



THE QUALIFICATIONS OF AN ELDER

The following study is designed to provide some initial help in understanding the qualifications for Elders in the local church, for those who may recommend potential Elder candidates, or who may be considering the office themselves. Key passages on Elders are I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9, where lists of qualifications are given, and I Peter 5:1-4, where Elders are given admonition and encouragement. The comments that follow are limited, and further insight may be found in commentaries or other general Bible study tools. Specific discussion of these qualifications may be found in The Measure of a Man, by Gene A. Getz (Regal Books), and Biblical Eldership, by Alexander Strauch (Lewis and Roth).

The terms "elder" (πρεσβυτερος), "bishop" (or literally "overseer", επισκοπος), and "pastor" (ποιμην) are used in the New Testament to describe a position of responsibility and leadership in the local church. The term elder is used sixteen times, bishop six times and pastor three times. It becomes evident with even a superficial study of such passages as Acts 20:17-28, I Peter 5:1-4, Titus 1:5-7, and I Timothy 3:1-7, 5:17, that these three terms refer to the same office within the church.

A prerequisite for serving as an elder is indicated by Paul as he opens the discussion in 1 Timothy 3. "If anyone aspires..." The word ορεγεται (orgetai) implies a willingness to serve the body of Christ, the local church, in this way. It should be observed that it is not the office of overseer but the function of overseeing that Paul asserts is honorable and noble (Sanders, SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP, p. 13). The writer of Hebrews says this about attitude toward the office: "... Let them (leaders) do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you". (Hebrews 13:17b) There must be an eagerness to serve on the part of the prospective leader. See also I Peter 5:2-3.

How do we know when a man who so aspires is truly qualified? Certainly no man would say that his life was totally a model of what the rest of the church is to become. To help in this matter the Apostle Paul described for Timothy and Titus the minimum marks of a true overseer (I Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9).

1. "ABOVE REPROACH" (ανεπιλημπτος), I Tim. 3:2

This attribute is a general one and deals with the overall character of the elder's life. The word Paul uses here literally means "one who cannot be laid off". There are two other words that have similar meanings: αμεμπτος, (amemptos, blameless, 1 Thessalonians 3:13); and ανεγκλητος, (anenkletos), used in Titus 1:6 and 7, blameless. This word is stronger than these, "...for it implies not only that the man is of good report, but that he is deservedly so". (Abbott-Smith, p. 36). This blamelessness must be maintained not only within the church, but also before the world. In I Peter 3:16, Peter exhorts, "Keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame."

2. "HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE" (μιας γυναικος ανηρ), I Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:6

In Biblical Eldership, Strauch suggests "This means that an elder [also deacon] must be above reproach in his marital and sexual life." Gene Getz in The Measure of a Man indicates it is "a character quality defining a man as a faithful husband to his wife." Literally it means "one woman man", and so Strauch further explains: "...the phrase 'the husband of one wife' is meant to be a positive statement that expresses faithful, monogamous marriage. In English we would say, 'faithful and true to one woman' or 'a one-woman man.' This latter phrasing closely follows the Greek wording" (Biblical Eldership, p. 192).

The DCC Elders adopted the following summary statement (in 2003) to clarify this qualification and its application to the offices of elder and deacon:

It is our intent to uphold Biblical standards for the offices of Elder and Deacon, holding to the ideal that God intended for leadership in His church. The two offices (Elders - male and Deacons - male and female) are to be filled by those believers who are blameless in their marriage relationship, namely, who are "men of one woman" (elders and deacons) and "women of one man" (women deacons) (I Timothy 3:2; 3:11; Titus 1:6). Where the candidate or his/her spouse has experienced divorce, that situation will have an impact on their qualification for leadership. Each will be considered on an individual basis as to their qualification to serve in the office of elder or deacon.

3. "SOBER-MINDED" (νηφαλιον), I Tim. 3:2

The root meaning is "not mixed with wine; of persons, sober, temperate". (Abbott-Smith, pg. 302) The word is found in I Tim. 3:11; Titus 1:8; 2:2,5 and I Tim. 3:2. The idea is not limited to mean avoidance of intoxication, but encompasses the more general and positive characteristic of mental alertness and spiritual awareness. Barclay describes the word thus:

The point the Pastorals make here is that the Christian must allow himself no indulgence which would lessen his Christian vigilance or soil his Christian conduct. (William Barclay, The Letters To Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975, pp. 79-80)

4. "SELF-CONTROLLED" (σωφρονα), I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8

The NASB translates this Greek word as "sensible" in Titus 1:8. The word is derived from the combination of sound (σως; sos) and mind (φρην; phren), resulting in the meaning of "sound mind, sane, sensible; self-controlled, sober-minded". (Abbott-Smith, p. 38). Aristotle described such a level-headed man in the Nicomachean Ethics as one who desired the right things in the right way at the right time (Ronald A. Ward, Commentary on I and II Timothy and Titus, Waco: Word, 1974, p. 55)

5. "RESPECTABLE" (κοσμιον), I Tim. 3:2

The word means "orderly, decent, modest". (Abbott-Smith, p. 255)
The NASB translates this word as "orderly" and "to adorn" in I Tim. 2:9, and is used to describe the way the women in the congregation were to dress as well as their habit of life. The disorderly and disorganized man does not develop the respect and honor necessary for the office of elder.

6. "HOSPITABLE" (φιλοξενον), I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8

This term in I Timothy 3:2 comes from the combination of "stranger" and "lover", hence, stranger-lover. The hospitality that is required of an elder constitutes more than being a good host at social events. Rather, it requires that he be ready and willing to use his home in ministering to those who are in need of shelter and provisions, both Christian and non-Christian.

7. "ABLE TO TEACH" (διδακτικον), I Tim. 3:2

This is a parallel concept to Titus 1:9. The elder must be versed in the truth and be able to instruct others in it. This is not necessarily the gift of teaching, but the intent to convey truth. He should be a discipler of men (2 Timothy 2:2).

8. "NOT A DRUNKARD" (μη παροινον), I Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7

Literally translated, it means "not given to wine or a drunken" (Abbott-Smith, p. 346). It does not mean total abstinence, but taken with other of the qualifications would forbid excessive use of wine. Application would naturally extend to forbid excessive use of any intoxicant.

9. "NOT VIOLENT..." (μη πληκτην), I Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7

The KJV translates the word "not a striker" which is more literal than the NASB. It also has the idea of being a "brawler". No elder is to be quick-tempered and quick-fisted.

10. "...BUT GENTLE" (επιεικη), I Tim. 3:3

The word means "seemly, fitting, equitable, fair, moderate". (Abbott-Smith, pg. 169) In Philippians 4:5, the NASB translates this word as "forbearing spirit".

11. "NOT QUARRELSOME" (αμοχον), I Tim. 3:3

Literally it means "abstaining from fighting; non-combatant; non-contentious" (Abbott-Smith, p. 24). A leader is not argumentative or quarrelsome. It is a similar idea to "not pugnacious".

12. 'NOT A LOVER OF MONEY" (αφιλαργυρον), I Tim. 3:3

This phrase comes from the one Greek word in I Timothy 3:3 which literally means "not a silver lover". Love for money becomes the root that nourishes all kinds of other sins (I Tim. 6:10). A leader cannot be pre-occupied with amassing material possessions. See also I Peter 5:2.

13. "MANAGE HIS OWN HOUSEHOLD WELL..."

(του ιδιου οικου καλως προϊσταμενον), I Tim. 3:4

He "stands before" (the literal translation) his household as a leader and as an example. How important is this quality? Paul writes, "But if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?" (I Tim. 3:5) The spiritual qualities which are necessary to properly administer a Christian household are the same qualities which are necessary to administer Christ's church.

14. "...WITH ALL DIGNITY KEEPING HIS CHILDREN SUBMISSIVE"

(τεκνα εχοντα εν υποταγη μετα πασης σεμνοτητος), I Tim 3:4

One of the evidences that a man is managing his household well will be his relationship with his children, if he has children. Children are to be obedient to their parents, but this must be nurtured and disciplined appropriately as they grow for this to take place. So managing one's household will mean fulfilling parental responsibilities in a respectable way ("with all dignity") or "with proper conduct" in relationship to child-rearing or parenthood. To Titus Paul writes, "...and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination." If the elder has children, they are to be believers. This qualification puts a high priority on the part of the leader for the spiritual development of his children. This implies an elder could be disqualified if his child or children depart from the faith. (Compare Titus 1:6)

15. "MUST NOT BE A RECENT CONVERT" (μη νεοφυτον), I Tim. 3:6

In I Timothy 3:6 the new believer is compared to something newly planted. The word is used in the LXX for a newly sprouted shoot of a plant (Job 14:9). The church must take time to allow the new believer to mature and produce fruit (the elder qualifications). The reason for this evaluation period is explained by Paul, ". . . lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil." Pride was the devil's problem, and it can be the new convert's problem if he is exalted too quickly.

16. "WELL THOUGHT OF BY OUTSIDERS" (those outside the church) (μαρτυριαν καλην), I Tim. 3:7

Here in I Timothy 3:7 the word "reputation" literally means "testimony". An elder's life must not only be exemplary when dealing with Christians but must also produce a good witness among those who do not know Christ. An elder cannot be a "Sunday Christian". A life lacking integrity will ultimately lead to "disgrace" (ονειδισμον) or reproach (see qualification 1) and disqualify a man, a trap set by the devil himself for those in leadership.

17. "NOT ARROGANT" (μη αυθαδη), Titus 1:7

In Titus 1:7 the phrase is made up of two words which mean "self-pleasing, arrogant" (Abbott-Smith, p. 68). Stubborn, headstrong men should have no place in the leadership of a local church.

18. "NOT QUICK-TEMPERED" (μη οργιλον), Titus 1:7

This term is used only here in Titus 1:7. Its root is common and means out-burst of anger or wrath or indignation. A leader is able to control his temper. He doesn't "fly off the handle". He doesn't have a "short fuse".

19. "NOT GREEDY FOR GAIN" (μη αισχροκερδη), Titus 1:7

Related to the concept of qualification 12, this includes the idea of being covetous, or eager for dishonest gain. This is greedy in a way that is shameful because it carries with it the thought gain through inappropriate means. This phrase is very similar to Peter's admonition for elders to shepherd "not for sordid gain" (I Peter 5:2). If a person has a "love of money", he will probably resort to "sordid gain" in order to satisfy his desires. The elder should have no part of a shady deal for unfair profit. I Thess. 5:21-22

20. "LOVER OF GOOD " (φιλαγαθον), Titus 1:8

The affection of the elder is to be toward the good, the wholesome. He always welcomes goodness in whatever form it comes. (Titus 1:8)

21. "UPRIGHT" (δικαιον), Titus 1:8

This word is not referring to positional righteousness, but practical day-to-day uprightness. It means "render to each his due as in I John 1:9 and here in Titus 1:8". (Abbott-Smith, pp. 115-116)

22. "HOLY" (οσιον), Titus 1:8

Whereas the former qualification of "just" deals with a leader's practical conduct, the term "devout" deals with a leader's personal holiness. He lives a life separated unto God. (Titus 1:8)

23. "DISCIPLINED" (εγκρατη), Titus 1:8

This word is a synonym of "prudent". It has more the idea of strength that is under control. Barclay states:

The Greek word describes the man who has achieved complete self-mastery. Any man who would serve others must first be master of himself. (William Barclay, The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, p. 239)

24. "HOLD FIRM TO THE TRUSTWORTHY WORD"

(αντεχομενον πιστου λογου), Titus 1:9

An elder must be stable in his faith and obedient to the Word in all respects, with the result that he "exhort" the believers, and "refute" the non-believers. This is related to qualification 7, "able to teach".

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