

How to Find Elders & Deacons  
and What to Do with Them When You Get Them

a sermon on Titus 1.5-9  
by David C. Mauldin  
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

It's that time of year again – that time when we as a congregation undertake a task critical to our mission and our survival as a congregation. In two weeks we will elect a new class of officers – a new crop of elders and deacons – whom we entrust with the job of leading us. No, we do not entrust them with the ministry of the church. That belongs, inalienably, to every believer who calls Westminster home. The officers set the tone and the priorities. They handle the details, like budgets and property. And hopefully, if we choose good leaders and they do what they are supposed to do, they show us the way and we follow.

The election is in two weeks, so that makes this hunting season. The congregational nominating committee – seven souls, brave and true; three elected by the session, four elected by the congregation, plus the pastor as a non-voting member of the team – we are on the prowl. Whom has God gifted and called to leadership? How easy the job would be if (a) God identified his choices by shrouding them in a glowing white light, a visible veil of holiness, so that we could all see it; or (b) if everyone we asked to serve said yes. Unfortunately for the committee – and the congregation – neither God nor prospective officers are so cooperative.

Some people have good reasons to say no. There is nothing wrong with saying no when you face a conflict of priorities. No one can say yes to everything – though some try. I often have to say no to a good opportunity that I know I would enjoy, because I am already involved with other things. The real test each of us faces when the committee comes calling is: What are those other things, and which things are more important?

As for God, well, I cannot claim to know the mind of God, but rarely does God make things that easy. He has given us a measure of wisdom and discernment, and he expects us to use them. I do believe God is at work behind the scenes. Sometimes God calls the usual suspects – elders and deacons who are such old hands most people assumed they were already on the session or active with the deacons. Sometimes God surprises us. He has given us discernment, and he has given us instructions in scripture. We do well to pay attention to what he says there.

Several passages of scripture speak directly to the question of what makes a good elder or deacon. We will glance at a couple of others, but our primary text this morning is

from Paul's letter to Titus. You may not be aware that scholars hotly debate whether this letter was actually written by Paul, sometime in the 60s, or by someone much later who invoked Paul's authority by signing his name to it. The main argument against Paul being the author is some people believe the church polity we see in the letter would only have developed much later. I'm not sure of that. First, the churches Paul started had to have some structure to them. You get a group of people together for any length of time, and some sort of order begins to emerge. It makes sense that Paul modeled the polity of his churches after the model he knew from the synagogue, which was led by elders. Second, when Paul uses a word, such as the word *bishop* in this passage, he does not necessarily have in mind what a Catholic or Episcopalian in our day thinks of when they hear that word. *Bishop* translates the Greek word *episcopos*, which means "overseer." Maybe all Paul meant by it was a church leader. Presbyterians have always assumed he meant something like a pastor.

For these reasons, I read the letter to Titus as an authentic letter of Paul. A good case can be made for Paul, and I see no compelling reason this should not be so. Here is the situation then: Paul, as you know, was a missionary. He traveled all around the eastern Mediterranean preaching and starting churches. He had a number of capable partners, such as Barnabas, and lieutenants, such as Luke, Timothy, and Titus. Paul could not be everywhere and do everything, so he dispatched these trusted colleagues to handle important tasks. In this case, Paul had been on the island of Crete. He had to leave before he was satisfied the churches were in good order. So he left Titus behind. In this letter Paul issues his orders: appoint elders in the churches. And he tells Titus what sort of person makes a good elder.

Character counts. If we compare Paul's instructions to Titus with those in 1 Timothy and in the book of Acts, two qualities stand out above all others: Christian maturity and good character. Those are essential. Without them a person cannot be an effective church leader. He or she is in fact more likely to do harm than good. Christian maturity and good character. We might want elders who are brilliant. Certainly we want them to be informed about scripture and theology. If they are punctual and efficient, so much the better. Good elders I have known have been generous, well-organized, self-motivated, knowledgeable in a specialized field (such as education or finance). They have known how to organize and motivate people. Often elders are chosen because they are leaders outside the church. They are managers, administrators, business executives. In other words, they know how to get things done. Leadership comes naturally, and since that is their gift, they use it in service to Christ in his church. There is nothing wrong with that, and there is nothing wrong with any of the positive qualities we look for in potential elders or deacons. But we must always remember the qualities God considers primary.

Look at what Paul told Titus. Who makes a good elder? Someone of good character, faithful in marriage, a good family person – although this by no means excludes single

persons. Jesus was single, and based on what we know, so was Paul! What else? Not arrogant. Not quick-tempered. Not a drunk or violent or greedy. But rather, hospitable, good, and self-controlled. Finally, sound in doctrine.

Let me say a quick word about that last one. You do not need to be a skilled theologian to be a good elder. You do not have to know the Bible forward and backward. It would be nice, but not essential. Here is what I think “sound in doctrine” means in our context at Westminster: Can you say the Apostles’ Creed with a sincere and joyful conscience? Can you explain what it means to a child? Also, Westminster has long been a member of the Confessing Church Movement, which simply means that we affirm three key truths of the Christian faith that we believe are under attack in our culture and in the Presbyterian denomination today. These three are: (1) The authority of scripture – the Bible tells us what to believe and do. (2) Traditional morality – that is, sex only within the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. (3) The unique importance of Jesus Christ in salvation. Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me.” This means that all who are saved to eternal life are saved by Christ and not in some other way. It does not mean Christ may not save many who were never church members. That’s up to him. Salvation is always in God’s hands, never ours. We do not believe we are tying God’s hands when we say this, but rather affirming simply what Jesus said. He is the only way to God.

If you are in basic agreement with these three points, and you can make the Apostles’ Creed your own, and you understand it well enough to explain it to a child, I’d say you meet the criteria of sound doctrine. Of course, that’s only the foundation. Hopefully your understanding grows and grows. We need elders and deacons who know what Christianity teaches and why. In fact, every believer ought to know that. Every believer ought to meet the minimum standard for sound doctrine, but certainly every elder must.

OK, those are the requirements laid down in our scripture reading. Compare them to the requirements in 1 Timothy 3 [2-12]. As I read this, listen for requirements that describe the maturity or character of the leader. See how many you can find about other things:

Now a bishop [remember this means overseer, so it may simply mean a church leader – a pastor or an elder] must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil; moreover he must be

well thought of by outsiders, or he may fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain; they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then if they prove themselves blameless let them serve as deacons. The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husband of one wife, and let them manage their children and their households well.

Did you hear anything that wasn't about maturity or character? The only things I picked up were "apt teacher" and "holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." That's sound doctrine again. Christian maturity and good character are so important, they seem to be about the only requirements for officers.

The situation does not change when we read what the apostles told the church when the first deacons were selected: "Pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty" [Acts 6.3]. Character and maturity again. In the New Testament, by the way, the office of deacon was not limited to men. We know of a woman named Phoebe who was a deacon in Rome [Romans 16.1]. When these passages use the masculine, they use it in the old inclusive sense that covered both men and women. English has changed over the last generation, but ancient Greek stays the same. Of course, in Acts, the apostles asked for and got seven men. The other passages ought not be read to exclude women serving when they say "man" or "he."

We do one thing differently from Paul's instructions to Titus. Paul told Titus to *appoint* elders. We have a congregational election. Can you imagine if we had someone to appoint them? I wonder if the Christians in Crete had the option to refuse. Titus shows up one Sunday morning and says, "You three are the elders for this church. I've prayed about it. I've thought about it. Paul said, do it. So, you three." And then one or two of them start to weasel, "What about Jason or Telemachus over there? Wouldn't they be better? Why me?" Or even, "Titus, I appreciate your vote of confidence, but you must have heard God wrong. I'm no elder." I suspect that in that time and place, the honor of being asked to be an elder was so great, no one refused.

Maybe that should be true today. Woodrow Wilson, our 28<sup>th</sup> President, was the son of a Presbyterian minister. He earned a law degree and was admitted to the bar. He earned a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins. He was President of Princeton University, Governor of New Jersey, and a two-term President of the United States. As President he pushed through legislation against child labor. He kept the country out of World War I for three years, then guided it through to victory. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919. Near the end of his life, a reporter asked him to name his greatest honor. His answer

still has the power to shock: "The greatest honor ever bestowed upon me was my election to be an elder in the Presbyterian Church" [Charles Elliott "The Officer's Calling," in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, April 8, 1985].

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Once we find our officers, what do we ask them to do? Deacons care for people, especially the sick, the grieving, the lonely, and those in need. That's straightforward. At Westminster our deacons follow the practice recommended for all Presbyterian churches of extending communion to our homebound members.

What about elders? Last Sunday you could feel a tangible reaction from the congregation when I announced that at the coming congregational meeting, the session would ask you to reduce the number of elders in active service on the session from twelve to nine. What was that reaction? Surprise? Confusion? Fear? A little of all three? You probably wondered what is behind the change and most of you probably guessed it. Twelve elders plus six deacons equals eighteen active officers at any one time. It is difficult for us to get that many qualified persons willing to serve. That's a simple fact. How should we interpret this fact? That God has not given us the gifts and people for the ministry he calls us to? That people are resisting God's call? Or could it be simply that a church our size doesn't need quite that many elders? Can nine elders provide sufficient leadership? I believe so. Nine elders plus the pastor are adequate to the task of governing this church. Are they adequate to doing the ministry of the church? Not a chance ... but then again, neither are twelve or twenty-four.

Westminster has organized its ministry around six commissions and one committee. The committee is property, because someone has to look after the building and grounds. The commissions are: worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, service, and administration. The idea has been that twelve elders provides for continuity because we can assign two elders to each commission. One can be the chair, the other is a kind of apprentice. Sometimes it works that way, and sometimes not. We always try to match the talent and passion of our elders to their work when we make commission assignments. That means things never divide up neatly.

There is much wisdom in having at least one elder on each commission, and it probably makes sense most of the time for an elder to chair each commission. What I fear, however, is this: We as a church really ask our elders to do ministry for us. And our system of assigning elders plays into that. Most commissions do not have many people beyond their elders. Some do. Also, there are people who are active in ministry but not on the session. In the past, our strategy has been to get them on (or back on) the session. Yet I wonder whether in some cases putting a person busy with ministry onto the session might take away from the ministry already being done.

My point is: If we are going to ask the session to do the ministry of the church, then reducing the number of elders will hurt us. We may not have much choice, but it will hurt. That's not the session's job, however. If we are all willing to do our part, whatever that may be, and we ask the session to lead, then nine elders is sufficient. I'm less concerned at the moment with how many elders we have than I am with how we support them.

I have been encouraged in recent years that we are getting a few younger people in leadership. I do not disparage older volunteers when I say that. Many of them became elders or deacons when they were young, and it is good to see others following in their footsteps. We are getting some new people involved in ministry. It's not enough, though. We are leaning too heavily on too few people. It is much better to have lots of people doing a few things they love than to have few people doing lots of things.

Therefore, I urge every person here to reflect and consider. God has given you gifts for ministry. One reason God forms believers into churches is that no one has all the gifts necessary for God's mission in the world. We have to work together. God has gifted you. What are your gifts? What are your passions? How can you use them to God's glory? How can you use them to bless the people of Westminster and the people of our community? What is God calling you to do? Maybe God is calling you to be an elder or a deacon. Maybe your gift is teaching or hospitality or just listening to people.

You may be outgoing, so your ministry has to include lots of interaction with people. You may be so shy your ministry will hardly deal directly with people at all. Whatever your unique package of talent and quirkiness and passion is, we need it. The people you see sitting in this sanctuary need it, and this city needs it.

In conclusion, if you get a call this week from someone claiming to be Titus – even though the voice may sound like Glenn Garside or me or someone else you know – the correct answer is, "I'd be honored to serve." That is, unless you have a *compelling* reason not to. And, if you get a call at any time from one of our commissions, looking for a helping hand, the correct answer is, "Yes, I will use my gifts." And if you see a notice in the bulletin or newsletter, asking for volunteers – for example, to run the sound system – consider it. And if no one comes calling, take the initiative yourself. Talk to me. Talk to one of the commission leaders. Or just show up at meeting night – the first Tuesday of every month at 7:00pm – and say, "I want to get involved."

The church exists to celebrate and proclaim the joyous reality of God's grace. Let us all be about the Master's business. Amen.

rev\_mauldin@yahoo.com