

The Officer's Character

Psalm 101; 1 Timothy 3:1–13

Grace OPC is currently receiving nominations for the offices of ruling elder and deacon. I pose the question in today's bulletin, "Whom would the Lord have you nominate?" Let's think about that.

A moment ago we read two Scriptures—both an Old Testament and New Testament text. Our Old Testament text was Psalm 101, which begins: "I will sing of mercy and justice; to You, O LORD, I will sing praises." The Psalmist praises the Lord because of his character: specifically, his mercy and justice. Specifically, he praises him by opening his mouth and singing to him. The born-again Christian gladly *sings* to the LORD.

In this Psalm King David contrasts *good character* and *bad character*. He holds up the character of the LORD God himself as the pattern: his mercy, justice, wisdom, perfection, faithfulness, truth, goodness, hatred of evil. (Some of these qualities are explicitly stated, some are implied.) Next, he surveys the sins and failings of fallen men: enjoying sin and looking on approvingly at sinful activities; failure to keep promises and commitments and a proneness to break them; a tendency to make oneself look better by putting down other people; haughtiness and pride of heart; deceitful scheming and lying. Toward the end of the Psalm, David as a civil ruler pledges to surround himself with good men; reject obstinate evildoers; mete out temporal punishment upon the wicked; and—in an anticipation of the perfect rule of the Messiah, who will come from his loins, "cut off all evildoers from the city of the LORD"—a judicial action ultimately fulfilled in Revelation 21, which refers to "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband," with "the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars [having] their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (21:2, 8).

David's opening words, "I will sing of mercy and justice," refer to two key attributes of God which directly impact our salvation: "mercy" (רַחֲמִים, also translated *lovingkindness* or *steadfast love*, a term occurring over 250 times), and "justice." Contrary to modern notions of justice, which have no fixed standard but continually mutate in accordance with evolving community standards, "justice" in the Bible is defined according to the character of God himself. It's easy to grasp: anything that is in accord with God's character, as defined in his law, is *just*; on the other hand, anything that is contrary to God's character as defined in his law is *unjust*—and anyone who fudges or equivocates or rationalizes is trying to bamboozle you (think of the slippery term "social justice," which makes some people victims and other people aggressors, not on the basis of fixed moral standards, but simply because of their ethnicity or skin color).

During the last sixty years or so, concepts like no-fault divorce, abortion on demand, the normalization of homosexual activity, and the notion that a person's gender is fluid and can be changed at will, have become more and more acceptable. All of these things were unthinkable as late as the end of the nineteenth century but are becoming mainstream. But God has not changed! He reserves the right to define right and wrong. He sternly warns, "*Woe* unto them that call evil good, and good evil" (Isa. 5:20)! At the final day, when every knee shall bow, and every man, woman and child who has ever lived shall be resurrected and stand before the judgment seat of Christ, the *standard* by which all will be judged will be the unchanging Word of the living God. Remember our Lord's dictum, "Thy word is truth." *Truth* is the opposite of error, and it is unchanging. There is no need for a new, updated, modernized Bible with content that pleases sinful man. In fact, to attempt to produce such is defiance against the Lord of glory. The Psalmist testified, "*Forever*, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven" (Ps. 119:89)—forever! While, from time to time, there is a need for new translations that put the unchanging Word of God into more understandable English, there is *no* need to bring the Bible into conformity with the "new morality." God's eternal standards do not change!

Psalm 101 is a description of godly character. I submit to you that the kind of men that God is raising up in our congregation's midst and calling as officers in his church should be men of godly character, as defined in Holy Scripture.

Our New Testament text, as we shall see, gives qualifications for ruling elders and deacons. The NKJV retains the traditional translation "bishop": note the phrase "a bishop then must be blameless" (1 Tim. 3:2). The underlying Greek word is ἐπίσκοπος, whose fundamental meaning is *overseer*. As we saw last week, the first time this term occurs in the Bible is in reference to Joseph, the Hebrew youth sold into slavery in Egypt. He served his Egyptian master so faithfully that his master (Potiphar) made him "overseer" of his house. Potiphar trusted the young Joseph so much that he entrusted him with the day-to-day operation of his whole household—everything: giving out jobs, buying and selling, financial transactions. But the English word *bishop* has come to mean something it never meant in its biblical context, namely: *one who assumes sole authority over multiple churches*. Though there are numerous such "bishops" in Christendom, the very idea is unbiblical. In the Bible, oversight over churches is always exercised by a *plurality* of elders, who are—like every other member of Christ—(in the words of Hebrews): to "obey *them* that have the *oversight* of you, and submit yourselves" (Heb. 13:17, Geneva Bible). Notice the plural: "*them* that have the oversight." You don't have to be a Greek scholar to see that "them" is plural. The only one who has *sole*, exclusive authority over the church—authority from which there is no appeal—is the Lord Jesus Christ, the only King and Head of his church. The very idea of a papal *crown*

is repugnant to Scripture. The Pope is not the king of the church but an imposter. There is no other King and Head of the church beside the Lord Jesus Christ, no matter who might claim such. All authority of human courts—*every* one, whether civil or religious—must be in accord with “the word of Christ,” the Holy Bible (Col. 3:16); otherwise, it is tyranny, not justice. That’s the biblical meaning of the word “bishop.” It means *overseer exercising biblical oversight in association with other overseers, as members of a church court*. It does *not* mean: “I am bishop; I get to do whatever I want.” Biblically, the church court has a name: it is called a *presbytery*. “Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the *presbytery*” (1 Tim. 4:14 KJV, cf. NASB). The word for “presbytery” is πρεσβυτέριον, related to the word for *elder* (πρεσβύτερος). The word πρεσβυτέριον (*presbytery*) means *council of elders, Sanhedrin*. Timothy, the young pastor mentored by the apostle Paul, was ordained, not by Paul alone, but by the “presbytery,” a council of elders who examined him as to his faith and life, theology and aptness to teach, and determined that he met the qualifications to serve as a preacher and pastor in Christ’s church. While it is not specifically stated, the presbytery that ordained Timothy would have retained oversight over his ministry as long as he served in the ministerial office.

So it is today. There are *no* independent Bible teachers in Scripture, who can preach and teach whatever they want simply because they are good with words and gain a following. *All* teachers of the Bible are to be in submission to the church. If someone comes around to your house and wants to teach you the Bible, ask what church he represents. If he won’t say, or tries to hide that information, then you can be assured that he does *not* represent Christ. The other day I picked up a tract in the Kroger parking lot that was from an organization purporting to be “giving light to our world,” whose website was *glowonline.org*.—purposely vague, hiding its true identity or church affiliation. The tract even stated something good; it stated that the Messiah “took upon Himself the penalty of sin we deserved and died on the cross”—so far, so good. But the emphasis was a little off, and by the time I got to the end I figured out it was from the Seventh-day Adventists—a group that professes that a nineteenth-century woman named Ellen G. White was a true prophet of God—I’m not making this up. Here was a *woman*—a person specifically commanded, on account of being female, to keep *silence* in the church and not to speak,¹ but who was purported to have had during her lifetime, some 4,000 “visions” that her followers to this day take to be new revelations from God. Let me be clear: Ellen G. White was a *false prophet*; she in no way represents the Christ of Scripture; and true followers of Christ must avoid her and everything she represents. The Seventh-day Adventists are *not* part of the church of Jesus Christ.

¹ 1 Tim. 2:11–12; 1 Cor. 14:34

Though individual Seventh-day Adventists may be truly trusting in Christ *in spite of* what their organization teaches, the organization itself is a synagogue of Satan, opposed to Christ's true kingdom. If you are trusting Christ alone for your salvation, then you belong in his body, the church, under the oversight of godly men called to the offices of minister and elder, in submission to the courts of the church.

I received a letter the other day from a couple who believe that they have been spiritually harmed by one of our churches. Now Christ is the wise and gentle Shepherd who leads his sheep into the green pastures of his Word and would never spiritually harm any of his sheep. Indeed, his rod and staff are *comforting*. He prepares a table for his people in the presence of their enemies. He anoints our bruised and bloodied heads with oil; and our cup “runneth over.” Christ the true Shepherd *cares* for his sheep—and godly elders care as well. The presbytery will look into the allegations that the session of one of our churches spiritually harmed a couple of Christ's sheep. If so, it will take corrective action. The reputation of Christ the good Shepherd is at stake!

Now what I want you to notice in our New Testament text is that there are extensive lists of qualifications for elders (“bishops” in the biblical sense) and deacons. *Elders* oversee the church's spiritual care of its members; *deacons* oversee the church's physical and material care of its members, with particular attention to the needy, the destitute and the defenseless, such as widows and orphans. Both offices are very important, and key to the church's mission—so much so that the exalted and glorified Savior calls men to special church office to care for his sheep on his behalf.

Now notice that the qualifications for elders and deacons are similar. Both elders and deacons are to be men of good reputation, maintaining exemplary Christian character, exercising due spiritual oversight over their own families, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, gentle, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, not quarrelsome, not covetous; reverent, not double-tongued, etc. Elders must be “apt to teach”—that is, competent, faithfully and accurately representing the Word of God. Deacons, on the other hand, must “[hold] the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience.” The difference comes down to this: deacons must *recognize* and *maintain* sound doctrine, while ministers and elders must be *able to teach* it, to the spiritual profit of their people. This is why, when the presbytery considers a man's fitness for ministry, it receives testimonials from congregations and individuals who have benefited from the man's ministry and can bear witness to that. This is why, before ordaining a man, the presbytery licenses him to preach in the churches of presbytery as a probationer, giving the church the opportunity to test his gifts. Christ's sheep need sound teaching in order to “grow in grace” (2 Pet. 3:18)—not “seven secrets to

experiencing your best life now” (or something like that). There is no growth in grace without the pure and accurate knowledge of Christ, “in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”²

The qualifications for elders and deacons can be classified into several categories: general reputation (must be “above reproach”), family leadership (manage their household well), character traits (such as being temperate, self-controlled and respectable), and doctrinal fidelity (holding firmly to the truth). Paul stresses the importance of integrity and maturity for officers and officer candidates.

God’s servant must desire the office; evidence exemplary Christian character; manage his own household competently, ministering to his wife and children, teaching them the faith. He must show Christian maturity, not being a recent convert, but having been tested appropriately, and found blameless. He must have a good reputation not only at church, but also in the larger community. The Lord Jesus himself had a good reputation, even among his enemies. When the Pharisees and chief priests sent officers to arrest Jesus, they listened to his teaching for awhile and were awe-struck. They returned to those who sent them without having arrested him. They were indignant; they asked pointedly, “Why have you not brought him?” The officers answered, “Never man spake like this man.”³ Imagine that! That was the conclusion of his *enemies*. The chief priests and Pharisees desperately wanted to arrest Jesus and shut him up. He was an annoyance to them. They felt that he was a threat to their own influence. But their intent would have been too obvious if they had gone out themselves, wearing the gorgeous robes of their priestly office, to arrest Jesus. So they sent accomplices to do the dirty work for them. Surely these men would perceive what a threat Jesus was! But when they arrived, they found Jesus teaching. They listened for awhile and—amazingly—what he was saying made sense. Perhaps he was the promised Messiah after all! They came under his spell, as it were. Surely the temple leaders had misjudged this man. He was teaching the Word of God! What they were hearing was consistent with the central message of Holy Scripture. To arrest him would be to oppose the work of God! So they returned and bore powerful witness: “Never man spake like this man!” If you are born again, you recognize this too. The gospel of Christ is “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). There is one way of salvation for both Jew and Gentile, and that is Christ. That is the unified message of Scripture. In Galatians 3 Paul makes the point that “the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the *gospel* unto Abraham.” Abraham, 2,000 years before Jesus, heard the *gospel*, the good news concerning the coming of Christ! As Peter would later put it, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for

² Col. 2:3

³ John 7:46

there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” There is *one* way of salvation—*one* way to get to heaven. You reject Christ to your eternal peril!

The elders and deacons of the church know the urgency of getting out the gospel message. All around us are sinners on their way to eternity in hell who need to hear the gospel. The gospel is “the power of God unto salvation.” That means that it changes the lives of those who receive it. “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). If you have received Christ, then your life is totally different. You have done a 180° turn. Once, you were on your way to hell. You loved your sin. You enjoyed hanging out with evil companions. You loved making fun of the truth. But then you heard the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit powerfully drove it into your heart. You received Christ and voluntarily submitted to his lordship. You believed on the Lord Jesus and were saved. Now, you want every knee to bow to Jesus, every tongue to confess that he is King and Lord.

Christ’s gospel must be preached by ordained ministers and elders whose own lives have been transformed by Christ—men who exemplify the character of the message they preach, the character traits expounded by the apostle Paul in our text today. If a man preaches the truth of Christ, but his own life has not been transformed by that truth, then there is a fundamental disconnect between the message on his lips and the message lived out in his life. A salesman can sell you a car if he does not personally own one, but a preacher of Christ must personally experience the power of a changed life if his message is going to have honesty and integrity. “Physician, heal thyself” (Luke 4:23)! If a man is preaching sexual purity, then he himself ought to be sexually pure. If a man is preaching temperance, then he himself ought to be temperate. If a man is preaching gentleness, then he himself ought to be gentle. If a man is preaching contentment, then he himself ought to be content. And so on.

Same with the deacons. Can a man be entrusted with the church’s diaconal funds, ministering to “the least of these” on behalf of their heavenly Shepherd, if he himself is untrustworthy and greedy for money? Judas Iscariot—one of the twelve Apostles!—would from time to time help himself to the disciples’ money and pilfer from the money box he was in charge of.⁴ He gave every indication of being a true disciple, so much so that the disciples chose him as their treasurer—but he was a fraud. Likewise with the temple leaders to whom our Lord emphatically declared, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore ye shall

⁴ John 12:6

receive the greater damnation.”⁵ They professed to follow God, but were given over to greed.

As we consider men for church office, let us meditate on today’s Scripture texts. Let us prayerfully consider whether the men whom we nominate exhibit the qualities spelled out in our text. If God is calling men to special office in the church, then his sovereign Spirit is working in their lives to develop Christian character befitting that office. If they do not measure up quite yet, then hopefully they will measure up at a future time. But these qualities are not solely for officers; the Lord wants *all* his children to grow in grace and develop Christian character. Amen.

⁵ Matt. 23:14