

# How To Choose The Elders

In our last study, we discovered how God wanted the church to be organized. We learned that the leaders of the church were to be elders, and the deacons are those who are willing to help the elders. The elders are also called overseers and pastors in the New Testament. The term elder refers to the man's spiritual maturity or spiritual character. The term overseer refers to his responsibility of providing oversight of the church, and pastor referred to his shepherding responsibilities, which includes teaching, counseling, and praying for the sick. That is, every elder is actually a pastor. In this study we want to discover how to choose the elders. We will discuss deacons in the next study. There are two things to consider in selecting the elders. First, what process does the church use to accomplish this task? Second, what criteria or qualifications should the church use to select these men?

**HOW THE CHURCH SELECTS ELDERS.** We will begin by asking, what process should the church use to select elders? In some churches the elders choose new elders. Usually, the selection process starts with the church members nominating or recommending some men to be approved to the office of elder. At this point the process usually follows one of three procedures.

- Nominating Committee + Elders — Sometimes a nominating committee reviews the list of nominations, removes or adds some men, and then sends the list of recommended men to the elders for final approval.

- Nominating Committee — Sometimes the nominating committee reviews the nominations submitted by the congregation, removes or adds some men, and then makes the final selection themselves.
- Elders — Sometimes the elders handle the complete process of choosing the elders.

It is wise when the final list has been decided to give the church members an opportunity to privately bring to the attention of the elders any concern about a name prior to the vote of affirmation. One church used to publicly post the list of names for a period of time before the congregational meeting and vote. Those who are approved are then submitted to the church for a vote of affirmation or recognized as the elders. Those are the usual procedures followed by most churches.

**QUALIFICATIONS FOR IDENTIFYING ELDERS.** But how should the elders, the nominating committee, or the people in

the congregation identify who is an elder? That is the primary purpose of this study. Before we jump into the qualifications for identifying elders, we need to understand an important biblical principle. That principle is that God prepares men to be



elders. The church's responsibility is to discover them. They should not be calling every name in the church directory until they find volunteers.

*Holy Spirit Prepares Men to be Elders.* Acts 20:28 is an important verse confirming that God selects elders. The verse

says,

**Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. Acts 20:28 (NASB)**

This verse records part of Paul's conversation with the elders of the church in the city of Ephesus. Acts 20:17 says that Paul had called these elders to come to him. He was in Miletus. When they arrived, Paul told them to be on guard for all the flock, not just for friends. Now notice what Paul said. He told them that the Holy Spirit had made them overseers. How did the Holy Spirit do that? The Greek word for "made" is *tithemi*. It can mean "put, place, or appoint." Maybe the Holy Spirit told Paul whom he should appoint to be elders in the church in Ephesus.

To some people this could sound like the Holy Spirit decided He wanted Joe to be an elder because he was one of the founding members of the church. He liked Joe. It could sound like the Holy Spirit wanted Sam to be an elder because he has faithfully attended for all these years. Or maybe the Holy Spirit liked George because he sure had been a faithful donor. What would the church do without him? Now I believe the Holy Spirit told Paul whom he should choose, but I do not believe the Holy Spirit's criteria was based on faithful attendance, giving, or who was a founding member of the church. Why? Because the Holy Spirit has given us two lists of qualifications that we are to use to determine who God has selected as an elder. Those lists are given to us in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. They include characteristics of spiritual maturity and spiritual gifts. We will discuss them soon.

But the message we must not miss is that the Holy Spirit already knew which men were qualified. They were prepared by the Holy Spirit because no man could satisfy the spiritual qualifications and possess the required spiritual gifts unless the Holy Spirit had prepared the men to be elders.

Let me illustrate. When I was in junior high school, my coach wanted me to try out for the low jump. I was tall and he thought I would do very well. During the practice workouts, I started by jumping over the lowest bar. I did great. I was happy.

Then coach raised the bar, and I jumped over that one. As the bar was moved up higher and higher, fewer boys could jump over it, without knocking the bar down. That is how the game was played. The boy who won was the one who did not knock down the bar after everyone else could not avoid knocking the bar down.

That is a good illustration of the qualifications that God has given the church for selecting elders. God's qualifications are like the bar on the low jump. The Holy Spirit has set the bar high, but He is not trying to eliminate everyone and declare someone a winner. Few men are able to clear the bar that God the Holy Spirit has established. That bar is set at a level so that only those men whom the Holy Spirit has prepared for the office of elder will qualify, if the church will faithfully apply the standards and not arbitrarily lower the bar.

*Holy Spirit's Qualifications.* So, how does the Holy Spirit prepare a man to be an elder? He matures a man spiritually from a little child in the faith to become a spiritual father of the faith. Philippians 2:12-13 says that while we are working out our salvation or striving to be more holy, God is working in us! The Holy Spirit does that in response to our obedience. Philippians 1:6 says that it is God who began a good work in us. He is still doing it, and He will keep doing it until Christ comes at the rapture. Again, the Holy Spirit does that in the life of every believer. So, the Holy Spirit prepares some men to be an elder by causing them to become more spiritually mature.

We will discover that the ministry of an elder requires certain spiritual gifts that enable him to serve as a shepherd and an overseer. Those spiritual gifts include the spiritual gift of teaching, which is often connected with wisdom, knowledge, and exhortation. The spiritual gifts connected with the responsibility of oversight are the spiritual gifts of leading and administration. That is, the Holy Spirit gives a mix of spiritual gifts to those men whom He wants to be elders.

So, the Holy Spirit must be involved in preparing a man to be an elder. This principle is also revealed in Titus 1:6 where we will learn that an elder's children must be believers. That requires the ministry of the Holy Spirit for those children to profess Christ as Savior and Lord. In these ways the Holy Spirit prepares a man. This gives us a very important principle.

The church cannot make a man an elder. Every church must understand that its responsibility is to recognize those men who have already spiritually matured and whose lives demonstrate that they are elders. Then the church asks these men to officially serve as elders. This means,

**An elder is an elder, because he is an elder.**

This means that a man can be an elder, even though the church never asks him to serve as an elder. A man who is an elder will be living like and functioning as an elder, even if he is never formally asked to serve as an elder in his church. Why? Because the Holy Spirit has transformed the man. Churches need to understand that if a man is an elder, his life will first demonstrate that he is one and is qualified to formally serve.

**INTRODUCTION TO THE QUALIFICATIONS OF ELDERS.** So, in 1 Timothy 3:2-7, God has given us a series of spiritual qualifications that a man must pass in order to qualify as an elder. These spiritual qualifications cover three areas. The qualifications are pulled from three areas of a man's life: his home, his community, and his church. These qualifications are related to 1) his personal life, 2) how he will perform in his areas of responsibilities, and 3) how he will function as a team member with the other elders. There are more spiritual qualifications for selecting an elder in Titus 1:5-9, but we will not cover them in this study.

*The General Principle.* So, what are the Holy Spirit's qualifications for elders? We will start with 1 Timothy 3:2, which says,

**An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach . . .**  
**1 Timothy 3:2 (NASB)**

Clearly, this verse is about elders. It begins by saying that an elder must be above reproach. I knew an elder who once said that it did not say an elder be beyond reproach. He made a distinction between "above" and "beyond." He was concerned that some men, due to politics in the church, might be beyond reproach. That is, no one would find fault with him due to politics in the church.

*Above Reproach.* The Greek word "above reproach" has the meaning of "one who cannot be validly accused." That is, there cannot be any valid accusations made against the man until after all of the evidence and investigation has been completed and the findings have been objectively reviewed. Here is an illustration that helps to crystalize this principle. I have known of situations where men are falsely accused, and later proven to be innocent after an investigation was performed. Yet, some men are not dismissed because the church just assumed they must be innocent. Some men are also removed without an investigation because it is assumed he must be guilty. So, if we apply this principle to selecting elders, we will need to investigate any disqualifying charge raised and determine if the accusation is true. We will discover later in 1 Timothy 5:19-22 how an elder should be removed from the nomination list. (The same procedure is to be used in removing men who are already serving as elders). Then if after the man has been nominated, and someone claims that a man is not qualified, an investigation must occur.

Yet, we must remember that the qualifications given in verses 2-7 describe a man's pattern of life. If they applied to every specific situation, then no one would qualify. No man is perfect every day of his life. If perfection was the standard, then Abraham would not qualify as a man of faith. When he and Sarah traveled to the Negev, he lied to Abimelech because he was afraid that he would be killed. He was afraid that Abimelech would kill him to take Sarah to be his wife!

**QUALIFICATIONS RELATED TO HIS PERSONAL LIFE.** There are nine qualifications related to an elder's personal life. They can be found in 1 Timothy 3:2-3, 6 and Titus 1:8.

*Husband of One Wife.* What follows now in verses 2-7 and in Titus are the high qualifications related to a man's spiritual life. The first qualification given of a man's spiritual life in 1 Timothy 3:2 is that he must be,

**...the husband of one wife,... 1 Timothy 3:2 (NASB)**

The literal Greek says that an elder is a "one-woman man." There are five major views as to the meaning of this qualification. Some think this means that an elder is not a polygamist, not a widower, has never been divorced, or is not single. It is

difficult to think that this qualification is prohibiting polygamy. If it was, a man could marry and divorce a series of women and still be considered a spiritual man. It also is not saying he cannot be a widower because it does not prohibit extra marital sexual relations with women. Some say this verse prohibits a man from being divorced. But that has a problem also. The man could be viewing pornography or committing adultery and then qualify. Being divorced does not fit the situation. The next view says he cannot be single. But that is contrary to the fact that Paul was single and he was an apostle.

It seems best to understand “one-woman man” to mean that an elder is completely devoted to his wife. He is a one-woman man. In fact, an elder who has never been divorced could also have multiple mistresses, flirt with women, and be addicted to pornography and qualify. But an elder who is completely devoted to his wife will not be committing such sexual sins. This qualification also reveals that an elder must be a man. This qualification is repeated in Titus 1:6.

*Temperate.* The qualification of “temperate” appears in 1 Timothy 3:2. The Greek word has the sense of “avoiding excesses and extremes.” He is not out of control. The ESV says “sober-minded.” This qualification would eliminate a man who has addictions and extreme behaviors.

*Prudent.* The qualification of “prudent” appears in 1 Timothy 3:2. The emphasis of the Greek is on his thinking. He is self-controlled. That is how the ESV translates the word. The point is that he has a “correct way of reasoning” and it affects his behavior as we will see in the next qualification.

*Respectable.* The next qualification is “respectable.” It appears in 1 Timothy 3:2. The Greek word reveals his conduct is “well-behaved, modest or respectable.” It means that the elder is well ordered in his life and is honorable.

*Hospitable.* The Greek word translated as “hospitable” in 1 Timothy 3:2 means that he loves strangers. As a result, he and his wife may have people into their home. But the emphasis is on his heart first and then actions. His outward behavior reflects his love for new people or strangers. This spiritual characteristic is part of the fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-23).

*Not Addicted to Wine.* In 1 Timothy 3:3, we see the next qualification is that he is “not addicted to wine.” This one is simple. It just means he is not addicted to wine. He can stop

drinking any time and never go back.

*Free From the Love of Money.* The next qualification in 1 Timothy 3:3 is that he is “free from the love of money.” The idea is that he is not greedy. Money is not a major focus of his life and he is not pursuing money. In Titus 1:7 we find a similar qualification. He does not love money. We could add that he does not cheat on his income taxes. He gives to the Lord Jesus.

*Not a New Convert.* The next personal qualification is that he is not a new convert. 1 Timothy 3:6 says the man is “not a new convert.” The Greek word literally means “not newly planted.” This eliminates new Christians from church leadership. The concern here is primarily that he not become proud. This qualification is a safeguard for the individual and the church.

*Good Reputation With Those Outside the Church.* The last personal qualification is found in 1 Timothy 3:7. It says,

**And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. 1 Timothy 3:7 (NASB)**

This does not mean that unbelievers love this man. But it does mean that the unbelievers do not have any valid accusation against him. It could be that he is a dishonest business man. This does not mean the church is supposed to go on a witch hunt. But it does mean that if a situation becomes obvious, that it should be investigated. If there is a valid accusation, then the man should not serve as an elder.

**QUALIFICATIONS RELATED TO OVERSIGHT.** There are two qualifications related to an elder’s responsibility of oversight. They can be found in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 and Titus 1:6.

*Manages His House Well.* The first qualification is found in 1 Timothy 3:5. It is that he “manages his house well.” The Greek word translated for “manages” has the meaning of “ruling.” It is used in 1 Timothy 5:17. The elder must have demonstrated that he can shepherd the church by first having demonstrated that he can shepherd his family. There is more to this requirement than just possessing organizational skills. His family must be in order.

*Children Under Control.* 1 Timothy 3:5 also says that an

elder must be a man who has his children under control. That is, his children are in submission. Titus 1:6 also adds that his children must not be rebellious. That does not mean the children must be perfectly behaved. No child is perfectly behaved. But they must display a pattern of submission to him. Titus 1:6 also adds that his children must be believers.

These qualifications regarding the children are barometers of the character of an elder's walk with Jesus. They reveal what the man is like in the home. The question many people struggle with is if this applies after the children leave the home. This qualification is important since unbelieving children would greatly hinder an elder's ministry in the local church. This is a very important one. Finally, the qualification that the children are believers is clearly determined by the Holy Spirit. A man cannot control what his children or anyone else believes about Jesus Christ. This reveals the Holy Spirit is determining who He wants as an elder.

**QUALIFICATIONS RELATED TO SHEPHERDING.** The next qualifications are related to an elder's shepherding responsibilities. They can be found in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6, 9.

*Able to Teach.* The next qualification is related to an elder's responsibility of shepherding. The first one is found in 1 Timothy 3:2. It says that an elder must be "able to teach." The Greek word means "skilled at teaching." Some years ago, a man claimed that anyone who could teach his own children satisfied this qualification. But if that is true, then most men might satisfy this qualification. We must not lower the bar so that everyone qualifies. This qualification has the idea of someone who is skilled in teaching. Notice that the qualification does not say "preaching." It is about being a skilled teacher.

It is important to know that Titus 1:9 adds two other requirements that connect with this qualification. That verse adds that he must have a great understanding of and knows Scripture well enough that he can defend it against false teachers. That means the prospective elder must have a great grasp of Scripture in order to teach it.

The bar is raised high. While we do not know how high it is raised, it definitely is not low. This is clearly a spiritual gift that is given by the Holy Spirit. No man has control over this gift.

**QUALIFICATIONS RELATED TO THE TEAM.** There are three qualifications related to an elder's ability to function as

a team member with the other elders and the congregation. They can be found in 1 Timothy 3:2-3, 6 and Titus 1:8.

*Not Pugnacious.* The first one is that a man must not to be pugnacious. It is found in 1 Timothy 3:3 and also in Titus 1:7. The word refers to one who physically fights. That is, this man does not resort to physical violence to get his way. He is calm in difficult situations. This spiritual characteristic is part of the fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-23).

*Gentle.* The next qualification is that an elder must be gentle. This qualification is listed in 1 Timothy 3:3. He is yielding, reasonable, and considerate. He is gentle like a tamed but strong animal. He is not a "yes" man. He does not hold a grudge. This is part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Once again, we find that only the Holy Spirit can give a man this spiritual characteristic.

*Peaceable.* The next qualification related to working with a team is that the man must not be contentious. 1 Timothy 3:3 says he must be peaceable. This means the elder does not seek his own will. He does not argue until he wins. He does not want to be the "king of many mountains." However, this qualification does not preclude an elder from taking firm positions on serious issues supported by Scripture. That is, he is prepared to stand for biblical issues to the point of being the odd man. He seeks unity of purpose and mind. This spiritual characteristic is part of the fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-23).

**CONCLUSION.** Now we have discovered the meaning of twenty-four qualifications that will help a church identify those men who are truly elders. We have learned that only the Holy Spirit can give these men these spiritual characteristics and abilities to carry out or fulfill their ministry responsibilities. That is, the Holy Spirit selected these men to be elders and brought these men to the church. It is Christ who is building His church and the Holy Spirit is implementing that plan. The church must never lower the bar of these qualifications if it wants to reap great blessings. It must never lower the bar for another reason. Elders are supposed to be examples to the flock. They are to be godly men. The spiritual character of the elders determines how God will bless the church. A church cannot make a man holy by appointing him as an elder. Service does not make a man holy.

So, these qualifications help the church to identify and

then recognize who the Holy Spirit has already matured to be elders. Or, we can say,

*An elder is an elder, because he is an elder.*