

Qualities that Should Characterize Elders

Titus 1:5-9

Titus 1:5-9 – *“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you—⁶ if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination.⁷ For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money,⁸ but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled,⁹ holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”*

Background Notes

Paul reminded Titus of his responsibilities in verse 5: *“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.”* Crete, as you know, is a large island in the Mediterranean Sea. It was the center of the Minoan civilization back in Old Testament times.

When did the gospel come to Crete? There are three good possibilities - and perhaps there was a combination of these possibilities.

- At Pentecost. Acts 2 says that Jews from all over the Roman Empire were present in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, and Act 2:9-11 mentions that Cretans were there. It's quite likely that some Cretans heard and believed the gospel, then returned to Crete and started Bible studies in their homes.
- During Paul's ship voyage to Rome. Acts 27 says that they stopped for some time on the island of Crete. Surely Paul would have witnessed to some Cretans at that time, and some may have believed the gospel and become Christians.
- During Paul's "Fourth Missionary Journey." Paul did quite a bit of traveling between his two Roman imprisonments (this is often called his "Fourth Missionary Journey"). During his travels Paul visited Crete, and left Titus there. We don't know how long Paul stayed on Crete, but undoubtedly some Cretans came to know the Lord during his stay, and those who were already Christians were strengthened in their faith.

Paul wrote his letter to Titus from somewhere in Macedonia, or perhaps from Corinth. He reminded Titus of what he had commanded when they were together on Crete - the importance of getting the churches of Crete established by appointing "elders," or "overseers." "Elder" or "overseer" is the meaning of the word that is translated as "bishop" (v7) in the King James Version. A bishop is a spiritual overseer.

Overseers and elders are not two different church positions. They are two different designations of the same church office. The term “elder” is used to emphasize the **spiritual maturity** of those who hold this office. The term “overseer” is used to emphasize the **spiritual responsibility** of those who are elders.

As an “apostolic delegate” to Crete, Titus was to appoint Christian men who were qualified for the office of elder. There are no apostles today, so there are no direct apostolic delegates, thus we don’t believe that one person is to appoint the spiritual leaders in the church today. Because apostles and direct apostolic delegates are no longer with us, it is the function of local churches to recognize and appoint elders. The method a church uses to recognize and appoint its elders can vary somewhat, but it should be governed by biblical guidelines.

There are three areas of qualification for spiritual leaders in the local church:

- the area of family life (v6)
- the area of temperament (v7-8)
- the area of doctrine (v9)

Doctrinal Points

1. Elders are men whose family lives are blameless.

Verse 6: *“If a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination.”* Notice the word is “blameless,” not “sinless.” No human is perfect! The idea in the word “blameless” is that an elder should be a model for church members to follow in the area of family life. As a husband and father, he should be above reproach.

In reference to his marriage, he should be the *“husband of one wife.”* What does that mean? Bible commentaries give a number of different interpretations for this phrase. Does it mean that elders *must* be married? Does it mean that elders cannot be *re-married*? Does it mean that elders should not practice polygamy? (Let’s hope it means that!) Does it mean that elders must not be divorced? Does it mean that an elder should be a “one-woman” type of man - in other words, not flirtatious?

The exact interpretation is hard to pin down. There are points that could be made for and against each of those views. However, we can be sure that elders are to be **models** in the area of their marriages. They are the leaders of God’s people and therefore they have the spiritual responsibility to exercise discipline in this area, especially if adultery (or other sexual sin) occurs in the church.

I find it interesting that even unbelievers expect their worldly leaders to be models in the area of family life! Consider, for example, the recent question about who’s qualified to hold the position of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or the past life of someone who wants to run for state governor or President. Although standards are slipping, even the world

has levels that they expect leaders to maintain. So certainly, within the church, spiritual leaders should be models in this area.

Verse 6: *“having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination.”* This verse indicates that the children of an elder should be faithful. They should not be wild or disobedient. That means no rebellious teens! Young people - do you see that your behavior may disqualify your father from holding a spiritual position in your local church? This is serious business! There's much more we could say here, but elders are men who have family lives that are blameless.

2. Elders are men who live sensitive, sensible, and sacrificial lifestyles.

Verses 7-8: *“For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled.”*

These verses teach that a controlled personality, a solid character and an even temperament are important qualifications for an elder. Elders must not be men who fly off the handle when they don't get their own way in church decisions. They should respect the ideas of fellow elders, and they should be sensitive to the needs of the flock.

Responsible elders do not experiment with wild, risky, far out schemes for the church. They should be “sober-minded” - or sensible.

Elders must not be characterized by trying to make a name for themselves, or by trying to become wealthy, or by any other selfish motive. They must be self-disciplined, self-controlled, and willing to give sacrificially of themselves for the sake of the flock.

You might be asking at this point, “So **who can qualify?** That list just about leaves everyone out - so maybe we should close down the church because everyone falls short!” Well, you must remember that these qualifications are the **ideal**. You look for the ideal when you recognize elders, but you remember that no one is perfect! There are situations where a church may have to “go with what they have”! But the ideal qualifications are what you shoot for. Elders are men who live sensitive, sensible, and sacrificial lifestyles.

3. Elders are men who know sound doctrine.

Verse 9: *“Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”* Sound doctrine is orthodox doctrine – and it's doctrine that leads to the spiritual health of the flock. Elders must be able to discern between sound doctrine and unbiblical and false teaching.

The parallel passage in 1 Timothy 3:2 says elders should be “apt to teach” - able to teach. They don’t need to be *gifted* teachers or preachers, but they should be able to teach sound doctrine to the flock - perhaps in a mentoring capacity, or in a home Bible study.

Verse 9 says that elders must be able to exhort the people with sound doctrine, and convict or rebuke those who are involved in unsound or false doctrine. That means that elders must be able to recognize false doctrine. Unsound doctrine can be either **heretical doctrine**, or it can be **unbalanced orthodox doctrine**. For example, a church may be “unbalanced,” even in sound doctrine, if it spends too much time in teaching and studying about demons or satanic activity. The Bible has a lot to say about Satan and demons - but a church can stray into unbalanced doctrine if it places too great a concentration on any single subject.

Just as a child needs a balanced diet of nutritious foods for good health and proper growth, a church must have sound and balanced doctrine for good health and proper growth. Elders are men who know sound doctrine – and sound doctrine is not only orthodox doctrine - it’s also **balanced!**

Practical Application

“Send me a few good men” when you want to build a church!

“Send me a few good men!” comes from a United States Marines recruitment ad. It emphasizes how much good can be accomplished with only a few men - as long as they are **good** men!

If you ever want to plant a new church in a biblical way, or build up an existing church in a biblical way, you need at least a few good men. You need a few good women, too - but you must have a few **good men**. According to Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 2 & 3, elders in the local church are to be male. The Word of God doesn’t change with time or with culture, and this is the way God designed the authority structure in the church.

The spiritual leaders are to be a few good men, not just one good man. There should be more than one elder per church. The idea of only one spiritual leader per church is never seen in the Bible. A plurality of elders is the scriptural norm. So – “send me a few good men” when you want to build a church.

Does the church at which I’m speaking today qualify as a biblical church? Yes! You have some good men - and some good women! Their family lives are in order. Your spiritual leaders are SSSS men – they are Sensitive, Sensible, and Sacrificial in their lifestyles - and they know Sound doctrine.

If your church or fellowship has leaders who are qualified by biblical standards, and who are willing to give sacrificially of their time and gifts to care for the flock, be encouraged! Remember - “Send me a few good men” when you want to build up a church!