

“The Qualifications of Elders, Part 4”
(1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9)

Over the past several weeks, we have been looking at what the Lord requires of a man before he can be an elder. Some of these things have to do with a man’s moral qualifications – he must be above reproach. One of them has to do with a man’s management qualification – he must be able to apply the Scriptures effectively to his own family. One of them has to do with his teaching abilities – he must know the Scriptures well and be able skillfully to apply them. And one of them has to do with his reputation – he must have a good name outside the church in the community. Now we would have to admit that most of these qualifications are things which can only come with time. They are things which we all possess as Christians, but which grow as a person matures, as we’ll see this morning. But one of these qualifications is a spiritual gift, one that only God gives by His Spirit, and that is the gift of teaching His Word skillfully. All of us here are called to be learners of the Scriptures. All of us are also called to teach them, at least at some level – parents are to teach their children; we are all to admonish one another; certainly, we are all called to sharpen one another’s understanding of the Scriptures as we have opportunity; and all of us are called, to one degree or another, to teach the Gospel to those outside the church through evangelism. But the one who would be an elder in Christ’s church must have more than this. He must be gifted in this area, since this is what the bulk of his work will involve. He must be able to search the Scriptures thoroughly and accurately to know Christ’s will, and he must be able to apply that Word skillfully in his governing, teaching and counseling.

This reminds us that God is the One who makes elders. We don’t. It doesn’t matter how many years a man is trained, if God hasn’t called him and gifted him for that office, he’s not qualified, and no amount of training will ever make him qualified. In other words, not every man is called to the office of elder. Not every man is gifted to do this work. But on the other hand, if God has in fact raised up a church, we can know that He has also gifted some of the men within that Congregation to be elders. One of the gifts Paul tells us that the Lord gives to His church are “some pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11). He gives them for the building up of the flock, to equip and prepare them for service in the body of Christ and in the world. They are His gracious gift, given out of His mercy, because He knows we need them. Christ Himself was a faithful elder – a faithful pastor and teacher – to His disciples, and as such He thoroughly prepared them for the work that He called them to do through His teaching and example. The Greek suggests that what Paul refers to by pastors and teachers are not two gifts, but one. Jay Adams calls them pastor/teachers. A pastor is one who leads the flock in the ways of God through his teaching, whether by way of preaching, instruction or counseling. Men who are qualified to do this are a gift Christ gives to every one of His churches. He usually gives more than one, so that there will be some level of accountability. How many more, we don’t know, which is why it’s important for us to know how to recognize these men, so that we can discern whom Christ has given us. Needless to say, these are the only men who should be ordained to this office.

Let’s move on now to the final qualification, which is that a man must be mature in his Christian walk, and then I will close with some final exhortations.

First, let's consider the final qualification. Paul writes to Timothy, "And not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil." Needless to say, an elder needs to be a seasoned Christian. This is what the word elder or presbyter means. It means one who is old or mature. Now generally, it takes time for a Christian to mature. When you were born, it took time for you to grow up, to learn what you needed to know to make your way in life. A baby isn't born on Monday and then goes in to work on Friday. It takes years of growing, developing, learning, failing and succeeding before a person is ready to be productive in life. The same is true of the Christian life. It generally takes years for that new life which God implants in our souls to develop to maturity. Now granted, some of the things we learned growing up in this world will help us to mature as Christians more quickly, so that there isn't a one-to-one correspondence between these two things, but it does take time. The apostle Paul appears to have begun his ministry as soon as he was converted. But he tells us in Galatians that after his conversion, he immediately left for Arabia, then he returned to Damascus (1:17). It might have been at that time that he began to preach. Just how long he was in Arabia, we don't know. But he didn't go up to Jerusalem from Damascus until three years after that (v. 18). All this is to say that the Lord didn't necessarily begin to use him right away. Even the disciples of our Lord were with Christ for a period of three and a half years, both day and night, and for another forty days after His resurrection (Acts 1:3), before He considered them to be ready to lead His church, with, of course, the gracious help of His Spirit.

Now in some cases, it doesn't take as long to grow up spiritually as it does physically, provided that there is already some maturity, as in Paul's case. The Levites didn't begin their work in the tabernacle or Temple until they were thirty years old (Num. 4:3), probably because the Lord wanted mature men in His service. Interestingly enough, even our Lord Jesus didn't begin His ministry until He was about thirty years of age, perhaps because of this qualification. But it didn't take nearly this long for Paul, nor for the other disciples, to prepare for Christian service, once they were converted. Yes, their years of training were much more intense than anything we will ever experience, but it was still a relatively short time. Sometimes maturity can come quickly. However, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes sin stunts our growth, so that we are not as mature as we should be for the years we have been in Christ's church. Some who have been in the church all their lives are still but spiritual infants. Now sometimes this is due to a lack of spiritual food – they're just not being fed a mature Christianity, what is called the meat of the Word. But sometimes it's due to the rejection of the food they're being fed, choosing rather to drink milk, than to eat the meat which Christ offers them. But in either case, sin is the problem. Sin can stunt our growth, which is why we need to be careful to avoid it and to receive everything our gracious Lord has for us by way of spiritual nourishment.

But I think you can see that maturity is important, especially to the elder. Without spiritual maturity, he won't meet the qualifications. His morals won't be what they should be. The management of his household will be weak. His knowledge of the Bible won't be full enough. His teaching gift will not be adequately developed, his reputation in the community perhaps flawed. But the most serious problem will be what it does to his own estimation of himself. If he is put in the position too soon, he is very liable to become conceited, to become prideful, and to fall into the same condemnation that the devil fell into. The Lord desires humble men, men who understand who and what they are, men who know their weaknesses and are as dependent upon Christ for their strength as anyone

can be. A prideful man, a man who thinks he knows it all, a man who thinks he can do it on his own, will soon fall and may very well bring the church with him.

Lastly, I want to leave you with some closing exhortations to help you sense the importance of this decision. The Session is continually evaluating men for this office. Sometimes we do it formally, by providing classes, testing them, interviewing them, their families and their neighbors. But most of the time, we do it informally, by keeping our eyes open to see if there is anyone who appears to meet these qualifications. But you need to keep your eyes open too. You need to be looking for this kind of men. You need to pray that the Lord would raise up this kind of men. When Jesus went out to do the work of the Gospel in Israel, He looked all around Him at the needs that there were. He felt compassion for them, because there was no one to shepherd them, to show them the way. “Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest’” (Matt. 9:37-38). You need to pray that the Lord would raise up these workers. You need them. You need their instruction. You need their counsel. You need their prayers. You need their example. Your Lord Jesus, your faithful Shepherd, the One who loves your souls, who laid down His life to redeem them, knows that you need these things. This is why He has provided them for you. This is why He has gifted men, and given them to the church, so that they might minister these things to you. Don’t settle for anything less. Don’t settle for someone who has the moral qualifications, but who can’t manage his family, or teach skillfully. Don’t settle for someone who can teach, but who isn’t mature, or doesn’t have a mature knowledge of the Bible, or who doesn’t have a good name in the community. Wherever your elders fall short, you too will fall short. Wherever they lack, you too will suffer for it. Confirm only those men who have the necessary qualifications, because these are the ones the Lord has given. And for those who are almost there, but not quite, keep praying for them that the Lord might build them up, strengthen and mature them, so that one day they might be able to help us do the same.

And lastly, with regard to those who might be pursuing this office, or who are already in this office, consider these questions: Do you want the flock to follow your example? Can you say to them, follow me, because I am following Christ? Do you spend enough time with your Savior to be like your Savior? Are you filled with His Spirit? Are you blameless within the church and without? Do you know the Word of God thoroughly, and are you able to teach it skillfully? Can you recognize and refute error when you see it? Are you managing your household well? Do your children obey you? Will your being an elder strengthen the ministry and witness of this church, or weaken it? These are very strong and searching questions because this is such a serious matter. No one is perfect, but our Lord Jesus. We all fall short in many ways. Only He doesn’t. But can you honestly say that you qualify according to these standards? If not, then wait. Don’t pursue the office at this time. Continue to pray and seek the Lord for His grace. Continue to study that you might know His will. Make use of the opportunities He gives you to sharpen your teaching and counseling skills. Submit to His gracious Providence as He continues to mature you and strengthen you in your battle against sin. And continue to cultivate faithfulness in your own household. Pursue these things before you take upon yourself the responsibility of managing the household of God. May the Lord help us all to take these things to heart as we need to hear them. May He help us to look up to Christ for His gracious help. And by these means, may He day by day make us all more like our Savior. Amen.