

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. 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 (1 Tim. 3:1-7 TNIV).

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 (Titus 1:6-9 TNIV).

The Constitution of the United States specifies the qualifications for those holding office in the federal government. For one to be in the House of Representatives, he or she must be at least twenty-five years of age and a citizen of the United States for at least seven years. Senators must be at least thirty years of age and a citizen of the United States for at least nine years. The president of the United States must be at least thirty-five years of age and a native born citizen.

Christians have sought to make the qualifications for elders in the church to be as easily understood as the qualifications for governmental office in the United States. The New Testament, however, does not accommodate our desires. There are two places within the New Testament that give what have been called "qualifications" for elders. The term "qualifications" is not found in the New Testament and may actually hinder us from understanding the meaning of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. First Timothy (and to a lesser degree Titus) has been viewed as a sort of church manual or handbook written for the church to use in selecting leaders. By viewing elders and deacons as officers in the church, the lists found in these two books have been combined and used as a checklist to find men who qualify for the "offices" of elder and deacon.

There are at least two obvious problems with this checklist procedure. Most importantly, the context of these two books is not identical. To properly interpret these lists, they must first be placed within the original contexts of the letters where they are found. Secondly, the lists concerning elders/overseers are not identical. If there was only one approved list of the qualifications of elders during the New Testament period, why did Paul, writing these letters at approximately the same time, write two similar but distinctly different lists concerning what to look for in an elder?

The Context of First Timothy

Paul spent three years in Ephesus according to Acts 20:31. He was forced to leave because of a riot and traveled through Macedonia. On his way to Jerusalem Paul visited with the Ephesian elders at Miletus. He charged them to be shepherds of the flock and warned them of problems that would soon arise in the church. Paul said, "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:30).

Seven to ten years later, Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy who was working with the Ephesian church. Timothy had been told by Paul to stay in Ephesus "so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies" (1 Tim. 1:3-4). The false teachers Timothy was to deal with were not outsiders such as one reads of in Galatia or Corinth. They were insiders. Some of them, at least, were elders! Paul's reason for writing is explained in 1 Timothy 3:14, "Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God," The key word here is conduct. From reading the letter one learns that improper conduct was a major problem in Ephesus.

It is obvious that Elders were already functioning within the church at Ephesus at the time Paul wrote 1 Timothy. In chapter 5, verses 17-22 specifically addresses some of the problems of the Ephesian church, which involved the elders and how Timothy should handle the situations.

Elders who do well as leaders should be reckoned worthy of a double stipend, in particular those who labour at preaching and teaching. For Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle a threshing ox"; and besides, "the worker earns his pay."

Do not entertain a charge against an elder unless it is supported by two or three witnesses. Those who commit sins you must expose publicly, to put fear into the others. Before God and Christ Jesus and the angels who are his chosen, I solemnly charge you, maintain these rules, and never pre-judge the issue, but act with strict impartiality. Do not be over-hasty in laying on hands in ordination, or you may find yourself responsible for other people's misdeeds; keep your own hands clean. (NEB)

Some of the Ephesian elders were doing a good job and were to be recognized and supported financially. Some of the other elders, however, were involved in sin. Timothy was to carefully evaluate the charges brought against an elder. Once it was confirmed that a particular elder was in fact in sin, he was to be rebuked publicly as a warning to all the other elders. One of the sins in question was that of teaching false doctrine. The only specific example of what that false doctrine was is found in 4:3: "They forbid people to

marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth."

Paul was not as concerned to discuss the specific doctrines of the false teachers as he was with the conduct such teaching was producing: controversy (1:4), anger, disputing (2:8), quarrels, envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction (6:4-5). Paul was even concerned about how Timothy might conduct himself in this situation and told him, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (4:12).

In the middle of the letter are lists to be used in evaluating the men functioning as overseers (3:1-7), deacons (3:8-13) and women servants (deacons) (3:11). A similar list is given to help Timothy determine the truly needy among the widows (5:9-10). All of the lists have one thing in common--conduct. How has this individual conducted himself? Is he/she an example to the believers and outsiders of one who is a member of God's household? This is the very reason Paul said he wrote the letter, so that people would know how to conduct themselves in God's household (3:15).

The last thing on Paul's mind when he wrote 1 Timothy was composing a church manual to be used for the selection of elders and deacons for all time in all situations! The specific qualities and characteristics mentioned had a specific application to that situation at that time.

The Context of Titus

In contrast to the situation in Ephesus, there were no elders in the churches of Crete. That is why Titus had been left by Paul on the island, to appoint elders in every town (1:5). Elders were desperately needed in those churches to silence false teachers and assist the brothers and sisters in godly living.

Conduct is strongly emphasized in the letter to Titus, as it was in 1 Timothy. Instructions in godly living are given to specific groups of Christians including older men (2:2 elders?), older women (2:3-5), younger men (2:6) and slaves (2:9-10). Titus himself is exhorted to live an exemplary life so that his opponents will have nothing to say against him (2:7-8). The emphasis of all these instructions is found in 2:11-14:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope--the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Doing what is good is mentioned several times in the letter. The Christians on Crete were to be eager to do good (2:14), ready to do whatever is good (3:1), and devoted to doing good (3:8). Paul concluded the letter by stating, "our people must learn to devote

themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives" (3:14).

Entire households were being ruined among the believers in Crete because of false teachers who were motivated by dishonest gain (1:10-11). Titus was instructed to take a three-fold approach to this problem:

- Appoint godly elders who were living exemplary lives in every town (1:5-11).
- Sharply rebuke the false teachers (1:13; 3:10-11).
- Teach the people to live the kind of lives God desires them to live (2:1ff).

Godly elders would be able to help Titus in dealing with the false teachers and in teaching the people. Paul specifically explained why an elder must hold firmly to the trustworthy message when he wrote, "so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (1:9). When one understands what was happening on the island of Crete, it makes sense why Titus was told to appoint elders that were blameless, living exemplary moral lives, having children that were not wild and disobedient, and all the other things listed. In keeping with the emphasis Titus was given to teaching the people to do good, one is not surprised to find that an elder must be one "who loves what is good" (1:8).

Traditional Use of the Elder "Lists"

It has become common practice in Churches of Christ to combine the two lists producing a total of twenty to twenty three qualifications. Often a church will type these into a list with a check box next to each item and ask church members to check each box if a certain man being considered for appointment to the eldership qualifies. This certainly could not have been Paul's intended usage of such lists or else he would have combined them from the start! If there is a specific set of qualifications that God has ordained, why was not the same list sent to both Timothy and Titus?

Two Separate Lists

Even though they are not identical, the lists are similar. The character of the individual elder is the predominant thought of each list. The controlling virtue of the list in 1 Timothy is "the overseer must be above reproach" (3:2). In Titus the controlling quality is "an elder must be blameless" (1:6). Even though two different words are used, the meanings are almost identical. An elder/overseer must live an exemplary life. No moral accusations can be made against him that can be substantiated. Peter points to the same ideal when he wrote that elders were to be examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:3). In spite of the fact that each list is primarily concerned with the character of elders, the differences between the lists highlights some specific concerns. The following table illustrates this point:

<i>Items found in both lists with identical wording</i>	<i>Items found in both lists with different wording but similar meaning</i>	<i>Items exclusive to 1 Timothy</i>	<i>Items exclusive to Titus</i>
Faithful to his wife [traditional translation "husband of one wife"] (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) Self-controlled (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8) Hospitable (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8) Not given to drunkenness (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7) Not violent (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim. 3:3 adds "but gentle")	Above reproach (1 Tim. 3:2) Blameless (Titus 1:6) Able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2) Hold firmly to the trustworthy message . . . encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. (Titus 1:9) Not a lover of money (1 Tim. 3:3) Not pursuing dishonest gain (Titus 1:7) Manage his own family well having children who obey him with proper respect (1 Tim. 3:4) Children who believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient (Titus 1:6)	Temperate (3:2) Respectable (3:2) Not quarrelsome (3:3) Not a recent convert (3:6) Good reputation with outsiders (3:7)	Not overbearing (1:7) Not quick-tempered (1:7) One who loves what is good (1:8) Upright (1:8) Holy (1:8) Disciplined (1:8)

Was it all right if Titus appointed a recent convert since that was not in his list? Paul apparently did in Acts 14:23. Was discipline and holiness to be overlooked by Timothy since that was not on his list? Certainly not, but why were they not mentioned? A better way to view the lists is to interpret each one in light of the context of the letter where it was originally written. Then the question becomes, "What might have been going on in Ephesus so that Paul would include a reference to an overseer not being a recent convert?" and "Why was Titus to use qualities such as self-control, uprightness, holiness and discipline in determining which men should be considered elders?" Only after looking

at the lists as part of the context of a letter addressed to a specific situation can we begin to ask questions as to how they relate to churches today.

What Do We Learn From the Lists?

Many of the items in each list concern **basic Christian morality**. It has often been stated that most of the things listed are to be in every Christian's life. No Christian is to be a drunkard or greedy or violent. The majority of members in the churches of Ephesus and on Crete came from pagan backgrounds. Accepting the high standards of morality demanded by the Gospel of Christ was often slow in coming. Just look at the church in Corinth for a graphic example. If an elder was to be an example of the Christ-like lifestyle, it was imperative that he be an example of morality.

The **ability to teach** was essential in both situations but for slightly different reasons. Elders were already teaching in Ephesus. Some were to be commended for it and others rebuked. Those teaching properly should continue to influence people in the ways of God. On Crete the elders were to help Titus by negating the influence of the false teachers. We should not think of such teaching as formal Sunday School teaching, as there was no such thing in ancient times. Although elders might have been expected to teach in the assembly, the emphasis of the letters appears to be private teaching and persuasion of individuals and small groups.

The items exclusive to 1 Timothy include **temperate, respectable, not quarrelsome, not a recent convert and good reputation with outsiders**. Quarreling is mentioned as one of the problems that had been created by the false teaching. Some of the elders had "an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, . . ." (6:4). The need for elders to have a good reputation with outsiders may have been because of the number of people in the Ephesian church that had left the faith. Some of the younger widows had "already turned away to follow Satan" (5:15). Money had deceived others who had "wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (6:10). The final instruction in the letter told Timothy to "Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith" (6:20-21). The church was not being a very good witness to the community, and elders with bad reputations would not help matters.

The items exclusive to Titus include **not overbearing, not quick-tempered, one who loves what is good, upright, holy and disciplined**. The island of Crete was infamous for the character of its inhabitants. Epimenides had written, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." Paul quoted this poet and agreed with him! (1:12-13). Paul may have simply been saying that the actions of the false teachers were in keeping with the reputation of Cretans but it was well known that Cretans were not exemplars of high moral behavior. Perhaps this is one reason why Paul emphasized morality even more strongly in his letter to Titus than in his letter to Timothy.

Application for Today's Church

Much of the discussion of the role and qualifications of elders in the church is centered on the church as an organization or even a government. When we ask organizational questions of biblical writers who considered the church to be a living, functioning organism, we will often misunderstand their writing. Douglas Foster wrote the following insightful comment:

Paul was not giving a business plan for successful management. He was trying to create a community out of people who had been unrelated, but who were now related in a special and intimate way in a new kind of extended family. The elders were not a governing board or in charge of an administrative structure. They were respected senior members of a community, a family of believers.¹

Tim Willis agrees when he writes concerning the "qualifications of elders,"

My own perception of what Paul prescribes, in light of the similarities to typical elderships, is that Paul is not concerned so much with giving us a divinely-ordained "structure" or "plan" as he is trying to create a community of believers. He wanted a community to emerge where one had not existed before, consisting of people previously unrelated, but now related (a family) in a very special way.²

Common sense should tell us that a man should not be considered an elder if he is a drunkard, a liar, dishonest, immoral, quarrelsome, a "hot-head," is not respected as a husband or father, greedy, etc. It should also be common sense that an elder should be hospitable, loving, caring, respectable, well thought of by outsiders, approachable, able to teach and counsel, etc. Such is the gist of the two lists in 1Timothy and Titus.

Several authors have grouped the ideas from both letters under topical headings. Such an arrangement can be useful in teaching about the type of man God wants to shepherd his people. J. W. McGarvey found six natural divisions: 1. Experience, 2. Reputation, 3. Domestic Relations, 4. Character, 5. Habits and 6. Intellectual (ability to teach).³ Flavil Yeakley divided the items under these headings: Desire, Experience, Reputation, Family,

¹ Douglas A. Foster, *Will the Cycle Be Unbroken?: Churches of Christ Face the 21st Century*, (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1994), p. 163.

² 2Tim Willis, "Elders in the Old Testament Community," *Leaven*, Winter Quarter, 1992, p. 12.

³ 3 J. W. McGarvey, *A Treatise on the Eldership*, (Murfreesboro, TN: Dehoff Publications, 1990; reprint of 1870 edition), pp. 53-66.

Teaching Ability, Negative Characteristics, and Positive Characteristics. ⁴Alexander Strauch places the characteristics under three headings:

1. An elder must have a good moral character.
2. An elder must be a good manager of his family.
3. An elder must be able to teach the Word.⁵

In my own teaching I have used four headings to teach the model character that God desires in elders:

1. An elder must have excellent moral character.
2. An elder must be a model family man.
3. An elder must be highly respected.
4. An elder must have a servant heart.

The danger comes when we interpret the lists as wooden (i.e., lacking flexibility) without realizing their purpose in helping to select men with the type of character and leadership ability God wants. Such an approach does not honor the Holy Spirit's original intent in giving the lists in the first place. One can legalistically meet all of the "qualifications" and be completely unfit to serve as a shepherd. Such a man can be appointed, however, because a majority of members feel they had to check the box beside each item on the checklist in the affirmative. Thus a man is appointed to shepherd, not because the people see a shepherd's heart within him, but because he is a pretty decent, moral guy who can teach a Sunday School class occasionally and some of his kids have been baptized.

Certainly a man cannot serve as a shepherd if he does not meet the standards set forth in Titus and 1 Timothy. But churches must move beyond the checklist mentality when selecting elders. Questions that need to be considered by individual members might include:

- If you were suffering, would you want this man to come and pray with you?
- If you needed to be corrected, would you want this man to come and teach you?
- If you needed counsel, would you call on this man to help you?

We must seek to understand the intent of the lists when they were originally given. The fact that they are different should help us in understanding that there was not one official list of qualifications for church elders. What we learn from the lists is important and should be used responsibly to insure that the men selected as elders are moral, spiritual, loving, kind, gentle, respected, peaceable and exemplary in Christian conduct.

⁴ Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr, *Church Leadership and Organization*, (Arvada, CO: Christian Communications, Inc., 1980), pp. 115-123.

⁵ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1986), pp. 78-79.