

ELDERS & DEACONS

**A Thirteen Lesson Bible Study
by Jeff S. Smith**



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8. What does it mean to have one's children in submission (Ephesians 6:1-4, Colossians 3:20-21)? How could you tell that a man meets this qualification?

9. What damage could a covetous man do to the church as an elder? How can we tell that he is or is not covetous?

10. If our elders are "not quarrelsome," does this mean they will avoid every conflict and quarrel (Romans 12:17-18, Jude 4, Proverbs 26:17)? Explain.

11. Does "blameless" mean that a man has never sinned or does not now even sin on occasion? What does it mean to be blameless (First John 1:7-9)?

12. An elder must be able to teach. List some ways in which he can show this aptitude.

13. What damage could a busybody elder's wife or deacon's wife do (Proverbs 11:13, First Timothy 5:13)?

14. Must deacons have the same family qualities as elders? Can you see how deacons today could provide the same sort of relief for elders and preachers that these seven gave the apostles? Explain.

Introduction

When Paul wrote Titus, an evangelist working on the island of Crete in the seventh decade of the first century, he reminded the young man that he was there to set in order things that were lacking and appoint elders in every city. While a church may exist for a time without appointed overseers, such a situation will always expose the need to ordain elders and deacons as soon as is scripturally possible. Appointing elders and deacons can be a difficult proposition, fraught with all sorts of potential pitfalls. Appointing them can be the most divisive thing a church ever does if egos and attitudes are not checked at the door. Ideally, however, appointing elders and deacons should be the most unifying thing a church ever does, eliminating the stopgap measure of the business meeting in favor of the wisely scriptural method.

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Lesson 13: *Review*

1. Who makes elders (Acts 20:17-28)? How (Ephesians 6:17)? What are some limitations to their authority (First Peter 5:1-4)?

2. What should the preacher do (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5)? What does he need to beware? What principles of selection are developed in Acts 6:1-7?

3. What is the danger of enforcing my traditional viewpoints on elder qualities rather than the simplicity of Scripture (Matthew 15:1-14, Third John 9-10)?

4. Is “pastor” synonymous with “elder,” “preacher,” or no other office? What aspect of the work is described by the term “pastor”?

5. For what are elders to watch (Acts 20:28-31)? What are they to provide (First Peter 2:2, Hebrews 5:12-14)?

6. What is the minimum scriptural age for the eldership? Can I enforce my opinions, traditions or comfort levels on the church or others?

7. Why do some cling to the business meeting arrangement and resist the appointment of qualified elders?

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does Paul mean in First Thessalonians 5:12 when he instructs the flock to “recognize” those who rule over them?
2. Describe some ways in which close relationships can be developed between shepherds and the flock.
3. What attitudes and actions disrupt the peace of the local church?
4. Under what circumstances would a church support its elders financially?
5. In times of accusation, do the elders deserve an extra measure of respect and benefit of the doubt, or do they deserve less? Explain. Can an elder sin and continue to serve? What is the preacher’s job in such cases?
6. How do we go about following the faith of our elders (Hebrews 13:7, Philippians 3:7-17, First Peter 5:1-4)? Are elders infallible once appointed?
7. What report will elders give to God on Judgment Day (Hebrews 13:17)?
8. How long should we wait when sick for the elders to come (James 5)?

Lesson 1: *The Role of the Congregation*

Because every church of Christ is autonomous and the only authority higher than that of elders is Christ himself, local congregations have the responsibility of appointing their own overseers. No regional committee exists to make such a mandate, but instead, it is the Holy Spirit who makes elders (Acts 20:28). He does not accomplish this task by casting lots, but by magnifying the qualities necessary to the office and challenging disciples to identify men from among them who fit.

Gospel preachers have a special role in the appointment of elders, although they have no right to appoint them unilaterally. In addition to giving the list of qualities to Timothy, Paul left Titus on Crete to “set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city” (1:5). Paul’s own custom, along with Barnabas, was to return to places where churches had been planted to appoint elders in every church (Acts 14:23). The word “presbytery” (First Timothy 4:14) indicates that elderships always consisted of a plurality of men of equal responsibility over that flock.

A principle developed in the church’s earliest days helps to establish the role of the congregation in appointing its officers. Before the office of elder was created, the apostles led the church at Jerusalem alone and when they caught wind of a problem in the congregation regarding a daily distribution to widows, they called for the appointment of seven men to serve the ladies’ tables (Acts 6:1-7). “Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation.” With the preacher’s encouragement, the congregation itself can seek out men to shepherd it as well.

As the congregation prepares to enter into a new age of submission to pastoral oversight, it must do so with humility and godliness. The time is ripe for hurt feelings, suspicions and careless whispering. Instead, we should resign ourselves to doing God’s will selflessly and honestly.

Some of the qualities that Paul enumerates have been the source of endless controversy, usually as some try to impose their own viewpoints on top of the simple scripture, building a hedge around it to make themselves comfortable. Some of the qualities are absolute—for example, a man is either married or he is not. Others, however, are matters of degree. Teaching aptitude, for instance, may be great or little, but still apt. We must be prepared to accept that a man can have the quality, but imperfectly.

Loyalty to tradition can be an impediment to an objective consideration. Many hedges around the law have been developed through the years that attempt to encapsulate the simple scripture in an extra protective field, but we have no right to add anything to God’s commands (Matthew 15:1-14, Third John 9-10).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who makes elders? How does he do it? What are some limitations to their authority?
2. How should the church's preacher exercise his role? What does he need to beware?
3. What principles of selection are developed in Acts 6:1-7?
4. Do you think that the appointment of elders can be an occasion for hurt feelings, gossip and the destruction of congregations? Why? How can all this ugliness be avoided, without giving up ordaining elders altogether (Philippians 2:1-11, First Peter 5:5-8)?
5. How hospitable must a man be to serve as an elder? How apt to teach must he be? How long must he have been a Christian so that he is no longer a novice? Can you see that most of these qualities have some relativity built into them and it is up to the church to decide if each man has them?
6. What is the danger of enforcing my traditional viewpoints on elder qualities rather than the simplicity of Scripture (Matthew 15:1-14, Third John 9-10)?

Lesson 12: *The Church's Duty To Them*

The flock must respect them (First Thessalonians 5:12-13a). Beyond simply knowing the elders by face or name (Hebrews 13:24), we are to recognize their sacrifice on our behalf, to empathize with the anguish and tears they sometimes feel on our behalf. Close, trusting relationships need to develop; elders should be viewed respectfully as one looks at his own father.

The flock should strive to be at peace (First Thessalonians 5:13b). Disciples of Christ should naturally be drawn toward peace, but often they are not. There are times when peace is shattered by false doctrine, and in those occasions, disharmony is unavoidable, but what of the times when discord is entirely motivated by sin and selfishness? No congregation will enjoy uninterrupted peace and some disharmony is necessary to fend off the tempter, but as much as depends on us, we should strive to be at peace. Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to deal with it effectively.

The flock should support them (First Timothy 5:17-18). In certain instances, it may become advantageous to support financially an elder who labors in the word and teaching. If an overseer is so dedicated to teaching the gospel that holding down a secular job would interfere with his effectiveness, he may scripturally be paid for his labor just as the preacher is (First Corinthians 9:9-11).

The flock should be reluctant to accuse them (First Timothy 5:19-22). Although we are to respect our elders, they do not become cult leaders who are above error or question. As Paul intimates, often accusations against the elders will be laid at the preacher's feet and he will have to deal with them. If at least two witnesses cannot substantiate the accusation against an elder, it cannot even be entertained. When an accusation against an elder is fully substantiated, the preacher must rebuke him publicly.

The flock should follow them (Hebrews 13:7). We should always remember how and why we appointed these men in the first place; they met the qualities determined by the Holy Spirit and so we asked them to rule over us. As much as they follow Christ and the apostles' doctrine, we are bound likewise to follow them down the road to glory (First Peter 5:3).

The flock should obey them (Hebrews 13:17). Elders will have to give an accounting to God, not only of their own lives, but also of the stewardship they occupied as congregational shepherds. Losing sheep will detract from their record and mar their stewardship; our love for them should motivate us to want to make their tenure as enjoyable as possible.

The flock should call for them (James 5:14-16). Whether our need is primarily physical or spiritual, we should feel at ease to call upon the elders to pray for us and to consider our problem. Elders are neither omniscient nor omnipresent, but good ones will come when called.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The seven men appointed by the Jerusalem church in Acts 6 are called servants, a term closely connected to the office of deacon that developed after elders were appointed first. What were the circumstances of these men's appointment? What focus did the apostles want to maintain?

2. Can you see how deacons today could provide the same sort of relief for elders and preachers that these seven gave the apostles? Explain.

3. Besides the delivery of money, how might deacons come to the aid of widows (First Timothy 5:3-10)?

4. What might deacons do for orphans or those without a father?

5. In what ways can you envision deacons being involved with the church's treasury?

6. What might deacons do around the meetinghouse in their role?

7. Can you imagine situations in which deacons might be tempted to overstep their role and begin exercising too much authority?

Lesson 2: *The Work of Elders*

“Elder” may sound like an honorary position bestowed upon the aged, but in reality it is a work that requires much time and energy. Those men who desire the office should understand what they are getting themselves into, because as stewards of God's house, they are fully accountable for their effort or lack thereof.

As we consider the office that we usually call the eldership, we find five English words being used to translate only three Greek words, but they all refer to the same position within the local congregation:

- *presbuteros* (πρεσβυτερος) is rendered “presbyter” or “elder”
- *episkopos* (επισκοπον) is translated “bishop” or “overseer”
- *poimenas* (ποιμενας) is translated “pastor”

The aspect of the work emphasized by the word “elder” has to do with the benefits of their experience in life and as Christians. They are qualified to lead the flock by example because they have trodden the same road themselves and can offer direction based on many years of observation and education at the hands of life. Elders lend their wisdom to the flock, many of whom will be too young to have much of their own.

We learn in Acts 20 that “pastor” is synonymous with “elder” (20:17-18, 25-31). The Ephesian elders were the ones ordered to shepherd, or “pastor” the flock among them. The work of shepherding is equal parts provision and protection—providing the milk and meat to sustain and strengthen the flock while watching out for its welfare in light of the grievous wolves that threaten it with error, greed, and hidden malice.

Unlike bachelor Paul, Peter was himself an elder (First Peter 5:1-4). Inspired by the same Holy Spirit, Peter tells his fellow elders to shepherd the flock among them, serving them as examples of good behavior. Elders must serve willingly, honestly and selflessly, not in an attempt to add to their resume, score points with the Lord or to go on power trips. They are shepherds, serving beneath a glorified Chief Shepherd, shepherding his flock, and should care for it with the same diligence and compassion.

To summarize, the elders' work is described as:

- Providing the wisdom and example of a seasoned Christian to all
- Visiting those in spiritual and physical need
- Feeding the flock spiritually nutritious milk and meat of the word
- Protecting sheep from tempters and false teachers by watching
- Serving selflessly, not for selfish gain or power
- Ruling the church as a father rules the house
- Exhorting believers
- Convicting gainsayers

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What two English words for this office come from *presbuteros*? What two English words come from *episkopon*? What comes from *poimen*?
2. What is the connotation of calling this office “elder”? What is one of their responsibilities, according to James 5:14?
3. Is “pastor” synonymous with “elder,” “preacher,” or no other office? What aspect of the work is described by the term “pastor”?
4. For what are elders to watch (Acts 20:28-31)? What are they to provide (First Peter 2:2, Hebrews 5:12-14)?
5. What kind of dishonest gain could motivate some men to seek the office of elder (First Peter 5:1-4)?
6. How do we distinguish between elders who “lord it over the flock” and those who rule “as examples to the flock”?
7. What must elders do for those who dabble in error (Titus 1:9-14)?

Lesson 11: *The Work of Deacons*

The specific duties of the deacons are determined by the elders who oversee the congregation and direct its program of evangelism, edification and benevolence. Their work will be primarily to see to physical needs.

The deacons' place is in submission to the eldership (Hebrews 13:17). They are not to take the oversight of the church upon themselves or to institute any effort without the consent of their overseers. They will regularly meet with the elders in the process of their service together, and may often make suggestions, but they will never step out of their role as servants to become shepherds (First Peter 5:2).

Acts 6 tells of the selection of seven men whose role as servants is typical of the office of deacon. These men were chosen by the church and assigned specific duties. We can glean from this that the deacons are responsible for ministering to the physical needs of the church so that her bishops and teachers might remain focused upon the spiritual ministry of the word. As Acts 6 makes plain, physical concerns can divide and cripple a church; deacons ensure that no one is neglected or left to suffer in need.

Special attention should be given to the church's widows, so that they are shown respect and not neglected. Some widows will need help in their homes, with meals, with the upkeep of their yards and houses, with the administration of their finances, with trips to the grocery store, pharmacy, doctor and elsewhere.

Special attention should also be given to any that might be orphaned in the church. A deacon might be especially helpful if a young person has lost his or her father. The deacon might ensure that this loss is softened by promises to stand in whenever necessary.

Deacons can serve the elders and the church by taking care of the church's physical property as well. They can see to it that the meetinghouse is in good repair and always prepared for assemblies. Likewise, they can take care of the grounds, that the yard might always reflect a diligent and vigilant group of people.

Since deacons are to be free of greed, they should be trusted to handle the treasury of the church. They may count the weekly contribution and see to the deposit of the funds. The elders will determine how the money is spent, in the Lord, but the deacons may do much of the actual purchasing of supplies for the church's use in teaching and maintenance.

Deacons may take care to maintain the tract rack found in many meetinghouses. While the elders determine which tracts are there, the deacons may arrange their purchase and ensure that the rack is neat and filled.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Consider the definition of “deacon.” Why is humility such an important factor in all the listed qualities just because of this definition?
2. Deacons tend to be younger than the elders and so the quality of reverence may take on increased meaning. Must a reverent deacon be stiff and unpleasant? How does he show his reverence?
3. What is double-tongued? Why do we not want a double-tongued deacon?
4. Is it okay if the deacon has a little nip of liquor every once in a while? Why or why not (compare Acts 6:1-7 to Ephesians 5:15-21)?
5. What duties might a deacon perform that would make greed dangerous?
6. Because their work is not on the same spiritual level as the elders, is it all right to appoint men of questionable convictions as deacons? Why not?
7. Must deacons have the same family qualities as elders?

Lesson 3: *Necessary Qualities: Age*

Intrinsic to the term “elder” is the concept of age and yet the word is entirely relative. What is “elder” to some is not “elder” to others and our assessment of age varies by generation based on life expectancy. Because the Scriptures do not legislate a minimum age, we must be careful not to press our own opinions as if they did. God proved that he knows how to designate minimum ages when he ruled that widows had to be 60 years old in order to be considered for a list of ongoing support (First Timothy 5). No such mandate exists for the elder. While there is an obvious reference to age in the term “elder,” just how much age will be defined relatively by the congregation without resorting to a stance on tradition and opinion (Phillips 294).

In the language context of the first century, the term elder was more often applied to members of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Roman Senate or to leaders of Jewish synagogues. It is important to remember that as Paul and Peter are being inspired to use these words, they would have understood them within the context of normal use in their own era. Archaeological research indicates that the Qumran community, whose roots were thoroughly Jewish, existed close to the apostolic period and set 30 as their minimum age to serve as an elder in the group (Glasscock). Historian Merrill C. Tenney likewise contends that 30 was the minimum to sit as an elder on the Jewish Sanhedrin (Lugt, De Haan).

A 30-year-old elder would be shocking to us today because life expectancy in America is approaching 80 years. Such a thing would invite comparisons with the absurd Mormon eldership in which teenage boys are granted all of the title with few of the qualities and none of the responsibilities. Life expectancy in the apostolic age, however, was far lower than it is today. “During the Roman Empire, Romans had a [sic] approximate life expectancy of 22 to 25 years. In 1900, the world life expectancy was approximately 30 years” (*Life Expectancy*).

Because the word “elder” is so relative, we must be careful not to impose our concepts onto the Scriptures, just to make ourselves more comfortable. The actual qualities listed by the Holy Spirit do better in establishing what it takes to be “elder.” Specifically, “not a novice,” “husband of one wife,” and “having faithful children” all advance the minimum well beyond the teenage Mormon boys and our own young men.

Some would suggest a minimum of 45 while others would contend for 50 or 60. In some eras and parts of the world, few would live long enough to qualify. While we would never contend for young elders, we must be humble and forbearing enough to recognize that our opinions are not binding. If the Scriptures are satisfied, we ought to be as well.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the minimum ages for the following:
 - a. Baptism:
 - b. Marriage:
 - c. Widows indeed:
 - d. Preacher:
 - e. Eldership:
2. How might life expectancy affect our perspective on what it takes to be considered an “elder” person?
3. What groups evidently had a minimum of 30 years old to qualify as an elder?
4. What is the problem with Mormons appointing teenage boys to be elders?
5. How do the following qualities help to ensure that elders will reach a certain degree of age before they can be appointed?
 - Not a novice:
 - Husband of one wife:
 - Having faithful children:
6. Why do I not have the right to enforce my own opinion about a minimum age upon other people, the entire congregation or even other congregations (First Peter 4:11, Matthew 15:1-15, First Peter 1:25)?

Lesson 10: *Qualities of Deacons*

The word “deacon” derives from the Greek word "diakonos," meaning "one who executes the commands of another, especially of a master; a servant, attendant, minister." In the church, a deacon is appointed to minister to the congregation under the direction of the overseers. It becomes clear that a deacon must be a humble man and one able to follow instructions industriously and faithfully. His qualities are in First Timothy 3:8-13.

A deacon must be reverent. Although they are often younger and less experienced than elders, that does not permit them to be irreverent, unable to handle serious matters with a sense of gravity. When a widow is in need, it is no joking matter to her and when elders have directed some relief, it ought to be authoritative to the deacon. A deacon must not be the kind of man who would disrupt Bible classes and the solemnity of worship with foolishness or selfishness.

A deacon must be not double-tongued. He must be reliable and trustworthy; his word must be his bond. When he promises to do something or be somewhere, he will perform. He will not be the kind of person who says one thing to one person and something different to another, so as to protect himself and avoid controversy.

A deacon must be not given to much wine. Literally, this means that he cannot be addicted to strong drink, but does it allow him to imbibe a little socially or even a lot every once in a while, unlike the elder who must be a teetotaler? As the elders were forbidden to come under an addiction to intoxicants, so the deacons are as well, for much watered-down wine was required to achieve inebriation.

A deacon must be not greedy for money. Deacons are often put in charge of funds for widows and the needy and must be trusted not to mispend the money or skim it for personal use. Some are entrusted with making deposits and writing checks and filing forms and must be reliable and honest or the church could be ruined.

A deacon must hold the mystery of faith with a pure conscience. Deacons must be stable as regards the Christian faith. False teachers and weak men do not qualify for they may mislead those they are to help or abandon them altogether.

A deacon must be proven blameless. Potential deacons must be examined against these scriptures and if found to meet the qualifications, they may be appointed. They may not be appointed with the understanding that we hope they will grow into the qualities, but must have them first.

A deacon must be the husband of one wife and rule his children and house well, although no caveat about “faithful children” is added.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why must we take a look at the wives of potential elders and deacons before appointing them? Is it really possible that we could disqualify a man based solely on the behavior of his spouse?
2. We generally counsel couples not to keep secrets from each other. Can you envision scenarios in which an elder would need to keep secrets from his wife in his capacity as an overseer? Explain.
3. Explain how a woman could show us that she is reverent, or respectful.
4. What damage could a busybody elder's wife or deacon's wife do (Proverbs 11:13, First Timothy 5:13)?
5. What does it mean that she must be temperate (cf. First Peter 3:1-6)? What kind of attitudes or behaviors would ruin a temperate manner?
6. What does it take to be "faithful in all things"?
7. In the faith, can a woman have authority over a man (First Timothy 2:8-15)? How is it possible for a woman to take this authority behind the scenes?

Lesson 4: *Necessary Qualities: Desire*

As part of the congregation, the candidate for the eldership must desire the office. Because of the lack of suitable men, many congregations have become far too comfortable with the stopgap business meeting arrangement in the interim. Some men who are unqualified enjoy having much of the power and influence of the office and feel that an ordained presbytery would destroy that. It would. This is the same attitude that kept many leading Jews from accepting Christ in the first century—a threat to their power. Every Christian should desire that the church have a qualified, appointed eldership.

"This is a faithful saying: 'If a man desires the office of a bishop, he desires a good work'" (First Timothy 3:1). It is a good work, filled with joy and reward, but also mixed with sadness, difficulty and even disappointment. Some doctors bring people into the world and others watch them leave; some do both. Elders will likewise participate spiritually in both aspects of life. Some souls will be saved and some will be lost. Watching the sheep struggle, progress and regress, can be both taxing and fulfilling. Pastoring the local congregation is a good work because it strengthens God's flock until Christ returns. Put plainly, it is very likely that good elders can sustain some saints who would be lost otherwise. Business meetings and preacher-dominated churches are far less effective at doing that.

Some desire the office, but for self-serving motives. They seek the prestige and power that can accompany it. As some men seem to want to be President too badly, some men want to be an elder for what they can get out of it, not what they can put into it for others. The elder ambition should be fed by humility, selflessness and dedication (Galatians 6:1-5). Elders are not "lords over those entrusted to" them, but examples (First Peter 5:3).

Some otherwise qualified men do not desire the office because they are exaggerating their own faults or anticipating the thankless work that it will involve. Really, no service to God should seem burdensome (First John 5:3) or thankless (First Peter 5:4, Luke 17:7-10, Colossians 3:23-24).

Still, no man without the desire can be compelled to serve, for he must lead willingly and eagerly (First Peter 5:2). Perhaps some men will react to the congregation's invitation with reluctance. Moses was reluctant to lead Israel and Jeremiah was slow to accept his role as prophet. There is nothing unseemly about a little persuasion and contemplation. The office is not without its challenges and heartbreaks, but as every flock needs a shepherd, every church needs overseers. The desire to see the congregation thrive and its members grow spiritually and numerically ought to help overcome initial misgivings about desire.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do some cling to the business meeting arrangement and resist the appointment of qualified elders?
2. What dangers would befall a flock of sheep out in the country if it were without shepherds for a prolonged period of time? How do these dangers parallel the local church when it does not have pastors in place?
3. What are some of the rewards that make “elder” a good work?
4. What are some of the hardships that make “elder” a hard work?
5. Why are preacher-dominated churches and those with business meeting leadership less effective than those with appointed elderships?
6. How can desire for the office turn ugly?
7. What should we do for a qualified man who reacts reluctantly at first when we ask him to lead us?

Lesson 9: *Wives of Elders and Deacons*

There is no church office known as “Elder’s Wife” any more than there is an office for “Preacher’s Wife” and we are not appointing an elder’s wife to any particular work. At the same time, her character will either support or interfere with her husband’s oversight of the church. Likewise, the spouses of deacons must be living testimony that our candidate for the office has shown himself capable at home.

The elder’s wife will especially be privy to information that would make for juicy gossip but which must remain secret; her husband will even keep many things about the flock a mystery from her and she must accept that without prying. To many, she will represent the best the church has to offer in the way of godly women, and if she proves a poor example, she will bring even graver dishonor to the body. In the midst of his discussion of deacons, the apostle Paul stops to comment upon their wives and it would seem odd if the wives of elders were not to be regulated by these words as well:

- Wives must be reverent (respectful).
- Wives must not be slanderers (not given to gossip, etc.).
- Wives must be temperate (mild-mannered and meek).
- Wives must be faithful in all things (trustworthy and believing).

In short, they must be worthy women (Proverbs 31) and daughters of Sarah (First Peter 3:1-6). They must be poised someday to be widows indeed and not like the other category (First Timothy 5:3-15). If she openly disrespects her husband in speech or behavior, if she is found whispering in the parking lot about what she has overheard, if she reverses the headship of the home, if she is unreliable and given to sin, her husband is unqualified to serve based on her character alone. If she is meek and mild, trustworthy and respectful, she has enhanced his ability to shepherd the flock without bringing reproach on him or it.

The popularity of the radical women’s movement has changed Americans’ attitudes about gender roles. Many denominations are appointing women to positions of authority over men, in violation of the New Testament (First Timothy 2:8-15). While few churches of Christ are so bold, there are instances in which women are exercising unjust authority behind the scenes, henpecking husbands in the business meeting and exerting undue influence when wed to elders. While our culture may reject God’s wisdom in the leadership of the home and the church, it is not ours to question and amend. If we recognize that a man’s home is not being managed scripturally, it ought to be obvious that installing him in the presbytery would have the same results for the church.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does “blameless” mean that a man has never sinned or does not now even sin on occasion? What does it mean to be blameless (First John 1:7-9)?
2. Is it possible to be holy (First Peter 1:13-16)? What is the difference between “holy” and “holier than thou”?
3. An elder must be able to teach. List some ways in which he can show this aptitude.
4. What role may his teaching aptitude play once appointed (Titus 1:9-11)?
5. How many years does it take for a man to be no longer a novice? What does it take to show that he is no longer a novice (Hebrews 5:12-14)?
6. Elders must be just and impartial. How can money or family relationships interfere with his impartiality?
7. In what way are elders stewards (First Peter 5:1-4)? Will men make good elders who have shown signs of treating the church as Diotrephes did (Third John 9-11)? Why or why not?

Lesson 5: *Necessary Qualities: Family*

There are many proving grounds to judge success in life—school, business, the athletic field—but none of these has anything to do with whether or not a man will do well as a bishop in Christ’s church.

Only one field of endeavor is any reliable indicator at all and that is the one that our society has learned to overlook in an age of fracturing families. The candidate for the eldership must be a proven family man.

“A bishop then must be ... the husband of one wife ... one who rules his household 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?)” (First Timothy 3:2-5). The parallel passage in Titus clarifies that he must have “faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination” (1:6). “Children” includes the singular; one is enough.

It is because the local congregation so closely imitates a nuclear family that this quality of home leadership must be present in our elders. Paul says, “I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of living God” (15).

A man cannot be a bachelor or a polygamist and serve as an elder, although he could be the former and still be faithful. A bachelor has never overseen a house and gives no indication how he would oversee the church. A polygamist, in the traditional sense or via unscriptural remarriage, is hardly fit to be an example to the flock since he is in sin himself.

He must have ruled his house well. Two extreme interpretations of this quality have emerged. Some hold that all or most of a man’s children must still be at home so that we can judge him. Others hold that all of his children must be grown and gone from the home. The Scriptures require neither, but that we can look at him presently and determine that he has led ruled them well, even if they are still works in progress toward adulthood. The verse itself is in the present tense.

Obviously, we cannot expect that his children will be flawless and perfect. But when they have erred, has he chastened them and do they generally toe the line of good behavior? Because his adult children have established their own sovereign homes, we cannot expect the elder candidate to exert the same authority over them as when they were at home.

The fact that he must have believing children causes him to wait for appointment until they are mature enough to make that choice. Brethren have differed through the years over whether all his children must be Christians and what impact later apostasy should have on his record. Again, we must remember to apply the Scriptures in their simplicity and without imposing our own comfort level upon them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why might we be tempted to consider a man's prowess in school, business or athletics when appointing elders? Can you think of some other attributes or achievement that we will need to resist considering?

2. An elder must be the husband of one wife. Whom does this disqualify? Whom does it not disqualify? Think harder!

3. What does it mean to have one's children in submission (Ephesians 6:1-4, Colossians 3:20-21)? How could you tell that a man meets this qualification?

4. Do the Scriptures require either that all a man's children be grown and gone or that all of them still be at home (First Timothy 3:4-4)? Consider notable fathers like Eli and Samuel (First Sam. 3:11-14, 8:1-9); how did God judge them differently when each had sons who failed? How do God's children reflect upon him (Isaiah 1:1-2)?

5. What impact might a man's adult children have upon his fitness to serve as an elder? How is he limited as they establish their own homes?

6. Who are faithful children? How many must he have?

Lesson 8: *Necessary Qualities: Integrity*

Some aspects of the elder's character cannot be fully developed until he is a faithful and mature Christian. To the flock, he will exemplify what it means to be a disciple of Christ and to undertake the duty that goes along with it.

He is blameless or holy (First Peter 1:13-16). This is not the arrogant "holier-than-thou" attitude that some Christians possess as a form of self-righteousness, but rather a holiness that comes from quietly doing right and praying that others truly might follow God. Is it possible to live perfectly, without a single blemish—no, for all sin and fall short of God's standard (Romans 3:23). One that lives blamelessly is he who doesn't let a stain on his soul remain (First John 1:7-9).

He is able to teach. There are lots of ways to teach. Beyond the sermon and Bible class are the private studies that can yield much fruit. An elder must have the knowledge of God's will, the desire to share it and the ability to sow the seed. He must be able to teach beyond his own family, for the work he undertakes will involve convicting the gainsayer and insubordinate.

He is not a novice. Inherent in the word "elder" is the concept of experience, not that experience beats wisdom and knowledge, but that the latter two are gained and honed by use. A novice cannot help being a novice at first, but his goal ought to be growth (Hebrews 5:12-14). The only thing worse than no eldership is an unqualified one and even a Christian of fifty years must prove that he has grown beyond spiritual infancy.

He is just, or fair and impartial. An elder is not a judge and yet he must make judgments that affect the entire flock. It is of capital importance that he be a fair-minded and impartial man, even though his own children, wife and closest friends may wind up on the short end of his decision. An elder who practices arbitrary marking and withdrawal, based on these considerations is unjust and unfit to serve. Likewise an elder who can be swayed by the aura of a large contributor's pocketbook or threats of departure is not fit to serve (James 2:1-4). An elder who is hen-pecked and the mere tool of his wife is not fit.

He is blameless as a steward of God. Paul uses the axiom in First Corinthians 4:2: "Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful." Elders are stewards of God's flock; Jesus is the Chief Shepherd. One day, an elder will stand before God and be made to give an account of the stewardship that the Holy Spirit entrusted to him in these qualifications we have studied (Hebrews 13:17). In their stewardship of the blessings of God prior to appointment, they must be blameless and more so after. God has blessed us all so richly with the knowledge of truth; of that kernel of grace, we are stewards and we must be found faithful.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to be hospitable? List some practical examples.
2. How does the Hebrew writer sweeten the concept of hospitality (13:1-2)? How can an elder (or anyone) ruin his hospitality (First Peter 4:7-11)?
3. What could possibly tempt an elder to resort to violence? Can you name an elder who did resort to violence, although before he was appointed?
4. We ask our elders both to stop the mouths of false teachers and to be gentle with babes in Christ. What guidance does he gain in First Thessalonians 5:14 and Jude 22-23?
5. If our elders are “not quarrelsome,” does this mean they will avoid every conflict and quarrel (Romans 12:17-18, Jude 4, Proverbs 26:17)? Explain.
6. How can he gain a good reputation among outsiders (First Peter 4:15-17)?
7. What is James’s temper rule that we should see in our elders (1:19-20)?

Lesson 6: *Necessary Qualities: Character*

Quite clearly, we want to appoint men to oversee us and to take charge of the church’s treasury who are men of high moral character.

He must be temperate (even-tempered, self-controlled). America is a society based on liberty and so the concept of self-control has always been at a precarious balance with unfettered freedom to do everything one pleases. More and more, decadent liberties are being experimented with while self-control is dwindling. An elder must be able to temper his fleshly passions and defeat the enticement to gratify them sinfully (First Corinthians 9:27). The urge to view sexually explicit materials or to act out fits of anger and frustration are strong and a man of great mettle is required to resist them consistently.

He must be sober-minded. While it is not necessary that an elder be unpleasant and stiff, he must be a man who takes serious things seriously. He must be able to make judgments based on rational thought, not just emotional appeals. He must be able to think clearly and take his work with great gravity and respect for the stewardship God has given him.

He must be of good behavior. This is a man who puts the word of God in application in his own life. His daily behavior is disciplined by the wisdom of God he reads and hears (Colossians 3:8-10).

He is not given to wine. The use of alcohol has at least two effects that would destroy the work of an elder—it leads to very bad behavior generally and hampers one’s ability to make good judgments (Proverbs 23:29-35). The man who is given to being intoxicated to any degree is not fit to pastor the flock of God for he will have lapses in his shepherding (e.g. Noah).

He is not covetous (not greedy for money). Covetousness is a broad term that includes greed for money and a host of other desirable things. In the New Testament, covetousness is equated with idolatry and is grounds for withdrawal by the church (Ephesians 5:5, First Corinthians 5:11). A covetous person, simply, allows another god to share the throne of his heart with Jehovah. He is ruled by lust, ambition and earthly treasure and cannot be trusted to oversee growing Christians or the treasury of the church (First Timothy 6:9-10).

He is not self-willed. Sometimes the will of God conflicts with our goals and ambitions and we feel the desire to reinterpret the Bible to match our attitudes rather than allowing the bible to defeat us in what is wrong. It is self-will that gives us modern innovations and church splits over matters of opinion and fraternal compromise. An elder is not a church legislator.

He must be a lover of what is good. This requires that he have a positive and forward, optimistic outlook and that we uphold the works of righteousness (Philippians 4:8-9).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to be temperate? How can we tell if a man is temperate (First Corinthians 9:27, James 1:12-22)?
2. What does it mean to be sober-minded? If he tells a joke or laughs at one, is he disqualified? What if he cannot take solemn matters seriously? How can we tell if he is grave, or sober-minded?
3. What things take away from “good behavior” (Colossians 3:8-10)? By contrast, what makes for the kind of “good behavior” we can identify to qualify a man (Ephesians 4:25-32)?
4. What is the danger of alcohol to the elder’s ability to guide?
5. What damage could a covetous man do to the church as an elder? How can we tell that he is or is not covetous?
6. What might a self-willed man do to harm the church? What did Diotrephes do to it (3 John 9-11)? What is the opposite of self-willed?
7. What good should he love?

Lesson 7: *Necessary Qualities: Personality*

In addition to possessing strong elements of personal character, the elder also needs to get along well with others. His interpersonal attitudes will weigh heavily as we determine if he is fit to shepherd the flock.

He must be hospitable (Romans 12:10-13). An elder must be the type of person who feels happy and privileged to open the doors of his home to others, especially those in dire need (James 2:14-17). Obviously, both spouses must be given and driven to hospitality for it to work; this is one point at which the elder’s wife plays an important role in the state of his household and his oversight of the church.

He must be not violent. A word against violence is needful for an office that often sends one’s blood pressure soaring. An attitude of “might makes right” won’t work because the truth cannot be intimidated into error and the errant cannot be bullied into faithfulness (First Thessalonians 5:14-15).

He must be gentle. Naturally, this follows the former as its desirable alternative. Parents learn that dealing with babies and young children requires gentleness, rather than gruffness. With babes in Christ and the Lord’s children of any spirituality, gentleness is needed as well (First Peter 5:1-4). Although a man is ordained an elder, the church does not belong to him; it is still Christ’s. Bossing and coercion are unproductive to the ultimate good sought. Although he is uncompromising in his opposition to error, he is gentle rather than violent as he reproveth and rebukes it.

He is not quarrelsome. Some Christians go out of their way to find trouble. An elder in the church will surely have his share of troubles with which to deal: “He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears” (Proverbs 26:17). A man who is qualifying to serve is the one who defuses contentions before they explode.

He has a good testimony among those outside the body. Despite the obvious philosophical differences we possess, still we hope that outsiders do not hate us. We try to oppose sin with honor and affability (Romans 12:18). We come to the aid of our neighbor, like the Good Samaritan and so gain a good name (First Peter 4:15-16). It is impossible for an elder to have a good influence in the community and commend the local church if he is hated and maligned by those in whom we are trying to sow the good seed.

He is not quick-tempered. Some folks are so apt to lose their temper that they get angry before they have even heard the whole story; their fuses are about an inch long and perpetually lit. They have some self-discipline, but if you blink, you will miss it: “He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (Proverbs 18:13). Such a person constantly ruins his influence and endangers his soul (James 1:19-20).