



Church on Mill

The Qualifications of Elders
A Theological Position Paper

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Introduction

The plan of God to unite all things under the good rule of King Jesus¹ is the greatest news the world will ever hear. This news – the gospel – is God’s power to save, expressed personally in the salvation of individuals and corporately in the gathering of saved persons from every tribe, tongue, and nation into churches. Far from a tangential addition to his gospel strategy, local churches are the embodiment of God’s immense, barrier-shattering wisdom² displayed in the gospel’s power to transform people from selfish sinners into sacrificial saints. In a very real sense God’s people in God’s churches are God’s display of his wisdom and glory. This has always been God’s plan – to form a people for his glory.³

With a vision for the local church this grand, trustworthy and competent leadership is essential. God’s sheep need godly shepherds so they can flourish in God’s plan for his church and their joy-filled responsibilities as members of the body of Christ. Scripture designates these shepherds as elders (or pastors), and outlines specific biblical qualifications for men who would hold this office.

On the pages that follow, readers will ponder the qualifications of elders, be

encouraged to give attention to who is to serve as an elder, and consider a conclusion.

Qualifications of Elders

Elders are responsible to protect, feed, lead, care, and serve as humble examples of Christlikeness, so that the members of the church are built up in the faith and the testimony of the church is clear to a world desperately in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is spiritual work requiring grace-driven spiritual maturity and servant leadership. Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus outline nineteen specific qualifications of elders.⁴ These qualifications are on the whole credentials of character. Since competency for spiritual leadership flows from godly character produced by the Holy Spirit, it should be no surprise that the biblical text focuses on the quality of a man’s character not the ‘best practices’ of secular leadership principles. Godly men will be yielded to Christ; therefore, they will shepherd well by following their Chief Shepherd, Jesus himself.⁵

Below is a brief explanation of each biblical qualification:⁶

- 1) *Above reproach* (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6) – This criterion encapsulates all nineteen qualifications. An elder must be a man of

¹ Ephesians 1:10

² Ephesians 3:1-13

³ Exodus 6:7, Titus 2:14, Revelation 21:3.

⁴ Specific qualifications are listed in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 2. The words elder (πρεσβύτερος), overseer (ἐπίσκοπος), and pastor (ποιμήν) are all synonyms for the same leadership office occurring throughout the New Testament, see Acts 20, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5. See also Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17, Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 5:17, and James 5:14.

⁵ 1 Peter 5:1-4.

⁶ The prerequisites of men who are qualified to serve as elders are nearly unanimously the characteristics that are to describe all mature Christians (save familial and teaching qualifications). Thus, elders are not super-Christians, but rather men of spiritual maturity. Churches should use caution to apply these prerequisites carefully but not moralistically. No man this side of heaven will always meet the qualifications 100% of the time; however, their character must be clearly consistent with the qualifications as they learn daily to live in light of and by the power of the biblical gospel.

demonstrated spiritual maturity, whose life is not easily prone to criticism and accusation. His Christian lifestyle must be readily apparent.

- 2) *Husband of one wife* (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6) – The Greek text of the New Testament reads literally “one-woman-man” (μἄς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα). If married, an elder is to be morally faithful. He is to demonstrate fidelity and purity. He has eyes for his bride. His mind and heart are to be solely captivated by his covenant wife. It should be noted this qualification does not require an elder to be married nor does it necessarily disqualify a man who is divorced.
- 3) *Sober-minded* (1 Timothy 3:2) – An elder is to be balanced in both words and actions. He is to be ruled by Christ not fickle emotions. Even in the midst of complicated contexts he must think clearly, maintaining a level-headedness that provides wise, godly leadership.
- 4) *Self-controlled and disciplined* (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8) – An elder will face occasions in which tensions are high and people speak and act without restraint. Like Christ, he is to be led not by selfish desires but by the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Thoughtfulness, prudence, and wisdom mark his character. He is not easily flustered or prone to extremes. He is disciplined and lives daily life under the lordship of his Savior and King, Jesus. No aspect of his life falls outside the thoughtful appropriation of the gospel, resulting in a character increasingly transformed by the Holy Spirit.⁷
- 5) *Respectable* (1 Timothy 3:2) – This qualification has to do with a well-ordered life. An elder is not prone to disorganized inner chaos, but rather to that which is proper and godly. His life is organized and focused on that which honors Christ and builds his body, which is the church. His credibility as a leader is enhanced not hindered by his everyday behavior. People regard his life as worthy of respect.
- 6) *Hospitable* (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8) – Shepherding is not accomplished from a distance. Elders love God’s people personally, willingly, and sacrificially. This means a shepherd’s home is to be a place where members are embraced as brothers and sisters. Far from arrogant unapproachability, an elder’s life and home are both accessible and commendable to both friends and strangers alike.
- 7) *Able to teach and rebuke those who contradict sound doctrine* (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:9) – An elder enjoys the responsibility to teach and preach God’s Word. The rhythms of his daily life includes personal study and meditation so as to continually treasure God above all else by applying the truths of the gospel to his own heart, and instructing others in the Scriptures. An elder must not only know the Bible well, he must be willing and able to communicate it accurately and passionately. God’s people need God’s good Word: an elder knows his charge to feed God’s sheep and eagerly invests great energy to that end.
- 8) *Not a drunkard* (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:6-7) – A man in a position of leadership whose work necessitates the trust of those under his authority cannot have problems with substance abuse. Every person reading this paper has likely experienced the carnage drunkenness causes. Elder leadership necessitates any use of alcohol not degrade into misuse.
- 9) *Not violent* (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7) – Pugnaciousness in an elder will do grave harm to those for whom Christ died. A quick tempered, prideful, and forceful

⁷ Galatians 5:16-26.

man who enters emotionally charged situations with the expectation of leading towards godly solutions will likely end in disaster. An elder must treat God's people with Christlike care, never roughly or abusively.

- 10) *Gentle* (1 Timothy 3:3) – Adjectives such as sensitive, loving, kind, merciful, and gracious are to describe an elder's temperament. He is one who understands when to confront and when to forbear. Because he has experienced the grace and mercy of God, he extends the same to others. An elder will refuse to return sin for sin. He patiently endures hostility with non-combative direction. He is an agent of peace for people living in a selfish, divided, and harsh world.
- 11) *Not quarrelsome* (1 Timothy 3:3) – An elder will often find himself ministering to hurting people. This type of work requires him to be non-combative and non-contentious. He must be regarded as one who is quick to listen, slow to speak, and on-guard against bitterness. He is neither subversive nor argumentative. He loves to help discover grace-filled solutions and God-honoring peace, not win debates and arguments. These motivations encourage him to remain considerate of other viewpoints and to be flexible with his own personal opinions. A quarrelsome, insecure, and arrogant man would do far more harm than good as an elder.
- 12) *Not a greedy lover of money* (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7) – As one scholar said, “Like a

powerful drug, the love of money can delude the judgment of even the best men.”⁸ An elder who loves money is an oxymoron. As an under-shepherd following the Chief Shepherd, an elder understands and heeds Jesus' warning that you cannot serve both God and money.⁹ Therefore, he believes and demonstrates that Jesus is his priceless treasure. Rather than being materialistically motivated, an elder is driven by a passion for the glory of God and the good of people.

- 13) *Effective manager of his household* (1 Timothy 3:4-5, Titus 1:6) – An elder is a leader in his home. If married and a father, his wise and faithful shepherding of his wife and children is to be resoundingly clear. The elder's attentive care for his bride should remind church members of Christ's care for them.¹⁰ His children's willing submission should be evidence of their father's gracious love for them.¹¹ If a prospective elder is unable to lead and care for his biological family there is no reason to think he would be faithful and fruitful in leading his spiritual family (the local church).

Churches considering a single man for eldership would be wise to consider if he exhibits maturity in caring for women and if he demonstrates an appropriate warmth towards and love for children. If he is harsh or indifferent towards the good of women, he is not fit to be an elder.

⁸ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*. Littleton: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1995; 198.

⁹ Matthew 6:24.

¹⁰ See Ephesians 5:25-33 for a brilliant articulation of this principle.

¹¹ 1 Timothy 3:4 requires an elder's children to be “submissive” (ὑποταγῆ), while Titus 1:6 reads “believers” (πιστά). Although debate exists among respected New Testament scholars and some

translators choose to interpret the Apostle Paul's intent in Titus to be the presence of saving faith, the most probable meaning of Titus 1:6 is that an elder's children must be faithful (to his leadership). Even the godliest of fathers cannot control whether or not their children profess belief in Jesus Christ. While parents are important role models of faith in Christ, many passages, such as John 1:12-13, articulate that salvation is ultimately a sovereign work of God.

Furthermore, if he belittles or idolizes children he is not fit to be an elder.¹²

- 14) *Not be a recent convert* (1 Timothy 3:6) – While Scripture gives no requirement of physical age for an elder, it does articulate the necessity that an elder not be a spiritual infant. As God expands his Kingdom through the disciple-making of the local church, new believers will become zealous for good works, including eldership. Thoughtful churches will disciple her members to not rush men into shepherding too quickly. The role of eldership demands maturity, and maturity comes only with time. A man must be practically wise, doctrinally sound, and ever aware of the proclivities of his heart: these traits do not develop overnight.
- 15) *Well-thought of by outsiders* (1 Timothy 3:7) – The credibility of the church is directly tied to the trustworthiness of her leaders. If a man has a bad reputation with non-believers he is not fit to be regarded as one with a good reputation with believers. Hypocrisy in the eldership ruins the testimony of the local church, making the gospel appear devoid of life-transforming, supernatural power.
- 16) *Not arrogant* (Titus 1:7) – An elder is never obstinate or primarily concerned with being right. He humbly works well with fellow elders and listens to counsel. His life is open to correction and his lips are

often filled with the personal confession of his own on-going battle with sin.

- 17) *Not quick-tempered* (Titus 1:7) – Eldership includes peacemaking ministry. A man cannot promote peace if he is easily angered. Sinful anger reveals a man is ruled by his own desires, not Jesus Christ.¹³
- 18) *Lover of good* (Titus 1:8) – An elder will delight in doing good. He not only talks about the things that please Christ but also actively pursues them and disciplines others in them. He lives obedient to and consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- 19) *Upright and Holy* (Titus 1:8) – The man called and equipped to be an elder will have learned to live obediently to God's Word. He will delight in doing what his heavenly Father commands by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. This supernatural obedience flows from a heart overwhelmed by God's gift of righteousness in Christ. The elder's closeness to Jesus will keep his heart soft and his behavior consistent in both public and private settings. He will be discerning, fair, and wise in his dealings with people. His attitude and actions will reveal that he is "...committed to a life especially separated to devotion and service of God."¹⁴

Who Cares?

Why should members care who serves as elders? While many reasons exist, three rise to the level of particular significance. First,

¹² It should be noted that the biblical qualifications do not speak to this situation directly; however, the general principles apply. The Scriptures in no way limit the role of eldership to married men (the human author of these qualifications was single, as was our Lord Jesus himself), so biblical requirements for married men ought to be prayerfully analyzed for any possible application to single men. The local church is family to single adults just as she is family to married adults. The opportunities for service and benefits of being part of God's people exist irrespective of marital status (Mark 10:29-31). Paul wrote the qualifications specifically referencing married men with children because that was

the cultural pattern, not because he intended to exclude single men. Merkle states aptly "...it was simply the norm that men married, and there was no need to highlight the exception", see Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008; 130.

¹³ See James 4:1-4 for a helpful understanding of the passions that exist underneath and are the primary cause of angry quarrels.

¹⁴ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, vol. 34, The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992; 284.

members are commanded by God to imitate, obey, and submit to their leaders.¹⁵ In a culture that idolizes personal autonomy those are shocking commands, yet they are God's instruction for our personal good and the faithful public witness of the church. Elders must be men worth joyfully following. God expects members to follow their elders' leadership.

A second reason to give specific thoughtfulness to who serves as elders is that the quality of leaders will in many ways determine the trajectory of the church. Long-time elder and author Thabiti Anyabwile notes, "A church without godly leaders is an endangered church. And a church that does not train leaders is an unfaithful church... Without godly, faithful, replicating leadership, churches suffer deeply."¹⁶ Members who care about their church and their Lord will be particularly mindful about who protects, feeds, leads, cares, and sets an example for the church. The tumultuous and chaotic history of the Israelites in the Old Testament reveals clearly that leaders have tremendous impact upon those under their care. In many cases as leaders live, the people will live.

A third and final reason why members should care who serve as elders is that members will have opportunities to affirm

prospective men to hold the office of eldership. While the Holy Spirit ultimately designates qualified men as elders,¹⁷ in the churches of New Testament it was the apostles or their delegates who recognized and appointed elders.¹⁸ Because apostles no longer exist, we believe it most wise¹⁹ for existing elders to ask church members to prayerfully examine the character of men recommended for eldership, being sure to test their internal sense of desire to serve as elders by the external demonstration of godly character and proven competencies as teachers of the Scriptures. Therefore, the responsibility to prayerfully and cautiously²⁰ appoint elders ought to be taken with great seriousness by every member of the church family. So important is this responsibility that Thabiti Anyabwile wisely states, "Choosing pastors is the most important decision a congregation makes, since the pastors will shape the congregation through their teaching and the model."²¹ By God's grace may we choose well!

Conclusion

Jesus is a good, gentle shepherd: he cares unrelentingly for his own.²² A primary way Jesus' care is given to his sheep is through under-shepherds, called elders or pastors.

¹⁵ Hebrews 13:7, 17.

¹⁶ Thabiti Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012; 11.

¹⁷ Acts 20:28.

¹⁸ For example, see Titus 1:5.

¹⁹ Merkle notes determining how elders are to be selected is difficult "...because we are never told precisely how to select our elders. As a result, there are a wide variety of views and practices on this issue." See Merkle, 199. In view of the biblical command that members submit to elders and the wisdom found in the unified voice of congregational churches, we believe it wisest to recommend prospective elders to the church membership for affirmation or denial. An example of this unified voice in a congregational church is the Jerusalem church's selection of proto-deacons in Acts 6. This is not, however, to be understood as a

popularity context. Wayne Grudem asserts, "When I mention a congregational vote I do not mean to suggest the idea of a competitive election such as is found in secular politics. It may simply involve a requirement that the congregation vote to ratify candidates who have been nominated by a mature group within the church (such as the present elders)...", see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994; 992n. 32).

²⁰ Notice Paul's instruction to Timothy not to appoint elders too quickly, which would have caused him to share in their sins if they ended up being poor elders (1 Timothy 5:22).

²¹ Anyabwile, 56.

²² John 10:14-18.

Strauch states, “The biblical image of a shepherd caring for his flock – standing long hours ensuring its safety, leading it to fresh pasture and clear water, carrying the weak, seeking the lost, healing the wounded and sick – is precious. The whole image of the Palestinian shepherd is characterized by intimacy, concern, skill, hard work, suffering, and love.”²³ God’s design is that every church would enjoy a plurality of godly shepherds for his glory and their good.²⁴



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²³ Strauch, 16.

²⁴ We can give no greater recommendation to you than the encouragement to study the relevant biblical

passages for yourself. The role of elders is given significant treatment in Acts 20:17-38, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-16, and 1 Peter 5:1-4.