

1 Timothy 3:2-6 - The Qualifications for the Office of Elder

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1. Introduction: How Important are Elders to the Christian Church?

Before we begin our walk-through of the qualification list for the office of ruling and teaching elder, I'd like to read in your hearing one of the most dramatic appeals found in the entire Bible - Paul's exhortation of the elders of the church at Ephesus:

Acts 20:17-38 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. [18] And when they had come to him, he said to them: "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, [19] serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; [20] how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, [21] testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. [22] And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, [23] except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. [24] But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. [25] And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. [26] Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. [27] For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. [28] Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. [29] For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. [30] Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. [31] Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. [32] So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. [33] I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. [34] Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. [35] I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' " [36] And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. [37] Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, [38] sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.

[Re-read v28] - It is a remarkable thing that the Lord Jesus would entrust His redeemed people to the care of fallible and sinful men who are always in need of shepherding, prayer, and encouragement themselves!

- **Illustration - How do denominations become liberal?** When I started looking around for a pastoral call, I found a website that listed a large number of the Presbyterian and Reformed

denominations in the world. There were 46 just in North America. The majority of those 46 were very small - with probably right around 100 churches, and many with less than 15. The 2nd largest is us, the PCA - with around 1800 churches and around 350,000 members. The largest is about 6 *times bigger* - the PCUSA - with 10,466 churches and just shy of 2,000,000 members. In the description of the PCUSA, it says this: "*The largest Reformed Denomination in the U.S., has a **strongly liberal leadership and is has approved of homosexual marriage and ordination**, a few of its churches are solidly Biblical and are fighting this, but most are jumping ship to the EPC, PCA, ECO, or other bodies. Original PCUSA formed in 1789, this one in 1983 with the union of Northern and Southern Churches. You can find everything from traditional to contemporary to postmodern to pagan worship of Sophia if you know where to look.*"

⇒ I have a tape series on the inspiration and authority of Scripture by a minister in the United Reformed Church named, Dr. Kim Riddlebarger, wherein he pointed out that the PCUSA's endowment is worth so much money that even if not a single member ever tithed another dime to any of its churches, it would still have plenty to keep the place running just fine until the end of human history

⇒ **How did this happen?** Electing ruling and teaching elders who did not really hold to the Westminster Confession of Faith's teaching on key doctrinal points - the sovereignty of God, 6-day creationism, and other essential doctrines like the Virgin Birth of Christ, the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, and etc....

⇒ **Remember, fundamental to Biblical church government is that the local church - the membership of the local church - elects its own elders & deacons, and calls its own pastor.**

Application: That is why sermons on the qualifications and duties of elders and deacons are very important for the health and future of Christ's church. *You as the membership of the church* must understand these qualifications and nominate and elect *qualified* men to these offices.

Application 2: What happens so very often in the local church is that these qualifications are not very well understood by the general membership, and men get nominated and ordained as elders simply because *they're really nice guys*. Now, do you want elders to be nice guys? Of course, but that elder must meet these qualifications -

- ***he must be able to teach*** and
- ***he must manage his family well in addition to all the other things listed here.***

⇒ Remember also, v1 here: **1 Tim. 3:1** This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he *desires a good work*.

⇒ Being an elder is work (as we will especially see when we look at Titus chapters 1 and 2 and the specific duties of the office, and it is a "good" work. **Calvin wrote:** "it is not any kind of work, but excellent, and therefore toilsome and full of difficulty, as it actually is. It is no light matter to be a representative of the Son of God, in discharging an office of such magnitude, the object of which is to erect and extend the kingdom of God, to procure the salvation of souls which the Lord himself hath purchased with his own blood, and to govern the Church, which is God's inheritance."

- There are many, I fear, willing to embrace the position and title of bishop or elder, but few want the *responsibility*.
- **Application:** It is no small thing, or light thing to becoming a ruling or teaching elder in Jesus' church.

2. A Godly Teacher - v2-3

[2] A bishop then must be blameless, - He must be a man against whom it would be very difficult to bring an accusation. Every man who is qualified for the office of elder has vices and sin in his life - but they must not be notorious or remarkable sins.

the husband of one wife, - The phrase here is literally: “one woman man.” There are some who misinterpret this passage to mean that a man cannot have a divorce in his past, but the passage does not address the man’s past with regard to marriage. The grammar of the passage makes such an interpretation *impossible*. The present tense is used: “A bishop must be blameless, **the husband of one wife...**”

John Calvin himself wrote: “Another other exposition has been more generally received, that the person set apart to that office must be one who has not been more than once married, that one wife being since dead, so that now he is not a married man. But both in this passage and Titus 1:6, the words of the apostle are, “Who is,” and not “Who hath been;””

Application: What is being condemned here is polygamy.

Illustration: The missionary in Cameroon who led a man to Christ who became a great man of God... he told us: “I want to train him to be an elder, and he wants to be an elder... but we can’t because he has three wives.”

Application: This is not saying that a man *must be married* to be an elder. The apostles themselves viewed themselves *also* as “elders” -

Peter, the apostle, himself wrote in inspired Scripture: 1 Peter 5:1 “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed...”

And yet, Peter was married, and Paul, though single, knew he had the right to be married if he so chose: 1 Corinthians 9:5 “Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?”

In a very helpful article on this particular elder qualification, I found the following which will close out my exposition of this particular qualification: “the husband of one wife:”

The only remaining question regards the general question of whether a divorced man should ever serve as an elder, *even if he has proven to be a present and faithful husband to his wife*. This matter is covered in Paul’s first qualification of 1 Timothy 3:2, “An overseer, then, must be *above reproach*.” Being above reproach means that there is nothing for which one can be accused or blamed; those things which could render a man as being validly accused of sinful behavior. He must not have a chargeable character; that is, he has an impeccable reputation. He lives his life in such a way that no one can accuse him of scandalizing the body of Christ in any way. This is the kind of man that, even with his critics, can find no fault in his character.

Another very important reminder is this: we must remember that the qualifications as listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are *present-tense* qualifications. The main evaluation of a man’s life must take place in the present, not in the past. Does this automatically mean that a man’s past actions have utterly no bearing on his present life? No. A man’s past could, in fact, render him as reproachable in some way. What ways could this be true? A man could be disqualified if his past divorce has continuing implications. For instance, a man who has had a divorce in his past (whether it is his pre-Christian past or his Christian past), might be rendered reproachable in the eyes of the congregation *if the man’s former spouse is in the same community as his local church, or in the same local church itself*. In some cases, this may mean he is not qualified to serve as an elder there. Another example is if his children from a previous marriage(s) are not believers or are a reproach to him in some way. This may also become a disqualifier.

temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior,

- level-headed, self-controlled, “having characteristics or qualities that evoke admiration or delight, an expression of high regard for pers., respectable, honorable”

⇒ The man qualified to be an elder is a man who is self-controlled and easy to admire for the overall way he conducts himself, his family, his work, and his life.

hospitable, - happily entertains strangers, fellow ministers, and fellow believers - is warm and welcoming toward people and is generally approachable and does not avoid contact with people. ⇒ In the historical context of the NT itself, this would have also referred to a willingness to give housing to exiled Christians from other lands. Especially in the first 3 centuries after Christ, there were many regional persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire... as a result of this, there were often displacements of Christians en masse from those areas. Leaders in the local church needed to be counted on to take them in and help them.

able to teach; - It is very important here that the qualified elder is **able to teach**. While this does entail a good storehouse of knowledge, it does not *only* entail this. It is **not enough** for someone to be very knowledgeable about the Bible and the doctrines it teaches, *although it is necessary that they have that knowledge*.

Illustration: I had a VHS tape when I was a young teenager called: "Big Blocks and King Sized Hits of the NFL" which I used to watch over and over again... One of the coaches they interviewed made a memorable comment about football players and hitting: "You can take a guy who is the meanest, toughest guy in the country, I mean this guy is really aggressive and really, really tough.... *but if he can't get over the line and hit anybody, he can't play.*"

Application: You can take a guy who is the nicest guy you've ever met and the most knowledgeable guy you've ever met. I mean, this guy has an undergrad degree in NT Greek, a Master of Divinity, and a PhD in Theology, *but if he can't open the Bible and teach it to people in a way they can understand and learn from, he can't be an elder.*

Application 2: Before you ever nominate anyone to this office, you must know beyond question that they do in fact understand our Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, and you have experienced yourself their **ability** to open the text of the Bible and teach what it says in such a way that those listening **learn**. And if you are not sure where he stands on the doctrines of our Confession of faith *do not nominate him until you do.*

[3] *not given to wine*, - They cannot be someone who is continually drinking or who has a problem with drunkenness. The consumption of alcoholic beverages is not sinful, but drunkenness is. He cannot be someone who "needs" a drink to get through the day, or who is addicted to wine.

Illustration: The very last question I was asked when I was examined on the floor of Westminster Presbytery was: "Do you know what PCA stands for?" And I said, "yes, the Presbyterian Church in America." And he said, "No. It's Pipes, Cigars, and Alcohol."

not violent, - pugnacious person, bully - bruiser, ready with a blow; a pugnacious, contentious, quarrelsome person.

Illustration: If you have to replace your cell phone every other month because you get angry and throw it against the wall, or if there are holes in the drywall at home because you get angry and punch holes in them, or if you are the kind of man who would be quick to physically intimidate someone if angered... then you would not be qualified.

not greedy for money, - someone who is covetous and therefore will take money dishonestly without shame. The KJV translates this as: "not greedy of filthy lucre"

but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; Here are 3 contrasts. The elder should *rather be*: Gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous. They are not fighters or violent, they don't start quarrels, and they are characterized by a general contentment of life that is *noticeable by others* - *i.e. they are not covetous*. **They are happy and content**. We often think of coveting as more of a

respectable sin, but it is very serious. Coveting is discontentment and a discontent individual is an individual **who struggles to trust God**.

Proverbs 15:18 A wrathful man stirs up strife, But he who is slow to anger allays contention.

Proverbs 26:21 As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, So is a contentious man to kindle strife.

⇒ **Important point to remember:** Having a willingness to stand up for the truth and fight for what is right *is not the same thing as having a violent or quarrelsome disposition*. In fact, as we will see next Sunday, the elder is commanded by the Word of God in:

Titus 1:9 “[A bishop is to always be] holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict (i.e. “refute”) those who contradict.”

⇒ **Can this man *defend* sound doctrine? Would the Jehovah’s Witnesses tie him up in a pretzel if they came knocking on the door, or would he be able to give them a hearty defense of the Trinity and the full Deity of Jesus Christ?**

⇒ **Could this man take a brand new Christian and teach them how to pray, walk them through the Confession of Faith and the catechisms, explain the basics of presbyterian church government, give a biblical defense of 6-day creation, the sovereignty of God, justification, adoption, and sanctification, the proper distinction between justification and sanctification, defend the Reformation Solas (Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Solus Christus, Sola Fide, & Soli Deo Gloria), etc.**

3. The Head of a Well-Run House - v4-5

[4] one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence

[5] (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?);

Point: Here we have the argument from the lesser to the greater. The qualified man must rule his own house well and have his children in submission with all reverence. The argument is that if he is unable to rule his own house, how can he hope to take care of the church?

What is a well-run house? It is a house where the father is the spiritual leader and shepherd of his wife and children if he has any. It is a house where the wife knows she is treasured and valued deeply and that her husband would willingly lay his life down for her at any time if need be. It is a place where the children obey and submit to their father’s authority and are respectful and reverent to him and his wife.

An illustration of the opposite would be Eli in 1 Samuel

1 Samuel 2:22-23 [22] Now Eli was very old; and he heard everything his sons did to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. [23] So he said to them, “Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all the people.

[24] No, my sons! For it is not a good report that I hear. You make the Lord’s people transgress.

1 Samuel 3:13 For I have told him that I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them.

The qualified man not only restrains his children, *but teaches and instructs them*. He takes to heart and seeks to live the commands of

Deut. 6:4-7 “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! [5] You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. [6] “And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. [7] You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

Application: The qualified elder takes very seriously the call of God upon him:

Ephes. 6:4 “And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.” **He does not abdicate this responsibility but *embraces it***

with joy and enthusiasm. He sees the ruling well of his family, loving his wife, and disciplining his children as his primary calling in life.

⇒ And this will be reflected in his children - are they obedient and reverent?

4. A Seasoned Veteran - v6

[6] not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil.

Point: You cannot have brand new converts as elders. There is no specific time-limit, but one of the primary reasons this is included is because of what Jesus taught about many who hear the Word of God:

Matthew 13:20-21 [20] But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; [21] yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.”

Application: Often we see a brand new professor of the faith and cannot help but be taken in by their zeal and joy - as this text says. But we must resist the temptation to put them immediately into leadership even if they do meet all the other qualifications.

Application 2: While we accept into membership anyone who makes a credible profession of faith, the bar is much higher for the elder because there is so much more at stake - this will be a man who teaches God’s people, who counsels them biblically, and who will be with them as their lives come to an end.

James 3:1 My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

Application 3: Pride is a terrible vice and one that elders *are not* immune from. If a new convert suddenly finds himself in a place where people look up to him and see him as their leader and shepherd, human weakness is such that we can so very easily become: **“puffed up with pride...” and “fall into the same condemnation as the devil.”**

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Make sure you understand these things - every individual member of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ must understand what their God has said about who is and is not qualified to shepherd them. I hope you will all take this to heart and make reviewing this passage - 1 Timothy 3:1-7 a regular part of your life!