

Officers in the Church: A Voter's Guide

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | August 2017

Goal: This series is a “voter’s guide” for the congregation at Harvest, telling them

1. WHAT office in the church is, Philippians 1:1
2. WHY Jesus gave officers to His church, Ephesians 4:11-16
3. WHAT offices Jesus has given to His church, 1 Timothy 3:1-13
4. WHO officers in the church ought to be, 1 Timothy 3:1-13
5. HOW officers are chosen, Acts 14:21-23

Action: After this series concludes, we will hold a period of private nominations and then a period of officer training. Then we will hold an election, ordain and install all those elected

Sermon 1, Elders: A Christian Voter's Guide, 1 Timothy 3:1-7

Read Acts 20/Ezekiel 34

“An elder who is not vigilant over his own life, both in private and in public, will not be able to be watchful over and care for the people of God. His senses and discernment will be dulled. He will be as one who is asleep or drunk. In the first place, an elder must constantly be vigilant in his own life lest he fall into sin. He must keep the law of God ever before his eyes. Second, an elder must constantly be vigilant in caring for the flock.” — Archie Allison, “Biblical Qualifications for Elders and Deacons”

“hospitality is sharing what God has given us with other Christians for their edification and mutual encouragement. It is friendly, generous reception and treatment of guests or strangers.” — Allison

To this we may add John Calvin’s comment on “apt to teach”: “Those who are charged with governing the people should be qualified to teach.” Rather than gifts for public speaking, Paul is “commending wisdom in knowing how to apply God’s Word to the profit of His people.” In the words of Lawrence R. Eyres, “an elder must be able to deal with people on a one-to-one basis, applying the Word to the needs of the individual.” — Allison

Proposition: When choosing an elder, Christ calls you to pick a man who manifests the qualities listed here.

- I. Something to Count On: Serving as an Elder Is a Good Task, v. 1
- II. Something to Look For: An Elder Must Be Well-Qualified, vv. 2-7
 - A. His Character in General: Blameless, v. 2a
 - B. His Character in Specifics, vv. 2b-7
 1. Personal Behavior, vv. 2b-3
 2. Family Leadership, vv. 4-5
 3. Maturity, v. 6a

- 4. Community Reputation, v. 7a
 - C. His Beliefs, Titus 1:9
- III. Something to Beware Of: The Elder's Vulnerabilities, vv. 5-7
 - A. His Family Life, v. 5
 - B. His Growth in Christ, v. 6b
 - C. His Reputation Outside the Church, v. 7b

Introduction

Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, a new era has come in the life of our congregation. We were particularized a little less than one year ago, and as a particular church, new tasks confront us. In particular, the task of choosing men to lead us in carrying out Christ's commands is something that we, as a whole church, are responsible for.

How do we do that? How do we decide who will lead us and what form that leadership will take? The answer is given to us in an extremely practical, down-to-earth way right here in Paul's instructions to his protege Timothy, a minister in Ephesus during the era of the early church. Paul had probably already taught Timothy that officers called elders are the ones set apart to rule in the church, and that officers called deacons are the ones who minister to the physical needs of the church body. In the same way, many or most of you have spent a good portion of your life worshipping in churches that have elders and deacons. You likely already have a concept of what elders and deacons do. Thus, rather than describing those offices in detail here, Paul simply tells Timothy what kind of men ought to fill them. In the book of Acts, we are told that the early church selected leaders by voting. Elders were elected by a show of hands (see Acts 14:23). And that principle stands in today's church. We at Harvest choose our leaders by a congregational vote.

Here's how that will work. This week, I will preach on the requirements for elders. Next week, I will preach on the requirements for deacons. Then we will start a new series on Ephesians, Lord-willing on the first Sunday of September. The month of September will be set aside for nominations. Any and all of you are qualified to nominate any male member of the congregation to be an elder or a deacon. If you hear this sermon and think, "I think so-and-so would be a good elder/deacon," then go talk to that person. Tell him that you're thinking of nominating him. Ask him whether he's willing to serve. Explain why you think he'd be a good candidate. If he says no, then you have your answer. But if he's open to being nominated, then please come talk to me or to one of the other elders.

This nomination period will be open for the month of September. You have a whole month to think and pray and choose those men in this church who meet the standards we just read and which I'm about to preach on.

At the beginning of October, I will start offering an officer training course for men who have been nominated to serve. Those who successfully complete the course and are still willing to serve as officers will have their names placed on a ballot, and at a congregational meeting

(probably early next year) we will vote on whether to elect them. At that time, you will be able to vote by secret ballot for any, all, or none of the candidates put forward. Those who are elected will be ordained and installed as elders and deacons of this church.

We aren't going to get into what elders do or the further specifics of the election process in the course of these sermons. But we are going to talk about the kind of man you ought to nominate and the kind of man you ought to vote for. Why are we going to talk about this in sermons rather than in announcements? Because brothers and sisters, the fact of the matter is that elders and deacons are gifts that Christ Himself gives to His church and calls to serve through the voice of the congregation. That's right. You are Jesus' representatives in this matter. A call from you to a brother in this church to serve as an officer is a call from Jesus Himself. So take heed to what you are doing! Christ calls you, when you're choosing an elder, to pick a man with the qualities listed here. This is how the Chief Shepherd cares for you as His sheep. He has you elect undershepherds from among yourselves who will lead you in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

I. Something to Count On: Serving as an Elder Is a Good Task, v. 1

So with that preface, let's dive in. We first see something to count on — a “faithful saying” — that is, a statement that you can build your life on. Paul includes several of them in his letters to Timothy and Titus.

The thing you can count on, as you look for officers for your congregation, is that being an elder in the church is a good work. It is work — make no mistake about that. If you go to someone and say, “I'd like to nominate you to be an elder,” you're saying, “I think you might be called by Christ to take on additional responsibilities and do more work than you are currently doing.” Being an elder doesn't mean having a title and some respect. It means working, sometimes working through very stressful and heartbreaking situations. You can ask our current ruling elders for some of the stories of what they've been through at other churches. This is work.

But it is *good* work. Paul uses the word for aesthetic goodness, but one which can also apply to moral goodness. This work is beautiful. What is the work? Well, he doesn't say here because he has made that clear elsewhere. The work is the work of shepherding the flock. It is the work of feeding, tending, and caring for Christ's sheep. And that work, brothers and sisters, is a lot of work but it's good. It is a worthwhile work to do.

If you would like to be an elder or a minister, then you are seeking something good. Paul doesn't encourage overweening ambition here. But he does say that if you have some desire to do this work, then you have a desire for something good.

II. Something to Look For: An Elder Must Be Well-Qualified, vv. 2-7

So who ought to do this work?

A. His Character in General: Blameless, v. 2a

The blameless man. What does that mean? Someone who has never done anything wrong? No. It means someone who is free from egregious faults, from the kind of big sins that attract reproach. Paul isn't saying, “Only people who have never forgotten to answer an email or text can be

elders.” He isn’t saying that only people who never think a bad thought can be elders. He’s saying that people whose faults stand out from the crowd must not be elders. Don’t vote for a flaky person who can never be trusted to keep his word. Don’t vote for someone who has a bad reputation in some area. Don’t vote for someone who can be justly blamed for indulging bad habits and who lets himself routinely commit the kind of sins that make a scandal and attract comment in the community. In short, blameless means that the only bad things you can pin on the person are the minor sins that are common to people of his time.

B. His Character in Specifics, vv. 2b-7

But Paul doesn’t just leave it there. He lists four areas in which the candidate’s blamelessness needs to be strikingly apparent. Again, this is not so that we can feel smug and superior, or think to ourselves, “Well, in these areas I’m much better than so-and-so!” No. Paul lists these areas because officers in the church represent Christ to the people under their charge. Officers need to be blameless because Jesus is blameless. If you believe in and trust Jesus Christ, then you need to seek to be led by someone who reminds you of Him.

1. Personal Behavior, vv. 2b-3

The first area where candidates for eldership must show good character is in their personal behavior. Paul highlights the number one issue here: is this man faithful to his wife? The Greek literally means “man of one woman.” Is that the kind of man this is? You see, Jesus is supremely and perfectly a man of one woman. He loves and courts His bride and only His bride. He has eyes and thoughts for nobody else. So is the candidate for eldership like that? Does he have intense, involved conversations one-on-one with, and deep emotional connections to women other than his wife? After the service is over each Sunday, does he make a beeline for someone else’s wife or daughter and show himself inseparable from her for the rest of the fellowship time? How about his view of virtual women? Does he watch TV shows that feature steamy encounters and scanty clothing? Does he look up porn or seek sexual stimulation on the web? Or are his eyes and heart, like those of Jesus, only for his wife?

This requirement is often taken to mean that an elder may not be divorced and remarried, or even that his wife must never have been married to someone else. But such an interpretation does violence to the obvious meaning of the phrase. Let me ask you two questions.

1. Do you think Paul was really saying that anyone who has never been married cannot under any circumstances be an elder in the church?
2. Do you think Paul was really saying that anyone who is happily married, but whose wife dies must get out of church leadership, either upon his wife’s death or at the time when he announces his engagement to another woman?

Frankly, I just don’t see how anyone could answer “yes” to either of those questions. But if you can’t answer “yes” to those questions, then you cannot say that “man of one woman” literally means “married always and only to one particular woman.” Rather, it means the more general “perfectly chaste — if married, faithful to the wife that he has; if single, faithful to live chastely before God, treating young women as sisters in all purity.” If a man has been divorced in

accordance with the law of God — that is because of adultery or abandonment — then, even if remarried, he is perfectly free to become an elder. This requirement has more to do with whether a man is presently chaste and faithful to his wife than with whether he has been lawfully divorced. At the same time, it definitely excludes all polygamists from the eldership. It also makes clear how foolish the Roman Catholic Church is to insist on clerical celibacy. Far from seeking never-married bishops, Paul assumes that the bishop will be married and run a thriving household.

But whether a man is faithful to his wife is only the first of several personal qualifications. An elder must also be vigilant and sober-minded. That is, he has to be someone who is on the watch for danger and harm both to himself and to the flock. Don't elect a ditz, a space cadet, or a clueless person. These people have no business leading the church. We have law enforcement officers in this church. If you want to know what vigilance looks like, ask them.

As for sober-mindedness, that means thinking which is in touch with reality. A sober-minded person doesn't let his thoughts run off into totally unrealistic places. Think about financially, for instance. A sober-minded person will never say, "I make \$4000 per month. That means I can easily swing \$1400 on housing, \$700 in car payments, and \$1000 in vacation spending every month." We all know people whose thinking is out of touch with reality. Whatever you do, do not nominate or elect such a person to the office of elder!

The elder must be respectable. This means that people who meet him think well of him, honor him, listen to his words because they are known to contain wisdom. Fools and laughingstocks need not apply for the position of elder. They are welcome in the kingdom of God, but they are not welcome to lead the church.

An elder candidate must be hospitable. Again, every one of these qualities is listed here for a church leader because they reflect the identity of Jesus Christ, the King of the church. Jesus is faithful to his wife. He is vigilant. He is sober-minded. He is respectable. And He is hospitable, to the point of inviting all of us to live with Him for the rest of eternity.

Hospitality is the opposite of xenophobia. In fact, the Greek word here is literally "xenophile" (or actually its reverse: *philoxenos*). To be hospitable is to invite people into your home so that you can share your food and some part of your life with them. Brothers and sisters, this is a non-negotiable requirement for leaders in the church. If you have a candidate in mind, ask yourself this question: Has this man ever invited me over to his home? Obviously, if you've only been here for a few weeks, then the man may just have not gotten around to it. But if you've been worshipping together for multiple years and never received a single invitation from the candidate, don't nominate or vote for that person. At the same time, before you get harsh with others, examine yourself. Have you invited the people of this church into your home? Have you shown yourself hospitable? Do you welcome guests into your home? If not, repent. Remember, these qualities are listed here not just for elders, but ultimately for everyone in the church to emulate. If you want to be like Jesus, then you need to be like an elder — and that includes showing hospitality.

The elder must be skillful in teaching. This is not the same as public preaching or even public speaking. The word can also refer to one-on-one instruction. Anyone fit to be an elder needs to be able to take the word of God and instruct others in it, at least one-on-one and perhaps also in larger groups. If a man can't for the life of him tell someone else what the word says and how it applies, then he should not be an elder.

He must not be a drunkard or drug addict, nor given to settling things by violence. He must not be characterized by greed, but rather by gentleness and an unwillingness to quarrel. He must not be full of desires for things he can't have. So that means that you must not elect or nominate someone who is always talking about the kind of cars he wants, someone who is always describing his dream vacation, someone who is always seeking to be substantially richer than he currently is.

Again, this is because leaders in the church show people what Jesus Christ is like. If you nominate or vote for someone who misrepresents Jesus, then that's blasphemy, and that's on you. You're telling a watching world (and a watching church!) that Jesus is covetous, greedy, violent, unable to teach, etc.

Well, these are the personal qualities. But Paul highlights three other areas in which an elder must shine.

2. Family Leadership, vv. 4-5

The first of these is family leadership. An elder must rule his own household well and keep his children obedient. If a man's household is in a perpetual state of crisis, if his children are rebelling against him and his wife and their authority as parents, then then he does not meet this criterion.

How will you know this? Partly through the hospitality command in v. 2. You should probably not nominate or vote for elder for anyone unless you've been in his home and seen how he relates to his wife and children. If it's obvious that he doesn't know how to lead, that his wife is barely holding things together, and that the kids are ready to burn the house down, then don't vote for that man!

Now, none of us is the family leader we'd like to be. All of us as spouses and parents have certain regrets. But there is nonetheless a clear distinction between those who rule their house well and those who rule their household badly. Anyone qualified to be an elder must have a household that passes inspection.

3. Maturity, v. 6a

The man you nominate and vote for to be an elder must also be mature — not a neophyte, Paul says. The Greek word literally means “newly planted” and implies that someone recently converted must not be a church leader. Sometimes people come to Christ and just take off with massive growth toward godliness. Yet that is not the time to say, “So-and-so is growing in Christ a great deal. Let's make him an elder or an associate pastor!” No. Wait. Let him grow. Mature Christians are the ones best suited to be elders in the church. Isn't that what the name “elder” implies?

4. Community Reputation, v. 7a

Finally, an elder candidate must have a good community reputation. If I call your boss and say, “I’m the pastor at Harvest Presbyterian. I’m thinking of asking so-and-so to be a leader in my church. Do you think he would be a good candidate?” I should hear your boss, whether he’s a believer or not, say, “I would absolutely recommend him in a heartbeat. He is a huge asset to my team here, and if he’s willing to be a leader in your church, you should snap him up.” In the same way, if you really value one of the brothers here at Harvest, and you believe that he meets all the previous qualifications, but you happen to know that he is not well regarded at his workplace, or at City Hall, etc., then that should give you pause. Obviously some good men are the victims of slander and envy. Just look at Jesus. But if those poor opinions are founded on real problems with the man’s character, then don’t nominate him to the eldership and don’t vote for him if someone else nominates him.

III. Something to Beware Of: The Elder’s Vulnerabilities, vv. 5-7

Well, by this point, if you’ve been listening to this sermon, you probably feel like you’re watching the training to be a Navy SEAL. Brother after brother in the church has been removed from the running in your mind, as you have come to grapple with the qualifications that Christ demands in those who will lead His people. When you recognize further that this is a voluntary position, and that its only reward is likely to be the joy of knowing Jesus Christ better, you might begin to wonder how anyone can be found to serve as an elder. Yet Paul rounds off his treatment with three warnings. The elder is particularly vulnerable in three areas.

A. His Family Life, v. 5

The first is his family life, both in his relationship to his wife and to his children. Someone who can’t do this well will not be able to take care of the church of God.

Is there a connection between family leadership and church leadership? YES! Just as Jesus Christ is the perfect Son to His Father, so that perfect family relationship grounds His role as head and king of the church. And just as you are a husband and father first and foremost, so if you are a bad husband and bad father you will also be a bad elder or a bad deacon. To myself and my fellow elders, I say, “Take care of and shepherd your own family first!” To you who are not elders but are tasked with choosing elders, I say, “Study and pray over these qualifications and ask God to lead you to the man or men in this church who embody them.”

B. His Growth in Christ, v. 6b

Second, an elder or elder candidate must be mature. The danger here is that he will grow ridiculously proud and fall into the same snare of pride that caught the Devil. That’s right. Satan’s sin was pride. That’s why we have the proverb “As proud as Lucifer.” Don’t elect a proud man or a newly converted man. They are likely to fall as hard as Satan did. To myself and my fellow elders, I say, look out! Pride is a besetting sin of ecclesiastics. Because I hold office in the church, I must be a pretty good person! At least, that’s how we like to think. But Paul says, “Not so fast. The second you think that, you are liable to fall like Satan did.” So the elder must be growing in Christ, not remaining a neophyte.

C. His Reputation Outside the Church, v. 7b

Finally, anyone nominated to be an elder needs to, as much as good character can, have good references from those outside the church. If he doesn't, he might be mocked and derided--and the whole church derided with him. Think about the fact that Michael Jackson was a Jehovah's Witness until 1987. Now, that just gives JWs a bad name! If a notoriously wicked pop star says, "Oh, by the way, I'm a Christian and a leader in the Christian church," people are going to think, "Well, that church isn't worth much!"

Indeed, through exactly this kind of social condemnation Satan has snared some people, Paul says. They made the poor testimony of elders somewhere an excuse to walk away from Jesus. To myself and my fellow elders, I say, "Do you want that on your conscience? Do you want to be the reason that someone went to Hell?" To the rest of you, I say, Beware how you nominate and vote! Elders are the gift of Christ to His church. They represent Him in His purity and glory. That's why good elders are such a blessing — but bad elders are such a curse. Beware! Nominate prayerfully. Vote prayerfully! And above, seek to honor Christ in this season when we as a church nominate and elect officers to the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen.