

The Qualities of Pastors

The time is drawing close to think seriously about the appointment of pastors.

Actually, it's never time not to think about it. God designed congregations to be led by pastors—also called elders and shepherds. A church without elders will never quite live up to the standard of Scripture. That's why Paul left Titus in Crete, to "set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city" (Titus 1:5). A church without elders will struggle, while the members wander "like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). People will lack someone to turn to for help in life, marriage, parenting, spiritual growth, and temptation. The church will always be vulnerable to false teachers. Those struggling will slip away into the world unnoticed. The church will never experience true and lasting growth, for those going out the back door will outnumber those coming in the front door.

It's good for everyone—young and old, male and female—to think about this, because one doesn't simply wake up and decide he is a shepherd of God's flock. The Scriptures present to us a number of important qualifications which require time and effort to develop, as well as cooperation from family, and encouragement from brethren. Besides, when the time comes to appoint elders, each member of the congregation needs to be able to measure the life of the candidate to the qualifications God requires.

Now, these ought not be overly daunting—after all, there are few qualifications for a pastor that are not also required of every Christian. But a pastor must serve as an example for others; and so he must show himself a man who has successfully submitted to the will of Christ and prioritized his life in pursuit of these virtues.

In fact, one of the best ways to understand the role of a pastor is to study the list of necessary qualifications. Maybe we should call them "qualities" rather than just "qualifications."

Let's look at them as revealed by Paul in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

1 Tim. 3:1, "If any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do." This has often been described as the first qualification: he must desire the work!

That makes sense, I suppose, but I would certainly hope that all Christian men with families would aspire to serve God in the best possible capacity. A lack of leadership is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the church today. Those who have the opportunity to lead should "do so with diligence" (Rom. 12:8).

Still, v. 1 points out that the role of elder requires practice getting involved in the lives of others. It is a common misunderstanding that an elder's role is to have an occasional board meeting to discuss mundane business such as carpet color and charity. These are

deacons' jobs. The elder's role is to shepherd—to lead, feed, and protect. That requires constant contact with the sheep.

Aspire to the office by gaining a love for people in all stages of their Christian growth, and the skill to apply God's word to each situation in the most direct and loving way.

3:2, He must be "above reproach." Some translations give "blameless." This word epilambano means literally "cannot be laid hold of." This word does not mean perfect; no Christian is sinlessly perfect (1 John 1:8). It refers to one who is, in the main, an excellent example of a disciple of Christ. He surely has made mistakes—in fact, how one deals with his mistakes is part of a good Christian example. But he permits in his life no sins that threaten to hamper his ability to lead the church. He must not have a weakness that he continues to give into, jeopardizing the image of the church and his respect in the eyes of the brethren.

3:2, He must be "the husband of one wife." There is some disagreement about applying this term. The Greek phrase is mias gunaikos andra, literally "a one-woman man." But most Greek dictionaries say that the phrase means "faithful to his wife."

There is no question that a man who would serve as an example to the flock in an area so important as marriage must prove himself to be capable of loving, nurturing, and leading his wife. At various times, members of the church will approach him for advice in dealing with problems in marriage. (Contrast this to the Catholic Church, which requires celibate pastors, in clear violation of this passage).

Some argue that this phrase requires an elder to step down if his wife dies. After all, he is now a husband of no wife. But this makes little sense, both in regard to the qualities required for an elder, and the meaning of the phrase. Consider: in 1 Tim. 5:9, the exact same Greek phrase is used, just with a reversed gender. Paul declares that a widow can be permanently supported by the church only if she is "the wife of one man." In Greek this is henos andros gune, literally, "a one-man woman" (I know it looks different than mias gunaikos andra, but mias and henos are the feminine and masculine forms of the same word "one"). Obviously, as a widow, her husband would have died; but the phrase "the wife of one man" still accurately describes her. Thus, mias gunaikos andra, "a one-woman man" would accurately describe an elder who was faithful to his wife before she died. (On the meaning of the various translations of gegonua, "being," see Lenski p. 667).

On the other hand, it's still an open question in my mind as to whether or not a man who divorced his wife for "Scriptural reasons" and remarried would be qualified. He is not literally "a one-woman man," but he is "faithful to his wife," which, again, seems to be the real meaning of the phrase in context. I guess I'd have to consider each on a case-by-case basis, for one cannot be fully judged by the faults of another. Still, young men, I advise you to have this conversation with your fiancée early, and choose someone who will remain faithful to you because she is faithful to Christ. Work to

nourish and cherish your wife, so that she will not be tempted to find emotional or physical fulfillment in others. Persevere through the storms of married life, and still come out intact when the storm lifts—for, as an elder, you will find yourself having to help others with the same storms. -- John Guzzetta