

ECCLESIOLOGY
THE LOCAL CHURCH
Lesson 13

Qualifications for an Elder

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. There is nothing more important in the local church than the selection of elders and deacons. As the leadership goes, so goes the church. A local church will never be any better than the men who lead it. Elders and deacons are essential for the proper functioning of the local church. Strong leadership means a strong church. Weak leadership means a weak church.
- B. The real tragedy is that because church government does not affect one's salvation or sanctification, more Christians have thought the subject secondary or unimportant. In fact, many Christians have never bothered to study the subject at all. The result is Christians trying to run a local church diametrically opposed to what the Bible teaches which leads to confusion, distrust, disgust, chaos and sometime anarchy. A right understanding of church government, especially the qualifications and duties of elders and deacons, will revolutionize our whole thinking about the local church and will make us more effective Christians.
- C. For those of us in this congregation whom God may call to be an elder or a deacon, we need to know about these offices so we can fulfill them as unto the Lord. For those of us who may never be elders and deacons (and that is the vast majority of us), we need to know this subject to make sure we nominate qualified men for the office who meet the biblical criteria. The congregation should insist that their officers meet the biblical qualifications and perform the biblical duties of an elder or deacon.
- D. The nomination of officers is not a popularity contest. God has raised up in this congregation qualified elders and deacons and it is the congregation's God-given responsibility to fast, pray and nominate the men who God has already raised up in our midst to be officers. We never nominate a man for the office of elder or deacon who is not qualified, hoping somehow he will get qualified while in the office. This will only throw the church into deep confusion and hinder its growth spiritually and numerically.
- E. The word "elder" is *presbuteros* in the Greek and from this we get presbyter and Presbyterian. The term "elder" can be somewhat misleading because it gives the idea of older person. Actually the word "elder" looks at the dignity of the office relating to spiritual maturity. A presbyter does not have to be old in age but he must be gifted in leadership and wise in handling people. Gray hair does not necessarily make one a presbyter.
- F. According to Jewish tradition, a man could not be part of the Sanhedrin (the ruling body in Israel) until he was 30 years old.

- G. While a person could be an elder at any age as an adult, it does help to have some age and experience to mellow one's leadership. Age 30 is a good rule of thumb for an elder (presbyter) but there may be exceptions.
- H. As for a deacon, there seems to be no age limit but the one basic qualification is that a deacon be a server. The word "deacon" means server.
- I. Traditionally in Presbyterian circles older men are made elders and younger men are made deacons, using the deaconship as a stepping stone for the eldership.
- J. Biblically there is no basis for this. These are two distinct offices for the local church. A man should feel free to move from an elder to a deacon if God should so lead. It is not demeaning to be a deacon. Both offices are important to the church. When one moves from a deacon to an elder or an elder to a deacon, it is not moving up or down. It is moving over.

II. DESIRE QUALIFICATION

- A. "Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer (bishop), he desires a noble task." The office of overseer (bishop) is the same office of elder. Overseer stresses the elders duty. The very first qualification for an elder is that a man must long for this office. This is not a selfish desire that longs for social prestige or religious power but a godly, spiritual yearning to have this office for the glory of God.
- B. To hold this office means a man is prepared for it, or, if not prepared, he must become willing to sacrifice to get prepared for this stewardship.
- C. An elder should never be chosen because he is a nice fellow, a good worker, a friend of the pastor, an opponent of the pastor, a man with money or a practical business man with administrative savvy. The question is, "Does he have the biblical qualifications for elder?"
- D. We must be careful about putting men into the office of elder just because there is no one else to serve. The man who says, "I will serve because there is no one else who wants the office" does not really desire the office. Conversely, the elder who serves three years and then is up for sabbatical and says, "I'm glad that is over" is a man who does not really long for the office of elder. Once an elder, always an elder, and an elder should continue to be a leader whether in a voting or non-voting status. An elder has to lead because it is his calling.

III. PERSONAL QUALIFICATIONS

A. Moral

- 1. Above reproach (1 Tim. 3:2). To be blameless or above reproach has the idea of not being a stumblingblock to others. He does not have anything in his life which would cause disgrace to the Lord or cause people to gossip about him. This does not mean an elder has to be perfect or that he has a 'halo' around his head.
- 2. Husband of but one wife (I Tim. 3:2). This is a very difficult phrase to interpret, and it has many emotional ramifications for some no matter how it is interpreted. The strict interpretation means one wife in a lifetime. An

elder is to have only one wife in his whole life. If his wife dies, he is to remain single. If he chooses to remarry, he must give up the office of elder. My objections to this view are: (1) It forbids remarriage even if the elder's wife dies when the Bible allows for remarriage after the death of a mate; and (2) It also forbids a single man from holding the office of elder. The strict interpretation is certainly the safest view to take but it may not be the biblical position. The broader interpretation is that it means one wife at a time, forbidding any type of polygamy. The Greek literally means "a one kind of a woman man," indicating faithfulness to one woman. The Bible allows for remarriage after the death of a mate so this view would allow an elder to remarry a Christian woman if his wife dies. This view would also allow a divorced person, who was divorced before salvation to Christ, to remarry a Christian woman and hold the office of elder. There is forgiveness for all sins. Divorce while a horrible sin is not the unforgivable sin, but it is one of the most damaging to the human psychic. This view also allows for a Christian man who is the innocent party in a divorce to remarry a Christian woman and hold the office of elder, providing the person has been before and cleared by the church court. However, no Christian man who has been the guilty party or who has purposely left his wife can hold the office of elder, even though there is forgiveness for this sin. A man's past may be forgiven by God but quite often is never forgotten by men. An elder must be "above reproach" not giving people things to gossip about. A divorced man can hold the office of elder, however, the elders should pray long and hard before they ever appoint a divorced man to the office of elder or deacon because the testimony of the church is at stake.

3. Temperate (1 Tim. 3:2). An elder is to be moderate in all things, not given to excesses of any kind.
4. Self-control (1 Tim. 3:2). An elder is to show self-control in attitude and demeanor, using good common sense about life.
5. Respectable (1 Tim. 3:2). An elder is to have an orderly life which includes neatness, promptness and personal dress.
6. Not given to much wine (1 Tim. 3:3). An elder may drink wine but he is not to be addicted to wine or to linger over the cup as the Greek literally says. We know this wine was of alcoholic content or the elders would not have been warned against the abuse of it. Personally I think this means wine was to be drunk as a basic food staple with meals and to exceed this is to linger over the cup. I do not think this allows an elder to drink a six-pack of beer on Saturday afternoon while watching a football game on TV, nor does it allow for two martinis before dinner. Yet, we cannot say the Bible teaches total abstinence of elders or for Christians in general. However, the safest position might be to abstain from alcohol so as to be effective with abstainers and yet teach the biblical truth so as to be effective with those who are free to partake.
7. Not violent (1 Tim. 3:3). An elder is not to be a constant fighter, who always carries a chip on his shoulder.

8. Not quarrelsome(1 Tim. 3:3). An elder is not to be contentious or a troublemaker. Elders must learn to agree to disagree among themselves and with the congregation, but they are not to be divisive and must show love rather than a cocky attitude.
 9. Not a lover of money (1 Tim. 3:3). An elder is not to love money for himself or be greedy for bigger and better personal or church funds. The thought of money is not to possess him in any realm whether church or secular. It does not say an elder cannot be wealthy but it does say he cannot love money. A man who loves money spends all his time thinking about it and does not have time to do the ministry of elder.
 10. Not overbearing (Titus 1:7). Literally this says, “not self-willed”. An elder must never desire to please only himself and gain his own ends and desires. He should always have the interests of the flock in view. He is not to be stubborn, opinionated and prejudiced but operate his life on biblical principles. An elder must not want his own way all the time, and must not get his way all the time.
 11. One who loves what is good (Titus 1:8). An elder should have a positive Christ-like life, centered in doing good, wholesome things.
 12. Upright (Titus 1:8). An elder must have a holy walk with the Lord Jesus Christ, separated unto Him and desirous to conduct his life and the life of the church according to the word of God.
 13. Holy (Titus 1:8). An elder must demonstrate a disciplined life over time, job, money attitudes, ministry or whatever. No man is worth his salt without discipline.
- B. Social
1. Hospitable (1 Tim. 3:2). An elder is to open his life and home to other Christians. Whatever else an elder is he must be a people-person—people oriented, people centered, people mover. Elders must be relational or they do not belong in the eldership.
 2. Manages his own family well (1 Tim. 4:4). An elder must be the governmental and spiritual leader of his home, having his wife and children in a place of submission. If he does not know how to manage his home, he surely will not be able to manage the local church.
 3. His children obey him with proper respect (1 Tim. 3:4). An elder must have children who honor and obey parents. He must be able to discipline and control his children.

IV. SPIRITUAL QUALIFICATIONS

Not a recent convert (1 Tim. 3:6). An elder should not be a new Christian but show signs of real spiritual maturity. No matter how good a leader, or how wealthy, or how dynamic a person, he should be a Christian for a good while before being put into office. Again a person of 28 could qualify if he had been a Christian since he was fifteen, but a person over fifty who has only been a Christian for several years would not qualify.

- A. Believing and behaved children (Titus 1:6). The sentence “a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient” is open to interpretation. The word “believe” may be translated “faithful.” Therefore, some have taken this to mean faithful children who have good behavior patterns but not necessarily saved children. Still others take this to mean believing children; that is, children who believe in Christ as Savior and Lord. This is probably what this means. The problem often comes in the teenage years when children sometimes become rebellious and reject the Christian faith temporarily or permanently. The best position seem to be that elders should have believing children as a rule, but again there may be exceptions, and it would be up to the elders to determine if a man was qualified. For instance, if a man had four children and three were believers and one was not, would he be disqualified if the unbelieving child was under control? Again the elders would have to decide this.
- B. A good reputation with outsiders (1 Tim. 3:7). An elder is to have a good reputation and testimony with the unsaved. He is to be a good citizen and business man but he must never compromise biblical principles. An elder may offend people with the truth of scripture, but he is never to offend because of his critical and obnoxious spirit.

V. TEACHING QUALIFICATIONS

- A. Able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). An elder should be ready, willing and able to teach and be skilled in instruction of any one of the basics of the Christian faith. One of the marks which distinguishes an elder from a deacon is that the deacon does not have to teach but the elder does and must.

This does not mean that every elder must teach by the lecture method publicly but he must know the Word and be able to teach it on a one to one basis. This does not mean every elder is to have the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher but he probably would have the gift of teaching to some degree.

- B. Encourage from the Bible (Titus 1:9). An elder “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it is taught so he can encourage others by sound doctrine.” An elder must encourage through a use of the Bible so the flock can grow spiritually. Therefore, an elder must have a practical working knowledge of the Bible.
- C. Refute unbelievers from the Bible (Titus 1:9). An elder “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it is taught”...so that they may “refute those who oppose it.” An elder must be able to correct errors, expose false doctrine and guard the flock from false teachers. He must have a basic theological understanding of the Bible to do this effectively.

VI. APPLICATIONS

- A. No man in our congregation should be nominated for the office of elder unless he truly desires the office. Therefore, before you place any person into nomination, go to that person and find out if he desires to be an elder.

- B. No man should be nominated unless he has ministered to others in some particular way: Sunday School Class, counseling, encouragement or whatever. Elders are called to minister and if they are not ministering before they become elders, they will not minister after they become elders.
- C. If a man is placed into nomination and you know something about that man's life which will hurt the testimony of this church, you are obligated to core to the pastor or elders and make this known before this man is put up for a vote.