

A Brief Exegesis and Personal Reflection
On the Qualifications for an Elder in 1 Timothy 3:1-7

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In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 Paul gives the qualifications for overseers in the church. What is interesting is that Paul does not present the duties of this position but rather the character of one who qualifies for the office. Paul is not giving an exhaustive, detailed list of every characteristic of a person who qualifies. Rather than presenting a check-list of qualifications, I believe Paul is getting to the heart of the man. I believe he's asking, "When we look at the whole picture of this man's life, in the present tense (as used throughout the passage), do we see that this man has been changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ? Is he currently growing in grace? Is he spiritually mature? And is this evidenced in godly character?"

The goal of this paper is twofold: first, to briefly exegete the passage by interacting with selected words from the original language with a focus on the character of an overseer; secondly, to discuss how I view myself in light of these qualifications.

Part 1: 1 Timothy 3:1-7, An Brief Exegesis

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore 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, ESV)

Verse 1: *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*

Overseer, Aspiring, and Desiring

To begin, Paul uses the term ἐπισκοπῆς, translated as “overseer” or “bishop”, for this office. This office is for those who provide oversight to the church. Other terms such as “elder” and “pastor” (or “shepherd”) are all used in the New Testament to describe this same office and are used interchangeably. This is clear in Titus 1:5-9, a parallel passage on qualifications for elders. In that passage the term πρεσβύτερος is used for “elder” and ἐπίσκοπος for “overseer” (also see 1 Peter 5:1-2). Acts 20:28 uses ἐπίσκοπος for “overseer” and helps us understand the role of this office:

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.

Though many translations use the term “anyone” or “whoever”, I believe a better translation in 1 Timothy 3:1 for the word τις is “any man”. The word is masculine as are all of the other adjectives in 3:2-6. This would also be in agreement with the fact that the overseer be a μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα (“one-woman man”, v2). Only men are called to this particular office of church leadership and I believe that, when biblically warranted, this should be stressed in all terminology referring to this person, which would include τις in 3:1.

Another interesting observation is that this person “aspires” and “desires” this good work (καλοῦ ἔργου). The term for “aspires” is ὀρέγω and is only used two other times in the New Testament (1 Tim. 6:10; Heb. 11:16). It means, “to strive to attain” or

“to reach out after” which points to the external steps being taken by the man to qualify for the office. The term for “desires” is ἐπιθυμέω and points more to the inward feeling. There should be a yearning, an inward call, created by the Holy Spirit that is like a fire in his bones (Jer. 20:9). It should be noted that this alone does not qualify one for the office but is a mere part of the whole. There have been many men who long to be in a position of spiritual leadership but their life as a whole disqualifies them. Proverbs 19:2 says, “Desire without knowledge is not good”. Desire, which is good and necessary for a man to have for this office, is not by itself enough to qualify one for the office. There are many who aspire and desire the office but lack the moral character required.

Verses 2-5: ² *Therefore 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?*

Above Reproach

The first qualification is an overarching requirement for leadership in the church. To be ἀνεπίλημτος is to be “above criticism” or “beyond blame”. It means “one who cannot be “laid hold of” and one “who gives no ground for accusation” (Vincent, 228). This is the bottom line characteristic in determining whether a man is fit for this office. If he is above reproach, he will be all of things that follow in this passage. Titus uses the term ἀνέγκλητος to communicate basically the same idea (“without accusation”). The leader must live a life worthy of imitation and not bring any disgrace to the gospel that he represents; for we are God’s ambassadors and he makes his appeal through us (2 Cor.

5:20). Living a life without blame (this, of course, does not mean sinless) is the overarching qualification of an elder. Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter, said:

“Take heed to yourselves...lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues...One proud surly, lordly word, one needless contention, one covetous action, may cut the throat of many a sermon, and blast the fruit of all that you have been doing.” (MacArthur)

The elder must remember his position and strive to live a blameless life, even worthy of imitation by others. All of the other qualifications that follow fall under and are assumed under this one.

Sober-minded and Self-controlled

Moving on, an elder must be νηφάλιος (sober-minded, v2) and σώφρων (self-controlled, v2). The term νηφάλιος means temperate, sober-minded, or restrained. This term gives the idea of being clear-headed and self-restrained. This word is only used in two other places in the New Testament: Once in Titus 2:2 as a characteristic of older men and in 1 Tim. 3:11 as a characteristic of deacon’s wives. The word has the idea that this person always has a hold on himself. Paul is also emphasizing that the leader must have clarity in this thinking and decision-making; “opposed to youthful levity” (Vincent, 229). The next characteristic is complementary to the one that precedes it: σώφρων means self-controlled or moderate in behavior. The elder must not be rash, but rather be self-disciplined, thoughtful, and serious-minded. This term is used again in Titus 2 twice (v2, 12). In light of these terms, an elder must be able to look at matters objectively and fairly

in order to rule well. He must be able to rule his emotions well and not be tossed around by them.

These traits, when viewed along with the following characteristics of “not a drunkard”, “not violent”, “not quarrelsome”, and “not a lover of money”, paint a picture of a man who is thoughtful, prioritized, well disciplined, gentle, patient, and content. Surely those who are in the office of elder should be such men.

Hospitable, Gentle, and Content

This man should exhibit the quality of being “hospitable” (φιλόξενος). This should be true of all Christians (Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9). This is a compound term containing the two Greek words for “to love” and “strangers”. This man should be a lover of strangers! Elders should be humble men who are approachable by all. They are not to be ones who are haughty, but above should be servants of all. Jesus himself, the ultimate Example of being a “lover of strangers” (for we were “strangers”, Eph. 2:12), taught this very principle (Luke 14:12-14).

An elder, rather than being quarrelsome and violent, must be gentle (ἐπιεικής). This is the mark of a man who knows the depth of his own sin and is able to bear with others in their failures. Remember, he is to be a shepherd. He is not one who is harshly drive the herd from behind with a whip, but is to gently lead the flock. The Apostle Paul uses this same term to describe Christ himself (2 Cor. 10:1)! This is a high calling and one that should not be overlooked when considering men for this office. A man without gentleness has no place in caring for the church of God.

Furthermore, this man should be content and generous. He should not be a “lover of money” (ἀφιλάργυρος) or greedy. The alpha at the front of the word negates the Greek word for “money-loving” here. Time and time again Scripture warns against the danger of loving money (1 Tim. 6:6-10. Later in the book Paul would tell Timothy, “godliness with contentment is great gain” (6:6). Paul could teach this as he lived it. He said he “coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothes” (Acts 20:33). Men who love money are manipulators, take advantage of others, and distort justice. An elder should be the opposite! He should be content with what God has given him and generous towards others.

Home Life

Interestingly, Paul takes a significant portion of this passage (two of the seven verses) to talk about this man and his life at home. A key qualification for this office is that a man manages “his household well” (v4). The word translated as “manage” in the ESV is the greek word προϊστημι. This word means to guide, lead, or direct and is applied to the elder’s ministry role in other places (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17). In light of this, Paul uses simple logic in verse five and basically says, “if he doesn’t responsibly lead and guide his own family, should he be appointed to an office with the responsibility of leading and guiding the people of God?” Or as Calvin says, “Clearly a person who is unfit to rule his own family is totally unsuitable to govern a whole group of people” (Calvin, 57). A man may aspire and desire the office, he may possess the godly

characteristics required, but if his home life is a mess he should not be placed in this office.

Verses 6-7: 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.*

Pride and Reputation

With position and authority often comes pride. Humility is an essential characteristic of an elder. Because of this, those who have recently become Christians should not be appointed to this office. I have often heard it said that, “the more I know, the less I know.” As one grows in the Christian life one realizes more and more how little they truly have figured out. I believe this leads to humility and helps one bear with others in their weaknesses. The term νεόφωτος (“recent convert”) is only used here in the New Testament and is used in extrabiblical greek to refer to a newly planted tree! (MacArthur, 118). It is crucial that those who are to care for and lead a group of people not be puffed up and conceited. A conceited person will not be gentle and understanding with others, but arrogant and callous. Placing a new Christian in this position of authority could easily lead to him becoming conceited (τυφώω). Not placing this person in this important leadership position is for their good, keeping them from falling “into the condemnation of the devil.” This phrase should be interpreted as the person receiving the same judgment that God has pronounced on Satan; his pride is what led to his downfall. An elder should be humble (Matt. 23:11-12).

Finally, an elder should “be well thought of by outsiders”. Even those outside of the faith, who may even be aggressively against the Christian faith, should confess that this is an upright man. The phrase “well thought of” is the Greek word μαρτυρία and can be translated as having “a good reputation” with those outside the church. This is the same word from which we get our English word “martyr”. These men should have a good testimony. The community should look on him as one who is respectable and regards him highly. Sure, they may and will disagree with his beliefs, some even attacking him for it, but they should have no leg to stand on when it comes to the quality of his character. The “snare of the devil” here is a subjective genitive and refers to a snare set by Satan. This snare would be Satan discrediting the leader in the church. Having a bad reputation with those outside of the church would be a bad witness and inevitably begin to hinder his leadership within the church.

Paul is not describing a certain type of person that qualifies to be an elder but rather he is giving the characteristics of one who has been changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. He rules, guides, and leads, and yet he is humble, gentle, and full of grace. He is faithful, loving, self-controlled, responsible, and content. A man who has been changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ will exhibit these qualities and is eligible for the office of overseer.

Part 2: Personal Reflection on 1 Timothy 3:1-7

In this section my goal is to approach this passage more subjectively based on the exegetical discussions above. I will discuss how I view myself in light of these characteristics including the areas where I have grown and where I struggle. I won't discuss all of them but instead the ones where I see God has worked on me the most.

First of all, I do aspire to this office of elder. This aspiration is not based solely on my wants but the aspiration itself is fueled by what I feel is the call of God on my life. I believe that God has called me to this position and my aspirations, my reaching out after this position, have arisen from this burden God has placed on my heart. I believe that I was obedient when he called me from the teaching profession and into the ministry, and also when he called me to seminary. I have seen the way God has grown me throughout the years by providentially placing me in opportunities to grow in ministry leadership. As I look back on the positions God has placed me in, such as being a worship leader for campus ministries and discipling others, I can see how God was preparing me for pastoral leadership. I do desire this noble task. I understand that it is not an easy task. It is not the position one would choose were it not for the compelling hand of God driving him to it. I know that God has called me to this position based on the Holy Spirit driving me to it, the way God has prepared me throughout the years, and based on the testimony of those around me confirming this call on my life.

Surely being held to the high standard of being "above reproach" is scary apart from the atoning work of Christ. No man other than Christ can claim fulfilling this on the whole, but when viewed in the context of the present tense (which is used throughout the

passage) with the understanding that “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23), it is clear that Paul is not saying that this man is sinless but rather that this man should live in such a way that others have nothing to accuse him of, a life worthy of imitation, and should represent Christ above all. I can’t help but feel that I fall short here! Others may see this in me, but I know the depth of my sin. Left to myself, I am unworthy to represent Christ in this noble office, as I believe that all men should feel this way. Also, the responsibility of this position makes me tremble, knowing how I fall short in so many ways. But in Christ “there is no condemnation” (Rom. 8:1) and I find courage to love and lead his people. As I look to the work of Christ for me and know the truth that Christ has qualified me, I take heart. I feel the weighty responsibility of living a life that is worthy of being imitated by the flock and I hope to always feel this burden in a healthy way. I never want to bring disgrace to the gospel and I pray that I will be guarded by the Holy Spirit to walk in the light of the Lord as I live and lead others. As the old hymn says,

*Well may the accuser roar, of sins that I have done;
I know them all and thousands more, Jehovah knoweth none!*

Knowing this truth and growing in my understanding of my justification by the work of Christ compels me to grow in holiness. I believe that God is constantly working on me, shaping me into a man that others can look to for imitation as I point them to Jesus Christ.

As for the characteristics of being “sober-minded” and “self-controlled”, God has grown me in this area. God used suffering in my life to sober me up to the realities of life, making me into a man who I believe now is able to effectively pastor people. My

first son was born with major complications. For us it was a long time of suffering and pain. We were driven to our knees in prayer and had nothing else to lean on. I believe this was the most significant time in my life where God shaped me. He stripped what felt like everything away from me and I only had him to fall on. Since this time I have had a more serious outlook on life. The dross of youthfulness was burnt away. I believe that one main purpose in this was that God was refining me for pastoral ministry. I now know how to “weep with those who weep”. My heart has been broken. I feel that God has wrestled me, touched me on the hip, and I walk with a limp. As for “self-controlled”, I have always been fairly self-disciplined, but God has used my family to sanctify me in this area. I have learned what it means to have important responsibilities and little time. As the leader of my household I’ve been forced to look at matters objectively, learn to not make rash, emotional decisions, and carefully consider things before acting.

As for not being a lover of money, I wouldn’t consider myself as struggling with desiring riches or greed, but probably more with the idea of having enough to feel secure. I thank God for my wife in this area. My wife is such a godly example of generosity. She has made me get out of my comfort zone, move out in love and faith, and give to others. Also, when my first son was born God stripped much away from us in the area of money and material things. She had to quit her job, we went down to one vehicle for over a year, we cancelled cable, and learned to live on less. God provided for us in amazing ways. Medical bills got paid for, debt was paid off, and today we are debt-free aside from our mortgage. Again, this is on one income; she’s never gone back to work. God has taught me so much in this area and I am still learning the balance of being

responsible in having savings and retirement funds, but not to find my sense of security there. I am learning the truth of what the Psalmist wrote: “I have been young and now am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread” (Ps. 37:35). In six years of marriage God has put us through some tough times and yet he’s always given us more than we ever asked for.

Another area where my wife has helped me grow is in hospitality. I have a tendency to want to close myself off from the world, especially when I get home. I sometimes have struggled with feeling entitled to being able to come home, shut the door, and let no one in. Sure, there is a healthy and needed amount of alone time that each person should have, but I often wouldn’t even want people to come over. My wife on the other hand is very hospitable. She’s opened my eyes to the importance of opening your home, inviting others over for dinner, dying to yourself to serve others, and much more in this area. She thinks of the person at church with no community and the homeless person on the roadside needing food. She has shown me what it means to show Christian hospitality and to love strangers. This has been a process and if it weren’t for God using her to grow me in this area I would still have more of a struggle with this.

I have been husband to Marissa for six years, I have two boys (Jonathan-3 & Isaac-1), and my wife is currently pregnant (edit—She recently miscarried). I believe we have a great marriage and a beautiful family. I am happy, content, and feel so blessed. Having a family has been the most sanctifying experience of my life. I am always being convicted, challenged, and growing in the areas of how to love my family well. I am learning to listen to my wife better and how to be intentional in asking her questions

about her heart. One of the areas I've grown in the most is praying with her. I cannot even begin to explain how significant of an impact this has had on my relationship with her. We pray together sometimes multiple times a day. Even short little prayers before I walk out the door can change our entire day. As a father, I'm learning how to meet my children on their level and really incarnate with them. Also, I'm constantly growing in learning how to discipline my children. I'm learning how to get to the heart level with them and my oldest is at the age where we can begin to have those types of conversations. I do struggle with fighting for and through times of family worship. With one and three year old boys, family worship can be an absolute battle. My wife has encouraged me to smile, be faithful, and press on through it. We've already begun to see fruit from these times with my children with them taking initiative to pray on their own. This has been such an encouragement.

One thing I had to learn early in my ministry was how to fight for time with my family. When I first went into full-time ministry, I had no children. I was guilty of putting ministry "stuff" over my wife because of my people-pleasing ways and fear of man. After the birth of my first son, that changed. God used that to put everything in perspective and show me the value of my family. I have since made huge strides in prioritizing my family.

To begin considering verses 6-7, I'm not a recent convert. I grew up in church and believed in Jesus Christ as Lord at a young age. It was then that I believe the Spirit of God regenerated me. It wasn't until my college years that I was discipled and experienced a significant amount of spiritual growth. It was after my college years that I

began to learn more about grace and to see the gospel in a new light. God has been working in my life for many years now. Because I'm not a recent convert, God has had time to work on my heart and humble me. God has brought me low through different circumstances and shown me how utterly powerless I am. Even still, I can tend to lean towards self-reliance. This is how pride shows itself in my life. It manifests itself as being "responsible" and "hard-working" when underneath it is a lack of faith. Sometimes I can live as if everything depends on me leaving no room for faith. This leads to worry and stress in my life. My wife challenges me in this area and has been such a huge help at seeing this blind spot in my life. I am aware of this sin in my life and am growing in relying upon God.

This is how I view myself in light of these qualifications for the office of elder. Overall, God has changed my heart by the gospel of Jesus Christ and is still doing that through the gospel. I am constantly learning that all of life is repentance and faith in the gospel.

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