

A QUALIFIED MINISTRY
A Brief Look at Seven Controversial Qualifications
For Elders in the Church of Jesus Christ
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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to briefly examine seven of the more controversial areas of qualifications for elders as given by the apostle Paul in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. It is of the utmost importance that elders, deacons, and the congregation be thoroughly acquainted with the biblical requirements for church officers. Otherwise, we will end up substituting our own standards for God's.

The biblical list for officer qualifications must be approached in a biblical manner. This means it must be approached as a whole, and not in a piecemeal fashion. In other words, every candidate for office must show every one of the listed qualifications which would apply to the function he is called to fulfill. We cannot pick and choose.

Approaching the list of qualifications for church officers in a biblical manner also means recognizing that virtually every trait listed is to be present in Christians generally. In other words, men who fulfill these duties are models for other Christians to emulate. Their example sets the pace for the entire congregation -- as the elders, so the people (cf. Hos. 4:9).

In addition, it must be acknowledged that any man who is successful in these duties is so only by the grace of God. Showing these personality qualities is a duty of every Christian, but every Christian duty is also a grace. If a man meets the biblical standard of leadership, it is only by the mercy of his Heavenly Father who has bestowed these gifts.

Finally, we must be struck the ordinariness of the list Paul gives the church. Church officers are not required to have spectacular gifts and abilities. Every one of these qualifications is generally attainable. By faith, any Christian can reach the level of maturity that Paul demands in the church's leaders. These qualifications are not unreasonable -- they describe what every Christian should aim for and, by grace, can accomplish.

BLAMELESS

Paul insists that a bishop must be blameless (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6). At first this may sound like an impossible standard; after all, "there is no one who does not sin" (1 Ki. 8:46). But the Bible does not speak in the scientifically precise language that we are accustomed to in modern culture. Therefore, "blameless" need not be taken to mean absolute

sinlessness, but rather a lifestyle characterized by righteousness, holiness, and godliness. As Calvin says, the apostle “does not mean someone free from every fault, for no such man could ever be found, but one marred by no disgrace that could diminish his authority -- he should be a man of unblemished reputation.”

The Bible unashamedly and with no fear of contradiction calls men righteous or blameless, often without qualification or explanation. For example, Job, an elder among his people (Job 29:7, 21, 25), was said to be, “blameless and upright, one who feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). Similarly, Noah found favor in the eyes of God for he “was a just man, perfect in his generations” (Gen. 6:9). The word here translated “perfect” could just as accurately be rendered “blameless” or “having integrity” (NKJV marginal reading). In the New Testament, we are told that Zacharias and Elizabeth “were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Lk. 1:6). Paul speaks of having a clear conscience, which certainly implies blamelessness (Acts 23:1; 2 Cor. 1:12ff; 2 Tim. 1:3).

Obviously the Bible is not teaching that Christians can attain sinlessness in this life. As the Heidelberg Catechism explains, “even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience” (Q&A 114). While blamelessness does not mean sinlessness, it certainly means that an advanced degree of sanctification is visible in a person’s life. There can be no glaring moral weaknesses. It must include maturity in godliness; the fruit of the Spirit must be clearly ripening; and one’s external conduct must conform to biblical law.

Perhaps the best working definition of blamelessness is laid out for us in the rest of the qualifications Paul gives us. All of these things must be considered to be attainable in this life by saints who strive for holiness, devote themselves to the means of grace available in the church, and persevere in faith and repentance. In an age in which the church has all too often sought after charismatic gifts rather than Spirit-wrought graces, and charming personalities rather than personal holiness, it is of the utmost importance that we insist on this quality of blamelessness. The congregation needs nothing more than shepherds who faithfully emulate the Great Shepherd, Christ Jesus Himself. As Scottish pastor Robert Murray M’Cheyne put it, “My people’s greatest need is my personal holiness.” Biblically qualified elders are men of the highest moral excellence.

THE HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE

There are few qualifications in Paul’s list that have caused greater confusion than his requirement that elders be the husband of one wife (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6). Several questions immediately come to mind: Must a man be married to serve as an elder? Is Paul merely ruling out a polygamist, or does he also rule out men who have divorced and remarried? Does it matter if the divorce was pre-conversion or post-conversion? Does it matter if there were biblical grounds?

I think the best way to interpret the apostle here is to read no more into this qualification than he actually states. Paul says that an elder is to be (literally) a “one-wife man.” Past divorces are not in view. Paul is simply requiring a man to have an exemplary marital

life in the present. I want to emphasize the present tense-ness of Paul's qualification.¹ Paul does not say that an elder must "have only had one wife," which would be a quite different point than the one he makes. Nor can Paul be understood to teach that an elder must be "married only once in his lifetime," ruling out widowers who have remarried. In cases where a spouse died or has broken the marriage covenant, remarriage is always an option and cannot disqualify a man. Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 is so brief and to the point that it is quite easy (and even tempting) to make him say more than he actually does. Paul's statement must be taken in light of the Scripture's overall doctrine of marriage; only as this is done can we begin to answer our complex questions.

When we consider the broader biblical teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, I think we can reach several helpful conclusions. Because there is an almost limitless number of possible cases, I will deal with five representative examples only: Polygamy; divorced, but with marital obligations outstanding; divorced, with no marital obligations; divorced and remarried; and never married.

- First, we may confidently exclude a polygamist from candidacy for office. Even if a man takes multiple wives before conversion, and reaches an exemplary level of holiness after conversion, this man's previous sin has barred him from a position of ordained leadership in the church. The consequences of his past sin remain visible to the world and are irreversible in one sense. Thus, we may be sure that God, in His infinitely wise providence, has chosen to not use this man as an officer in His church.
- If a man has been unbiblically divorced, before or after conversion, and is not remarried, he is disqualified from eldership because his marital life is not above reproach. He still has marital obligations to fulfill, namely, to seek reconciliation.
- In the case of a man who has been divorced biblically, and is not at fault, the church faces a judgment call. Here other factors must come into play: Even though he was not "guilty," does his wife's sin prove he was not managing his home well? How will this effect his reputation with outsiders? Can he be considered blameless?
- In the case of past divorces (before or after conversion, whether or not there were biblical grounds) where there are no remaining obligations (because of remarriage or death), the church once again faces a judgment call. I do not see how Paul's qualification automatically excludes a man who has divorced and remarried. Paul only seems to be concerned with the man's present blamelessness in his marriage. All other factors, such as how long ago the divorce was, what its ramifications were for the man's reputation, how he has demonstrated repentance, the lawfulness of his remarriage, etc., will all have to be taken into consideration. A certain measure of subjectivity will be inescapable, so wisdom must be our guide.
- Does Paul require an officer to be married? Paul addresses men in the married situation because, after all, most people get married. But this does not seem to

¹By analogy consider the qualification for blamelessness. Paul does not mean that a person must have *always* been above reproach, for that would be virtually impossible -- every Christian starts out immature and grows in godliness. Consider that Paul himself had once been an accomplice in murder! Pre-conversion sin did not disqualify him for office.

absolutely prohibit single men (including widowers and those never before married) from office. After all, Paul himself was single, at least at the time of his apostolic ministry (1 Cor. 7). Certainly the experience of marriage and child-rearing can do much to prepare a man for office, but it seems single men can contribute to church leadership in unique ways as well.

In summary, Paul is simply requiring men to be blameless in their marital lives. The question of whether or not a divorced man (or a divorced and remarried man) may be an officer is not directly dealt with in the Scriptures; therefore, we must sort through these situations on a case-by case basis, taking into account Scripture's overall teaching on marriage and the qualifications of officers. What is unquestionable is that church leaders must exemplify godly marriages, loving their wives as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5).

ABLE TO TEACH

Paul includes these words in describing the kind of man Titus should ordain: "holding fast the faithful word he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (Tit. 1:9). Elders must be apt to teach and capable of defending the faith. Calvin put a premium on this qualification and considered it to be the heart of the elders' task: "Therefore, it was a principle of long standing in the church that the primary duties of the bishop were to feed his people with the Word of God, or build up the church publicly and privately with sound doctrine."

The church is built on the foundation of God's truth (Eph. 2:20); at the same time, she is God's instrument for guarding and propagating that truth in the world (1 Tim. 3:15). Therefore, it is of great importance that her elders be uncompromising in their commitment to biblical truth. They must not only have a firm grasp of the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), but must be ready to die for this truth if necessary. It does not seem possible to overstress the importance of this allegiance to the Word of God. Scripture must be the rock officers cling to -- it must govern their personal lives, control the way they shepherd the flock, and serve as their standard for implementing church discipline.

This qualification should not be taken to mean that all elders must be uniquely gifted in teaching (cf. 1 Tim. 5:17). However, it does seem to include the following:

- A thorough familiarity with God's Word, involving a working knowledge of all sixty-six books of the Bible. Elders must be familiar with the history of redemption as unfolded in the pages of Scripture; systematic theology; the biblical worldview, including how the Bible applies to our contemporary cultural context; biblical law/ethics; etc.
- An unswerving loyalty to the truths of Scripture. Learning alone is not enough; there must be zeal and jealousy for God's truth. In our denomination, this of course requires faithfulness to the Westminster Standards as an accurate summary of biblical teaching. It is not simply enough to believe the Confession; faithful elders must be

willing to enforce it.²

- An ability to properly handle the Word of God, including the ability to explain and apply it to others. This includes using Scripture in evangelism, discipleship, and counseling. Elders must be able to communicate with their flock in order to do these things effectively.
- An ability to defend the faith. Elders must be able to refute those who would undermine God's Word and attack it -- both inside the church and outside the church. This requires not only some degree of aptitude in apologetics, but also the courage and conviction necessary to guard the truth. Elders must be loving and patient, but also intolerant of doctrinal error.

Thus, knowledge of the truth, zeal for the truth, ability to communicate the truth, and aptness in defending the truth, all must characterize qualified elders.

I take this qualification to mean that elders must be skilled in handling God's Word. Knowledge of the truth is not enough; it must be coupled with the ability to instruct. On the other hand, wonderful gifts of teaching and exhortation alone do not prepare a man to be a bishop; he must also maintain and uphold God's undiluted truth in sincerity and faithfulness. Godliness is no substitute for knowledge of the truth (indeed, it not even possible without a knowledge of the truth), but neither is scholarship an adequate replacement for character, as is often thought.

It can be reasonably asked, "Why must elders whose primary function will be that of ruling rather than teaching have the ability to teach well?" This qualification applies to all elders without distinction insofar as it requires a firm knowledge of and ability to handle God's word (which is certainly important to ruling as it is to teaching). However, those elders who are not called to function as regular teachers in the church (i.e., carry on a preaching or teaching ministry) do not need to have a special giftedness in regards to teaching. Paul clearly did not believe all elders were primarily teachers (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Cor. 12:28) and this is a continuation of the Old Testament pattern in which many who are designated elders clearly did not carry on special teaching ministries.³ Thus, the way

²A study of how the northern Presbyterian church capitulated to liberalism earlier this century will demonstrate the truth of this assertion.

³See *Order in the Offices*, edited by Mark Brown, especially 44ff. A brief comment on the distinction between so-called Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders may be appropriate here (though I realize my position is somewhat different than the PCA BCO). The debate over whether the New Testament calls for three church offices (minister/Teaching Elder, Ruling Elder, and deacon) or two (elder, deacon) has been the occasion of great controversy in Presbyterian circles, especially for the last 150 years. (Calvin's four office view seems to have fallen by the wayside, which is too bad.) I certainly cannot solve all the questions that have been raised in this perplexing debate, but I will offer a few suggestions. First of all, it is hard to see how the distinction between two types of elders can be as rigid as we have made it, in light of passages such as Phil. 1:1. Thus it seems there are two basic offices in the New Testament church. This would mean all elders should have the same rights and prerogatives (i.e., the right to administer the sacraments and belong to the higher courts of the church). But secondly, there is clearly a

in which the qualification “apt to teach” applies depends upon the ministry or function the elder in question is called to fill.

MANAGES HIS FAMILY WELL

If there is any area where contemporary Reformed churches have disregarded God’s standards for eldership, and substituted man’s standards, it is here. As one theologian puts it, we have replaced the family with footnote, focusing on academic training and intelligence rather than godly family life. But Paul is not concerned about a man’s degrees, how well he runs his business, or how successful he has been outside the home. For Paul, family life is the school that prepares a man for office.

It is difficult to exegete this qualification briefly because it presupposes so much biblical instruction on such things as the covenant of grace, biblical parenting, the status of covenant children, etc. The best I can do is recommend the thoroughly biblical essay “The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and Covenant Succession” by Robert Rayburn. Also worth reading are Doug Wilson’s *Standing on the Promises* and *Will My Children Go To Heaven?* by Ed Gross.

The importance of a man’s family life cannot be overestimated. Paul’s rhetorical question in 1 Tim. 3:5 drives this home: If a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God? The home is the training ground and proving ground for future church officers. If a man cannot keep his family in order, well

differentiation of function among those who hold the office of elder. This is clear from passages such as 1 Tim 5:17 and 1 Cor. 12:28 where teaching and ruling functions are distinguished. (Again, we see this same distinction in the Old Testament). My point is that the differentiation is based not on holding a distinct office but possessing unique gifts. It is a *functional* distinction, not an *official* or *judicial* one. Thus there is a division of labor among those who hold the office of elder. Duties are divided amongst the elders based on abilities, gifts, providential callings, etc. (And I would argue that there are more than just teaching and ruling elders in this sense. There may also be elders who specialize in evangelism, counseling, exhortation, rendering judgments, and so on -- or any combination of these functions may be fulfilled by one man in accordance with the grace apportioned to him). Thirdly, while all elders hold the same office, this does not preclude there being a “first among equals” at each level of the church’s courts, corresponding (perhaps somewhat roughly) to the Old Testament pattern of having “rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, rulers of tens” (Ex. 18:21). At the risk of sounding episcopalian, let me add that by this I mean more than just one who serves as a moderator to pace discussions and break ties. This “first among equals” (archelder perhaps?) would act (as needed) as an official spokesman or representative of the whole body of elders over which he presides. So I believe firmly in the parity of all elders while firmly denying it! Well, I’m sure this footnote will either seem like an amazingly well-balanced “best of all worlds” approach to church government or will make everyone on every side of the debate mad, but at least it gives us something to think about.

disciplined, and fruitful under his leadership, how can he do these things in the church? If a man does not shepherd his wife and children effectively, how will he do so in the congregation?

The difficulty is in evaluating the way a man has managed his home. Apparently, the results of godly leadership in the family will be evident to all. His children will be submissive and reverent (1 Tim. 3:4); they will be “faithful children, not accused of dissipation or insubordination” (Tit. 1:6). But what does this mean? I think Paul is clearly requiring elders to have children who are not only well behaved but who are Christians. As Calvin says, Paul, “demands that the children be believers; whence it is obvious that they have been trained in the sound doctrine of godliness, and in the fear of the Lord.” Renowned biblical exegete William Hendricksen explains the phrase “believing children” in Titus 1:6 as “having children who share the Christian faith of their fathers and who adorn that faith with a godly conduct. A man whose children are still pagans or behave as pagans must not be appointed elder.” Doug Wilson further explains Titus 1:6:

The phrase “faithful children” can also be rendered “believing children” -- in other words, they should be *Christians*, whose lives match their profession. Moreover the word translated as “riotous living” is *asotia* -- literally this means unsaved. An elder must not have a rebellious, unsaved child.

But the basic meaning remains unchanged even if we leave the translation as “faithful children.” In the context, what are they faithful *to*? Clearly, they are to be faithful to the teaching and instruction of their father. Now do we want to require children to be faithful when they are told to make their beds or take out the trash, but leave them to their rebellion at the most important point -- when they are told to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? It is hardly possible that Paul is here requiring faithfulness in the little things but indulging faithlessness at the most central area of any Christian parent’s concern.⁴

It may seem that this puts an unbearable burden on the shoulders of fathers. And certainly, if fathers were left to their own strength, there would be no hope, for no one can make someone else a Christian. But God has not left us to our own devices -- He has made glorious promises to believing parents, promises that include the salvation of their children. The promises made in the covenant of grace do not merely give the children of believers a privileged status, but promise them all the benefits of the gospel itself (Gen. 17; Ps. 103:17-18; Ps. 127; Ps. 128; Acts 2:38-39; etc.). We must not water down these promises; to do so is simply unbelief. Of course these promises are not automatic either, so the sin of covenant presumptuousness must be avoided and warned against. Parents have no right to claim the promises unless they fulfill the conditions. Rayburn writes:

⁴*Standing on the Promises*, p. 47.

That faithful nurture should be a real condition of the fulfillment of the promise of covenant succession is, after all, only to be expected. It is exactly parallel to other such conditions and to the stress placed on other instrumentalities of saving grace. Just as those who are far off will not be brought near unless someone is sent to preach to them, just as the church will not remain faithful to God unless her ministry remains faithful, so the church's children will not awaken to a life of living faith without covenantal nurture. Such are the appointed means of grace which divine sovereignty, with its secret purposes, provides for all who are being saved.

In a footnote, he adds:

It is the faithful acknowledgment of the seriousness with which the Lord views this parental nurture as a condition of the fulfillment of his promise that is the true protection against a nominalism which denatures the doctrine of covenant succession and bases upon it a false presumption of the eternal security of the church's children. Holding fast to the clear connection drawn in Scripture between the fulfillment of God's promise and the divinely appointed instrumentality of its fulfillment is [the most effective deterrent to careless presumption].

In other words, the promises made to parents must not be isolated from the duties given to parents. But at the same time, the conditions of the promises are not beyond the reach of Christian fathers, any more than the other qualifications for church office. Certainly, if a man is blameless, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, etc., it is due to the grace of God. But this is not to say a man has no responsibility or control over the formation of these characteristics in his life. Likewise, if a man has believing children, it is due solely to the grace of God. But God uses means, and the primary means he uses in raising up godly offspring is faithful covenant nurture on the part of the parents. If Paul requires elders to have believing children, certainly this is something men can, under the grace of God, do something about. Parents who trust God's promises with a genuine faith that produces works of obedience (Jas. 2:14ff) can be assured they will see the results in their children.⁵ Fathers who rest in God's covenant promises will be faithful in disciplining their children, praying for them, instructing them, setting them a godly example, and so on, and God guarantees that these means will bear fruit. God's grace does not abrogate the conditions of the covenant but enables parents to meet them. Shying away from these covenant promises is due to either our unbelief or desire to escape responsibility. Disobedient children bring shame to their parents (Prov. 29:15) precisely because the parents could have done something about it and failed. Rayburn explains:

[In] Titus 1:6... Paul lays down the requirement that to qualify for consideration for the eldership a man must have believing children. Upon this rock must finally shatter every attempt to argue that parents are not

⁵It should be recognized that a man may be godly in many ways and yet still not be faithful in the matter of parenting. The Old Testament is full of such examples.

directly accountable for the spiritual issue of their children's lives. A man with unbelieving children is a man with a defect which disqualifies him from the leadership of the church.

Obviously much more could and should be said about this. But hopefully this short exposition has clarified Paul's requirement. There is an inescapable link between godly parenting and godly children. Because elders are to set an example to the flock, and because the congregation is to consider the outcome of their conduct (Heb. 13:7), it is of enormous importance that church leaders manage their homes biblically. Elders must be able to say with Joshua, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15). If a man cannot handle the tremendous responsibility of bringing up his children in the Lord (Eph. 6:4), he is certainly not qualified for the even greater responsibility of leading the congregation in the ways of the Lord.⁶

NOT A NOVICE

Paul forbids new converts from church office, lest they become "puffed up with pride" and fall into the snare of the devil (1 Tim. 3:7). Those who are new in the faith simply have not proven themselves and are therefore unfit for leadership. They should be the trainees, not the trainers; they should be receiving discipleship rather than discipling others. It would seem that new converts were excluded, if for no other reason, than that they cannot meet the other qualifications. How can a new Christian have proven his blamelessness to the congregation? How could he have mastered the Scriptures to the point that he can teach and instruct others? Paul seems to think that young Christians who are wrongly thrust into positions of leadership will be vulnerable to pride, the very sin that led to Satan's downfall.

How long must a man be a believer before he is fit to lead? Paul does not give a hard and fast rule, so we must not make one. As in other cases, we are left with a judgment call. The church will have to prayerfully consider when a man is ready to take a church office,

⁶I realize how controversial my exposition of this qualification is in our day. To speak of trusting God for the salvation of your children as a matter of course just does not make any sense to modern American individualists. To affirm confidence that your children will indeed grow up loving and serving the God of their parents seems presumptuous to some and foolish to others. Arminians will object: "There's no way you can know your kids will be Christians! It all depends on how *they* exercise their free-will!" Calvinists will object: "There's no way you can know your kids will be Christians! After all, only God knows if they're elect!" I believe there are legitimate dangers Christian parents face on both sides. On the one hand we must guard against anything like covenant presumption, constantly laboring by the grace of God to raise our children in the Lord. On the other hand God certainly does want us to raise our children in a state of panic and anxiety, wondering if they'll turn out ok. I contend we can and must truly trust in the gracious promises of God about our children and as we do so we will see his faithfulness bear beautiful trans-generational fruit.

evaluating him and testing him. When he has shown that he meets all the other conditions in a mature fashion, he is prepared for office.

GOOD TESTIMONY AMONG THOSE WHO ARE OUTSIDE

Paul requires elders to be respected by those outside the church. Why does it matter what the outside world thinks? Because when a man is elevated to the office of elder, he becomes Christ's official representative. The church is declaring to the world, "This man is like Christ and we have chosen him to lead us in Christ-likeness." The world judges the church first and foremost by her leadership. Church leaders must, like Daniel (Dan. 6:4), live in such a way that their adversaries cannot really get a handle on them in order to accuse them of wrong doing. Elders need to remember that many around them would love to see them fall, so they must always be on their guard.

There is some difficulty here, however, with this qualification. After all, if a man is truly godly, won't he be hated by the world, scorned, reviled, and even persecuted (Jn. 15:18ff; 1 Pt. 2:11-12)? To have a good reputation among outsiders does not mean that a man must be well liked by everyone all the time. It does not mean that every non-Christian (or even every Christian, for that matter) will consider him to be a "jolly good fellow." In fact, if this is the case, the man may actually be disqualified (Lk. 6:22, 26). What Paul means is that a man must be so righteous and blameless in his conduct that no one can bring a believable charge against him. This does not mean that there will not be any charges against him, though. For example, Jonathan Edwards, who to this day is one of the most respected Christians in church history, by both believers and unbelievers, was accused continually of having "sinister motives" and misleading his congregation. John Bunyan, a Christian of remarkable godliness, was once accused of adultery, because his enemies were trying so desperately to bring him down. Of course, those who knew Bunyan laughed at the charge, and Bunyan himself responded, saying, "If all the adulterers in this town were hanged, I would be alive and well." Other great Christian leaders such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, Charles Spurgeon, Augustine, and so on, were reviled at different times and in different ways for shameful activities they did not commit. Because elders are often victims of such persecution, Paul tells Timothy to be cautious in even considering a charge against an elder (1 Tim. 5:19).

Because an elder is in the spotlight, he certainly must live in such a way that he is not an easy target for those who would love to bring disgrace to the name of Christ. It is possible for the enemies of the gospel to hate us and respect us at the same time. A candidate for office must be known as a man of integrity, a man who cannot be corrupted, a man who is uncompromising in his obedience to God's law. Because elders are not only private persons but also serve in a public capacity, they are often not the real point of attack. In fact sometimes elders will find themselves in the somewhat awkward position of having to defend their righteousness, not because they are self-righteous but because the cause of Christ is at stake in them (cf. Acts 20:18-21, 26-27, 33-35; 24:16, 19-20; 25:8, 11; 26:10; etc.). In such cases, an elder who fails to defend himself actually fails to defend Christ.

What may we conclude then? Elders may not always be spoken of well by the world in every sense (cf. Mt. 11:19). But when they are reviled and persecuted, it must be for the sake of righteousness, not because they have been disobedient. Elders who openly stand for the truth of the gospel and for biblical morality will undoubtedly come under fire in our day. But the question here is whether or not the accusations will stick. Persecution because of godliness certainly does not disqualify a man for office. Is a man well respected even by his enemies? Is he known for his integrity and resolute obedience? Or do those outside the church see him regularly compromise? Does his conduct tarnish or enhance the church's witness before a watching world? In short, is he known as a Christian by all around him? These are the questions we must use in evaluating potential candidates.

NOT VIOLENT BUT GENTLE, NOT QUARRELSOME

In 1 Tim. 3:3, Paul says an elder must be a man who is "not violent...but gentle, not quarrelsome." In Titus 1:7, Paul echoes this, saying an elder must not be quick tempered. Among the moral qualifications listed, these three go together, so I will deal with them as a whole. Perhaps the meaning of these overlapping qualifications can best be captured simply by examining the words Paul used.

The word translated "violent" literally describes a fighter who is out of control, who is short tempered. The word is derived from the Greek verb for "to strike;" it excludes a man who physically or verbally harms other people. This word could also be translated "pugnacious." Because elders often must deal with emotionally charged issues, it is imperative that they do so in a non-combative manner. This does not exclude strong passion for the truth or for a certain course of action in a given set of circumstances. But it does mean that strong feelings should be expressed in a godly manner.

The word rendered "gentle" describes the gracious, forbearing, loving, patient, magnanimous, equitable character that all elders must display. Elders must not treat the sheep roughly. In dealing with those who are ignorant of some portion of God's truth, or who have strayed into some form of immorality, elders must firmly but kindly shepherd their flock. Obviously, this gentleness is to form a stark contrast with the violent, overbearing man.

When Paul requires bishops to not be quarrelsome, he is demanding that they be men of peace. They must not be contentious, divisive, or proud. Elders must not cause unnecessary strife in the body of Christ, for this is something the Lord hates (Prov. 6:19). A hostile and argumentative spirit has no place among the leaders of God's people.

Obviously these qualifications do not require elders to be passive, tolerant wimps (cf. Mt. 23; Jn. 2:15; Gal. 2:11). Elders, as we have seen, must fight for God's truth. But they must do so in a manner that is compatible with that truth -- in love (1 Cor. 13; Gal. 6:1; Eph. 4:15). Elders are to display a humble boldness.

CONCLUSION

The church today is in a horrible mess, largely because her leadership is in a horrible mess. If reformation and revival are to come, they must start with the church's officers. Real and lasting change in the church and the culture will only come when the church is led by biblically qualified men. It is easy to point out the sin of the church across town with a woman (or even homosexual) pastor, but why do we think our disobedience in this area is any less severe? Liberals learned how to disregard biblical qualifications from us! Our corporate sin in this area has brought many chastisements from the Lord upon his church, to be sure. Congregations must insist on officers who meet the specifications given by Paul. Elders who are not qualified must pursue a course of repentance, even if it means stepping down from office. We should be thankful to God for the faithful leadership that is present in the church today, but we must also beg Him to raise up more qualified men to do the work of the church in the future (Mt. 9:37-38).