

# Not Arrogant, Not a Recent Convert, & Able to Teach

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The Christian life is a new life—the life of a sinner washed and made new. Like physical life, this new spiritual life begins with a new birth. It is a new beginning which requires growth and maturing. That growth should result in a holier life that looks more and more like Jesus as time goes on. As a Christian pursues righteous living, however, they must avoid self-righteousness and arrogance. One can and must live a holy life without developing a “holier than thou” demeanor. As a Christian grows in their walk with Christ, they should also grow in their humility.

As Christians mature in their knowledge, ability, and attitude, they become more capable of leading and influencing others. Their knowledge of the truth allows them to share the truth with others. Their righteous yet humble attitude helps them care for and love the souls of others, allowing them to teach and influence others most effectively. Spiritual maturation is essential for all Christians, and it is especially imperative for Christian leaders. The church needs guides—leaders capable of teaching and exemplifying what it means to follow Christ. Such men are the elders, overseers, and shepherds of the church. As we seek men to lead our congregations, we must ensure they possess the qualities laid out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The qualities under current consideration warn us against immaturity, help us see a man can teach others, and help us know a man’s attitude and demeanor is appropriate for teaching and leading others.

## Not Arrogant

In the letter to Titus, the eldership qualification list begins with “above reproach” and then addresses the marital and family qualifications. Verse seven restates the importance of being above reproach, and then Paul lists five negative qualifications—that is, five attributes an elder is not. That list begins with the quality of “not arrogant.”

Translations render this idea in a variety of ways:

“not arrogant” (ESV, CSB, NET, NRSV, RSV)

“not self-willed” (KJV, NKJV, MEV, LEB, NASB, ASV)

“not overbearing” (NIV)

“not self-pleased” (YLT)

The Greek word (**authade**) is only found twice in the New Testament; here and in 2 Peter 2:9-10:

“Then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority. Bold and *willful*, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones (emphasis added).

Typically, we think of arrogance as thinking too highly of oneself. Such is indeed a sin, and many other passages in the New Testament condemn arrogance (cf. 1 Cor. 13:4; 2 Tim. 3:2; Jas. 4:16). This particular word in Titus, however, addresses a specific type of arrogance. It is an arrogance that effects how one works with others.

Mounce's Expository Dictionary defines this word as "one who pleases himself, willful, obstinate, arrogant, stubborn."<sup>1</sup> So it isn't just a matter of having a high opinion of oneself—this is an arrogance that refuses to assess others' needs, interests, and desires. It is the attitude of a person who must have things his way or no way at all. Any person in a position of authority must fight the temptation to rule tyrannically. It is tempting to assume you know best and thus take a "my way or the highway" approach to leadership. In the Lord's church, this simply will not do.

There are many plain reasons an elder cannot be arrogant or self-willed. First, elders cannot focus on pleasing themselves. Many leaders use their position for their own benefit and pleasure. The power to do so is why so many people desire leadership positions in the first place. But an elder must be focused on pleasing God first, not self. Second, elders must work together. If a man always insists on having his way, he will never work with other leaders, and his self-willed arrogance will lead to problems. Third, elders are servants who lead by example and teaching, not dictators who rule by fiat. They are shepherds guiding sheep, but if they are stubborn and obstinate shepherds, they will ultimately hurt the sheep instead of helping them.

While this quality is only found in the Titus list, it can be viewed as the antithesis of "must be gentle" in 1 Timothy 3:3.

### **Not A Recent Convert**

Arrogance relates to the next quality for us to consider. In Paul's list to Timothy, one of the final attributes addresses an elder's experience as a Christian. The reason ties directly to conceit. Paul says,

He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil (1 Timothy 3:6, ESV)

The NKJV renders this as "not a novice," but most translations say something like "not a recent convert" or "not newly converted."

The Greek word (**neopytos**) is used only here in the New Testament, and literally, the word means "newly planted." It refers to someone who is new to something—a Christian who has recently obeyed the gospel and is in the early stages of their faith. It is a person we might typically call "a babe in Christ."

We understand someone must have experience if they are to lead. Teachers cannot teach unless they have first learned. Businesses want managers and executives who have experience in managing and running teams or organizations. More importantly, the church needs to be led by men of experience. Christianity is a process of growth. If spiritually immature men lead the congregation, how can the congregation hope to grow to maturity itself?

But beyond the obvious, Paul lists another reason why a recent convert should not be appointed as an elder. He says, “or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.” This explanation teaches us something about all the qualities—they protect the congregation *and* the man. While an inexperienced leader could undoubtedly cause harm to the congregation, Paul focuses on the danger posed to the leader. Paul warns Timothy that appointing an inexperienced man as an elder would be setting him up for failure.

When someone gains a position of prominence, prestige, or power before they have earned it and gained the necessary experience, it nearly always leads to either discouragement or an over-inflated ego. Paul uses a colorful description when he says he may “become puffed up with conceit.” Some people are arrogant because they know they are talented, intelligent, or attractive. That is bad enough, but this idea goes further—this is the concept of being far over-confident, arrogant far beyond reason.

The word used here is connected to one meaning, “to be crazy or demented.” Thus, the Louw and Nida Lexicon defines this word as “to be so arrogant as to be practically demented, to be insanely arrogant...”<sup>ii</sup>

Such a person cannot be reasoned with, will not listen to others, will not serve others, can never be rebuked, and will not consider others’ welfare. Clearly, such a person cannot lead the church.

Perhaps this is even the connection to Paul’s warning one may “fall into the condemnation of the devil.” We don’t know and don’t need to know all the details of how and why Satan chose to defy and challenge God in the first place—but surely we can say that such a move displayed a demented, insane form of arrogance to challenge God! Obviously, a man susceptible to this type of mindset and behavior should not be leading the church. But when spiritually immature men are appointed to lead as elders, that is exactly what we’re asking for!

Regarding the phrase “fall into the condemnation of the devil,” there are several views. This could mean the man falls into the same type of condemnation as the devil. Or it could mean the man is targeted as a leader by the devil and succumbs to Satan’s devices, thus incurring condemnation. Either way, the result is tragic and must be avoided. Therefore, the church must ensure that it only appoints experienced men as elders.

### **How Long is Someone a Recent Convert?**

While some aspects of this qualification are plain, there are still questions we may have. First, at what point is a person no longer “a recent convert?” The Bible does not give a timeline. We cannot say a person is a recent convert for one year, five years, or ten years. We read of no minimum timeframe of how long a person must be a Christian before they are no longer a recent convert. So how do we know?

When we look at the examples of congregations and elders in the New Testament, we see that many congregations appointed elders within ten years of being started, if not fewer. When Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the Galatian churches (Acts 14:23), they appointed elders in churches that had existed for several months or a few years at most. Perhaps the newness of the congregations demanded a slightly different approach, or maybe there were converts with a deal

of spiritual maturity already (e.g., devout Jewish converts). Whatever the case, it did not seem to take decades and decades for men to meet the qualification of no longer being a new convert.

What we can safely say is that for a Christian not to be a new convert, they must have had enough time to learn God's Word and grow in their faith and faithfulness. But further, the key is they must have grown. Some Christians have had ample time to grow and mature and could not possibly be called new converts, for they've been members of the church for years and decades. And yet, sometimes such people are still spiritual infants. The recipients of Hebrews were rebuked for this very thing.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:1-14, ESV)

Here is a clue (that also ties into our later point) about spiritual maturity. Part of spiritual maturity entails growing to the point that one can teach others and is not entirely dependent upon being taught by others. Surely, there is more to spiritual maturity than just this, but this is a significant part.

The truth is, appointing new converts does not seem to be a big problem in most congregations today. Sadly, what seems to be the bigger problem, is the tendency of many Christians to be content with spiritual infancy. Too often, congregations are not able to appoint elders because, despite men having been Christians for many years, they haven't grown, spiritually matured, or gained the spiritual experience needed to lead the Lord's church.

None of us should be content with this. Every one of us needs to recognize the importance of growth. We must each seek to learn and grow in our own faith. We must encourage and help one another grow. It is not wrong for a new convert to be spiritually immature, but it is wrong to remain in that state perpetually. Whether you are young or old, man or woman, plan to be an elder or not; if you are a Christian, you should be devoted to spiritual growth.

### **How Old Must an Elder Be?**

Now is an excellent time to address another common question about elders: how old a man must be to be an elder? It is natural to wonder if there should be some minimum age limit for a man to qualify as an elder. But the simple fact is the Bible does not provide us with an age qualification. If there was an age requirement, we can trust the Bible would provide it. For example, when Paul writes about widows' qualifications, he says a widow cannot be supported by the church if she is less than 60 years old (1 Timothy 5:9). But there is no age given for an elder, which means any age requirement we impose would be speculative and an addition to the qualifications prescribed by the Holy Spirit.

The term elder naturally speaks of an older person, at least old enough to have experience. Experience can only come with time. But time and age are not a guarantee of expertise. So again, what the church is to look for in an elder is a mature Christian with the experience and ability to teach and lead others.

## **Able to Teach**

As a mature Christian, the elder must also be able to teach. Nearly every translation renders this the same way, although some translate this as “skillful in teaching” (e.g., LEB). The phrase means exactly what it says—he has the qualifications and ability to teach or instruct others.

As a mature Christian who must guide, grow, and protect the flock, an elder must have the ability to teach. Part of an elder’s responsibility is to teach the congregation he cares for and the souls under his care. Teaching is the bedrock foundation of Christian leadership. When Jesus gave the great commission to the apostles, He commanded them:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 8:19-20, ESV)

When Paul described the church’s various leadership roles in Ephesians 4:11, he listed apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers. The common trait in all these roles is the ability and function of teaching in some manner. A man who is unable to teach simply cannot function as an elder in a congregation.

The question is, to what degree must an elder be able to teach? Also, must an elder be a public teacher, or can he be qualified as long as he can teach others privately?

### **Who is Able to Teach?**

To the first question, we must be careful. The Scriptures do not require an elder to be a dynamic and eloquent teacher. We often judge men’s teaching ability on their presentation, style, and overall, how much we enjoy listening to them. But eloquence does not prove a man is a good teacher. A man can be very eloquent and enjoyable to listen to, but his talent may be in teaching fluff which entertains but does not equip.

Further, elders will possess varying skill levels when it comes to teaching. Paul told Timothy, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17, ESV). We should not expect all elders to possess the same skill level. Some elders may be exceptionally talented at teaching, while others are not as talented. The key is not necessarily the talent level, but the ability. A man may be devoted to learning Scripture and teaching the Word accurately but may do so without the flare and dynamics that others have. When a man faithfully teaches the Word, then we can learn. This is not an excuse for a man not to improve his ability to teach in a manner that is easier to listen to and understand. Still, it is a reminder that a man’s teaching skill cannot be based solely or even primarily on his presentation. If a man is able to teach others the truth faithfully, then he is able to teach.

To help understand if a man does have such ability, we can look to the list in Titus.

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 1:9)

A man who is able to teach is first a man who has learned the Word of God. He is a student before he is a teacher. Having faithfully devoted himself to learning the Word, he must be equally devoted to teaching the Word in its simplicity and fullness. The able teacher is not a man who waters down

the gospel nor the a who adds flair to it. The able teacher sticks to the gospel. As Paul said, he preached “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). The able teacher can accurately instruct others in the sound doctrine of Scripture. He cannot be expected to know everything, but he must know the straightforward teachings of Scripture. He should be able to teach others the gospel.

Further, the able teacher can recognize and refute false teaching. Sadly, the church has always had to battle false doctrine. The men who should be the front line of defense in that battle are church leaders, primarily the elders. As men of spiritual maturity, they know the teachings of Christ well enough to recognize when someone teaches a false doctrine. But they are not just able to recognize false doctrine; they are men who are able and willing to combat it. They are prepared to defend the truth, refute error, and rebuke those who would teach falsehood. This does not mean they are harsh or cruel—they rebuke false teachers to protect others and to (hopefully) correct and convince the false teacher.

This ability to refute false teaching is clearly crucial because this is the final qualification listed in Titus. It does not come last because it is unimportant. It comes last because Paul then spends verses 10-16 discussing the great danger of false teachers. In a way, all the other qualifications help us see a man who is experienced, able, and willing to defend the truth, both in his actions and in his teachings.

### **Public or Private?**

Now to the question of whether an elder must be a public teacher in the church or not. This is a fair and important question. As with all the qualities we have discussed, we do not want to add to them or take away from them, so we want to be careful. Also, we want to consider the reason for the quality. In this case, the reason is stated—an elder must teach in order to instruct others and to refute false doctrine. Obviously, a man who can do that publicly and privately is able to teach. But what about a man that can only do one or the other? While I believe we must be cautious and thoughtful, I do think an elder should have the ability to teach both publicly and privately. Here are some reasons why:

1. If a man can only teach in private, then there may be a portion of the congregation that does not know and has not benefited from his teaching ability. If that is the case, how can they know he is able to teach and thus is fit to lead as an elder?
2. While the public teaching during church assemblies should not be the only teaching done, it is the only teaching done with the entire body present and together. It is the only time we learn and grow as a full, collective body. Thus, it is one of the most critical times for unified learning and edification. For an elder to not be able or willing to help and lead in that aspect is questionable at best.
3. False doctrine is often spread privately, but it can also be spread publicly. There are times when false doctrine must be rebuked and refuted publicly. If an elder cannot teach publicly, how can he publicly rebuke and refute false doctrine?

On the other hand, while public teaching is important, we should not neglect the importance of private instruction. Paul told the Ephesians he taught them in public and from house to house (Acts

20:20), that is, publicly and privately. Sometimes we focus a great deal on public teaching and developing pulpit teachers and preachers while neglecting to teach and train men to be able to teach privately. Men learn how to write up sermons, but not how to conduct a Bible study, have a one-on-one conversation about the Bible, or provide spiritual counseling. But an elder must be able to do these things.

### **Just for the Elders?**

For a long time, I used to say that some qualifications pertained only to elders and that being “able to teach” was one such attribute. I do not believe that’s quite right, though. I certainly do not mean that every church member can or should be a public, congregational teacher. But sometimes, we act as though public teachers are the only ones who have the responsibility to teach or even be able to teach. But that simply is not true. The phrase “able to teach” appears once more in the New Testament.

And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 2:24-25, ESV).

One could argue that Paul’s words were directed at Timothy as an evangelist. But all Christians are the Lord’s servants. As such, we are all required to be “able to teach.” The role, scope, and skill of teaching will undoubtedly vary from person to person. But if every Christian is expected to mature, then every Christian should come to a point where they can, in some form and fashion, be able to share what they have learned with others. Fathers are to be teachers in their home, as are mothers (cf. Ephesians 6:1-4). Older men are to teach younger men, and older women are to teach younger women (cf. Titus 2). Every Christian must “always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). So yes, we are all teachers in some sense. Are we all elders? Of course not. But elders are to be shining examples of what it means to be a mature, experienced servant of Christ, and this is true in the fact that they are mature enough to teach others. All of us should desire such maturity.

### **Conclusion**

The church needs qualified leaders to do just that—lead. We need men with the right experience, the right ability, and the right attitude. That means men who are mature in the faith. That means men who are able to teach. But such experience and ability cannot make a man arrogant and self-willed. The church needs men whose maturity has led to humility and whose ability is characterized by their faithful yet loving and gentle application of that ability so that they may genuinely influence and instruct others in the way of Christ.

*Sermon by: Nate Bibens*

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<sup>i</sup> Mounce, W. D. (2006). *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* (p. 1101). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>ii</sup> Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, pp. 123–124). New York: United Bible Societies.