

Living in God's Church Today

Qualifications for Overseers

1 Timothy 3:1-7

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March 20, 2022

Qualifications for Overseers

Scripture

In chapter 1, Paul wrote about the importance of *doctrine*. In chapter 2, he wrote about the proper conduct in *public worship*. And in chapter 3, he wrote about the *qualifications* for church officers.

Paul began chapter 3 with these words, “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (3:1). This is the second of five instances in the Pastoral Letters in which we find the expression, “The saying is trustworthy” (1:15; 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:11; Titus 3:8). It is an announcement of an important point or key doctrine. The important point was the introduction of the qualifications for overseers and deacons. Paul was concerned that each local church was governed properly. So he set down qualifications for men who would serve in these offices.

Paul began with “the office of overseer” (*episkopes*) and it refers to “the office of watching over, directing, and caring for a church.” In the New Testament, “overseer” (*episkopos*) and “elder” (*presbuteros*) are two titles for the same office. The title “overseer” is about the *nature* of the work and the title “elder” is about a man’s *age* and *dignity*. The point is that there is not a hierarchy of offices in the church.

Let us read about the qualifications for overseers in 1 Timothy 3:1-7:

¹The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ²Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one

wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (1 Timothy 3:1-7)

Introduction

The following description of the perfect pastor appeared in the *Rochester Courier Journal* in September 1981:

The perfect pastor preaches exactly 10 minutes. He condemns sin roundly but never hurts anyone's feelings. He works from 8 am until midnight and is also the church janitor. The perfect pastor makes \$40 a week, wears good clothes, drives a good car, buys good books, and donates \$30 a week to the church. He is 29 years old and has 40 years' experience. Above all, he is handsome. The perfect pastor has a burning desire to work with teenagers, and he spends most of his time with the senior citizens. He smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps him seriously dedicated to his church. He makes 15 home visits a day and is always in his office to be handy when needed. The perfect pastor always has time for church council and all of its committees. He never misses the meeting of any church organization and is always busy evangelizing the unchurched.¹

Churches sometimes have very unrealistic expectations

¹ See https://www.frtommylane.com/stories/priesthood/perfect_pastor.htm.

for their pastors. Thankfully, Paul set down the qualifications for pastors here in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and also in Titus 1:5-16. It is important to note that these qualifications refer primarily to *character* rather than to *duties*.

I want to note, however, that 1 Timothy 3:1-7 refers to qualifications not only for pastors but also for elders. In our denomination, we have one *class* of elders with two *orders*: teaching elders and ruling elders. All elders rule. In addition, teaching elders also have responsibilities for preaching and administering the sacraments. I mention this because today's text is about the qualifications for *all* overseers. These are the qualifications that are required of a teaching elder. And these are the very same requirements that are required of a ruling elder.

Lesson

1 Timothy 3:1-7 shows us the qualifications for overseers. Let's use the following outline:

1. A Man Must Be Called to Be an Overseer (3:1)
2. A Man Must Be Qualified to Be an Overseer (3:2-7)

I. A Man Must Be Called to Be an Overseer (3:1)

First, a man must be called to be an overseer.

Paul's purpose in writing this letter to Timothy was to give instructions about how Christians are to behave in the household of God (3:14-15). Qualified church officers are of first importance in the church so that they may set an example for the rest of the flock. Paul wrote in verse 1, **"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task."** The Greek word for "aspires" (*oregōmai*) occurs 3 times in the New Testament, and it means "to

exert much effort or energy (for something).” Thus it refers to external action, not an internal motive. The Greek word for **“desires”** (*epithymeo*) occurs 16 times in the New Testament, and it means “to have an intense desire for some particular thing.” This is the desire that God places on the heart of a man to serve as an overseer in the church. Taken together, these two words describe the type of man who belongs in the eldership, that is, a man whose strong internal desire expresses itself in outward pursuit of that goal.

Paul went on to say that a man aspiring to serve as an elder desires a **“noble task.”** The Greek words are usually translated as “good work.” It seems that the adjective (“good”) and the noun (“work”) have a broad range of meaning which is why the *ESV* translators came up with **“noble task.”** Paul’s point is that serving as an overseer is “good, fitting, beautiful.”

Serving as an under-shepherd of the flock of God is a wonderful and glorious calling. It is also difficult and tedious as elders care for sheep who often want to go their own way and don’t know what is best for their spiritual growth. No man should undertake this calling unless God has called him.

II. A Man Must Be Qualified to Be an Overseer (3:2-7)

And second, a man must be qualified to be an overseer.

Not only must a man be called to serve as an overseer, but he must also be qualified to serve as an overseer. Paul set down two guidelines regarding a man’s qualifications.

A. *A Man Must Have an Overarching Qualification to Be an Overseer (3:2a)*

First, a man must have an overarching qualification to be

an overseer.

Having stated that the office of overseer is a “noble task,” Paul wrote in verse 2a, **“Therefore an overseer must be above reproach.”** This qualification governs all other qualifications. It is the overarching qualification. The Greek word for **“above reproach”** (*anepiblepton*) occurs 3 times in the New Testament and only in this letter (3:2; 5:7; 6:14), and it means “not deserving or worthy of rebuke or criticism.” Commentator John Stott notes, “This cannot mean ‘faultless,’ or no child of Adam would ever qualify for a share in the oversight.”² The overseer must not be vulnerable to criticism concerning his Christian life in general, and especially concerning the list of qualifications that follow. This does not mean that the overseer may not be charged with something but that when he is charged with some flagrant sin, it will not stick because he has not committed such a sin.

B. A Man Must Have Particular Qualifications to be an Overseer (3:2b-7)

And second, a man must have particular qualifications to be an overseer.

Paul listed thirteen particular qualifications that a man must have to serve as an overseer.

First, his marriage. Paul wrote in verse 2b that an overseer must be **“the husband of one wife.”** Literally, in the Greek text, it reads as “of one woman a man.” We could also read it as “a one-woman man.” Paul assumed that overseers would be married, although marriage was not in itself a requirement. Paul himself was not married. Nor was Jesus, the Chief Overseer.

² John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 92.

However, Paul wanted to stress that if an overseer was married, he was committed to his wife. The point is not the elder's marital status but rather his moral and sexual purity.

Second, his sober-mindedness. Paul wrote in verse 2c that an overseer must be **“sober-minded.”** The Greek word for **“sober-minded”** (*nephaleon*) is used 3 times in the New Testament, all of them in the Pastoral Letters (3:11; Titus 2:2). It means “not given to any extremes in behavior; perhaps especially in terms of alcohol.” This adjective means “temperate” (as it is translated in some Bible versions, such as the *NIV*) or “sober,” and can be used figuratively as being self-controlled and sober-minded. An elder must be a person who thinks clearly.

Third, his self-control. Paul wrote in verse 2d that an overseer must be **“self-controlled.”** The Greek word for **“self-controlled”** (*sophrona*) occurs 4 times in the New Testament. The word is found only in Paul's First Letter to Timothy and in his Letter to Titus. It means “wisely keeping self-control over one's passions and desires.” The word carries the idea of “having right thoughts about what one should do.” Paul wanted overseers who were not swayed by emotions but who were disciplined in their thinking and way of life.

Fourth, his respectability. Paul wrote in verse 2e that an overseer must be **“respectable.”** The Greek word for **“respectable”** (*kosmion*) occurs 2 times in the New Testament, and it means “befitting admirable propriety or moderation.” While the previous character qualification “self-controlled” deals with inward character, **“respectable”** deals with external deportment, deportment that causes others to regard the overseer as respectable.

Fifth, his hospitality. Paul wrote in verse 2f that an overseer must be **“hospitable.”** The Greek word for **“hospitable”** (*philoxenon*) occurs 3 times in the New Testament (cf. Titus 1:8

and 1 Peter 4:9), and it means “disposed to treat guests and strangers with cordiality and generosity.” The Greek word is made up of two Greek words and it literally means “a friend of strangers.” The hospitality that Paul envisioned did not have the modern connotation of one entertaining friends or even the poor. Rather, Paul envisioned hospitality as taking in Christian strangers or acquaintances when they were traveling or fleeing persecution and they were without means of any kind. The Christians in Eastern Europe are extending this kind of hospitality to the refugees from Ukraine.

Kent Hughes tells the story that as a young man the missionary statesman-to-be E. Stanley Jones experienced the ultimate in hospitality when he was preaching his first evangelistic service among the poor mountaineers of Kentucky. The meetings were held in the schoolhouse. Says Dr. Jones:

At the schoolhouse I was invited to stay with a man and his wife, and when I arrived I saw there was one bed. The husband said, “You take the far side.” Then he got in, and then his wife. In the morning we reversed the process. I turned my face to the wall as they dressed, and they stepped out while I dressed. That was real hospitality! I have slept in palaces, but the hospitality of that one-bed-home is the most memorable and the most appreciated.³

Sixth, his ability to teach. Paul wrote in verse 2g that an overseer must be **“able to teach.”** The Greek word that is translated as **“able to teach”** (*didaktikon*) occurs 2 times in the New Testament (cf. 2 Timothy 2:24), and it means “of or characterized by teaching (imparting skills or knowledge to someone); especially the ability to do it well.” Of all the qualifications that

³ R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 79.

Paul noted were necessary for a man to serve as an overseer, this is the only one that related to skill or ability. It is also the only qualification that distinguished elders from deacons. For Paul, teaching God’s word was the elder’s primary duty.

Seventh, his temperance. Paul wrote in verse 3a that an overseer must be **“not a drunkard.”** The Greek word for **“drunkard”** is a compound word made up of “alongside” (*para*) and “wine” (*oinos*). This suggests the picture of a person who spends too much time with wine and who lingers beside his wine. Paul did not want overseers who had a reputation as one who spent too much time with wine. The judgment of elders must never be clouded by alcohol—or any substance.

Eighth, his temper. Paul wrote in verse 3b that an overseer must be **“not violent but gentle.”** The Greek word for **“violent”** (*plekten*) occurs 2 times in the New Testament (cf. Titus 1:7), and it means “a giver of blows.” It refers to someone who is a violent person and who physically strikes others. The word has an extended meaning of someone who has the attitude of a belligerent person so that he is quick-tempered. In contrast to being violent, the overseer must be **“gentle.”** This word (*epieike*) occurs 5 times in the New Testament. There is no English word that is the full equivalent of this Greek word, but it means something like “forbearing and peaceable.” Thus the *ESV* translators have used the word “gentle.”

Ninth, his peaceableness. Paul wrote in verse 3c that an overseer must be **“not quarrelsome.”** The Greek word for **“not quarrelsome”** (*amachos*) occurs 2 times in the New Testament (cf. Titus 3:2), and it means “inclined or disposed to peace (whether in war or in personal relations).” The adjective that is used here in verse 3 is a strong term that describes active and serious bickering, which could even lead to physical combat. What Paul wanted was an overseer with a peaceable attitude

who rejected all forms of threatening and fighting. He would heal rifts caused by bitter arguments and help unite people.

Tenth, his attitude to money. Paul wrote in verse 3d that an overseer must be **“not a lover of money.”** The Greek word for the expression “not a lover of money” (*aphilargyron*) occurs 2 times in the New Testament (cf. Hebrew 13:5), and it means “not characterized by an immoderate desire for acquiring wealth.” The Greek word is a compound word made up of “not” and “lover” and “silver.” So it literally is “not a lover of silver.” An overseer cannot be motivated by money. He must be motivated by love for God and love for God’s people.

Eleventh, his family. Paul wrote in verses 4-5 that an overseer must **“manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?”** Just as an overseer needs to display an exemplary personal life, so must he also display an exemplary home life. His children must be **“submissive,”** meaning that they must respect his authority, be well-behaved, and respectful. The overseer’s first responsibility is to his own family. If he does a good job with his own family, then he is qualified to care for the precious flock of God.

Twelfth, his spiritual maturity. Paul wrote in verse 6 that an overseer must **“not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.”** An overseer cannot be someone who was recently converted to Christianity. Paul’s requirement was not directed so much against a youthful candidate as against one who was new in the faith, whether old or young in years. Paul’s reason for this prohibition is twofold. First, if a recent convert was made an overseer, he might become puffed up with conceit. That is, he might become proud and arrogant. And second, he

might fall into the condemnation of the devil, that is, he might become subject to incurring God's judgment.

And thirteenth, his reputation. Paul wrote in verse 7 that an overseer must be **“well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”** Paul now listed as a qualification how the overseer was viewed by unchurched people. Even though unchurched people may disagree with him biblically and morally, they must nevertheless regard him well. The overseer must have an unimpeachable reputation with the unchurched community. He cannot serve effectively if the unchurched community do not respect him.

I once served a church in which one of my predecessors had been censured by the Presbytery. In the first year of my ministry in that community, I would meet people in the community. When they learned that I was the new pastor of the church, they would ask if I had followed my predecessor. They did not speak well of him. After I had been serving in that community for several years, people would say to me, “You are so normal!” I believe they meant that as a compliment! Overseers must have a good reputation with the unchurched community. If they do not have a good reputation, they will not be effective in ministering in that community.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed overseers in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, let us ask the Lord to send us men who are qualified to serve as overseers in our church.

I also want you to know that these qualifications should be seen in seed form in the life of every Christian. They don't only belong to officers. Look at your own life and ask God to help you grow in each characteristic. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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