

The Spiritual Call of Eldership

Position Paper

(primarily 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17-23; Titus 1:5-9)

The biblical requirements are primarily concerned with three categories:

1. Character: above reproach
2. Content: committed to Scripture, able to teach and refute error
3. Calling: proven managerial ability with people

The requirements for leadership are higher than for other Christians. An elder is a steward of God's house, an example to adults and children in the church alike. This is especially significant when it comes to issues of marital fidelity and the behavior of his children. The church should err on the side of caution when appointing its leaders.

No one person has a "right" to leadership. It is a gift given by God to be recognized by the Elders and the church. An Elder position should be left vacant rather than fill it with someone who is not qualified.

For an explanation of my interpretations please see my commentary, *Pastoral Epistles*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series (Zondervan, 2000), especially pages 153-166. All citations below are from the ESV.

Importance

1 Tim 3:1 If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 1 Pet 5:1-3 So I exhort the elders among you ...: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly.

Despite the problems and dangers inherent in leadership, being an elder is an important task.

Titus 1:7 God's steward. Heb 13:17 Your leaders ...are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. 1 Thess 5:12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you. Rom 12:8 the one who leads, with zeal. Acts 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. 1 Pet 5:1-3 So I exhort the elders among you ...: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

An elder is a steward of God's house. This means he is responsible to God for how he cares for God's church. The church does not belong to the elders, but to God.

While eldership requires dealing with some of the day-to-day matters of the church, it is primarily a spiritual position, as one who keeps watch over souls. Just as God's family is a spiritual family, so are its stewards. This means his own spiritual walk must be exemplary, and that he invest time in the spiritual walk of others, whatever be his specific calling. Elders are accountable to God for the quality of their work.

Level of Commitment

Due to the importance of an Elder's task, his stewardship requires a significant commitment to the task; it is a labor of love. An Elder is to have three levels of commitment.

- (1) He is to make a significant and continual commitment to pursuing his own spiritual growth.
- (2) He is to have a visible presence as a leader of the congregation as a whole. He does not need to be at church "every time the door is open," but his level of involvement must be such that many of the people in the church know who he is and respect him. This is achieved through involvement in activities such as public worship times, actively greeting people, attending prayer times, Bible studies and small groups, and pursuing hospitality.
- (3) Except under unusual conditions, he is to give leadership to one major ministry within the church. As is true of any lay leader, he is to do whatever is necessary to help the ministry achieve its stated goals.

1 Thess 5:12-13 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. Heb 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

In response, the people of the church are to respect their elders, to esteem them in love, obeying and submitting to their collective decisions.

The church is to act in such a way that the elders can do their work "with joy and not with groaning." While there often will be difficult decisions to be made, grace and patience must be extended to the elders.

General

1 Tim 2:12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. 1 Tim 3:2 the husband of one wife.

Because eldering is an official position of authority within the church, in accordance with God's design it is to be held only by men.

1 Tim 5:17-18 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." 1 Pet 5:1-3 So I exhort the elders among you ...: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. 1 Tim 3:3 not a lover of money. Titus 1:7 He must not be ... greedy for gain.

All elders are worthy of the church's respect (i.e., honor). Those who are working full-time for the church are to receive an "honorarium" (the second part of the double honor).

Yet, they are never to be greedy for their honorarium or in the handling of the church's finances.

Tasks

Titus 1:7 an overseer, as God's steward. 1 Thess 5:12 respect those who ... are over you in the Lord. Heb 13:17 your leaders ... are keeping watch over your souls. Eph 4:11 And he gave ... pastors (i.e., "shepherds").

As "overseer," the elder has general oversight, responsibility, and authority. As "steward," he carries the authority and responsibility of caring for God's household. Leaders are responsible, as stewards of God, to watch over the spiritual well-being of the church. As "shepherd" an elder is to guide and direct, care for and protect, the people.

1 Thess 5:12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you. 1 Tim 3:3 not quarrelsome. Matt 18:15-17 If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

An elder must be willing to admonish people in the church. This entails the refusal to act on gossip but the willingness to know people face to face, become involved in their lives, and then have the courage to confront them if necessary, with the goal of restoring them to fellowship. It also means he must be willing to be part of the church discipline process.

While he must be willing to take a stand in a biblically-informed debate, he must pursue peaceful relationships. There may be times when taking a stand is best done one on one; however, most of the time it is the result of a corporate Elder decision.

Heb 13:7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. 1 Pet 5:1-3 So I exhort the elders among you ...: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Elders must be willing and able to lead by example.

1 Cor 12:28 God has appointed in the church ... gifts of ... helping, administrating.

Some elders must be willing to help the people, which entails a commitment to know the people and be part of their lives. Some of the elder(s) must be gifted in administration. If at all possible, the administrative load of the church should not depend fully on one person.

1 Tim 3:2 hospitable. Titus 1:8 hospitable.

An Elder must be actively involved in the lives of people, including opening up his home to others.

1 Tim 3:2 able to teach. Titus 1:9 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. Heb 13:7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.

While every elder may not be required to stand before the church and preach, or before a large class and teach, at a minimum he must be able to teach one to ten people at a time.

There must be an observable adherence to and devotion to the Bible in his life. He must be able to teach doctrine and refute those teaching error. This includes both a knowledge of the biblical text and also theology. As God's steward, the elder must be willing to take a stand based on biblical principles, even if it is disruptive of the peace of the church. The truth of what is taught is paramount.

This does not mean that each elder must be formally trained, but he must know his Bible and doctrine well enough that he will see error and challenge it biblically. At a minimum, this means he can explain every word in the Statement of Faith and know how to apply it to life, and he must be able to share the gospel in a way that is sufficient for salvation.

It is imperative that the preaching elder/pastor be committed to elder training, especially in training up the next generation to be qualified elders.

The requirement of being able to refute errors means that the elder must be somewhat aware of his culture, what is being taught, and how to defend Scripture against it.

(1 Tim 3:9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.)

While this verse applies to deacons, it helps us understand this point with an elder (cf. Titus 1:9). He must hold (tightly) to the faith, without reservation. If he is not honest, says he believes the Bible and yet has reservations, then his conscience cannot be clear and he is disqualified.

Personal Qualities

1 Tim 3:2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach. Titus 1:6 if anyone is above reproach. Titus 1:7 an overseer ... must be above reproach.

This does not mean the elder must be perfect. However, when someone looks at his life in general, especially someone from outside the church, it must be above reproach. There should be nothing that is major or ongoing that someone would properly view as damaging the cause of Christ (i.e., "reproach"). This includes his life at home, in the neighborhood, at play, and at work.

1 Tim 3:2 the husband of one wife. Titus 1:6 the husband of one wife.

While the phrase is difficult to interpret, it must include at a minimum the fact that the elder is faithful in his marriage (if he is married). This includes sexual faithfulness as well as those things that lead up to unfaithfulness such as even casual use of pornography, emotional abstinence, emotional abuse, degrading speech and conduct, and excessive attachment to other women.

This allows for an elder in his second marriage if the first ended in death.

This allows for an elder who was divorced many years in the past, but who has been faithful in his subsequent marriage for a discernible period of time.

It also means that if a man has not been faithful to his wife, even if it did not end in divorce, he has excluded himself from eldership until a time when he can once again be classified as "faithful."

If a husband was unfaithful to his wife, was divorced and has remained single, it is difficult to know if he can ever become an elder. However, he should not be restricted beyond the unfaithful husband who was not divorced.

A man does not need to be married to be an elder. If the elder is single, then the same guidelines of sexual purity apply.

If the man were not a Christian when he was unfaithful, and if he has been faithful since the time of conversion, he is eligible.

Titus 1:7 He must not be ... quick-tempered. 1 Tim 3:2 sober-minded. 1 Tim 3:2 self-controlled (also 1:8). 1 Tim 3:3 not violent but gentle. Titus 1:7 He must not be ... violent. Titus 1:8 disciplined.

He must have achieved the balance between standing for the truth and fighting for the faith once delivered to the saints, and yet not being quick-tempered in the process.

1 Tim 3:2 respectable. 1 Tim 3:7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

A good reputation with non-Christians outside the church is essential.

1 Tim 3:3 not a drunkard. Titus 1:7 He must not be ... a drunkard.

While this does not exclude social drinking, if it is seen that the elder has a problem with drinking such that he cannot stop, or if he is not willing to stop, and if his drinking is damaging the faith of some in the church, then he is excluded from leadership.

Titus 1:8 a lover of good. Titus 1:8 upright. Titus 1:8 holy.

It is not enough to not do sinful things. The elder must be seen to be aggressive about pursuing good things. He must not only run from sin but pursue holiness.

1 Tim 3:3 not a lover of money. Titus 1:7 He must not be ... greedy for gain.

In both the administration of the church, his business, and how he manages his personal finances, the elder must have decided to serve God, not mammon.

Titus 1:7 He must not be arrogant.

Both as an elder and as a person, he must be observably humble.

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

His maturity in the faith must be observable over a period of time. While people mature at different rates, it is hard to imagine that anyone who had been a Christian less than 5 years should be an elder.

Family

1 Tim 3:4-5 He must manage his own household well, ... for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?

The elder's ability to manage his home must be evident. This does not mean it must be perfect, but he must clearly be seen to be in control. The elder is to be the head of the home, not just in title but in function, which includes his marriage (if married).

A managerial ability shown in business has no necessary relevance to managerial ability with the family and church.

1 Tim 3:4 with all dignity keeping his children submissive. Titus 1:6 his children are ... not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.

Note: discussion of rebellious children is separated from the issue of children being Christians.

This does not mean the elder must have children. But if he does have children, his managerial ability must be seen in how he handles his children. He is to retain his dignity.

Children at home. They are to be submissive to his authority. They do not have to be perfect, but they must be under control. Just because a child is in rebellion does not mean the father is not a good manager; sometimes his managerial ability is seen in the heat of the conflict. Consideration should also be paid to whether the rebellion is short-term or long-term. However, if a majority of his children are in rebellion, then he is no longer eligible for leadership. If even one child is in rebellion, perhaps he should be encouraged not to become involved in church leadership but to spend what time he has building the relationship with his child.

Children who have left home. Just because his children have left the home does not mean that he has now become a good manager. If a rebellious child leaves home, the elder is not freed from the qualification of having managerial ability. Recognition should be paid to the fact, however, that he no longer has direct control of his child, and yet how he manages his distant child continues to indicate his managerial ability. It is difficult to imagine how a father could be classified as a "good manager" if a majority of his children are living rebellious lives.

In both these situations, recognition should be given to the fact that other children in the church are looking to the lives of their elders and their families, and learning from them. Leadership is a higher standard than is applied to church members.

Titus 1:6 his children are believers.

Note: "children" below refers to those old enough to understand the gospel and become Christians, perhaps teenagers.

This is a difficult passage, literally meaning "his children are faithful." While the ESV is the better interpretation, it is sufficiently difficult that caution is urged.

Parents do not have control of their children's salvation; however, they are a powerful example and influence on the children.

If the majority of the man's children are not believers, while they are living at home he should not be involved in church leadership but spend time building relationships with his children and evangelizing them. If leadership would interfere with the evangelism and nurturing of his children (or child), then his priorities must be at home.

If the Elder became a Christian after his children were grown, it seems doubtful that this requirement would apply.

Sin

1 Tim 5:19-20 Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. Matt 18:15 If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

By becoming an elder, he is giving the other elders the right to examine his life. If charges are brought by two or more witnesses and are found to be true, and if the sin is of a significant and on-going nature (as further defined by *The Statement on Discipline*), then the elder is to be disciplined before the church as a whole so that the rest of the elders may stand in fear.

Likewise, charges of no kind will be entertained if there are not multiple witnesses, unless the charge is of a private nature such as molestation. This includes a refusal to even listen to gossip.

Appointment

1 Tim 5:22, 24-25 Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. The sins of some men are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.

The appointment process must be slow and deliberate. If a man is appointed as elder and is later to be found lacking the qualities necessary for elder, then those who supported his appointment share, to some degree, in his sin.

(1 Tim 3:10 And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.) 1 Tim 3:6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

While 1 Tim 3:10 is directed toward deacons, the policy is applicable to elders. This means that the candidate for elder must be well-known by the other elders. It is hard to imagine that anyone who has attended the local church for less than 3 years should be considered for appointment.

Final notes

Men qualified to elder will already be eldering even if they do not hold the position. They will be pursuing their own spiritual growth, managing their own families, staying involved in the lives of others in the church, participating in ministry, and growing in their knowledge of the Bible and theology. Their giftedness should be apparent to others in the church.

None of this Position paper is meant to be viewed as legalistic. However, there is a crisis of leadership in the American church partially because the biblical mandates are so often ignored. Our Statement of Faith states: “The Bible is the infallible word of God, the supreme rule for faith and practice. The sixty-six books of the Old and New Testament came from the very mouth of God and are without error in the originals. Scripture is therefore the unique and supreme guide for all it affirms, including both belief and behavior.” This Position Paper is an attempt to implement our view of Scripture.