



SESSION OBJECTIVE: 1 TIMOTHY 3, TITUS 1, & ACTS 20

To better understand the office and function of “pastor.”

Read the Text:

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)

Study the Text:

An Emphasis on Character

While there are differing opinions on how elders ought to be structured in the church, one thing is clear: the New Testament calls for qualified men to serve as elders in the local church to teach, correct, and lead the people toward biblical fidelity. Still, questions remain in the church about what an elder is and how the elder is different than the pastor of the church. The goal of this study is not only to better understand the office and function of the elder, but also to understand that the New Testament describes it as one and the same as the office and function of “pastor.” An elder *is* a pastor. A pastor *is* an elder. They are interchangeable words that point to the same office and function within the church. We will begin by considering the various biblical qualifications for the office, and then read a passage from the Book of Acts that explicitly connects these two terms (along with a third) to the same office.

PUBLIC WITNESS

Several scholars have argued that while the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 share many with those in Titus 1:5-9, the differences likely reflect the underlying emphases of each list. For Timothy, the emphasis seems to be on the elder’s character, specifically as it pertains to his public witness. Verse 7 concludes the list by saying: “He must be well thought of by outsiders.” In light of that, the rest of the qualifications make a lot more sense. The public witness of the elder is upheld by his character, which is “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2). That he is “the husband of one wife” shows further strength of character. The Greek rendering *μίας γυναίκος ἄνδρα* can be literally translated, “a one woman man” or “a one wife husband.” The terms for “woman” (Gk. *γυνή, gune*) and “man” (Gk. *άνήρ, aner*) are translated both as “woman and man” and “wife and husband,” depending on the context.

The point is that the elder maintains a good public witness by virtue of being wholly committed and faithful to his wife. The other qualifications follow suit. That the elder is “sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money” (1 Tim. 3:2b-3) indicates he is someone trustworthy in the eyes of both Christians and non-Christians.

EXPERIENCE MATTERS

The singular commitment to one wife, coupled with being the overseer of a household with children who are “submissive” (1 Tim. 3:4), also provides the kind of experience that upholds the elder’s witness. This means, practically speaking, an elder needs to be not only a man who is committed to his wife, but also to have children. Why? Verse 5 answers this: “For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” There is a kind of rigorous experience a man gains when he is responsible for providing for his family. He learns to lead sacrificially, putting his own needs after the needs of his wife and children. This is a crucial detail. Often, the “husband of one wife” is relegated to a discussion about limiting women (who cannot, by definition, be “a husband of one wife”), which misses the more crucial limitation against single men and men without children. Men can have a good character and still be disqualified from serving as an elder until they are married and have children. These are not “hypothetical” qualifications. They are qualifications intended to uphold the public witness of the elder by demonstrating that he is a man of great character and responsibility.

An obvious objection might be: “But what about Jesus and Paul?” However, consider that neither Jesus nor Paul is ever referred to as an “elder.” Paul routinely appeals, not to the fact that he’s an elder (which is not a fact because it’s never explicated in Scripture), but rather to his apostleship when making an authoritative statement (Gal. 1:1; 1 Cor. 9:1-2; 2 Cor. 12:11-12; Rom. 1:1-5). Likewise, Jesus does not need to be an “elder”; He is the authoritative Son of God. On the contrary, Peter is referred to as an elder (1 Pet. 5:1) and, incidentally, is married (Matt. 8:14-15; 1 Cor. 9:5). The office of “apostle” is an extraordinary office; the office of “elder” is an ordinary office.

Read the Text:

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— 6 if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. 7 For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, 8 but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. 9 He 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 1:5-9)

Study the Text:

An Emphasis on Sound Doctrine

You’ll notice that Paul’s list of qualifications for elders to Titus is remarkably similar to his list of qualifications to Timothy. However, there are some differences, and these differences are best understood by understanding the different context of Titus. Titus was in Crete (Titus 1:5), and the primary issue there was false teaching. Therefore, while the character qualifications matter (Titus 1:5-8), so too do doctrinal qualifications become all the more important, as evidenced by verse 9: “He 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.” Elders should be “able to teach,” a qualification given in both lists. This necessarily entails that they possess sound doctrine. One cannot teach faithfully if one does not believe faithfully.

A NOTE ABOUT CHILDREN

Additionally, some translations (including the ESV) render verse 6 as “his children are believers,” but this is not the best translation. The term “believers” is the Greek πιστός (pistos), which is also translated as “faithful.” That they are “faithful,” combined with the fact that they are not “insubordinate,” conveys, more or less, the same idea that is conveyed in Timothy’s list. They ought to be submissive and compliant to their father’s leadership, which indicates relational intimacy. It would be strange to hang salvation on a child as a qualification for the elder when the Scripture routinely says that salvation belongs to the Lord (Jonah 2:9; Psalm 3:8), which is further emphasized later in Titus 3:5: “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”

ELDER AND OVERSEER

Finally, one additional comment should be made about two distinct terms that emerge in this passage, both of which point to the office of elder. Notice that verse 5 dictates the appointment of “elders,” the Greek term πρεσβύτερος (presbyteros), the word from which we get our English word “presbyters” or “Presbyterianism.” However, this word becomes interchangeable with another term introduced in verse 7, “overseer,” from the Greek term ἐπίσκοπος (episkopos), the word from which we get the English words “episcopate” and “Episcopalianism.” Notice that both denominations (Presbyterianism and Episcopalianism) are led by a group of “elders” who provide oversight of the church. They derive their name from these biblical terms, both of which point to the same office: *elder*.

Read the Text:

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. 18 And when they came to him, he said to them... 28 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. 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be alert... (Acts 20:17-18a; 28-31)

Study the Text:

Is a Pastor an Elder?

The crucial question we still must answer is: “Is the elder the same thing as the pastor?” Acts 20 provides the clarity needed to answer this. In Acts 20:17, Paul calls for the “elders of the church to come to him,” and then addresses them directly starting in verse 28. First, he says that, as elders, “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,” which is the same term used in Titus 1:7. In other words, the elder (presbyteros) has been made by the Holy Spirit an overseer (episkopos). But notice that right after, the function of this office is introduced: “to care for the church of God.” The term “care” is the Greek term ποιμαίνω (poimainō), a term that means “to shepherd, feed, or pasture.” It’s the verbal form of the Greek noun ποιμήν (poimēn), a word often translated as “shepherd” or “pastor.” In other words, the elder/overseer is the office that carries out the function of “pastoring.” This same sentiment is found in Peter’s exhortation in 1 Peter 5:1-3: “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

The Importance of Teaching

There are a number of ways the pastor’s function is carried out. Pastors correct, disciple, serve, counsel, pray for, and administrate, among many other responsibilities, many of which are also carried out by non-pastoral

Christians. The primary identity of the pastor, however, is to provide instruction, correction, exhortation, and encouragement from the Scripture through the act of preaching to the gathering. This function separates the pastor from every other office. When you think of “the pastor,” the distinguishing factor that comes to most people’s minds is that the pastor *is* the preacher. That is not to say that all elders will actually preach, but that they must be able to is a non-negotiable. Paul does, however, imply that not all of them will teach. In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul writes: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, *especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*” This indicates that while all elders are able to teach, only some will actually execute this duty.

What About Now?

At least two major takeaways emerge from this study. Both are important.

1. We must limit the office when the Scripture does.

Denominations that seek to limit the office of pastor-elder-overseer to specifically qualified men seem to uphold biblical qualifications. Southern Baptists have recently received criticism for this, but they are far from the only denomination to do so. The Reformed Presbyterian Churches, Presbyterian Churches of America (PCA), Free Church in Scotland, Anglican Churches of North America (ACNA), Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Roman Catholicism, as well as many others, hold this view of qualified, male-only elders/pastors/overseers. When churches or denominations do so, it is not that they are limiting women (as the headlines sometimes suggest), but rather that they are upholding the limits on the office that Scripture has already established.

2. We must not limit people when the Scripture does not.

With that said, we must also fully affirm the full value, worth, and dignity of women in the church, as the Scripture does. The elder/pastor/overseer office is the only office in the Scripture limited to qualified men. This limitation does not extend to the office of deacon, servants in the church who do not hold positions of authoritative teaching. There are biblical examples that support women's full right to serve in the office of deacon. Right after giving the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3, Paul lists the qualifications for deacons next, and in verse 11 says, “Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.” Recall that the term for “wives” is the same underlying Greek term also translated simply as “women.” The ESV interprets this to mean that wives of deacons can serve alongside their husbands as deaconesses. However, the LSB translates it as such: “Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.” Whether the woman is to be married to a man who serves as a deacon is unclear. What is clear enough is that the office welcomes women.

Additionally, in Romans 16:1, Paul writes: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae.” The term “servant” is the Greek δίακονος (diakonos), the exact same underlying term that means “deacon.” In other words, Phoebe served the church at Cenchreae as a “minister” or “deacon.” She is commended for her service to the church, with no information concerning a husband. We take this to mean that women are permitted by the Scripture to hold this office.

Practically, this means that while women are not permitted to serve as an elder-pastor-overseer, they are permitted to serve as “ministers” in the church. This means they are fully commended to teach Bible studies, pray for people, serve communion, baptize new converts, disciple others, and basically any other act of service that can be rendered in the church. Additionally, this means that church positions that do not function

as elders should not be labeled as “pastors” (e.g., worship pastor, student pastor, children’s pastor, etc.), but rather “ministers.” This upholds the biblical language without limiting the individual.

3. We must consider the historical record.

Last, a note about history should be made. The strongest historical argument rests not on a single church father’s work, but on the overwhelming consensus across the early centuries. From the second through the fifth century, there are no major orthodox works arguing that women should be able to serve in the office of elder/pastor/overseer, despite significant disagreement on other major doctrinal issues. The debate simply isn't recorded in history from that time. When the church fathers write on the pertinent texts (1 Timothy 2-3, Titus 1), they uniformly assume that the office of elder/pastor overseer is limited to qualified males.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read 1 Timothy 3:1-3. What are the qualifications listed here for elder?

2. Read 1 Timothy 3:4-7. What are the additional qualifications listed for elder?

Day Two

1. Read Titus 1:5-8. Are these qualifications the same or different from the ones in 1 Timothy 3?

2. Read Titus 1:9. What does this verse specifically indicate about the context of Titus?

Day Three

1. Read Acts 20:17-18a. Who does Paul call to himself?

2. Read Acts 20:28. What does he tell the elders? What is significant about this verse?

Day Four

1. Read Acts 20:29-31. Why does Paul feel the need to encourage the elders before he leaves?
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2. Read Acts 6:1-6. Why were the first deacons chosen? What was their purpose?
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Discuss the Text!

Session 17 Discussion: Elder-Led Church

The office and function of *the* elder are for the health of the church. The elder provides correction when sin occurs, oversight, protection from false teaching and wolves, teaching and training, and general spiritual direction. As an important office, not just anyone is qualified. Talk as a group about the importance of elders.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever been a part of a church that was not elder-led? How was it structured? Did you agree or disagree with this leadership model?
2. Have you ever been in a church where the deacons made all the decisions? After this study, do you agree with this approach? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think the office of elder is limited to qualified men?
4. Can people still engage the body, teach Bible studies, pray, serve communion, baptize, and go on mission trips if they are not elders? Why or why not?
5. Read Romans 16:1. What does Phoebe's role in the church indicate about the office of deacon?
6. Kid Talk: Ask your child whether they feel more confident doing something if only one parent gives permission, or if both parents do. Now ask why (likely, they will answer "both"). Explain to them that, in the same way, it is better for both parents to give permission to do something, it is also better for a church to be led by a multitude of individuals, not just one person.

Takeaways:

1. Elder qualifications are given in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and speak to the importance of both their public witness, upheld by their strong character, and their commitment to biblical and doctrinal fidelity.
2. Acts 20:17 and 28 indicate that the elder is the same thing as an overseer and a pastor.
3. While only qualified men are permitted to serve as elders, both qualified men and women may serve as deacons.