

Biblical Qualifications for Elders (Titus 1:6-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-7)

I. Outline of the Qualifications

A. General Reputation	(Titus 1:6a;	1 Tim. 3:2a)
B. Family Life	(Titus 1:6b;	1 Tim. 3:2b, 4-5)
C. Negative Characteristics	(Titus 1:7;	1 Tim. 3:3a, 6)
D. Positive Characteristics	(Titus 1:8;	1 Tim. 3:2b, 3b, 7)
E. Teaching Requirement	(Titus 1:9;	1 Tim. 3:2)

Note: A man's *desire* to be an elder must precede any official evaluation (1 Tim. 3:1a). If a man does not want to become an elder, it matters little whether he qualifies, so even if "desire" is not considered a qualification, it certainly is relevant. Also, "BAGD" in the qualities below abbreviates the Greek lexicon by Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker. This work is considered the standard dictionary for defining Greek words.

II. Examination of the Qualities Individually (NIV translations are underlined)

A. **General Reputation (Titus 1:6a; 1 Tim. 3:2a)**

1. Above Reproach is a general qualification of general reputation that can be seen as an "umbrella principle" under which all the other traits fall.
 - a. (*avne, gklhtoj* Tit. 1:6, 10 [deacons]) means "blameless" (cf. KJV) or "irreproachable" (BAGD 64b) in the sense that no one can point a finger at his character or behavior with an accurate accusation—not perfect, but having a good reputation. This means not "merely unaccusable, but unaccused; not free from any just charge... but free from any charge at all...if any present [at the elder's ordination] had such a charge to bring, the ordination should not go forward until such a charge had been sifted" (Trench, 381). This requirement to be blameless excludes one guilty of sin in his past which the church would need to discipline (e.g., divorce, immorality, criminal offenses) or which affects his present reputation.
 - b. (*avnepi, lhmp-ton* 1 Tim. 3:2) is translated "above reproach," being a synonym and also meaning "irreproachable" (BAGD) with the same sense as *ajnevglhtoj*
2. Respectable (*kosmion* 1 Tim. 3:2b) also has the idea "honorable" (BAGD) and is used of women who wear modest apparel (1 Tim. 2:9). The word refers to one who is living an orderly or well-arranged life, and Christ used the verb form (*kosme,w*) to designate a "well-ordered house" (Matt. 12:44), "well-trimmed lamps" (Matt. 25:7) and "decorated" tombstones (Matt. 23:29). A respectable man shows maturity that avoids personal excesses that may offend others, particularly weaker brothers and sisters. The church whose leaders do not earn respect will have a difficult experience.
3. [Having] a Good Reputation with Those Outside the Church (*marturi,an kalh,n e[cein avpo. tw/n e]xwqen* 1 Tim. 3:7) also is mandatory for one being considered for office. An elder should be respected both inside and outside the church. The phrase literally reads, "to have a good witness from those outside." This requirement disqualifies anyone known by unbelievers as a crooked businessman, a lazy worker, a tyrant, a hardheaded and insensitive man, etc. A "good reputation" can be very broad.

Note: The following qualities relate to a man's *genuine* character, but the qualities above ("above reproach," "respectable" and "good reputation") denote his *perceived* character. A godly man who is not *known* as a godly man cannot qualify as elder.

B. **Family Life (Titus 1:6b; 1 Tim. 3:2b, 4-5)**

4. The Husband of One Wife (*mia/j gunaiko,j a;ndra* in 1 Tim. 3:2; *mia/j gunaiko,j avnh,r* in Tit. 1:6) emphasizes a man's control in sexual restraint and a faithful relationship to his wife if he is married. (If he is not faithful in this second most important relationship in life should he be trusted in the affairs of the church?) This qualification excludes any husband unfaithful to his wife or one guilty of homosexuality, incest, and other sins of the flesh. (See the detailed evaluation on pages 228-230).
5. Having Responsible Children is generally translated like the NIV's "whose children believe" (*te,kna e;cwn pista*, Tit. 1:6) but may also be translated "having faithful children." This alternate translation is preferable since: (1) parents are not ultimately responsible for the salvation of their children, and (2) because the parallel meaning is supported in 1 Timothy 3:4 where an elder is required to "manage his household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity" (cf. 1 Tim. 3:12 for deacons). The word for "manage" is also used of elders who "rule" (1 Tim. 5:17). The meaning of "having faithful children" is explained in the following clause (below).
6. (Whose Children Are) Not Accused of Dissipation or Rebellion (*mh. ewn kathgori,a avswti,aj avnupo,takta* Tit. 1:6) refers to the elder's children not being able to be slandered for riotous living or insubordination ("being wild or disobedient," NIV), but rather being disciplined and restrained (able to accept authority). The man whose children are rebellious or excessive (drugs, sex, drunkenness, etc.) would best get his family under control before taking on responsibility as a church leader (cf. 1 Tim. 3:5).

C. **Negative Characteristics (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim. 3:3a, 6)**

7. Not Self-Willed (mh. auvqa,dh Tit. 1:7) means that the man under consideration must not be “stubborn or arrogant” (BAGD), or not self-indulgent to the point of showing arrogance to others. He must be a protector of God’s concerns (holiness, purity, faithfulness, etc.) rather than of selfish pursuits (desire for control in the church, overbearingness, etc.). Humility is indispensable.
8. Not Quick-Tempered (mh. ovrgi,lon Tit. 1:7) means not “inclined to anger” (BAGD), not given to outbursts of wrath, not contentious or belligerent. Gentle (evpieikh/ 1 Tim. 3:3) or “yielding” and “kind” (BAGD) describes this characteristic positively.
9. Not Addicted to Wine (mh. pa,roinon Tit. 1:7; 1 Tim. 3:3) properly describes one who is “not drunken” (BAGD). The literal translation is “not (one who lingers) beside (his) wine.” Temperate (nhfa,lion 1 Tim. 3:2) refers to the same idea, “literally temperate in the use of alcoholic beverages, sober, clear-headed, self-controlled” (BAGD). An alcoholic or heavy drinker should never be considered for the office of elder. Ideally an elder should be a non-drinker and at the most one who drinks with great moderation.
10. Not pugnacious (mh. plh,kthn 1 Tim. 3:3) refers to a “pugnacious man, bully” (BAGD). This is a man who is “not violent” (NIV) and not given to blows, not eager to use his fists, and not argumentative. Certainly any man with a reputation for physical and emotional retaliation at others would not meet this elder qualification.
11. Uncontentious (amacon 1 Tim. 3:3b) properly understood refers to the quality of being “peaceable” (BAGD). Not only should the elder avoid fighting (“not pugnacious” above), he must also actively pursue unity and harmony within the body of Christ. One who has a tendency to “witch hunt” makes the work of the elders terribly difficult in the many potentially explosive situations that eventually face every church. If this characteristic is expected of all believers (Tit. 3:2), how much more for the leaders!
12. Not Pursuing Dishonest Gain (mh. aivscrokerdh/ Tit. 1:7) refers to one “not fond for dishonest gain, greedy for money” (BAGD 25a). He makes an honest living and is upright in all his business dealings since he is “not given to filthy lucre” (KJV). Free from the love of money (avfila,rguron 1 Tim. 3:3b) describes the characteristic positively. A man who gambles, hoards his money, or is pursuing the elder office for financial advantage is clearly disqualified, as would be one who refuses to at least tithe.
13. Not a New Convert (mh. neo,futon 1 Tim. 3:6) means not “newly planted” and gives our English word “neophyte” (BAGD). The age in Christ a Christian qualifies for eldership is not designated, but Paul appointed elders from men less than a year old in Christ during his first missionary journey (Acts 14:23). However, they were not novices as they were steeped in Judaism. The principle is to appoint mature men in Christ, especially mature in humility to fight pride from being appointed to office.

D. **Positive Characteristics (Tit. 1:8; 1 Tim. 3:2b, 3b, 7)**

14. Hospitable (filoxenon Tit. 1:8; 1 Tim. 3:2), or “loving strangers” (Hendriksen), also should characterize one considered for the office of elder. The word for “hospitable” here is a compound word (fi,loj, “brotherly love” plus xe,noj, “stranger, alien”) which means showing love towards those one doesn’t know. Does the man love and care for believers and strangers, or treat people with contempt, especially if they are of a different social status or race? One who still struggles with racial, religious, or social prejudices is disqualified on this requirement. “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14).
15. Loving What is Good (fila,gaqon Tit. 1:8) has the same root (fi,loj, “brotherly love”) as above, meaning “loving goodness, virtuous, ready to do what is beneficial to others” (Hendriksen; cf. Phil. 4:8). The KJV, “a lover of good men,” is an inaccurate and unfortunate translation in its exclusiveness (especially since believers are commanded to love all men; cf. Rom. 13:8-10). “Loving what is good” in its simplest sense means loving God and what God loves. This characteristic definitely disqualifies from office one who approves of abortion, premarital and extramarital sex, and other harmful practices clearly forbidden by Scripture.
16. Sensible (sw,frona Tit. 1:8) suggests being “of sound mind, reasonable, sensible, serious, keeping one’s head” (BAGD). Prudent (sw,frona 1 Tim. 3:2) expresses the same concept with a different English translation of the same Greek word. This connotes that an elder needs to be wise and balanced in his judgment, marked by a proper self-image (humility without self-condemnation) as Romans 12:3 exhorts. This quality excludes men known as lacking proper judgment or proud “know-it-alls.”
17. Just (di,kaion Tit. 1:8) is defined as “upright, righteous” (BAGD). Being just suggests a man who demonstrates impartiality in his decision-making. He is fair, able to make mature judgments and characterised by practical righteousness affirmed in his lifestyle.

18. Devout (ο[σι]on Tit. 1:8) especially emphasizes a man's relationship with God as “devout, pious, pleasing to God, holy” (BAGD). One demonstrating this quality continually progresses in holiness to be more like Christ. He has made it a priority to “put on the new man” (Eph. 4:24). He is one of whom people declare, “He sure is a godly man!”

19. Self-Controlled (εὐγκραθῆ/ Tit. 1:8) also refers to being “disciplined” (BAGD). A man with excesses in habits, tardiness, anger, etc. reveals him to be undisciplined in his lifestyle and therefore not qualified for the office of elder. The point here is to require someone to exercise control over his own life before he is given control over the church.

E. **Teaching Requirement (Tit. 1:9; 1 Tim. 3:2)**

20. Able to Teach (didaktikōn 1 Tim. 3:2) and Holding Fast the Faithful Word... to Exhort (Encourage)... and to Refute... (Tit. 1:9) both specify that elders should have some aptitude for teaching, although not necessarily possessing the *gift* of teaching (Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11). They need not be scholars, but they should have a good grasp of the Word of God for two purposes (Tit. 1:9b): (1) to exhort (encourage) others in sound doctrine, and (2) to refute those who contradict [sound doctrine]. This teaching qualification is no light order, especially since the responsibility covers a church-wide scale. It is imperative that an elder be well grounded in the “faithful word which is according to the teaching” (Tit. 1:9), and yet to be able to communicate the Word in a non-offensive manner. This characteristic excludes those with no aptitude for teaching on a group or one-on-one basis and those who possess only a superficial knowledge of the Bible, especially in its basic doctrines.

III. Summary of the Qualifications

The 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 elder qualifications mostly describe a man's character, not his abilities (exceptions being “able to teach” and “managing his household well”). It can be concluded from this observation that God is more concerned with *who* a man is than *what* he can do, especially as this is revealed in his family relationships and general reputation as a man of God.

IV. Practical Implications

- A. The qualifications for elder are presented as a unit. No ratio or percentage of them that need to be true of a man appears in either 1 Timothy 3 or Titus 1. Paul stressed each characteristic as vital. Therefore, *all* of the traits are necessary to accept a man as an elder. (If *all* the qualities were not mandatory, who would be so presumptuous to decide *which* ones are optional?)
- B. This requirement of all the qualifications does not infer that the man must have *arrived* as a man of God, but that he is progressing toward greater spiritual maturity with these qualities as a foundation. The church should be instructed in the meanings of the requirements in a series of messages, then as a congregational body should decide upon each possible elder candidate who is put forward by a committee which recommends elders.
- C. The question rises concerning how long to wait until such men are identified in a congregation. Scripture gives no time indication here. The temptation in some churches is to appoint men too quickly to this office; this leads to selecting elders who don't really scripturally qualify.
- D. However, this also doesn't mean that the body of believers should sit around and wait for qualified men to appear like magic. The pastor needs to build his life into several men with the prayer that many of them would eventually qualify to assist him as elders.
- E. These men certainly can and should assist the pastor before assuming the title of elder. They need not be elders to be useful to the church. Being disciplined by the pastor allows them time for growth into men of God who then can serve as elders with the pastor as models of a church with high, biblical standards of church leadership.

F. Alexander Strauch summarizes the importance of elder qualifications:¹

“It is highly noteworthy that the New Testament provides more instruction concerning the qualifications for eldership than on any other aspect of eldership. Such qualifications are not required of all teachers or evangelists. One person may be gifted as an evangelist and be used of God in that capacity, yet be unqualified to be an elder. An individual may be an evangelist immediately after conversion, but Scripture says that a new convert cannot be an elder (1 Timothy 3:6).”

When we speak of the elders' qualifications, most people think that these qualifications are different than those of the clergy. The New Testament, however, has no separate standards for professional clergy and lay elders. The reason is simple. There aren't three separate offices—pastor, elders, and deacons—in the New Testament-style local church. There are only two offices—elders and deacons. From the New Testament perspective, any man in the congregation who desires to shepherd the Lord's people and meets God's requirements for the office can be a pastor elder.”

¹ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: Restoring the Eldership to Its Rightful Place in the Church*, rev. (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1997), 21. This is a pamphlet size summary of his earlier full-length book available for US\$14.99 at <http://www.discerningreader.com/bibelalstrau.html>.