

Choosing Elders - 1

1 Timothy 3:1-7

Choosing elders for a local congregation often becomes one of the most difficult, controversial, and sometimes divisive things a group of saints undertakes. When this is the case, it is usually linked to misunderstandings about the Scriptural qualifications given for congregational overseers. Such misunderstanding can result from a failure to adequately investigate those qualifications and how they relate to the work of elders. Or, it can come when brethren seek to ignore some qualifications or add some not given in the Bible.

Brethren often interpret the qualifications in such a way that the only outcome is an impossible standard--absolute perfection. Naturally, when people take this view, the church will continue to function without elders.

Occasionally, the opposite reaction occurs. Desperate to have elders, a congregation may ignore one or more qualifications so that a man or men may be appointed.

All such failures represent disrespect for God and His word. Failure to study what God has said about elders is sinful. Interpreting the Scriptural qualifications to exclude every human being is equally wrong. And it goes without saying that just ignoring what God has said will result in severe judgment.

So, what is the answer?

The Lord's list of prerequisites for an elder is found in two passages--*1 Timothy 3:1-7* and *Titus 1:5-9*.

These qualifications for leadership in the local church can be variously subdivided into "positive" and "negative." So, potential elders **must have** certain abilities and characteristics, and on the other hand, he **must not** possess certain characteristics that would undermine his ability to do the job of leading the congregation.

These qualifications are of two types--those that are definite or absolute; and those that are relative. Let me hasten to clarify. **I am not suggesting** that some qualifications must be met while others can be ignored. Rather, I am asserting that a small portion of the qualifications isn't subject to any human judgment. For example, a prospective elder either is or isn't a man (*1 Timothy 3:1; Titus 1:6*). And, corollary to that, he is either a husband or not; a father or not (*1 Timothy 3:2,4-5; Titus 1:6*).

As we read the qualifications, it is apparent that some do require a high degree of maturity in various aspects of Christian living. For example, an elder must be ***able to teach***. *1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9-10*. Among candidates for the office of Elder, these men may have this ability in varying degrees, yet all can be said to have met the qualification. One may be able to preach from the pulpit, teach on the radio, and lead large, public Bible classes. Another may be unable to do any of these things yet be able to teach individuals and small groups and refute false doctrine in less formal settings.

I also want to mention that most of the qualifications to be an Elder are also traits that every Christian should be working toward. Hospitality, sobriety, good behavior, proper child rearing, holiness, and perseverance in the word are duties of all Christians. Likewise, all saints are required to avoid violent behavior, greed, dissipation, insubordination, self-will, covetousness, and quick-tempered.

I've labeled these qualifications as "relative." While all Christians are obligated, as they mature, to "put on" the positive traits and "put off" those that are negative (*Ephesians 4:22-24*), not every Christian is mature. So, we see, in the qualifications to be an Elder, a man must not be a novice, which is a not-yet-mature Christian (*1 Timothy 3:6*).

Maturity and experience are the key ingredients.

A careful summary of the qualifications Paul set forth in his epistles to Timothy and Titus shows two that are essential in an elder. One is maturity.

All Christians should be working to achieve most of these traits, but many have not yet attained them. That is why Elders are to be "examples" to the flock among them (*1 Peter 5:3*). So, if elders possess the positive traits and have been successful in eliminating the negative traits, they serve as models for younger, less mature saints. By doing this they demonstrate to the less mature that these goals are attainable.

Further, the qualifications of being a successful husband and father address the need for experience in those who will lead others. This, again, is why an elder can't be a very young man or a novice. The home, in many ways, is a microcosm of the church. If a man learns to exercise his God-given authority in the home, in the manner that God intends, then he has the necessary experience to exercise similar authority in the larger context of the church. Paul said it this way, "*One who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?*" (*1 Timothy 3:4-5*)

This is crucial experience. God has given men the leadership over the home. Yet, a man can't exercise that authority through brute force or merely by demanding compliance with his orders. He must lovingly lead and guide his family, putting their needs before his own, teaching them that following his lead is God's will, not his own.

The parallel, I hope, is obvious. The authority of elders isn't like that of corporate chief executive officers or military generals. Everything a Christian man learns from leading his home is of direct usefulness in leading brethren in the local church.

Maturity vs. absolute perfection.

In Scripture, the word "perfect" is often used as a synonym for mature. But we tend to equate perfection to being without any flaw or sin. If we assume that the "relative" qualifications require a man to be, and to have always been, perfect, then the Scriptural traits set forth **can only exclude every potential candidate for the office of bishop.**

This approach at once ignores the fact already noted--that Christians, much like physical children, go through a maturation process. It isn't a sin to be a novice or to be a "babe in Christ" (*1 Corinthians 3:1; Hebrews 5:13; 1 Peter 2:2*).

Thus, what we are looking for are men who have attained a relatively high degree of maturity in each qualification. This calls for some judgment on the part of the congregation examining such men.

As noted earlier, a man must be able to teach. A judgment must be made, considering the local congregation's overall maturity and common-sense reasoning, whether a man has sufficient ability to teach, deal with false teachers, and help less learned members to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. To demand that he be a great orator is to demand more than God's word demands. His success, or lack thereof, in teaching and guiding his family is one place to look in assessing this qualification.

Cautions

It has already been stated, but deserves another reminder, that none of the qualifications given can be ignored or taken lightly. All the qualifications are "musts," as is made clear in *1 Timothy 3:7*.

No one qualification should be deemed more important than another. That said, it often is the case that one elder may have achieved more success in one area than another elder. And the second elder may have achieved a higher degree in a different qualification.

We should also understand that a man is to achieve these qualifications **before** the congregation appoints him to be an elder. A man shouldn't be ordained or appointed with the expectation that he will grow into the job. Souls are at stake. This is one of the most critical jobs in the world, so throwing an unprepared man into it not only harms him, but untold others.

Most congregations find they have a few "nearly qualified" men. But all too often, the lacking qualification has to do with the experience of successfully guiding the home. Sadly, when a man's children are grown, he can't go back and redo the job. So, there is a great need for emphasizing to young people in the Lord's church, the character traits that make a spiritually mature Christian--whether man or woman. These are also the traits that qualify a man to be an elder. If a young man and woman who marry give little thought to raising children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, it is unlikely that the young man will be elder material when he is older. He may have all the moral and spiritual characteristics demanded, but he won't have the experience needed to guide a local church.

Conclusion

When we look at the qualifications for elders, we see that they involve the totality of a man's experience, reputation, domestic relations, character, habits, knowledge, and capacity to teach others.

When a man possesses these traits to a high degree, you have before you a spiritually mature Christian man that God says should oversee His people in the church.

And this is the man God desires to lead His people.