

Today we're going to be talking about "Spiritual Maturity". And I'm actually going to begin with the punch-line, and then go back to the beginning.

Alright, so the order of the reading, is there's a paragraph:

- spelling out the qualifications of an overseer/bishop (a person who is in a recognised ministry of spiritual oversight in the church); and then
- there's a paragraph spelling out the qualifications of a Deacon (that's someone who serves in a recognised serving ministry); and then
- there's a paragraph that explains why these standards apply...

But I'm going to begin with **that** paragraph, because I don't want anyone here to turn off, because you're thinking "*I'm not an overseer/bishop/deacon, and I'm not likely to become one...*"

So, we're going to begin with the church.

Church, is the household of God. And yes, that **does** mean that we are God's family, but it means more than that. A better way of saying this, is "Church" (not the building, but the gathered community of Christ), is the dwelling place of God. God doesn't choose to live in buildings of bricks and mortar. The living God, dwells in those who are living. The

Living God lives in Christians. And so **we**, as Disciples of The Lord Jesus Christ, are the dwelling place of God.

And each localⁱ church gathering are **a pillar and buttress of the truth**. Do you know what a buttress is? It's like a foundational supporting structure. *If you go to the Bunya mountains, you'll see some really big trees, and the really big ones have what we call "buttress roots", that come down from the main trunk, and act as a stay, sorta like a "gusset".*

A brick wall needs a buttress (either a wall at right angles to it) or a support to stop it from falling over. That's what a buttress is.

And the Christian church, is a pillar – a buttress of the truth...

An amazing mystery of the Gospel, is that Christ has **done** everything needed, for us to be saved.

- God came to earth as a human;
(God, revealed to men);
- He suffered and died, to save us from our sins; and
- He was raised from the dead; and
- He ascended to the Father in Glory

- And all who repent of sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, will be saved...

This is a mystery that has been revealed to us (made known). God has done all of this, but **further** to this mystery, is that the message of this (the Gospel): He's put that, into the hands

of the church, to proclaim it to the nations, and proclaim it locally...

And in this regard, the **Christian church**, is **a pillar and buttress of the truth**. Every **local** Christian church (our little fellowship here) [shed church Cecil Plains], is **a pillar and buttress of the truth**. If the Gospel truth is not proclaimed in the world (our town and district, from our little local church), that would be us, failing to hold up the word of God's salvation work, so that it can be heard and believed...

But it's not only a matter of words.

A church being **a pillar and buttress of the truth**, is **more than proclaiming** the Gospel – it's **living** it...

If the Living God, is living inside us (the church), then how **we** live, reflects on God... Or more to the point: Christ living in us, reflects God in our lives... And that's why this is about spiritual maturity. As we continue to live with God in us – as we mature as Christians, the way we behave, reflects more and more Christ Who is in us.

And so, as I read the qualifications of these offices in the church (Overseer & Deacon), **most** of the qualifications, are about spiritual maturity. And that is something that by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us, we should **all** be growing towards. There's a tiny bit of it about "spiritual gifting", but **most** of it is about spiritual maturity. And so the people we set aside in the church as recognised leaders in the

church, **must** be people, who are demonstrating spiritual maturity.

But it's not only the leaders. This is a message for all of us. It's about every one of us, growing in faith and growing closer to God, and maturing in Christ... We recognise **true** spiritual maturity in other people, and we followⁱⁱ their Godly example, to increase Christ-likeness in ourselves.

So, let's go back to the beginning.

It's become a very popular sport, not only among the Godless, but also amongst Christians, it's become a very popular sport, to have a disdain for any form of church structure or authority within the church. Some people:

- like to decide for themselves what they want to believe;
- don't like to be held to account when they do something wrong;
- feel they can be a Christian (and a better Christian at that), without being a member of a church; and
- they look back to what **they** call “a biblical model of church”, where they would just meet in people’s homes and no structure or authority...

But to call that a **biblical** model of church, is selective... At best, it's naive, and at worst, it's deceitful – they deceive themselves...

If I believe that a good model of “church” for me, is a church with:

- no authority;
- no structure;
- no accountability;

- a church where I can be a Christian on my own, without the inter-dependence of being the body of Christ,,, and having to fellowship with those other pesky Christians...

I have totally deceived myself of what the biblical model of church is.

Some of the earliest writings in the New Testament, in the 1st generation of the Christian church, talk very clearly about the role of certain offices within the church.

There's the office of ἐπίσκοπος (*episkopos*) (overseer, guardian, bishop). It refers to the church leader in local Christian church. It's the person who has been recognised by the church, to have spiritual oversight in the church. And we'll talk more about that shortly.

Secondly, one which **isn't** in today's reading, is the office of πρεσβύτερος (*presbyteros*) (elder). Very early in the church, elders were appointed in local churchesⁱⁱⁱ. And sometimes, the offices of elder & overseer are interchangeable, but not completely.

And thirdly, the office of διάκονος (*diakonos*) (servant / deacon) was established. And so this was about a person set aside for very practical service within the church, which

would free-up the preachers and overseers so they could do what they are called to do...

And when it came to recognised offices of leadership within the church, whether the office was for “spiritual oversight”, or whether it was for “practical service”, spiritual maturity was essential.

Righto. So Paul writes: **If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.**

Now, in the Greek, that word “aspires” means “stretches out for”, and in this case, it’s not in the bad sense. Some people crave positions of authority, and they see positions within the church as an achievement/accomplishment that marks them as being a person of importance, and of course, they deserved the honour... But in this case, it’s about a sense of calling, and striving to serve God in what He’s called us to do – it’s not about a sense of personal importance...

And to aspire to the office of overseer, is a very noble task...

There’s not a lot of thanks in it; there’s no earthly reward... It’s a chance to serve God, in what can sometimes be a very tough and thankless job.

And when it comes to the qualifications of an overseer or a deacon, it’s primarily about Spiritual maturity. I think “the ability to teach” is the only thing that’s really about “gifting” rather than “spiritual maturity”...

And as we look at that list there, you can see there's a fair bit of overlap between the overseer and the deacon. And it's not a complete list. It's not like a Deacon can't be double-tongued, but an Overseer can. And it's not like an Overseer can't be violent, but a Deacon can... It's about spiritual maturity.

And this is what true spiritual maturity looks like. And this, is what we should be growing towards

It's to be:

- **Above reproach / tested and proved blameless**

If we are the dwelling place of God; If the church, is to be the buttress of truth, then integrity is everything. Complete honesty... Complete truth... We don't work in the field of rumour; innuendo; hearsay; theories; conspiracies... The Church is to be the buttress of truth...

A Christian man was at work, and he got a phone call for his boss who happened to be in the room at the time. And he said to his boss, so-&-so's on the phone and he wants to talk to you. And the boss said, "Tell him I'm not here." But the employee handed his boss the phone and said "You tell him."... And after the boss got off the phone, he tore strips off his employee. And this Christian man said, "If I can lie for you, I can lie to you."... And from that day, he became the most trusted worker in the firm...

Integrity is everything. And there's been instances in this very town, where a person who's integrity is a little bit questionable (a bit iffy), have become Pastors or overseers in a church... That should never happen... I talked to somebody

about this once, and their response was, “Yeah, I know he’s not the perfect Christian – he’s just a carnal Christian – it’s ok. He loves Jesus; he might be a bit 2-faced, but he’s OK...”

It’s not ok... It’s not ok for a leader, and it’s not ok for you and I. Spiritual maturity means we will be above reproach.

We are the dwelling place of God. We are the buttress of truth. And that’s why a person who is spiritually mature, will be above reproach and tested and proved blameless.

They are to be:

- It’s to be monogamous (only one wife). It’s **not** saying you **have** to be married, but when you are married, one man, one woman, for life.
- sober-minded
- self-controlled;
- respectable;
- dignified;

That all means we have an orderly life. We don’t act rashly; We think things through;

- hospitable

means we are a welcoming people. We’re generous in providing for others, and welcoming them into our homes

- able to teach

As I said before, this is probably the main one that is a gift rather than being purely spiritual maturity. Not everyone will be gifted as a teacher. But **all** of us (at some level), as we do

mature in Christ, and as we read God's word, and as we've been learning **from** teaching, all of us should be able to teach at some level...

Alright, it's not saying that everyone has to be a gifted teacher, but we have to know what we believe, and know why we believe it.

And it's important for an Overseer to be able to do that, because one of the jobs of an overseer is ^{Titus 1:9} ...**to give instruction in sound doctrine, and to rebuke those who contradict it.**

- Spiritual maturity means there's no drunkenness. We are to be filled with the **Holy Spirit** – not filled with grog...

- not violent (or a bully), but gentle
Being considerate; displaying forbearance

- not quarrelsome

Some folk seem to be always looking for a dispute. They focus on things that are contentious. But if we as the church are spiritually mature, and if we are the buttress for truth, there's nothing to be contentious about.

- The Spiritually mature are not greedy
They're not lovers of money or materialistic.

And our Spiritual Maturity will be demonstrated in how we run our families...

- obedient children / manage own household well

In other words, while one's children are "not yet of age", and are subject to the authority of the parents, the Spiritually mature, step up in their role as parents and command respect, with all dignity...

There will come a time when our kids grow up. And from about the age of 12 or 13, they are choosing their own path, and it's going to be very hard to rein them in when they run amuck... But while they are under our authority, a Godly parent, will control their family.

And in the case of an Overseer, basically what Paul's saying, is if they can't manage their own family, how can they care for the church???

Back in the day, it was quite common for the Pastor's kids to be the most rebellious misbehaving little rotters in the whole church... I don't know if that's as common as it used to be. But it should never have been...

- not a recent convert

Basically, this **is** about spiritual maturity. It takes **time** to learn; It takes **time** to know and to experience the Gospel and ministry. It **usually** takes time for the fruit of the Spirit to develop in our lives.

And so, a brand new Christian might be **full of enthusiasm** and vim and vigour, but might not have the necessary experience to oversee a church.

Paul actually says:

6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit [τυφωθεὶς (typhōtheis) means to become insanely arrogant]
and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

In other words, arrogance was the sin that brought the fall of Satan. He was filled with arrogance, and now the only thing Satan has ahead of him, is the judgment of God. And that's why we don't raise people up into leadership too quickly.

- well thought of by outsiders (non-Christians)

Strangely enough, because Christians are to be distinct from the world, some Christians see it as a feather-in-their-cap, if they can be as offensive as they can to outsiders... Christians shouldn't be unnecessarily offensive. And the reputation we have in the larger community – we should be well regarded.

The spiritually mature and those who are to become the leaders in the church, are to be well thought of by outsiders... It doesn't mean that we change the message of the Gospel to keep ourselves popular with outsiders – it's about our personal conduct.

1 Peter 2:(ESV) ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against

you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Most of the time, the spiritually mature, will have a good reputation. There will be an odd occasion, where faithfulness to God will require us to go against the tide of the world, and we'll be unpopular because of it. But if, by the Holy Spirit, we are doing what the Law requires, we will be known as a people who:

- keep their word;
- pay their bills;
- can be trusted

We won't be a people who:

- are unnecessarily offensive; or
- vindictive; or
- judgmental; or
- unnecessarily divisive.

And part of this respect we earn, is because we are good citizens, as we saw in Chapter 2. We pray for all people, and for our kings/governments

2: (ESV)² ...and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

The Spiritually mature, are not

- not double-tongued

Or we might say “two-faced”... We don’t say one thing and mean another. I don’t tell you what you want to hear, and then tell that other person what they want to hear, and they be two opposite things...

I learned a long time ago, and I keep being reminded of it, that to speak the biblical truth word of God, means that I'm going to upset some folk. And I know that some people's church leadership method, is to tell people only what they want to hear. That is, to be double-tongued... And by doing that, they can endear themselves to everyone... But do you know what happens? No longer, is the church the buttress of truth

Spiritually mature will not be double-tongued... And how can we be? because the Spiritually mature:

- hold the mystery of faith with a clear conscience

As Christians, everything we do has to be in the light of the faith that we hold... With a clear conscience. We believe it; we do it...

And the final qualification for those in church leadership, is to do with their spouse.

Deacons are to have:

- dignified wives (not slanderers, sober minded, faithful)

Ministry (for those who are married) is a partnership. We do not serve Christ on our own. We serve him as part of the church, but also Husbands and wives are a unit, who in many ways, minister together. And I thank God for my wife, Robyn. The ministry we do, it's a joint thing. And we complement each other.

And this is why it's so important that a Christian should only ever marry a Christian. Because, if you are joined (in marriage) to someone who is not a Christian, how can you partner with them in the most important things of life?

When I was going to bible college, there was a real push on for “the professionalisation” of ministers... They were trying to make it look like being a minister/pastor is a profession, and that, as long as you’re qualified for the job, the state of your family doesn’t matter...

It does matter.

When one is called to leadership in the church, it's not a job that one should try to do on their own. And for all of us who are married (here in this church) husbands and wives together, should be growing together, and becoming more spiritually mature together. That's part of being married; the one flesh relationship; loving one another and upholding one another... And it's a blessing.

Righto, that's what true spiritual maturity looks like... My, what a sad state the church is in. We're in an era, where the search for church leaders often focuses on:

- managerial ability;
- popularity;
- entrepreneurial;
- charismatic personality;
- accomplishment in some field or other;
- enthusiasm;

- gift of the gab;
- know how to work a crowd;
- history of church growth;

Or they might focus on someone who:

- will tow the party line;
- say nothing controversial;
- won't tell anybody that they're wrong...
- walk the centre-line down the big issues, so as not to offend.

But when we look at these qualifications, pretty much the main qualification, is spiritual maturity / holiness / Christ-likeness... And this is something that all of us – the whole church, should be growing in.

Why? Because God lives in us, and our focus is on Christ.

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. ¹⁶ Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,

taken up in glory.

ⁱ “The absence of the article before *ekklēsia* (church) suggests that the local community is again primarily in mind, yet conceived of as part of a larger whole.”

Guthrie, D. (1990) *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries).

ⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 11:1 (ESV)

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5;