

Sermon for Sunday, January 4, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"THE TEST FOR A CHURCH OFFICER"

I Timothy 3:1-13

Text: "The saying is sure: "If any one aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task."
I Timothy 3:1

This particular Sunday at Central has always been a very special and a very impressive time for me. When we ordain and install Elders, Deacons, and Trustees, it is almost overwhelming to see all of these outstanding men gathered together, representing the spiritual leadership of this great congregation. Someone asked me recently, "why just the men? Doesn't Central believe in ordaining women?" You know, I don't know the answer to that question! Our denomination permits the ordination of women and as far as I know, there is nothing official here at Central to prohibit women from being officers. However, to my knowledge there has never been a woman officer in this congregation.

As I said, there is nothing official that prohibits it, but the fact is, it has been the women themselves more than anyone else who have said to me that they don't want women officers. Now, personally, I think a Bible-believing Christian who takes scripture seriously, can come down on either side of the question. As a matter of fact, our scripture for this morning implies that there were women deacons. Do you remember what it said? First, it talked about men deacons and then it said, "the women likewise must be serious, etc." implying women deacons. And, St. Paul elsewhere speaks of deaconesses.

But I really don't want to talk about whether the Bible does or does not permit women Elders and Deacons and even preachers. As I said, I think good Christians can find room for disagreement on that point. The fact is, however, the women of Central have been the first to insist that the men be officers. When I have asked them why, their replies can be summarized something like this: "In every church we know, when women have been elected as officers, the men begin to step back and the next thing you know, you have the whole church run by women. And we know that isn't biblical!" The women go on to tell me that there are many things in Central they can and ought to do and if the men are willing to assume the spiritual leadership of the church, that is fine with them. As a matter of fact, our Women's Organization is perhaps the strongest such group in our entire denomination.

Well, there may be a lot of truth to that attitude. I do know that Central has had a strong appeal to men as well as women and that is important. It distresses me sometimes that most of our teachers in our Sunday School are women and our children begin to think that religion is something for women. Men certainly need the Gospel as much as women and men know very well that Central is not just another woman's organization.

So, it has always been impressive to me to see all of the men who are Elders and Deacons and Trustees of Central gathered together in one large group. And what we are going to do this morning is something as old as the New Testament. As a matter of fact, it has roots that go back much further into the Old Testament. We are told, for example, that after Moses led the Children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, that he appointed Elders to help him in the spiritual governing of the people of God. So, under God we have chosen these men to be our spiritual leaders and today we are going to set them apart by the laying on of hands as we ordain them.

But the question I want to deal with this morning is this: how does one get to be an officer at Central? Each year I have people say to me, "well, I think I might like to be an Elder--or a Deacon--at Central." Or someone will say to me, "Why don't you see to it that so-and-so is made an officer this year." So I want to share with you how one gets to be an officer.

Let me hasten to say first of all that I am not the one who chooses officers! It is true I meet with the nominating committee, but it is a decision of that committee--not the preacher--as to who will or will not be put up for nomination.

In the Presbyterian church we have always said there are three "callings" necessary for a person to become an officer. First, somebody does the calling. In this case, the congregation "calls" a person to be an officer by electing him at a congregational meeting. Nominations are made to you and you vote on whether or not to extend a call to a person to become an officer. That is a great part of the Presbyterian system. No one may be put over a congregation of the people of God without their consent. Presbytery cannot come in here and put me or anyone else in as your pastor. You have to first issue a call before I can be your pastor. By the same token, nobody can come and install somebody as a Ruler--a spiritual leader--over you. You must first elect them. That is one of the great safe-guards in the Presbyterian system. The congregation has the final say in who will or will not be an officer. The second calling is in that person's heart. He must ask himself, "is God calling me to this office? Is this something God wants me to do and am I truly led of him to accept the call of the congregation." That's why our Book of Church Order says that after a congregation elects a person to office, the Session shall confer with him to determine if he accepts the call. The Session has the job of having that person confirm in his own heart that he is indeed called of God. Then the third "calling" is that of the Session. After the officer-elect goes through a period of training, (and here at Central that is twelve sessions of training) the Session meets with him and examines him. It asks him to share how he became a Christian and how he is growing as a child of God. It asks him questions about theology, about the sacraments, about church history, and about church government. When it has heard his examination, then the Session votes whether or not to confirm and approve that persons call. If the Session agrees that he has been called and that he is indeed qualified, it sets a date and time for his ordination and installation. That is what we are doing this morning.

To my way of thinking, that is a pretty good system. It has a lot of checks and balances in it. It necessarily takes a little time which gives everyone an opportunity to think about what is being done. You know, we Presbyterians never do anything hastily--we always try to act with what the Bible calls "decency and order." And that's usually our excuse--that we are acting decently and in order--when we are really procrastinating!

So, a congregation calls, God calls in a man's heart, and the Session confirms the call. But notice that the first step is to be called by the congregation. The way that works in our church is something like this. First the Session appoints on behalf of the congregation a nominating committee. This is always a very representative group with both Elders and Deacons, and sometimes members from the congregation at large. The people on that committee will represent various age groups in the church; it will have some fairly new members to Central as well as persons who have been here a long time. We don't want persons nominated who are largely new to Central, but by the same token we don't want just the same old faces! We don't want just young persons, but by the same token we don't want just old foggies either. So, Central tries hard to get a good balance of young, middle, and old; of new, not so new, and old timers. That's why we try to appoint a committee that is broadly representative. We really do need to be sensitive to new members. Sometimes those who have been here forever; and you know we have members who are fifth and sixth generation members, begin to feel like they are being pushed out by the new members. In the past two years we have received almost 500 new members and in the ten years that I have been here as pastor we have received over 1800 new members--so we do have to be sensitive to the new people who come.

Once the committee is selected, it is announced to the congregation and all of you are urged to suggest names to them --to give them names of persons you feel should be considered for an officer. Members of the committee itself also suggest names and very shortly the committee has a list of names that is far larger than the number of vacancies available. And let me say that Central is very blessed in this way. I have been the pastor of churches--and there are many congregations today--who really do not have enough qualified men to fill the vacancies available. Many churches have officers who are not truly qualified spiritually simply because such persons were not available. But that certainly isn't true at Central. We always have a number of names for each spot that is open and I praise God for that. However, it does mean that not every qualified person will get elected. I'm sure there are many men here at Central who are qualified in every way to be an Elder or Deacon but have not been elected simply because there were not enough openings.

So, the committee is selected and they begin to accumulate a list of names. Next the committee begins to ask itself, what are the Biblical qualifications for an officer? What kind of man of God should a person be for us to recommend his election to the congregation? And the committee begins to pray earnestly. We have never had an officer nominating committee since I have been pastor that did not spend a lot of time collectively and individually seeking to know God's will.

What are the qualities in a person's life that the committee looks at? Well, one such quality is family life. Before becoming a Christian a person may have had some features to his family life that he isn't very proud of, but what we look for is the quality of his family life now that he is a Christian. Sometimes the change in a person's attitude about his family can be the finest testimony he can give to his faith. Also, what happened in a person's pre-Christian past shouldn't disqualify him now that he is a Christian. If that were the case, by his own admission, St. Paul would never have been a leader. For example, a man in his pre-Christian days may be divorced. But when he becomes a Christian and in his new marriage and new life seeks to serve God, his old mistakes should not disqualify him for service. But that is a far cry isn't it, from the man who professes to be a Christian and then knowingly and deliberately violates his marriage vows. The committee is concerned about the present quality of his life.

Another quality of life the nominating committee examines is stewardship. The committee isn't as much interested in the amount a person gives as it is in whether or not that seems to represent a tithe of one's income. You can't buy your way to officership at Central. By the same token if your giving doesn't reflect your income it does seriously challenge your commitment. Incidentally, you may be interested to know that the top three or four givers at Central have not been Elders--they have been Deacons. And people say to me--that is, people outside of Central--that the reason we do so well financially is because we have so many rich people. Well, nobody has shown me their bank balance, but I suppose there are a lot of wealthy people here at Central. But I will tell you this: while some of them are generous, many are not. Wealthy people are not the financial backbone of this congregation. It's pretty average families who have fairly average incomes who are tithing who make the difference. And that's as it should be, isn't it? Just to give you an idea of how well distributed our giving is, if you took the top 15 pledges and removed them, this congregation would still over give their budget in 1981.

But stewardship is broader than money. It means involvement, giving of self, sharing of gifts and talents. Recently a fairly new member of our congregation came to one of the pastors with a check for over \$20,000. "This is over-and-above," he said, "I came into a little inheritance and this is my tithe." Well, the money is useful for our ministry, but the most important thing about that man is the spiritual leadership he is giving to a special group in our church. The best thing he has given us has been himself as he is reaching out to touch lives for Jesus Christ. If you aspire to be an officer, then get involved. Give of yourself. Offer to drive the bus or usher or

whatever needs to be done; take part in the programs and avenues for spiritual growth and development. It is not likely that a man will become an officer in this church whose only participation is to come to church on Sunday morning, even if he comes every week.

Another quality the nominating committee looks for is spiritual leadership. They are looking for men of God, who are close to the Lord, who study His Word, who have a prayer life. I must confess that in my younger days I wanted officers who were leaders in the community, who were well-known, who had received public recognition for their deeds in the world. And do you know what happened when I got officers like that? Well, I got good, worldly leadership. I tell you, the church will not prosper under God with that kind of leadership. The church will not grow and develop any higher spiritually than its leadership.

There are a lot of other biblical qualities the committee looks for, many of them mentioned in our scripture for this morning. But let me mention one other. It is the quality of vision. Without a vision the people perish--that's what the Bible says. We need leadership in this congregation that has a vision of this city for God--a vision of the place Central has in God's great plan for St. Louis--a vision of what God can and will do with a church like this that is committed to the Lord. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us--and we need leaders who have a vision and who know that. Let us pray to God that in these men we have such leaders today!