

Above Reproach: An Introduction and Overview of Eldership Qualifications

Introduction: The Biblical Qualifications for Elders

The New Testament demonstrates that the local church is led by a group of spiritually minded men called elders. Elders appear or are addressed multiple times in the book of Acts and Paul, Peter, and James's writings. While most of the New Testament focuses on elders' purpose and role, they do not explicitly or thoroughly describe who among the church can or should be an elder. First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 resolve that question for us.

Both of these letters are written by Paul to an evangelist. While Timothy and Titus' works were undoubtedly unique in various ways, both were laboring to evangelize their area and to build up the body of Christ where they were.

A key aspect of building up the body was developing and maintaining appropriate leadership. Paul did this when he established congregations (cf. Acts 14:23). He was entrusting Timothy and Titus to do that work where they were. To help them towards that goal, Paul provided a Spirit-inspired list of qualities or qualifications they should ensure a man possessed before appointing him to lead the local church.

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (1 Timothy 3:1-7, ESV)

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:5-9, ESV)

Each list contains 15 qualifications, but the lists are not identical. Between the two, nine qualifications appear in both, and each list includes six unique qualifications. Thus, combining the lists, we have 21 distinct qualifications, and many of the "repeated" items have slight nuance between the two lists.

First, we should notice that while the lists are not identical, they are more similar than they are different. Even among the unique attributes, they are closely related to items in the other list (e.g., sober-minded & Disciplined | Not quarrelsome & Not Quick-Tempered, etc.). It certainly is not as if Paul wrote something to Timothy, and something entirely different to Titus.

Still, we might wonder why there are differences at all. A couple of reasons could include:

1. Timothy was working in Ephesus where the church had been established for at least some time. Further, it seems that Ephesus already had elders. So, Timothy was responsible for working with existing elders, as well as appointing new elders.
2. Titus was working on the island of Crete. While we don't know precisely when these congregations began, they were likely reasonably new. Also, these congregations had no elders. Thus, Titus is seeking to appoint elders for the first time in all the congregations of Crete.

Whatever the reason, the lists were especially suited for Timothy and Titus where they were, and in the congregational settings they were in.

Today, we can trust in the Spirit's work of providing both of these lists for us in Scripture so that together we have a full picture of the qualities and qualifications we should primarily look for in an elder.

How to Handle the Qualifications

As we review the lists of First Timothy and Titus, how should we view and handle them? While that may seem like a strange question, I believe that mishandling these lists has possibly, if not likely, prohibited many congregations from establishing a functional eldership.

Qualifications or Qualities?

First, should we view the attributes given by Paul as “qualifications” or as “qualities?” At first, that may seem like an unnecessary distinction. The two are certainly somewhat intertwined. But consider their definitions. a “qualification” is defined as: "A quality or accomplishment that makes someone suitable for a particular job or activity." On the other hand, a “quality” is defined as: "A distinctive attribute or characteristic..." (Courter, 2020)

As the definition indicates, a qualification pertains to a quality that someone possesses. But when we think about qualifications, we tend to think primarily about the position they are trying to be qualified for. Thinking about qualities, on the other hand, focuses on the individual.

The office should undoubtedly be in view. Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:1, “if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” But the following list is focused then on what a man “must be.” In Titus, Paul says, “If anyone is...” Paul's lists are qualifications—but they are especially qualities that should be present in a man who is an elder. They are attributes or characteristics that are clearly seen in the man's life.

Since the man “must be” these things, it is not fit for him to become qualified on the job. These are attributes he must possess before he can truly serve as an elder.

Also, realizing these are qualities a man possesses helps us avoid the trap of over-zealous evaluation. That is, as we approach one quality or another, we do not try and go back years and years to find one or two times when a man may not have been gentle, not been hospitable, and so on. Essentially, we don't disqualify a man because years ago, he wasn't the man he is today. If these qualities can currently describe a man, then he should be qualified.

Grading the Man or Protecting the Work?

When we consider Paul's lists, we should evaluate how we view the lists and what we think about their purpose.

Typically, when we think of a list of qualifications, we think of a means of evaluating and grading an individual. While that may be a part of selecting and appointing elders, is it the primary part. In an article on **One's Perspective on Eldership**, Ron Courter says:

...do you examine the qualifications with the main thought being 'grading the man' or 'protecting the work?' Are the lists of First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 placed there to grade men, promote men in the kingdom, or are they there to glean God's wisdom regarding the protection of the work and the church? ... It seems better to approach and perceive the qualifications from the perspective or thrust of being published by the Holy Spirit to preserve and protect the work and the church, rather than simply grading men."¹

The more we view these lists as primarily "grading the man," the more likely we are to turn them into lists of *disqualification*. The more we focus on grading men, the more likely we are to find fault and reason to believe he isn't "qualified."

When we realize the Spirit gives these lists to help the church grow and be protected by godly leadership, we can consider the greater purpose and why these qualities are so important. When we do, I think we will also be able to determine when men truly possess such qualities and attributes.

I don't mean to lessen the importance of these lists. Elders must be men defined by these qualities. They must possess these qualities. But the point is this: we must not view this list as an arbitrary list of exacting requirements. It is a list of attributes that helps us find the men most capable of leading the congregation. These lists shouldn't keep us from having elders—they should help us see who the elders should be.

What is the Purpose of the Qualifications?

That brings us to an important question we should consider with each quality: "what is its purpose?" Some interpret these qualities without regard to how the quality impacts a man's ability to lead as an elder.

To illustrate, consider the qualification that a man must be "the husband of one wife." Some interpret this to mean that if a man's wife dies, and he later remarries, he is no longer qualified to be an elder. As we consider that, however, we might ask, "what does the tragic event of losing a spouse have to do with a man's ability to lead the church? Is a man unqualified to lead because his wife died in an accident? If sickness takes a man's wife, does that illustrate some lack on his part?"

When we consider these qualities from the standpoint of “how does it illustrate the man is fit to lead” we should be able to avoid some interpretations and pitfalls that might disqualify appropriate men or even qualify unfit men!

Are these Qualifications Unique to Elders?

A final question to consider regarding these lists is, are they unique to elders? One might imagine that elders are held to a standard much different than other Christians. But an honest inspection of these lists doesn’t quite reveal that. On the contrary, what is expected of elders is mostly expected of all Christians! Many of these qualities apply to Christians (even those who aren’t leaders) in other parts of Scripture. For example, an elder must be holy, but all Christians must be holy. Elders are not supposed to be greedy or covetous, but neither are other Christians.

By and large, the qualities given for elders are qualities that all Christians should strive to possess. True, some qualities are unique to elders. Elders must be men, be married, have children, and can’t be new converts. These things aren’t true of all Christians. Even within these unique qualifications, however, there is something for every Christian. While a Christian doesn’t have to be married, they must be pure. And those that are married must be faithful to their spouse. Even if a man is not an elder or aspiring to be an elder, he must be “the husband of one wife” or “a one-woman man!” Even parents who aren’t church leaders should strive to bring up faithful children. And while a new convert can’t be an elder, we aren’t to be new converts forever. Babes in Christ are not allowed to remain as babes in Christ, but they are commanded in Scripture to grow and mature in their faith. Thus, these qualities are not just for elders; they are for all of us. This series will not only help us identify men qualified to be elders—it will help all of us see the type of Christian we should be.

So, what’s the difference between an elder and any other Christian? Primarily, experience and a proven track record. Elders are simply men of Christian experience and who have demonstrated their dedication to the Lord by seeking to follow Him, serve Him, and become like Him. When that is the case, we’ll find a man who can be described in the terms of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Christianity is a growth process, and many of us lack experience and maturity. Elders are not perfect men, but they are mature men whose faithfulness is apparent to others.

Above Reproach

The first quality Paul provides is that an elder must be “above reproach” or “blameless (NKJV).” While there is some disagreement, I believe that this quality is essentially a “foundation” or an “umbrella” qualification. It is a general overview—a one-word descriptor of an elder.

The other qualifications fill in details about how a man is blameless. There may be times a man meets some qualifications, but not others, and is not truly “blameless.” Or a man may technically meet a qualification, but not to the degree he would be considered blameless.

But what does this word mean? First, it’s worth noting that Paul uses two slightly different Greek words in 1 Timothy and Titus, both of which are translated into English as “above reproach” or “blameless.”

In 1 Timothy, Paul uses the Greek word *anepileptos*. This word means: “pertaining to what cannot be criticized—“above criticism, beyond reproach” (Louw & Nida) or “not to be laid hold of; metaphorically beyond reproach, unblamable” (Mounce)

This Greek word is only used twice more in Scripture, both times also coming in First Timothy. In 1 Timothy 5:7, for the church to support a widow, she must be “beyond reproach.” Then in 1 Timothy 6:14, Timothy is commanded as a man of God to “...keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Interestingly, this particular word applies to elders, widows, and an evangelist—three types of people that can be fully supported by the church. Such individuals should strive to live lives above reproach.

In Titus, however, Paul uses a similar but slightly different word, the Greek word *anenketos*. While a different word, the definition is very similar: “Pertaining to one who cannot be accused of anything wrong— ‘without accusation’ (Louw & Nida) or “Unblamable, irreproachable (Mounce). This word appears in other New Testament Scriptures:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him (Colossians 1:21-22, ESV)

Other words are used in the New Testament to describe Christians as being “blameless” also.

That you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world (Philippians 2:15, ESV)

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless (2 Peter 3:14, NKJV)

Clearly, all Christians are to be blameless. We are to be blameless in that we:

1. Have had our sins washed away by Christ and are thus “blameless” in God’s sight.
2. Abstain from the crooked and twisted ways of the world. We do not “live in” sin.

Obviously, an elder must be blameless in these regards. Further, when we combine what Paul says to Timothy and Titus, an elder is a man who has lived in such a way that he cannot be easily criticized or accused.

This does not mean the elder must be perfect—otherwise, we could forego studying eldership altogether, for no men are perfect. This also does not mean people will never blame the elder. An elder will be accused a times, particularly by disgruntled individuals or groups. And thus, the need for this qualification. He may be blamed, but his character makes it such that false blame is easy to spot. A couple of examples help us understand this concept:

Job

The Bible describes Job as a man who was “blameless and upright.” After Job suffered the terrible losses described in [Job 1-2](#), his friends visited him. Ultimately, they blamed Job’s problems on him. They tried to blame him for great sin to be suffering so terribly.

The problem was, their accusations couldn't stick. Job could rightly deny their accusations. At some points, their charges were nothing but made up speculations. This was part of what frustrated Job. His friends continued to cast blame, but their accusations weren't accurate or truly descriptive of Job.

Jesus

Of course, the most outstanding example is Jesus. Jesus was blameless in the sense that he was indeed perfect. But as such, He also demonstrates what it means to be above reproach. Jesus had lived such a perfect life that the Jewish leaders had a hard time even coming up with lies about Him!

Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. (Mark 14:55-59, ESV)

Elders—the primary leaders of a congregation—must be men who are above reproach. They are not men who can be easily blamed. They are men that when someone does blame them, our first response is, "That doesn't sound right. Surely that can't be true of ____." If the men who lead us are easily blamed, or we suspect most things they are blamed for as likely true, then we are following untrustworthy men. We have leaders that we probably aren't following because people don't follow those they don't trust. Thus, elders must be above reproach.

Again, elders will likely be blamed and accused. When they stand against false teaching, they may be maligned as Paul often was. When they rebuke a sinning Christian, that person may seek to tear them down. But an elder is a godly and trustworthy man, and thus these false attacks should not easily tear him down.

Further, blameless does not mean perfect, and it doesn't mean that an elder is never open to honest blame. In fact, Timothy was instructed about rebuking elders:

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. (1 Timothy 5:19-20, ESV)

Elders are men and will make mistakes. Sometimes, they may even make mistakes that require them to be rebuked—thus incurring credible blame. This reminds us that while elders are above reproach, they are not perfect. But if they are men who fit the descriptions of First Timothy 3 and Titus 1, then the need for rebuke will undoubtedly be the exception, not the rule. Elders are men above petty criticism, men who cannot be easily blamed or torn down because their lives are great examples of godliness and Christian faithfulness.

Conclusion

Paul tells Timothy, “If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work” (CSB). The role and work of the shepherd-elder is genuinely noble work. And such noble work requires noble men. It’s a role of leader and servant. A job that requires a sheep also to be a shepherd. A labor of love that will often bring joy but will also expose one to heartache. It is the noble task of working with the ordinary problems and challenges of ordinary people. It’s not just another type of leadership as a business, school, or club. It is a position of leadership in the very church built by Jesus.

The role of an elder is certainly not a role for just anyone. It’s not for those that simply want to wield power; it’s not for those that will do the job only because no one else will. It’s certainly not a job for the lukewarm. And thus we can only look for, only appoint, and only follow qualified men. The Spirit has provided us with a picture of what such a man looks like. In a word, he is blameless. But in that quality, there is so much more. And thus, we begin the noble task of learning more about the qualities of a man fit to serve as an elder in the Lord’s church.

Sermon by: Nate Bibens

ⁱ [A Perspective on Eldership Qualifications - Christian's Expositor Journal \(thecejournal.org\)](http://thecejournal.org)