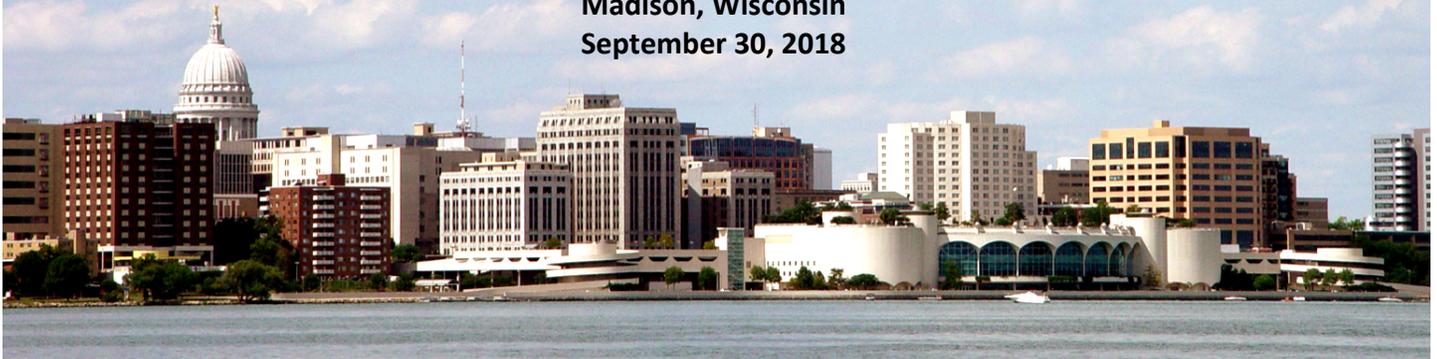


Elders: An Overview

1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9

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This morning, in light of us looking into adding to the eldership, I'd like for us to take a few moments to do something of an overview of the terms and the qualifications. ****HANDOUT**** As I started preparing for this morning's lesson, I was actually shocked that it has been more than six years since we have done this in depth, in sermon form. We had a series of four lessons back in February and March of 2012. We, of course, studied this again in a series of Bible class lessons in the fall of 2015. Those lessons were taught by various men of the congregation as well as by two elders who came in from other congregations to give us the inside scoop on what elders actually do. We then appointed elders for the first time on the last Sunday of December 2015, and we have not really studied the eldership as a congregation since that time. A number of you here today were not with us in 2015 or in 2012, so, it is time for us to go back and to do something of a review, especially in light of working to expand the eldership.

I. As with any study, it is often helpful to start with a definition of terms.

There are three main terms that refer to the same role - in English, those terms are ELDER, OVERSEER, and SHEPHERD - and we know that all three refer to the same position, because in Acts 20:17, as the apostle Paul is passing by near Ephesus, he calls the "*elders*" of the church together, and then, in verse 28, he refers to the fact that the Holy Spirit has made these men "*overseers*," and he refers to the fact that these same men have been called to "*shepherd*" the church of God. So, all three terms refer to the same office or position.

A. The word "ELDER" is the translation of a word that literally refers to someone who is "older."

So, the word "**ELDER**" is the word that goes in that first blank. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), the word that you see here was used to translate a Hebrew word that meant "beard" or "chin." And the idea is, a man can usually be identified as being older simply by looking at his chin! Not literally, of course, but in a sense, an elder, then, is someone with a gray beard! No age is ever given in the qualifications; instead, this term seems to simply be a description of those who meet the qualifications (and we will get to those in just a moment). The closest we get to an age requirement in the qualifications comes in 1 Timothy 3:6 where we learn that the man is not to be a "*new convert*." Literally, he is not to be "newly planted," but he is to be a man with some experience. He is to be old enough to have weathered some church storms.

B. The second term is normally translated as “OVERSEER.”

In some of the older translations, the word is translated as *“BISHOP,”* but the meaning in modern English is “overseer” or “manager.” So, out beside Roman Number II, you might want to write in *“OVERSEER”* or *“BISHOP.”* And even looking at the Greek word, you might be able to recognize the word “scope” in it - as in a microscope or the scope on a rifle. “Epi” means “on” or “upon,” so the word refers to the idea of “looking on” or “looking over,” the idea of managing, the idea of making sure that the things done by others are done correctly. The concept is referred to in Hebrews 13:17, where we learn that serving as an overseer carries with it a great deal of responsibility. In Hebrews 13:17, the Bible says, *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.”* So again, part of the responsibility of an elder is to oversee, to keep watch over the souls in the congregation. Based on this passage, I imagine Jesus approaching elders personally on the Day of Judgment and asking about each member of the congregation, “What happened to so-and-so? I see that this person is lost. What went wrong there? What efforts were made to reach this person?” As the overseers of the congregation, elders will give an account.

C. The third most common term is a word translated into English as SHEPHERD.

The Latin version of this word is *“PASTOR.”* So, with this third term, we have *“SHEPHERD”* or *“PASTOR.”* And like BISHOP up above, PASTOR might be accurate, but it is somewhat out of date, and perhaps a bit misleading due to the way the word is commonly used today. Today, when most people hear “pastor,” what do they think of? They think of a minister. They think of somebody who leads a church. In the New Testament, though, the preacher is not somebody who singlehandedly leads the church. The preacher’s job is to preach, not govern - the responsibility for governing falls on a plurality of elders.

But the point here is: Elders are described as SHEPHERDS. Those who lead the church are not commanders or generals (as we might have in the military), they are not elected representatives (as we might have in government), they are not CEO’s (like we might have in the business world); but instead, God decided that each local congregation would be overseen and guided by men described as SHEPHERDS.

And the primary role of shepherds is to feed, protect, and care for sheep. As Paul said in Acts 20:28, *“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.”* A good shepherd is on the lookout for danger at all times and if necessary will lay down his life without hesitation.

An elder, then, is someone who is a man of experience with some level of spiritual maturity (as indicated by the word “elder”). Secondly, an elder is a man who has willingly taken on the responsibility of overseeing the souls entrusted to his care (as is indicated by the description of “overseer”). And finally, an elder is a spiritual shepherd - responsible for feeding, caring for the flock, and protecting God’s sheep from spiritual danger.

II. As I mentioned earlier, I also want us to do at least a quick summary of the QUALIFICATIONS, and most of those qualifications are found in two passages.

The first passage is found in 1 Timothy 3 and comes in a letter from the apostle Paul to the young preacher Timothy who was preaching in Ephesus at the time. Notice, please, the words of Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1-7,

¹ *It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.* ² *An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,* ³ *not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money.* ⁴ *He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity* ⁵ *(but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?),* ⁶ *and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.* ⁷ *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.*

The other passage is very much parallel to this one and is found in a letter from Paul to another preacher - notice, please, Titus 1:5-9,

⁵ *For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,* ⁶ *namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion.* ⁷ *For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain,* ⁸ *but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled,* ⁹ *holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.*

On the handout, I've put these very roughly in order, with the family qualifications at the end, and as we have done before, I have tried to show that generally speaking, what is required of elders is also expected of all of us. Only with elders, these qualities are necessary not to the level of perfection, but to the level that they can be some kind of example, to the level that they can lead. In a sense, some of these are yes or no kind of qualifications - either he is or he is not married to one woman. Others, though, we might picture as being on some kind of a scale. Is this person hospitable, for example? In a sense, we could answer yes or no. But in another sense, some are more hospitable than others, so the question is: Is this person qualified to lead in this area? All of us are to be hospitable, but those who serve as elders need to have this quality in a way that allows them to lead, in a way that they can serve as an example.

1. We don't have time to go through these in any detail, but we start with the idea that an elder must be **"above reproach,"** and from Philippians 2:15, we see that this applies to all of us as Christians. And I've put a column in the middle in case you'd like to make a brief note as to the meaning of the qualification. To be **"above reproach"** refers to someone "who cannot be attacked because of his moral conduct." The ancient Greeks suggested that this word referred to not giving the enemy anything to grab on to. It's why beards are generally not allowed in the military. A beard, although awesome, does give an enemy something to grab onto. You might remember that right after 9-11, as our special forces were being sent into Afghanistan, their first job was to grow beards so they could fit in a bit better with the local population. They didn't have beards previously, because beards are generally a liability in combat. In a similar way, spiritually, speaking, we are not to give Satan anything to grab onto; we are not to give Satan a stick to beat us with! An elder, then, is to live in a way that enemies of the faith will not be able to use some moral flaw in his life to pull the church down.

2. Secondly, to be **"temperate"** is to be sober and clear-headed, the opposite of being under the influence of alcohol.
3. To be **"prudent"** or **"sensible"** is the idea of keeping our minds safe and sound by keeping our thoughts under control.
4. To be **"respectable"** is to live a life that is "orderly." The root of the word is KOSMOS, which refers to the order that we see in the universe. An elder, then, is to have a well-ordered life. His home and family life should not be chaotic.
5. Going back to the example I used earlier, elders are required to be **"hospitable."** All of us are to be hospitable, but elders are to be hospitable in a way that the rest of us can follow his example. Sometimes we think of hospitality in terms of having people over for dinner, entertaining, and that might be part of it, but the word literally refers to having a "love for strangers." This is what the Good Samaritan did for the man who was beaten up and robbed and left by the side of the road. Literally, the Samaritan was **"hospitable."** He showed love for a stranger by doing what needed doing. Hospitality might be bringing food to someone who is sick, filling up somebody's car with gas at a gas station, taking somebody to Woodman's and buying their groceries, treating others the way we ourselves would want to be treated, showing love and concern in a practical way.
6. The next qualification is that an elder must be **"able to teach."** This is a goal for all of us. An elder doesn't need to be a perfect teacher, but an elder must be "able to teach." As men, we can work on this by volunteering to teach when the regular teacher is out of town. We can jump in to the teaching rotation, either in the adult class or in one of the children's classes.
7. An elder must not be **"addicted to wine."** With all of the warnings in the Bible about the effects of alcohol, and with all of the people in this congregation who really struggle with alcohol, all of our current elders have made the decision that we will not drink. Even if we have some kind of freedom in this area, we have decided not to exercise that freedom.
8. An elder must not be **"pugnacious."** **"Pugnacious"** is not a word I use too often, but it refers to someone who assaults others.
9. An elder must also be **"gentle."** The word is defined as "yielding, having regard for the feelings of others."
10. He must also be **"peaceable."** Years ago, I literally laughed out loud when I looked up this word in a Greek dictionary. It's basically the word "macho" with an "a" in front of it. In Greek, an "a" in front of a word turns that word into a negative. So, literally, we are looking for a man who is "not macho." Not a wimpy man, by any means, but the word "macho" actually refers to a conflict, dispute, or quarrel. An elder, then, must not be someone who is always looking to pick a fight. We are looking for someone who is the opposite of "trigger happy." He is to be **"peaceable."**
11. He is also to be **"free from the love of money."**
12. He is not to be **"fond of sordid gain."** As I see it, eleven and twelve go together. And again, like the others, these also apply to all of us, but even more so for an elder. He must demonstrate in the way

he lives that he is not in love with money. He is to be an example in generous giving and stewardship, and he is not to accumulate wealth dishonestly.

13. He must not be a **“new convert.”** Literally, he is not to be “newly planted.” Paul doesn’t give us a figure in years, because I believe it could be different for different people. Some people mature faster than others. Some are more serious about spiritual growth. We do know, though, from the book of Acts, that Paul established churches and appointed elders in those churches within a period of about three years. But the idea is: He is not to be a newbie, but he is to be mature in the faith.
14. He must also have a **“good reputation with those outside the church.”** In other words, he is not only to be respected in the church, but he must also be respected in the community - paying his bills on time, obeying the laws of the land, and so on - he is not to be an embarrassment to the congregation.
15. He must not be **“self-willed.”** Literally, he is not to be a “hedonist.” He is not to be focused only his own pleasure. He is not to be selfish.
16. He is not to be **“quick-tempered.”** He is not to be quick to anger. Anger should not be his default position, but he should be very slow to get angry.
17. He must be someone who is known for **“loving what is good.”**
18. He must be **“just.”** That is, he must do what is necessary and right. He must be correct, righteous, and innocent. He must give people what is due them - whether it be praise or correction, and decisions are to be made without partiality.
19. He must be **“devout,”** Paul says - pious, righteous, and holy. I’ve heard that this is a difficult word to translate, because it goes beyond the written law to things that are just decent. Maybe you can remember a good Western movie where the good guys killed a bad guy, and then they stopped to bury him. They did that because it was just the right thing to do. So, we are looking for an elder who can bury a bad guy in the desert. He must be **“devout,”** a decent person.
20. He must be **“self-controlled.”** Again, before he tries to encourage others to be self-controlled, he must personally be **“self-controlled.”**
21. Paul next speaks of **“holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance to the teaching.”** The word of God is to be important to the man. An elder must keep a firm grip on the word of God.
22. This firm grip on the word will then allow an elder to be **“able to exhort in sound doctrine.”** The word **“exhort”** refers to the idea of calling somebody to your side, putting your arm around somebody as you encourage or explain something. We need elders who can sit down with us and help us apply the word of God to our situation.
23. And then we find that an elder must be able to **“refute those who contradict.”** To **“refute”** means “to expose, convict, or reprove.” It is sometimes translated as **“reprimand,”** and it might be a correction done in private or in public. We need elders who aren’t afraid to tell it like it is.

24. I've put the family qualifications here at the end, and we find here that an elder must be **"the husband of one wife,"** or literally, **"a one-woman man."** So, this is where we learn that an elder must be a "man." He must also be a married man. And he must be faithful to the wife he is married to.
25. A few verses later in 1 Timothy 3, Paul goes on to give the qualifications for deacon's wives, and he says (in verse 11) that, **"[the] women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things."** There is some discussion as to whether this applies only to deacon's wives. Does it make sense, though, to say that a deacon's wife must not be a malicious gossip, but an elder's wife can gossip all she wants to? I've generally taken verse 11 as qualifications for the wives of elders and deacons, especially since Paul says **"likewise."**
26. Beyond this, we also find that an elder must be someone who **"manages his own household well."**
27. He must **"keep his children under control with all dignity."**
28. He must have **"children who believe."**
29. And, his children must not be **"accused of dissipation or rebellion."**

Raising a family has been described as "boot camp for elders." A man demonstrates many of these other qualities as he leads his own family. And so, if a man raises children who all grow up to be criminals, that tells us something. If he raises children who all fall away from the faith as soon as they leave home, that tells us something. Children demonstrate something of a man's leadership ability. What our children choose to do as adults will not cause us to be lost (unless we have sinned against them in some way). However, what they do might show that someone is not qualified to serve as a shepherd. What our kids do might damage our ability to lead others. I've put a scripture on the handout about Eli and his children. Eli was a great person, but he refused to discipline his own sons, and that lack of discipline in his own family ultimately led to his failure as a leader of God's people.

My understanding of **"children who believe"** is that an elder must have raised at least one child who is a faithful Christian. It doesn't say that 100% of his children must be faithful. But there must be at least one in order to meet this minimum qualification. As I was growing up, one of our elders had **"believing children,"** but then his wife got pregnant, and they had another child. Some, I suppose, might have insisted that he step down, since 100% of his children were not technically **"believing,"** at that point, but that is not the way I see it. He did not get any less wise or less qualified when that new child was added to their family. Biblically speaking, the word **"children"** can definitely be used to refer to only one child. We have studied this before, but I have put several of the references there at the bottom of the page if you would like to look into that on your own. None of an elder's children, though, can be **"accused of dissipation or rebellion."** My understanding of this is that if the child of an elder goes out and wreaks havoc in the community and is always in trouble with the law (or whatever), first of all, that might cause the church to lose faith in his leadership ability (why should we go to him for any kind of parenting advice, and so on), but secondly, he probably needs to take some time off from his duties as a shepherd and to focus that effort on his own family.

Conclusion:

I know we have covered a lot of material this morning. If you would like to know more or have any questions that I might be able to clear up, I would love to hear from you during the week. My contact information is on the front of the bulletin each week.

But as we close, one thing that impresses me whenever we study this is: These qualifications are doable! Elders are not perfect. But, they can be qualified. And with very few exceptions, these qualifications pretty much apply to all of us. And so, to our men: If you aren't quite at this point yet, I would encourage you to keep on working on it. And so, if somebody approaches you today and wants to nominate you to serve as an elder, and if you are not quite there, there is no dishonor in saying, "Thank you for thinking of me, but please check back with me in six months, or a year," or whatever. When I preached on this back in 2012, I referenced that old saying, "The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, and the second best time to plant a tree is right now." So the idea is: Let's keep working on it. If we are not hospitable, let's get hospitable. If our tempers get out of control, let's get ourselves under control. If we are addicted to alcohol, let's reach out for help in conquering that addiction. If our children are not yet faithful (even as adults), let's not give up on that. If our children are still young but out of control, let's demonstrate some leadership and give the family some structure. If we are not teaching right now, then let's step up and get some experience. Talk to Josh, and he can get you plugged in to our education program. Beyond that, start doing some of what elders do. A lot of what elders do you don't need to be an elder to do - reach out to try to rescue a Christian brother or sister who might be slipping, visit the widows, learn, get involved, take on a special project.

For those who are not quite old enough to get married, keep this in mind. Young men, only marry someone who will help you to be qualified to serve as an elder someday. Young women, only marry someone who you could see serving as an elder someday. Young couples, make sure your relationship is strong. And for those here today who are still kids, you have a part in this. Your dad cannot serve as an elder unless he has Christian children, children who are not wild or rebellious. You have a part in this.

And of course, there is something all of us can do - we can pray. We can pray for the elders we have now. We can pray for this church as we try to add to the ones we have now. We can pray around the dinner table. We can pray at bedtime with our little children. We can pray when we get together with Christian friends. We can pray together as a congregation in our public assemblies. Our prayer and our goal is that we will always have faithful, qualified men who will continue to serve this congregation as shepherds - from today until the Lord returns.

As we close, we want to give everyone here an opportunity to obey the gospel, to obey the good news that Jesus came to this earth to live a perfect life, to die for our sins, to be buried, and to rise up on the third day. It seems strange to "obey" good news, but we obey the good news when we allow ourselves to be buried with Jesus in the act of baptism, as we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins, just as Jesus commanded. It's at this point that the Christian life begins. We are born into God's family. We want to do anything we can to help in that process. If you would like to talk about it, if you'd like to study, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can come talk to me right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com