

# Issues of Confessionalism

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Preacher: Carl Truman

[ 0 : 00 ] But today I want to look at issues surrounding the nature of the church and confessionalism. Lecture 2 and Lecture 3 I want to look at confessionalism itself and bring out some of the reasons why I think it's practical and important and indeed why it's actually a biblical thing.

I chose the title of the little book I wrote on this, *The Creedal Imperative*, very self-consciously because I think that something that does the job of a creed or a confession is a biblical imperative. But I want to start by reflecting on the nature of biblical eldership. So if you would turn with me to 1 Timothy chapter 3. We'll read chapter 3 together.

1 Timothy chapter 3. 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.

[ 1 : 25 ] 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 that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Deacons likewise are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.

They must first be tested and then, if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers, but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

[ 2 : 26 ] Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great. He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed upon in the world, was taken up in glory.

Praise God for his holy word. If you knew that death was just around the corner, what message would you give to the church? What would your priorities be for the next generation?

Death, of course, impending death, is a great prioritiser of time. Samuel Johnson famously declared, Depend upon it, sir. When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.

Richard Baxter, of course, always went into the pulpit with the thought of death on his mind. Baxter, I think, was in some ways a very impressive individual, but was probably a very miserable person, by and large, to know.

[ 3 : 33 ] So, Puritans often have this funny thing about death. I remember reading Lewis Bailey's work, *The Practice of Piety*, and saying, you know, every night when you get into bed with your wife and you wrap the sheets around yourself, it should be a reminder to you that one day the winding

sheets will be wrapped around you, laid into the earth.

But Richard Baxter always said, I preached, as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men. Paul's pastoral letters, I think, fit into precisely this kind of moment.

There are, well, the language of watershed is much overused. Certainly in the era we live in now, with a 24-hour news cycle, rarely a day goes by without something happening that we're told is going to change everything forever.

Very few things, of course, happen that change everything forever, but such is the hyped nature of our language, we use such terms as watershed and defining moment very, very regularly.

Paul is writing, I think, in this context at a truly defining moment. If you think about the context, Paul is coming towards the end of his ministry, and the end of the era of the apostles is a true watershed for the church.

[ 4 : 53 ] The church has been governed prior to the end of the apostolic era by those men who knew Christ personally, those who walked and talked with him when he was ministering along the shores of Galilee.

And then, of course, Paul himself, who meets Christ in a spectacular, mysterious, but very personal way on the Damascus road. When Paul's writing his pastoral epistles, of course, he's conscious that that time is coming to an end.

That the apostles are coming to a point when they're all going to die and pass away. And I think what that raises in his mind is, how do we guarantee that the church will remain safe in subsequent generations?

What do I need to lay out for Timothy? What do I need to tell the next generation in order to make sure that the gospel, the tradition, the gospel, is safely communicated from one generation to the next?

And to sort of summarize all three of today's lectures in just a couple of lines, Paul's basic answer is, establish a structure and hold on to a form of sound words.

[ 6 : 14 ] Elders and confessions, one might say, are our way of thinking about those things. So Paul is writing at a time when he's really thinking, what is authority going to look like in the next generation and the generation after that?

How do we guarantee that the church will continue to function? What do we have to do as our part, if you like, of making sure that Matthew 16, 18 is fulfilled?

And of course, what Paul writes in his pastoral letters are not particularly what you'd find in many books on the church today. There is nothing in here about technique, as far as I can see.

Paul doesn't talk about technique as such. There is no demographic discussion. There is no statements about how one should deploy the latest technology.

Now all of these things may be important, but they are of secondary importance compared to the things that Paul lays out in 1 Timothy. What we actually have in the pastoral epistles are warnings against false teaching.

[ 7 : 29 ] We'll talk a little bit about the false teaching in a couple of minutes. And warnings about excessive conformity to the world outside the church.

He lays out his vision for the organisation and the government of the church. Not, I would say, government by the bold and the beautiful, but government by people who are really pretty ordinary. When you read the list of characteristics of elders and deacons, by and large, they don't sound like particularly interesting people. These are high standards, but they're not exceptional standards in many ways.

What he's looking for, he's basically saying, look for nondescript, respectable guys that you can trust. That is what he's essentially saying in these letters.

And we see him urging the congregations to remain faithful to the apostolic gospel. We can flesh these out a little bit. When Paul writes to Timothy, there is problematic teaching in the church in Ephesus.

[ 8 : 33 ] We don't know much about the details of the teaching. We do know that it focuses somewhat on the law. Instead of using the law as a way of exposing sin, it seems that somebody or some group of people in Ephesus are using the law as a way of making themselves look clever.

They're into genealogies. They're into arcane stuff. Rather than the straightforward application of God's law, these men are those who claim to have some sort of gnostic knowledge. They're making it more complicated than it has to be in order to draw attention to themselves.

I've always been struck by verse 7. 1 Timothy 1, verse 7. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

They want to be teachers. I wonder if Paul there is hinting at what drives these men is that they want to be known as teachers. What they teach is incidental.

The focus is really on them. They want to be teachers. Not they want to teach. They want to be teachers. They're using the law as a way of drawing attention to themselves. Perhaps there's an elitism here.

[ 9 : 40 ] There's also problematic moral behavior in Ephesus as well. I preached through 1 Timothy a couple of years ago. It's tough to preach on 1 Timothy 2, verses 9 and 10.

I also want women to dress modestly with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds. And you look out at the congregation and you can immediately...

It's amazing. I've never noticed the pearl earrings before. As you start to preach on this, suddenly every woman in the congregation seems to have pearl earrings. And you're thinking, how am I going to get out of here alive?

I just know that the sisterhood are going to gather en masse at the back. I don't know if you know the Euripides play, The Bacchae, where poor old Pentheus crosses the women in the city and they tear him limb from limb.

And there's a sort of feeling that am I heading into a backy kind of situation here. Of course, what Paul is doing, I don't think Paul is saying that pearl earrings are inherently sinful. Bruce Winter, the New Testament scholar, has done a lot of work on women in the ancient Roman context.

[ 10 : 44 ] And of course, attention to that that what Paul is describing here is the uniform of the so-called New Roman woman of the first century. What was the New Roman woman? We would say a kind of proto-feminist, liberated, often have their own businesses, wealthy, powerful, sexually promiscuous.

What Paul is saying here is don't want the women to dress in a way that sends the wrong signal. There's not pearl earrings so much that he's concerned about as what do these conventions of dress say to the wider culture?

So what we can say here is there is worldliness in this church. Well, there's false teaching and there is worldliness. And then when he talks, of course, about the role of men in the church, we can also assume that the men have abdicated their responsibility somewhat in the congregation.

In other words, Ephesus is a mess and it represents pretty much every church you'll ever come across. There's a danger of false teaching, there's a danger of worldly behavior, and there's a danger that those who should be stepping up and taking responsibility are abdicating it.

So Paul, he's facing the general question of what happens to the church after the apostles pass away and he's facing it in an acutely specific form in Ephesus and yet in some ways the problems of Ephesus, whatever church you're in, whatever problems you face, you could probably fit them into one or more of those basic categories that Paul lays out for us.

[ 12 : 18 ] And underlying this, I think, and this is, why I'm laying all this out is that I think this is why eldership is important. Underlying this, I think, is the problem that the church will always be the primary area of struggle for the church.

It's very easy to get distracted, I think, when, you know, for maybe a thousand, maybe fifteen hundred years now, the church has experienced, what we might say, exceptional circumstances. The majority of the church is history in the West. The church has been by and large in charge or has been walking hand in hand with the values of the wider culture. It's hard to imagine that that's an exceptional circumstance because it's gone on for so long.

Of course, the New Testament makes it clear we shouldn't be surprised when we get persecuted. It says in Peter, do not be surprised. Don't allow the length of time to lead you to think that that's the norm.

The Bible tells us what the norm is. The norm is culture is going to be hostile. But even so, we shouldn't allow the hostility of the culture to distract us from the fact that the church is always going to be the primary area of struggle for the church.

[ 13 : 31 ] And that's important to grasp. Just to jump ahead, there are those who look at the pastoral epistles and say, well, what Paul is suggesting here is a temporary thing just for Ephesus. That eldership has no permanent significance because what you've got is particular problems that just need to be dealt with particularly.

I think what Paul is pointing out here is specific instances of the general problem that would always affect the church and therefore eldership will always be relevant. We cannot restrict Paul's instructions here to Ephesus.

Ephesus is a test case pointing to a general pattern. The church itself will always be the primary area of struggle for the church. 2 Timothy 3, verse 1 and following.

Listen to this. But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. And for the record, we're living in the last days. We make a case for saying the last days are here and now. Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. And listen to the description. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

[14:50] We listen to that description. And you mean, that's what I see every night when I switch on the news. That's what I see when I walk around the streets of Philadelphia or London. That's exactly what people are like.

Lovers of self, treacherous, greedy, arrogance. But of course, Paul has this devastating punchline in verse 5. Having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.

Avoid such people. The sting in the tail is, Paul's describing people in the church at that point.

Paul's saying, in these last days, this is what people in the church will be like.

The church herself will always be the primary area of struggle for the church. And I think when you read the New Testament through those eyes, you see, yeah, a lot of the time when Paul's talking about enemies and struggle, he's not talking about Nero.

Paul lives in a culture that is far more hostile than anything we've experienced. As I was giving my lectures in Belfast yesterday morning, it strikes me that Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, they are somewhat, even throw Peter Tatchell into the mix, somewhat less scary than the Emperor Nero, Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin.

[16:10] You know, we're really not up against the worst that can be thrown at us. Paul spends far more time talking about the struggle in the church than he does talking about struggle with a hostile culture.

It makes perfect sense. Surely the church is always clearly going to be the primary focus of attack, for those who wish to see her work destroyed. And subversion from within has always been more successful than opposition from without.

Julian the Apostle becomes Emperor. I think it's about 360, 361, during a time when the church is undergoing debates about the nature of the Trinity.

Julian the Apostle, despite the name and despite the fact that Gore Vidal wrote a book about it, he was actually quite a boring emperor. He was a fairly puritanical pagan in many ways. But he knew how to subvert the church.

And what did he do? When he became emperor, he didn't persecute the church, he brought the problematic bishops back from exile and put them back in the church. The sting in the tail of that, of course, is the most famous problematic bishop of all that he brought back was a man called Athanasius.

[17:21] And the Lord used Julian's own policy to subvert his policy. Julian understood that the best way to destroy the church is to get it from within.

Secondly, of course, the church is composed of those who are themselves engaged in a dramatic internal struggle between the old rebellious nature and the new resurrected one.

It is inevitable that the inner fight that every Christian wages will spill over into the church herself.

And again, to remind you, why am I laying all this out at this point?

It's to make the case that elders are a perennial in the church. Part of Paul's solution to this problem is eldership. So I disagree with those scholars and Gordon Fee, I think, would be one, who argue that eldership is a temporary thing to deal with specific issues.

I think that elders, we may describe them in this sense, they're the stormtroopers of the end times. That has slightly creepy connotations given all of the end time novels, of course, but it's an image to hold in your mind.

[18:31] What are the elders there? The elders are there to wage war in the end times within the church against the forces within the church that seek to destroy her.

I remember a few years ago, some of you may know, Gary Miller, who was a Presbyterian Church of Ireland minister. He's now principal of Queensland Theological College.

Gary and I studied together in Aberdeen in the late 80s. I was doing my PhD. Gary had done a degree in engineering and was doing his BD. We were the same age and got to know each other quite well and we went off to our separate spheres of work afterwards and I ended up as Vice President and Dean at Westminster during a time when there was just an almighty fight going on on faculty.

and the Dean is the worst job to have because it's the one job where you can't. The President can go away and fundraise. The other faculty can keep their heads below the parapet.

The Dean's the guy who's just getting hit by bullets left, right and centre. Gary had taken a call around about this same time to a church in Dublin, PCI church near Dublin where I think most of the session when he went there were not Christians.

[ 19 : 42 ] and he was pounded through the courts of the church I think ultimately by members of the session, the congregation and we used to talk on the phone occasionally and I remember one conversation when I said to Gary, I used the phrase, I said, you know Gary, I wish that the conflict would finish so that I could actually get on with what I came here to do.

And he said to me, he said, well I used to think that way about the church I've been called to. He said, now I realise that the conflict is what I was called here to do. And when I was reflecting on 1st Timothy chapter 3 and the connection of the elders to the end times, that came back to me and I thought, that's it, isn't it?

We have visions of what we should be doing as those in positions of leadership in the church. Actually the Bible presents in some ways a much bleaker picture for us, that conflict is not something that we get over in order to do what we've got to do.

If you're an elder, that's part of the very job description you have. It's going to be a continual battle. Paul, what time do you want me to go on to?

I lost track of when I started. We've got about an hour and a half. Okay. So another two hours and I should bind it up. Go to 11. Go to 11.

[ 21 : 01 ] Go to 11. Okay. So that's the situation in Ephesus. There's this end time struggle going on within the church that's going to go on until Christ returns.

That's the situation Paul is facing. And his solution is, well I think it's twofold. We'll come to the second one later on today. But a fundamental part of the solution is creating an authority structure within the church.

Creating a hierarchy. hierarchy. Now again we have to be careful when we talk about hierarchies here. Clearly we're not talking about a priestly hierarchy. You look at early church history I think church government very very quickly starts to lean in an inappropriate direction in the early church. We don't have a priestly hierarchy. All have direct access to God the Father by Christ the Son through the whole work of the Holy Spirit. What we have is a hierarchy designed to protect the church from internal enemies and dangers as here in Ephesus.

A comment to make at this point I think an important comment. Notice of course and I think we have to constantly remind ourselves of this today that Paul's solution to the problems in Ephesus is a churchly solution.

[ 22 : 26 ] Paul does not look outside the church to solve the problems for Ephesus. He doesn't look to free floating Christian leaders or parachurch ministries to solve the problems of the church.

The church is to appoint men from within her own ranks to do this. I think we often know we have the mindset today denominations are a bad thing and they're divisive.

Therefore the solution to our problem is we form parachurch organizations that we can all join and belong to. Now parachurch organizations have their strength. I draw my pay stub from one of them. Seminary is a parachurch organization but the problems of the church can only be solved it seems to me Paul is saying from within the church herself.

The church is to appoint men from within her own ranks. Why is that? I think the church is where Christian character is formed for Paul. Where is it that people grow as Christians?

[ 23 : 33 ] They grow in their local church setting where the word is preached, where the sacraments are administered and they grow in this church which as Paul says elsewhere is to walk in good works that have been prepared beforehand.

The church is the place where Christians grow together, where their character is formed. Everything else is just so much icing on the cake if you like but the cake itself is the church.

It's where there is real discipling. It's where individuals grow together to spiritual maturity. It's like sport. The best way to become better at any sport ultimately is to play it.

There are plenty of disciplines associated with, you know, well rugby would be one example but you know that my chosen love really the last few years has been running.

My son's a runner, I've done a bit of running myself. How do you get good at running? You just have to go out and run. There are certain other things you do, stretching etc. etc. But basically you become a better runner by running.

[ 24 : 41 ] That's the only way of doing it. How do you become a Christian of character? You need to be engaged in life as a Christian. And what is the Christian life first and foremost?

It's a churchly life. The church is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is the body of Christ. It's the primary place of God's presence and activity through the world today.

Paul's language about the church really points to the sum, the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts, isn't it? The hand needs the foot. When he's talking in Corinthians about the temple of the Holy Spirit, by and large he's talking about the church as a whole, not about individual members within the church.

And elders and deacons are to be those who have been schooled in the church and have come to develop the virtues Paul describes here. I think one way of looking at the role of elders and deacons is to say they are to represent aspirational models for congregations.

What do you want in an elder? You don't want somebody who's perfect, but you want somebody who embodies what mature Christianity looks like. You want the elder to set the standard for where you would like everybody in the congregation ultimately to grow to.

[ 26 : 05 ] I'm going to use this analogous in some ways to the confession. I'm going to say later on the great thing about having a confession is not everybody is going to believe every jot and tittle of the confession when they become a member of the church.

Every elder has to do so. Why? Because they are meant to represent that to which individuals are to aspire within the church.

So that brings us then to the qualifications for eldership that Paul talks about. There's a remarkable similarity in many ways between elders and deacons, the list of qualifications.

The key distinguishing feature of course is that the overseer is to have competence to teach. Other than that, by and large, they are to represent, we might say, mature, stable Christian life.

They are meant to be moderate in temperament. Very important. Having described elders as the stormtroopers of the end times in the church, you don't want an elder whose first instinct is to reach for his sidearm and start shooting bullets at people.

[ 27 : 08 ] The elder needs to know that not every hill is worth dying on. Not every issue raised is the reformation all over again. That's why I think Paul points by and large towards older men holding the position of eldership.

Because age by and large does give perspective. I found once, it's funny, you pass 40 and then my father died. That gives you, first of all, passing 40, you begin to think, well, maybe I'm well over halfway now.

And then your father dies and you think, wow, people I know die. People I knew when they were young die. Life suddenly starts to shorten and you begin to realize, well, maybe, maybe, God willing, I've got 30, 35 years left.

Maybe I could be hit by a bus. I believe he could push me under a bus when we leave here tonight. Maybe I've got 30, 35 years left. When you see life as short, you really begin to think, well, I see that that's a problem, but frankly, I don't have the time left to spend on that issue.

It's just not that important. Moderate temperaments tend to reflect maturity, I think. The elder needs to know that not every hill is worth dying on.

[ 28 : 23 ] An elder is to have personal integrity. They're not to be greedy, they're to be trustworthy with money. It's interesting, the household language that Paul uses in the pastoral epistles.

He uses a lot of terms for the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit. When he's starting to think pastorally in the pastoral epistles, household language comes in. We might say it's his equivalent, if you like, of the language of management theory, if you like.

He's starting to think, what sort of person would be a good elder, the sort of person who runs his own household well and with integrity.

I was talking to somebody just last week who had to ask, a couple of years ago, had to ask a long standing elder to step down from the eldership in his church. Not because this man had done anything morally wrong, but his marriage was a train wreck.

And the bottom line was, if you can't manage your own household, you can't you're not qualified to be an elder. It doesn't mean you're not a Christian, it doesn't mean you can't take the Lord's supper, it doesn't mean you're going to be excommunicated. But household management is an important part because seeing how a man runs his household gives you key insights into how he operates.

[ 29 : 39 ] If a man hasn't got the backbone to stand up to his own kids, he'll never have the backbone to stand up to somebody who's causing problems in the church. And I think it clarifies the language when Paul talks about elders being gentle, I think we need to hold gentleness within the context of that kind of household management idea.

Gentleness does not mean spinelessness. To say a man who manages his own household well has inevitably had to stand up to his own kids.

He's inevitably had to take the lead on something. He's inevitably had to make a difficult decision that may have made him a bit unpopular even within his own household. Precisely the same kind of strengths are needed leading the church.

So as you read the past epistles, take note of the household language that Paul uses. I think it's very important for getting an understanding of exactly what he's trying to get at in terms of eldership.

Must have a solid grasp of the gospel. Must be knowledgeable about the gospel and about the scriptures.

[ 30 : 51 ] Must be able to apply it to people. And I think it kicks in with what I'm going to say later about confessions. Romans 16 of course makes it clear that the divisive people in the church are those who've departed from the teaching.

The non-doctrinal, the anti-doctrinal, the divisively heterodox! The divisively heterodox ones. An elder's got to have a solid grasp of the gospel because that's where part of the struggle is going to be. Part of the struggle is going to be a doctrinal one and you have to have men on the eldership who can spot that.

My own experience, as limited as it is, has taught me that institutions and churches generally don't go bad because liberal people take over.

They go bad because the men in charge don't have that combination of a solid grasp of the gospel and firmness of purpose. If you have firmness of purpose and no grasp of the gospel, it's a disaster. You have a good grasp of the gospel but you're never prepared to act firmly, it creates all manner of problems. I might add to that as well, my observation is that generally speaking when a problem occurs, it's better to deal with it sooner rather than later.

[ 32 : 00 ] Ignoring a problem generally means it's simply going to get worse and worse until finally you have to take really drastic action where perhaps a gentle word of rebuke right at the start might have reset the person on the right pathway.

Must not be new converts, verses 6 and 10. Too much too soon can be too great a temptation. I think that's in part because of course the leaders of churches have much higher profiles than others.

The fall of a leader is that much more catastrophic than the fall of a member. When I was at university, I sat for two and a half years under the ministry of Roy Clements.

I guess many of you will remember the name Roy Clements. Great preacher. Learned probably more theology and more about preaching from just sitting and listening to Roy Clements than from anybody else.

In fact the other week I started to preach through Malachi and I dropped Paul a note and said what do you recommend I read? And he said well the best thing is it is Roy Clements' sermons on Malachi. I can't get them now of course because all of his stuff is out of print.

[ 33 : 08 ] Ran off, left his wife, ran off with another man, absolute disaster. I suspect that that kind of thing happens fairly regularly in the church and nobody notices. But when it happens to Roy Clements, it's absolutely disastrous.

Catastrophic PR disaster. Is it Cardinal O'Connor? Cardinal O'Brien. The disaster that is Cardinal O'Brien at this point.

What a mess. Church leaders have a much higher profile and therefore it's important that we don't appoint somebody too early to that kind of position.

When a church leader falls, the whole church is shamed. The whole church is shamed. Then fifthly, they must have good reputations even with outsiders.

That's an interesting one. Elders are part of the evangelistic witness of the church. The church is to be different. But outsiders should be able to see that we take our testimony seriously.

[ 34 : 17 ] And a number of the qualifications here I think sort of connect to this good reputation with outsiders. Husband of one wife for example. I don't think Paul is saying that you've got to be married and have a wife to be an elder.

I think what he's saying is if you are married you've got to be a one man woman. You're not somebody who's sleeping around or sorry? Sorry. One woman man. One man woman.

Yeah. Don't Twitter that. It won't work well on Twitter. I'll get back. I'll be arrested at the airport by OPC central office or something if I get off the plane. Yeah.

There was me thinking that you were going to point out some that I was misunderstanding Paul there by just sheer stupidity. You've got to be a one woman man. It's all part of having a good reputation with those outside.

I would say that's one of the things that churches and presbyteries don't often do very well. I'm on the candidates committee in Philadelphia. We rarely ask guys about what does your neighbour think about you?

[ 35 : 18 ] What sort of reputation do you have in the community? Do you know your neighbours? I noticed that the Philadelphia presbytery of the PCA they actually now ask candidates to get a reference from a neighbour preferably I think a non-Christian neighbour just to say this person's a decent member of the community he's helpful he's polite he has good reputation.

It's a qualification for eldership good reputation with outsiders it's there in the list it's as important if you like as anything else. In short then the offices of the church are to model in life and doctrine that to which all Christians should aspire and it should be visible to all those in the church and those outside.

I think we'll make some general comments now about this to sort of backtrack and offer some reflections. Notice above all that Paul's focus in these offices is on character.

Character issues not technical competencies. Yes the elder's got to be able to teach but beyond that Paul is really interested in character. A number of things I think we can infer from that.

We can actually go back to the problems in Ephesus. So what's the root of the problems in Ephesus? Well ultimately they're not technical problems. That's why I think Paul does not spend a lot of time talking about technique here.

[ 36 : 48 ] You've got these problems so these are the techniques you need to apply. These are the management theories that you need to apply in order to solve these problems. If a pipe is leaking in your house you call a competent plumber to fix it.

You don't worry about whether he's the husband of one wife. You don't worry about whether well you might worry that he's got good reputation with others in terms of his plumbing but by and large you don't worry if his neighbours like him.

The only question in your mind is can he fix the pipe? That's not what Paul is doing here. The primary concern for Paul seems to me to be a moral and ethical one.

False teaching and inappropriate behaviour. The answer to them is installing men of the right character in the right places. It's as simple as that. It's amazing how many books are written about how to make the church work.

Paul does it in a single chapter in 1 Timothy chapter 3. Find ordinary boring guys of good reputation within and without the church and put them in the right positions.

[ 37 : 56 ] If you like give them those positions of influence where their good character and their grasp of the gospel can be put to great effect within the church.

It's quite counter-cultural. We routinely separate of course character and competence in the wider culture. We're all aware that technical brilliance is no reflection of character.

From Wagner and Chopin down to modern day rock music the world of arts and entertainment routinely separates between the character of a person and the beauty of their products.

It's increasing true in the world of politics. If a man's wife can't trust him why should we be asked to trust him? That argument doesn't carry any weight these days.

Nobody cares about that argument anymore. I'm almost inclined to say there's been a dangerous reverse in our culture that competence has become character to a large extent.

[ 38 : 57 ] Think about Michael Jackson. I was amused. Somebody said on the news in America they said you know you're in trouble when somebody has to use the phrase everybody is innocent until proven guilty at your memorial service.

That's a problem when that comes up. Well Michael Jackson Roman Polanski these are men well in Roman Polanski's case we know he did it in Michael Jackson's case under serious suspicion of horrible crimes against children.

But because they produce works of art that some people like we give them a pass culturally.

Competence has come to replace character.

Steve Jobs would be another guy a messianic figure in death. He's actually just a ruthless businessman. He's a ruthless businessman. And yet he has this sort of messianic status when he dies.

No reflection on his character at all. And I think we've got to be very careful in the church that we don't allow that attitude to seep in. Seeping into the Corinthian church with their factionalism.

[ 40 : 05 ] We have to keep I think a single-minded focus when we're looking towards appointing men as elders and ministers. Character is absolutely critical to that process and that decision.

So, summary then. Summarise what I've said. Problems in the church, whether they're moral or theological, the answer is the same for Paul.

Appoint elders. You need men who command respect to have authority within the church to deal with these issues.

What's the primary constituent of an elder? It's his character. There are technical things they've got. He's competent to teach. That's a technical quality. I suspect there's also a character dimension to that for Paul as well.

His teaching would also be the example he sets to some extent. Character is king. And also remember that the public reputation of the church is important.

[ 41 : 14 ] Even today, I think even today in the context we live in, the public reputation of the church, even as the world gets more and more hostile, is important. Paul says, you know, may your good deeds be evident to all so that when people insult you and they throw slanders at you, everybody will know that they're slanders.

Don't give them any evidence of that this is the case. And finally, when asking who is sufficient for these things, I think we need to remember that what Paul is asking for here is not perfection, he's just asking for a decent degree of Christian maturity.

I have heard these passages read, you know, who's sufficient for these things? Because nobody can achieve perfection in these areas, therefore, we shouldn't have a hierarchy. I don't think Paul's asking for that.

Paul's basically saying it decent. Vanilla men, people who are not controversial, notorious, who are just sort of boring, ordinary members of the church, who embody in the lives, who embody in the way they run their households, who embody in what they say and how they teach, the kind of thing to which all Christians should aspire.

pretty much the end there, Paul. I'm opening up for discussion. We break into small groups, or prayer ministry.

[ 42 : 44 ] Comments, questions? Richard. Martin. This is a question. I'm very much taking on forward what you say about that character.

I'm interested that you said, kind of in passing, that there's a word of self-pies that helps all the older men. What do you do? We're at the young church in New York.

What do you do when you look back at church and you think we're all to have a number to qualify? I don't know. When is the right to say that because of who we are we're going to have to achieve a bit lower than we would like to do?

Well, I think that, first of all, it says a general point, I never want to build my general principles on exceptional circumstances. Yesterday I gave my talk on confessions and suddenly came up to me afterwards and said, what about ten believers meeting in Iran under persecution?

Some are Baptists and some are Presbyterians. Should they really be jamming the Westminster Confession? Well, there's exceptional circumstances. And I think Paul allows for that. When he says, Timothy's a young guy.

[ 43 : 52 ] Timothy's the one man that Paul seems to be able to trust at this point to get the job done in Ephesus. And he says, let no man despise you because of your youth. So I think what Paul is saying there is, age would be the norm, but you don't have to be an older guy.

I don't think any of those characteristics are monopolies of older guys. I know young guys who manage their households well. I know you and Kate, you manage your household well.

So I don't think that, I think Paul is saying that the norm is that they'll be older, but it's not exclusively the case. And then when you're in a church you've got to use what the Lord has given you. And it may well be that there is nobody in your congregation you can bring on as an elder at the moment, in which case you've got to think about training them.

Find the guys who have potential. Maybe they've got the character traits but they're not able to teach at this point. Try to train them, sit with them, talk them through things, see if you can build them up to where they would be qualified to be elders.

So I think there are ways of doing it. One of the odd things that always struck me in churches, and it's the same in America, is it's interesting to me that a church will call a man in his twenties as a minister, who would never dream of calling a man in his twenties as a man.

[ 45 : 08 ] That seems to me to be a strange inversion. You make the guy who's most influential in the church, the young guy, but you've really got to be in your mid-thirties or older to be considered for ruling eldership.

I'm not quite sure why that is the case, but that strikes me as odd and something we need to reflect upon. Is that the helpful answer? Does it help in not setting the thing that you also have the word overseer, which is another parallel with elder, so that it's possible to have characteristics and characteristics to make you an overseer, even if you're not actually old?

Yeah. And of course, Paul lives in a culture where, for him, age is respected. We now live in a culture where age is not respected, and we need to take that into account as well when we're thinking of these things.

The overseer gets out of the age implication, but I still think when Paul has a good reputation with those outside, those qualifications by and large point you towards an older person, but I don't think they're monopolized by older people.

How about Hells to Die On? How do you work that out? How do you That's a tough one.

[ 46 : 39 ] It's a different one to deal with in the abstract, because some issues may be Hells to Die in certain circumstances because they represent something much wider. A recent example would be the intinction debate in the PCA.

This take communion by dipping it in. There's a sense in which I'm not sure that that's a hill to die on, except the fact that it seems to me to plug into a much wider trend of other things that are going on, which might make that particular instance, that's the point at which we've got to fight this more general overthrowing of confessional standards.

But I would say within a local congregation, to what extent is it impacting the gospel? To what extent is it impacting the central truths of the faith? To what extent is this issue causing serious division?

Do we have to address it because it's causing division? An issue not to fight on for me would be women's head coverings, for example. If somebody arrived in my church and said women have got their heads covered in worship, I would say if you hold that view, probably our church is not the one you should attend.

I'm not going to bring emotion from the session to start forcing that on people. Though you should feel free to wear a head covering if that's what your unconscious requires you to do. don't do it.

[ 48 : 04 ] I'm not able to teach this mind. I mean, we've always seen some of your late sessions, but you said it more likely, I suppose people can be able to preach.

Right. something in practice, I don't see that as meaning that you're able to preach. I think all elders should be able to take a Sunday school class. All elders should be able to sit one-on-one with individuals in the congregation and explain the word more fully to them.

So I see Paul there as speaking quite broadly about teaching rather than just narrowly in terms of pulpit ministry. In other words, not everybody who's ordained as an elder is going to be a minister.

That's how I would read that. And I think that's historically how it has been typically understood. There are elders who get a point and you think, man, they can't teach. And the bottom line is they shouldn't be elders at that point. Could you just say something about the significance and what the point is of hospitality being increased?

[ 49 : 16 ] Whether that's to be focused towards the church or outside? That's interesting. What's the significance or what the status?

Yeah. Respectable, hospitable, able to teach. I have always understood that as really referring to the church as opening your house up to the saints.

I want to go and look at some commentaries and see if it's legitimate to have it that narrowly. But I've always assumed that that meant the elder was somebody whose house was to be open. The saints were to have people around for lunch. These days it says having people around for lunch on Sundays or opening your house during the week. And I think that's important because it's a work of mercy in some ways towards people who might be lonely or lacking food. I think it's important in that it shows, it allows people to see how the elder operates within his own home. Is he a good household manager? I think that the life of the elder should be relatively transparent on that front.

[ 50 : 21 ] And in some ways it's of a piece with what Paul is saying there. It fits with everything else. You can imagine somebody who has all those other characteristics would inevitably be hospitable. So hospitality is an important part of the elder's role.

My wife and I, once a month we open our house for all the Westminster students and their wives who are at our church. We've divided the hospitality among the elders so that everybody gets covered by somebody if you like.

And it has struck me that the, well, Simon and Matthew are graduates of Sunday night at the Truman's for table talk I guess. And I've got some, the feedback I've had over the years is that sometimes that has been some of the most influential time for some of the students because they've actually seen you in a relaxed mode, hanging out, opening your house, being kind to people, and that's made more of an impression in some ways than many of the things that have been said from the pulpit.

I don't know if you can confirm that Matthew, you might say that's absolute rubbish, we hated it. Truman's wife cooking was terrible, in which case I will immediately report it to my wife. Oh, you were in Stacker Carstens time, yeah, we inherited it from Stacker Carstens.

Yeah, we inherited. Simon would have, you would have been in my house, would you Simon? Hospitality, I can care. Oh, I want to assure you, we've recently become really hospitable.

[ 51 : 44 ] people. I don't want to be the grit of the oyster, but these are qualifications for help, so it's also that it's something that should be displayed before they become a child.

So maybe it's easier to think of it, what is lacking if somebody doesn't display that? Well, I would say, again, I would go back to the, I would give a practical answer to that, if you've got a guy in the congregation and you think, you know, he's got a lot of the characteristics of being an elder, and he may not have them all, but I really think he's got potential, I see no problem in elder training.

Yeah, I want to come around and check out your wife's cooking, just to see if you're, but I think we can be very passive sometimes in the way we think about elders.

We're looking for the guys who are already qualified, whereas actually the churches are full of a lot of decent guys, some of whom don't have some of these qualities because nobody said to them, you just need to be a bit more hospitable, or you need to work on this a bit.

I see no problem in elder training whatsoever, it's just another aspect of discipleship in the local church. In fact, I was talking to Paul last night, and we were trying to expand the session at my church, mainly because I'm part-time and the church has grown a bit and we desperately need it, at least one if not two more guys.

[ 53 : 16 ] The problem is I look at the congregation, at the moment there aren't many options, we've probably got to grab somebody and train them. partly by structure, yeah.

I confess I do not understand in 21st century prison what a deacon does. Am I allowed to ask for that? Sure. Well, I can tell you what a deacon does in the OPC.

In the OPC, a deacon is somebody who's really looking after what I would say is the physical welfare of the congregation. We often get, I'll get an email saying person X in the congregation has got a big medical bill and they can't make it, or the car's broken down, or they can't make their food

bill this week.

What do we do? I'm a big, my management style has always been when it is to be delegate, and it's the same in the church. We've sent it to the deacons, we've said to the deacons, the deacons have a certain amount of money in the budget, and they're able to use that to alleviate hardship in the congregation, and on occasion in the neighborhood.

We had, when the hurricane passed over, November I think, we had a hurricane go through, and one of the ladies nearby the church, her power was knocked out, she's not in the church, but she called us desperately, I've got no power, been out of power for three weeks, is anything you can do?

[ 54 : 49 ] Well the church brought a generator that we then loaned her, part of being good reputation with outsiders, I would see that. So deacons really deal with the material aspects.

We take our cue from the appointment of, there's some debate about whether those appointed acts to wait on tables are deacons or not, but we take the sort of broad principle from there and say the deacons are there to deal with the material aspects of pastoral care, so that the elders can focus on the spiritual aspects of pastoral care.

It's not, one of the things that I've noticed in some churches is that deacons, it's often seen as a kind of training ground for elders, we make you a deacon and if you work out we'll make you an elder. That's not how we treat it, we treat it as a separate office with its own honour and integrity and its own job description which is the material alleviation of hardship within the congregation. So that's how the OPC understands it. I think you'd look at how they treat other people.

I think you'd look at how they present themselves. I mean if they turn up as scruffy as this, you know, you'd wonder, well what's going on? No, I think that we all know, we all know single guys who have their lives up together and we all know single guys who their lives are a disaster.

[ 56 : 33 ] It's not an exact science but I'm saying I'm thinking of probably give you a, you know, if somebody walks in, if you get to know somebody, you'd soon get an idea as to whether, yeah, do they organise their lives well?

You know, do they get to work on time? Do they pay their bills on time? Do they go and get drunk every night? Do they keep themselves, you know, physically clean? They're all sort of telltale signs I think that allow you to see what principles Paul's thinking about here apply to the life of a single individual.

And of course I had in my notes, I didn't mention them, you know, the church is full of single men who have remarkable ministries. Paul probably himself, Augustine certainly after his conversion, John Stark, William Steele.

So, I definitely don't think Paul is disqualifying single guys from ministry. I think you just have to transpose what he's saying there into a bachelor context.

Yeah? This first one, so Paul's writing to Timothy and saying that there seems to be lots of people aspiring to this.

[ 57 : 44 ] Is that specific to the situation episodes or is it more likely to be the case that in our churches there are going to be people who are going to aspire and people we're going to have to look for?

Good question. Well, I think when Paul says here is a trustworthy saying, he's often referring it seems to me to something that's doing the rounds. Here's a trustworthy saying. You've heard this before.

So, probably Paul isn't speaking specifically about Ephesus. It's just generally thought that a man who wants to be an elder, that's an honourable desire to have. So, in our churches, we're both going to have to look at people but they're likely are people aspiring to the office.

The key there is you've got to make sure the internal call does not constitute, an external call. Just because God tells you when you're washing the dishes that you've got to do a certain job, doesn't mean that you should do it.

That's an illusion. You got it. That's that. Nothing. The numbers here were very confident.

[ 58 : 49 ] We had a couple months here. Where the speaker was speaking on teaching. And what he had been interested to provide the net. And what he called the black teacher. was a lot of things.

And I know there's lots of facts that, which I'm sure that given your introduction, you would say that you've got elders and confession one verse. But I, speaking with that one, for example, I've heard it many times.

But I did it a much more informal way, which is kind of us gossiping the gospel, obviously, in the way you pass it on. Now, I think here's what your answer would be, but I'm wondering how would you kind of nail down that you can't justify that.

That's just, we need to be just passing the gospel in forming, finding people to open the right way. And that's what they're saying. Are you wanting me to talk about office or about confession there? Well, I would say when he talked about reliable men there, I've heard that kind of language before, when he's talking about overseers. And it seems to me he's writing again to Timothy.

[ 59 : 54 ] In Timothy's mind, the synapses are going to fire and he's going to think about reliable men. I don't think he's necessarily saying there that we shouldn't be telling each other the gospel, but get reliable men to pass on what I've told you.

That's essentially what he's saying in 1 Timothy chapter 3, it seems to me. So that's how I would respond to that. He's also saying that the appointment, appointing a medal should constantly be on the radar.

Yeah. So I think you look at lots of situations where you have the same eldership. Very often they come on as young men and they stay in elders for 30 years. And it works.

It works well. But then you have all elders in their 60s and 70s. And a church that's not appointed elders in 20 or 30 to that. That's quite often the case of Presbyterian churches in the UK.

And so how do we build that into the elders' DNA that we are constantly looking for men to be?

Well, yeah, there's a practical problem there of course because the more elders you have, the less efficient the session will be.

[ 61 : 00 ] I don't know how these guys in big churches, Derek Thomas, how many elders have you all got? 70 elders. 70 elders? How do you work? Well, what happens is we have a committee and people cycle on and off the committee.

that's not going to be a problem that you and I likely wrestle with any time soon. Believe me, Paul, you're not going to wrestle with any time soon.

But it's one of the arguments for term eldership, that some churches have term eldership. Now, I'm reliably informed by our PTI, Westminster affiliate, that the only good reason for having term eldership is allowing you to conveniently get rid of that awkward elder you want to get rid of at a certain point in time.

But it's an interesting question. Let's just say you're a young church and you're 0.5 elders and you never really grow beyond the size you are, but those elders get older and older and older.

That's an interesting question. I'm not quite sure what the answer to that is. Maybe telling, maybe at some point having a hard conversation with some of the older elders when they're beginning to function less efficiently.

[ 62 : 10 ] The hard conversation that it's time to step down. 100. 100. Ironically, I was asking a question about what's the basis for term elders?

Am I right that it was John Knox who first came up with the idea of term elders? don't know about Knox. I would say there is no theological basis for term eldership.

I don't think you can get it from scripture. I think it's purely a practical move. Whether it's unbiblical, I don't know. It seems to me to be non-biblical. Whether it contradicts a biblical principle, I'm not quite sure I'd go that far, but Paul doesn't seem to me to say appoint men and then get them to cycle off in a couple of years' time.

So there are congregations in the OPC that have term eldership. The OPC church in Wilmington in Delaware has term eldership. Where that becomes problematic is that when elders have to make tough decisions and have to stand for re-election, it somewhat weakens, it makes the elders more accountable, but it also somewhat weakens their position in terms of authority, I think.

I know a church in Canada where some of those have to serve as church. I think the Canadian Reformed have term eldership.

[ 63 : 45 ] They're in Dutch origin, of course. Vote for Pedro kind of thing.

We would try to avoid competitive elections. What would happen is that we would bring one name to the congregation and do you want this man or don't you?

So it's not, here are two names, which of them do you prefer? I think we would only ever bring one name at a time. Or if we brought more than one, it wouldn't be one versus the other, it would be here are two guys, we think they're both qualified and would be separate votes on each of them.

my father-in-law is an elder in the Dutch form church and so he comes up every three years and he's always being re-elected which means whoever gets to stand again with him always loses. it's a humbling experience. I think Mitch doesn't like it so much, he thinks he's a thing he more like a buddy. Yeah, Paul, you asked a question earlier about a great Sunday.

[ 65 : 01 ] How does the diet mean? And I probably answered that you decided on the issue to fight. My think he took the health to die on the combination of priority issue and the spread of the follows.

I think so.

I would also add a certain hierarchical aspect to it as well. There might be issues that come up among the elders. They need to be dealt with. That wouldn't need to be dealt with among the congregation because the level of subscriptions, the confession for an elder is much stricter and higher.

I'm going to talk about that a little bit later, but I think that would also be a factor. That one would tolerate views among congregants that one would not tolerate among elders. So that too would be a factor in it.

I was thinking about hills to die on it and the analogy is with the military. If you want to withdraw from the hill for strategic or tactical reasons, if you do that, you want to inflict some damage on the enemy first.

[ 66 : 18 ] There is a danger in what we're talking about that you say it doesn't matter and therefore we won't talk about it. But it doesn't matter. You have to make the case even if you're not going to push it as a discipline.

You can't just abandon the ground without creating the case. I'm saying we live on this. We're living on a church which says actually only five or six things really matter.

So justification by faith really matters. You know the kind of minimalistic stuff. And so that is going to look different for a person between the churches.

Well I'm going to talk about that later. There is a certain ineradicable complexity to Christian orthodoxy that the church has to hold to.

It's okay for individual believers perhaps in the church to be a bit woolly on one or two points but the church as a whole has to hold to a pretty complex set of doctrines. Steve Chalk is a great example.

I think it's a fairly simple one.

[ 67 : 17 ] Ten years ago he was denying penal substitution. Now he's affirming gay marriage.

There is a connection between those two things. Denial of penal substitution ultimately requires if you're being consistent a revision of one's understanding of sin etc.

So you can see that the one ultimately over time flows from the other. Whereas a disagreement over baptism may not carry quite that same theological momentum to it.

These are issues of course where I think again one thinks of the church. Elders if you say to me okay Carl which are the hills to die on at your church? I would say well let me call my elders and I'd want to do a corporate discussion and get their wisdom from other guys.

I think that's another thing that Paul enables us to do here that it isn't a one man show it isn't me making a decision about the chills and the dial. It's a part of the discussion of the session and the presbytery.

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