

Elders – What Kind of People? What do they Do?

1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, Acts 20, 1 Peter 5

Turn to 1 Timothy 3 please. We'll talk about elders today, elders in the church. We will look at four New Testament Scriptures. The first two Scriptures tell us what kind of people should become elders. And the last two Scriptures speak to those who are already elders, and tell them what to do.

In Acts 13–14 Paul and Barnabas went on what we call Paul's first missionary journey. They preached the gospel in different cities, and started a church in each place. Then they turned around and went back through the same cities, and appointed church elders in each city.

They choose a group of men to take care of the church, to lead it and watch over it. Every church had them. That was church organization in its simplest form, and the rest of the NT follows this. Some churches eventually had deacons as well, but each church at the start had only elders.

The Scriptures assume the elders are men. We will stay with that today for the sake of convenience. We will leave aside the issue of women elders. We'll get to that after Christmas.

This sermon goes in two parts, first, what kind of people should elders be? Second, what is their job; what are they supposed to do?

What kind of People should Elders be?

Elder qualifications are listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and those two are much alike. We'll begin with 1 Timothy 3.

Understand this: there is no such thing as a church without elders. These Scriptures give us the basic measuring stick, and if no one seems good enough, then we relax requirements. We select people that are closest. In some New Testament churches these lists must have been viewed flexibly, because they had been rough people who had not followed the Lord very long.

1Tim 3:1-7 *Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever wants to be an overseer desires a noble task.*

*Whoever wants to be an overseer desires a noble task. Whoever wants this, whoever desires it. Peter will say in 1 Peter 5, serve because you are *willing*, and be eager to serve. In our church, finding elders who are willing to serve has not really been a problem, and that's good. One more thing: in the New Testament, "elder" and "overseer" are used interchangeably.*

Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not

know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

We'll not go over each one of these. They are pretty clear as they are. But let's make some general observations: This list is about moral character, about godly character. It is not about spiritual gifts. Both lists mention teaching, but not in the sense of the gift of teaching, we'll see that more clearly in Titus. It means the elder knows enough to tell when something goes against the gospel, and knows the basic correction.

This is about moral character. There is nothing in this list that is not a call to every child of God. When we told God we wanted to live in his ways, which we did when we believed and were baptized, this is what we were saying, all of us. We would aim our lives in this way.

Church leaders are not called to different qualities, they are called to the same qualities as everyone, and they are known to live like this habitually. They're not perfect, but they are steady at this. Peter will say that shepherds should lead by example, and this list sounds like that.

There is nothing in this list about being a natural leader, or a strong leader, or have strong vision, or having good ministry skills, or successful in business, or remarkable experiences from God. These are not bad things. But that's not what it takes to be an elder. Elders lead by example.

Daily godly living trumps everything. Remember this people. We get worked up about little things. Daily godly living trumps everything. Not just here, but everywhere in the Bible.

Titus 1:5-9 I left you in Crete so you would put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

Children. A man whose children who believe, not wild or disobedient. This qualification puzzles me a bit because it is not how the Bible usually looks at disobedient children. In Deuteronomy 21, a stubborn and rebellious son was to be put to death by the men of the town, and the parents were not considered responsible for this.

Proverbs speaks the same way, a wise child listens to the teaching of his parents, and a foolish child does not. It is the child's choice, not the parent's. The prodigal son, in Jesus' parable, had the perfect father; and yet that son was wild and disobedient.

So we must make room for this. On the other hand, Paul assumes that the household will show what kind of parent the potential elder is. Those who do not manage their children and family well won't care for the church properly either.

Titus was on Crete, and it was a new church. Cretans were a wild crowd as a whole. If you compare Titus 1 with 1 Timothy 3, you can see this. Both lists say "not violent," but for emphasis the Titus list also has "not quick-tempered."

Both lists have "self-controlled" but for emphasis the Titus list adds "disciplined." Cretans tended to be quick tempered and lacked self-control, so Paul stressed those.

To Timothy in Ephesus, Paul says "not a lover of money," but to Titus on Crete, Paul says, "not pursuing dishonest gain." In Ephesus greed was a problem, but not stealing. In Crete, however, Titus needed to rule out stealing or cheating with money when he selected elders. To Timothy, "not a recent convert," but not to Titus, probably because on Crete they all were recent converts.

Teaching: *He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught.* This is what "able to teach means." The basic quality – "hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught." Every believer should hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught. The elder pays attention to what's been taught, to the core gospel truths, and holds on to them. We're talking about the salvation that God offers everyone through Jesus. Elders believe and trust the gospel for themselves, and they firmly hang on to it. Why?

So that he can encourage others by sound doctrine, and refute those who oppose it. That's not the gift of teaching, it is more basic, all believers should hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught. Elders hold on so they can encourage others and correct those who teach that something else is the gospel.

To summarize: Elders should be people to imitate. Before I move on to what elders should do, the last two texts we'll read, I will mention Galatians 5. In the second half of Galatians 5, Paul lists the works of the flesh, and a sentence or two later he lists the contrasting fruit of the Spirit.

The flesh produces one kind of life, the Holy Spirit produces a different kind of life. After having gone through the list of requirements in Timothy and Titus, if we now read in Galatians 5, the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit, you would see the similarity.

What the flesh produces is what elders should not be like. Rather the elders should be like what the Spirit produces. We are all urged to live as elders. Some might read these lists in Timothy and Titus, and decide that elder requirements don't have much to do with the Holy Spirit.

But don't be fooled by thinking like that. Galatians 5 teaches us that the only way a person qualifies for eldership is if they've made a habit of being led by the Spirit, and staying in step with the Spirit – that's Paul's language in Galatians 5. Elders qualities come no other way.

What should Elders do?

Turn to Acts 20. Here Paul speaks to the elders of the church at Ephesus. Paul asked the Ephesian elders to meet him in Miletus, and he speaks to them there.

Acts 20:28-30 - Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

The elders are guards, they watch over themselves, and the watch over the flock as a shepherd would watch over sheep.

When I first became an elder of this church, that seemed impossible. I am just a sheep, like all of you. But the Lord said, “Yes, Ed, you are just a sheep, but now I want you to walk on your hind legs, and wear a shepherd’s cloak, and carry a shepherd’s stick, and be their shepherd.” And I thought to myself, “you have to be kidding!” But he was not kidding. That’s what elders do. Eventually it became less awkward.

Whatever the human process of selecting elders might be, it is really the Holy Spirit. “The Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Pure and simple.

Why keep watch over the flock? *Savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.* There are people who claim to be servants of Christ who come into the church. But their hidden plan is not to serve Christ or the church, it is to serve themselves. They want something for themselves from the church. And they don’t care about damage and confusion they cause. Guard the flock.

Why do we watch over each other? *Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.*

The goal of some of those Ephesian elders would change. At the start they wanted to serve Christ and the church. But Paul knows that will change. They want to make a name for themselves, and pretending to serve Christ, they use the church to serve themselves. Some of those very elders would do this. That is why we guard ourselves. They may not even know this is happening to them, but it is, and is no less dangerous just because they don’t see it themselves.

No church is immune from savage wolves who come in and do not spare the flock. No church is immune from its own leaders losing their way and wanting to make a name for themselves. These things happen just as much in these days as those days.

What should elders be doing? *Guard yourselves, keep watch over one another, and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*

Turn to 1 Peter 5. This is our fourth and final text today. Peter was the one to whom the Lord said, “do you love me, Peter? Feed my sheep. Do you love me, Peter? Tend my lambs.” I hear that conversation ringing in Peter’s ears as he writes this to his churches.

1 Peter 5:1-4 - *To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ’s sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*

What do elders do? What is our task? V2 - *Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them.* Be shepherds, watch over them. It sounds a lot like Paul in Acts, doesn’t it? Paul said: *Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.* Hebrews 13:17 says the same: *your leaders keep watch over you as those who must give an account.*

Then Peter shows us how we will do it. Three times he says, “not this way, but that way.”

1. **Not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be.** Maybe after awhile, you elders don’t want this calling. I’ve felt like that. Peter says, “Put your heart into it.”

2. **Not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve.** I’m not sure how they used eldership to line their pockets, but it could be done. No, rather: *be eager to serve.* Being an elder is a way of serving the Lord and serving his people. Be ready and willing to serve the Lord and his people.

3. **Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.** Now we are back at the lists we began with. The Titus list said, “*not overbearing.*” The Timothy list said, “*gentle, peaceful.*” The strong emphasis of the lists was godly character, not gifts, not ministry skills.

We cannot imitate gifts we do not have, or skills we do not have. But we all, young and old, can imitate a godly life. *Be examples to the flock.*

Detour on “authority”: 1 Timothy 2:12 includes these words: *I do not permit a woman to have authority over a man.* Let’s think about that word “authority.” *I do not permit a woman to have authority over a man.*

We often assume a second part: *I do permit a man to have authority over a woman.* Since Paul says he does *not* permit a woman to have authority over a man, we could assume a man *can* have authority over a woman. It makes sense that we would assume this. But he does not say that.

The Lord and the apostles call us away from that. The Lord’s people don’t get authority over each other. In Matthew 20, Jesus tells the apostles, “you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them, but it will not be so among you. You will be servants and slaves to each other.”

The New Testament always encourages obedience and submission, because that's how Jesus lived. The apostles tell wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord, but when they talk to husbands, they call husbands away from authority. Paul writes, "*Love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*" Peter tells husbands to *respect* their wives and to treat them *considerately*. The apostles don't support "authority" for husbands.

Hebrews calls churches to trust their leaders and obey them, but Peter calls leaders to reject authority and lead by example. If Paul means to say, in 1 Timothy 2:12, that he does permit a man to have authority over a woman, that would be the only place in the New Testament to say such a thing.

But Paul does *not* say that at all, and that's the point. It's just what we assumed. We need to put question marks around what he did not say but we might think, a man having authority over a woman, because the Lord and the apostles worked hard to avoid that kind of talk. Detour is over.

Let's repeat Peter's third contrast for elders: ***Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.*** To Titus Paul wrote, "not overbearing." To Timothy Paul he wrote, "gentle, peaceful." The emphasis is godly character, things everyone can imitate.

What kind of person should an elder be? They should be examples to imitate. We all want to be a people who love the Lord, and follow him and live in his ways, and serve each other. That's the proper goal of every believer. Elders should model it.

What should elders do? Paul: *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.* Peter: *Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them.* May the God who calls us be faithful to do it. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, you have called us the elders to watch over the church, and to live as examples. We often do not feel up to this. But we know, Father, that you chose us for this, and that you are with us, and we know that with your Spirit you will faithfully help us to live this out every day. The God who calls us is faithful, and he will see it done. For this all we give you thanks and praise. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.