

Elders: Qualities and Tasks

1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, Acts 20, 1 Peter 5

Turn to 1 Timothy 3 please. We'll talk about elders today, elders in the church. We will look at four NT texts. Two of these Scriptures tell us what kind of people should become elders, what the requirements are of this church service. And the other two Scriptures are instructions to those who are already elders, telling them what to do.

In Acts 13-14 Paul and Barnabas went on what we now call Paul's first missionary journey. They preached the gospel in different cities, and started a church in each town. Then they turned around and went back through the same cities and appointed church elders in each city.

They choose a group of men to take care of the church, to lead it and watch over it. Every church had them. That was church organization in its simplest form, and the rest of the NT follows this. Some churches eventually had deacons as well, but each church at the start had only elders.

If you watch for it, these four Scriptures speak about a lot more than just elders. They are a pretty good window into church life, how the church operates and what is important.

The Scriptures assume the elders are men. We will stay with that today for convenience sake. We will leave aside the issue of women elders. We can talk about that any day you want, not today.

This sermon goes in two parts, first, what kind of people should be selected as elders? Second, what is their job; what are they supposed to do?

What kind of people should be selected as elders?

First of all, every church needs elders. The requirements are listed in 1 Tim 3 and Tts 1, and those two read much the same.

There is no such thing as a church without elders. These Scriptures give us the basic measuring stick, and if no one seems good enough, then we relax requirements. We select people that are closest. In some NT churches these lists must have been viewed flexibly, because had been rough people and had not followed the Lord very long.

1Tim 3:1-7 *Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever wants to be an overseer desires a noble task.*

Whoever wants to be an overseer desires a noble task. Whoever wants this, whoever desires it. Peter will say in 1 Peter 5, serve because you are willing, and be eager to serve.

In our church, finding elders who are willing to serve has not really been a problem. But I am troubled by something related to this. I have taught at the seminary for many years. Our students are people who want to serve the Lord and serve people. But few of them want to be shepherds in a local church.

They want to serve the Lord and serve people, but **outside** the church. They will work with the needy in some way, or do relief work, or be counselors, in some way help people who are lost or in trouble. But few want to be shepherds **inside** the church. They will train and take a living to serve unbelievers, but not train and take a living to serve a local flock. And that is a problem.

I don't understand it, actually. It was in their church that these people met the Lord, and in their church their desire to serve the Lord began. But few desire to return that, to make the local group their calling. Some blame the churches for this, and churches certainly have big flaws. But it was in these failing churches that the Lord met them, and called them to himself. So I am sad.

That was a detour; now to our text. ² *Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,* ³ *not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, peaceful, not a lover of money.* ⁴ *He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect.* ⁵ *(If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)* ⁶ *He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.* ⁷ *He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.*

I am not going to go over each one of these characteristics. They are pretty clear as they are. But let's make some general observations: This list is about moral character, about godly character.

It is not about spiritual gifts. Both lists mention teaching, but not in the sense of the gift of teaching, we'll see that more clearly in Titus. It means the elder knows enough to tell when something goes against the gospel, and knows the basic correction.

It is not about spiritual gifts, it is about moral character. There is nothing in this list that is not a call to every child of God. When we told God we wanted to live in his ways, which we did when we believed and were baptized, this is what we were saying. We would aim our lives in this way.

Church leaders are not called to different qualities, they are called to the same qualities as everyone, only failure is a bigger problem when a leader fails. Peter will say that shepherds should lead by example, and this list sounds like that.

There is nothing in this list about being a natural leader, or a strong leader, or a person with strong vision, or having good ministry skills, or remarkable experiences from God. These are not bad things, the NT has people that are strong leaders and have strong vision and so on.

Paul has all of that himself. That's not what it takes to be an elder. Elders should be people to imitate. Daily godly living trumps all that. Not just in these lists, but everywhere in the Bible.

We want to be a church of people who love the Lord, and trust in him, and want to follow him with all our hearts, and out of that we want to serve each other and do good to all. That's the proper goal of every church. Elders should model this. Now the second list of requirements.

Titus 1:5-9 The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. ⁶ An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. ⁷ Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁸ Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. ⁹ He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

Children. A man whose children who believe, not wild or disobedient. This qualification puzzles me a bit because it is not how the Bible usually looks at disobedient children. In Deuteronomy 21, a stubborn and rebellious son was to be put to death by the men of the town, and the parents were not considered responsible for this.

Proverbs speaks the same way, a wise child listens to the teaching of his parents, and a foolish child does not. It is the child's choice, not the parent's. The prodigal son, in Jesus' parable, had the perfect father; and yet that son was wild and disobedient.

So we must make room for this. On the other hand, Paul assumes that the household will show what kind of parent the potential elder is. If a person does not manage his children and his family well, he will not care for the church properly either.

Titus was on Crete, and it was a new church. Cretans were a wild crowd as a whole. If you compare Tts 1 with 1 Tim 3, you can see this. Both lists say "not violent," but for emphasis the Titus list also has "not quick-tempered."

Both lists have "self-controlled" but for emphasis the Titus list adds "disciplined." Cretans tended to be quick tempered and lacked self-control, so Paul stressed those.

To Timothy in Ephesus, Paul says "not a lover of money," but to Titus on Crete, Paul says, "not pursuing dishonest gain." In Ephesus greed was a problem, but not stealing. In Crete, however, Titus needed to rule out stealing or cheating with money when he selected elders.

To Timothy, "not a recent convert," but not to Titus, probably because on Crete they all were recent converts.

Teaching (v9) *He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught.* This is what “able to teach means.” The basic quality – “hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught.” Every believer should hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught. The elder pays attention to what’s been taught, to the core gospel truths, and holds on to them. Why?

So that he can encourage others by sound doctrine, and refute those who oppose it. That’s not the gift of teaching, it is more basic, all believers should be doing this, particularly elders, holding firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught.

To summarize the qualities of an elder: Elders should be people to imitate. We all want to be a congregation of people who love the Lord, and follow him with all our hearts, and out of that, we serve each other. That’s the proper goal of every church. Elders should model it.

That’s what kind of people should become elders. Before I move on to what elders should do, the last two texts we’ll read, I will mention another Scripture. Galatians 5, the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. In the second half of Galatians 5, Paul lists the works of the flesh, and a sentence or two later he lists the contrasting fruit of the Spirit.

The flesh produces one kind of life, the Holy Spirit produces a different kind of life. After having gone through the list of requirements in Timothy and Titus, if we now read in Galatians 5 the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit, you would see a clear similarity.

What the flesh produces is what elders should not be like. Rather the elders should be like what the Spirit produces. This shows us that the requirements of elders are not different than what we all are called to show.

Also, some might read the lists of qualifications in Timothy and Titus, and then decide that elder requirements don’t have much to do with the Holy Spirit. But don’t be fooled by thinking like that. In Galatians 5 it is entirely clear that the only way a person will have this kind of life is if they’ve made a long term practice of being led by the Spirit.

I will say this again, for all of you and for the current elders: In Galatians 5 it is entirely clear that the only way a person will qualify for eldership, is if they’ve made a long term practice of being led by the Spirit, and staying in step with the Spirit – that’s Paul’s language in Galatians 5.

NOW, let’s look at two more Scriptures that show what elders do in the church.

What should they do? Turn to Acts 20. Here Paul speaks to the elders at Ephesus. They are not in Ephesus, Paul sent ahead for just the elders to come to Miletus, in Miletus he speaks to them.

Acts 20:28-30 - *Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*

²⁹ *I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.*
³⁰ *Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.*

The elders are guards, they watch over themselves, and the watch over the flock as a shepherd would watch over sheep.

When I first became an elder of this church, that seemed impossible. I am just a sheep, like all of you. But the Lord said, “Yes, Ed, you are just a sheep, but now I want you to walk on your hind legs, and wear a shepherd’s cloak, and carry a shepherd’s stick, and be their shepherd.” And I thought to myself, “you have to be kidding!” But he was not kidding. That’s what elders do.

Whatever the human process of selecting elders might be, it is really the Holy Spirit. “The Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Pure and simple.

Why guard the flock? *Savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.* There are people who claim to be servants of Christ who come into the church. But their hidden plan is not to serve Christ or the church, it is to serve themselves. They want something for themselves from the church. And they don’t care about damage and confusion they cause. Guard the flock.

Why guard ourselves? *Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.* The goal of some of those Ephesian elders would change.

At the start they wanted to serve Christ and the church. But Paul knows that will change. They want to make a name for themselves, and pretending to serve Christ, they use the church to serve themselves. Some of those very elders would do this. That is why we guard ourselves.

No church is immune from savage wolves who come in and do not spare the flock. No church is immune from its own leaders losing their way and wanting to make a name for themselves. These things happen just as much in these days as those days.

What should elders be doing? *Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*

Turn to 1 Peter 5. This is our fourth and final text today. Peter was the one to whom the Lord said, “do you love me Peter? Feed my sheep. Do you love me Peter? Tend my lambs.” I hear that conversation ringing in Peter’s ears as he writes this to his churches.

1 Peter 5:1-4 - *To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ’s sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ² Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; ³ not lording it over those*

entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ *And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*

What do elders do? What is our task? V2 - *Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them.* Be shepherds, watch over them. It sounds a lot like Paul in Acts, doesn't it? Paul said: *Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.* (Heb 13:17 the same.)

Peter says *Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them.* Peter's line is shorter, but says the same thing as Paul. Be shepherds, watch over God's flock in your care.

Then Peter shows us how we will do it. Three times he says, "not *this* way, but *that* way."

1. *Not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be.* Maybe after a while you elders don't want this calling. I've felt like that. Peter says, "Put your heart into it."

2. *Not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve.* I'm not sure how they used eldership to line their pockets, but it could be done. No, rather: be *eager to serve*. Being an elder is a way of serving the Lord and serving his people. Be ready and willing to serve the Lord and his people.

3. *Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.* Now we are back at the lists we began with. The Titus list said, "*not overbearing.*" The Timothy list said, "*gentle, peaceful.*" The strong emphasis of the lists was godly character, not gifts, not ministry skills.

We cannot imitate gifts we do not have, or skills we do not have. But we all, young and old, can imitate a godly life. *Be examples to the flock.*

What kind of person should an elder be? Elders should be examples to imitate. We want to be a whole congregation of people who love the Lord, and follow him and live in his ways, and from that we want to serve each other. Elders habitually turn away from the works of the flesh to show the fruit of the Spirit. That's the proper goal of every believer. Elders should model it.

What should elders do? Paul: *Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.* Peter: *Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them.* May the God who calls us be faithful to do it. Amen.

[Prayer] Father, we were your enemies, but through Christ you made us your children. So we all together want to love you, and delight in your will, and walk in your ways. We all together want our lives to be a living gift to you. Lead us and fill us with your Holy Spirit so that this comes out of us every day.

And you have called us the elders to watch over the church, and to live as examples. We often do not feel up to this. But we know, Father, that you chose us for this, and that you are with us, and we know that with your Spirit you will faithfully help us to live this out every day. The God who calls us is faithful, and he will see it done. For this all we give you thanks and praise and glory. Amen.