

QUALIFAICATIONS FOR ELDERS OR PASTORS

A Paper

Presented to

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for 27080

by

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N/A

November 29, 2007

*On my honor, I have neither
given nor taken improper
assistance in completing this
assignment.*

student signature

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Introduction

God gives spiritual gifts through the Holy Spirit to His people. Christians use these gifts in the church for the furthering of His kingdom. However, as Paul says, “God gave... the pastors and teachers... for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:11-12, ESV). He also gave people in offices to the church, where one office is pastor or elder. The pastor or elder is one of two offices in the church for which the Bible gives specific requirements.

The perception of a pastor in American culture has changed considerably over time. Much has changed since the days when Ivy League schools trained biblical pastors and graduates were highly honored, revered men of God. Now, the weekly television news magazines frequently air stories of clergy scandals. Therefore, the miasmatic climate overshadows the office causing suspicion in the mind of a prospect. This downward spiral is a reflection of the church’s lack of consideration in selecting biblically qualified pastors and allowing one to remain in office after violating those qualifications.

The church has answered these questions in different ways throughout history, but the Bible should be our authoritative source in context of the original hearers. What does the Bible teach about pastors, the prominent office of the church? Who can occupy this office? God did not leave His people with a generic description, but with parameters and a purpose. This paper will address the biblical qualifications for elder or pastor, the nature of the office, and then the application of these qualifications as a picture. Throughout the paper the terms elders, overseers, and pastors are used synonymously.

The Qualifications

Scripture contain two primary passages discussing the qualification of pastors: 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Exegeses of these passages are the backbone in this listing of requirements for an elder or pastor. A consideration of the context of the letters is essential for the right application of these biblical principles. Afterward, a systematic listing of qualifications of the office is delineated. God guards this high and noble office through the demands of Scripture, so there one turns for His perfect will for His present church.

Paul wrote letters to Timothy and Titus as young pastors of local congregations. These letters are designated “pastoral epistles” denoting the pastoral instruction in them. As a part of instruction is the appointment of elders for the church, Paul lists qualifications for these appointees. Did these pastors lead their churches to develop a nomination process where potential elders are interviewed with a list of questions? Was a salary and benefit package formulated to aid in searching for a future pastor outside the local church? No, the church environment was very different at that time.

In a picture, persecution pervaded the early churches and they most likely met in peoples’ houses. Timothy and Titus traveled to different locations to oversee these house churches and provide guidance. The constant threat of persecution hovered over their heads, and these men knew they could not shepherd all these people alone. Paul, knowing their struggles, wrote letters outlining the picture of the person to choose as pastor. The position of pastor was not a popular one, since being singled out as a leader of a Christian church could mean death. Therefore, whether Timothy huddled with the few believers in a house or the letter circulated to other small gatherings, they started looking at the requirements and asking corporately whom they could choose from within themselves.

Desire

The first qualification for a pastor is desire. “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Tim 3:1). The pastor should desire the position. The church does not appoint those who begrudgingly or unwillingly accept the

position, nor should they use moral coercion. This desire is not a sin, but noble. Though one could desire this office for evil intent, the desire of one to the office is not wrong. The prestige given socially to the pastor today is much different from the primitive church. Lacking prestige, one desiring the office during New Testament times is acting on faith to the hardship of pastoral ministry therefore they are worthy of “double honor” (1 Tim 5:17). Those lacking other requirements but aspiring to be pastor can be spurred to greater sanctification and a closer relationship with God.

Above Reproach

“Therefore an overseer must be *above reproach*... he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil” (1 Tim 3:2a, 7, emphasis mine, cf. Titus 1:6). Being above reproach involves living to a stricter standard beyond any reasonable accusation.¹ This qualification encompasses the other non-qualitative attributes like being well thought of by outsiders (1 Tim 3:7). It is the overarching quality. MacArthur poetically asserts, “[The steward lives] in such a holy manner that his preaching would never be in contradiction of his lifestyle, that the pastor’s indiscretions never bring shame on the ministry, and that the shepherd’s hypocrisy not undermine the flocks’ confidence in the ministry of God.” The elder’s life is a consistent example of others to imitate (1 Tim 4:12). They are the shepherds of the church that the members follow and imitate, and the representative for outsiders to observe and evaluate like an ambassador to another country. The pastor is holy (Titus 1:8), or set apart to righteousness by the Father, and set apart for this office.

The Bible holds pastors to a stricter standard. Two examples are in teaching (James 3:1) and the discipline of church leaders (1 Tim 5:19-21). “Scripture gives no command to disclose publicly the sins of people who are ordinary members but not recognized leaders in the

¹ James H. Scroggins, “Pastoral Leadership” (classroom lecture notes, 33320 - *Principles & Practice of the Intercultural Youth Minister*, Fall 2007), personal notes.

church,” Grudem observes.² The church provides accountability so that the pastor will remain above reproach and keep the church morally pure if a pastor should taint his reputation.

Gender

The next two requirements are from the phrase translated “husband of one wife” (Titus 1:6, 3:2). A pastor should be male. Only a male can be a husband and all the pronouns of the passages are masculine. In the wake of feminism, this idea is not popular in America. As one feminist writer states, “We can applaud the fact that over the course of several decades, images of sex roles in pastoral theology have been significantly transformed.”³ Writers before this “transformation” oftentimes take for granted the pastor’s gender because the other requirements entail one to be a male.

In male leadership over the church, the church reflects the biblical family structure (Gen 3), so that they may work in harmony. Husbands lead their families toward godliness, as the pastor is to lead the church. Unfortunately, women have taken more spiritual leadership in the home because of their lax husbands, and with the stripping of the biblical authority through liberal ideas, women pastors have been justified.

One Woman Man

The expression “husband of one wife” is literally rendered “one woman man”. This phrase does not refer to marital status but lifestyle. The pastor is totally devoted to one woman, with no hidden orientation to lust or addition to pornography. He guards his heart for one woman only, giving himself only to her. If a pastor is widowed and remarried, he still qualified because he is no longer bound to the previous marriage (Romans 7:1-6). McArthur states, “Others

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervon, 2000), 899.

³ Pamela D. Couture, “Pastoral Theology as Art”, in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 171.

therefore conclude ‘the husband of one wife’ means the pastor must be married, not single. The emphatic position of the word *one* argues against that, though.”⁴ Afterward he asserts the use of the word *a* if Paul wanted to communicate only married pastors. MacArthur is very meticulous in supporting every proposition with Scripture with few exceptions like this one. One could also argue that the use of the emphatic *one* guards against polygamy keeping the assumed marital status. If the accepted translation is right, one cannot be a husband or pastor unless one is married. One author states, “A minister *needs* a wife as a companion in the work of the gospel, as his partner in the enjoyment of their mutually expressed sexual powers, and as a comrade in the adventure of parenthood.”⁵ Some argue that since Paul was single, pastors could be single as well. However, did Paul hold the office of pastor or missionary? His commissioning by the church of Antioch was to send him out, not to shepherd the church (Acts 13:1-5). Second, some scholars think Paul might have been married at some point because of his Jewish pedigree (Phil 3:5).

In the Greek culture of Timothy and Titus, polygamy and concubines were prevalent practices not shunned by society. Oates rightly states, “The writers evidently were insisting that their leaders be an example of the Christian principle of monogamous marriage.”⁶ The pastor’s single, unconditional love to his wife is a picture of his love to God and Christ love to His church. This distinctive separated Christian leaders from the surrounding Greek polytheism and continues to separate Christian leaders from present day humanism and naturalism.

Personal Character

The above reproach pastor is “sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable... not a

⁴ John MacArthur and the Master’s Seminary Faculty, *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2005), 69.

⁵ Wayne Edward Oates, *The Christian Pastor*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

drunkard... not a lover of money” (1 Tim 3:2-3, cf. Titus 1:7-8). These characteristics describe the personal character of the elder. He thinks clearly, not having any mental problems that might compromise the church integrity. He is self-controlled or able to discipline himself in many areas of his life (Titus 1:8). Discipline is essential to maintain a balance in exercise, study, family time, pastoral care, evangelism, and all the other functions of a pastor. A drunkard is the opposite of self-control because it is giving over their mind and will to a drug, and then by default the sinful nature. Self-control in Proverbs is often linked to anger for, “Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city” (Prov 16:32). In Titus, Paul specifically states that the pastor must not be quick-tempered (1:7). The lifestyle of composure describes the pastor even when things do not go the way he wants them to.

Money is the root of many a pastor leaving a church and much of the public’s distrust of clergy. The qualification is clear; he cannot be a lover of money. Money does not drive him to work hard, but the advancement of the Kingdom and the glory of God. The materialistic societies make this a counter-cultural trait of the elder. The pastor should live a culturally relevant but simple life, seeking not to be over involved in the financial matters of the church especially concerning his salary. Generosity characterizes the pastor; he might even give out of his own pocket an offering back to the church not using the “benevolence fund”.

Treatment of Others

Paul requires that the elder is “hospitable... not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome... (1 Tim 3:2-3; cf. Titus 1:7-8). In the fast-paced, task oriented world, hospitality falls to the ground needing defibrillation. The pastor’s task list is endless, but he must be hospitable. More relational cultures, like the New Testament, highly valued taking care of someone when they entered your home. Hospitality demonstrates love to people through sacrificing one own resources to take care of another. Hebrews commands all Christians, “to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb 13:2). The safe haven of the pastor’s home cares for the flock and provides a platform to share Christ’s love to strangers.

As consistent with other character traits, the elder is gentle and not quarrelsome. The idiom, “Ministry would be great if it was not for people” does not characterize his attitude. Though not a pushover, he deals with others in gentleness, a fruit of the Spirit, (Gal 5:23) seeking to edify the body and continually loving others without harshness (1 Tim 2:24), even when they fail. Quarrels produce “envy, dissension, slander, and evil suspicions” (1 Tim 6:4). These results of quarrels do not belong in the church.

Proven Family Leader

The Bible assert the pastor to be a proven family leader, “He 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” (1 Tim 3:45). As a married man, the pastor leads his home spiritually, emotionally, financially, in decision-making, and in loving one another. The family shows respect because he earns it and his God-given authority demands it. He has ultimate responsibility for the in-workings of the home. This implies a submissive wife who seeks after the Lord, and children who obey or receive discipline. Jesus gave this principle, “He who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much” (Luke 16:10). Paul applies this principle to the pastorate.

In pastoral theology, writers with various stances debate the possibility of divorced pastors. Most deal with the topic under “the husband of one wife”. Some assert a divorced man cannot be a pastor because he has had multiple wives, just not at the same time, naming it a form of polygamy. Others argue that the broadest reading of the literal “one woman man”, allows for one who was biblically divorced. Both endeavor to uphold the integrity of the office so that one would “have no opportunity to compromise, confuse, or attack the credibility of the highest office in the church and destroy the reputation of the man by saying things about him.”⁷ This quandary falls under the qualification of proven family leadership. Has the candidate proven

⁷ MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically*, 69.

leadership abilities in the family? Divorce taints that record, but does not destroy it. After considerable time a divorced man can prove family leadership and represent the office well as the congregation demonstrates forgiveness. However, this hypothetical would be extremely rare.

Paul gives Titus perhaps the toughest qualification to accept. “His children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination” (Titus 1:6), meaning, the pastor’s adult children are to be believers and those living under his roof under familial restrictions or control. MacArthur states well, “It may be that you as a father have made a good and righteous effort to lead your children to faith in Christ, but you have not seen the fruit that you would desire. You are not responsible for your children’s rejection of the truth, but neither would you be qualified to be a pastor.”⁸ The point is not a condemnation of the pastor’s actions in child-raising, but the picture the office represents. The pastor however has every reason to believe that God will redeem his children, as he lives a godly life in front of them and God gives a special grace to His servants.

Able to Teach

Where Paul gives Timothy these three words (1 Tim 3:2), he tells Titus that an elder “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). The pastor possesses the conviction of the sound doctrine “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3) for the purpose of teaching and rebuking. Implied is knowledge of the Word. Reflecting on Paul’s latter word in 2 Timothy 3:16. Parkhurst says, “The only truths that we can preach are the truths that we know, and the only truths that we know are the truths that we know experimentally, truths that have run in the grooves of our own thinking, saturated with the juices of our personal feeling and interpreted to us by the discipline of our individual living.”⁹ Teaching is the ability to identify

⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁹ Charles H. Parkhurst, *The Pulpit and the Pew* (New Haven, Yale University Press,

important information and communicate it in a way the receivers can apply it.¹⁰ Spurgeon mastered teaching in the pulpit stating, “I am perhaps vulgar, but it is intentional, save that I must and will make people listen.”¹¹ Paul does not prescribe an amount of teaching but the ability of every pastor to teach effectively.

Not a Recent Convert

The Word asserts simply that an elder, “must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.” The pastor should be a veteran of the Christian life. He has worn the armor of God and received battle wounds for Christ’s sake. No specific length is required, but prudence requires a considerable test of time before giving him the responsibility of caring for others. If put in office, the new convert will inevitably become puffed up with a sense of importance. Afterward, the new convert will be overwhelmed with the responsibility and his inadequacies such as ignorance and lack of maturity will be flaunted before him. The end picture results in resignation or a false perception displayed to the church and conceit in his heart.¹²

Office and Function

The qualifications for pastor are more concerned with who the pastor is than with skills, gifts, or talents. A pastor is an office, not a function. In other words, every Christian receives spiritual gifts to perform tasks in the church. Some teach, others administrate, and still others serve through cleaning. A pastor also performs certain tasks dependant upon the culture and church set-up. He visits the sick, preaches, leads a prayer group, gives vision, administrates,

1913), 17.

¹⁰ Scroggins, “Pastoral Leadership”.

¹¹ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 103.

¹² Oates, *The Christian Pastor*, 74

evangelizes and many other things. These tasks are functions of a pastor. Functions of pastors may be performed by anyone with the skills and training. For example, a youth minister may do all these various functions as well. However, unless the congregation sets him apart as a pastor of the church, he does not hold the office. In context of the American church staff, they each function to particular duties relating to church business and ministry. The men who are biblically qualified may rightly be called pastor if the church installs them in that office.

Like the office of President of the United States of America, there are qualifications, and that office contains a person and not tasks to perform. Likewise, God reserves the pastoral office for persons who most biblically qualify to represent Christ's church to the surrounding culture. The office is the highest in the church demanding a holy person, above reproach who is a model for other believers. The church should respect the office and fill it with one worthy of the calling.

A Picture

Throughout history, most congregational churches have searched for pastors internally. As a 1774 confession states, "A church having no minister should look among its members and see if there be any who seem to have promising gifts and graces for that great work."¹³ The early apostolic church did the same thing. One can consider this picture of pastor selection in the following paragraph.

Looking around the room, the primitive house church leader opens in prayer and reads the letter they received from the church of Ephesus originally written to Timothy from Paul. The church filling the need to enlist elders of the church begins an informal process. The leader asks, "Who wants to be a pastor?" A few motion they are interested so he proceeds to remind them of the definite qualifications, a married man, faithful to his wife, and not a new convert. That

¹³ Charleston Association, "A Summary of Church Discipline," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (USA: Center for Church Reform: 2001), 120.

narrow the pool a little, but still in a spirit of prayer, they slowly reread the qualifications meditating whether they or someone else qualifies. Afterward, one man who desires to be a pastor tells the rest of the church he is not mature enough and is still struggling with his temper. Another asks for prayer because he is not prioritizing his family to raise his children in Christ. With only a two men remaining, the church prays and dismisses. They come together, reconsidering both two men, and decided to appoint one as elder. The other candidate still had some maturing to do. The church celebrated because they had a candidate that fulfilled all the qualifications. They have heard of other church, in which the task was more difficult and they chose the best person they could.

The qualifications listed and explained above give the ideal picture of a pastor. Many primitive churches in pagan cultures of the world have great difficulty finding this picture perfect pastor. Contained in all the requirements is an element of grace. No one is perfectly generous or self-controlled. This grace should extend to places where a non-polygamous pastor cannot be found, where everyone under the age of 15 has had extramarital sex, or where the male Christians are under the age of 18 because of martyrdom. Paul did not intend a legalistic list of requirements, but a picture every church should strive after. As the church in a culture matures to the second or third generation of believers, the ideal pastor should begin to surface more and more as the church longs for greater purity.

Conclusion

The qualifications for pastor articulated in Scripture challenge every Christian. The character traits and lifestyle are worthy of emulation, even for believers who do not desire to be a pastor. To the ones who qualify and are in this high office, the church should give double honor. The responsibility of being a pastor is beyond human ability, necessitating God's grace and mercy. Churches seeking purity must evaluate their pastoral selection, in order that Christ is uplifted and God is glorified.

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