



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

1 Timothy 3:1-7

“The Office of the Elder - II”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] We again turn to Thee, Lord, with anticipation and also with petition that Thou will through the ministry of the word lead us and guide us into the truth. We thank Thee for the promise of the Holy Spirit and the ministry which he has in our hearts, and we pray that he may illumine us, give us understanding, and also Lord, we pray for enablement as we have each Wednesday night to perform the things that we see in holy Scripture. Guide and direct us as we consider the important question before us tonight. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] Our study tonight is really the continuation of the study that we began last week entitled “The Office of the Elder,” and we are in the process of expounding 1 Timothy, under the general theme of Paul, Timothy and the Doctrine of the church. So if you have your New Testament, and I hope you have, turn with me to the 3rd chapter of 1 Timothy. Let me read again these 7 verses which give us the qualifications for the bishops or elders:

“This is a true saying, if a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober minded, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no violent, 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; (or outside) lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”

In our last study we sought to discuss these points. There are some who claim that the New Testament does not give us any settled church order. And we admitted that there is a bewildering variety of church orders manifest in the professing Christian church. Generally speaking these types of church order may be classified under one of four heads. There are those who use an Episcopalian form of church government. That is a hierarchical form of government under bishops who claim often apostolic succession. The second is the Presbyterian form of government which is representative government, government by means of a series of courts, the Presbyterian, the synod, and the general assembly. Congregational form of government, which is a democratic form of government, and finally what we could call a free or charismatic form of church government in which there are sometimes no specifically, publically recognized church offices at all.

Now, of course there are many variations within these general categories, and some of the churches with which you are familiar probably partake of characteristics of more than one of these. But these are generally the forms of church government that are manifest down through the years in the history of the Christian church. Now, we acknowledge that there is a bewildering variety of church orders, and history supports

that without question. But we deny that it is right to say there is no such thing as the New Testament church order. It is my own contention, and I would of course try to persuade you to believe what I say is true to Scripture, that the form of church government set forth in the New Testament is just as plain, if not plainer, than some of the doctrines of the New Testament which you accept without question.

Now we discussed that last time briefly, but of course all of these things that we are talking about have to do with church order. Then we asked the question, “Does the order really matter?” And we said, “Yes, the order does really matter.” Although, of course, church order by itself does not guarantee that a church shall have an effective ministry. Church order is not enough, but if the church order is according to the New Testament it provides all things being equal greater opportunity for the fulfillment of the will of God for a local church.

We also went on to say that theologically, by virtue of the nature of the church itself as the household of God, scripturally by virtue of the apostle’s statement in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 and verse 40 that “Things should be done decently and in order,” and practically, we must have a church government that is suitable for universal witness to Christ in all cultures. These matters tend to suggest that we must have a specific church order. And that I think is what the New Testament does give us. Perhaps some have stumbled over the fact that it is so simple, but the simplicity of the church government set forth in the New Testament should not cause us to stumble and look for something more complicated. The simplicity of it satisfies the requirements of theology, of Scripture, and of practice in the evangelization and building up of those who have come to Christ.

We were discussing the general description of the church office of elder as set forth in the first verse referred to there, and we discussed the explanation of the term elder and tried to point out from Scripture that elder and bishop are the same terms. We looked at a number of passages in order to support this. I don't think there is any

question but that the Bible teaches that the term bishop and the term elder refer to the same office, one having reference to the duty, oversight, that's the meaning of the term bishop and the other the term elder having to do with the spiritual dignity of the person who gives the oversight in the local church. The modern term bishop in the sense of a person who has territorial control of the church is a product of the church and not of Scripture.

We discussed the evaluation of the office. We set forth the duties of the elder as being three fold. That is, he is to lead or shepherd, and that includes the government of the church. It also, specifically, refers to the handling of finances, the shepherding of the flock, the teaching, or the handling, of the teaching of the flock, the guarding of the flock against the false teachers and this, of course, means that every elder must be a man who is well versed in holy Scripture.

And I think it is implied by this that an elder should be a person who is interested in the varieties of false doctrine that are prominent in the particular age in which he lives because he must be prepared to defend the saints against the contemporary departures from the faith. And so it would seem to me that every elder who is going to be the kind of elder that the Bible would have us to have must be a person who is well versed in the positive teaching of Scripture and well versed also in the forms of apostasy that are rampant. That means if you happen to be in this audience and you're an elder in your particular church that you ought to know something about process theology. You ought to know how to defend yourself against the claim that Universalism is taught in Scripture. You ought to know something about Barthianism. You should know something about the Theology of Revolution. You should know something about the Theology of Hope and a few others of the types of heresy that are prominent. You also should know, in addition, those types of heresy with which you are constantly faced in a more practical way, that is, in your neighborhood such as Seventh Day Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses,

and various other types of heresy and apostasy along those lines because how can an elder defend the church if he does not know the forms of error that are rampant.

It's evident that the Apostle Paul knew, and the other elders, knew the forms of error that were prominent in their day, and they warned the flock against them. There are some who seem to think that all that an elder needs to know is to have a general idea of Bible doctrine. Unfortunately the evangelical church has been given the impression that it is possible for you to attend a few lectures on God's plan of the ages and come out knowing more theology than is really necessary for effective Christian living. I'm sad to say we have a very shallow idea of the content of the theology of the word of God in evangelicalism. And as you know I'm engaged in a one man crusade to correct that, at least in Believers Chapel and in other places with which we have contact.

Now the elder, also, thirdly should discipline the flock. And therefore he needs to know the principles of discipline. We also mentioned last time that the New Testament teaches a plurality of elders in a single church. That seems to be the force of the passages that we referred to, and I referred you specifically to Acts chapter 20, verse 17 and verse 28. I referred you to Philippians chapter 1 and verse 1 in which the Apostle Paul addresses the church at Philippi with the bishops, or elders, and deacons; he says nothing, incidentally, about the pastor of the church because the church at Philippi did not have “the pastor” as administrative head of that church. He addressed the officers, the church and the officers, the bishops and the deacons.

Now I did not refer to some other passages, and I think that we stopped just about here so, I'm going to pick it up here with the discussion of the plurality of the elders and ask that you turn with me to James chapter 5 and verse 14. There are some people who believe, I think with insufficient ground for their faith, that in the early days of the Christian church, there was only one elder in each individual church, and that, therefore, when we read in the New Testament of the elders of the church at Ephesus, we are to

understand by that that there were a lot of little house churches and that the apostle addresses the elders of these house churches, and one elder was over one church.

Now, as some of you know, that is the heart of a certain form of democratic polity which teaches that the minister is the elder of the church. I do not think that is the teaching of the New Testament. We have already referred to Acts chapter 20 where Paul addresses the elders of the church, singular, at Ephesus, and I argued that we should base our doctrine upon what Scripture says and not upon that which may be inferred from incidental references of Scripture. In other words, if in the New Testament we are never told that there was one elder in one church, but rather we are told there are elders in the church, we should assume that church means one church rather than several churches in the light of the specific statement.

Now, I grant that it is possible that that may have existed. There may have been little churches, and when we read the elders of the church at Ephesus, it's possible from that statement that there were little house churches and that there was one elder from each. And Paul addressed one elder from each. But there is no specific reference to such. It's a pure assumption. And so we ought to go on what is written and not on what we may assume.

Now, in a moment I'll give you some further evidence which I think further defeats that idea, but that's as far as we've gone to this point. In James chapter 5 and verse 14, we have a very interesting verse. And in this verse James says, “Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church;” now, notice the plural. “Let him call for the elders (plural) of the church (singular).” Now the natural reading of that is surely let him call for the plurality of elders who belong to the one church, since church is singular. Now it is possible that this means, let them call for the elders of the specific little house churches in the community which make up the church, but again we have no evidence that such churches existed. And so we must go by what the Scriptures say. And here “elders” is plural, and church is singular. And it's a reasonable assumption; it

seems to me, to argue that there is plurality of elders. Now, I don't think anyone would have to argue these things. I'm sure that you're probably thinking, “My goodness, anybody can see that. You don't have to be a theologian to see that.” But the facts are that there are a wide number of churches that has its church order based upon the fact that there is one elder in each individual church.

Let's look at another text, Hebrews chapter 13 verse 7, verse 14 and verse 21. The writer of this epistle, in the 13th chapter, gives some instructions that concern Timothy leading some people to think that this chapter is one of the evidences Paul wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews. Whenever you hear someone say, “Now let's turn to the letter of the Epistle to the Hebrews written by the Apostle Paul,” you can know that that is also a pure assumption. It is not stated anywhere. Verse 7 reads, “Remember them which have the rule over you,” notice, “Them,” plural. “Remember them which have the rule over you.” Now if this is to be taken in the plain sense of the word, “them,” is plural referring to the elders or bishops, and we assume then that the individual is under several elders. Verse 14, did I say verse 14? It's verse 17. That's the third mistake I've ever made. [Laughter] “Obey them that have the rule over you,” notice again, “them,” plural. And finally verse 24, “Greet all them that have the rule over you.” Three times in this 13th chapter those who have the rule who are said, in 1 Timothy, to be the elders, they are plural.

Now, let's turn to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 and verse 17, 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verse 17. Now this is really not the right text. [Laughter] It's verse 12. [Laughter] Did you hear somebody say 17? [Laughter] Verse 12, “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord.” Now notice again, “Those that labor among you and are over you in the Lord,” and they are plural. Now this epistle is addressed to the church of the Thessalonians which is God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. If you know something about the history of 1 Thessalonians you will remember that the apostle was there just a few weeks before he wrote this epistle

back to that church at Thessalonica. In other words, we do not have time for the building up of a number of little churches in the homes by the time the Apostle Paul writes 1 Thessalonians. He wrote it just a relatively few weeks after he was there. He ministered the word there. He came down to Athens. He wrote the epistle just on the same missionary journey. There is no possibility, reasonably, for there to exist in the city of Thessalonica at this time little different house churches. And yet the apostle says in verse 12, “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them who are over you in the Lord, and admonish you.” The plain sense of the word then is that in the local church there was a plurality of elders.

Now the verse I think that, if more than even these very convincing texts, demonstrates the falsity of that view is 1 Timothy chapter 5, verse 17, and this is the correct verse, 1 Timothy chapter 5 and verse 17. Now the apostle in this epistle states, “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.” Now look carefully at this text. It’s very important in church order. Will you notice that there are two types of elders set forth in this passage? Verse 17, “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour.” Now, every elder rules. Every elder has the responsibility of ruling, but it is evident from this text that some of them also labor in the word and doctrine. “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.”

Now that would clearly teach us that there are some among the elders who do not labor in the word and doctrine, and if there are some among the elders who do not labor in word and doctrine then how can we possibly have a church polity in which the elder is the minister who does all, or relatively all, of the laboring in the word and doctrine? You could not under that form of government have an elder who does not labor in the word and doctrine for by his very title as elder or minister or shepherd he is the minister of the word. And yet Paul says there is a class of elder who does not labor in the word and doctrine. So there are two kinds of elders. All elders rule, but some have gifts of

ministry. And in having gifts of ministry they labor in the word and doctrine. All the elders shepherd, as we shall see. All the elders are responsible and must have the ability to teach on a man to man basis. But not every elder is a man who has been gifted as a teacher of the word, with the gift of teaching, or the gift of pastor/teacher, or the gift of evangelist, for example. So that, it seems to me, clearly teaches there are two kinds of elders, all rule, but one also may labor in the word and doctrine. The local church is governed by a plurality of elders, not by one.

Incidentally, I know that some of you who come from Baptist churches who are in the audience think that I'm trying to flay you alive. Well, no not really, just to show that that polity is wrong, that's all. [Laughter] No, I mean in a friendly way. Let me assure you that I am not really trying to do that. I want you to see, however, the implications of that system. Let me also acknowledge that there are many great churches that have done a tremendous work. We have some right here in this city. I am a great admirer of Dr. Creswell at the First Baptist Church. There are many churches organized this way who have done a very effective job of presenting Jesus Christ. That's not really the question. There are many that have been organized similarly to Believers Chapel that have not done a very good job at all. And we have many, many failings ourselves here. But we're just looking at what the Scripture seems to teach on this point.

I want to say this in connection with it, that if it is true that there is just one elder in the church, if it is really true there is one elder, then absolute authority rests in that one person because the elder is given by the New Testament the right to discipline. And the power of discipline is the ultimate power in the church. So if the power of discipline rests with the elder and there is only one elder, then we have a totally autonomous organization which finds its true head and only and ultimate head in one man. We have in effect then a kind of church order that leads to a protestant pope. Now fortunately, many who follow this form of church government do not carry it to its ultimate conclusions. Some of you may know some exceptions here or there. But nevertheless, as

a general rule, most of the Baptist churches, and the government of the church, rests with the board of deacons, and the facts are that they often function very much like a church organized with the plurality of elders. But we're just talking about what the Bible teaches.

Now I wanted to lead up to this. Not all Baptists have agreed with that Baptist polity. For example, A.H. Strong, who has written probably the best known Baptist theology, certainly one of the finest of the Baptist theologies, and one from which I learned a great deal almost every time I read it, Professor Strong is not a believer in the one elder theory of church government himself, a good Baptist, but he does not agree. The New Hampshire Articles of Faith, a Baptist expression, does not accept that either. There is also some good historical testimony to the effect that the Baptists did not originally believe in one elder for one local church, but rather accepted the theory, or doctrine, of plurality of elders. Well I've said enough about that. If you have any further questions about it, I'll be glad to try to answer them, but these are some of the reasons why it is necessary that we have a plurality of elders in the local church.

Let me say just a word now about the tenure of elders. I grew up in a church in which elders were elected to office by the congregation, and they representatively served. I grew up in a Presbyterian form of government. Now the elders in the First Presbyterian Church of Charleston, the old Scotts church, those elders were elected in rotation. They would serve for three years and then their names would come up, and they would be either reelected or dropped for a time. That has become quite common in Protestant churches. That is a recent deviation from much earlier Christian church government. As far as the New Testament is concerned elders are appointed for life, as long as they stay in that local church and as long as there is no moral failure. Now in the New Testament we are taught that an elder, and in a moment I'll say something about it, an elder may fail morally, and the New Testament says something about that. But unless moral failure takes place and as long as the elders remain in the congregation, according to the New Testament, having been appointed by the Holy Spirit, it is a permanent appointment.

Now, the Bible doesn't say anything about whether an elder may resign. He may do that as far as I can tell. But his appointment is an appointment for life unless there is moral failure. It is my opinion, I am not sure of this for I have never really investigated this, it is my opinion that rotation arose because of the failure of elders to exercise discipline over the elders. In other words, it was a stop gap measure. It was a measure developed out of failure of the offices themselves. “Brother so and so is not really carrying out the office of elder.” But it's very often a very disagreeable thing to go to “Brother so and so,” or “Elder so and so,” and say, “Look it's the general feeling of the elders you're not really serving the office of elder well, and we want to council with you about it.” It's much easier to avoid possible unpleasantness by instituting a system of rotation so that you can do it nicely. But if you do it nicely you do not face the issue. And so what we have that has arisen in the Christian church is a weakness, it's my feeling, it is a definite weakness. And the elders have the responsibility of going to other elders who are not carrying out their office to the glory of God and counseling with them hoping, of course to recover them for faithful ministry. But the tenure is for life unless there is moral failure.

One thing we learn from this is that we must never take the position that we are wiser than God. And if God has set forth a certain thing in holy Scripture as agreeable to him, it is always best to leave it that way. And not think of rationalizations by which we can avoid unpleasant situations that might arise. There's a great lesson in that because there is a tendency in every one of us to be just a little wiser than God. And yet he has given us in holy Scripture a beautiful plan for the effectual functioning of the local church.

The method of choice of the elders is probably the most difficult question concerned with the question of elders. In Acts chapter 14 and verse 23, we have a statement by the Apostle Paul that bears on this question. In chapter 14, verse 23, we read, “And when they had ordained elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.” And evidently the apostle

and his friends ordained publically elders in every church. The Greek word translated ordained here is a word that meant originally to elect by a show of hands. That word originally meant that, but that meaning was long lost in the transmission of the term and by the New Testament time, it had no connotation of electing by a show of hands. It meant simply to ordain.

Now in the case of the elders that the apostle appointed, he, an apostle who had authority, appointed them. The New Testament teaches that the Apostle Paul appointed elders, and he also gave authority to his legates. Titus, for example, gave him authority to appoint elders. However, there is no other evidence of any other persons ever being appointed to the office of elder publically by anyone else. So therefore we are left with a very difficult question. How shall elders be elected or ordained today? There are some who think that we should vote. That has always seemed a rather strange thing to me that the sheep should elect the shepherd. That just doesn't seem right. There's just something out of adjustment with sheep selecting their shepherd.

So we read in the New Testament very plainly that God appoints elders. For example, the passage we read in Acts chapter 20, there remember we read the apostle said, “Take heed to the church of God over which you elders the Holy Spirit has appointed you overseers to feed the flock of God, which he has purchased with his own blood.” All elders are appointed by the Holy Spirit. We do appoint elders. When, for example, the elders in Believers Chapel recognize another elder, we do not appoint them. The elders are only seeking to recognize that which God has done.

In other words, elders emerge in a congregation, and they emerge in this way. They emerge fundamentally because God has appointed them sovereignly to the office. And second, they manifest the characteristics of the elder in that they shepherd the flock, guard the flock and are interested in the disciplining of the flock. That is how elders emerge. And they will emerge as we look for the Holy Spirit to work in the congregation. If a man, for example, has been given by God a love for the flock, a love for the sheep, a

love for theology so that he is able to instruct and teach and guard and protect, and if he meets the other qualifications which we shall refer to in a moment, that man becomes a likely possibility for elder. He may not be, ultimately, it is a matter of God's appointment, but that is how elders emerge. And practically speaking, in a church such as this, I don't think there is a great problem here, but I must confess I have never yet seen a totally satisfying explanation of the method of choice in the sense of the method by which they should be recognized. I'm expressing to you what the Scripture says, but there are a few points about this that we shall have to continue to study the word for. At any rate the norm is the apostolic word, and we should not be wiser than God and invent things to do.

The failure of elders is referred to in 1 Timothy chapter 5 verse 19 though verse 21, and let me read these verses. We must hasten on to deal with the qualifications for the office. Verse 19, the apostle states, 1 Timothy chapter 5, “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.” Now do you know what that means? That means when someone comes and says, “Elder so and so is not doing something that is in accord with Scripture, or Elder so and so has done something which is contrary to Scripture,” you are to ask for two or three witnesses. Now that means that if you do bring accusation against an elder without the necessary witnesses, it is you who have violated holy Scripture. It is you who are out of fellowship with God. “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.”

I remember when this text was impressed upon me very vividly by the man who led me to the Lord. I was at Dallas Seminary. I had just begun to teach in the seminary having graduated just a short while before, and I got a very important letter from Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse. And it was personal on the outside. And he went through, it was a couple of pages, I still have the letter, very forthright, he never did beat around the bush. He came right out and he said, “Lewis, I'm the man who has led you to the Lord.” He said, “I have been in Birmingham, Alabama and I have heard that you have been

critical of me. I have heard that you have said that you have gone to the local Presbytery and you have brought an accusation against me before the local Presbytery, and that accusation which has been reported to me by a friend in Birmingham.” And he was a man whom I just knew casually. “That accusation has been brought to me by that man, and Lewis, I want to remind you that I am not only your father in the faith, but I am an elder in the church of Jesus Christ, and I want to cite a Scripture to you.” And he cited this text. “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.”

Well most people I would have written a letter in response. With Dr. Barnhouse, I got on the telephone immediately, and I said, “It is not true. I have never stood up in the Birmingham Presbytery and said anything, much less anything against you. And it’s totally false. And so I suggest that you check it out.” And he checked it out, wrote me a letter a couple of weeks later and apologized, he didn't apologize. He never apologized.

[Laughter] That was alright. That was alright. He was doing what he should do. He wrote me a letter and he said, “I have checked it out. It is not true. You did not do it.” And I am grateful. Well that text, every time I read that text, [Laughter] I think Donald Grey Barnhouse, [Laughter] “Against an elder receive not an accusation.”

Now it is evident from this text though that an elder may fail. And we do read here that it is possible for an accusation to be brought against them. “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.” This text is a very important passage because it teaches us this about an elder, that while he is a leader and office bearer in the church, he is also the servant of the church, and he is himself subject to discipline by the other elders. So you see a plurality of elders is necessary for another reason, for discipline when the elder needs disciplining. And every elder needs to remember that he is not himself the head of the church, but only one who serves with others who have power of discipline over him. So, even those who are over us in the Lord are at the same time under authority themselves. How fitting. I do not think anyone but God could have

arranged such a beautiful system of church order as that which we find in the New Testament.

Now let's turn back to chapter 3 and begin to look at the qualifications that are set forth here. What beautiful qualifications they are too. There is first a general one, and then there are some specific ones. And will you notice the first of the qualifications? “A bishop then must be blameless.” I think every true bishop and elder who reads that wants to resign immediately. Who could be blameless? The Greek text suggests that what this means is that he is not only of good report but deservedly so. So it is more than just a good report. But that he should deserve that good report, and the good report, or the blamelessness here is from the standpoint of those within the church. In verse 7 he will talk about having a good report of them which are outside. So he is speaking here about one who is blameless in the midst of the church. Now let's make one thing clear, I think, about this term blameless. If this really means that we should be totally without any lack at all then, obviously, no one could ever be an elder. As long as we are in the flesh, we are not blameless. Not a single person would ever stand up, surely, in the church of Jesus Christ and claim to be blameless. What then must this mean? I've thought a lot about this. I think I'm right. I'm not sure. But I think that what we are forced to believe regarding this term blameless is that it means blameless in the particulars that are mentioned in the context. That is, that in these respects, he must not be at fault. There has to be some room for growth in grace in the elder. But there are certain specific qualifications that he must meet. So blameless is a term that applies to the specific matters that follow.

And incidentally, the reason that he is to be blameless, that is, he should meet these qualifications is that only if he meets them is he able to lead others in the church of God. As Bishop Armstrong's ordination hymn puts it, “Themselves first training for the skies, they best will raise their people there.” It's a well known spiritual principle that we cannot lead a person to higher spiritual ground than we are occupying ourselves.

Now, let's look at these specific ones. There are, I think, twelve of the items that explain this blameless. And all are appropriate to an overseer and some of them have direct relevance to the functions that he engages in. Incidentally, these twelve things are minimum, not maximum, standards. Maximum standard is always the standard of total blamelessness. But these are minimum standards.

It's like a professional golf tournament. The first two rounds are the means by which the field is cut. To a certain limited number, usually about sixty who get to play the last two days and there is a maximum score that qualifies one for the last two rounds, but, of course, it would be a whole lot better to have a much lower score than that maximum. But there is a cutting off point and here in the qualifications for elder, we have the minimum standards, not maximum standards. Every one of us has the same maximum standard of Christian living, but in the case of an elder and deacon, there are certain minimum standards as well, and that is what we have here.

The first of them, what an interesting way to begin too, “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife.” Now I know that I'm going to make a few of you irritated with me tonight. I only ask you to study the Scriptures for yourselves, and if you disagree, exercise a little patience with me. I will with you. There are some who think that this means that this is a warning against polygamy. That is, an elder should have only one wife, not two, or three, or five. There were polygamists at this time. But was that ever a live option in the Christian church? There is no evidence from early Christian literature that polygamy was ever a live option in the Christian church and particularly for an elder. And furthermore in the Roman Empire there were specific laws against polygamy. So it does not seem likely that the apostle would say that an elder should be, “The husband of one wife,” and mean polygamy.

Others have interpreted this as the elder must be a married man. I have some good friends who earnestly feel this is the interpretation. An elder must be a married man, and single men are ruled out. The Apostle Paul by that would not be qualified to be

an elder. If we understand, as the New Testament seems to suggest, he was not a married man. So, that would rule out the apostle. "Husband of one wife," but it's very doubtful that that's the meaning of the text. That little word "one" becomes meaningless by that interpretation. Why not just say, "The husband of a wife," or "Married," but "The husband of one wife," that doesn't seem to be a very good way to say that a person should be married. "Husband of a wife," yes, but the little word "one" has no meaning by that interpretation, so we must abandon it.

Others have said in the original text there are no articles here and so what is meant is that he should be a one wife kind of man. That is, the kind of man who is faithful to one woman characterized by fidelity. So this would be another way of saying that he should be faithful to his wife. But a much simpler way of saying it would be that he should not be an adulterer, if that's the meaning. So what then are we forced to believe about this? Well what the apostle is saying is that an elder should not have more than one wife under any circumstances. Now that means that if an elder is married and if his wife dies, and he marries again, he forfeits the privilege of service as an elder. In other words, the elder is to have one wife and one wife only.

Now we are living in days, of course, where we have almost as many divorces as marriages. We often have some very godly men who have been married and divorced and married again. And we have many godly men, whose wives have died, and they have remarried, and they have lived godly lives and are living godly lives. It seems unfair, some think, to exclude them from the office of elder. I'd like to say this that it's very plain there isn't anything in the Bible as far as I can tell that suggests that for a man whose wife has died to marry again is sin for him. But evidently the apostles felt so strongly about the office of elder that they wanted to avoid any sign of weakness and therefore the prescriptions for service in the office are exceedingly stringent. Furthermore a double family might be a kind of hindrance.

In support of this interpretation, in the inscriptions in Antiquity, for both literary and funerary inscriptions, Pagan and Jewish, it is stated over and over again that to remain unmarried after the death of one's spouse, or after divorce, was considered meritorious, while to marry again was taken as a sign of self indulgence. The early church fathers largely followed this interpretation.

For example, Hermas, Clement of Alexandria, of course, Tertullian, and among later followers, Chrysostom, Epiphanes, Cyril, all write in disparagement of second marriages, not as sin, but as weakness. To marry again is to fall short of high perfection set before us in the gospel. Now, Athenagoras goes so far as to call a second marriage respectable adultery. Now, that's wrong, of course, but it illustrates the attitude of the early church to men who married more than once. “And to say that one who thus severs himself from his dead wife is an adulteress in disguise,” Athenagoras said. Respecting the ministers clergy origin says plainly, “Neither a bishop nor a Presbyter, nor a deacon, nor a widow can be twice married.” Tertullian, in one of his Montanist treatises, taunts the Catholics in having even among their bishops men who had married twice and who didn't blush when the pastor epistles were read.

So, it's evident that in the early church there was a wide agreement that this interpretation that I am suggesting to you is the meaning of the text is the biblical interpretation that Paul intended we put upon. But now most convincing is the statement in the 5th chapter and the 9th verse, so I want every one of you to turn there so that even if you don't agree with Dr. Johnson, you go out and say, “I don't agree with him,” I want you to know why I do say what I'm saying. And if you look at all of this and you still don't agree I hope you'll be my friend because I'll be yours. I don't even know who you are. [Laughter]

Now notice, this passage has to do with the widows. And Paul is giving some instructions about the widows in the church. He states, incidentally, that the young widows should marry again, which shows of course that a second marriage for a widow

was not adultery. But in the 9th verse he says, “Let not a widow be taken into the number,” that is they evidently had a role in the early church of the widows who needed help and when the widows needed help, they were placed on a role, “Widow so and so,” “Sister so and so is a widow. She needs financial help.” And the church systematically, evidently helped these widows. But there were certain qualifications to be put on that role. And the apostle says, “Let not a widow be taken into the number under sixty years old,” now notice, “having been the wife of one husband.”

Now I ask you the question. First of all I say that in the Greek text this expression is the same type of construction as that found in 1 Timothy chapter 3 verse 2, except that here it’s “the wife of one husband” and there it’s “the husband of one wife.” But the construction otherwise is identical. Now if she’s a widow then what is the meaning? Is it one husband at the moment? No. It must be one husband in her lifetime. So if we have here the husband, the wife of one husband, then that means one in her lifetime. Applying that same reasoning back to chapter 3 and verse 2, the elder, then must be the husband of one wife in his lifetime.

Now I don't know how to get over this any better than just to make a suggestion or two about what might happen in a local church in case, let's just suppose, when I was growing up, the international playboy was a name by the name of Tommy Manville. Most of you are not old enough to remember Tommy Manville, but where you have read about Elizabeth Taylor and others who have been married five and six and seven times, let me assure you, those are just pikers in comparison with Tommy Manville. The last time I remember he was up in double figures for his wives. He was over ten back when I was young. I don't know how many he ultimately married, but I remember when he had ten or eleven wives. He was a very wealthy man. He had wives almost by the month. Now all of them were plastered all over the front pages. It became quite a joke. Now let's just suppose for a moment that Tommy Manville should have been beautifully and wonderfully converted by the grace of God, and let's suppose that he should associate

himself with a Christian church and should make great progress in spiritual things. Do you think it would be wise for the Christian church in the light of the international notoriety of the man to make him an elder in the church? I don't think so. It would not be a very good testimony because it could not be explained properly. And it would seem to me that this is what the apostle is speaking about. The office of elder must be filled by men who are irreprehensible. “The husband of one wife,” I have never found that this really hurt.

I can remember many years ago I was in a church, and I was asked by the elders, I was one of the elders, to ask a certain man if he would serve as one of the officers. Incidentally, this requirement is one that is stated with reference to the deacons as well as of the elders. And I was asked to ask this man if he would serve. He said I will pray about it. And then about a week or two later he called me late at night here in Dallas, and he said, “Lewis, I cannot serve.” I said, “Why?” We all thought he was qualified. “Well you don't know this but many years ago when I was very young I was married briefly to another woman. I've studied Scripture. I've heard your exposition of it. I think you're right. I do not think that I should serve as one of the officers of the church. I would appreciate it however if you say nothing about it because most people do not know. It was a moment of foolishness in my youth. But nevertheless it's there and I feel that Scripture teaches it.” So, I reported to the elders that he had stated that he was unable to serve.

That is all that is meant by this, but it is in the word of God. And I think we should follow it. Now, perhaps we have time to handle one more of these. “The husband of one wife, temperate,” that is vigilant, “Sober minded, of good behavior,” these three words are words that describe the personal habits of the elder. The first two words mean something like clear headed, prudent, or controlled, a man who has himself under control. The third one is a word translated of good behavior in the Authorized Version, sometimes translated with reference to beauty. It's a word that refers to outward beauty.

Now, of course, it doesn't mean that you have to be handsome in order to be an elder. The beauty that he is referring to is not the beauty of countenance, but it is a propriety in conduct and a propriety in all of the habits of life, including dress. This is the word translated often adorn. For example, back in chapter 2 verse 9 we read with reference to the women, “In like manner also, that women adorn themselves,” that’s the verb. This is the adjective related to it. “Adorn themselves in modest apparel, with godly fear.” Now I’m going to say something else. I don't know the elders may say they don't want me to teach 1 Timothy chapter 3 after all these controversial things come up but Paul is responsible. [Laughter]

Now, it seems to me that we have here justification for saying that an elder should have a certain type of conduct and a certain type of dress. He should be characterized by a kind of adornment in his personal habits and in his personal dress that is honoring to the Lord Jesus. Now, that would seem to say that it is true that in the Bible God is interested in the things that we wear. Now the fact that this word in its root is used with reference to a woman’s attire, warning against over dressing, that is her attire should be in modest apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly array, the fact that she should not go to the extreme in rich and...

[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]