



The written word points us to the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. The apostle John, who was an eyewitness of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection begins his gospel by saying, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1-3, 14). As we look into and listen to God's word, we see the glory of God's Son. With that in mind, let us turn to 1 Timothy 3 (p. 932, pew Bible).

Chapter two ends with instructions to men and women regarding how to behave in church. This is no minor issue because our behavior in church impacts our witness to the world.

- Paul tells the men to pray. They're not to sit by passively while the women do all the praying. Nor are the men to pray to the Lord while fighting with one another. "The men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling" (1 Tim. 2:8).
- Women are to dress appropriately, lest they draw attention to themselves instead of God. Women make themselves attractive by the good things they do. This includes respecting the men God has called to lead and teach the church (v. 12).

That begs the question, "Which men are qualified to lead the church?" Paul's answer to that question appears is the subject of the first paragraph in chapter 3. Having instructed women to respect the authoritative teaching and governing role assigned to male leaders in the church, Paul now lists the qualifications for men to lead in such a capacity.

Beginning in chapter three, verse one, Paul writes,

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. <sup>2</sup> Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, <sup>3</sup> not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. <sup>4</sup> He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, <sup>5</sup> for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? <sup>6</sup> He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. <sup>7</sup> Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

- 1 Timothy 3:1-7

## **1. Overseeing the church is an excellent work.**

Paul begins chapter 3 with one of five “trustworthy sayings” that he writes in his letters to Timothy and Titus. We came across the first “trustworthy saying” in 1 Timothy 1:15, where Paul declared, “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners....” Paul introduces this declaration as a “trustworthy saying” to emphasize it for our encouragement. It’s a statement that should be readily received and repeated. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners!” What a glorious truth! *Have you received this truth yourself? Are you repeating it to others?*

Chapter 3 begins with another “trustworthy saying”: “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (v. 1). “The office of overseer” is one word in the Greek *episkopos* (*epi*, over + *skope*, look intently). It could be translated *overship*.<sup>1</sup> The word “overseer” is interchangeable with the words “elder” and “pastor/shepherd” throughout the New Testament. Peter uses all three terms in chapter 5 of his first letter, saying, “I exhort the *elders* among you ... *shepherd* the flock of God that is among you, exercising *oversight*...” (1 Peter 5:1a, 2a). In Paul’s farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, he exhorted them,

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

- Acts 20:28

Nothing on earth is more precious to God than the church! We know that because the Lord Jesus Christ purchased the church with his own blood! Peter reminds believers,

“You know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And it was not paid with mere gold or silver, which lose their value. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God.”

- 1 Peter 1:18-19 NLT

That’s what makes the work of an overseer such a “noble task.” The Greek word for “noble” (*kalos*) can also be translated “excellent,” “worthwhile,” or even “beautiful.” Remember, Paul is writing to Timothy, who is facing some difficult challenges as a pastor. But Paul wants Timothy to know that his labors for the Lord are worthwhile. If Jesus gave his very life for the church, then it is worthy any sacrifice on Timothy’s part. It is an excellent work, a beautiful work, that he is doing.

In fact, Paul says, “If anyone aspires” to do such a work, “he desires a noble task.” The Greek word for “aspire” (*oregetai*) literally means “to reach out, to stretch towards.”<sup>2</sup> This verb always appears in the middle voice in Greek, which means the action is done with reference to one’s own self. It’s stretching yourself, to attain something – in this case it is something worthwhile, excellent, beautiful: “the office of overseer.”

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, revised and expanded (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 186. I first became aware of Strauch’s book about twenty-five years ago, and to date it is still probably the most comprehensive resource on biblical eldership I’ve ever come across. Much of the material in this sermon is drawn from Strauch’s excellent work on this subject.

<sup>2</sup> This verb always appears in the *middle* voice in Greek, meaning “stretch oneself out.”

Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18), and he uses the ambitions and desires of godly people to make that happen. In his book, *Rescuing Ambition*, Dave Harvey writes, “As God moves to the center of our dreams, our desires conform to his glory. God then grants desires because he knows they will magnify his name, not ours. Psalm 37:4 says, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere Paul wrote, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others. Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:3-5 CSB).

Some men want to lead for the sake of power, prestige, or some other selfish motive. That kind of ambition divides and destroys the church. God says, “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him” (1 Cor. 3:16). Selfish ambition is a sin. But the Lord delights to use godly ambitions “that exalt him and enthuse us.”<sup>4</sup> I hope and pray that some young men hearing today’s sermon will set their hearts on spiritual leadership.

Before pastoring, I was pastored. The first pastor I remember was the one I had when I was four years old. By the time I was six I wanted to be a pastor or a missionary. When I was twelve, my pastor helped me to prepare to preach my very first sermon as part of a youth event. After that experience, I knew that I wanted to be a pastor. All my life I had looked up to my pastors. My parents taught me to love and respect them for their work. The more that I matured and studied the Scriptures, the more I realized that a high view of pastoral ministry is based not on personal preference or opinion, but on Scripture itself. It is an excellent, worthwhile pursuit!

But such a pursuit must be driven by godly motives. *Because overseeing the church is excellent work, it requires men of excellent character.* That’s why Paul begins verse 2 by saying, “Therefore, an elder must be above reproach....” Because overseeing the church is a noble task, it requires men of noble character. **[show highlight]**

***Overseeing the church is excellent work,  
which requires men of excellent character.***

Their motives must be pure. Their character must not be in question. That’s why “the New Testament spends more ink on the qualifications than on the job description” – “because the qualifications *are* the job description.”<sup>5</sup> Elders lead by example.

## **2. Overseers must be men of excellent character.**

In verses 2-7, Paul lists fifteen qualifications for men who seek the office of overseer. I call these “elder essentials” because they are non-negotiable. In verse 2, Paul says, “Therefore an elder *must* be above reproach....”

### **Above reproach**

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<sup>3</sup> Dave Harvey, *Rescuing Ambition* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 79.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Authority: How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), 250.

This is the over-arching qualification that encompasses the fourteen qualifications that follow. It concerns a man's *observable conduct*. It means that he is blameless, free from any glaring character deficiency. Practically speaking, if this man's name were publicly posted for comment, no one would be able to bring a legitimate charge against him with respect to anything in the following list.

### **The husband of one wife**

In both of Paul's qualifications list for elders – the one here in 1 Timothy 3 as well as the list in Titus 1 – “the husband of one wife” immediately follows “above reproach.” That's because the first and foremost area in which an elder must be above reproach is in his marital and sexual life.<sup>6</sup> The phrase “husband of one wife” is made up of three Greek words that literally mean “one-woman man.” The emphasis is not on the man's marital status, but on his character. He is devoted to one woman: his wife.

Twenty years ago I read C. J. Mahaney's book, *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God: What Every Christian Husband Needs to Know*. C.J. dedicated the book to his wife, and I still remember what he wrote on the dedication page: “To Carolyn, with all my love. When I see you in a crowd, you're the only one who appears in color – the rest of the world is black-and-white to me.” (That's a great line. I wish I could think of one like that!)

We know from Ephesians 5 and other Scripture passages that the marriage relationship is to reflect Christ's love for the church. In his book, *The Loveliest Place*, Dustin Bengé provides from nature a beautiful analogy of Christ's love for the church, pointing out,

Doves mate for life and are often represented at weddings because they symbolize a lifetime of love. The bond is so strong that it can extend, for a time, beyond death as they watch over their mates, trying to care for them, and returning again and again to the place of their death. The ever-watchful dove looks only to its mate and has no eyes for another.

Christ has eyes only for his church. Believers, saved by grace through faith, are espoused exclusively to him. His righteousness, pardon, forgiveness, love, care, provision, eternal life – these are only for her. His singular eye is upon her at all times. ... There's never a time when Christ doesn't love her. There's never a time when he doesn't extend his whole heart to her. There's never a time [when] his heart isn't captivated by her.<sup>7</sup>

What is true of Christ ought to be true of every married Christian man. And what ought to be true of every Christian man *must* be true of an elder. He is not a womanizer. He is not a flirt. He is not a ladies' man. He is a one-woman man who is fully devoted to his wife.

The next three character qualities listed in verse 2 are closely related and could be grouped under the heading of self-mastery.

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<sup>6</sup> Strauch, 189.

<sup>7</sup> Dustin Bengé, *The Loveliest Place: The Beauty and Glory of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 19-20.

### **Sober-minded ... Self-controlled ... Respectable**

He is “sober-minded.” He is clear-headed, a man who exercises sound judgment. He avoids any debilitating excesses that would cloud his thinking.

He is “self-controlled.” He’s able to curb his impulses and passions, especially in tense situations. Others may lose their cool, but he keeps his head in all situations. He shows great discretion in handling people and their problems.

Therefore, he is a “respectable” person. He behaves appropriately and conducts himself in a well-ordered manner. People are not inclined to follow someone they don’t respect. That’s why an elder must be characterized by good behavior and a well-ordered life.

### **Hospitable**

Hospitality is one of the most fundamental, concrete expressions of Christian love. The Greek word for hospitality (*philoxenos*) literally means “love of strangers, foreigners, or guests.” The Old Testament character Job, whom the Lord described as a “blameless and upright man” (1:8) was a model of hospitality. He was able to testify, “no stranger had to spend the night in the street, for my door was always open to the traveler” (Job 31:32 NIV).

Hospitality should characterize all Christians. Paul writes in Romans 12:13, “Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality.” The New Living Translation conveys a fuller sense of this command, saying, “When God’s people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.” First Peter 4:9 says, “Be hospitable to one another without complaining.” Again, the New Living Translation explicates the command, saying, “Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay.” Alexander Strauch writes,

For an elder to be inhospitable is a poor example of Christian love and care for others. The shepherd elder is to give himself lovingly and sacrificially for the care of the flock. This cannot be done from a distance – with a smile and a handshake on Sunday morning or through a superficial visit. Giving oneself to the care of God’s people means sharing one’s life and home with others. An open home is a sign of an open heart and a loving, sacrificial, serving spirit. A lack of hospitality is a sure sign of selfish, lifeless, loveless Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

Ruthie and I have found that some of our most meaningful visits and conversations with other believers have occurred within the walls of our own home. I know my fellow elders feel the same way. I thank the Lord for how they and their wives show hospitality to others. “We must never underestimate the power of hospitality in ministering to people’s needs.” If you need some incentive in this area, consider what the author of Hebrews writes in chapter 13, verse 2, of his epistle: “Don’t neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it” (CSB). That happened to Abraham and Lot, remember (Gen. 18-19)? Who knows, it could happen to you!

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<sup>8</sup> Strauch, 194.

### Able to teach

This qualification, like the one before it, emphasizes what an elder does. He must be “able to teach.” The apostle Paul expounds on this qualification in his letter to Titus, saying,

He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instructions in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

- Titus 1:9

An overseer must *know God’s word extensively* and be able to *teach it effectively*.<sup>9</sup> John Calvin captured the essence of this qualification, saying that an elder must have wisdom “in knowing how to apply God’s word to the profit of the people.”<sup>10</sup> An elder must be able to teach, but he doesn’t necessarily have to do so from the pulpit. Teaching God’s word takes place in several different contexts, such as Sunday School classes, small groups, counseling sessions, and personal conversations.

### Not a drunkard

An elder must be above reproach in his use of alcohol. The Bible does not command abstinence, though some Christians may choose that option as the safest path for themselves. But the Bible does command against drunkenness. Ephesians 5:18 says, “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads, to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (NIV).

Scripture makes it clear that drunkenness is sin, and persistently drunk people require church discipline (see 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:9-10; Gal. 5:21; 1 Peter 4:3). Drunkenness wrecks homes and ruins people’s lives. For obvious reasons, a person in a position of trust and authority over other people should most certainly not have a drinking problem.

### Not violent

According to the National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence (NCADD), alcohol plays a role in 40% of all *violent crimes* in the U.S.<sup>11</sup> Because drunkenness often leads to violence, that’s probably why Paul thought of this quality next. The Greek word for “violent” in this verse literally means “striker” or “brawler” and suggests a violent person who is prone to physical assault on others. The New American Standard Version uses the word “pugnacious.” “A pugnacious man is a fighter, a bad-tempered, irritable, out-of-control individual.”<sup>12</sup> Proverbs 22:24 says, “Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered” (NIV). A violent man or drunkard has no business leading Christ’s church.

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<sup>9</sup> David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 55-56.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smail, Calvin’s Commentaries (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1964), 79. Cited by Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, Reformed Expository Commentary, New Testament edited by Daniel M. Doriani, series editors Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 115.

<sup>11</sup> Corey Reynolds, “Alcohol-Related Crimes and Offenses,” National TASC, 30 October 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 2 December 2023 from <https://www.nationaltasc.org/alcohol-related-crimes-offenses/>.

<sup>12</sup> Strauch, 196.

## Gentle

This is the very word that Jesus uses to describe his own heart in Matthew 11:28-30: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (NIV).

The Greek word for “gentle” (*praus*) conveys the idea of *power under control*. A Greek military leader named Xenophon used the word to describe war horses that were well trained – strong and spirited, yet highly disciplined. Socrates used the word to describe a person who could argue his case without losing his temper. Plato used the word to describe a victorious general who was merciful to a conquered people. Aristotle used the word to refer to someone concerned about justice but whose anger did not degrade into revenge or retaliation.<sup>13</sup> So, gentleness or meekness is certainly not weakness. It is power under control.

When writing to the church at Corinth, which was embroiled in conflict and had caused Paul much grief, he said, “Now I, Paul, appeal to you with the gentleness and kindness of Christ...” (2 Cor. 10:1 NLT). In his book, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*, Dane Ortlund writes, “Jesus is not trigger-happy. Not harsh, reactionary, easily exasperated. He is the most understanding person in the universe. The posture most natural to him is not a pointed finger but open arms.”<sup>14</sup>

Men, does this sort of posture characterize you? It should. That’s how Jesus describes his own heart: “gentle.” That’s what he wants the overseers of his church to be.

### Not quarrelsome

Titus 3:2 says that Christians are “to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.” What ought to be true of every Christian must be true of an elder. He is not to be a trouble-maker, but a peace-maker.

### Not a lover of money

Paul will expound on this subject in chapter 6, where he says, “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. It is through this craving that some have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves through with many pangs [griefs]” (1 Tim. 6:10). In verse 9 Paul says that those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For this reason Scripture tells believers, Hebrews 13:5 tells all believers, “Keep your life free from the love of money. Be content with what you have, for he [Jesus] himself has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’” Elders are to model such contentment, showing others that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim. 6:6).

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy R. Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, Kindle version (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2023), 156-157.

<sup>14</sup> Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 19.

### **Must manage his own household well ...**

The Greek word for “manage” has two primary meanings: governing and caring. An elder is to exhibit both qualities with respect to his family. One way he demonstrates this is by “keeping his children submissive with all dignity.” The phrase “with all dignity” describes the way the father keeps his children submissive. It’s not by manipulating them, belittling them, or abusing them, but by showing them respect as fellow image-bearers of God. A father who treats his children with respect will earn their respect. But a man with a temper and inconsistent discipline exasperates his children and exacerbates their rebellion.

But “a man whose children respect him must be a good father, which is exactly what the church is looking for.”<sup>15</sup> That’s Paul’s point. In verse 5 he says, “for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul writes, “you may have countless instructors in Christ, but you don’t have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15). A man may be able to teach, but the church needs more than a Bible lecturer. It needs men who love God’s family like a father. In his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul says, “As you know, like a father with his own children, we encouraged, comforted, and implored each one of you to walk worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:12). Good fathers make the best elders and pastors.

### **Not a recent convert**

An elder cannot be a new Christian, a baby believer. “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.” Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” Remember King Uzziah in the Old Testament? Second Chronicles 26, “his fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped, till he was strong. But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God...” (vv. 15b-16a). The same thing happened with Hezekiah, who, like Uzziah, had been a good king. He became sick to the point of death, but he prayed, and God healed him. “But,” Scripture says, “Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore, wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem” (2 Chron. 32:25).

If godly, well-seasoned leaders are prone to pride, how much more so are new, untested believers? Biblical history and church history show that pride has destroyed the greatest of men. Pride led to the devil’s downfall, and he does all he can to drag down others with him. Appointing a new believer to elder leadership makes him susceptible to pride, which incurs God’s displeasure on him and the church. That’s why an elder must not be a new convert.

### **Be well thought of by outsiders**

This final qualification is stipulated in verse 7: “Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders [nonbelievers] so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.” The Greek phrase for “well thought of” literally means “beautiful witness.” In their letters,

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<sup>15</sup> Ryken, 117.



The New Testament repeatedly emphasizes the need for Christians to have a good reputation before a watching, nonbelieving world.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout Charles Spurgeon's decades of ministry in the 1800's, more than 14,000 people sought to join the church he pastored. Rather than rushing them into membership, Spurgeon and the other pastors at the Metropolitan Tabernacle led applicants through a five-part process. First, the applicant met with an elder to make sure the applicant was clear on the gospel and showed evidence of true conversion. If that interview went well, the applicant then met with Spurgeon, the lead pastor, himself. Spurgeon trusted his fellow elders but saw the membership interview as an opportunity to make sure that nothing got missed. It also gave him the opportunity to begin pastoring the candidates.

If the applicant passed these first two steps, an elder would share the applicant's testimony at the next members' meeting and then nominate a member of the church to be a "visitor" or "messenger." The congregation would then vote to commission the visitor to go on behalf of the church to the candidate's home, workplace, and neighborhood and ask questions about the candidate, such as:

"Do you know this applicant?" ... "Do you know he is a Christian?" ...  
 "What do you know about his character?" ... "What is he like at work?" ...  
 "How does he treat his family?"

This step allowed the church to get a sense of the person's ongoing reputation in his community. If all went well with the inquiry, the candidate would attend the next members' meeting, share a brief word of testimony, and opportunity would be given to the members to share any words of testimony that would give their affirmation of the candidate's conversion. This process would culminate in a congregational vote. Once the applicant was approved, he would be baptized as a public profession of his faith in Christ, receive the ordinance of communion, and be added to the membership roll.<sup>17</sup>

In our day, we may not appoint messengers to make such inquiries. Still, there's wisdom in helping applicants to see that joining the church is not a private affair. Neither is *leading* the church. Alexander Strauch notes, "An outsider's opinion of a Christian leader's character cannot be dismissed, for it affects the evangelistic witness of the entire church."<sup>18</sup>

In these last two verses, Paul warns us twice about the devil. Phil Ryken writes, "These warnings lead us to an obvious conclusion: Satan is out to get the elders of the church. This is basic military strategy ... the oldest trick in the book. ... The best way to defeat an army is to attack its command and control. What better way to frustrate God's plans for the church of Jesus Christ than to overthrow the elders he has appointed to lead it?"

So, let's make sure we have the right men – *scripturally qualified* men – in leadership. Then let us respect them, encourage them, follow their example, and uphold them in prayer.

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<sup>16</sup> See 1 Corinthians 10:32; Philippians 2:15; Colossians 4:5-6; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; 5:14; 6:1; Titus 2:5, 8, 10; 3:1-2; 1 Peter 2:12, 15; 3:1, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Geoff Chang, "Membership at Metropolitan Tabernacle: Church Polity with Charles Spurgeon," *desiringGod*, 03 August 2023 [online]. Retrieved on 02 December 2023 from <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/membership-at-metropolitan-tabernacle>.

<sup>18</sup> Strauch, 201.