

*THE EPISTLE TO TITUS.*

QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE ELDERSHIP. *Chapter i. 5-9.*

HIS salutation over, St. Paul enters at once on the practical business in hand. Titus had been left behind, when his chief sailed away, not (as prelatie writers in a past age used to think) as permanent "Bishop of Crete," but with a temporary and special design to be accomplished in a few months.<sup>1</sup> It would be more just to term him (with Vitringa) Paul's "legate extraordinary," were it not that such high sounding titles consort ill with the simple ways of primitive churchmen. The task entrusted to this "legate" was simply to finish the organization of the Cretan congregations—a measure which the Apostle had himself begun, but, through want of time, had been obliged to leave incomplete. The phrase "that thou mightest further set in order what I left lacking (or unfinished)" is general enough to cover everything in the shape of remedies which the confused and unhealthy state of Cretan Christianity called for. But the chief remedy which he at once proceeds to mention is simply the appointment of elders in every town where Christians were to be found. It was part of the verbal instructions Paul left behind him, that over each small group or congregation of disciples, such a regular administrative body should be instituted. The arrangement seems to have been new in the island, but it existed, so far as we know, everywhere else in the infant Christendom of that day.

To many it will appear singular that this should be the remedy for Cretan disorder to which St. Paul assigns the foremost place. Those who have been brought up in the bosom of a Church that possesses an ancient and venerable

<sup>1</sup> See Chap. iii. 12. He was to rejoin the Apostle at Nicopolis before the end of the approaching winter.

polity, under which the wholesome regulations and precedents of centuries have secured to every member the blessing at once of guarded freedom and of settled order, are perhaps the last to appreciate how much they owe to a good system of ecclesiastical government. There are drawbacks to every constitution in Church or State; but it might induce some of us to value more highly what we possess if we only tasted for a while, like the men of Crete, the fruits of anarchy, and learned by experience what becomes of the Christian body when it has no government at all, but its discipline, its doctrine, and its worship are alike at the mercy of every self-constituted guide or ambitious pretender.

St. Paul had never shewn himself indifferent to the local organization of each little community which he founded. On his very earliest missionary tour, he and Barnabas had ordained presbyters over the Gentile churches at Derbe, at Lystra, at Iconium and at Pisidian Antioch. It seems likely that, as he grew older and realized how soon both he and the other temporary chiefs of the new Society must be withdrawn, he only came to feel more strongly than at first the importance of providing for its permanent administration through stationary office-bearers who could be continually replaced. Such a case as this which had come to his knowledge in Crete must have sharpened that conviction. As error spread, and especially such error as led to lax morals, the office of ruler in the young community grew to be of the higher consequence, and it became more important to secure that those who were admitted to office possessed the requisite qualifications.

It throws a good deal of light on this point to observe where the stress is laid in Paul's catalogue of these qualifications. Ability on the elder's part to argue with Jew and heathen, or even to edify disciples, is not put in the foreground. On the contrary, the qualification insisted upon

with most detail is one of character. Among the little companies to be found in the towns of Crete few men would probably be found competent to discuss points of theology, or to hold their own on subtle questions of Mosaic law with glib talkers of "the circumcision." Certainly there could not as yet exist a class of professional divines, expert in controversy or specially educated to instruct their brethren. What was to be had was just a few men of some years' Christian standing and of grave and approved Christian character, who, knowing from experience that the true faith of the Lord Jesus was a faith "according to godliness," could bring new-fangled doctrines to this plain test: Did they contribute to promote wholesome manners, or did they betray an evil origin by their noxious influence upon practice? In effect, it was by their pure example, by the weight of their character, by the sober and balanced judgment which Christian experience forms, and, above all, by that instinct with which a mature Christian mind, however untrained in theology, recoils from morbid views of duty, dangerous errors or mischievous speculation: it was by the possession of gifts like these that the elders were fitted to form a salutary force within the Church; and the best service they could render it at that conjuncture would be to keep the flock in old safe paths, guarding its faith from poisonous admixture, that, amid the restlessness of a fermenting period, men's minds might be settled in quietness upon the simple teaching of the gospel.

Many amongst us can very well understand how such a body of elders was likely to answer Paul's expectation. For many of us have seen, and some of us may have intimately known, in the Church of our fathers, godly and venerated men in the eldership who could boast of no social rank above that of a humble peasant, nor any greater scholarship than every Scottish peasant possesses; men with slender power indeed to harangue, but with eminent

power to pray; men who, by virtue solely of their blameless lives, their spiritual maturity, their acknowledged godliness, their venerable and saintly character, have proved a bulwark of sound doctrine and a preserving salt to the religious life of a whole parish. It is perfectly true that in stagnant times such a body is apt to get wedded to routine. It may mistake tradition for revelation. It may cast the weight of its conservative influence upon the side of some worn-out and trifling usage which no longer represents the real life of the body. For it is the infirmity of every factor in a society that it easily comes to over-act its part. When the ruling body becomes thus obstructive, there is of necessity a certain loss of influence on its part, with some risk of revolt against its just authority. But evils like these cure themselves in time. When Paul was an old man, the danger of the Church lay altogether on another side. Since Paul's time, too, in how many a day of religious confusion or precipitate change, when winds of opinion from opposite quarters were vexing the sea, and the barque of the Church ran hazard of shipwreck, has it been her safety that she carried, not merely a mutinous crew or a disorderly mob of passengers, but officers also of ripe sagacity, whose well deserved authority reposed on the integrity of their Christian faith and the weight of their godly character.

It cannot surprise us therefore to find, when we come to look at the qualifications Paul desires in the Cretan elder, that the condition first insisted on is, not simply character, but reputed character. He must be a man against whom public rumour lays no scandalous charge, either within or without the Christian Society.<sup>1</sup> There may have been something in the condition of the Cretan Church which rendered it specially desirable that its representatives should stand well in the esteem of their neighbours. But it is

<sup>1</sup> In a parallel passage of Timothy (1 Epistle iii. 2) he is to be one against whom no such accusation can fairly be laid.

plain that upon this qualification must always depend in every church the real value and influence of the eldership. It matters comparatively little how active or zealous or even devout a church-ruler be, if men cannot respect him because they either see, or imagine that they see, such flaws as seriously detract from the total impression his character ought to make upon them. However useful in other ways a man of blemished estimation may prove, he is not likely to lend dignity to sacred office or attract to it the confidence and reverence of the people.

The same quality of "blamelessness" ought to extend itself to his domestic relations. The assumption that he is sure to be a family man, not only hits hard at the celibacy of the later clergy, but also serves to remind us how much more universal marriage was among the ancients than with us. Evidently it might be taken for granted of any one old enough to be selected for such an office. The phrase "husband of one wife" has become so obscure to moderns that possibly we may never arrive at an agreement whether it was designed to exclude (a) bigamy, or (b) remarriage after divorce, or (c) second marriages. But whatever it may have imported to Paul's Greek readers, it must fairly be held to exclude every such irregularity in the matrimonial connections of the elder as will occasion a scandal in the society to which he belongs, because condemned by the public sentiment of his land and age. The same idea evidently governs what is said of the elder's family. His children, if he has any, are required to be professing Christians, and free from the accusation (most to be apprehended in that age) either of dissolute behaviour or of unfilial revolt against parental control. Here, again, it is to be implied that whatever lowers the esteem in which the family is held must be *pro tanto* a disqualification for office. Not that it may be in every case possible to insist on such a condition to the letter. The Apostle is to be understood

as sketching an ideal which should be sought after, though it may not be invariably found. The important point is that the fair and stainless repute in which a Christian elder stands among his neighbours is so essential to the value of his office that even his inability to restrain his sons from profligacy or open disregard of his authority must (as in the case of Eli of old) militate against his official usefulness.

The reason for this<sup>1</sup> lies in the very nature of an elder's duties. Curiously little is said either here or in the letters to Timothy about the functions of these primitive officers; a subject on which we should have been glad to learn more. The Apostle kept it steadily in view that he was not writing a manual for the eldership, but for one who was to supervise the choice and ordination of elders. In order to shew, however, how essential in such an officer is a blameless character, he selects two names for the office which do serve to describe or to indicate its functions. Both the name of "bishop," or overseer, and that of "house-steward" were originally, and at the date of this letter probably continued to be, descriptive epithets rather than official titles. The proper title for ruling office-bearers in the Christian Society was simply Presbyters, which we may either retain, or translate into "elders"; and this designation suggests by its derivation rather the quality of the persons selected (elderly, therefore experienced and grave) than the character of their duties. It is, in fact, the most usual name for a ruler in the primitive tribal organization of every people; a name to be found in many languages, and very obviously springing out of the growth of the family into the clan. When this primitive title, familiar to Jewish ears, was transplanted into the Greek-speaking churches on both sides of the Ægean, it became desirable to introduce alongside of it titles of office more cognate with

<sup>1</sup> Force of the γὰρ in verse 7.

Greek usage, which should make it clear what the nature and functions of the Christian Eldership really were. Such were the two terms here employed, borrowed the one from civil, and the other from domestic life. These words have had a singular destiny. The one, adopted possibly from the administrative officers of Greek guilds, early came to overshadow the original title of Presbyter, was gradually appropriated by a special class who acquired pre-eminence over their brethren, and has thus grown to be the symbol for a prelatie, as opposed to a presbyterial, administration of ecclesiastical affairs. The other—steward—never became naturalized in the Church as a title of office at all, but remains to this day a mere epithet, marking for us, as it did for Paul, the subordinate and purely administrative character of such rule as is alone admissible in the House of God. Both names, however, lent force to Paul's argument that the holder of such an office should be above reproach. Seeing it is a responsible oversight of his fellow-members which, as a bishop, the elder is to exercise; and seeing that the congregation of the faithful constitutes a sacred family or household of brethren, with whose affairs he is to be entrusted; it is plain that the primary condition of both the supervision he maintains, and the trust he administers, must be that he possess the full confidence of the community.

The general conception of "blamelessness" St. Paul breaks up into eleven particulars; of which five describe what the elder must not be, and six what he ought to be. Of the negative requirements, the first and the last<sup>1</sup> need not surprise us. Many a good man exhibits an unconciliatory and unpliant temper; but such a disposition is a peculiarly unfortunate one in the official who has to act along with others in the management of a large body of brethren, and to preserve that peace which is the bond or girdle of

<sup>1</sup> "Not self willed . . . not greedy of filthy lucre" (Rev. Vers.).

perfection. The stubborn man who insists on having his own way at too heavy a cost makes a bad elder. So of the fifth negative. The instance of the false teachers at Crete shewed how readily in that age a greedy man might take unworthy advantage of the confidence of the Church, not to say by downright peculation, but at all events by making a good thing out of his position. Such a temptation lay near to a trader in one of the Greek seaports, as many among these new-made Presbyters would be. But the spirit of covetousness is hard to exorcise from the ministry at all times; the harder now, because the ministry has come to be a "profession."

Let us hope that the modern ecclesiastic stands in less danger of the group of things forbidden which lies between these two: "not soon angry; not given to wine (or in the R.V., *no brawler*; literally it means one who is not rude over his cups), no striker." All three expressions picture for us a type of character with which Paul and the Church at Crete were possibly too familiar; a hot-tempered man, apt to get excited, if not a little tipsy, on jovial occasions; and, when heated with wine, only too loud in his talk and too prompt with his fists. The seaboard of these Greek islands must have offered plenty of specimens of this sort of fellow; but we should scarcely have supposed it needful to warn a Christian congregation against making an "Elder" of him. Although the temptation of drink drags too often even Presbyters from their seats, we should not elevate to that position a quarrelsome tippler if we knew it. I suspect that the surprise we feel when we meet such items in a list of disqualifications for office, serves in some degree to measure the progress in social manners which, thanks to the gospel, we have made since these words were written. Our holy religion itself has so raised the standard of reputable behaviour, at least among professors of the Faith, that we



revolt from indulgences as unworthy even of a Christian which Cretan converts needed to be told were unworthy of a Presbyter.

When we turn to the positive virtues which Paul desired to see in candidates for sacred office, we are again reminded of our altered circumstances. No modern writer would think of placing hospitality at the top of the list. But in times when travelling was difficult, and the inns few or bad, those Christians, whom either private business or the interests of the gospel compelled to visit foreign cities, were exceedingly dependant on the kindly offices of the few who in each chief centre owned and loved the same Lord. At heathen hands they could count on little friendship; the public usages of society were saturated with the associations of idolatry. The scattered members of the Christian body were therefore compelled to form a little secret guild all over the Mediterranean lands, of which the branches maintained communication with each other, furnishing their members with letters of introduction whenever they had occasion to pass from one port to another. To receive such stranger disciples into one's house, furnish them with travelling requisites, further their private affairs, and bid them God speed on their journey, came to be everywhere esteemed as duties of primary obligation, especially on the official leaders and wealthier members in each little band of brethren. Hospitality like this would be a part of the elder's public duty; it was to be wished that it should spring out of a liberal and friendly disposition. Hence to the word "hospitable," the Apostle adds, "a lover of good men," or of all noble and generous acts.

The main emphasis, however, in Paul's sketch of the good "bishop," rests on the word our Authorized Version renders not very happily: "sober."<sup>1</sup> Of sobriety in its restricted application to wine, we have already had enough

<sup>1</sup> Better in the Revised Version: "sober-minded."

said. This favourite word of the Apostle throughout the Pastoral Epistles describes, according to Bishop Ellicott, "the well-balanced state of mind resulting from habitual self-restraint." As he grew older St. Paul appears to have got very tired of intemperate extravagance both in thought and action, even among people who called themselves Christians. He saw what mischief was threatened to the Christian cause by wild fantastic speculation in theology, by the restless love of novelty in matters of opinion, by morbid one-sided tendencies in ethics, and generally by a high-flying style of religiousness which could minister neither to rational instruction nor to growth in holiness. Sick of all this, he never wearies in these later letters of insisting that a man should above all things be *sane*—morally and intellectually; preserving, amid the bewilderment and "sensationalism" of his time, a sober mind and a healthy moral sense. If the new elders to be ordained in Crete did not possess this quality, they were likely to effect extremely little good. The unruly Jewish deceivers, with their "endless genealogies," legal casuistry and "old wives' fables," would go on "subverting entire households" just as before.

It certainly pertains to this balanced or sober condition of the Christian mind that it rests firmly and squarely on the essential truths of the Gospel, holding for true the primitive faith of Christ, and not lending a ready ear to every new-fangled doctrine. This is the requirement in the Presbyter which at the close of his instructions St. Paul insists on with some fulness (Ver. 9). The mature and judicious believer who is fit for office must adhere to that faithful (or credible?) doctrine which conforms to the original teaching of the Apostles and first witnesses of our holy religion.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise, how can he discharge his twofold function of

<sup>1</sup> This I take to be the force of the unfinished phrase: "the word which is according to the teaching" (Revised Version).

“exhorting” the members of the Church in sound Christian instruction, and of “confuting” the opponents? He needs to be himself in close sympathy with that gospel doctrine which can alone build up a robust, healthy, and high-toned virtue. For there are styles of religious teaching (as Cretan readers well knew) which are not wholesome, do not tend to virtue, but foster only a fictitious unhealthy piety in combination with practices that are even immoral. If the Presbyter is to guard the Church against such unsound teaching, there is surely all the greater need that his own character should demonstrate on what kind of doctrine his inner life has been fed. Thus we are thrown back after all for the grand qualification for ecclesiastical office on those homely and imperishable virtues, which, under every form of belief, are seen to be indispensable, although not every form of belief possesses the power to produce them; the virtues of justice to one’s neighbours, piety toward God, and temperance in the government of one’s self.<sup>1</sup> He who approves himself by such virtues to God, and to the esteem of his fellows, is not likely to be led astray either by dangerous heresies in religion or by unhealthy tendencies in society. He is a man, sober and balanced and sound, by whose counsels the flock may be guided, and on whose words of Christian wisdom it may feed to profit.

J. OSWALD DYKES.

<sup>1</sup> In Verse 8: *δικαιον, δσιον, ἐγκρατῆ*.

---