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02 Jan 11

2011 is upon us. The old adage that says that time and tide waits for no man rings true. Like it or not, ready or not, one year had passed, and another has just begun. I pray that over the course of the holidays, you have set some time to reflect upon God, His hand upon your life, and to pray for His guidance in the days ahead.

For the church, our theme this year is “Labouring with God,” taken from 1 Corinthians 3:9 – “*For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building*”. There are three main points. First, it is a call to action. Second, it is call to unity. Third, it is call to reliance upon God.

Call to action

The Christian life is not merely a life of solitary contemplation. It is a call to active service. After our risen Saviour had met Saul on the road to Damascus, Saul asked, “*What wilt thou have me to do?*” (Acts 9:6). Likewise, the believer who has the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16) is also the one who labours. Right thinking produces right action. The redeemed person ought to be the one who is also “*redeeming the time, because the days are evil*” (Ephesians 5:16).

Paul uses the picture of farming to describe the work of Christians. There are those who plant, and there are those who water. Speaking of himself, Paul said, “I have planted, Apollos watered” (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Paul adds, “*So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth*” (1 Corinthians 3:7). The work may be different – some evangelise; some do the follow up. The timing of the work may be different – some plant churches and another may come later to build up the church. The style of working may be different – some may preach fire and brimstone; another may be more composed. The place of the work may be different – the young people may be working in the university to tell their friends about the Gospel; the father may be doing the same thing but to his colleagues in the office. However, there is no differentiation in the value of the work between the person who plants and the one who waters. No one is more honourable because both are nothing, but both are equally crucial.

In the context of the church, it is a call to serve in the ministry that God has enabled it without being envious of the more prominent job of another person. The one who serves tea and the one who stands at the door to welcome worshippers are no less important than the one who teaches Sunday School or preaches. The reason is that we serve the same God, and we are being used for the same end.

Call to unity

The Christian also does not walk alone. He does not serve alone. There is an essential unity in God's people. A unity that is manifested vertically with God as well as horizontally with God's people. The one who plants, and the one who waters are one. We are labourers together.

Paul is saying that we are in this together. We need each other. Above all, we each need God. The work of God is a work of cooperation and not competition. It was true in the Corinthian church some 2,000 years ago. This is even more true in our church today.

Paul did not say, “You are labourers of God.” Paul uses the plural first-person pronoun, “We are labourers together with God.” Paul, the apostle and the founder of the church puts himself on the same level as every believer in the church. We are labourers together with God. Not just the leaders, not some, not even many, but all who have been saved by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ are labourers together in the harvest field of souls.

There is an obvious difference in the work of planting and that of watering. Planting is not watering, but the one who plants and the one who waters are one. The areas of ministries are different, but the ministers are one. The work may be different, but the workers are one.

In Calvary, we have three congregations – English, Mandarin and Hokkien. The work is different, but the workers must be one in Christ. In 2011, I believe for the first time in Calvary, all three congregations have the same theme for 2011. We are not just labouring, but we are also labouring together.

call to reliance upon god

What a privilege it is that God calls us to serve Him. However, we must be careful not to serve God with the strength of our own flesh. Thus, we are labouring with God. We are not just doing the work of God, but we are also doing the work of God with God.

God does not need us. God is able to work alone; that He chooses us to be His labourers is our privilege. We have no part in His creation. We have no part in His providence. There is really only one area of work that God has called us to do – to proclaim the Gospel. The psalmist says, *“Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain”* (Psalm 127:1).

The success of any endeavour is our diligence with reliance upon God. There will be no house if we do not build. But the house will not last if God is not our co-builder. If the Lord is not in what we do, it is not that we will fail, but that whatever we do will be of no eternal worth. But when we labour with God, we can be sure of success.

we are labourers of God

God is looking for labourers in the church. God has a purpose for the church. The farmer ploughs his land, sows the seeds, and waters because he expects a harvest. Likewise, what we do must be purposeful and useful. As God’s people, we are described by our work. We are God’s husbandry; we are God’s building. This is what the world ought to see in us. There is not only a unity of service, but there is also a unity of testimony. We (not individuals, but together) are God’s husbandry. We (not individuals, but together) are God’s building.

We are labourers together with God. What privilege in such a work. What power to do the work. What prospect of success that we will have in the work. May the LORD be pleased to grant us the grace to do the work that He has entrusted to us, to bless our labours, and to give us the increase for 2011 for His own glory.

09 Jan 11

The first meeting of GIFTS (God's Invitation For Tertiary Students) will be held on 14 January (Friday) in the home of Rev and Mrs Chan. GIFTS is a new ministry in our church reaching out to tertiary students (polytechnics, NUS, NTU, SIM, SMU, etc.). GIFTS serves a twofold purpose: evangelism and fellowship. First, to present the Gospel to tertiary students through Bible studies. Second, to provide a platform for encouragement through Christian fellowship. Please pray for GIFTS, and please invite your friends who are studying in tertiary institutions.

WHEN GOD'S WORD IS SILENT

Doing the will of God starts with obeying the Word of God. In choosing the will of God, the believer's primary concern must be obedience to God's Word. The Bible does not reveal to us the person whom we should marry, the kind of work that we should engage in, the street that we should live. Any decision made within the moral will of God, with biblical wisdom, with prayerful consideration, and with the desire to glorify God will be acceptable to Him.

I have never come across a believer who seeks to honour God in his life and is forsaken. David says, "*The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand. I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread*" (Ps. 37:23-25).

However, there are some decisions that are harder to make than others because God's Word is silent. On these "silent" matters, we are to apply God's Word wisely, and exercise our Christian liberty prudently. Ironically, it is in these issues where God's Word is silent, that men sought to impose their will on others, and there are others who refuse to be imposed upon – hence conflicts between believers.

At one extreme, there is the Christian who prizes his freedom and emphasizes his direct accountability before God. He has no concern for the opinions and convictions of other believers. He does what he thinks is right, and he lets the chips fall where they may. If others are offended, his response would be: "It's too bad. It's their problem, not mine."

At the other extreme, there is the other Christian who recognises that he is not only accountable to God but also to the body of Christ – the local church. And he tries not to violate anybody's convictions. As a result he binds himself into a cocoon and is unable to move.

Needless to say, neither of these two extremes is scriptural. There will be differences between Christians. It is neither right to sweep them under the carpet nor to be constricted by them. The Word of God laid down certain principles for Christians to handle their difference biblically.

Unity in Christ, not Uniformed in Thought

God designed the church to be a body of believers with different personalities, ethnic backgrounds, talents and roles. The Apostle Paul compared the church to a body of different parts. "*For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ*" (1 Cor. 12:12). God's intent is that believers should become one in Christ without forgoing their personal distinctiveness. God's desire is that believers are united in Christ, and not necessarily uniformed in their thinking. Hence, God does not command believers to think alike in everything; instead, the Bible gives principles to help believers work through our differences in non-essential issues and still maintain the unity of the body of believers. The Apostle Paul gives these principles in Romans 14-15 and 1 Corinthians 8-10.

Meat or No Meat

The issue that Paul addressed in his epistle to the Romans concerned the consumption of meat. There were believers in the church who abstained from eating meat, and there were others who thought that Christian liberty meant that they were free to eat all things (Rom. 14:2). The people who abstained from certain meats were probably the Jewish converts who were still sensitive to the Old Testament dietary laws. These laws forbade the Jews to eat the flesh of certain animals, and they were also absolutely prohibited from consuming the blood of all animals. These restrictions would mean that Jews could not share a meal with the Gentiles.

The situation in the Corinthian Church was similar to the one in Rome except for an additional detail – could a believer eat food that had been offered to idols? The differences between Christians arose when there were believers who were convinced that the meat was not made worse or better just because it has been offered, after all “an idol is nothing” (1 Cor. 8:4). However, there were other believers who had been converted out of such paganism who believed that meat offered to idols should not be eaten.

The Apostle Paul uses the “meat” issue in the churches in Rome and Corinth to give us several principles to help us exercise our Christian liberty.

What Does the Word of God Say?

God’s commands are non-negotiable. (For a start, read Exodus 20:1-17). Christians have no right to choose which commands they want to obey. We cannot choose when we want to obey them. Selective and occasional obedience is disobedience. If a believer violates an explicit commandment of Holy Scriptures, he can neither appeal to his conscience nor liberty.

Hence, Christians must first learn to distinguish between matters in which God has spoken unequivocally and those “morally neutral” areas where we are allowed to exercise our liberty.

Am I Affected Spiritually?

Clearly, from the context of *Romans* and *First Corinthians*, the issue of eating of meat falls into the second category (1 Cor. 8:9; 9:4-6; 10:23, 29). In the church today, the list of activities and opinions that are deemed as “morally neutral” has grown – Can Christians...attend movies, watch television, drink wine, buy insurance, gamble for recreation, play cards, play video-games, go to the pub, engage in sports and recreation on the Lord’s Day, dance, listen to rock music, use a Bible translation other than the KJV...and the list goes on.

The fact that the number of activities and opinions that fall into the category of Christian liberty is increasing is a sign of the time, and it is not a good sign. It is a symptom of a generation of Christians who knows about the liberty that Christ has wrought for us. “*If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed*” (John 8:36). “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage*” (Gal. 5:1). But they do not know from what Christ has set us free, why He has set us free, and how they are to exercise their freedom in ways that glorify God.

· What has Christ freed us from? He has set us free from the bondage to sin. “*Being then made free from sin....*” (Rom. 6:18, 22).

· Why did He set us free? So that we might be “*servants of righteousness...servants to God*” (Rom. 6:18, 22).

· How are we to exercise our freedom? “*Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another*” (Gal. 5:13). The Apostle Paul says the man who is “*called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord’s freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ’s servant*” (1 Cor. 7:22). And Paul himself who is “*free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all*” (1 Cor. 9:19).

The debate over eating of meat boils down to this one question – Does eating meat spiritually defile a person? With regard to our updated list of activities that we are “free” to do, we ask the question – Does engaging in those “morally neutral” activities affect us spiritually?

Paul recognises that the eating of meat is a “morally neutral” activity. *“But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse”* (1 Cor. 8:8). However, if a person is convinced that by eating meat, he is violating God’s standard of holiness, then eating meat would become a sin to him. *“I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean”* (Rom 14:14; 1 Cor. 8:7).

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WHEN GOD'S WORD IS SILENT (II)

The concept of Christian liberty has been widely misinterpreted. In our post-modern world, Christian liberty is taken to mean that believers are free to do what they want as long as the laws of God are not broken. The problem with this attitude is that there are many activities in our day that are not specifically mentioned in the Bible. And there are Christians who take the silence of the Scriptures as God's approval, leading to the abuse of Christian liberty.

On the other hand, there are also believers who believe that anything that has not been explicitly commanded by the Scriptures is forbidden. And this leads to a restrictive understanding and application of the liberty which we have in Christ Jesus.

In our post-modern age of individual freedom and rights, it is more likely that Christians will abuse the liberty that we have in Christ, and it is more likely that we also lower our convictions on some issues on Christian living.

On matters where the Word of God is clear and specific, there is no room for personal convictions, Christians must simply obey. However, with regard to matters that are not clearly commanded in the Word of God, such as morally neutral issues and non-essential doctrines, the Christian is to exercise his freedom wisely and responsibly. It is also important that Christians develop strong personal convictions on these issues. How can we do that?

Remember Your Purpose in Life

First, remember what your purpose in life is. The Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Regardless of what stand we take on an issue, the purpose must be to glorify God. Paul says that the man who keeps a particular holy day keeps it for the Lord. Another person who does not keep the same holy day does what he does for the same reason. Likewise, *"he that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks. For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's"* (Rom. 14:6-8). The principle is this: our motive must always be to serve our Lord and glorify Him.

Remember Your Accountability to God

Second, while convictions may differ amongst Christians, it is important to remember that it is neither men's opinions nor our personal conscience that will determine whether or not our convictions are right or wrong. God is the One to whom we will be held accountable. So Paul tells us to *"judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts"* (1 Cor. 4:5). And it is then when *"every one of us shall give account of himself to God"* (Rom. 14:12).

Thus, it behoves Christians to exercise spiritual discernment and godly wisdom in determining and developing our convictions. It is also important to recognise that the other person whose convictions may differ from yours is also entitled to his Christian liberty in morally-neutral issues and non-essential doctrines.

Remember to Be Fully Persuaded in Your Mind

Christian liberty is a blessing from God. Paul tells us that *"happy is [the man] that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth"* (Rom. 14:22). In other words, a man who is fully convinced that eating a particular meat is not a sin, then he is free to eat that meat. And he does not condemn himself in the eating. On the other hand, a man who is fully convinced that eating a particular meat is a sin, then he should be free not to eat of that meat so that he would not violate his own convictions.

Thus the Apostle Paul exhorts every Christian to *“be fully persuaded in his own mind”* (Rom. 14:5). Every Christian should be fully convinced in his own mind of his own convictions.

There is a caveat. A man may be fully persuaded in his own mind that his convictions are right. That alone, however, does not mean that he is right or that his convictions are pleasing to God. Just because a man thinks that he is right does not mean that he is. The Bible warns us that *“the heart [of man] is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings”* (Jer. 17:9-10).

Developing biblical convictions is like wielding a sword. It takes skill. It takes sincerity. It requires spiritual maturity. It means that a new believer will need the help of a spiritually matured Christian to develop his convictions. In the home, it means that Christian parents have the responsibility to develop biblical convictions in their children. In the Sunday School, that responsibility falls on the shoulders of the Sunday School teacher. Christian parents can help our children develop strong biblical convictions by asking these questions:

- Is the activity/programme/decision forbidden in the Bible? (1 Cor. 10:23). If the Bible has a direct command forbidding that activity, no Christian should engage in it.

- Is it expedient? Is it profitable? (1 Cor. 10:23). An activity may not be sinful, but if it is an inane activity with no redeeming value, then Christians should refrain from it. Bungee jumping would fall under this category.

- Is it edifying? Is it faith-building? (1 Cor. 10:23). Christians should refrain from activities that are detrimental to the building of faith. Example: reading books is neither forbidden nor unprofitable; however reading certain books (e.g. romance novels) can be unedifying.

- Is it self-serving? (1 Cor. 10:24; 32). A man may benefit from a programme, but another Christian may be offended by it. The Bible teaches that we are not to use our Christian liberty for *“for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another”* (Gal. 5:13). In other words, consider your brother or sister in the Lord; make sure that you stumble no one in the exercise of your Christian liberty.

- Is it glorifying to God? (1 Cor. 10:31). This ought to be the question that is uppermost in a Christian’s mind before he makes a decision, or embarks on a new venture. The world recommends that we ask: “what can I gain for myself?” The Christian should ask, “how can I glorify God?”

- Is it exemplifying? (1 Cor. 11:1). Paul boldly asked the Corinthians to follow him, as he was a follower of Christ. In the same way Christian parents must build and pass on their convictions to the children. Christian parents must be able to look our children in their eyes and say, “Be ye followers of me.”

Christians will differ over a myriad of issues that are non-essential to the fundamentals of the Christian faith. We have to be guarded in how we deal with these differences, remembering that every believer is made free in Christ Jesus, but no believer has the right to exercise that liberty at the expense of another.

It will also do Christians well to develop stronger and not weaker convictions in some of the social issues that confront us today. We are reliving the period of the Judges where *“every man did that which was right in his own eyes”* (Jud. 21:25). May our Lord help us to be wise and to be holy as He is holy!

23 Jan 11

Last Friday (14 January 2011), we had the inaugural meeting of GIFTS (God's Invitation for Tertiary Students). This is an outreach primarily to foreign students in Singapore. Praise God for the good response of 29 young people with several new friends. The next meeting is scheduled for 11 February at 7:00pm in the church. So, I would encourage all the tertiary students in Calvary to invite your friends to GIFTS. Look out for more notices.

Strong and Weak

The ideal church would be one where every believer would love God and His people supremely. Our Lord Jesus taught that the two greatest commandments were, "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind... Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*" (Matt. 22:37-40). That is the ideal. The reality is that even the best of us have failed in these two areas; hence, the internal conflicts within an individual Christian and divisions between them. One reason for our failure can be attributed to a lack of understanding and practice. We do not have the biblical understanding of what it means to love God and our neighbours, and with the little that we know, we do not apply even that modicum of truth sufficiently. A second reason for our failure is to exercise the liberty that we have in Christ Jesus. We have been raised on a philosophy of individual rights and freedom without due emphasis given on the exercise of our rights – biblically. Consider this: what would our future be if God had chosen to exercise only His rights over us. So, to the extent that we deviate from the Word of God and biblical practice, the church will continue to have its share of strife and divisions.

Dutiful Servant

Martin Luther, in his book *The Freedom of the Christian*, writes, "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one." The Apostle Paul also dealt extensively with this issue in his epistles – Galatians 5; Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 6, 8, 10.

In Romans 14, Paul gives us several principles on how to deal with Christians whose convictions differ (not cardinal doctrines of the faith which cannot be compromised). What should a Christian do when his views clashed with others? He could either impose his views on others so that all agree with him, which means that his personal conviction becomes the conscience of the whole group; or he could shift his position in violation of his own conscience. Neither is right nor biblical.

To the Galatians, Paul wrote, "*For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another*" (Gal. 5:13). This implies that there is something more important and valuable than the enjoyment of one's personal liberty. Paul is calling on the stronger Christians to be mindful of the effects that their conduct and convictions will have on the weaker brethren.

Weak Christians

Who are the weak Christians, and what are their weaknesses? A weak Christian is one who is weak in the faith (Rom. 14:1). This is not to say that the weak Christian has no saving faith, or that he is a new convert. A weak Christian is one whose faith has not reached the state of maturity where he can be freed from the vestige of his past religious experience. For example, a former Buddhist who had been converted to Christianity may have some reservations about eating meat.

A weak Christian is also one who is lacking in the knowledge of the Word of God. Such a person tends to base his faith on emotions – “I feel good about this.” He is also easily influenced by another person – “John says that I can do this.” He could also be tied to some tradition – “The last church I attended always said the Apostle’s Creed.”

A weak Christian may be one who has a weak conscience. This is the over sensitive person who is easily offended by another Christian even in matters that the Bible declares to be permissible.

Finally, a weak Christian is one who is weak in his will, meaning to say that his personal convictions are based upon what he sees other do or do not do. Such a person is easily influenced.

Strong Christians

Who are the strong Christians, and what are their strengths? A strong Christian is strong in the areas where the weak Christian is weak except in one area – the exercise of his liberty in love. Paul placed the onus of maintaining the conscience of the weak Christian on the strong one.

Paul reminds the Christian who is strong in knowledge – “*Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge*” (1 Cor. 8:7). Not every man is as strong as you in knowledge. Not every person’s conscience is as strong as well – “*their conscience being weak is defiled*” (1 Cor. 8:7). Not every believer is strong in his will; hence, do not allow your liberty to “*become a stumblingblock to them that are weak*” (1 Cor. 8:9). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the strong Christian to be mindful of his conduct in the presence of weaker believers. “*When ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend*” (1 Cor. 8:12-13).

It must also be pointed out that the matters over which the weak Christian is stumbled and which the strong Christian practises are not issues of life and death, or truth and falsehood. In the context of 1 Corinthians 8, it was the eating of meat. “*Meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse*” (1 Cor. 8:8). There is no gain to those who eat the meat, and no loss to those who do not. What is truly important is the faith of another fellow believer in Christ.

Therefore, you who are strong in the faith, do not be a “*stumblingblock to them that are weak*” (1 Cor. 8:9; Rom. 14:13). Rather, forgo your personal liberty, and use the occasion to help the weak ones.

30 Jan 11

Once again, the old year has left and a new year is coming. According to Chinese mythology, the reign of the fearful tiger has gone and now comes the rabbit which is a soft and tame animal. In the year that has just passed, under the “reign of the tiger”, the world economy has picked up somewhat, but it was accompanied by many world calamities such as widespread floods and earthquakes killing thousands of people; hundreds of thousands of people lost their homes and livelihood. Billions of dollars had gone down the drains. In Malaysia, a number of tour buses got into accidents and ferry boats capsized killing hundreds of unfortunate tourists. In Manila, a bus hijacker killed almost all the tourists in the bus and in Europe, snow covered all the airports causing thousands of travellers to be stranded for days. Back home here, the Resorts World Sentosa and Marina Bay Sands had enriched some unscrupulous billionaires from the casinos and night clubs but robbed away the life savings and livelihood of thousands of poor ignorant gamblers. The crime rates had also climbed up and secret societies once again made their presence felt. Thus was the so-called ‘prosperity’ brought about by the superior tiger.

Now comes the seemingly innocent and mild rabbit or hare. The superstitious Chinese believe that “一年好运随春至，四季幸福同兔来” meaning that “good fortune comes only at spring time but the rabbit can bring blessing 福 all round the four seasons.” So, the Chinese believe that this year the rabbit will bring us good fortune round the year and that this is a good year to venture into businesses and investments. As children of God, we know that it is our heavenly Father who showers upon us blessings throughout the year and not the rabbit. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of light, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (Jas 1:17).

The rabbit or hare is an unclean animal.

The Bible has not mentioned much about the rabbit or hare except that the hare is an unclean animal. “And the hare, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof; he is unclean unto you” (Lev 11:6). Here the Lord God was speaking about food for consumption. There are food that the Lord regards as clean and there are food that the Lord regards as unclean. This distinction was made even before Noah entered the Ark. “Of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the male and his female: and of beasts that are not clean by two, the male and his female” (Gen 7:2). The clean animals are for food and procreation while the unclean ones are for procreation only. Similarly, when we talk about blessing or 福 God wants us to make a distinction between that which is clean and holy and that which is not clean and not holy.

In fact, as early as the time in the Garden of Eden, God had already made a clear distinction of what Adam and Eve could eat and what they should not eat. “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen 2:16-17). The consequence of eating what God forbade was spiritual death. God made a very clear distinction between the spiritually clean and that which is unclean and the hare fell into the category of the unclean; the Jews were forbidden from eating it. Today, it is not so much the meat that we should or should not eat but how we live our lives on earth; whether what we do is holy and acceptable to God or unholy and rejected by God. We should make sure that our “福” comes from God, our Father in heaven, and not from the devil. “But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable and murderers, and whoremongers and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death” (Rev 21:8). Here we see the result of obtaining “福” from the devil.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of true blessing.

The superstitious people, in their ignorance, chose to trust in the zodiac animals but we children of God will put our trust in our Almighty Father in heaven. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov 1:7). To have a peaceful and prosperous year, we need wisdom and this wisdom does not come from the rabbit but from the fear of God. “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (Jas 1:5). So as we step into the new year, let us not greet each other “恭喜发财” (increase in wealth on earth) but rather “主恩更多” (increase in grace of God). Let us therefore “set your affection on things above and not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with

Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory” (Col 3:2-4). Our hope is not in temporary prosperity on earth but in the promise of the richness of God in eternity which God our Father in heaven will give us on that day when He will appear. While on earth, surely God will take care of us. He knows all our needs and will provide us all our necessities if we will put our trust in Him. Our Lord Jesus said: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt 6:33).

As believers, we are to separate ourselves from the pollution of the world

The New Testament Christians are not required to make a distinction between food that is clean and unclean, provided that they are hygienic and well prepared. When Peter was praying upon the housetop in Joppa at the sixth hour, he saw a vision. “And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, (including the hare) and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat...What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (Acts 10:10-15). Later, a decision was made at the Council in Jerusalem that “we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God, But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:19-20). So, as far as meat is concerned, there is no more distinction between the ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ for us New Testament Christians. However the apostles made a very clear distinction between that which is holy and that which is unholy. Worship of idols and all the pollution from the idols, as well as fornication are definitely unholy, and Christians are forbidden to practise them.

Wishing everyone a “Blessed Chinese New Year.”

06 Feb 11

Strong and Weak (II)

To the strong Christian, Paul gives this charge, *“Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak... Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend”* (1 Cor. 8:9-13).

Warnings to the Strong Christian

With regard to a strong Christian’s eating of meat that could be offensive to another believer, Paul’s warning in *Romans* was even stronger. *“Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of...for meat destroy not the work of God”* (Rom. 14:15-16; 20-21).

There will be those who say, “It is just meat.” (Substitute eating meat with any non-sinful activity). “I am doing this just for fun. Do not be so serious.” But we have to be serious because God is, and because it has to do with another person’s faith in Christ Jesus. To you who think eating meat is nothing, praise the Lord for your conviction.

However to the weak Christian who neither has the same level of spiritual maturity nor the same strength of conviction and will, and he follows the stronger Christian in participating in that activity against his own conscience, he has sinned. The Bible says that *“he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin”* (Rom. 14:23). The strong believer has stumbled the weak one by causing him to sin against his own conscience.

There is another reason – a personal one – for the strong Christian to exercise his liberty with care. The abuse of one’s liberty can lead to sin. Even the strong man who is fully persuaded in his own mind and of his conscience can fall. A man’s mind can be deluded, and no man’s conscience is perfect. A man’s conscience can be seared (1 Tim. 4:2) and defiled (Tit. 1:15). Even a strong man can be mistaken, and his conscience can be weakened.

Take the example of eating meat (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8), a strong Christian who eats meat, which is a matter of conscience, may end up indulging in something that is sinful. So Paul warns the strong Christian: *“Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall”* (1 Cor. 10:12).

Exhortation to the Strong Christian

What is the responsibility of the strong Christian to the weaker ones?

- Do not be a stumbling block to another believer (Rom. 14:13), instead, deal with him in Christian love (Rom. 14:15).
- Do not be self-serving in the pursuit of your activity and in the process destroy the faith of another believer (Rom. 14:15), instead serve Christ and those whom He had redeemed (Rom. 14:18).
- Do not tear down the work of God (Rom. 14:20), instead hold up those who are weak (Rom. 15:1).
- Do not cause another believer to stumble (Rom. 14:21), instead build up one another (Rom. 15:2).
- Do not please yourself (Rom. 15:1), instead please your brother/sister in Christ (Rom. 15:2), and God will be pleased.

Simply put: the Christian is not to live to please himself. The stronger the inward faith of a believer, the more that faith must be directed outward. The Apostle Paul was a good example. *“For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more...I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you”* (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

F.F. Bruce makes this insightful comment about Paul: “Paul enjoyed his Christian liberty to the full...So completely emancipated was he from spiritual bondage that he was not even bondage to his emancipation...The interests of the Gospel and the highest well-being of men and women were paramount considerations with him, and to these he subordinated everything else.”

Looking Out for Another

Paul was mindful in his dealings with Jews and Gentiles. *“Unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law...that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak”* (1 Cor. 9:20-22).

The Apostle showed a sensitivity to all people. Gentile Christians must learn to avoid practices that would offend the Jewish converts. At the same time, the Jewish converts must also be sensitive to the practices that would stumble the Gentile believers. The point is that all Christians must learn to look out for one another.

Who are the ones for whom special attention is needed? The strong Christian must help build up...

- The young person who is developing his personal convictions. Putting them down and humiliating them into accepting your convictions will not do. Young people need guidance and mentoring.
- The person who is saved out of a sinful and immoral life. To these people, the bar of convictions must be raised high. Men and women who were delivered from such depraved environment need more accountability and not liberty.
- The person who is saved from a different religion. There are Christians who collect religious artefacts. It is easy for one who has never known idolatry to callously dismiss these idols as dead wood and cold stone. But to the person who has been delivered from such spiritual darkness, these artefacts can be a great stumbling block.
- The child whose friends’ parents have different convictions from his own. “Johnny’s dad says it’s alright.” As Christian parents, we must take care that we do not undermine the convictions that another Christian parent is trying to instil in his child. Before you do anything or go anywhere with your child’s friends, check with their parents.

Conclusion

Our Lord Jesus Christ has freed us from the bondage of sin. *“If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed”* (John 8:36). God has given us *“richly all things to enjoy”* (1 Tim. 6:17), even our liberty. So enjoy, but do so with discretion and Christian love. Remember the weaker brother/sister in the Lord. Do not be a stumbling block. Be a stepping stone for our Saviour.

13 Feb 11

Knowing the Will of God in Giving

Our Lord Jesus said that “*it is more blessed to give than to receive*” (Acts 20:35). This is a God-breathed statement where its power and truth will be seen and known by the Christian’s obedience. I, for one, have never been comfortable with asking for money for the Lord’s work. I believe that Hudson Taylor was right when he said that God’s work done in God’s way will not lack God’s supply. Hudson Taylor was the first missionary to go into inland China, and he ran his entire ministry by faith without any regular support from churches from back home. Through the course of my ministry, I have the pleasure of knowing the joy of Christians who tithed and gave to the Lord. They have tasted the truth of Acts 20:35, and they found it to be sweeter than honey and the honeycomb (Ps. 19:10).

Tithing in Israel

Many Christians understand giving as tithing. There is a difference. The tithel literally means “tenth.” Tithing is practised by the Jews in the Old Testament to support priesthood. The first tithes were made by Abraham to Melchizedek, the king of Salem (Gen. 14:18-20). Before the Jews occupied the Promised Land, God gave the people the law of tithing. In the Old Testament, there were at least two different kinds of tithes: the first tithel was a tenth of one’s possessions (Lev. 27:30-33). The tithel was used to support the temple ministry and the Levites who were not given any land in Canaan (Num. 18:20-21). The second tithel was taken from whatever was left of the produce after the first tithel was taken (Deut. 12:5-6; 14:22-23). The *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states that “the second tithel of the remaining nine-tenths had to be set apart and consumed in Jerusalem.” The third tithel, which was also known as the Poor Tithel, was taken every three years and that was used to help the orphans and widows (Deut. 14:28-29). In all, the Jews in the Old Testament would give at least 22 percent of their income – first tithel (10%), second tithel (9%, 10% of the remaining 90%), and third tithel (3% or 10% every three years).

Giving in the Church

The obvious difference between Israel and the church of course is that Israel was a nation, and the tithes were more like taxes rather than gifts and free will offerings. The church does not levy taxes, collect membership dues, or charge any user fees. How then does a believer give? And how much must he give? Christians give in two ways.

Tithel: Tithing, at least the first tithel, is still practised by some Christians today. The believer brings ten percent of his income to the church. It is important to understand the purpose of tithing. Its primary purpose is not to support the church or the pastor. The first tithel is given to recognise that the Lord is God. “*All the tithel of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD’S: it is holy unto the LORD*” (Lev. 27:30).

While the types and nature of tithing and giving in the church may have differed from the practices of the Jews, the fundamental principle remains the same – tithing is giving to the LORD.

Our church does not have the practice of ensuring that every member tithes. We do not have by-laws in our constitution on tithing. Our church does not refuse entry to any worshipper or member who does not tithel. However, we do believe that the covenant of grace and the law of love should reign supreme in the hearts of God’s people to give cheerfully and liberally. We believe that “*every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity*” (2 Cor. 9:7).

There is certainly nothing wrong with Christians who practise tithing. More should tithel. In fact, research has shown that if God’s people tithel faithfully, the church will never have to make special appeals to raise money in order to build churches and start missionary endeavours. The fact is that even as Christians became more affluent, the percentage of their giving dropped.

Faith Giving: This type of giving is usually associated with raising funds for some expensive projects, such as building a church. Faith giving is trusting God to provide the funds which a believer does not yet have to give.

This method of giving presupposes that God is the Supplier, and that He will supply the money which a person has decided to give. Faith giving is popular because it motivates prayer. Faith giving is also popular with those who raise funds because it usually raises larger sums of money.

However, the scriptural bases for faith giving are rather weak. First, God does not require us to give what we do not have. The Word of God, however, does teach that we are to give sacrificially of what we do possess. The poor widow gave of her two mites because that was all she had. She did not give a third mite because she did not have that.

Second, faith giving can lead to misunderstanding of faith. Faith is not just believing God. Faith is believing in what God has revealed. Paul said of Abraham that despite his old age, he believed that God would give him a son because Abraham “*staggered not at the **promise of God** through unbelief; but was strong in faith...being fully persuaded that, what **He had promised**, He was able also to perform*” (Rom. 4:19-21). Thus for a believer to hold God to a promise of a particular sum of money which He has not revealed is not faith but presumption.

Third, faith giving has the unintended result of assessing a person’s faith. The person who makes a faith pledge but is unable to meet it may conclude that his faith is weak, and takes away the joy and blessing of giving.

Biblical Principles on Giving

Giving in the age of grace is motivated by grace, and it is a response of a grateful child to a loving heavenly Father. Here are some principles for giving.

· We give because God first gave to us. God Himself provides the best example of sacrificial giving: “*God the Father that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?*” (Rom. 8:32). God the Son is also a sacrificial giver – “*For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich*” (2 Cor. 8:9).

· We give because all that we have belong to God. Tithing and giving to the Lord is an extension and expression of the giving of ourselves. It is hard to imagine how a believer can present himself as a living sacrifice (meaning everything that he has and is) and does not give of his substance. When he was preparing to build the temple, David asked, “*But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? For all things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee*” (1 Chron. 29:14).

· We give because we are thankful. That we can give to the Lord is proof of His work of grace in our lives. “*And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work*” (2 Cor. 9:8). Giving therefore is a spiritual exercise for all believers – young and old, rich and poor may give. Parents must teach their children to give a part of their allowance, and teenagers who work must learn the blessing of giving to the Lord.

· Our attitude of giving is more important than the amount given. We do not give to God our spare change. Often the greatest hindrance to giving is not poverty but covetousness. As one writer puts it, the question concerning giving is not “How much can I spare?” but “How much can I sacrifice?” In this regard, the poor widow who gave her two mites (Luke 21:1-4) gave far more than the rich men’s gifts.

· The spiritual blessings that we receive from God are directly related to our giving to Him. “*He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully*” (2 Cor. 9:6).

Biblical Priorities in Giving

In giving to the Lord, we must also first consider the priorities in our lives. It would be irresponsible of a man to starve his wife and children so that he could give half of his wages to the Lord.

· In our giving, we must not neglect the well-being of our own family. *“If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel”* (1 Tim. 5:8). The Christian must be careful to avoid the other extreme of indulging the family and neglect giving to God. It will do well for Christian parents to train our children to budget their allowance, and part of their budget must include an amount that they give to the Lord.

· In our giving, we must provide for those who minister the Word. No man should enter the ministry hoping to get rich, but the Word of God also teaches that the man who *“is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things”* (Gal. 6:6).

· In our giving, we must provide for believers in other places who are in need. When there was a famine in Jerusalem, Paul collected an offering from the churches in Macedonia to help the mother church.

· In our giving, we must provide for the work of evangelistic and missionary endeavours. With regard to our church, we have devoted a tenth of our offerings to missions outside of our church.

Biblical Instructions on Giving

The Lord has given us the reasons and the priorities for our giving, and He has also given us instructions on how we should give. We are to give:

- Faithfully: God has promised to supply all our needs; our giving will not be our lack (Phil. 4:19). We can never outgive God.
- Purposefully: We are to give from careful and prayerful planning (2 Cor. 9:7).
- Regularly. We are to give on *“the first day of the week....”* Regular giving is disciplined giving (1 Cor. 16:2).
- Personally. *“Let every one of you....”* Giving is a personal blessing and responsibility.
- Systematically. *“Every one you lay by him in store....”* This emphasizes the need to purposefully set aside a sum of money to be given to the Lord.
- Proportionately. Give *“as God hath prospereth”* (1 Cor. 16:2). In the New Testament, the tithe has been replaced by the grace principle of voluntary, purposeful, and proportionate giving.
- Liberally. Although the Macedonian Christians were poor, they gave *“beyond their power”* (2 Cor. 8:3).
- Cheerfully. Giving cannot be forced (2 Cor. 9:7).

How much to give is a matter between the believer and the Lord. There are Christians who need to be freed from the guilt and burden of tithing. But I think there are more Christians who must be freed from the limitations of merely giving the tithe. The amount that you purpose to give must be decided after prayerful consideration. So let every Christian *“as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work”* (2 Cor. 9:7-8); bearing in mind it is God from whom we have received His unspeakable gift.

20 Feb 11

At our coming Annual Congregational Meeting (30 April 2011), we will be electing a new session. This series of articles, over the next few weeks, will instruct you on the procedures for nomination and the qualities that you should be looking for in the person who is going to hold spiritual leadership in the church.

WHOM TO ELECT?

The needful periodic exercise of electing leaders for the Gospel ministry in the local church if properly conducted ensures the continued well-being and progress of the congregation. On the other hand, if mismanaged or manipulated by pressure groups and dissident factions, it can cause untold sadness, strife and disharmony which may eventually destroy the church.

It is absolutely vital therefore, for every responsible church member and leader to have a sound and spiritual understanding of this matter.

ELECTION TO THE CHURCH SESSION

Election to the Session, the governing body of the local church, is a spiritual exercise of utmost importance. A Session of spiritually mature and devoted members, striving together in one spirit and with one mind for the faith of the Gospel is a most effective body for the advancement of the Church of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the election of unqualified persons, or those unwilling to discharge their full responsibilities, or holding divergent views from the leadership, can seriously hinder the work of the Session and cause disharmony and dissension in the group. Candidates for election should therefore be most carefully scrutinised by the Board of Elders so that only those with the necessary spiritual qualifications are nominated.

FUNCTION OF SESSION

Candidates for election as well as the electorate should fully understand the functions of Session and thus be guided in the choice of officers of the church. The functions of Session are:

1. To maintain the corporate witness of the Church in Public Worship, Prayer Meeting and other spiritual meetings, and the administration of the Sacraments.
2. To have the oversight of the flock in nurturing, teaching and *“perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”* (Eph. 4:12).
3. To help in the fulfilling of the Great Commission, calling sinners to repentance, and receiving believing sinners into the Church.
4. To earnestly contend for the faith (Jude 3) in the midst of apostasy and unbelief in the Church at large.
5. To maintain the peace and purity of the Church by wise government.

These are heavy responsibilities not to be lightly regarded by the congregation or lightly undertaken by any candidate. *“And who is sufficient, for these things?”* (2 Cor. 2:16) By ourselves we shall fail, but our sufficiency is of God (2 Cor. 3:5). This should be the attitude of all prospective candidates towards serving in the Session.

QUALIFICATIONS OF CANDIDATES FOR SESSION

It is needful for every member of the congregation to study carefully Article 13 of the Church Constitution on *“Election to the Church Session.”* I quote 13.1 for the reader’s benefit:

13.1 Candidates shall satisfy the requirements listed in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5. Additionally, and to ensure better objectivity in selection, they shall fulfil the following conditions:

13.1.1 Demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt and over a sufficient length of time that they are faithful and mature members of the Body of Christ and faithfully devote themselves to personal prayer and study of the Word.

13.1.2 Attend public worship and prayer meetings of the Church regularly unless prevented from doing so for valid reasons.

13.1.3 Make a careful study of the Constitution in particular the Principle and Practice of Biblical Separation and fully accept it.

13.1.4 Be willing to participate wholeheartedly in the ministry of the Church, with the Pastor, and to devote time, talents and resources in such ministry which shall include serving in the various departments of the Church.

If the question is, *“Whom to elect?”* the answer is: let the congregation study the three Scripture passages referred to above, and the Article 13.1 of the Constitution. This will enable the members to recognise the gifts and qualities in others and in themselves. Prayerful study will lead them to nominate and elect the persons of God’s choosing.

BIBLICAL SEPARATION

Each congregation and the candidates for election should make careful study of Article 6 of the Constitution on Biblical Separation and our B-P stand. Candidates in particular should be fully persuaded of its blessedness, and take a stand against the false teachings of liberalism, modernism, neo-orthodoxy, neo-evangelicalism, Roman Catholicism, charismaticism and ecumenism. It is vital that all *who* intend to serve the Lord together in the Session agree in this area. Only then can God's work progress smoothly, to His glory.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. **A pastor / elder must be a man.** This is the clear teaching of Scripture (1 Cor. 11:3; 14:34, 35; 1 Tim 2:11-14). The New Testament Church had only men for elders, pastors, presbyters, bishops (elders). In the overall ecclesiastical leadership, man takes precedence, over woman, for "Adam was first formed. Adam was not deceived, but the woman was in the transgression" (1 Tim 2:13, 14). Our Church stands against the current move to put women into these high positions, contrary to Biblical teaching.
2. **A Pastoral candidate** must be called of God, gifted in preaching and teaching, exemplary in conduct, filled with the Spirit, able to lead and administer the work of the Church. He should have the appropriate theological training but he must not be puffed up or greedy of filthy lucre.
3. **Pre-election Pastoral instruction** of the congregation in the spiritual nature of the election is absolutely vital. The members should understand that the Church is not a social body and the Holy Spirit must be in full charge of the entire process of the election. Politicking, canvassing for votes and the formation of pressure groups must never be permitted.
4. **Candidates for Eldership** should study carefully the spiritual qualifications pertaining to elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. An elder must be a man of stable, mature and blameless Christian character, vigilant, sober and of good behaviour, given to hospitality, not arrogant or lusting after wealth, apt to teach, able to rule his own household, and the church, and to lead the flock in the path of righteousness.
5. **Candidates for Deaconship** should study carefully the spiritual qualifications pertaining to deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. A deacon must be a man of sober, stable, mature and blameless Christian character, not lusting after wealth, faithful and diligent in serving the Lord and able to rule his own household. The CBPC Constitution, in line with the Constitution of BP Churches in Singapore, allows for the office of deaconesses for the purpose of ministering to the ladies. We recognize that there are needs of woman that, in light of Christian prudence and discretion, ought not to be ministered by men but by other women.

WILLINGNESS TO SERVE

Membership in Session carries grave responsibilities. None should accept nomination who is not prepared to give the necessary time and devotion, in the service of the church. All too often, members of Session are ignorant or negligent of their duties and thereby impede the advancement of the Kingdom. It is therefore necessary to define in what ways a member of Session is required to devote himself / herself to the work of the church. Briefly, they are these:

1. Members of Session must be faithful in their own devotional life, giving adequate time to prayer and study of God's Word daily.
2. Members of Session must be exemplary in attendance at Public Worship and Prayer Meeting. Members should endeavour to arrive at meetings well **before** starting time, as a minimal requirement.
3. Members of Session must be prepared to attend all Session Meetings, unless prevented from so doing by urgent or unforeseen circumstances.
4. Members of Session must be prepared to participate in the ministry of the church, under the direction of the Pastor and to devote due diligence, time and attention to the duties assigned. Such duties include helping in committees, Sunday School, fellowship groups, visitation, Public Worship and Prayer Meetings.

Candidates should declare in writing their willingness to serve before they are nominated for election.

NOMINATIONS

Every member of CBPC has the right to propose another member for the positions of elder, deacon, or deaconess if the person meets the biblical qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

Forms will be made available to the members of CBPC by 20 March 2011. All proposed candidates must be submitted by 3 April 2011.

According to the Constitution, Article 6, the interim Board of Elders (BOE) will examine the suitability of every name proposed. In other words, not every name that is proposed will be put up for election. Only persons whom the BOE deem as suitable will be put up for election. A list of the nominees for election will be presented to the congregation on 17 April two weeks before the Annual Congregational Meeting.

The election of session will be held on 30 April 2011 at the Annual Congregational Meeting. The new Session should be installed at the soonest possible date after the Annual Congregational Meeting.

PRAYER IS THE KEY

Much prayer by the whole Church in submission to God's Holy Spirit is the key to a smooth and successful election.

27 Feb 11

As we prepare for the election of the Church Session, let me impress upon you the seriousness of the work by directing your attention to the Word of God.

“But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

It seems strange – and even inexplicable to some people – that God should choose the weak and the nobodies to do His work. In the sporting world, the winning team would be the team with the best (and most expensive) players. In the world of politics and business, the best team will be the one with the best brains. Yet when it comes to the work of the church, God chooses the weak, base and despised. The reason is clear that no man should therefore rob God of His glory; that no man who would serve God ought to serve in the strength of his own flesh. That means that the highest honour given to sinful men is to serve God.

As the Church elects her new session on 30 April 2011, no man ought to embark on this ministry lightly and flippantly. And no church member ought to take lightly the responsibility of voting for a man into the office of the church.

As noted last week, while the Board of Elders has the responsibility to determine the suitability of proposed names before they are put up for nomination, members of church who have the right to propose names for nomination must do so with much prayer.

We have to recognize that it is God who calls and makes leaders. *“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the **Holy Ghost hath made you overseers**, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).* Yet it is also God who gives us the qualities (1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:7-9) so that members of the church may recognize men with such qualities and to appoint them to positions of leadership in the church. It is God who calls, but members of the church must learn to recognize men with spiritual gifts. I would encourage members to read 1 Timothy 3:1-7 over and over again in preparation for the Church Session election.

Members must exercise great care when choosing leaders of the church. It will not do for members of the church to nominate and elect persons on the basis of their likeability or ability. Problems arise in the leadership of church because members fail to elect men according to God’s instructions. There are two reasons: there are few men who openly seek the office of an elder or a deacon in the church, and this leads to the eagerness of the church to choose those who are available rather than those who meet the criteria set forth in God’s Word. One writer offers this wise counsel, “It would have been better that the church consulted less its own eagerness and more the man’s reluctance.”

The Bible text that we will be looking at specifically addresses the elders, but whenever appropriate, we will apply God’s instructions generally to all who seek the office of a leader in the church – elder, deacon or deaconess.

Who Should Stand? How to Choose?

Spiritual aspiration is not wrong per se. *“This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work” (1 Timothy 3:1).* The Apostle Paul says that it is not wrong for a person to desire (same word in translated as “coveted” in 1 Timothy 6:10) the office of an elder/leader. However, it is the motive behind the desire. It is not a desire to a position of prestige. It is a desire to good work. Thus a man who has this spiritual desire ought to examine his heart and prepare himself for the work.

The motive must be right, and the ability must be evident. The man whose heart is in the right place but lacks the ability will be promoted for a fall. The man who has the ability but not the right motive will be just as destructive. Paul gives this warning, *“We beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at*

peace among yourselves” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). There is an implied sequence – members are to know those who labour among you, and when you have known them, esteem them very highly. It would be anachronistic to esteem a person for work which he has not done, or where neither the person’s character nor work calls for such esteem.

The onus is therefore on members of the church. It is a privilege to choose one’s own leaders, and it is also a serious responsibility.

In our Church Constitution, the session consists of elders, deacons and deaconesses, if any (Article 12). It further makes the distinction between pastors and elders (Articles 14 and 15), although both offices make up the Board of Elders (Article 17).

What do Elders do?

Apt to Teach. The two offices of pastors and elders lead to the unfortunate differentiation between “ruling elders” and “teaching elders.” While it is true that all elders rule, it is wrong to say that only some elders teach. God says that one of the qualities of the elders must be “apt to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9). The aptness to teach is not a description of the man’s eloquence; rather it describes his knowledge of and his ability to impart the truth.

John Calvin offers this comment: “They who have the charge of governing the people, ought to be qualified for teaching. And here he does not demand volubility of tongue, for we see many persons whose fluent talk is not fitted for edification; but he rather commends wisdom in applying the word of God judiciously to the advantage of the people.”

The distinction between pastors and elders must be seen in the light of 1 Timothy 5:17 – “*Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.*” All elders rule and teach, but pastors (who are also elders) are called to “*labour in the word and doctrine.*”

Rule by Serving, not Sitting. The phrase “ruling elders” is misleading for a second reason; that they only rule. Sadly, this is the misconception that some have of eldership; that they just sit and rule. No! Elders are called to a good work (1 Timothy 3:1). Elders are to “*Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock*” (1 Peter 5:2-3). Elders feed the flock. Elders act as shepherds to care for, visit, minister to the sick. Elders serve willingly. Elders are not to be lords over the flock. Elders do not merely ask others to do these things and sit in judgment of their performance.

Teach Publicly and from House to House. From 1 Peter 5:2-3, we see a down-to-earth quality that must be present in elders. They must put their ears to the ground, and they must feel the pulse of the people. How do elders do that? Paul, a pastor and elder, offered this advice. When speaking to the Ephesians, he said that he “*kept back nothing that was profitable unto [them], but have shewed [them], and have taught [them] publickly, and from house to house*” (Acts 20:20). Elders have a public ministry in the church, but they must also be engaged in the private ministry from house to house, and that would include home visitation and family worship.

“*This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work*” (1 Timothy 3:1). To do well in any field requires effort and sacrifice. No runner enters a race untrained. No soldier goes to war unequipped. No musician goes on stage unrehearsed. How then can we expect a man who neither has the knowledge nor the character to take on the role of shepherding the souls of God’s redeemed?

May the LORD help us!

06 Mar 11

What should we be looking for in men whom we elect as elders? The Word of God clearly lists the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:7-9. *“A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil”* (1 Timothy 3:2-7). While this passage deals specifically with the conduct of elders, the lessons are applicable to leaders. Certainly, it would make no sense to suggest that only elders need to have these qualities, or that a man needs only to behave in this manner after he becomes a church leader. I would invite all of you to read these two passages repeatedly before you propose any name for the office of a deacon or elder.

An Elder must be a Man

Specifically for the office of an elder, the first criterion for the person who desires the office of an elder is that he must be a man. As we have seen last week that the elder has the responsibility to teach publicly and to counsel privately, this criterion means that there would not be female elders and pastors in the church. This requirement does not in any way demean women, dismiss their importance, or absolve them of any responsibility within the body of believers.

This biblical injunction is affirmed in other portions of Scripture. *“Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law”* (1 Corinthians 14:34). *“But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God”* (1 Corinthians 11:3).

In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul compares the relationship between man and woman with that of Christ (God the Son) and God (God the Father). Just as he is not saying that God the Father is superior to Christ, he is also not teaching that man is superior to woman. Man is the head of the woman only positionally and not essentially. In other words, in essence (substance), there is no difference between man and woman. But there is a difference in position between the two genders.

Man’s positional superiority over woman is based on the fact that God made woman out of and for man. *“And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet **for** him”* (Genesis 2:18). This is the creation order. And this principle remains unchanged. *“But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve”* (1 Timothy 2:12-13). Paul applies this principle to the relationship between man and woman in the church.

An Elder Must Be...

Before considering the specific criteria for eldership, we have to consider whether or not these qualities are negotiables. In other words, are they must-haves or are they nice-to-have-but-not-necessary? *“A bishop then **must be blameless...**”* (1 Timothy 3:2). This is the same phrase that our Lord Jesus used when He spoke with Nicodemus. *“Ye must be born again”* (John 3:7). To enter the kingdom of God, a man must be born again. It is an essential criterion. It is mandatory. Likewise for the list of criterion for eldership, each one of them is an essential criterion.

Would any man be able to stand up to the scrutiny of the list of qualifications for eldership? When I used the list in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 to counsel young ladies looking for a husband, the unanimous reply from them was that it would be impossible to find such a man. There will be no man who has all these qualities to the full extent. However, Christians must be able to discern elements of these qualities before nominating a man for eldership.

The point is that God has given a list for us to make an objective observation of the workings of grace in men within the church so that you can judge their fitness for the office of an elder. We are not to nominate a man on the basis of ties of friendship or kinship.

In 1 Timothy 3:2-7, the criteria can be divided into positives and negatives. There are some things that an elder must be, and there are some things that an elder must not be.

· **An elder must be blameless.** It does not and cannot mean that an elder or a man aspiring to be an elder is sinless or that he must be perfect. Albert Barnes writes that an elder “should be a man against whom no charge of immorality, or of holding false doctrine, is alleged. His conduct should be irreprehensible or irreproachable...he should be a man of irreproachable character for truth, honesty, chastity, and general uprightness.” John Calvin adds that he must have a “good and honourable reputation.”

A blameless man is one who will be found with no skeletons in his closet; not a man who has things to hide or does not want some things in his life to be known. As one writer points out such a man “will always walk as one who is aware that men will judge Jesus Christ by him. And it will be his prayer that men will see Jesus Christ through him.”

An elder must be the husband of one wife. Does this mean that an elder must be a married man? When Paul wrote these words, polygamy was the societal norm; thus, this criterion is intended to exclude men who have more than one wife. There is nothing in the verse to say that unmarried or widowed men cannot be elders. Widowers who later remarry are also not disqualified from the office of an elder. Having said that, for reasons of prudence, it is desirable for a man who aspires to the office of an elder to be married.

What about a divorced man? Can he be an elder? It depends on the reasons for the divorce. Are there biblical grounds for the divorce? Did the man in any way contribute to the breakup of the marriage? Did the divorce take place before the man’s conversion? In the case of a divorced man, extra steps must be taken to ensure that the man is blameless so that his ministry will not be hindered and the name of Christ will not be held in reproach.

· **An elder must be vigilant.** The word “vigilance” is used in only two other places – 1 Timothy 3:11; Titus 2:2. Literally, it means to be free from wine. To be vigilant is to be sober, and the word is often used in relation to the consumption of wine. To be vigilant is to be alert and watchful, and this describes a man who is conscious of his words and deeds. With regard to vigilance, Barnes writes that “a minister should have a watchful care over his own conduct. He should be on his guard against sin in any form.”

· **An elder must be sober.** He must be sober [Gk: *sophron*]. The same word is also translated “temperate” (Titus 2:2), and “discreet” (Titus 2:5). It describes a man who follows sound reason; one whose decisions and life are not dictated by passions and prejudices. A sober man is reasonable. A sober man is also one who has his life well-regulated and not controlled by desires.

· **An elder must be of good behaviour.** The phrase is also translated “modest” in 1 Timothy 2:9, when Paul was describing the clothes that are appropriate for Christian ladies. The phrase describes the outward appearance of man. While it is true that it is the heart that is important, the outward impression is not to be neglected. Barnes says that an elder “should be a gentleman. He should not be slovenly in his appearance, or rough and boorish in his manners. He should not do violence to the usages of refined intercourse, nor be unfit to appear respectably in the most refined circles of society. Inattention to personal neatness, and to the rules which regulate refined intercourse, is indicative neither of talent, learning, nor religion....A minister of the gospel should be a finished gentleman in his manners....He should be an example and a pattern in all that goes to promote the welfare of mankind....No man can do good, on the whole, or in the "long run," by disregarding the rules of refined intercourse; and, other things being equal, the refined, courteous, polite gentleman in the ministry, will always do more good than he who neglects the rules of good-breeding.” In other words, a man who desires to be an elder must not be sloppy in his outward appearance, uncouth in his manner of conduct, and crude in his speech.

The three qualities – vigilance, sobriety, and good behaviour – taken together describes a man who is of a good mind, one who is ruled by reason, one who looks at things objectively and is able to rise above his own feeling and prejudices. He is a man who lives an ordered life in and out of the home.

13 Mar 11

Last week, we began considering the various criteria that must be met by a man who aspires to the office of an elder. Before we continue, let me add a word to all whom God has called to serve Him in the years ahead in this capacity. We all recognize the need for renewal of leadership. This leadership cannot take place over night without a gradual and deliberate transition. While I appreciate that the work may be tough (I am not one for sugar-coating), let me urge those who are called to seriously pray about serving in the Church Session.

Last week, we noted that an elder must be blameless, one of irreproachable character. He must be faithful. He must be watchful. He must be temperate. He must be of good behaviour. This week, we will continue with the other criteria.

An elder must be hospitable. In our days of highway motels and eateries, such hospitality may not be as necessary in the days of the Apostle Paul when a traveller finds rest and food by appealing to the kindness of strangers. Nevertheless, the hospitality of a man reflects the nature of his heart. The writer of Hebrews reminds us, *“Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares”* (Hebrews 13:1-2).

Hospitality and the love for strangers is one of the things that differentiate between the righteous and the unrighteous. Our Lord Jesus told the disciples, *“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me... And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal”* (Matthew 25:40, 45-46).

An elder must be apt to teach. Writing to Titus, Paul says that an elder must be *“Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers”* (Titus 1:9). Clearly stated, an elder must be a diligent student of God’s Word. Before one can teach, he must first be willing to learn.

However, it must be pointed out that this does not mean that an elder must be a gifted orator or an excellent Bible teacher, although such gifts are desirable and advantageous for one who desires the office of an elder.

The minimum criterion is that an elder must be able to give biblical counsel to another person. Albert Barnes: *“No one should be allowed to enter the ministry who is not qualified to impart instruction to others on the doctrines and duties of religion; and no one should feel that he ought to continue in the ministry, who has not industry, and self-denial, and the love of study enough to lead him constantly to endeavour to increase in knowledge, that he may be qualified to teach others. A man who would teach a people, must himself keep in advance of them on the subjects on which he would instruct them.”*

An elder must not be given to wine. Wine controls (Ephesians 5:18; see also Proverbs 31:4-9). Drunkenness is the direct opposite of what an elder should be – blameless, vigilant, sober, and well-behaved.

This criterion may be applied generally to things other than wine. A man who desires to be an elder must be freed from things and activities that drive his passions and consume his time and resources. In our day, there are many things that are addictive, some just as, if not more, dangerous and addictive as wine. The general principle here is God must have full control of a man and his life.

An elder must not be a striker... must be patient, not a brawler. The word “striker” does not mean one who resorts to physical violence. A “striker” is one who is quarrelsome. How do you spot a “striker”? This is a man who is not open to sound reason. This man regards any man who questions his ideas as an apostate, and he does not hesitate to use this label. This man is not a team player. He must be the boss. He must be the captain. He must sit at the head of the table. He is the one who bangs the table to make his point, who raises his voices and walks out of the room when the opinions are not in his favour. What he says, goes; and what he does not, stays. The Apostle John writes of a man by the name of Diotrephes, who loves “to have the pre-eminence” among the people (3 John 9).

Paul uses another term to describe another aspect of a contentious man. An elder must not be a brawler. This word is also translated “strife” (2 Timothy 2:23), and “fightings” (James 4:1). An elder does not go around looking for a fight. In fact the phrase “not a brawler” means that he is not predisposed to strife and contentions.

The opposite of a striker and brawler is a man who is patient. The same word is also translated “gentle” (Titus 3:2; 1 Peter 2:18). A patient man bears the reproaches of those who oppose him, gives up what is his by right, puts up with the injuries and hurts that are directed at him.

An elder must not be greedy of filthy lucre... must not be covetous. In the Old Testament, elders must “*not wrest judgment...respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous*” (Deuteronomy 16:19). God knows the power of money and the evil that can be perpetrated because of the love for money. It does not mean that an elder cannot be a business man or a rich man, but he must not be a slave to wealth. Believers cannot worship God and mammon; how much the more an elder.

An elder must rule his house well. To rule is one of the most important responsibilities of an elder. To rule is to stand over, to preside, to lead. The responsibilities of an elder strongly resemble that of a father to his household. Therefore, it is most natural to assess a man’s ability to rule in the church by examining his leadership in the home. Here is perhaps an implication that it would be desirable of an elder who is married because his leadership in his household is evidence of his character and maturity.

Eli was judged not because he failed as a high priest, but in his role as father. He was judged because “his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not” (1 Samuel 3:13). That is why Paul says that an elder must have “*faithful children not accused of riot or unruly*” (Titus 1:6). To Timothy, Paul says, that an elder must have “*his children in subjection with all gravity*” (1 Timothy 3:4), and then in parenthesis, Paul gives the reason – “*For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?*” (1 Timothy 3:5). If a man fails in his leadership in his own household, how can he be expected to succeed in his leadership in the church?

There are several questions that need to be asked of a man who desires to be an elder. How is his relationship with his wife and children? Does it show evidence of a Christian home? Is he the spiritual leader in the home? Does he love his wife? Is he firm and fair in his discipline of the children? Does he teach and demonstrate Christian virtues to them? Are these virtues evident in their lives?

Having said that, it is sadly true that there are godly fathers whose children grow up to be ungodly. The sons of Samuel are an example. Are these men disqualified from the office of an elder? I think not. While there is no age description for “children,” it is understood that children are those who are living under the roof and authority of the father, where he still is responsible for their welfare and conduct.

These are difficult criteria for any man, but God’s leaders are required to live up to their calling. One writer warns that “a want of this [quality of ruling his household well] will always be a hindrance to extensive usefulness.”

Who then is qualified for such an office? No man is, at least not by his own judgment or wisdom. But it is God who calls, and whom He calls, He will also equip. It is therefore important for the Church to be in fervent prayer that God will raise men to teach and lead. And all who are called must enter into the office with fear and trepidation. No man is sufficient for this high calling; the sufficiency must be from God alone.

20 Mar 11

At 2:46pm, Friday afternoon (11 March 2011) an earthquake 8.9 on the Richter scale hit Japan. It would not be hours later that the whole world came to grips with the magnitude of this earthquake and 30-foot tsunamis and aftershocks that followed. One news report says that this is the worst crisis in Japan since the Second World War. Scientists said that this earthquake was so powerful that it moved the coastline of Japan eastward by eight feet and shifted the earth's axis by ten centimetres. The first death toll was twenty-four. Now it is tens of thousands.

What are Christians to make of such earth-shaking natural disasters? The wording found in insurance policies to describe natural disasters is "acts of God." Yet nothing is said of the normal weather that mankind has enjoyed for years and centuries.

God is the Creator (Genesis 1:1). The first world-wide disaster was God's judgment against sin. "*GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air...*" (Genesis 6:5-7).

"I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me: That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the LORD, and there is none else. I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things" (Isaiah 45:5-7). The word "evil" does not necessarily refer to "moral evil." It can also refer to something that is not pleasant (Genesis 28:8; 41:3). It can also refer to adversity (Psalm 10:6), death (Psalm 23:4) or calamity (Deuteronomy 6:22).

The Bible tells us that our Lord Jesus Christ is not only the Creator but also the Sustainer of creation. "*For by him were all things created...all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist*" (Colossians 1:16-17). God is in full control of His creation, to bring about and to end disasters, and to determine the extent of their power. The Bible also tells us that God does and will bring about natural disasters as His judgment against sin (Deuteronomy 11:17; Revelation 6, 8, 16). But are all disasters God's judgment? The answer is no!

Just as God allows wicked people to carry out wicked acts, so God allows His creation to reflect the effects of sin. One day all will be made new, but until then, creation is in the "*bondage of corruption...[and] the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together*" (Romans 8:21-22).

The more pertinent question is this: Why did God allow such devastating disasters? Why did God allow tens of thousands of people – young and old, men and women – to be destroyed?

We admit that these events do shake the faith of God's people. David's faith was shaken, causing him to ask, "*How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? how long shall mine enemy be exalted over me?"* (Psalm 13:1-2).

However, there are at least two important lessons that we can learn from these acts of God. First, these events force us to look to God. C. S. Lewis, in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, wrote "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Yes, David's faith was shaken. But he turned to God and asked, "How long, LORD?" That is a good question to ask in times of trials. And God is the right person whom he should ask. The events in Japan over the last week must have surely caused one to pause and consider the uncertainty and frailty of human life. At 2:45pm last Friday, everybody might have a plan for the evening. A minute later, the plans were radically altered. There would be those who died with eternal regrets. There would be those who survived with eternal regrets too because loved ones had perished in that few minutes when the world shook.

Second, these calamities ought also to give us pause to re-evaluate our lives and priorities. There is a greater day of judgment coming. The Bible warns us to be alert and watchful. "*The day of the Lord will come as a*

thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness” (2 Peter 3:10-11). One aspect of that holy conversation and godliness that is expected of all who are concerned about the coming judgment is to be engaged faithfully in the work of the LORD. Occupy till our Lord comes. Our Lord Jesus says to us, “Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

With that in mind, I want to urge all whom God has called and have been asked to take up the reins of leadership as deacons and elders in Calvary BP Church.

Nominations for Church Session start today (20 March 2011). Members may approach pastors, elders and session members to propose names to stand in the coming Church Session Election. The Board of Elders will prayerfully consider the proposals and nominate the eligible ones to stand for election. Nominations will close on 3 April.

Over the last few weeks, we have been considering the qualities that a man should have if he aspires to the office of an elder. God has set the bar high because the work is serious and the responsibilities are heavy. It is not a job for the faint-hearted who gives up at the slightest sign of trouble. It is not a job for the weak-hearted who is easily discouraged. It is not a job for solo-hearted because the work is bigger than one man. It is not a job for the egotistic-hearted because it seeks no man’s approval, only God’s. It is not a job for the weak-kneed because it requires courage to do what is right.

Paul told the elders at Ephesus, *“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood”* (Acts 20:28).

In 1 Timothy 3:6-7, there are a few more qualities to be considered for the man who is called to such a work. *“Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil”* (1 Timothy 3:6-7).

An elder must not be a novice

“Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:6). An elder must not be a novice. In other words, an elder must not be a new convert lest he be taken up with pride.

This does not mean that those who have been converts for a long time are therefore qualified to be elders. The Apostle here is referring to those who are new to the Christian faith and those who are still “babes in Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:1, see also Hebrews 5:10-14). It is unwise to have such a person bear the responsibilities of caring for the souls of others.

An elder must not be like children, *“tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness”* (Ephesians 4:14). As far as spiritual understanding is concerned, an elder must not think like a child, and he must *“put away childish things”* (1 Corinthians 13:11).

For these reasons, Paul warns Timothy, *“Lay hands suddenly on no man”* (1 Timothy 5:22). An elder must be one who is spiritually mature and well-grounded in the Scripture (he must be apt to teach), one with a proven track record of service in the church.

There are many ways of determining a person’s suitability for eldership. Look at the person’s character. Is he serious minded? Look at his service. Is he faithful in his ministry as a deacon, as a Sunday School teacher? There must be a preponderance of proof before the church calls a man to be an elder.

There are some who would say that a Presbyterian church is not one until there is an elder. But I would argue that unless there is one who clearly meets the criteria that the Bible sets for us, it is better to be safe than sorry.

An elder must have a good report

“Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:7). What is the man’s standing in the public domain? What do the neighbours say about him? What opinion do his colleagues and business associates have concerning him?

The world has its own standards. Every profession – lawyer, doctors, real estate agents, financial planners – has its own code of conduct, which the members are expected to fulfil. Honesty and integrity still matter. Through our interactions with others, they will know who is trustworthy. Paul says of himself, *“And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men”* (Acts 24:16). The Apostle Peter says that Christians ought always to be ready *“to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you”* (1 Peter 3:15). That is apologetics. But besides having the right answers, Peter says that the Christian must have the right life; that we are to have *“a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ”* (1 Peter 3:16).

Reasons for Caution

“Be careful!” That is Paul’s counsel. The reasons: *“Lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil....Lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil”* (1 Timothy 3:6-7). A godly elder will be a great blessing to the church. An ungodly one will be a blight. Paul says that having a bad elder is tantamount to being ensnared by the devil.

The devil is keenly aware of our frailties. He knows the right buttons to push to get us on the wrong side. The devil knows how to fill our hearts with pride, lifts us up before he crashes us down. There is nothing that the devil loves more than to see church leaders being tarnished by pride and sin.

Paul warns us about the “wiles of the devil” and the “fiery darts of the wicked” (Ephesians 6:11, 16). It is bad enough for the Christians to fall to the wiles of the devil, but what is more devastating is for that to happen to men who hold the highest office in the church.

It is therefore paramount that the right men be called. Choose well, and there will be God’s blessings. Choose badly, the consequences will be as devastating as having the devil run the church.

The work is serious. The criteria are stringent. The one being chosen, and the ones doing the choosing must be prayerful and honest. There must be a self-examination on the part of the man who has been called to the office of an elder. The church is not looking for perfect men. That is an impossibility. But the church is looking for men who are aware of their own frailties and shortcomings, and yet there is a sincere and diligent strife for godliness in their lives. The church is looking for men who are of uncommon devotion to God, His Word, and His Church

00 Mar 11

The Responsibility of Choosing

In the last few weeks, we have been looking at the qualities that we should be looking for in men who would be elders of the church. As I have said, it is impossible that there would be one who has those qualities to perfection. Nevertheless, the church must maintain those biblical standards.

Seeking the Right Man for the Office

In finding the right men to lead the church, we must be careful not to be driven by need that we settle for any willing person. The Bible tells us that, as He did Samuel, *“Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature...for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart”* (1 Samuel 16:7).

To be sure, we do not have God’s omniscience to know a man’s heart. But the LORD has given us instructions. Look at the man’s character. Look at his family. Look at his various relationships — as a neighbour, as a worker, as a supervisor to his subordinates, etc. There must be some consistent marks of approval from the people who have dealings with the man.

The responsibility of finding the right man rests on the shoulders of the congregation and the younger men in the church. The duty of the former is to seek the right men. The latter’s duty is to seek the office.

Churches are not always wise in seeking the right men. Often, the church chooses men who are popular, men who have seen much and done much; men who are eloquent and experienced; men who have prestige and position. However, such men do not necessarily have the qualities to for the office of an elder. Paul told Timothy, *“The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also”* (2 Timothy 2:2). The criterion here is faithfulness to God and His Word.

In Acts 6:3, as the church was looking for men to serve as deacons, God said, *“Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business”* (Acts 6:3). It seems that it was possible to distinguish men who are full of Holy Ghost. God has given us power to observe and discern. And God has given us the responsibility to choose not on the ground of personal friendships but on the biblical criteria as given to us in the Word of God (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1). The church must therefore seek and find those whom the LORD has used in the ministry of the local church.

It is God who gives pastors and elders (Ephesians 4:11). Godly leaders are not made overnight. The church must always be encouraging young men to seek the office, giving them opportunities to serve in the church *“If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work”* (1 Timothy 3:1). Paul says that this man — with the right motivation — has a proper desire. One author suggests that all Christians should think in this fashion: *“I have been bought with the precious blood of Christ; therefore I am not my own. Since I have but one life to live for my Lord and Saviour, I must invest it where it will bring Him the highest return. And where is the highest place of usefulness in the cause of Christ’s kingdom? Is it not in service as one of Christ’s under-shepherds? I shall pray and prepare myself for this office if it shall please Him to confirm His gifts in me. And when He calls me through the call of His church, I will follow Him.”* Just as the church must observe and discern the men whom they would choose to be elders, so the individual being called must also examine his own gifts. Young Christian men need to be encouraged and equipped for the office of elder.

Submitting to the Right Man in Office

Up till now, our focus has been on finding the right men to take on the office of elder in the church. But after a person has been called, elected and ordained as an elder, what next? A society where there is neither rule of nor respect for the law is anarchy. This principle of rule of law and respect for those who have the responsibility to maintain it is important for the orderliness of the church.

Our Lord Jesus says, *“Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls”* (Matthew 11:29). Our Lord Jesus says that He is under a yoke. The yoke is a restraining device. Here, our Lord Jesus is saying that He is under the yoke of God the Father. He *“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him*

the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death” (Philippians 2:6-8).

Christ was also under the yoke of the law. *“When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law”* (Galatians 4:4). In His earthly ministry, our Lord Jesus was perfectly obedient in every aspect of the law. Though He was God, He submitted Himself to the authority of mere men.

In the same text, our Lord Jesus is also asking us to take up His yoke. And it is the same yoke of meekness and lowliness, of submission to God’s appointed authorities over us. *“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls”* (Hebrews 13:17). *“We beseech you...to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake”* (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). *“Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine”* (1 Timothy 5:17).

It is therefore a serious error in a church when the members do not take the rule of elders seriously. There are two possible reasons for this unhappy situation. One, the failure of the elders to do their job. Two, the failure of the members to submit to the elders in obedience to the Word of God.

Scripture that calls for respect and honour for elders also warns *“Be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation”* (James 3:1). A man who assumes the office of an elder but is derelict in his duty and careless in his conduct demeans the office and brings reproach to the Name of Christ.

Peter says, *“The elders which are among you I exhort...Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock”* (1 Peter 5:1-4). Elders must remember that they are not merely running the church to make sure that bills are paid, and preaching roster is in order; but it is also the caring of the souls (Hebrews 13:17).

The church that called men to be elders must recognize and remember that they are not perfect. In the days of the apostles, there was only one church. Believers did not have the “luxury” of church-hopping. The situation in our day is far different. If you do not like a particular elder, you can cross the street and join another church.

Of course, there will be excuses and even legitimate reasons for church-hopping. One reason could be that a member can no longer come under the authority of the elders because he disagrees with a decision that the elders had made. Should he just leave? The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches that *“All synods or councils, since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both”* (WCF, Chapter 31, Section 3).

The Confession recognises that men who made up the presbytery/session are sinners. They can make the wrong decisions. What do you do when you think that the elders have a wrong decision? A.A. Hodge offers this wise advice, *“If their judgments are unwise, but not directly opposed to the will of God, the private member should submit for peace’s sake. If their decisions are opposed plainly to the Word of God, the private member should disregard them and take the penalty.”*

There is a tendency in Christians to leave the church when they cannot agree with the decision of the elders; or worse, garner a revolt against the church leadership. These kinds of actions are evidence of lack of submission to the rule of elders of the church to which members are bound by their vows. More importantly, it is disobedience to God. If there have been no misdeeds on the part of the elders, every church member owes submission in hearing the preaching of the Word, and in obeying the authority of the elders.

Christ is the head of the church. Elders are His appointed leaders over His church. To disregard the authority of elders is to despise Christ Himself. All believers would do well to bear in mind that the perfect Christ grew up in a home of imperfect parents, and He wholly submitted to them. Every Christian who claims he is under the lordship of Christ should therefore place himself under the rule of elders whom God has set over the church. May the LORD help us!

In Christ
Pastor Isaac Ong

+++The End+++

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