

Temecula Hills Christian Fellowship

Elder Qualifications and Role Position Paper

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to outline and explain the qualifications and role of elders at Temecula Hills Christian Fellowship as we believe they are expressed in Scripture. We recognize that some elder qualifications raise more questions than others, and so more attention will be given to certain qualifications. This is not meant to imply that these qualifications are more important or weighty than others, but only that they require more explanation.

Qualifications of Elders

1. “Above reproach” or “blameless” – This is the overriding character qualification for eldership. They must be “above reproach” meaning that they must have irreproachable observable conduct in the sense of not being open to attack or criticism (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6), especially as it relates to the qualifications that follow. This does not mean that the elder must be perfect, but that it may be fairly said that each named characteristic below marks his life.
2. “Husband of one wife” - They must be a “one woman man”—meaning that they must have the quality of being faithful to their spouse if they are married. By inference, this demands sexual purity of an unmarried elder. Furthermore, elders ought to be a “one woman man” in that they must never have been divorced and remarried. God has purposed that marriage is to be a binding covenant between one man and one woman that can only be dissolved by death (Gen 2:24; Mat 19:5-6; Mal 2:14-16; Rom 7:1-3; 1 Cor 7:39). The marriage covenant is an important picture of God’s enduring relationship and faithfulness to His people (Eze 16; Eph 5:22-32). Consequently, elders ought to serve as examples as men who have never been divorced and remarried. Specifically, this means the following:
 - a. If a man was divorced before he became a Christian and he has remained unmarried, he *may* be qualified since he would be the husband of one wife.
 - b. If a man is not married and has never been married, there would need to be a strict and vigorous evaluation of his life since it would be difficult to evaluate an elder candidate due to the emphasis on his household being a measure of his qualification. “If he cannot manage his household, how will he be able to care for the church?” (1 Tim 3:4-5). However, this in itself would not preclude someone from being an elder as it is clear in Scripture that there were unmarried elders (2 Joh 1:1; 3 Joh 1:1; 1 Pet 5:1; 1 Cor 7:25-39).
 - c. If a man was married and his wife died, then this would not preclude him from being qualified as an elder. His life could be evaluated on the basis of his faithfulness to his wife during their marriage and the purity of his life at the present time.
 - d. If a man was married and his wife died, and he remarried, then this would not preclude him from being qualified as an elder because the marriage covenant is dissolved by death (Rom 7:1-3; 1 Cor 7:39).
 - e. There may be an unforeseen and unique circumstance in which a divorced believer may qualify as an elder (1 Cor 7:10-16); however, in this case the overarching qualifier of being above reproach must be considered first and foremost.
 - f. The overarching qualifier of being above reproach must be considered above all else, and therefore any person’s unique situation would need to be viewed through this overarching principle.
 - g. The strict restriction we place on those who would serve as elders should in no way be taken as our posture towards who may have suffered through a painful divorce. We will extend to them the same love and grace that God has so graciously extended to us, while upholding the sanctity and seriousness of marriage.
3. “He must manage his own household well, with 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?” – This qualification regarding an elder’s children is debated because of the phrase in Titus 1:6, which states that an elder must be such that “his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.” The question arises as to whether this qualification is about the obedience and submission of the children, or if it includes that an elder’s children must be believers. Our position is that the contrast is not between believing and unbelieving children, but between obedient, respectful children and lawless, uncontrolled children. What is at stake is the children’s behavior, not their eternal state. The following considerations support this position:

- a. The term *pistas* (“believing,” “faithful”) in Titus 1:6 can be translated as either “faithful” or “believing” (cf. 1 Tim 6:2; 2 Tim 2:2). In the near context of Titus 1:6, the adjectival form of the word is used in the sense of “faithful” in verse 1:9. Therefore it does not seem that word studies can resolve this question and instead the question must be resolved by examining the context.
- b. The parallel between Titus 1:6 and 1 Timothy 3:4 indicates that “faithful” is the truer sense of the qualification in Titus 1:6—not “believing.” In 1 Timothy 3:4, it is clear that the qualification in view is the obedience and submission of the children—not whether they have faith in Christ. It seems strange that Paul would offer one set of qualifications to one church, and then offer a differing set of qualifications to another church. Much more likely, Paul meant the same thing in both passages: children must be faithful and obedient.
- c. The grounding of 1 Timothy 3:5 explicitly connects the elder’s qualifications with his managerial skills in verse 4. However, salvific faith is not the result of managerial skills, but rather is the result of God’s work within the heart of man (Joh 6:44). Therefore if we insist that salvation is fundamentally connected to the managerial skills of the father, we have inadvertently assigned an unbiblical role to human action. Similarly, simply because a father has children who are believers does not always mean that the father is a good manager of his household.
- d. The requirements for eldership seem to be primarily character attributes involving personal responsibility. We would expect that this qualification regarding children would be in the same category. However, we do not have a personal responsibility for the salvation of another person.
- e. In both 1 Timothy and Titus, it seems that children are those who are under the authority of their fathers and not yet of age. In Titus 1:6, the verb translated “having” indicates that Paul is talking only about children who are still rightfully under their father’s authority in his home.
- f. The overarching requirement of an elder is that they must be above reproach, and this must be considered regarding this qualification. If there is likelihood that someone could bring an accusation against a man because of how he manages his family, then it is best that he would not serve as an elder.

Therefore, given the above considerations, an elder must be a competent manager of his family home—both in the sense of leading/directing the affairs of the home, and in caring for those entrusted to his care. This is evidenced by (1) the submission of the man’s children, and (2) the way this submission is manifested—with dignity and respect (on the part of the father and the children). An elder’s children must be “faithful” in the sense of being “submissive/obedient,” just as a servant is regarded as “faithful” when he carries out the requests of his master (1 Cor 4:2; Eph 6:5-7). Children must not be immoral or undisciplined/rebellious. An elder must lead his household both by word and deed and have a peaceable home. He must not have uncontrolled, undisciplined children. Furthermore he must not exasperate or provoke his children by his communication or manner (Eph 6:4; Col 3:21).

4. Self-mastery – Within the 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, the following words indicate that elders must have self-control in various respects.
 - a. “Temperate” – The elder must be free from every form of excess, rashness, or passion; he must be clear-headed and self-controlled in the sense of not being indulgent.
 - b. “Prudent” – The elder must give thought to his actions and think through the consequences so as to act sensibly. This is thus the thoughtful aspect of self-control.
 - c. “Respectable” – The elder must act in such a way so as to be regarded as respectable by others. His life should display orderliness, good behavior, and virtue. Whereas prudence deals with inward self-control, respectability deals with the outward manifestation of inward self-control.
5. “Hospitable” – Elders must be open, friendly, and loving towards others—especially strangers. They ought to be willing to welcome others into their home when appropriate (cf. Heb 13:2).
6. “Able to teach,” “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” – Elders must treasure God’s Word and understand it. They must have the ability to teach it in two respects: (1) to encourage others with the truth, and (2) to oppose those who teach false doctrine (Eph 4:11-15; Col 3:16; 2 Tim 2:15, 24-26, 3:16-17, 4:2; Titus 1:9). This, of course, entails that elders must be blameless in their doctrinal orthodoxy.
7. Elders ought to be free from the following sins of self:
 - a. Pride – “Not self-willed” – The elder ought not to be arrogant, overbearing, or stubbornly self-willed. Elders ought not to be headstrong or autocratic, but rather ought to readily listen to advice and criticism. They ought to lead by example not by force, and by humble service not self-assertion.
 - b. Anger – “Uncontentious” – An elder ought not to be quick-tempered, but rather peaceable. He must not be irritable or impatient.

- c. Desire for drink – “Not addicted to wine” – An elder ought not to be dominated/controlled by alcohol.
 - d. Dominance – “Not pugnacious” – An elder must not be violent or a bully—with the tongue or the hand. He ought not to be a fighter, but rather gentle, kind, and gracious—even when correcting opponents. He must not be quarrelsome (cf. 2 Tim 2:24-25).
 - e. Greed – “Free from the love of money” – An elder must not be greedy, but rather ought to be content with what they have (cf. Heb 13:5).
8. “Gentle and peaceable” – An elder ought to be a peacemaker and he must have a patient and peaceable spirit. Elders must not be overbearing, but rather must have a yielding spirit when appropriate (James 3:13-18).
 9. “Not a new convert” – Elders ought to be mature in their Christian experience, so as to not become prideful.
 10. “A good reputation with those outside the church” – An elder ought to be well thought of by the non-Christian public because of the consistent integrity between his lifestyle and beliefs (cf. Col 4:5; 1 The 4:12).
 11. “Lover of what is good” – An elder must be a person of large charity and a supporter of good causes. An elder’s love for people is always to be correlated with a love for what God wants people to be (cf. Phil 3:8).
 12. “Just” – An elder ought to be righteous in his behavior towards others (cf. 1 Joh 3:7).
 13. “Devout” – An elder ought to be holy and reverent in his attitude towards God.
 14. “Not under compulsion, but voluntarily” – An elder ought to lead out of joyful, free service to God—not because they feel they must. The role of elder ought to be a position that one desires to fulfill—not a position that is burdensome to one’s soul (1 Tim 3:1; 1 Pet 5:2).
 15. “Not for sordid gain, but with eagerness” – Elders ought to fulfill their leadership position with zeal, energy, and enthusiasm—not because they receive a paycheck from the church. Their attitude ought to be that even if they were not paid, they would still eagerly serve as an elder regardless of the compensation.
 16. “Nor yet as lording it over...but proving to be examples.” – Elders ought not to be domineering. They are to be servants, not bosses; ministers, not executives. They ought not to see being the boss as a “perk” of leadership, but rather ought to serve as examples that the flock might imitate.
 17. Age – The term “elder” itself implies that elders must be mature adults.
 18. Men – The Bible is clear that only men may serve as elders (1 Tim 3:2; 2:11-12; Tit 1:6; 1 Cor 11:3-16, 14:34-36).

Role of Elders

Summary

- **Jesus Christ is the Chief Shepherd of the Church** (Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 5:4). He is the Leader, Chief Shepherd, and Senior Pastor of our church in a very real sense. The elders corporately look to His guidance and direction for the Church and depend on Him as the Chief Shepherd.
- **The elders are a group of godly men who take primary responsibility under Christ for governing the church.** While the words ‘elders,’ ‘overseers,’ and ‘shepherds’ (‘pastors’) each carry a different nuance, each of these words is used to refer to the office of elder. The elders are to provide direction and oversight to the church and devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word of God (Act 6:2-4). They therefore must be careful not to have their time consumed by day-to-day administrative matters. As leaders of the church, elders have great responsibility before God (Jam 3:1; Heb 13:17). They are immune to accusations of an individual, but subject to public discipline for well substantiated moral charges (1 Tim 5:19-20).

Elders and Decision-Making

- **Equality** – There is no hierarchy within the elders, but rather they function equally under Christ. In this way, the elders serve as checks and balances for each other, and so must submit to and defer to one another appropriately. Every concern of an elder will be heard and addressed, and any elder may submit an agenda item for discussion prior to a meeting. Once a decision is reached, all elders should submit to the decision and support it publically.
- **Unity** – Each of the elders has equal say, and the group makes decisions corporately. Each decision is a unified decision made prayerfully by the entire group, and thus elders strive to build unity and consensus. All elders must speak their minds openly in truth and love.
- **Diversity** – Some decisions may be made out of deference for one another in the interest of moving forward. Additionally, some decisions may be made by a single elder when that responsibility is delegated to him to empower him to act on behalf of the elders. This delegation is done on the basis of spiritual gifting, experience, available time, and season of life. Such delegated actions should be reviewed on an as needed basis by the elders to assure ongoing alignment and accountability.

- **Care** – Elders are to know one another and care for one another on a personal level. Elders should regularly spend time praying for one another.

The Duties of Elders – There are at least four primary duties of an elder that must not be ignored:

- **Elders are leaders.** Corporately, the elders are the leaders of the church. They have authority in the church to give direction, oversight, and set vision to staff, ministry leaders, and others. The church is instructed to “obey your leaders and submit to them” (Heb 13:17; cf. 1 The 5:12). However, the type of leadership that elders are to exhibit is not domineering, but rather elders are to be “examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:8; cf. Heb 13:7). Biblical leadership is humble, servant leadership as modeled by Jesus (John 13:1-20). Therefore, elders do not demand respect, but instead are to be teachable, willing to learn from and work with others, and to do everything for the glory of God (1 Pet 5:1-3; 1 Cor 10:31). Although the leadership of the church is shared by all the elders, there is a role for visionary leadership whereby a certain elder is used by God as a catalyst to wisely move the people of God in a certain direction (Rom 12:8). This leadership ability is functional and should not be seen as giving this elder more importance than the others.
- **Elders are shepherds.** The term “pastor” (see Eph 4:11) is a term used to describe the office of elder, and “pastor” is synonymous with “shepherd.” Peter exhorts elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Pet 5:2). Thus elders lead and care for the people of God as a shepherd cares for and leads a flock of sheep. This is a significant analogy. The shepherd’s primary task is not to run an organization, but to care for people’s souls. In this, Jesus is our model who is the Good Shepherd who “lays down his life for the sheep” (Joh 10:11; cf. Eze 34:2-4; 1 Pet 2:25, 5:4; Psa 23).
- **Elders are teachers.** Elders are the primary teachers within the church (Eph 4:11; Gal 6:6; Act 2:42; 1 The 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17). The one unique qualification that separates elders from deacons is that elders must be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2). In Titus, Paul explains 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” (Tit 1:9). Hebrews 13:7 defines the church elders as “those who spoke...the word of God” to the church. In Paul’s instructions to Timothy¹ he commanded him to “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim 4:13). Later, towards the end of his life, with the utmost solemnity and seriousness, Paul writes, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:1-2). Thus elders safeguard the doctrinal and moral purity of the church with sound biblical teaching.
- **Elders are equippers.** Elders are not simply teachers; they also must be purposefully equipping the rest of the church body for ministry. In Ephesians 4:11-16, we read that elders (“pastor-teachers”) are to “equip the saints for the work of ministry.” The word “equip” in this verse is the same word used of “setting a bone.” Therefore, elders are to equip the saints in the sense that they help them to be rightly aligned and arrayed with the rest of the body so that they can fulfill their function within the body of Christ. The goal is that each member of the body would be mobilized and active in their Spirit-given giftedness, and thus engaged in ministry to one another. Additionally, elders must equip next generation of elders/leaders to minister alongside them or to plant new churches in the community. In 2 Timothy, 2:2 Paul charges Timothy, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” Elders must train, equip, and raise up new leaders who can take their place, and then empower these leaders and release ministry to them.

¹ Although it is incorrect to view Timothy as the “pastor-elder” of the church at Ephesus because he carried more authority as Paul’s apostolic delegate, it is clear that his role overlapped with that of the elders. Therefore, instructions given to him may be rightly applied to elders. For more on this, see Benjamin L. Merkle, 40 Questions About Elders and Deacons (Grand Rapids: Kregal, 2008), p. 101-105