

Qualifications for Elders and Overseers of the Local Church

1 Timothy 3:1-7

1 Timothy 3:1-7: “*This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. ² A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; ³ not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; 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?); ⁶ not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. ⁷ Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.*”

Background Notes

The New Testament mentions only two offices in the church: the office of elder, and the office of deacon. The qualifications for both of these offices are covered right here in this chapter. Elders, or overseers (translated “bishops” in the King James Version), are one and the same. The elders or overseers are the spiritual authority in the local church. “Elder” emphasizes their *spiritual maturity* and *dignity*, whereas “overseer” emphasizes their *function*.

The Bible does not mention any kind of ecclesiastical hierarchy, where the spiritual leaders of individual churches are answerable to a regional authority, or a national headquarters, or a worldwide religious authority. The Bible teaches that every New Testament church is directly responsible to Jesus Christ. The line of authority to the spiritual leaders of each local church comes down directly from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church. There is no intermediate hierarchy. Each local church is autonomous and self-governing before the Lord.

Furthermore, the Bible teaches a *plurality* of elders. The New Testament never speaks of the **one** pastor of a church, the **one** minister of a church, or the **one** bishop of a church. No. The leadership is always **plural**. Acts 20:17 says that Paul met with the elders (plural) of the church at Ephesus. Philippians 1:1 says the letter was addressed to all the saints in Christ Jesus who were at Philippi with the overseers or elders (plural) and deacons (plural).

The Bible teaches that the persons holding the office of elders or overseers are male. Wherever the New Testament mentions “elders,” they are always men. To say that these teachings were only for the 1st century, and that they are not normative for the church today, opens the door for changing many teachings of the New Testament. We need to be very careful not to conform Scripture to what **we** might like it to say, or what is politically correct today.

Who makes a man an elder? Is he elected? Is he voted into that office, based on popularity, or wealth, or ability as a corporate executive? No! The **Holy Spirit** selects a man to be an elder or overseer. Listen to Paul's teaching to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:28: *"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."* So it's not the responsibility of local church members to elect their elders – it's their responsibility to **recognize** those men who have been **chosen to be elders by the Holy Spirit**.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13: *"And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake."* How a local church goes about officially recognizing the elders that the Holy Spirit has appointed is not described in the New Testament, and thus this task can be accomplished by a number of different methods.

Doctrinal Points

1. Elders are responsible for spiritual leadership.

Acts 20:28 teaches that the work of the elder is to shepherd the flock. *"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."* That's why the word "pastor" (shepherd) is also used for the position and work of the overseer or elder. But remember, in the New Testament, more than one man will be doing the pastoring in each local church. By the way, even if a believer is not an elder, he or she can be involved in the pastoral care of fellow believers in the local flock. However, the elders are officially recognized as the spiritual leaders, and they all are to be shepherds.

As shepherds lead and care for their physical sheep, so elders are to give spiritual leadership and care to their spiritual sheep. Elders are not to be dictators! They are not to be not marine drill sergeants! But on the other hand, they are not to be like an affable and benevolent Santa Claus. 1 Peter 5:1-3: *"The elders who are among you I exhort...: shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers; not by compulsion, but willingly; not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."* As shepherds, elders are responsible to care for the flock, lead the flock, feed the flock, protect the flock, and discipline the flock. It's not a passive role. I'm thinking of a local church right now that is dying - because the elders are not properly fulfilling the role of a shepherd.

Being an elder is not an easy job. Notice verse 1 again: *"This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work."* The responsibility of overseeing and shepherding the flock is hard work, because sheep are always wandering, always complaining, and never satisfied.

Thus the work of an elder is not always a pleasant job! But it's a *good work*, a *noble work* - and there is reward. Once again, 1 Peter 5:4: *"And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you [the elders] will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away."* Elders are responsible for spiritual leadership.

2. Elders are characterized by moral integrity and ability to teach.

Looking over the qualifications for elders that are described here, it's important to mention that these qualifications are the *"ideal."* They are the *ideal* of what we look for in an elder. Probably not one single man will meet 100% of all these qualifications, but this is what we should look for in the spiritual leaders of the church. In addition, these qualifications should be the goal for *every believer*.

Most of the qualifications listed here are easy to understand, but in verse 2, two qualifications require some elaboration:

a. *The elder must be the husband of one wife.* What does that mean? Does it mean that he must be married? After all, a married man would generally be more experienced in dealing with family problems (as verse 5 indicates). Does it mean an elder must not be remarried? Does it mean that an elder must not be a polygamist - and must not be divorced? Does it mean that he must be a "one-woman man" – not flirtatious, but rather a model husband who sets a good example for other men in the church?

As you read what the various commentaries have to say about *"the husband of one wife,"* you find that a good case can be made for several of these views. I don't think we can be dogmatic. However, one thing we can say for sure is that ***elders must be characterized by moral integrity.***

b. *The elder must be able to teach.* Why is it important that he be able to teach? It's important because an elder must be able to distinguish between sound biblical doctrine and false teaching. Elders may be gifted preachers or teachers, but it is not essential that they be gifted for public teaching from the pulpit. However, it ***is essential*** that they be able to explain the Scriptures, answer questions about interpretation, and sniff out heresy. They must be sensitive to the possibility of false teaching creeping into the teaching of the church. So the ability to teach is an important characteristic for elders. Elders must be characterized by moral integrity and an ability to teach.

Practical Application

1. Watch out for "the snare of the devil"!

In verses 6-7, the devil is mentioned ***twice***. Verse 6 says that an elder should not be a novice or a new convert, *"lest being puffed up with pride and he fall into the same condemnation as the devil."* We know that Satan was created blameless, but he fell and was harshly judged because of his sin of pride. (Read Isaiah 14 in this connection.) The same thing can happen if a man who is a recent convert or immature believer is wrongly recognized as an elder. No matter how talented he is, or how gifted he is - don't do it! It can lead to pride and problems. Believe me - I've seen it happen. And the end results are very sad for the individual, as well as for the entire local church.

Verse 7 says that the elder “*must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.*” Watch out for the snare of the devil! Satan loves to trap or ensnare a church leader into making a mistake that will ruin his reputation. Thus shame will be brought on himself, his family, the local church, and the Christian community.

Church leaders must maintain a good testimony before this non-Christian world. The world loves to publicize Christian leaders who fail. Brothers and sisters, this is one reason why it’s so important to ***pray for your elders***. Satan is out to trip them up. He’d like to trip all of us up, but he especially aims his schemes and snares at Christian leaders.

Watch out for the snare of the devil!