

Qualifications for the Elder & Deacon role at Bridge City

The Qualifications of Elders

The Bible presents quite a comprehensive list of qualifications for Elders and Deacons. This focus leads us to the conclusion **that the quality of the individuals who serve is by far the most important aspect of this mode of governance.** This is far more important than meeting some quota of representative government. The Bible instructs us that leaders meet certain qualifications and are tested for that purpose. These people must be chosen and examined carefully, thoughtfully, and prayerfully. People don't become leaders in the hope that this will encourage these qualities in them. The question posed is: "Who is doing these things among us already?"

The qualifications are outlined in two primary -passages, 1st Timothy and Titus. After studying the qualifications in these two places, we recommend that any candidate for Eldership be evaluated by the following qualifications. Deacons are to have the same qualifications, excepting the requirement of being able to teach.

We have divided the qualifications into four general categories for ease of examination.

1. Situational Qualifications

- **Desire to serve:** (1 Tim 3:1) Elders must have a willingness to serve. Recognizing the seriousness of this role, they must voluntarily be willing to accept the weight of this responsibility. This desire must also be shared by the congregation, as affirmed through some formal and public process. This suggests that potential Elders and congregation members be well aware of the qualifications, understanding the qualifications, the Elders role, and job description of the office.
- **Able to teach:** (1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:9) The primary distinction between Elders and Deacons is the Elders must be able and willing to teach. Elders must have the ability to communicate the gospel to members and those interested in the church, and defend the faith from heresy. They must have a capacity to communicate Biblical concepts to people practically in various contexts. This implies a good understanding of the Bible, enough to recognize unhealthy or destructive doctrine, and a deep understanding of the Biblical story. Although the primary pulpit teachers would be Elders, this does not require that all Elders be preachers, but that all Elders are capable of providing teaching in some context whether large group, small group, or one-on-one.
- **Not a recent convert, is mature:** (1 Tim. 3:6) An Elder must not be a recent convert or member of the church. The spirit of this qualification seems to be aimed at protecting both the Elder and the congregation that they serve. This is meant to rule out spiritual immaturity or naivety, as well as leaders who are out of sync with the culture and direction of the church. Recent converts might be prone to desire the office for pride, power or recognition bringing harm to themselves and others. From the congregational standpoint, Elders are to be well grounded in scripture, wise, and tempered by life. This suggests those that have been followers of Jesus long enough to not be discouraged by people's mistakes, not likely to avoid difficult decisions, or unsettled by dealing with people and the challenges of leadership. The guideline also suggests that the candidate would have been a member of the church long enough to integrate into the culture and have demonstrated servanthood, leadership, and character already. Although the Bible does not speak

directly to the practical application of this, we are recommending that an Elder have been a Christian for 5 years or more, and a full member of Bridge City for a minimum of 3 years, with an emphasis on observed maturity and integration into the culture of Bridge City. These timeframes are suggestions. The key issue is whether the candidate is spiritually mature, and whether the congregation will respect their leadership.

- **Age:** Finally, the very word Elder, and its use within New Testament times, suggests an age which implies respect within the community. Again, this principle is less defined Biblically, but the conclusion of the team was that the Elder must have some level of spiritual maturity that comes with experience so that the congregation will more likely respect their judgment and direction. We discussed that age is a proxy for facts related to maturity and life- experience. Understanding that maturity is not always measured chronologically, and that there could be exceptions made, we recommend a minimum of 30 years of age for eldership, and 21 for a deacon.

2. Family Qualifications

- **Is faithful in relationships:** (1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:6) The Biblical language here is “the husband of one wife.” The Greek translated in this verse is literally a “a one-woman man.” This seems to highlight that the Elder should be able to stay focused within their relationship, practicing healthy and appropriate boundaries, and that, if they are married, the burdens of Eldership aren’t a risk to their marriage. We don’t believe this passage means that all Elders must be married (Paul wasn’t, nor was Timothy), or that someone who has been divorced can never be an Elder. The emphasis seems to be that the Elder has demonstrated to be the kind of person who is able to maintain faithfulness and commitment within a healthy and stable relationships. We do not believe this also suggest that Elders must have children.
- **Manages their own Household Well:** (1 Tim. 3:4-5; Titus 1:6) Since the Elder will be helping to manage the household of God, Paul asks us to examine how they rule their own household. If they have children, what is their relationship like with them? Family relationships can be a indicator of character, priorities, emotional, relational, and spiritual maturity. We do not believe that this requires an Elder’s children be believers, or be involved in the church, since children often make decisions that do not reflect on a parent’s role in their lives, but instead that their children respect who their parent is. Instead, we suggest that one of the measurements of integrity is that Elders who have children are respected by their children.

3. Character Qualifications

Paul’s longest list of qualifications fall in the category of personal character and integrity. **This long list is quite possibly the most intimidating. Who among us can qualify by such a standard?**

The truth is that these are qualities that all followers of Jesus are called to grow in and embody. It seems to us that Paul is emphasizing that those who lead should be examples of these qualities within the community. Many of the following qualities seemed to overlap at times, with the emphasis on overall character, particularly as it related to dealing with people. These are character qualities that lead to thoughtful judgement and decision-making. These people can make cool-headed, calm decisions. They reflect growing in both mental and emotional stability. They deal with others gently, with

sensitivity and care. They are reliable, have good follow through, are fair in their dealings with others, and are able to speak for those who may be marginalized or go unheard. Our understanding is not that these are a bullet-point list where each bullet must be perfectly manifested in order to qualify, but that this portrays the ideal of leadership in the church. Leaders who demonstrated a commitment to grow in these areas and has built trust through the quality of their character are qualified.

- **Blameless, Above Reproach:** (Titus 1:6) Blameless, as demanding and unrealistic as it initially sounds, is best translated as "free from obvious blemishes of character or conduct". Elders should have no glaring weaknesses that would compromise their leadership or the integrity and ministry of the church. This person should be the kind of person who is respected and admired by those they are serving. We believe this quality has less to do with perfection, and more to do with direction. Is this person honest about their struggles, challenges, are they committed to growing? Paul himself had a thorn in the flesh, but ministered on regardless. So Elders should be free from hidden blemishes and living in a way that is congruent with the redemptive message. They provide an example that others can aspire to.
- **Sober-minded.** (1 Tim. 3:2 Titus 1:7) An Elder is self-controlled, having a balanced judgement, and able to rationally make cool-headed decisions. It suggests mental and emotional stability. They are not addicted or operate with compromised judgement due to some unhealthy attachment. Sober-minded is not a reference to alcohol consumption, but rather temperament.
- **Self-controlled.** (Titus 1:8, 1 Tim. 3:2) An Elder is prudent, sound-minded, and discreet. They are attentive to not "rule over" the church, being imposing, but are clear-minded about appropriate roles and boundaries. They demonstrate personal discipline in their lives. They are free from addictive behaviors, being balanced in thinking and conduct. It also suggests being able to establish and maintain personal and relational boundaries and roles.
- **Gentle.** (1 Tim. 3:3) Given the delicate situations that are dealt with in people's lives, Elders must be kind, gracious, forbearing, restorative, and patient with others.
- **Lover of Good.** (Titus 1:8) Elders are to be committed to doing what is right and good. This should be a guiding principle in their decision making.
- **Upright or Righteous** (Titus 1:8) Elders have a responsibility to be fair and concerned with justice. The Greek word translated as "Righteous" is *Dikaiosune* which refers to God's redemptive justice. Elders must be able to speak for the voices of people who are often not heard, and possess a heart to include, uplift, and do on behalf of the marginalized.
- **Holy.** (Titus 1:8) The Elder must be someone who is invested in spiritual things, the pursuit of Jesus is central or core to them. They have demonstrated spiritual devotion and commitment.
- **Not a drunkard.** (1 Tim. 3:3, Titus 1:7). A drunkard lacks self-control. Their decisions are compromised by addiction to alcohol or some other substance. A person who relies on a substance for coping, or has an addiction to the point where it actually shapes their choices and decisions, is disqualified from leadership. This does not rule out a treated addiction or someone sober in ongoing recovery with some clear track-record (3- 5 years) of sobriety.
- **Not Violent, Quarrelsome, or quick tempered.** (1 Tim. 3:3, Titus 1:7) Elders face many difficult relational issues in their shepherding. For this reason, Elders must be able to keep themselves in check. An Elder must be able to deal with tensions and not add to them. (2 Tim 2:24-25) They are

able to deal with conflict with gentleness, even (especially) when they are in the right. (Titus 3:2) They don't speak poorly of others, they don't share out of confidence keeping confidentiality with good boundaries. Good boundaries require that this isn't about a need to keep the peace no matter what. An Elder must be able to face difficult situations and conflict in order to deal patiently with difficult or emotionally charged situations that arise in the life of a church.

- **Respectable.** (1 Tim. 3:2) Elders are respectable, not because of their office, but because of the character they have demonstrated in community. These are people who have earned respect already in the community, due to their involvement, leadership, and character. They are listened to and their word carries influence.
- **Hospitable.** (1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:8) If an Elder is to get to know people and invest in their lives, they must take time to build relationships in the church. Their primary influence and authority will be relational, so they must be willing and able to get to know people and engage them relationally. This quality is about relationship openness, giving, receptivity and generosity, where their home and life must be open to others.
- **Not a lover of Money.** (1 Tim 3:3, Titus 1:7) Elders can easily compromise their influence by greed, fixating on personal security, or an agenda of personal gain. This qualification does not exclude people who are wealthy or are business people, but those whose decisions are compromised by pursuit of security or money.
- **Not Arrogant.** (Titus 1:7) Eldership is a team endeavor. The Elder leads within a team, and is accountable to the congregation. This requires that an individual Elder doesn't have to have their own way, they are open to collaboration and compromise, and willing to submit themselves to the will of the team. They are not seeking to overpower congregation members, or gather authority for themselves.
- **Well-thought-of by Outsiders:** (1 Tim. 3:7) An Elder is well thought of in their community outside of the church, particularly in their field of business or relationships. This is a fundamental check on character. Their integrity is well known, even among people not predisposed to like them, and they are respected by those who know them. In their workplace, neighborhood, school connections and other associations, the Elders conduct themselves in such a way that the public respects them.

4. Gender Qualifications

It is a common interpretation that the New Testament assumes that Elders will be men, even instructing that this is a requirement. However, our careful study of the context of these passages shows that the matter is more complex. **We believe that, when the Bible is interpreted comprehensively and in context, it teaches the full equality of men and women in status, giftedness, and opportunity for ministry.**

There were clearly women Deacons (Phoebe, Rom. 16:1), and there is reasonable evidence that there were women elders in the early church as well. For example, In 1st Tim 5:2 the phrase often translated as "the older women" or "the widows" is actually *presbuteras*, which is the female form of the word translated as Elder elsewhere. Additionally, it was at the Council of Laodicea in 344 AD that women were expressly forbidden to be elders. You don't forbid something that isn't happening. It is of note that this council also formalized the priestly role by disallowing lay people from serving communion and delineating other tasks that only male priests could do.

The Bible teaches that men and women were created by God and equally bear His image (Gen. 1:27). God's intention was for them to share oneness and community (Gen. 2:23-24). This intention was shattered by the Fall. The struggle for power and the desire to "rule over" another is the result of human sin. Genesis 3:16 is a prediction of the effects of the Fall rather than a prescription of God's ideal order.

However, God has acted in Christ to redeem the human race, and to offer to all people the opportunity to be part of the New Community, His church. It is God's intention for His children to experience the oneness that exists between the Father and the Son (John 17:11, 20-23). This means that old divisions and hierarchies between genders and races are not to be tolerated in the church, where all are "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). The Holy Spirit gives gifts to all members of the church without any preferential treatment based on gender (Acts 2:1-21, I Cor 12:7,11). Every believer is to offer her or his gifts for the benefit of the Body of Christ (Rom 12:4-8, I Peter 4:10-11). To prevent believers from exercising their spiritual gifts is to quench the work of the Spirit.

In Christ we are all equal, and God has the sovereignty to be able to call any person into leadership, regardless of their gender. Additionally, Bridge City has a strong tradition of beneficial and capable leadership from women, whom God has clearly worked through. It is our position that an invitation to leadership be based on character, maturity and spiritual depth, and not be limited in any fashion by gender.