

Selecting Shepherds to Guard the Flock

The New Testament uses three words¹ to describe the office of an elder or bishop. Each word carries a different aspect of the office. The word, “bishop,” describes the role of the shepherd as one who oversees the work of the church. Ultimately, responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the local church rests on their shoulders; thus they are in need of support and prayer. Perhaps you have noticed that the qualifications center on the character of the man instead of qualifications for fulfilling the office. God wants men of character and faith more than he wants men efficient in leadership or business. Yet, I would argue that these character traits make one successful in the secular world as well. Elders should be selected from men experienced in spiritual matters whose advice has proven true and whose life sets a spiritual standard within the congregation. Finally, the concept of shepherd or pastor suggests the nurturing aspect of the bishop. He leads us to safe pasture and feeds our souls on God’s righteous words. Thus, the primary role of the elder is much the same as Peter and the apostles who devoted themselves as they gave their “...*attention to prayer and the ministry of the word*” (Acts 6:4).

The New Testament always speaks of a plurality of elders. No bishop, or any man for that matter, ought to dominate the leadership of the local congregation. This collective reflects God’s nature. God, though three distinct personalities, remains one. Each personality plays a significant role in our salvation. Yet, more importantly, it is their agreement to save us that matters most. Agreement (or covenant) and reconciliation are powerful words in scripture. The Lord’s church must reflect the God we worship in its government, its execution and its life. The world comes to know God through us. We must strive to be like him so the world will know him more clearly.

What Is an Elder?

Episkopes (bishop, overseer)

This word stresses the solemn charge of these men to be responsible for the welfare of the flock.

Presbuteros (elder)

This term denotes greater age especially of men, referred to Jewish religious leaders, older men whom others sought out for advice and to have disputes settled

Poimen (shepherd, pastor)

Paul makes a clear distinction between a minister whose primary mission is to spread the good news and a shepherd or elder (Ephesians 4:11). The Bible pictures their role more as

¹ In Acts 20:17, 25-36; Paul uses three terms interchangeably in reference to the office of an elder.

a mentor/guardian for the congregation than a corporate head. Paul charges the Ephesian elders with guarding themselves and the flock (Acts 20:28-31). He committed them to God and the word of grace, which would be able to build them up (Acts 20:32).

What Are the Qualifications for Being an Elder?

The qualifications for the office of elder are listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. You will note that with the exception of being a good family man, and even this too involves character, that God wants men of good character and faithfulness in this office — not necessarily the more efficient and productive. God calls good men to work his will in this world. It is a test of character for each personally and a test of fidelity to God's word. When Jesus chose his apostles, he looked for humility and integrity—not prestige, power, success or even intellect. This is not to say these qualities are undesirable but subordinate to God's demand for men of good character and spirit. What follows is a translation of these two passages along with explanatory notes. Their contents (i.e., the translation and explanatory notes) are solely my responsibility, and I hope they will prove useful in your study of God's inerrant word on this matter.

1 Timothy 3:1-7

¹ Here is a faithful saying, "Whoever stretches himself out² for the office of bishop³ sets his heart on a good work." ² It is necessary, therefore, that a bishop be blameless⁴, the husband of one wife, clear-headed, prudent, respectable, a lover of strangers, skillful in teaching, ³ not addicted to wine, not a bully but gentle, peaceable, without greed, ⁴ one who takes care of his own house, having his children under control with all respectfulness ⁵ (For if someone does not know how to care for his own house, then how can he look after God's church?), ⁶ not a neophyte, so that he will not be swollen with pride and fall into the condemnation of the devil.⁷ It is necessary also that he has a good reputation with unbelievers⁵, so he does not fall into disgrace and the devil's trap [translation mine].

1 Timothy 3:1

- Here's a trustworthy saying: "Whoever stretches himself out for (or aspires to) the office of bishop (or overseer) sets his heart on a good work."
- Literally, the first phrase reads "Faithful is the word."
- Aspiring to the office of a bishop or elder involves two things: putting one's self on the line and preparing for a lifetime.

² Or aspires to be.

³ Or overseer.

⁴ I.e., his conduct is irreproachable

⁵ Or outsiders.

- The word for “sets his heart on” means to lust after the office of overseer. The object of the desire signifies whether the desire is appropriate or sinful. Intensely desiring to lead God’s people in God’s way should be commended, not shunned.

1 Timothy 3:2

- It is necessary, therefore, that a bishop (or overseer) be blameless (i.e., his conduct is irreproachable),
 - The word translates literally as not able to take hold of.
 - In other words, this is a man that cannot be touched by anything that even hints of ill or wrongdoing.
 - This means without indictment, unchangeable, without fault, above reproach (same word found in 1 Timothy 3:10, Titus 1:5).
- His behavior stands beyond reproach to a point that his life points to the importance that truth plays in his life.
 - He ever seeks to be loyal and true to his God, and his life is not open to blame or a charge of wrongdoing (1 Timothy 5:7).
 - No spot or blame can be detected in his life (1 Timothy 6:14).

...*husband of one wife,*

- The phrase literally translates to “one woman man.” The reference is probably directed at polygamy and the sense should be taken to mean “one wife at a time.”
 - Would this passage exclude a widower?
 - At what point would he be ineligible for the office of elder—when his wife died or when he remarried?
 - If a wife's death excludes one from this office, then so would the death of his children. Isn't the point that he is a successful family man?
 - If it is when he remarries, then we have failed to remember what Jesus taught in Matthew 22:23-33 (cf. Romans 7:2-3, 1 Corinthians 7:39).
 - Thus, the status of whether his wife lives ought not to disqualify him.
- Would it exclude someone who is scripturally divorced?
 - Taken in context with verse five, it would.
 - At the very least, a divorce indicates a breakdown in the family.
 - One cannot rule his own house well if his family is not intact.
- An elder’s entire life testifies to outsiders of God’s grace. Paul indicates that his testimony and status as a leader in God’s house is hindered if a man’s house is not in order. Let’s remember that this does not exclude this man from serving God in other vital roles within the church.

... *clear-headed*, (2 Tim 3:2, 11; Titus 2:2)

- This word literally means holding to no wine, clear-headed. His thinking is not clouded or befuddled by drugs, emotion or situation.
- In this context, the text suggests that the ideal candidate for the office of bishop thinks through problems thoughtfully and with a level head.

... *prudent*,

- This word connotes a person who is self-controlled, thoughtful and sensible.
- In context with temperance and not given to wine, this underscores that an elder is not given to drinking or a partygoer.
- More importantly, it points to his wisdom and advice as reliable and well thought out.
- The candidate for elder is to be rational without illusions: discrete, wise, modest and carries himself with proper decorum.

... *respectable*,

- This word suggests that a proper candidate for shepherd has an orderly, well-ordered demeanor, fulfills all his duties in an orderly manner, is disciplined; he is well behaved, honorable, respectable and full of propriety.
- The root of this word refers to the ordered whole of the cosmos and suggests that the whole of his life in general can be characterized as good.

... *a lover of strangers*,

- This word literally means lover of strangers (cf. 1 Peter 4:9f.).
- Having an open house is essential to good leadership. We must influence each other on a personal basis.

... *skillful in teaching*,

- This word is not properly translated in the NIV.
 - The word means a mastery of teaching or one skilled in teaching.
 - A teacher leads others to a clearer understanding of God's word and plays a vital role in the life of the church (cf. 2 Timothy 2:24).
- One of the Greek words for teacher is used fifty-one times in the New Testament. Forty-one times it is used of Jesus, twenty-nine times in direct address.
 - Since teachers play a significant role in the early church (see Hebrews 5:12, James 3:1, Ephesians 4:11), it seems fitting that elders are skillful teachers.
 - Thus, elders must possess knowledge of God, personal devotion to him and the means to express that commitment and knowledge to others persuasively and convincingly.

1 Timothy 3:3

...not addicted to wine,

- Literally, this phrase means one who does not sit long at his wine, and thus indicates one not addicted to wine or a slave to strong drink.
- The word also carries with it one not given to violence associated with drunken behavior.

...not a bully but gentle,

- An elder should not be a bully or a pugnacious man.
- He should not be a giver or striker of blows or violent; rather he must be even-tempered and persuade by example and not by threat.
- The word for gentle suggests a forbearing spirit and gentleness of speech.
- In essence this person is yielding, gentle, kind, equitable, lenient, and kind.

...peaceable,

- This word signifies someone who is peaceful not a quarreler, not contentious and lives without fighting.
- Elders initiate peace and foster a sense well being in the congregation.
- In standing for the truth, he does not seek to domineer.
- God's word dominates his life, and he must work to reconcile his life as well as the church to God's eternal standard.
- Ultimate peace comes from knowing God.

...not covetous,

- The term literally means "not a friend or lover of silver".
- In other words, greed and money do not provide the basis of motivation in this person's life. The candidate for bishop seeks higher ground.

1 Timothy 3:4

...one who takes care of his own house, having his children under control with all respectfulness,

- This word emphasizes caring for the house and literally means, "to stand before."
- Thus, one who manages his own house stands between his home and evil.
- Children are to be obedient, not because they must, but because their father has earned their admiration and respect, and they seek to please him for his love and care of them.

- This kind of obedience leads to their possession of dignity and stateliness that are the result from a well cared for house.

1 Timothy 3:5

(For if someone does not know how to care for his own house, then how can he look after God's church?)

- The question is rhetorical—what makes a good father and husband makes a good shepherd.
- The word “to care for” denotes an exercise of concern for the church.
- Thus the word indicates how elders are to manage the affairs of the church — not as authoritarian dictators, but as concerned fellow citizens of the kingdom.

1 Timothy 3:6

...not a neophyte, so that he will not be swollen with pride and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

- The word here for novice is the one from which we get neophyte. It was used of newly planted trees. Thus, an elder should be a veteran Christian like a well-established, stately tree.
- The phrase puffed up connotes the notion of being beclouded with pride or to wrap in smoke.

1 Timothy 3:7

It is necessary also that he has a good reputation with unbelievers, so he does not fall into disgrace and the devil's trap.

- It is necessary also that he has a good reputation with unbelievers, so he does not fall into disgrace and the devil's trap.
- An elder's life, family and reputation must testify to the Lord's presence.
- Nothing will hinder the growth of a church than to have leaders for whom the world has no respect.

Titus 1:5-9

⁵ *For this reason I left you in Crete so that you would finish setting in order elders, which was lacking in each city as I commanded you.* ⁶ *If someone is beyond reproach, the husband of one wife, believing children, not open to the charge of reckless living or disorderly conduct.* ⁷ *It is necessary for an overseer (or bishop) to be beyond reproach as a trustee of God, not arrogant, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not a bully, not greedy for material gain,* ⁸ *but a lover of strangers, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, self-controlled,* ⁹ *holding firm to the faithful word according to the teaching so that*

he may be powerful and urge in sound (or healthy) teaching and convince others of their fault who stand in opposition [translation mine].

Titus 1:5

For this reason I left you in Crete so that you would finish setting in order elders, which was lacking in each city as I commanded you.

- The reason Paul left Titus in Crete was fill in what was lacking.
 - Paul saw his task as being a church planter.
 - Part of this was due to the extreme opposition he often faced, but also due to his desire “to plow new ground” (see Romans 15:20).
 - Part of what the churches in Crete lacked was solid leadership.
- Paul commissions Titus to see that qualified men occupied the office of elder in every city on the island country.
 - Paul instructs Titus to ground the church in Crete to the point that these men can take the lead in healthy teaching⁶ so that the church will not fall away (Titus 1:10-2:10).
 - Paul further notes that their faith must be evident.
- A profession of knowing God must operate in concert with their good works (Titus 1:16).⁷
- Paul seems to indicate that lying and laziness were a normal part of Cretan culture; so he orders strict orders to put an end to such behavior quickly (Titus 1:12-13).

Titus 1:6

... If someone is beyond reproach, (same as 1 Timothy 3:2, see notes there)

...the husband of one wife, (same as 1 Timothy 3:2, see notes there)

... believing children,

Does “faithful” mean the children are Christians?

- The phrase translates literally as “children having faith.”
- Thus, the term would not demand them to be Christians, but once they have reached the age of accountability true faith would mean that they would become Christians.

What about children who fall away after they leave home?

⁶ Paul discusses the result of sound doctrine in Titus 2:1-10 and then goes on to outline its content in verses 11-15.

⁷ Paul draws a clear distinction between good works produced by a faithful heart turned to God and works of righteousness (i.e. works done to display one’s own righteousness instead of relying on God’s righteousness, cf. Matthew 6:1-4).

- While obviously it is more desirable that they should remain faithful, we must realize that each case should be taken individually.
- To use Proverbs 22:6 as our proof text will cause us great difficulty when we come to Proverbs 26:4-5.
- Faithful men must not neglect their families as they are doing the Lord's work.

Must there be two or more children?

- Scripture uses the term in a generic sense to include singular or plural. For instance, in Ephesians 6:1, we understand it to mean each child.
- Having only one child would not better qualify a man and his family for the office. If it would, God would have specified a specific minimum.
- In English usage of "children", when we ask, "How many children do you have?" no one responds "No!" when he or she has but one child. This is understood the same way in Greek as well.

... not open to the charge of reckless living or disorderly conduct.

- The first charge deals with the inability to save money to the point that one who wastes money on pleasure.
- The second charge deals with a person who is disorderly.
- This person is characterized by an independent, unruly, insubordinate, undisciplined spirit; and thus, will not subject himself to God's word.

Titus 1:7

... It is necessary for an overseer (or bishop) to be beyond reproach as a trustee of God,

- The bishop must be blameless, without indictment, unchangeable, without fault, above reproach (see Titus 1:6).
- The term steward refers to the management of family; in this case it involves the proper management and care of God's house.
- The word emphasizes the commitment of a task to someone and the responsibility involved.
- The story of Joseph captures the essence of the good steward who faithfully executes his duties even in the face of accusations taken at face value then turn out to be baseless only after time has proven him virtuous.

...not self-willed,

- Not obstinate to one's own opinion, arrogant, refusing to listen to others, does not assert one's own rights, not reckless in the feelings of others.
- There must be constant devotion to God's will in all matters.

...not quick-tempered,

- This is someone not inclined to anger, quick-tempered.
 - It differs from the bully in that the bully while quick-tempered is prone to violence.
 - The word here suggests a person prone to emotional outbursts.
 - The word here carries with the connotation of a habit.
 - Thus, occasional outbursts would not necessarily rule out the candidate.
- Even Jesus had emotional outbursts and even threatened bodily harm at the cleansing of the temple (John 2:13-17)

...not addicted to wine, (same as 1 Timothy 3:3)

...not a bully (i.e., given to violence, same as 1 Timothy 3:3)

...not greedy for material gain,

- The word suggests someone who makes money in a discreditable trade.
- It also suggests that one's motivation — the focus on material possessions — would hinder someone from carrying out the office of elder properly.

Titus 1:8

... but a lover of strangers, (same as 1 Timothy 3:2)

...a lover of goodness,

- This word means a friend to good and devotion to all that's best.
- It suggests a commitment to all that is pure, good and holy.

...prudent, (same as 1 Timothy 3:2)

...upright,

- This word means one who conforms to the standard, will or character of God and thereby stands in a right relationship with God.
- Along with the principle meaning of righteousness, the word also suggests someone who is fair, honest and innocent.

...devout,

- The word suggests someone who is devout, holy.
- It is one who pleases God and lives a virtuous life.

...self-controlled,

- The focal point of this word is self-discipline.
- This word also suggests a complete self-mastery, control passions and even loyalty to God's will.

Titus 1:9

... holding firm to the faithful word according to the teaching so that he may be powerful and urge in sound (or healthy) teaching and convince others of their fault who stand in opposition.

- In Titus, Paul tells us something of what the role of the elder/overseer involves.
 - The bishop's power comes from his careful attendance to God's word.
 - The passage suggests an intimacy with scripture (cf. Acts 6:4).
 - His power stems from proper application of the word to the life of the church as well as himself.
- The primary tool of the bishop for carrying out his duties is convincing and persuading others to hold to God's word through careful instruction.
 - This teaching brings health, wellness and soundness to the soul.
 - While persuasion is his principle tool, a bishop must be willing to take a strong stand against those who oppose the truth.

Conclusion

Perfect men do not exist but God does call his people to perfection and holiness. It is impossible for a church to rise above her leadership. Therefore, her leaders must commit to these ideals. No single man can live up to these standards completely. The question that must be asked is, "Whom among us would we seek solid spiritual advice from when we have questions on personal, scriptural or spiritual matters? Whom do we trust to set us on the path to follow God? Whom do we seek to follow because of the good example of his life?" No, he is not perfect, but he works hard for the cause of the kingdom. We cannot follow men whose spiritual lives we cannot respect or honor. Looking through the lens that Paul provides, who best meets these qualifications?

Leaders, once you have been selected, look carefully at these qualifications. What do you lack? Commit yourselves to working on these areas. Do not canonize your opinions into scripture but always seek to prove every matter by scripture. Stand boldly where the scripture speaks, be flexible in matters of opinion and tread carefully in all things. Protect the flock from false doctrine and guard her purity. Seek God's will not your own. Don the mind of the Spirit (Romans 12) and take on the attitude of Christ (Philippians 2:1-7).

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