then what Paul has to say, in particular, about eldership in 1 Timothy 3.

Now, these are verses that you know so very, very well. And if you don't, well, you should be ashamed, whether you're an elder or not. You belong to a church.

You either are an elder or you're responsible for choosing elders. And you should be embedded in passages 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, 1 Peter 5.

What always strikes me as strange is that many of the treatments of this passage that I've read don't begin where Paul begins.

[10 : 37] This is a trustworthy saying, he says. If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

That's where Paul begins. Isn't that striking? If anyone aspires. Now, we're into humility in the Christian church, especially evangelical church.

Humility. You know, Augustine was asked, what are the three great virtues? Humility, humility, humility. Absolutely right. But there's a false kind of humility.

And there's a right kind of humility. And Paul begins his unpacking of the qualifications for eldership with this.

Do you desire to be an overseer? An under-shepherd? A bishop in the church of Jesus Christ? Has God planted that desire within you?

[11 : 51] Do you aspire to this office? Now, maybe you're sitting thinking, well, that's not quite at work with me.

Maybe Paul persuaded you, cajoled you, threatened you. I don't know. Occasionally in the church, God has used unusual means to place men in positions of oversight and care in his church. John Calvin, when he was passing through Geneva, you probably know the story well, 1536, William Pharrell, Guillaume Pharrell, heard Calvin was on his route to Strasbourg. He went to visit Calvin. He pleaded with him. He'd heard of Calvin. And he said, please stay and help us defend the Reformation. And Calvin said, I'm a poor, timid scholar. That's John Calvin. I want a life of retirement and writing. And Pharrell looked him in the eyes and said, God curse you if you leave this place.

[12 : 59] Maybe Paul did that with you. He said, if you don't become an elder, God will curse you. Now, there's a place for that. Maybe a not big place.

But there is a place. Augustine, or Augustine if you're a Roman. John Knox. There are exceptions. But, more commonly, desire and aspiration.

Humility does not negate godly aspiration. And the Christian life is as much about cultivating godly desires as it is about killing ungodly desires.

So I just wanted to begin there to encourage you. We're in the process of hopefully adding to the eldership in Cambridge. And, the first question I ask the two guys that we're seriously considering is, do you have a desire to shepherd the flock of God?

Sometimes the desire can be buried deep because we think, you know, who am I? am I just fooling myself? And sometimes it needs to be just gently drawn out.

[14 : 25] But, do you have a desire? How many of you here are elders? One, two, three, four, five, six.

So, I just want you to, I want to encourage you to go home and to pray. Lord, if you would have me in your grace to serve this congregation as an overseer, an under-shepherd of Christ, reflecting and mirroring and modelling the care of the chief shepherd to his people, plant that desire within me, stir my soul with the desire.

However, poor and weak it be, stir that desire within me. Then, in the following verses, Paul lists sixteen characteristics.

And you'll notice that they are non-negotiable. Four times, he uses the word must in verse two, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife.

Verse four, the overseer must manage his own household well, with all dignity. Verse six, he must not be a recent convert.

[15 : 53] Verse seven, moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders. There are four musts, but they're all predicated on the sixteen characteristics.

six. It's not that you can have fifteen and think, well, that's good enough.

No. They've all to be there. Now, you're all sitting hopefully and saying, well, Ian, get a life power. who is sufficient for these things? Because surely all of us would read all of these sixteen and be humbled to the dust.

On the other hand, at the same time, synchronously, we can look at these sixteen and say, Lord, by your amazing grace, I can see these realities in my life, faint maybe, far from what they should be, but planted there and cultivated there by your word, by your spirit, in the fellowship of this congregation.

[17 : 22] Now, there are sixteen characteristics, and eleven are positive and five are negative.

Now, I've often wondered about that, and I don't want to dwell much on, I'm going to just touch on four of them, but the fact that eleven are positive and five are negative at least says to me that we should be more noted for what we are for than what we're against.

There is probably not an IPC, because Paul's here, but I've been in many reformed churches where it's almost thought that the holier you are, the more gloomy you should appear.

Sorry, I've had a chest infection for the last week and it's come out of my throat. And often the cast that we give people is that we are more demarcated and determined by what we don't do than by what we do do.

And it seems to me that the balance here is eleven positive and five negative. Of course there are things we will not do. But the principal shape of an elder's life protrudes in aura of positive godliness.

Now I just want to pick out four and you can come back into any of these. First of all, an elder is to be a husband of one wife or more literally in the Greek a one woman man.

[19 : 12] Now there's a great debate as probably most of you know about what exactly does Paul mean here. I don't want to get into that. what at least he's certainly saying is an elder is to be a man who models the creation ordinance of marriage.

The two shall be one flesh. He's a one woman man not only physically but mentally. Now you can't examine someone's thoughts can you?

Some people have tried. But one of the first questions in fact I think it might actually now be the first question we ask all the young men who come under care in our presbytery is when did you last look at internet pornography?

Not do you but when did you last? Now when this was first suggested I don't know 18 months ago I said internet pornography it's not something that's ever bothered me other sins bother me actually what the bible call worse sins and since then I thought boy that that is a very good question to ask tell us about your thought life and we've had very fine young men very fine say I need to tell you something and I think what Paul is saying here is that an elder is to model not only in his physical relationship with his wife but in everything about him in his relationship with his wife that he's a one woman man that his marriage reflects

Christ's union with his church I think that's what he's getting at there's a lot more than that another qualification or characteristic is an elder to be hospitable and the word literally is a lover of strangers and one of the marks of a church in general should be that it loves strangers doesn't just welcome them but loves them and elders are to exemplify that their homes are to be hospitals for strangers because in case you didn't know it your home has been given to you by the Lord you're a steward everything you have everything I have we're to expend ourselves and people are to see in the way elders live their lives something of the welcoming arms of the

[22 : 27] Lord Jesus Christ who welcomes strangers come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest that's what elders are to be saying by their lives now we will say it poorly and at times shamefully we'll go home I don't know about you but there are times I go home and I just cry to the Lord and say Lord I'm just a disaster I don't say that for effect because brothers I'm just a disaster but God is kind to disasters and I sometimes thought Lord I should be a civil servant certainly earn a lot more than I do in Cambridge but then reality kicks in and I think Lord there isn't anything in this creation I would rather do and be than what you've called me to do and be and then he says the elders are not to be quarrelsome do you know the Greek word here

Paul anyone interested John do you know the Greek word amacho elders are not to be macho they're to be men but not macho Peter will talk about 1 Peter 5 not domineering because Jesus Christ is the model elder isn't he how did he and how does he lead his church isn't it interesting that the first servant song in Isaiah as we begin to be given a picture a graphic unfolding picture of the servant of the Lord what we told about him it's just breathtaking he doesn't break bruised wheels behold my servant he won't cry out in the street that doesn't mean he won't be an preacher it means he's not self advertising and he's gentle and that's what Paul says not a drunkard not violent but gentle not quarrelsome not someone who demands his own way but who leads by example at times elders have to be very strong

I'm temperamentally someone who draws back from confrontation I don't like it but an elder is someone who must be ready and willing when necessary to confront a few years back a couple in our church asked me to come and see them having great problems with their children and I knew that and they said we really need your help here I took a deep breath and I said well here's the help the problem isn't your children you're the problem the way you live together is why your children are the way they are I thought well they looked at me and they simply said that's absolutely right now I didn't know how maybe another couple would just fulminate and say we're leaving this church only twice in 34 years

I've ever said that to couples other times I've wanted to say it but cowardice won the day to my shame we're not to be a macho non-macho we are to be gentle but gentleness you know the I think in classical Greek the word had the idea of a horse that was under the bridle controlled strength so Jesus and the only time he draws attention to qualities in himself he says I am meek and lowly of heart that's the only time he ever self-consciously speaks about his qualities Moses was the meekest man who ever lived wouldn't like to meet him in a dark night the psalmist says Lord your gentleness has made me strong so gentleness isn't weakness but it's tenderness it's seeing people

as

God sees them and it's interesting in the passage I'm just trying to hurry on here that the devil's mentioned twice verses 6 and 7 not a recent convert or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil and again in verse 7 moreover it must be well thought of by outsiders so that he may not fall into disgrace into the snare of the devil elders are particularly in the sight of Satan we all are in Satan's signs but you can be absolutely sure that ministers and elders have a particular focus for the evil one bring down a minister cause a minister to speak an unguarded word and what damage can be done what credibility can be lost cause an elder to fall into some public sin and so

[28 : 11] Paul is saying to Timothy be careful in the kind of men that are chosen so that's who they are what's the chief calling of an elder just very very briefly simply to shepherd Christ's sheep 1 Peter 5 2 Titus 1 9 how are we to do that let me just mention three things just touching them first of all by taking heed to ourselves Acts 20 28 Paul says to the Ephesian elders take heed to yourselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you oversee us take heed to yourselves he says something similar in 1 Timothy 4 end of the chapter take heed to yourself and to the doctrine

John Murray one of my theological mentors wrote piety must first burn in the individuality of our own hearts and lives we shall not be the faithful keepers of the vineyards of others if we have not kept our own what will mark the people we oversee and visit and speak to will be intangible to us but manifest to them I visited two women in our congregation a while back and visited the second one and she was very low and we're talking and she said you know Ian I just feel a disaster I just so wish

I could be like and I burst out laughing and she looked at me I said I'm sorry I visited her last week and she said to me Ian I'm a disaster I just wish I was so like we don't really know what we're saying to people and that's why we need to take heed to ourselves we need to be men of the word but men who believe that the word without the spirit is just a dead letter John Owen said without the holy spirit we may as well burn our bibles do you believe that you should without the holy spirit burn your bible no good we need the word and the spirit and the fellowship of the saints we need to be men noted for piety not pietism but pietas

Calvin's great word piety godliness that out of the overflow of communion with god we minister the humanity of christ to people second in acts 20 28 paul says take ye to yourselves and all the flock i found this a challenge over the years some people are a delight to visit you almost can't wait until you go and visit them it was just an encouragement and then there are other people and maybe you're not like me but i think i'll put it off this week and this next week comes around and i think i'm not in the right frame to visit them this week and there are some people who are cross drained that's the church god loves them some people are just difficult but paul says all the flock the people who are easy to visit the people who are not because you're a shepherd some people require more care than others i've got people in my congregation if i only visited once a year they would think that was wonderful there are others if i didn't visit every month they would think i was failing you have to work out who needs what but it's all the flock and the director of public worship and you know the director of public worship westminster talks about seven different kinds of people in a congregation and that's putting them conservatively all with different needs and the third thing i simply want to say is you're to be an example to the flock as paul puts it and as peter puts it one peter five be an example to the flock and paul develops that doesn't he in one timothy four regarding timothy be an example to the flock in speech in godliness in manner in behavior in attitude because you're modeling the chief shepherd jesus christ so having said that let me close just with two things i'll just say in a sentence or two shepherds are sheep before they're shepherds if you ever forget that you're first the sheep you've lost the plot when you visit people when you counsel people when you care for people when you meet as elders when you think about the oversight of the congregation if you don't start with the conviction i'm a sheep who needs to be shepherded you've lost the plot we come alongside people we don't stand over against them we come alongside them we're told about our lord jesus that he is able to sympathize with us in our weakness before the incarnation he couldn't sympathize he could pity but he couldn't sympathio he couldn't and the point in hebrews 4 is not that he is able to sympathize that's not actually what the right of saying is because he is now one with us he cannot but sympathize and that's what people need to know that we're just like them yes called set apart but we're just like them we're under the word under the lordship of christ just like them and people begin to hear us differently not least when we preach and teach

them when they hear us through a grid of sympathy and so elders are men who visit the flock who make time to do it and after a hard long day and you know when I was in Scotland all the men in my congregation basically finished work at 5.30 they were home by 5.30 dinner was over by 6 o'clock and most of our elders visited one night a week they had maybe 14 families I started off with 1,100 members and 42 elders 36 of the elders couldn't find

[36 : 28] Romans 700 of the 1,100 members never came to church so it wasn't really a church was it but the Lord was kind over the years things changed things are different in the southeast demands are different I have to make appointments to visit people I never did that 20 years in Scotland if I made an appointment folk would think what's wrong here I just have to make appointments it's just a different world for me but visit use your home as a welcome for people that be in people's homes where they're more comfortable share your humanity with them judiciously not stupidly judiciously share your struggles with them your concerns your your failures as well as your victories and slowly people see yes you're a shepherd but you know he's also a sheep now that's long enough what doest thou now thank you very much so questions first in to rather as a foreigner

I am fully agree regarding the visitation and the importance of visitation but the culture here is a big obstacle I don't know whether somebody is ill or had operation the culture says don't go close they have their privacy if somebody is pregnant you don't know whether to them or not because of giving them space to breathe so our culture says that I have to go straight away but we can part because we don't know whether that will offend them will be discomfort for them how do this area of culture if it is true that's very very good well my simple answer is that scripture always trumps culture I've heard this so often that you know us Brits we're actually more reserved we don't go in for this overflowing exuberance that many of our African brothers sisters have I actually think that's a cop out I don't mean that there aren't idiosyncratic shapes to different cultures but when I read the New Testament it speaks about joy unspeakable and full of glory Paul tells all the people he writes to that he loves them he prays for them when did you last go to our brothers and say I just love you for the sake of Jesus Christ hold on a minute that's a bit scary and we've allowed this shibboleth of culture I think to trump scripture and that's where the preaching ministry is so absolutely pivotal slowly but surely reshaping the mind of men and women into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ so that we don't say well it's okay if you're an Italian that's okay where are you from Egypt or an Egyptian or whatever scripture trumps culture it doesn't trample on culture but it always trumps culture and I think that people need slowly to be transformed by the renewing of their minds Romans 12 I think we need to penetrate the 300 plus years of atomized individualization in western civilization we need to recover within our churches the corporate covenantal familial texture as well as theology of biblical religion our default needs increasingly to be our father not my father and so all of that

I think plays a part it takes time I think there are layers to cut through and to remove but it's important that we do any other questions comments people want to make things to throw out and see yes hi thank you so much for your talk there's a very new question and I don't know how much of this question relates to the fact that I'm blind but I wonder whether a more convenient way of visiting people who might be helped or just might not welcome it would be because for me personally I would be very happy just with it!

[42 : 11] yeah that's very helpful anything that works we're all wired differently I think it's important in a church that in God's providence and kindness elders should be very different you don't want them all like Paul no one Paul is enough and one Ian Hamilton is enough and within the diversity what will work for one may not work for another I use the phone a lot I use the phone a lot like that one of our elders doesn't like using the phone so I think you just work out what's most comfortable for you or perhaps better what's best for the people a phone call might work for you but it would be somewhat clinical and remote for someone else and we're all wired differently and we're to do nothing in a clone like way the church is variegated and we have to work at thinking now some people honestly still today 15 minutes for some people is all that they need they just love it other people at least an hour

I think sometimes we spend far too long with people I've come to the conclusion that actually an hour is a good time some people will just eat up your time and you have to watch that as well but just be sensitive to people get to know them what works for one won't work for another questions comments John that's very good no the former as far as I can see the the only the only quality or

characteristic or gift that an elder will have that is not general to the people of God is that of teaching and even then I hesitate because all of God's people are prophets we all share in the prophetic ministry of

Jesus Christ but this will get us into the debate of whether there are two officers or three officers the big thing in favor and I'm a kind of two and a half guy in favor of people who say there are three officers you know very long tradition in the Presbyterian church is that there are those whose work whose life is given copy owl to labor in preaching and teaching but elders are to maximally model the graces of the Christian man in the life of the church they are the shop window and that I say these things and I'm almost condemned out of my own mouth but that's the fact of it the church rises or falls depending on the quality of the men who are overseeing this life that's just a fact of life and a fact of history a one woman man would that rule out those who are not married how do you feel about that yeah no I don't think it does there's no indication

Timothy was married or Paul I think it's the general principle the bible often uses generalities I think that's one of them it's reflecting the creation ordinance Genesis 1 and 2 has to be read rightly in the broader conspectus of God's revelation some are eunuchs for the kingdom of God sake some by God's good purpose will never be married they're not lacking in anything so I think it's a general principle if I could extrapolate from what he's saying there I would think the extrapolation would be an elder is a man who lives under the lordship of Christ as that lordship is revealed in his word concerning his relational and sexual life brother come back come back come back talk about several of the elders in the church what's your suggestion about the situation of the young ladies in the church who are in need of advice in need of counseling or apprenticeship if you suggest the elders and they elders what's possible for them aren't you going to a dangerous territory of youth Paul clearly speaks about older women having pastoral responsibility towards younger women in the life of the church and the way again there are differences I personally would not be in favor of women deacons it's not a hill I would die on but it's a hill I would fight for I wouldn't die and I wouldn't dream of leaving a congregation a denomination if they decided that women deacons I would never dream of doing that but the way let me give you an example in my church in Scotland what we did we had 14 elders we appointed a woman to each elders district she visited under the oversight of the session as a whole and of the elder in particular and where the session or the elder felt it would be more appropriate and wiser and more needful for a woman to visit then the woman would do that we also employed a woman pastoral visitor whose responsibility was visiting widows at all these hundreds of funerals so widows galore and and she would visit widows so but

[50 : 15] I think it's very important that the session the elder session does not abdicate its responsibility to shepherd all the flock now how it shepherds all the flock will need at times ingenuity wisdom there was one woman in our church I just refused to visit I just won't visit I won't go into reasons why I just won't do it so we had to work out a way around that but with younger women I think we need older women who are spiritually mature trained John Calvin actually had women deacons but he was wrong pregnant clause well he wasn't really the women deacons only ministered to the women in the congregation so he called them deacons and I wouldn't bother much about that laughing

LAUGHTER