

The Biblical Qualifications for Elders and Deacons:

An Exegesis of 1 Timothy 3:2–13

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Part I: Elders

1 Timothy 3:2–7
(author's translation):

²The overseer then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, prudent, respectable, hospitable, skillful in teaching, ³not given to much wine, not a violent man, not fond of shameful gain, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not loving money, ⁴ruling his own house well, having his children in submission, with all reverence ⁵(for if one does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?), ⁶not newly converted, lest being puffed up he fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷Moreover, he must also have a good testimony from those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Blameless

Structure

The apostle Paul begins this list of qualifications for the office of overseer with a general requirement, followed by specific areas in which the overseer must be blameless.

Comment

In Scripture, the word *overseer* refers to both ruling and teaching elders. In other words, the qualifications listed in 1 Tim. 3:2–7 apply to both ministers of the Word and the other elders who shepherd the flock under their care. The word “must” in verse 2 means that these qualifications are essential. They are not merely helpful guidelines. All of these qualifications are mandatory. They are requirements which God has laid down for the office of elder in his church. No man may be an elder in the church of God unless he meets all of these qualifications. We confess that Christ is king of the church. That means that the rules for the church which Christ sets down in his Word must be followed. It is the church’s God-given duty to keep all unworthy men out of the office of ruling and teaching elder. Should a man who is already in office show himself unqualified for the office he holds, the church must be diligent to remove him from that office. In so doing, the church will uphold the honor of Christ and insure that the church is edified for greater peace, purity, and unity.

By “blameless” the Scripture does not mean that a man must be sinless in order to be an overseer in the church of God. To be blameless is to be irreproachable. No one should be able to lay a charge against an overseer and make it stick. To be blameless does not mean that one is able to evade accusation or conviction. Rather, a man is blameless or above reproach when his words and conduct conform to the holy commandments of God in Scripture, so that he cannot justly be accused or convicted of any sin.

The Scripture says that Job was “blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). The people of God should be able to say that about every elder in the church. The overseer’s reputation should be above reproach. No one should be able to lay hold of him or assail him or reproach him because of his sins, whether in speech, conduct, or doctrine. Every Christian sins until the day he lays down this body of sin at death. Daily sins that are common to all men do not bring reproach and blame

upon a person from others because they too are guilty of the same sins. An overseer must have and maintain a good name. There should be no question as to his integrity or upright character.

John Calvin explains it this way: An elder “ought not to be marked by any disgrace that would detract from his authority. There will certainly not be found a man who is free from every fault, but it is one thing to be burdened with ordinary faults that do not hurt a man’s reputation, because the most excellent men share them, but quite another to have a name that is held in infamy and besmirched by some scandalous disgrace. Thus, in order that the bishops [overseers] may not lack authority, he gives charge that those who are chosen should be of good and honorable reputation, and free of any extraordinary fault. Also, he is not merely directing Timothy as to the sort of men he should choose but he is reminding all who aspire to the office that they should carefully examine their own life” (Commentary on 1 Tim. 3:2).

Conclusions

1. Every minister of the Word and every ruling elder must be a man of mature character and integrity before God and men so that he is irreproachable.
2. Only a man of such maturity, character, and integrity can be a godly example to those under his care in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, and in purity (see 1 Tim. 5:12).
3. Any man who has a stain upon his character or does not live a consistent, godly life does not meet this qualification and should not be an elder.
4. A man in the office of elder whose character and reputation are not above reproach, or whose authority is undermined by a recurring pattern of sinful behavior in his life, ought to be removed from office.

The Husband of One Wife

Structure

The first qualification that Paul sets forth is that the overseer must be blameless or above reproach. The subsequent qualifications address specific areas in which the overseer must be above reproach. “The husband of one wife” (or, “the man of one woman”) is the first specific area addressed by the apostle.

Comment

Peter begins his first letter by identifying himself as “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Although he is an apostle, he also calls himself a fellow elder: “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as

overseers" (1 Peter 5:1–2). From these two passages it is clear that the apostles were also elders (called both elders and overseers). We know from 1 Cor. 7:8–9 that the apostle Paul, who wrote both 1 Timothy and Titus, was unmarried. Yet he was "an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the commandment of God our Savior and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 1:1). As an apostle, Paul was also an elder, an overseer among the flock of God. He wrote this letter to Timothy, his "true son in the faith" (1:2), in order that Timothy might know how he ought to conduct himself "in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (3:15). Paul often gave himself as an example of what Timothy ought to be doing as an overseer. This being the context, one has to twist the Scripture to derive from the stipulation "the husband of one wife" that an elder must be a married man.

This requirement means that if a man is married or has been married, he must not have more than one wife in God's sight. This is an express prohibition of polygamy for an overseer at a time when some men had more than one wife (see Chrysostom and Calvin). The New Testament confirms God's command from the time of creation that a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife and the two shall become one flesh (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; Eph. 5:31). Those who divorce their wives unjustly and/or marry another woman, so that before God they have more than one wife at the same time, contrary to God's law, may not be office-bearers in the church, which is the bride of the Lord Jesus Christ. The point here is that the elder must be blameless with respect to the law of God concerning marriage (and divorce). If a man can justly (keeping the precepts of Scripture) put away his wife with the approval of God and remarry, then he is still qualified to hold the office of overseer.

Paul is not barring from office *ipso facto* anyone who is remarried (cf. 1 Tim. 5:14; 4:3; Rom. 7:2–3; 1 Cor. 7:8–9). If a man's wife dies and he marries another, he is still qualified to be an elder in the flock of God. Whether married or unmarried, the elder must be an example to others of faithfulness and chastity in obedience to the seventh commandment. A married elder must be faithful to his one wife as long as she lives. Sexual immorality and marital infidelity cannot be tolerated among office-bearers in the church. If there are two or three witnesses that a man has committed such sins, he may not hold office in the church.

Paul assumes that the elder will normally be married. That is generally the case, both with office-bearers and with all men, though to some it is given to be eunuchs voluntarily for the sake of the kingdom of God, by birth, or by an act of men (Matt. 19:12).

Conclusions

1. It is important to know what the law of God forbids and allows concerning divorce and remarriage. In some cases that will determine whether a man who aspires to the office of teaching or ruling elder has only

one wife.

2. It is normal for a man to marry and to gain experience governing his household so that he may know how to take care of the church of God (1 Tim. 3:4–5).

3. Men who are unchaste, who are unfaithful, who divorce unlawfully, who marry unlawfully, or who do not shepherd their wives as they ought, should not become or remain an overseer.

4. Women are excluded from the office of overseer.

5. It is not normal, nor is it commanded, that overseers remained unmarried. “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb. 13:4). Marriage is holy and ordained by God. The office-bearers of the church ought to live in the married estate in holiness and obedience to God as an example to all the flock. Their experience as the head of their home will be useful in their oversight of their congregation.

Vigilant

Structure

“Vigilant” or “temperate” is the first in a series of three character traits.

Comment

The Greek word for “temperate” can mean “sober, not intoxicated, clearheaded, self-controlled, moderate, frugal, continent, sober-minded, prudent, reasonable.” The King James Version translates this Greek word as “vigilant.” There are good reasons to believe that by this word Paul is not speaking of an elder’s restraint in using intoxicating drink, but rather of how an elder thinks and reacts in general.

First, in the next verse (v. 3), Paul specifically states that an elder must not be given to much wine. (This same qualification regarding the use of wine is also in Titus 1:7.) Since Paul deals specifically with the use of wine in verse 3, it would seem unlikely that he would also do so in verse 2.

Second, “temperate” is at the beginning of a list of qualities that have to do with the general character of an elder’s behavior, thinking, and attitudes. “Temperate” is followed by “sober-minded.” The translators of the New King James Version used these two English words interchangeably in the New Testament. For example, in Titus 2:2 we read “that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience.” The word translated as “sober” is the word we are discussing (“temperate”). The word translated as “temperate” in Titus 2:2 is the same word as “sober-minded” in 1 Tim. 3:2. Notice that the translation of these words has been interchanged in Titus from what we have in 1 Timothy. If the words “temperate” and “sober” were two totally different ideas, clearly distinguished from one

another, then it would be erroneous to interchange them in translation. These two (Greek) words are closely related and have almost the same meaning in the New Testament.

Third, in Titus 2:2 and 2:6–7 Paul uses the words “temperate” and “sober-minded” (the same word as “sober”) in the context of a man’s general character. The context of these passages shows that by these words Paul is not talking about a man’s restraint in drinking wine.

In 2 Tim. 4:5 we have the verb form of the word translated “temperate” in 1 Tim. 3:2. “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things” (2 Tim. 4:3–5). The qualification we are discussing means to be watchful and on guard against turning aside to nice stories and fables in place of the truth of the gospel of Christ.

Paul uses this same verb in 1 Thess. 5:6, “Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.” This time the verb is translated “be sober.” It is placed parallel to “watch.” Paul uses the same verb again in verse 8: “But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.” The qualification we are discussing means to be on guard, to be diligent in faith, love, and hope, to pay attention to the things of God in order that we might persevere until the day of the Lord (cf. Heb. 2:1; 6:11–12). This is why the King James Version uses the translation “vigilant” instead of “temperate” in 1 Tim. 3:2.

The apostle Peter uses this same verb several times in his first letter. In 1:13–14 he writes: “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance.” The idea in this passage is that we must pay attention, be serious, and think clearly. We must be able to give diligent heed to the truth of God’s Word and consequently obey with determination. In 4:7 we read: “But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers.” The command to be watchful is parallel to the command to be serious. The end of all things is about to come. Be alert! Be wide awake! A drunkard and an indifferent man pay little attention to what is going on. Their senses and faculties are neither sharp nor keen. This is the opposite of what it means to be vigilant or clearheaded or sober. When warning the saints about the devil, who walks about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, Peter says, “Be sober, be vigilant” (1 Peter 5:8).

Conclusions

1. The sense of the original Greek word is better conveyed by the translation “vigilant,” which is found in the King James Version.
2. An elder must be on guard and alert, just as a shepherd must always

be watching for wolves and anything else that might endanger his flock. An elder must have a sound, incisive mind to discern the times, truth from error, the needs of the sheep, etc. He must watch carefully over his own life and heart, lest there arise any root of bitterness, unbelief, sinful patterns of living, neglect of the things of God, or disobedience to the commands of Scripture. His senses must not be dull, but exercised by reason of use (Heb. 5:12–14). This is required of deacons' wives (1 Tim. 3:11), older men (Titus 2:2), and all God's people (1 Peter 5:8).

3. This character trait is central to the work of the office of elder, for Paul charged the elders from Ephesus: "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.... For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears" (Acts 20:28–31).

4. An elder who is not vigilant over his own life, both in private and in public, will not be able to be watchful over and care for the people of God. His senses and discernment will be dulled. He will be as one who is asleep or drunk. In the first place, an elder must constantly be vigilant in his own life, lest he fall into sin. He must keep the law of God ever before his eyes. Second, an elder must constantly be vigilant in caring for the flock.

Prudent

Structure

This qualification is closely related to the previous one, "vigilant." It is the second in a series of three character traits.

Comment

The Greek word can mean "prudent, thoughtful, self-controlled." The word refers to wisdom, good sense, a sound mind, good judgment. Whereas the previous qualification is that an elder must have a clear head and a sound mind in order to be alert in watching himself and the flock, this qualification is that an elder must have a sound mind and wisdom in order to exercise good judgment. When Festus charged the apostle Paul with being beside himself because of too much learning, Paul replied: "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason [*or, sound judgment*]" (Acts 26:25). The word translated "reason" or "sound judgment" is related to the word we are discussing. Paul was in full control of his mind and was using his mind to speak the truth. Paul's testimony before Agrippa and Festus was based on sound thinking and good judgment.

Conclusions

1. An elder must be guided by wisdom in his work. He must have good judgment in dealing with people and their problems. He must know right from wrong and be able to give good advice in the situations that people encounter.
2. An elder must be characterized by self-control. He must be reasonable, sympathetic, and yet straightforward and serious.
3. One of the tasks of an elder is to judge disputes. This requires wisdom and seriousness. The judge must be in control of himself so that anger or personal prejudice does not cloud his thinking and rob him of discernment and good judgment.
4. A person who is fickle, unstable, without wisdom and sound judgment, or unable to deal with issues does not meet this qualification.

Respectable

Structure

This qualification for the office of overseer is the third in a series of three character traits that God requires an overseer to have.

Comment

The New King James Version (just like the King James Version) does not translate the original Greek word literally when it says: “of good behavior.” In the first place, the original word is in the accusative case, not the genitive; nor is it the object of a preposition. Secondly, the Greek word means “respectable” or “honorable.” The word may be used with reference to men as well as to impersonal things connected with men. We find it used in an inscription honoring a man. The apostle Paul uses it to describe the kind of clothes that a woman should wear. He says in 1 Tim. 2:9 that women should adorn themselves with respectable clothing; one could also translate it by “proper clothing” or “modest clothing.” This is the only other time that this adjective is used in the New Testament.

This adjective is related to a verb which can mean “to put in order,” such as to trim one’s lamp (cf. Matt. 25:7). However, the usual meaning of the verb is “to adorn or decorate.”

Conclusions

1. The sense of the original word is better conveyed by the translation “respectable” (which is the translation found in the New American Standard Version and the New International Version).
2. “Respectable” and “honorable” are broader in meaning than “of good behavior,” but a man whose behavior is bad cannot be respectable or honorable.

3. A respectable man deserves to be treated with deference, esteem, high regard, and honor because of his qualities and his honest, decent character.

4. This qualification means that a bishop must have his life in order. He must adorn his character so that it shines with truth, honesty, justice, purity, loveliness, and virtue. A respectable man is a model of godliness because he keeps God's commandments; he is a man who has wisdom from above and understanding from the precepts of Scripture like our Lord Jesus did; he is a man who has humility, love, compassion, and self-control like our Lord Jesus Christ. Proverbs has much to say about the respectable or honorable man:

3:6 — He has wisdom and understanding (cf. 8:18).

5:9 — He avoids the strange woman.

15:33 — He is humble (cf. 18:12; 22:4; 29:23).

20:3 — He ceases from strife.

21:21 — He follows after righteousness and mercy.

22:4 — He fears the Lord.

26:1 — He is not a fool (cf. v. 8).

Paul says in 2 Tim. 2:15–26 that the man who departs from iniquity and purges himself from every evil thing will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, and fit for the master's use, prepared for every good work. This is a sample of what Scripture teaches about the respectable or honorable man.

Hospitable

Structure

This is the first of two abilities or gifts that God requires an overseer in the church to have.

Comment

The Greek word for "hospitable" is a compound word. The first part of the word means "friend" or "one who loves"; the second part of the word means "host." Although the second part of the word can also mean "stranger," I think the meaning "host" is used in this compound word meaning "hospitality." A bishop must be "one who loves to be a host." Paul commended Gaius in Rom. 16:23 for hosting him and the whole church. This quality is required of all God's people. Peter writes: "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins.' Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:8–10). In Rom. 12:13 the apostle exhorts God's people to pursue hospitality. The writer to the Hebrews also commands Christians not to forget hospitality, for thereby some have entertained angels without knowing it (Heb. 13:2).

Being a host does not necessarily involve providing a meal for guests. Gaius opened his place to the apostle Paul and the church, presumably for meetings. In many of the examples of hospitality in the Bible, the host offered his guests a place to rest, food, and provision for their animals. The passage in 1 Peter 4 teaches that being hospitable is one way we are to express our love for the people of God. It is something we are to do cheerfully and willingly. It is a means by which we can use our gifts, whatever they may be, to minister to others in the body of Christ. In the broadest sense, hospitality is sharing what God has given us with other Christians for their edification and mutual encouragement. It is the friendly, generous reception and treatment of guests or strangers.

Conclusions

1. Every Christian must be hospitable, but especially an overseer in the church. An overseer is to be an example to the people of God in this area and should teach the people under his care to be hospitable.

2. Christ has given elders to the church for the edification and equipping of the people of God. Elders should be willing and glad to share their gifts with others, especially those under their care. That could mean providing food or lodging, using one's place for meetings, or even making oneself available for visitors or those in need of counsel.

3. All the people of God, and especially the elders, are not to be cold toward strangers and visitors, but warm, gracious, friendly, and kind, endeavoring to meet their needs and in this way to show the love and compassion which our Lord Jesus showed when he was on earth, and which he still daily shows in his faithful, gracious provision for all our needs and the needs of all his creatures (cf. Ps. 104).

Skillful in Teaching

Structure

This is a second gift or ability that an overseer in the church must have.

Comment

This qualification is an important gift or ability that God requires an overseer in the church to have.

1. *Who Is an Overseer?*

The question arises: does this qualification refer only to a minister of the Word or also to all the elders who oversee the flock? I stated earlier that the word "overseer" refers to both ministers of the Word and ruling elders. This becomes evident when we examine the text of Scripture itself.

It is clear that an overseer (*episkopos* = overseer or bishop) must be able

to teach. In Titus 1:5–7, Paul writes to Titus: “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders [*presbyterous* = presbyters] in every city as I commanded you—if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop [*episkopon* = overseer or bishop] must be blameless....” Paul commanded Titus to appoint presbyters in every city. A presbyter is an elder. The word is used sixty-two times in the New Testament with the meaning of “elder.” The flow of the text in Titus just quoted is: If anyone is blameless, Titus may appoint him to be a presbyter, for the bishop must be blameless. Paul refers to the same people, using the word “presbyter” in verse 5 and “bishop” in verse 7. One could say that Paul commanded Titus to appoint ministers of the Word (because they too are elders) in every city, but the evidence in the rest of the New Testament is against this understanding.

First, the pattern shown in the New Testament is that several elders in a particular congregation shepherd the flock. Paul says that some of those elders labor in the Word and in teaching (i.e., in instructing, the act of teaching), while others only rule (1 Tim. 5:17). Titus appointed more than one elder in each city. Certainly, when Paul commanded Titus to set in order the things that are lacking, he at least wanted Titus to appoint elders to rule and shepherd the flock, just as the Ephesian church had elders to watch over the flock (see Acts 20). That means that a presbyter (elder) is an overseer (*episkopos*) and that the qualifications in Titus 1:5–9 apply to all elders.

Second, the New Testament uses the word *elder* (*presbyteros*) for the Old Testament office of elder among the people of Israel. You see this often in the Gospels and Acts. The Old Testament office of elder was closer in function to the ruling elder than to the minister of the Word, the elder who rules and also labors in the Word and in the work of teaching. This is evidence that a presbyter is an elder who shepherds the flock and rules in the congregation.

Paul and Barnabas appointed presbyters in every church at the end of their first missionary journey (Acts 14:23). Then Paul and Barnabas and certain others went up to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and presbyters (15:2). They were received by the church and the apostles and the presbyters (v. 4). The apostles and presbyters came together to consider the matter brought to them (v. 6). The apostles and presbyters, with the whole church, decided to send chosen men back to Antioch (v. 22). The apostles, presbyters, and brothers wrote a letter to the Gentile brothers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (v. 23). The apostles and presbyters made the decision in Jerusalem (16:4). At the end of his last missionary journey, as Paul traveled back to Jerusalem, he stopped in Miletus and sent to Ephesus and called for the presbyters of the church. When they came to him, Paul charged them to take heed to themselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers (*episkopous*) to shepherd the church of God. Paul exhorted the overseers to watch carefully because savage wolves would come into the

flock (20:17–38). When Paul came to Jerusalem, he reported in detail to all the presbyters in Jerusalem those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry (21:19). We see in the book of Acts, then, that the presbyters are the same people as the overseers; that there are a plurality of presbyters/overseers in one congregation; that the presbyters/overseers are commanded to watch over the congregation and to shepherd the church (rule and guide them) so that the people of God are preserved from wolves and errors.

Fourth, James mentions the presbyters of the church as serving the people of God by visiting the sick, praying over them, and anointing them with oil (James 5:14). We would classify this more as part of the shepherding and ruling of the sheep, than as laboring in the Word and in the work of teaching (which is the special work of the minister of the Word).

Fifth, the apostle Peter, who was a fellow presbyter, exhorted the presbyters among those to whom he wrote his first epistle to “shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (5:1–4). Peter does not exhort the presbyters to shepherd the sheep by publicly preaching and teaching the Word, but by being examples to the flock and by not ruling over them as lords. The specific work of public preaching and teaching is only a part of shepherding the sheep. This shows that by shepherding and overseeing, Peter primarily has in mind the work of ruling and caring for the sheep. That work does not exclude teaching or preaching, but that is certainly not Peter’s focus.

Sixth, the apostle Peter uses the terms *shepherd* and *overseer* for God: “For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25). We were like sheep going astray, but now we have returned and are like sheep who live under the rule, guidance, and care of God, who is the great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20). This shows that to shepherd and oversee is to care for, rule over, and guide the people of God, more so than public preaching and teaching. Many who preach and teach publicly do not care for the people of God. They do not take the time, make the effort, and have the patience to guide and rule over them. That is one reason why the church in America has fallen into the weak condition that it is in today. There have been plenty of preachers and teachers, but few who have shepherded and watched over the people of God as Scripture requires the presbyters/overseers to do.

Seventh, when Paul writes to the church at Philippi, he addresses them as follows: “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops [overseers] and deacons.” It would be strange indeed, if Paul had specifically mentioned the believers, the ministers of the Word and the deacons, but ignored the ruling elders in the congregation, for they are an essential and important part of the church. They are some of those to whom

God has given gifts and his authority to lead, shepherd, teach, correct, and preserve his people in the way of truth. It is more likely that Paul refers to all the elders in the church at Philippi with the one word “overseers”—both the teaching and the ruling elders.

Lastly, if the qualifications in 1 Tim. 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 are not the qualifications for the office of elder in the church, then what are the qualifications for this office? Why would Scripture give the qualifications for deacons and ministers (who are also elders in the church), but not give any qualifications for the office of elder, especially since the office of elder is one of the most important special offices for the well-being of the church?

We should also note that much of the work of the ruling elders and the minister of the Word is the same. The New Testament makes one important distinction between the work of the ruling elders and the work of the minister. The special task of the minister of the Word is to labor in the Word and in the work of teaching. Along with that, the minister has the task of administering the sacraments. Otherwise, all the presbyters/overseers (ministers and ruling elders) of a church have the same names and the same duties. They both have the duties of shepherding and ruling the church.

Our conclusion is that the New Testament uses both the words *presbyter* and *overseer* to refer to all the elders, both those who rule and those who rule and labor in the Word and in the work of teaching. It follows, then, that 1 Tim. 3:1–7 sets forth the qualifications for both ministers of the Word and ruling elders.

2. *The Difference between Teaching and Preaching*

To be skillful in teaching is not necessarily the same as being skillful in preaching. In the New Testament, teaching is a much broader activity than preaching. Preaching is the public proclamation of the Word of God. All preaching should teach the congregation. But teaching includes many things that are not preaching. Let me give some examples: Jesus says that his Father taught him the things he spoke (John 8:28). The man born blind taught the Pharisees about Jesus Christ (John 9:34). Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would teach us all things (John 14:26). Paul says that he taught in Ephesus from house to house (Acts 20:20). In 1 Cor. 11:14 Paul says: “Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?” In Eph. 4:20–21 Paul writes: “But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus.” Paul commands all believers to teach one another “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your heart to the Lord” (Col. 3:16). Paul tells the Thessalonians to “stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thess. 2:15). Teaching someone by writing a letter is not preaching. When Paul says in 1 Tim. 2:12, “And I do not permit a woman to teach,” he is not referring exclusively to preaching. When Hebrews 5:12 says, “For though by this time you ought to

be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God," it does not mean that all believers should be preachers. Further, parents teach their children, and teachers teach their students, and none of that teaching is preaching.

I am not saying that Paul means all these things when he says that an overseer must be skillful in teaching. My point is simply that teaching is not equivalent to preaching. An overseer may be skillful in teaching and not even be able to preach. Since the Reformation, Reformed churches have insisted that the preacher of God's Word should be able to read the original languages in which the Bible was written in order that he might rightly divide the word of truth. Ruling elders do not need to meet this standard because they are not ordained to preach the Word of God and administer the sacraments.

3. The Meaning of This Requirement

The requirement of Scripture for every elder is not that he be able to preach, but that he be skillful in teaching. The Greek word for "skillful in teaching" is used twice in the New Testament. The other place is 2 Tim. 2:23–25. There Paul commands Timothy to avoid foolish and ignorant disputes. Instead of quarreling, the servant of the Lord must be "gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and ... come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil." This passage is not about preaching the Word of God, but about patiently and humbly correcting those who oppose sound doctrine by teaching them the truth. Timothy is to do this, rather than embroiling himself in foolish and ignorant arguments with people.

We see the same thing in the qualifications for presbyter/overseer given in Titus 1:5–16. An elder must hold fast the faithful word according to the teaching he has received, in order that he may be able both to convict and to exhort by sound instruction those who speak against the truth (v. 9). "For," continues Paul, "there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain" (vv. 10–11). Paul continues: "Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith" (v. 13).

We know that those who are going astray and have come to the point of speaking against the truth and subverting whole households, need more than just the public preaching and teaching of God's Word. That is still important for them to hear, but if that were all that they needed, there would be no need for the elders to visit the people in their homes, just as a shepherd goes after a straying sheep (see Ps. 119:176 and Luke 15:3–10). When a person opposes the truth as described here, he urgently needs the elders to come to his house with sound doctrine and convict and exhort him to turn

from his error. The elders may need to rebuke him sharply. This is the work of watching over the flock and shepherding them so that they remain in the truth and are not destroyed by wolves or false teaching. The elders must seek out those who stray and seek to restore them by exhorting them and teaching them the truth. The elders must also teach and exhort the faithful sheep so that they do not go astray.

In order to do this, an elder needs to know well what Scripture says about doctrine and life. He needs to be able to discern error in doctrine or life. He needs to be able to show a man his error from Scripture and teach him the truth in a simple way. That does not require the gifts necessary for preaching, or even public teaching, yet that is the essence of the work of a shepherd overseeing the church of God which he purchased with his own blood. That is the most essential part of ruling in the church. The apostle Peter is very clear that the elder's rule is not like that of the factory boss. Rather, it is the rule of a shepherd who sets a good example both in doctrine and in life and who patiently and gently cares for the individual needs of the sheep.

Although Acts 20 does not specifically refer to teaching, the work which Paul lays out for the Ephesian elders fits precisely with what I have described as the principal ways in which ruling elders are to use their skill in teaching. In Acts 20:17–38 Paul does not charge the elders to preach the Word, but to take heed to themselves and to all the flock, to shepherd the church of God, and to watch and warn the people (including themselves), lest savage wolves rise up, speak perverse things, and draw away disciples after themselves.

To this we may add John Calvin's comment on "apt to teach": "Those who are charged with governing the people should be qualified to teach." Paul is commending not gifts for public speaking, but "wisdom in knowing how to apply God's Word to the profit of His people." In the words of Lawrence R. Eyres, "An elder must be able to deal with people on a one-to-one basis, applying the Word to the needs of the individual" (*The Elders of the Church*, p. 34).

Conclusions

1. *Presbyter* and *overseer* are synonyms for a person whom we more commonly call an elder.

2. The qualifications in 1 Tim. 3:1–7 apply to all elders in the church, both those who rule and those who rule and labor in the Word and in the work of teaching.

3. There is a difference between teaching and preaching. One who is skillful in teaching is not necessarily skillful in preaching. "Apt to preach" is not a qualification given in 1 Tim. 3 for all elders.

4. This in no way denies that God has gifted, called, and set apart some men to preach his Word. For example, Paul commanded Timothy to preach

the Word (2 Tim. 4:2). Jesus and the apostles also preached the Word of God. The truth is that some elders rule and also labor in the Word and in the work of teaching (1 Tim. 5:17). Such men are ministers of the Word or teaching elders.

5. God has not called all elders to preach, or even to teach the Word publicly. He has gifted some for preaching and some for public teaching, and these he calls to that work. The congregation must call men to work according to the gifts that God has given them.

6. God calls all elders to rule, to shepherd, to oversee, to watch out for, and to care for the church. The elder's rule (and all that goes with it) in its very nature involves teaching. That is why Scripture requires that an elder must be "skillful in teaching." To rule over the people of God is not merely to set the times of meeting, but, more importantly, to encourage and exhort God's people to believe and live according to the Bible and to warn and convict those who stray from the truth. That requires skill in teaching people privately with patience and gentleness. The elders must see to it that the congregation not only hears the public preaching and teaching of God's Word, but also lives in obedience to God's Word. That requires skill in teaching. An elder must be able to discern false teachings, whether by his own minister or by others, both inside and outside the church. He must be able to stop them with the truth of God's Word. He must be able to teach the people how their ideas contradict Scripture. An elder should be able to give biblical counsel to the people of God in matters of faith and life. He should be able to make decisions at meetings and judge matters according to biblical principles.

Not Given to Much Wine

Structure

Verse 3 primarily contains things that must not characterize an overseer. The first of these negatives is "not given to much wine."

Comment

An elder must not be given to much wine. A man who is given to much wine drinks too much wine; in the words of Prov. 23:30, he tarries long at the wine. That includes a man who has only occasional bouts of excessive drinking, as well as the man who regularly drinks too much. Wine takes an inordinate place in his life, becoming more important to him than it ought to be. In that sense, he is enslaved to drinking. Such a person is not qualified to be an elder in the church. The Scripture says that a man who tarries long at the wine, who goes in search of mixed wine, has woe, sorrow, contentions, complaints, wounds without cause, and redness of eyes. He who longs for wine and is captivated by it will see strange things and will utter perverse

things. He will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea or at the top of a ship's mast, having lost his senses and resting only to awake for another drink (Prov. 23:29–35).

Paul does not say in 1 Tim. 3:3 that an elder must not drink wine. Those who require elders to abstain from drinking any wine on the basis of this verse have twisted this qualification to say something that it does not say. We know from the rest of Scripture that just as God causes the grass to grow for the cattle and vegetation for man to eat, so God gives us “wine that makes glad the heart of man” (Ps. 104:14–15). Jesus used wine as one of the elements of the Lord's Supper, and we are to continue using wine in the Lord's Supper until Jesus returns.

A little later in 1 Timothy, Paul tells Timothy: “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities” (5:23). The Scripture expresses the covenant blessing of God in this way: “Honor the LORD with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine” (Prov. 3:9–10). Wine is one of God's good gifts and is to be used to the glory of God.

In this verse the Lord of the church disqualifies from the office of elder anyone who is given to much wine. That includes all who drink excessively, including the drunkard. Scripture condemns drunkenness, saying that no drunkard will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9–10).

In general, an elder must not let wine govern him, but must be able to use wine wisely and in moderation for the glory of God. Although wine is specifically mentioned by the text, I think the principle here applies to any food or drink which has mastery over a man, especially those things which impair a man's judgment and his ability to control his speech and actions.

Because wine can impair a man's judgment and ability to control his speech and actions, God commanded Aaron: “Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die” (Lev. 10:8–9). The reason for this was so that they would be able to “distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by the hand of Moses” (vv. 10–11).

Similarly, civil magistrates, just like elders in the church, are also not to be given to much wine: “It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, nor for princes intoxicating drink; lest they drink and forget the law, and pervert the justice of all the afflicted” (Prov. 31:4–5). Compare also Isa. 5:20–25; 28:7; Ezek. 44:21.

Conclusions

1. Wine is a good thing given by God, but must be used rightly to the glory of God.
2. An overseer must not be given to much wine. He must not use wine

unwisely in any way, nor be enslaved by it or any other food or drink that impairs his judgment. Addiction to wine disqualifies a man from office. A man who becomes drunk also fails to meet this qualification for office.

3. In the words of John Calvin, “Excessive drinking is not only unseemly in a pastor, but usually results in many things still worse, such as quarrels, foolish attitudes, unchastity, and others there is no need to mention” (Commentary on 1 Tim. 3:3). Compare also Paul’s exhortation to all believers in Eph. 5:18. No believer, but especially no elder (for he is to be an example to all the flock), should be drunk with wine. Rather, Christians should be filled with the Holy Spirit.

4. From this qualification we can infer that an overseer, just like civil magistrates (especially judges), should be neither “given to” nor under the control of any food or drink or drug which has the same kind of effect as wine on a man’s speech, conduct, and judgment.

5. An elder must show his ability to rule himself in the way he uses God’s gift of wine. He must be able to use wine wisely and in moderation to the glory of God; he must never “give himself to much wine.”

Not a Violent Man

Structure

This is the second of five negative requirements in verse 3.

Comment

The Greek word which I have translated “a violent man” occurs only twice in the New Testament, both times as a requirement for the office of overseer (1 Tim. 3:3 and Titus 1:7). The Greek word is a noun which refers to a person who strikes or smites another person. This is the reason why the King James Version translates this word as “striker.” The word used here is related to another Greek noun which means “blow, stroke” or “wound, bruise” as the result of a blow (see Acts 16:23, 33; Luke 10:30).

This is clearly referring to men who are wont to strike others out of anger with their hand or foot, or even with some instrument in their hand. Such men are not qualified to hold the office of overseer. Neither anger nor violence should characterize an overseer. He must not strike his family, nor people outside the family. The only exceptions are striking that is specifically permitted by God in Scripture (e.g., punishment by the civil magistrate [Ex. 21:23–25] and discipline by parents [Prov. 23:13–14]).

God forbids all men (not just overseers) to strike one another when there is an argument or fight (Ex. 21:18–19). Children are forbidden to strike their parents (Ex. 21:15). There is even a penalty when a man strikes the eye or tooth of his servant or maid and destroys it (Ex. 21:26–27). Jesus teaches us in Matthew that God abhors the root of violence, namely, anger (Matt.

5:21–26).

Conclusions

1. An overseer must have control over his mind and body so that he does not hit other people and is not swift to anger.

2. This means that an overseer must be gentle, peaceable, and able to keep his body under control so that no one can say that he is a striker or a violent man. A man who gets into violent arguments or fistfights is not qualified to be an overseer.

3. A man who physically abuses his wife, his children, or anyone else, is disqualified from the office of elder.

4. A man who is not able to control his anger, who has outbursts of anger, or who lashes people with his tongue, ought not to bear the office of overseer, since uncontrolled anger is bound to erupt in violence.

Not Fond of Shameful Gain

Structure

This is the third of five negative requirements in verse 3.

Comment

Not all Greek manuscripts of 1 Timothy contain the two words translated “not fond of shameful gain” in 3:3, but the “Byzantine” manuscripts (mostly minuscules), which form the vast majority of the extant manuscripts of the New Testament, along with a greater number of manuscripts out of other groups (*al* in Nestle’s critical apparatus), include them. Since the vast majority of manuscripts attest to their authenticity, we should accept them as rightly part of this verse. The argument against accepting them is that they have been added from the similar passage in Titus 1:7.

In Greek, Paul uses a compound adjective composed of the words for “shameful” and “gain.” Its meaning is best conveyed by the translation “fond of shameful gain.” Shameful gain is anything that a man gets by dishonest means, or which is itself shameful or wicked.

Peter speaks of the same thing in 1 Peter 5:2, where he exhorts the elders to “shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly.” Peter is saying that a man’s motivation to serve as an overseer should not be to achieve dishonest gain. He should not seek to exalt himself by using his position as an overseer among the flock of God. He should not try to garner to himself power, control, or authority over others.

His desire should not be to puff himself up with pride because of the honor, respect, prestige, or flattery that may come to him. His motivation to be an overseer should not be some advantage that he can get by this office.

Rather, a man's motivation should be an eager desire to serve Jesus Christ and further his kingdom.

This qualification should be applied broadly to money and material goods. A man who just wants wealth should not be an overseer. One's goals in defending oneself or others from criticism or accusations should not be self-serving. This qualification also applies to the shameful gaining of nonmaterial things, such as power, honor, and praise.

Conclusions

1. This qualification forbids an overseer to acquire money or material possessions with sinful motives or in any dishonest way.

2. It also disqualifies from office a man whose goal is to get power, control, authority, honor, prestige, respect, or flattery, rather than to glorify God and edify the church.

3. A man who is unscrupulous in getting his way is also fond of shameful gain, and therefore is not qualified to be an overseer.

Gentle

Structure

This positive requirement stands in contrast to the five negative requirements which surround it in verse 3.

Comment

The word means "gentle, yielding, or kind." The apostle Paul ascribes gentleness to our Lord Jesus Christ in 2 Cor. 10:1, where he pleads with the church at Corinth "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ." James tells us that the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable and gentle (James 3:17).

Gentleness should characterize every Christian. Paul writes: "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men" (Titus 3:1-2), and "Let your gentleness be known to all men" (Phil. 4:5).

Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, singles out gentleness as a necessary quality in an overseer. In contrast to a man who is given to much wine, violent, or fond of shameful gain, an overseer must be gentle. Gentle is the opposite of abrasive, caustic, or oppressive. The apostle Peter admonishes servants to be submissive to their masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh (1 Peter 2:18). In this verse Peter sets gentle over against harsh. We learn in the next verses (vv. 19-24) that a harsh master causes his servant to endure grief and suffer wrongly, that is, suffer for doing good. Peter points to Jesus Christ, who is our example. He com-

mitted no sin and yet was reviled by harsh men and suffered at their hands for us.

An overseer is not to be a harsh man. He is not to revile people and make them suffer for doing good. A man who makes others endure grief unnecessarily lacks this important qualification for the office of overseer. An overseer must not get rough and angry, even when people oppose the truth. Rather, he must have a forbearing spirit toward all, even in the midst of disputes and opposition, seeking to avoid strife, not incite it. Paul wrote to Timothy: “But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth” (2 Tim. 2:23–25).

Conclusions

1. All Christians should be gentle, but especially an overseer.
2. Young and inexperienced men often lack this quality; they tend to be impetuous and rash. They may be very zealous for the truth, but offend others by their harsh manner. Or they may lack a forbearing spirit and easily get offended by what others say or do.
3. It is often in the midst of controversy that a man shows whether he has the gentleness which Scripture requires for overseers. It is a natural tendency for a man to lose his forbearing spirit and gentle manner when something is not right or when there is disagreement or criticism.
4. A man who loses his forbearing spirit and gentle manner when there is controversy ought not to be an overseer.

Not Quarrelsome

Structure

The fourth negative requirement in verse 3 follows the positive requirement that an overseer be gentle. There are three closely related requirements in this verse which all have to do with a man’s disposition. The particularity in this area shows the importance that God places on the necessity of an overseer having a right disposition.

Comment

The word translated “not quarrelsome” means “not given to disputes or quarrels or strife.” From this follow translations such as “uncontentious,” “not a brawler,” “peaceable,” and “not quarrelsome.” The adjective itself is used only one other time in the New Testament, in Titus 3:2. There Paul tells Titus to remind people “to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men.” Translated “peaceable” in Titus, the word

means that one does not have sinful hatred toward others for any reason; one does not speak evil of others or hold grudges against them; one is not lifted up in pride as though he were better than others. All these sinful things show that a man has a contentious, quarrelsome spirit.

A man who lacks this qualification will continually find fault with people, continually pick apart what they say and do, and will always have a bone of contention with someone. Consequently, he will find it hard to get along with others and will tend to have many grievances, disputes, and quarrels. He will always be finding something that is not right. Such a disposition will make a man very unhappy.

Several passages containing the related verb or noun support this interpretation. In John 6:52 the Jews quarrel about Jesus' statement that he will give people his flesh to eat. In 2 Tim. 2:23–25 Paul exhorts Timothy to "avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, ... in humility correcting those who are in opposition." In Titus 3:9–11 Paul tells Titus: "But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned." In James 4:1 the apostle asks: "Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?"

Instead of being quarrelsome, an overseer must avoid disputes, quarrels, and strife. He must correct those who stray, but without quarreling with them. He must be gentle (see the exegesis of "gentle," above), humble, peaceable, long-suffering, forbearing, and reconciliatory, rather than antagonistic and divisive. John Calvin comments that this verse requires an overseer to be a man "who knows how to bear injuries peacefully and with moderation, who excuses much, who swallows insults, who does not make himself dreaded for his harsh severity, nor rigorously exact all that is due to him. The man who is not contentious is he who avoids disputes and quarrels."

Conclusions

1. 1 Tim. 3:3 emphasizes the need for a godly disposition in an overseer.
2. One aspect of that is that an overseer must not be given to quarrels. Rather than continually being disgruntled about something, an overseer should be peaceable, reconciliatory, thinking more highly of others than of himself, long-suffering, and forbearing.
3. It is typical of sinful human nature to find something wrong, something to quarrel over, some point to dispute, just for the sake of contention. A man who is qualified for the office of overseer must have overcome this sin by the grace of God. Until he does, he should not bear office in the church.
4. This qualification does not mean that an overseer ought to ignore or

whitewash sin, claiming that he is avoiding contention. Rather, as Paul writes in 2 Tim. 2:23–24, in humility an overseer must correct those who err and oppose the truth, while at the same time not quarreling. It is sinful for an overseer to ignore or whitewash sin.

Not Loving Money

Structure

This is the fifth negative requirement in verse 3, and the last single-word characteristic in this list of qualifications.

Comment

The translation “not covetous” (NKJV) is too imprecise for this word. A literal translation of the original Greek word is “not loving silver.” Since silver was commonly used as money in Paul’s day, we should not restrict the word to its literal meaning. That is why I have followed the lexicons’ translation, “not loving money.” The broader idea of covetousness is usually conveyed by other Greek words (see, e.g., Rom. 13:9).

The same adjective is used in Heb. 13:5, where all Christians are exhorted to live without loving money, being content with what they have. This qualification is not unique to elders. Scripture gives some examples of the sin of loving money. One example is found in Luke 12:13–21, where we read that a man said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” After replying directly to the man, Jesus warned the crowd: “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.” Then Jesus told them a parable about a rich man who built bigger barns to hold his plentiful crops and goods, telling himself, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.” But God rebuked the rich man: “You fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided? So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” A second example is Luke 16:1–14, where Jesus tells the story of the unjust steward, concluding with this statement: “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (v. 13). “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him” (v. 14).

These examples show that loving money means serving it, placing one’s confidence in it, or having a deep affection for it. To think that life consists in the abundance of wealth and possessions is to love money. To live as if money were the most important thing in life is also to love money. Paul warned Timothy: “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in de-

struction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness" (1 Tim. 6:9–11). Again, in 2 Tim. 3:1–5 Paul warns: "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power." Loving money, self, pleasure, or anything else competes with loving God, which is the first and great commandment (Matt. 22:37–38).

Some people who are untaught and unstable twist the Scriptures to their own destruction when they say that it is wrong for Christians to have more than the bare necessities of life. To the contrary, the Scriptures teach that a good increase, wealth, and possessions are the blessings of the Lord to those who honor him (e.g., Deut. 8; 28:1–14; Prov. 3:9–10). The love of money cannot be equated with the amount of wealth a man has or the money he receives.

Conclusions

1. This qualification is more specific than just "not covetous." It requires that elders not be lovers of money.
2. All Christians, and especially elders, must love God above anything else. Nothing else should ever take the number one place in a man's life.
3. A poor man may be a lover of money, while a rich man may not, or a rich man may be a lover of money, while a poor man is not. Anyone who lives for his money, places his confidence in it, or has a deep affection for it, is a lover of money.
4. A man who loves money will inevitably be drawn away from serving the Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot serve God and mammon.

Ruling His Own House Well

Structure

This is the first of three lengthy requirements which conclude the list of qualifications. While most of the requirements concern a man's character or status, this is one of the few that require certain abilities.

Comment

One of the main duties of an overseer is to take care of the church of God. The Greek word translated "take care of" is used only three times in the New Testament. In addition to this verse, it is used in Luke 10:34–35,

where the good Samaritan took care of the injured man by binding up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them, taking him to an inn, and hiring the innkeeper to take care of him. Just as a shepherd cares for all his sheep, so an overseer must care for all the people of God. He must feed the people from God's Word, protect them from enemies and wolves, and lead them in doctrine and conduct that is scriptural, comforting, admonishing, and censuring as needed.

In order to be qualified to take care of the church of God, a man must first know how to rule his own household. The Greek word translated "house" has a wide range of meanings. In this verse it refers to several aspects of a man's household. First, an overseer must rule himself well. This is foundational to good government because, ultimately, good government is based on self-government. A man who does not rule himself well, but seeks to rule others or expects them to govern themselves, is a hypocrite. He will lose the respect of others and will be unable to rule over anything well. Prov. 16:32 says: "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city." Prov. 25:28 says: "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls." Second, an overseer must rule his wife and children well, having them in obedience and submission, according to the law of God. There must be reverence, respect, and good order in the home. Third, an overseer must govern his servants, employees, property, and business affairs well.

This means that an overseer must demonstrate that he has the ability to run his own affairs properly. He must show good judgment and discipline in his daily life. If this is deficient, a man will not be able to take care of the church of God properly. He will lack both the abilities and the respect and authority that are necessary. The argument is from the lesser responsibility to the greater responsibility. He who is faithful with a few things will be put in charge of greater things. Compare the parable of the talents in Matt. 25:14-30.

Conclusions

1. Part of the elders' task is to take care of the church of God, just as a shepherd takes care of his sheep.
2. Before a man can be trusted to care for the church of God, he must rule his own household well, including himself, his family, and his daily affairs.
3. If a man does not govern himself well, if his children are unfaithful or insubordinate, or lead dissolute lives, or if his wife is rebellious, he is not suited to govern in the church of God.
4. Paul does not require that an overseer be without experience in the ordinary life of men. Contrary to the Roman Catholic ideal, a man experienced in ordinary life and well practiced in the duties that human relationships impose, is far better trained and fitted to rule in the church than a man who leads a hermitic life (see Calvin, Commentary on 1 Tim. 3:4).

Not Newly Converted

Structure

This is the second of three lengthy requirements which conclude the list of qualifications. This one is worded negatively, while the other two are worded positively.

Comment

Paul uses a Greek adjective (*neophyton*) that is not used anywhere else in the New Testament. Literally, it means “newly planted.” In Christian literature, this adjective is used of those who have been newly planted in the Christian church. I have translated it as “newly converted,” since that clearly conveys its meaning. There are several other passages of Scripture which use the metaphor of a plant for believers (e.g., Matt. 13:1–23; John 15:1–8; Rom. 6:5; 1 Cor. 3:5–9).

Paul adds a reason for this qualification. If a new convert were an overseer, he would too easily become puffed up or conceited. In the perfect tense, the Greek word can also mean “beclouded,” “deluded,” and “becoming blinded or foolish.” This verb is used in two other places in the New Testament, both in Paul’s letters. In 1 Tim. 6:4, the word is translated “he is proud,” which fits well with the context. One could translate “blind” or “foolish,” but the context suggests that the man is puffed up: he refuses to teach and consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness (6:3). You could say that his pride blinds him to the truth and gives him poor judgment. The other text where Paul uses this word is 2 Tim. 3:4, where it is translated “haughty.” This fits the context in 1 Tim 3 also, for arrogance and pride are mentioned in several ways in verses 1–5. Although not used in the New Testament, the noun related to this verb means “delusion, conceit, or arrogance.” A further indication of the meaning of this verb is given in the consequence: one may fall into the condemnation of the devil (v. 6, see below). Taken together, the evidence is fairly convincing that by this verb Paul means “be puffed up or conceited.”

If a new Christian suddenly received the responsibility of watching over the congregation, teaching and ruling in the church, he could easily become puffed up with pride and foolish self-confidence. It takes the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit with the word of God to sanctify a sinner. Humility, knowledge, wisdom, self-control, and all the other things an overseer needs do not come overnight. It takes time for a man to learn and practice these things, to put off the deeds of the flesh and put on the fruit of the Spirit. Scripture also teaches that God sends trials and chastening to work these things in his people (cf. Heb. 12:10–11; James 1:2–8). A new convert must go on from the milk to the solid food of the mature Christian before he is ready to be an overseer. He must by reason of use have his

senses exercised to discern both good and evil (Heb. 5:12–14).

The consequence of being puffed up with pride is that a man might fall into the condemnation of the devil. Since the Lord Jesus Christ is the Judge, we must understand Paul to be speaking of God’s condemnation of the devil for lifting himself up in pride against God. According to 2 Peter 2:4, God cast the angels who sinned down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment (cf. Jude 6). God condemned the devil to everlasting punishment in hell. Paul is saying that pride leads to destruction (cf. Prov. 16:18–19).

Hendriksen suggests that the apostle Paul did not appoint elders in new churches until he revisited them (*New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*, p. 128). However, it does not appear that Paul waited very long before appointing elders on his first missionary journey (see Acts 14:23). The reason for this is that not all the members of these new churches were newly converted. Many Jews who had learned the Scriptures as a child and had served the Lord all their life also believed in Christ and became part of the Christian church. Since these Jews were not new converts, there were many men in these new congregations who were qualified from the start to bear office in the church.

Conclusions

1. Whether young or old, one who is a new Christian should not be an elder. A man’s maturity as a Christian is more important for the office of elder than his age in years.
2. Even outstanding human abilities and learning are not sufficient to qualify a newly converted man for the office of overseer.
3. Making a new believer an overseer in the church may lead to pride, which may lead to his fall and even to his eternal destruction.
4. It takes time before a congregation of new believers has men who are qualified to be elders in the congregation.
5. New Christians should show maturity in the faith before they are called to be ministers of the Word of God.

A Good Testimony from Those Outside

Structure

This is the last of three lengthy requirements which conclude the list of qualifications for the office of overseer. This last requirement has to do with a man’s reputation outside the church (i.e., among unbelievers). Verses 2–6 form one long sentence in which Paul lays out all the qualifications, except the last one. The last one is in a sentence by itself. Part of the reason for this is that the main verb in verses 2–6 is a form of the verb “to be,” while the main verb in verse 7 is a form of the verb “to have.”

Comment

Although Paul begins a new sentence, he connects it closely to the preceding verses in order to make it clear that this is just as much a necessary qualification for the office of overseer as the things mentioned in verses 2–6.

A man who is qualified for the office of overseer must live in such a way that even unbelievers (those outside the church) give a good testimony concerning him. They should be forced to acknowledge that he is an upright and wise man because he behaves honorably and innocently among them in his daily life. An overseer must not be a hypocrite who does and says the right thing around Christians, but does not walk worthy of his calling in Christ in his daily affairs. Often a man spends many hours a day working with unbelievers. Their assessment of him is important. They may hate his Christianity, but they should not be able to prove any just charge against him. He must be a man of character and above reproach. Paul exhorts all Christians in Col. 4:5, “Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time.” In writing to the Thessalonians, Paul says: “But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing” (1 Thess. 4:10–12). Every Christian, including an overseer, must conduct himself properly among all men, including unbelievers.

Daniel is a good example of this quality which elders must have. Daniel “distinguished himself above the governors and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king gave thought to setting him over the whole realm” (Dan. 6:3). The king of the Medes and Persians, though an unbeliever, was forced to speak highly of Daniel and entrust him with great responsibilities. “So the governors and satraps sought to find some charge against Daniel concerning the kingdom; but they could find no charge or fault, because he was faithful; nor was there any error or fault found in him” (v. 4). Daniel’s unbelieving colleagues could find no fault with his daily work or life, except his devotion to the living God.

If an elder does not have a good testimony among unbelievers who know him, he is in danger of falling into reproach and the snare of the devil. This is not the reproach of Christ (cf. Heb. 11:26), but reproach for misconduct. Unbelievers will heap insults and disgrace upon a man who behaves improperly and yet is placed in the office of elder in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Not only will they revile such a man, but they will also blaspheme Christ and his church because of him. Unbelievers are always looking for an occasion to mock Christ and his church.

To fall into the snare or trap of the devil is to fall back under the power and control of the devil. Paul tells Timothy to correct in humility “those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they

may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will" (2 Tim. 2:25–26). To fall into the snare or trap of the devil means to do the devil's will instead of God's will. It could involve a serious sin or simply neglecting one's duty as an elder. Another way in which an elder may fall into the snare of the devil is to take a bad stand and set oneself against the truth, good judgment, and the good of the church.

A man without a good testimony from those outside has a divided heart. He is not serving the Lord with all his being. The church should not trust him to lead and shepherd the sheep in the paths of righteousness. To make such a man an elder only increases the division of his life. It tends to increase his hypocrisy and the tension in him between obeying the Lord and doing his own will. This only sets him up for a great fall. An elder who does not have a good testimony from those outside is in danger of being taken captive by the devil so that instead of standing for and defending the truth (as a faithful elder should), he opposes the truth and needs to repent.

Conclusions

1. Even unbelievers should be forced to testify that an elder lives honorably in his daily life.
2. This qualification excludes hypocrites whose daily life contradicts their confession of Christ.
3. This qualification excludes any who do not conduct themselves properly among unbelievers. How a man acts at work and in his business dealings is an important indication of his qualification for the office of elder.
4. It is important that an elder conduct all his daily affairs well so that unbelievers have no occasion to reproach him or the church of Christ.
5. An elder who gives unbelievers occasion to be justly displeased with him is in danger of being trapped in error by the devil.

Part II: Deacons

1 Timothy 3:8–13

(author's translation):

⁸Deacons likewise must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not fond of shameful gain, ⁹holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. ¹⁰But let these also first be tested, then let them serve, being blameless. ¹¹Wives likewise must be reverent, not slanderers, vigilant, faithful in all things. ¹²Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. ¹³For those who serve well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great confidence in faith in Christ Jesus.

Reverent

Structure

The qualifications for the office of deacon follow immediately after the qualifications for the office of overseer. Grammatically, verses 8–9 of 1 Tim. 3 depend upon verse 2. “Reverent” is the first of five qualifications in the first sentence, which covers verses 8–9.

Comment

Several considerations lead us to conclude that in verse 8 the apostle Paul gives the qualifications for the special office of deacon in the church. First, verse 8 follows immediately after Paul gives the qualifications for the special office of overseer in the church. Second, Paul connects verse 8 with verse 2 by using the word “likewise,” which means “in the same way” or “similarly.” Third, there is no main verb in the Greek text of verse 8. A reader of the Greek text understands verses 8–9 to share the main verb written in verse 2 (“must be”).

The word “likewise” indicates that verses 8–13 are similar in some way to verses 2–7. In Phil. 1:1 Paul addresses the saints in the church at Philippi with the overseers and deacons. The office of overseer and the office of deacon are two special offices in the church. Verses 2–7 are similar to verses 8–13 in that both passages give the qualifications for a special office in the church. Further, the qualifications for these offices are similar, though not identical.

Early in the history of the church, the apostles found it necessary to choose men to help them with their work (see Acts 6). The apostles ordained these men to special office in the church by laying their hands on them. In 1 Tim. 3:8–13, the Lord gives us the qualifications for those who serve the church in this office of deacon.

The implied main verb in verse 8, “must be,” means that these qualifications for the office of deacon are essential. They are not merely helpful guidelines. All of these qualifications are mandatory. They are requirements which God has laid down for the office of deacon. No man may be a deacon in the church of God unless he meets all of these qualifications. We confess that Christ is King of the church. That means that we must follow the rules for the church which he sets down in his Word. God has laid upon his church the duty to keep all unworthy men out of the office of deacon.

Should a man already in office show himself unqualified for the office he holds, the church must remove him from that office. By removing unqualified men from office, the church maintains discipline, upholds the honor of Christ, and insures that the church is edified for greater peace, purity, and unity.

The first qualification is that a deacon must be “reverent,” which means that he must be worthy of respect or honor. He must be noble or dignified. He must not turn everything into a joke. He must be serious about things that are important. A deacon must be a respectable person. In order to be worthy of respect and honor, he must be above reproach. If a deacon can be justly accused and convicted of sin, he is not worthy of respect and honor, and the people in the congregation will not hold him in high esteem. Such a person does not meet this first qualification.

The people of God should respect and esteem those who serve in the office of deacon. They should have love and affection for him. To be reverent is to be worthy of this esteem and honor.

Conclusions

1. Every deacon must be a man of upright character and integrity before God and men so that he is worthy of the respect, honor, admiration, love, and affection of God’s people. This was one of the qualifications for the seven “men of good reputation” chosen to help the apostles in Acts 6:3.

2. Any man whose manner, conduct, thoughts, or attitude is not honorable, worthy of respect and admiration, and dignified does not meet this qualification and should not be a deacon.

3. A man in the office of deacon whose character and reputation are marred by sinful or improper behavior ought to be removed from office.

4. The congregation should revere and honor the deacons who serve in their midst.

Not Double-Tongued

Structure

This is the second of five qualifications for the office of deacon in the first sentence, which covers verses 8–9. This is the first of three negative requirements in verse 8.

Comment

The Greek word translated “double-tongued” occurs only once in the New Testament. Its literal meaning is “two-worded.” It is essentially the Greek equivalent to the English expression “talking out of both sides of the mouth.” A deacon must not talk out of both sides of his mouth. He must not say one thing, but mean something else. He must not say one thing to one

person, but the opposite to another person. He must not just say what different people want to hear. He must not be a liar. The deacon must not deceive with his speech. He must speak the truth clearly, faithfully, and consistently. He must be a man of his word. His speech must be sincere.

Jesus commands all Christians not to be double-tongued when he says in Matthew 5:37, "But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one." Paul, led by the Holy Spirit, singles this out as a necessary quality in a deacon.

John Calvin writes in his commentary on this verse "that by deacons we are to understand those mentioned in Acts 6:3, officers, that is, who are entrusted with the care of the poor." Calvin continues: "The four chief qualities Paul requires them to possess are well enough known, but it should be carefully noted that he admonishes them not to be double-tongued, for this is a fault that is hard to avoid in that kind of work, and yet which more than any other should be completely absent from it."

Conclusions

1. Every deacon must consistently speak the truth and be a man who keeps his word. This is no different than God's command that all Christians speak the truth and mean what they say.
2. Duplicity, double-dealing, or deliberate deceptiveness in speech disqualifies a man from the office of deacon.
3. It is especially important that a deacon's speech be trustworthy, true, and free from deception, since he handles the church's money and property. A deacon who does not meet this qualification can easily end up stealing from the church.
4. A deacon should not speak kindly to the poor and needy and then turn and speak ill of them to others.

Not Given to Much Wine

Structure

This is the third of five qualifications for the office of deacon in the sentence that covers verses 8–9. This is the second of three negative requirements in verse 8.

Comment

A deacon must not be given to much wine. The Greek verb means "to occupy oneself with" something or "to devote oneself to" something. Paul uses this same verb in 1 Tim. 4:13, where he tells Timothy: "Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." Paul wants Timothy to occupy himself with, or devote himself to, reading, exhortation, and teaching.

In 1 Tim. 3:8 Paul tells Timothy that a deacon must not occupy himself with, or devote himself to, drinking a great amount of wine. A man who is given to much wine drinks too much wine; in the words of Prov. 23:30, he tarries long at the wine. That includes a man who has only occasional bouts of excessive drinking, as well as the man who regularly drinks too much. Wine takes an inordinate place in his life, becoming more important to him than it ought to be. In that sense, he is enslaved to drinking. It occupies too much of his time, his thinking, his desires, and his life.

Such a person is not qualified to be a deacon in the church. The Scripture says that a man who tarries long at the wine, who goes in search of mixed wine, has woe, sorrow, contentions, complaints, wounds without cause, and redness of eyes. He who longs for wine and is captivated by it will see strange things and will utter perverse things. He will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea or at the top of a ship's mast, having lost his senses and resting only to awake for another drink (Prov. 23: 29–35).

Paul does not say in 1 Tim. 3:8 that a deacon must not drink wine. Those who require deacons to abstain from drinking any wine on the basis of this verse have twisted this qualification to say something that it does not say. We know from the rest of Scripture that just as God causes the grass to grow for the cattle and vegetation for man to eat, so God gives us “wine that makes glad the heart of man” (Ps. 104:14–15). Jesus used wine as one of the elements of the Lord's Supper, and we are to continue using wine in the Lord's Supper until Jesus returns.

A little later in 1 Timothy, Paul tells Timothy: “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities” (5:23). The Scripture expresses the covenant blessing of God in this way: “Honor the LORD with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine” (Prov. 3:9–10). Wine is one of God's good gifts and is to be used to the glory of God.

In this verse the Lord of the church disqualifies from the office of deacon anyone who is given to much wine. That includes all who drink excessively, including the drunkard. Scripture condemns drunkenness, saying that no drunkard will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9–10).

In general, a deacon must not let wine govern him, but must be able to use it wisely and in moderation for the glory of God. Although wine is specifically mentioned by the text, I think the principle here applies to any food or drink which has mastery over a man, especially those things which impair a man's judgment and his ability to control his speech and actions.

Because wine can impair a man's judgment and ability to control his speech and actions, God commanded Aaron: “Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die” (Lev. 10:8–9). The reason for this was so that they would be able to “distinguish between holy and unholy, and between

unclean and clean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by the hand of Moses" (vv. 10–11).

Similarly, civil magistrates, like elders and deacons in the church, are also not to be given to much wine: "It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, nor for princes intoxicating drink; lest they drink and forget the law, and pervert the justice of all the afflicted" (Prov. 31:4–5). Compare also Isa. 5:20–25; 28:7; Ezek. 44:21.

Conclusions

1. Wine is a good thing given by God, but must be used rightly to the glory of God.

2. A deacon must not be given to much wine. He must not use wine unwisely in any way, nor be enslaved by it or any other food or drink that impairs his judgment. Addiction to wine disqualifies a man from office. A man who becomes drunk also fails to meet this qualification for office.

3. The words of John Calvin regarding pastors apply also to deacons: "Excessive drinking is not only unseemly in a pastor, but usually results in many things still worse, such as quarrels, foolish attitudes, unchastity, and others there is no need to mention" (Commentary on 1 Tim. 3:3). Compare also Paul's exhortation to all believers in Eph. 5:18. No believer, but especially no deacon, should be drunk with wine. Rather, Christians should be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is especially true of deacons. One of the qualifications for the seven men chosen to help the apostles in Acts 6:3 was that they be "full of the Holy Spirit."

4. From this qualification we can infer that a deacon, just like civil magistrates (especially judges), should be neither "given to" nor under the control of any food or drink or drug which has the same kind of effect as wine on a man's speech, conduct, and judgment.

5. A deacon must show his ability to rule himself in the way he uses God's gift of wine. He must be able to use wine wisely and in moderation to the glory of God; he must never "give himself to much wine."

Not Fond of Shameful Gain

Structure

This is the fourth of five qualifications for the office of deacon in the sentence that covers verses 8–9. This is the last of three negative requirements in verse 8.

Comment

In Greek, Paul uses a compound adjective composed of the words for "shameful" and "gain." Its meaning is best conveyed by the translation

“fond of shameful gain.” Shameful gain is anything that a man gets by dishonest means, or which is itself shameful or wicked.

Peter speaks of the same thing in 1 Peter 5:2, where he exhorts the elders to “shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly.” Peter is saying that a man’s motivation to serve as an overseer should not be to achieve dishonest gain. The same is true of deacons. A deacon should not be seeking dishonest gain. He should not seek to exalt himself by using his position as a deacon among the flock of God. He should not try to garner to himself power, control, or authority over others.

His desire should not be to puff himself up with pride because of the honor, respect, prestige, or flattery that may come to him. His motivation to be a deacon should not be some advantage that he can get by this office. Rather, a man’s motivation should be an eager desire to serve Jesus Christ and serve the people of God. A deacon should desire to use the gifts and abilities God gives him to advance the kingdom of God.

The task of a deacon is to serve God by helping the pastor and elders in their work and by helping the people in the congregation with their needs. The task of a deacon is to give, not to take. His task is to serve, not seek dishonest gain. Rather than seeking shameful gain, a deacon should have the mind of Christ, who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). A deacon should serve in order to make others gain.

God gives us the power to accumulate wealth (Deut. 8:18). It is certainly not wrong for a deacon to be wealthy, since it is a covenant blessing from the Lord (cf. Prov. 3:9–10 and Job 42:12). This qualification, therefore, does not forbid a deacon to gain wealth. Rather, it forbids a deacon to covet his neighbor’s wealth, or desire to gain wealth in a wrong way. Instead of seeking shameful gain, a deacon should remember the words of the apostle Paul to the Ephesian elders: “I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ ” (Acts 20:35).

This qualification should be applied broadly to money and material goods. A man who just wants riches should not be a deacon. Paul writes in 1 Tim. 6:9–10: “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

This qualification also applies to the shameful gaining of nonmaterial things, such as power, honor, and praise. One’s goals in defending oneself or others from criticism or accusations should not be self-serving. A deacon should not use his special office in the church to serve himself, but rather to

serve God's people.

Conclusions

1. To have or gain money and wealth is a covenant blessing from the Lord. It is not evil. It is not something that the godly man must avoid, as asceticism falsely maintains.

2. This qualification forbids a deacon to acquire money or material possessions with sinful motives or in any dishonest way. A man should not become a deacon in order to get money or any other material advantage.

3. It also disqualifies from office a man whose goal is to get power, control, authority, honor, prestige, respect, or flattery, rather than to glorify God and serve the church.

4. A man who is unscrupulous in getting his way is also fond of shameful gain, and therefore is not qualified to be a deacon.

Holding the Mystery of the Faith with a Pure Conscience

Structure

This is the last of the five qualifications for the office of deacon in the sentence that covers verses 8-9. The middle three requirements are stated in the negative, but the first and the last are stated positively.

Comment

The apostle Paul uses the word "mystery" several times in his letters to refer to a truth that was previously obscure and relatively unknown, but which God has now made plain to his people through special revelation. For example, in Eph. 3:3-6 Paul writes: "By revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I wrote before in a few words, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel."

1 Cor. 2:7-8, 10 is another good example: "But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.... But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God."

At the end of 1 Tim. 3, Paul refers to the mystery of godliness when he writes, "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory" (v. 16).

In this verse Paul uses the term “mystery of godliness” to refer to the Christian faith.

The “mystery of the faith” in verse 9 refers to the same thing. John Calvin comments that in this verse Paul “gives to the sum of Christian teaching the dignified title of ‘the mystery of the faith,’ since through the Gospel God reveals to mortal men a wisdom that makes the angels in heaven wonder, so that it is not surprising if it is too great for human capacity.”

A deacon must believe the Reformed faith, which God has revealed to us in his Word, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. A deacon must hold without reservation to the doctrine taught in the Bible. He must have true faith in God. He must know and accept as true all that God has revealed in his Word. He must live in obedience to God’s revealed will as the only standard to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy God. He must not be a hypocrite, who says he believes, but does not bring forth the fruits of repentance and true faith in Jesus Christ.

To have a pure conscience is to be cleansed from the guilt of our sins through the blood of Jesus Christ and to be clothed in his spotless righteousness by faith. To have a pure conscience is to be a true Christian. It is to be redeemed by Christ and renewed to live in obedience to God’s holy law. Heb. 10:19–22 speaks of this: “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

A deacon must hold firmly to the truth, to the Christian faith. He must believe it and practice it because God the Holy Spirit has regenerated him, giving him a new heart and granting him repentance and faith, and the blood of Christ has cleansed his conscience from dead works to serve the living God (Heb. 9:14). A man who lives in sin or who does not obey God in some area of his life cannot have a pure conscience. A pure conscience requires a life of faith, a life of obedience, a life which submits to the Word and rule of Christ the King in all things.

In the words of John Calvin, “It is as if he had said, ‘Holding the pure doctrine of our religion from the heart with a sincere fear of God, men who are rightly instructed in the faith, ignorant of nothing that it is needful for a Christian man to know’ ” (Commentary on 1 Tim. 3:9).

Conclusions

1. Deacons, like elders, should be well instructed in Reformed doctrine and practice. Deacons should know the Scriptures well, live according to them, and be able to use them correctly in all kinds of situations that occur in daily life.

2. Deacons must be true Christians, sound in doctrine, and obedient and faithful in life. They must be committed to the Reformed faith—to all that God has revealed to us in his Word. They must hold to the faith of our fathers without reservation.

3. Even though deacons do not hold a teaching office in the church, Christ does not want anyone who is unskilled in the Christian faith to hold public office in his church.

4. It is important that a deacon be skilled in the Christian faith (see Heb. 5:12–14) because he will often have to give advice and seek to comfort other people. That is part of the work of a deacon as he ministers to God’s people. The advice and comfort he gives must be biblical. It must be doctrinally sound. It must be correct and wise in practice. That can only come from faithfully studying and using the Scriptures.

First Be Tested

Structure

Verse 10 is a new sentence which has its own main verb. There are two qualifications in this sentence. The first is that men should be tested before they serve in the special office of deacon.

Comment

In the Greek text, the first word in verse 10 is the word translated “also.” This word indicates that deacons must first be tested and proved, just like the overseers referred to in verses 1–7. Both elders and deacons must be tested before they are placed in office by the church.

The word translated “tested” means “to evaluate, to put to the test, to examine, to scrutinize.” The point is that a man must first prove to be suitable and qualified for the office of deacon before he serves God’s people in that special office. The focus in this passage is on the result of the examination. We prove that gold is genuine and pure by testing and evaluating it. Similarly, Paul is saying that the church should prove that a man is qualified for the office of deacon by putting him to the test and evaluating him.

Paul does not say how a man is to be tested before he holds the office of deacon or overseer. If the man has been a member of the congregation for a long time, his character and abilities may be well known. In that case, he has been tested and proved to be qualified over the many years of his life and service in the general office of believer in the congregation.

A man who has not been a member of the congregation for a long time may come with attestation from other Christians that he does have proven character and is gifted for the office of deacon or overseer. We read in the New Testament that the apostle Paul often attested to the proven character and gifts of a person who was coming to a congregation that did not know

him. Col. 4:7–9 is an example: “Tychicus, who is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will make known to you all things which are happening here.” In Acts 9:20–30 we read that Barnabas attested to Saul’s (the apostle Paul’s) genuine faith and exemplary service before the apostles in Jerusalem, so that they would receive him as a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

The process of testing men for special office in the church will vary from person to person and from place to place. Testing and evaluation can be combined with a period of training spread over several months or even a year. Training can include not only studying, but also helping the deacons with some of their work in the church, such as visiting the widows, helping those with special needs, or planning activities for people in the church. The elders and deacons, as well as the congregation, can evaluate those being trained as they do various tasks in the church. If they show themselves to be qualified, if they pass the test, if they prove themselves to be gifted for special office, then the church should gladly let them serve in the congregation in the office of deacon. The same applies to prospective elders and ministers.

John Calvin writes in his commentary on this verse: “And this proving process is not for a single hour but consists of a long period of trial. In a word, the appointment of deacons should not be a rash and random choice of any who come to hand, but men who have commended themselves by their past manner of life should be selected, so that as a result of full inquiry they are found to be suitable.”

Conclusions

1. Both deacons and elders should be tested or evaluated prior to taking office in the church.

2. This evaluation or testing may be done in a variety of ways, but it should be more than just a hasty examination. A man should prove over a period of time that his character is above reproach and that he has the gifts and abilities to serve in a special office in the church.

3. We should not look upon the office of deacon as the bottom rung of the church’s leadership ladder, as it were. A deacon is not a “junior elder.” It is wrong to put a man in the office of deacon in order to try him out or test him, so that, if he does well, he can continue in that office or move up the ladder to the office of elder. The office of deacon is not a testing ground. This qualification requires that a man be tested before he becomes a deacon.

4. Only men of godly character and good reputation, who are governed by the Word and Spirit of Christ and who are gifted by Christ for special office in the church, should be chosen as deacons and elders. Before a man is put in office, the church must test his character and gifts and prove that he is

qualified and worthy to hold special office.

5. New or immature Christians should not be put in the office of deacon.

Blameless

Structure

Verse 10 is a complete sentence with two qualifications. The first is that men should be tested before they serve in the special office of deacon. The second specifies what the result of that testing must be in order for a man to be qualified to serve in that office.

Comment

The Greek word means “blameless” or “above reproach.” It is a different word from the one translated “blameless” in verse 2, but the meaning is identical. This is confirmed by the list of qualifications for elders in Titus 1:6–7, where Paul uses the same word as a qualification for elders as he uses for deacons in 1 Tim. 3:10.

Paul says that a deacon must first be tested. The result of that testing must be that the man is blameless or above reproach. If he is not above reproach, then he has failed the test and is not qualified to serve as a deacon. A man may only serve in the office of deacon if he is first tested and he proves himself to be above reproach.

By “blameless” the Scripture does not mean that a man must be sinless in order to be a deacon. To be blameless is to be irreproachable. No one should be able to lay a charge against a deacon and make it stick. A man is blameless or above reproach when his words and conduct conform to the holy commandments of God in Scripture, so that he cannot justly be accused or convicted of any chargeable offense. In the words of John Calvin, “To be blameless means to be free from any notorious fault” (Commentary on 1 Tim. 3:10).

The Scripture says that Job was “blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). The people of God should be able to say that about every deacon in the church. The deacon’s reputation should be above reproach. No one should be able to assail or reproach him because of his sins, whether in speech, conduct, or doctrine. Every Christian sins until the day he lays down this body of sin at death. Daily sins that are common to all men do not bring reproach and blame upon a person from others, because they too are guilty of the same sins. A deacon, like an overseer, must have and maintain a good name. There should be no question as to his integrity or upright character.

Calvin explains that a deacon, like an elder, “ought not to be marked by any disgrace that would detract from his authority. There will certainly not be found a man who is free from every fault, but it is one thing to be bur-

dened with ordinary faults that do not hurt a man's reputation, because the most excellent men share them, but quite another to have a name that is held in infamy and besmirched by some scandalous disgrace. Thus, in order that the bishops [or deacons] may not lack authority, he gives charge that those who are chosen should be of good and honorable reputation, and free of any extraordinary fault. Also, he is not merely directing Timothy as to the sort of men he should choose but he is reminding all who aspire to the office that they should carefully examine their own life" (Commentary on 1 Tim. 3:2).

Conclusions

1. When the church tests and evaluates a man for the office of deacon, the man must prove over a period of time that he is blameless in order to be qualified for the office of deacon. He must show that he is a man of mature character and integrity before God and men. He must show that he is above reproach.

2. If a man is above reproach, he may then become a deacon. Otherwise, he fails the test.

3. Only a man of such maturity, character, and integrity is trustworthy and will serve God's people faithfully in the office of deacon and glorify God in his work (see Acts 6:3–5).

4. Any man who has a stain upon his character or does not live a consistent, godly life does not meet this qualification and should not be a deacon.

5. A man in the office of deacon whose character and reputation are not above reproach, or whose authority is undermined by a recurring pattern of sinful behavior, ought to be removed from office.

Wives

Verse 11 lists four qualifications for women. The structure of this sentence is similar to the structure of verse 8. Neither sentence has a main verb. Both verse 8 and verse 11 depend grammatically on verse 2.

Comment

This verse raises many questions. What is Paul talking about in verse 11? Are these qualifications for women deacons, as some commentators argue? Should the first word of the verse be translated "women" or "wives"? Why does Paul use the word "likewise," the same word he used in verse 8 when he began a new set of qualifications?

In classical and Hellenistic Greek, the word translated "wives" can mean either "women" (females in the generic sense) or "wives." This may seem strange to people who speak English, but other languages have the same ambiguity. For example, the German word *Frau* can mean either "woman" or "wife." We have to figure out from the context which meaning is intended.

The question in verse 11 is this: does Paul give four qualifications for the wives of deacons or four qualifications for female deacons? There are several good reasons that compel us to conclude that Paul is talking about wives, not female deacons.

First, if both men and women were permitted to be deacons, there would be only one list of qualifications. No special qualifications for women deacons would be necessary. For example, in the United States Congress we have both male senators and female senators, but there is only one list of qualifications for senators of both genders. There are no separate qualifications for any category of senator, according to gender, race, or whatever. All senators must meet the same qualifications.

Second, the word “likewise” does not imply a separate class of office-bearers, as some commentators argue. The word simply indicates that these qualities required of wives are similar to the qualities required for deacons. The qualifications in verse 11 are similar to the qualifications for deacons in verses 8–9. In fact, some are identical. Furthermore, the qualifications for both deacons (verses 8–9) and their wives (verse 11) are similar to the qualifications for overseers in verses 2–7. Again, some are identical.

This brings us to a third point. The word “their” is not in the Greek text. It is not unusual in the Greek language to omit an article or possessive pronoun. However, in verse 11 Paul may have had a good reason to leave out the word “their.” If Paul had used the word “their,” most readers would refer the qualifications in verse 11 to the wives of the deacons only, because Paul is talking about deacons in the immediate context. By leaving out the word “their,” Paul refers not only to the wives of deacons, but also to the wives of overseers (ministers and elders). In other words, in 1 Tim. 3:1–13 Paul gives the qualifications for both overseers and deacons. In the midst of that—specifically, in the midst of the qualifications for deacons—the apostle says that the wives of both overseers and deacons must have certain qualities which he lists in verse 11. This interpretation also fits with the fact that both verses 8–9 and verse 11 share the main verb in verse 2, and thus are grammatically dependent upon verse 2.

Fourth, 1 Tim. 2:12 forbids women to teach or exercise authority over a man. This means that women may not hold special office in the church, because ministers, elders, and deacons all exercise authority over men. None of the apostles were women. None of the original deacons chosen in Acts 6 were women. Acts 6:3 specifically states that the deacons were to be men. There is no record in the New Testament of a woman being an elder or a minister. In fact, 1 Tim. 3:2 requires an overseer (whether a minister or an elder) to be “the husband of one wife.” This disqualifies all women from the office of overseer. Similarly, 1 Tim. 3:12 requires a deacon to be the husband of one wife. No woman can meet that requirement.

For Paul to speak about female deacons in verse 11 would contradict many other passages of Scripture. Female deacons also do not fit with the

four points mentioned above. Some argue that in Rom. 16:1 Paul calls Phoebe a deacon. It is true that the Greek word in that passage is the same one used in the New Testament for the office of deacon in the church. However, in the New Testament that word (*diakonos*) does not usually refer to the office of deacon. It is just the ordinary Greek word for “servant.” That is what it usually means in the New Testament. Phoebe was a servant, just as every member of the church should be.

John Calvin comments on verse 11 that Paul “refers here to the wives of both bishops and deacons, for they must help their husbands in their office and they can do that only if their behaviour is better than other people’s.”

Conclusions

1. Verse 11 gives qualifications for the wives of both overseers and deacons. If a man’s wife does not have the four qualities stated in verse 11, he may not become a minister, elder, or deacon in the church.

2. In verse 11 Paul does not give special qualifications for a female deacon, a deaconess, or some other special class of women or special office for women in the church.

The Wives of Elders and Deacons

We now consider each of the four qualities that wives of both overseers and deacons must have.

1. “Reverent”

This first quality is the same one as the first qualification for deacons in verse 8. The wives of both overseers and deacons must be “reverent,” which means that they must be worthy of respect or honor. The wives must be noble or dignified. They must not turn everything into a joke. They must be serious about things that are important. The wife of an overseer or a deacon must be a respectable person. In order to be worthy of respect and honor, she must be above reproach. If the wife of a deacon or overseer can be justly accused and convicted of sin, she is not worthy of respect and honor, and the people in the congregation will not hold her in high esteem. Such a person does not meet this first qualification. Therefore, her husband may not hold a special office in the church.

The people of God should respect the wives of overseers and deacons because they are admirable women. The congregation should have love and affection for them. To be reverent is to be worthy of this esteem and honor.

Conclusions on “Reverent”

1. The wives of overseers and deacons must have upright character and integrity before God and men so that they are worthy of the respect, honor,

admiration, love, and affection of God's people. Like deacons, these wives must have a good reputation.

2. Any wife whose manner, conduct, thoughts, or attitude is not honorable, worthy of respect and admiration, and dignified does not meet this qualification. Her husband should not be an overseer or deacon.

3. The congregation should revere and honor the wives of overseers and deacons who serve in their midst.

2. "Not Slanderers"

The Greek word translated "slanderer" is *diabolos*, which is one of the names that the Bible uses for Satan. The English word "diabolical" comes from this same Greek word. This word is translated "devil" thirty-five times in the New Testament. It is translated "slanderer" three times when it refers to people (1 Tim. 3:11; 2 Tim. 3:3; Titus 2:3).

Satan is called the devil because he slanders God's people. He falsely accuses them of sin in the vain hope that God will condemn them and they will suffer eternal punishment with him and his angels. See Matt. 4:1, 8, 11; 1 Tim. 3:6-7; 2 Tim. 2:26; 1 Peter 5:8; Rev. 12:9-10.

Paul says that the wife of an overseer or a deacon must not be a slanderer like the devil, who tries to get as many people as he can to fall into his trap of reproach and condemnation. Slander is a false tale or report that one maliciously utters in order to injure the reputation of another person by causing others to esteem him less, by exposing him to impeachment or punishment, or by impairing his means of living. The wife of an overseer or a deacon must not spread false reports which defame or injure a person's good name. She must not falsely accuse people. She must not say things about people in order to damage their reputation. She should not make up stories about people that tend to impair their good name or make others esteem them less.

Two striking examples in the Bible of women who slandered other people are Potiphar's wife, who slandered Joseph (Gen. 39:7-20), and King Ahab's wife, Jezebel, who slandered Naboth (1 Kings 21).

God forbids slander in the ninth commandment (see Ex. 20:16 and what the catechisms teach about the ninth commandment). In Titus 2:3, Paul says that especially all older women should not be slanderers. John Calvin comments: "Talkativeness is a disease among women and old age usually makes it worse. In addition to this, women are never satisfied with their talking till they have become prattlers and scandal-mongers attacking everybody's reputation. The result is that old women by their slanderous garrulity, as by a lighted torch, often set many homes on fire" (Commentary on Titus 2:3). The wives of those who bear special office in the church should not imitate the devil and set homes on fire. They should help their husbands preserve, encourage, and build up God's people, not devour them by slandering them.

Conclusions on “Not Slanderers”

1. The wives of office-bearers in the church must not slander other people, that is, say false things which damage other people’s good name. Rather, wives should assist their husbands in building up others and equipping them for every good work.

2. Every person, including every woman, should cultivate this quality, but especially the wives of ministers, elders, and deacons.

3. A man whose wife does slander other people is not qualified for the office of overseer or deacon in the church.

3. “Vigilant”

This Greek word can mean “temperate, sober, not intoxicated, clear-headed, self-controlled, moderate, frugal, continent, sober-minded, prudent, reasonable.” The King James Version translates it as “sober” in 1 Tim. 3:11 and “vigilant” in verse 2. The New King James Version uses the translation “temperate” in both places. We usually use the English word *temperate* to mean “moderate,” as when we speak of a temperate climate. In 1 Tim. 3 Paul does not use this Greek word to refer to restraint or moderation in using intoxicating drink, but rather to refer to vigilance in thinking and acting in general. The reasons for this conclusion are set forth in the discussion of verse 2 on pages 7–9 above. Since the context of the word is so similar in verses 2 and 11, one would expect it to have the same meaning in both passages.

Conclusions on “Vigilant”

1. The sense of the original word is better conveyed by the translations “vigilant” and “sober,” which the King James Version uses in 1 Tim. 3:2, 11.

2. The wife of an overseer or deacon must be on guard and alert. Her senses must be sharp. She must watch out for wolves and anything else that would devour her or any of God’s people. She should not be an immature Christian who drinks only milk and is unskilled in the word of righteousness. Rather, she should be mature and able to eat the solid food of Scripture. Her senses should be exercised by use, so that she is able to discern truth from error (Heb. 5:12–14). She must watch carefully over her own life and heart, lest there arise any root of bitterness, unbelief, sinful patterns of living, neglect of the things of God, or disobedience to the commands of Scripture. She should be able to help her husband, her family, and others guard against sin and error. This is required of overseers (1 Tim. 3:2), older men (Titus 2:2), and all God’s people (1 Peter 5:8).

3. The wife of an overseer or deacon should be wise, stable, and discerning. She should have a clear mind and sound judgment. A man whose wife does not have this quality, but is gullible, immature, and always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 3:6–7) is not qualified for the office of overseer or deacon.

4. “Faithful in All Things”

This Greek adjective means “trustworthy, faithful, dependable, reliable.” The wife of an overseer or deacon must be faithful in every respect. Her husband should be able to trust her completely in everything. He should have no doubt that she will be faithful to him in marriage. He should have no doubt that he can trust her not to tell others about confidential information that he tells her. He should trust her to teach and train his children. He should trust her to manage the household. He should trust her to be prudent and gracious to others. She should be a trustworthy advisor and helper to her husband. Her word should be reliable. Her husband should be able to depend upon her no matter what the situation.

The Bible says that every wife should be faithful in all things. Prov. 31:10–12 provides a model which every wife should follow: “Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts in her; so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life.” Verses 13–25 provide examples of her faithfulness in every aspect of daily life as she manages the household and helps her husband. She is a faithful steward in all things. Verses 26–31 conclude: “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: ‘Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all.’ Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates.”

These verses from Prov. 31 describe a wife who is faithful in all things. A man who cannot trust his wife to be faithful in all things is not qualified to be an overseer or a deacon in the church.

Conclusions on “Faithful in All Things”

1. Every wife should be trustworthy and faithful in every area of life. Her husband should be able to trust her completely. Prov. 31 illustrates a godly wife who is faithful in all things.
2. If a man’s wife is not faithful in all things, that man is not qualified to be an overseer or a deacon in the church.

The Husbands of One Wife

Structure

Verse 12 is a complete sentence with two qualifications. The first has to do with a deacon’s wife; the second has to do with his family and household.

Comment

This qualification does not mean that a man must be married in order to be a deacon. The apostle Peter calls himself a fellow elder in 1 Peter 5:1–2: “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers.” We know from 1 Cor. 7:8–9 that the apostle Paul, who wrote both 1 Timothy and Titus, was unmarried. Yet he was “an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the commandment of God our Savior and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim. 1:1). As an apostle, Paul was also an elder, an overseer among the flock of God.

Paul says in 1 Tim. 3:15 that he is writing this letter in order that Timothy may know how he ought to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. Paul would disqualify himself from being an elder if he meant by “husband of one wife” in verse 2 that an elder must be married. If an overseer such as Paul can be unmarried, then a deacon may also be unmarried.

This requirement means that if a man is married or has been married, he must not have two wives in God’s sight. This is an express prohibition of polygamy for a deacon. This same requirement is given in verse 2 for the office of overseer. In the first century, many men had more than one wife (see Chrysostom and Calvin on this). The New Testament confirms God’s command from the time of creation that a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife and the two shall become one flesh (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; Eph. 5:31). Those who unlawfully (according to God’s law) divorce their wives and/or marry another wife, so that in God’s eyes they have more than one wife at the same time, may not be deacons in the church, which is the bride of the Lord Jesus Christ. Deacons must be blameless before God with regard to marriage (and divorce). If a man can justly (keeping the precepts of Scripture) put away his wife with the approval of God and/or remarry, then he is still qualified to bear the office of deacon.

Paul is not barring from office *ipso facto* anyone who is remarried (cf. 1 Tim. 5:14; 4:3; Rom. 7:2–3; 1 Cor. 7:8–9). If a man’s wife dies and he marries another, he is still qualified to be a deacon. Whether married or unmarried, the deacon must be an example to others of faithfulness and chastity in obedience to the seventh commandment. A married deacon must be faithful to his one wife as long as they both live. Sexual immorality and marital infidelity cannot be tolerated among office-bearers in the church. If there are two or three witnesses that a man has committed such sins, he may hold neither the office of deacon nor the office of overseer.

Paul assumes that the deacon, like the overseer, will normally be married. That is generally the case, both with office-bearers and with men in general, although to some it is given to be eunuchs, whether voluntarily for the sake of the kingdom of God, or by birth, or by the act of men (Matt. 19:12).

This qualification confirms our interpretation of 1 Tim. 3:11 regarding women (see below). This verse clearly requires that all deacons be men. Paul uses the Greek word that means “men” or “males.” Women may not become deacons. Paul says that if these men are married, they must have only one wife at one time, in order to be qualified for the office of deacon. If Paul allowed women deacons in verse 11, he would not insist in the next verse that all deacons must be men. That would be a complete contradiction.

Conclusions

1. It is important to know what the law of God forbids and allows concerning divorce and remarriage. In some cases that will be decisive as to whether a man has only one wife and is qualified for the office of deacon.
2. It is normal for a man to marry and gain experience serving his household so that he may know how to serve the people of God. Also, a deacon’s wife should be a great help to her husband in ministering to the needs of God’s people. Even a deacon’s children can help him greatly in this important task.
3. Men who are unchaste, who are unfaithful, who divorce unlawfully, who marry unlawfully, or who do not shepherd their wives as they ought should not become or remain deacons.
4. Women are excluded from the office of deacon.
5. It is not normal, nor is it commanded, that deacons remain unmarried. “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb. 13:4). Marriage is holy and ordained by God. The office-bearers of the church, including deacons, ought to live in the married estate in holiness and obedience to God as an example to all the flock. Their experience as the head of their homes will be useful in ministering to the needs of the congregation and in building up the families in the congregation so that they glorify God.

Ruling Their Children and Their Own Houses Well

Structure

This is the second of two qualifications in verse 12. This second one has to do with a deacon’s ruling over his children and his household in general. This is the last qualification that Paul gives for the office of deacon. Verse 13 speaks of a reward for those who serve well as a deacon.

Comment

This is similar to the requirement for overseers in 1 Tim. 3:4–5. The point made in verse 5 applies equally to deacons. Although deacons do not take care of the church of God in the same way as elders, they do care for God’s people. If a deacon does not know how to rule his own children and house-

hold well, how will he be able to care properly for the church of God? The obvious answer is that he will do a poor job caring for the church if he does a poor job ruling over and caring for his family.

Paul says that a man must rule his own children and household well and take good care of their needs before he is given the office of deacon, in which he must rule and care for the needs of God's family, the household of faith. A man must show that he has the gifts and abilities to care for his own family well before he is put in the office of deacon to rule and care for the church.

The Greek word translated "houses" has a wide range of meanings. In this verse it refers to several aspects of a man's household. First, a deacon must rule himself well. This is foundational to good government because, ultimately, good government is based on self-government. A man who does not rule himself well, and yet seeks to rule others and expects them to govern themselves, is a hypocrite. He will lose the respect of others and will be unable to rule over anything well. Prov. 16:32 says, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city." Prov. 25:28 says, "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls." Second, a deacon must rule his wife and children well. They must obey and submit to him and to God. There must be reverence, respect, and good order in the home. Third, a deacon must govern his servants, workers, property, and business affairs well.

In other words, a deacon must show that he has the ability to run his own affairs properly. He must show good judgment and discipline in his daily life. He must rule with a servant's heart. If he is deficient in these things, he will not be able to take care of the church of God. He will lack the abilities, the respect, and the authority that are necessary. The argument is from the lesser responsibility to the greater one. He who is faithful with a few things will be put in charge of greater things. Compare the parable of the talents in Matt. 25:14–30.

A deacon's wife and children should be obedient, respectful, and godly. They should not be undisciplined and rebellious. They should fervently serve the Lord. A man who rules his home well will "command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:19). A deacon's wife and children should be well taught because he knows what he believes and teaches his family a biblical, Reformed confession of faith. This fits with the qualification in verse 11 that wives be "vigilant" (or temperate).

This qualification does not require that a man's children all be believers. What it requires is that he rule well all those in his household and all the children who are under his authority. While his children are in his home, if he rules them well, he will, like Abraham, command that they keep the way of the Lord and do righteousness and justice. If he rules them well, while

they are in his home they will be obedient and respectful and will serve the Lord. When the children leave their father's home, the father no longer rules them. If a man has grown children who are unbelieving, it may indicate that he did not rule his household well when his children were at home under his authority. But that does not disqualify him from the office of deacon. What counts is how he rules his household now. If he still does not rule his household well now, then he is not qualified for the office of deacon. A man may have done a poor job ruling his children when they were at home, but now by the grace of God he may rule his household well. Such a man did not meet this qualification for the office of deacon in the past, but he does now.

A deacon's wife and children should be well kept because he cares for them well. They should be content and happy. A deacon's home should be harmonious and peaceful because he maintains good order. Paul does not say that a deacon's home should be just average. No, this qualification requires a deacon's children and home to be exemplary. A deacon should set an example of ruling his household well.

John Calvin comments that deacons "should set an example of chaste and honourable family life and should keep their children and their whole household in a holy discipline" (Commentary on 1 Tim. 3:12).

Conclusions

1. Part of a deacon's task is to take care of the church of God. Before a man can be trusted to care for the church of God, he must first rule his own household well, including himself, his family, and his daily affairs, and all that is under his authority.

2. If a man does not govern himself well, if his children while under his authority are unfaithful, insubordinate, or lead dissolute lives, if his wife is rebellious, or if his household is disorderly, he is unsuited to rule in the church of God and serve in the office of deacon. What counts is how a man rules his household now.

3. Paul does not require that a deacon be without experience in the ordinary affairs of life. Contrary to the Roman Catholic ideal, a man who is experienced in ordinary life and well practiced in the duties that human relationships impose, is far better trained and fitted to rule in the church than a man who leads a hermitic life (cf. Calvin, Commentary on 1 Tim. 3:4).

4. Women are excluded from the office of deacon because this qualification requires a deacon to rule his house well. The Bible clearly forbids a woman to rule her husband. This qualification fits perfectly with male deacons, because the Bible commands the man to be the head of his home, providing for and ruling over his household.

5. This qualification also refutes the view that 1 Tim. 3:8–13 is about household servants rather than the office of deacon in the church. Household servants do not rule over their households.

A Good Standing and Great Confidence

Structure

Paul concludes the list of qualifications for the office of deacon by stating two benefits that God gives those who serve well as deacons.

Comment

The phrase “as deacons” in verse 13 is not in the Greek text. The context, however, makes it clear that Paul is talking about serving in the office of deacon.

Verse 13 does not contain any qualifications for the office of deacon. It simply says that men who serve well in this office gain two benefits. Some deacons serve better than others. Those who serve well gain a good grade or a good standing. This is similar to 1 Tim. 5:17, where Paul says that presbyters who rule well are worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. A man who serves well in the office of deacon will gain the honor, esteem, respect, and praise of the congregation. That is what it means to gain good standing. The congregation will honor him and esteem him highly because he has done a good job as a deacon. The church will have a high regard for a good deacon. That is good. It is an honor when those you serve think well of you and trust you. It encourages you to continue your good work and excel still more in it, for the glory of God and the good of God’s people.

The second benefit Paul mentions in this verse is that a deacon who serves well gains “great confidence” or “great boldness” in faith in Christ. When a man serves well in the office of deacon and gains the respect and honor of the church, he also becomes more confident in his Christian faith. He gains assurance that what he believes and what he does in service to Christ and his church are pleasing to God and to the church. He becomes bolder and less inhibited in his work as a deacon. His trust in Christ becomes stronger, and he is able to serve Christ with greater boldness. He is more confident that he knows how to apply God’s Word to the needs of people whom he serves in the office of deacon. Those who do not serve well in the office of deacon become more and more timid.

In the first or second century after the apostles, the practice of choosing presbyters from among the deacons was introduced in the church. People cited 1 Tim. 3:13 in support of this practice, as if the apostle Paul were saying that those who have been faithful deacons should move up a step into the office of elder. The text does not support this interpretation. In the words of John Calvin, it is true “that the diaconate may sometimes be the nursery from which presbyters are chosen” (Commentary on 1 Tim. 3:13), but this verse simply says that those who serve well as deacons are worthy of great honor.

In other words, the office of deacon is not a menial task, but a highly

honorable office. We should not look down upon the office of deacon, as though it were inferior and less honorable than the office of elder. Deacons assist the elders, but that does not make one office more honorable than the other. God says that those who hold either office are worthy of great honor. Paul's point in this verse is that when the church carefully chooses qualified men to be deacons and they perform the duties of their office faithfully and well, not only does the church benefit, but the deacons gain esteem and reverence, as well as boldness in the faith.

Conclusions

1. This verse states two benefits for those who serve well as deacons. First, they gain a good standing, that is, the honor, esteem, respect, and praise of the congregation. Second, they gain confidence or boldness in their faith.

2. This verse does not support the ancient practice of choosing presbyters from among the deacons as a promotion to a higher rank. A deacon may be chosen to be an elder, but a man who is not a deacon may be more qualified to become an elder than the deacon is.

3. The office of deacon is not a menial task, but a highly honorable office. The church should be careful to choose well-qualified men to be deacons. Deacons should strive to serve well in their office. The church should highly honor and respect deacons who serve well, just as the church gives double honor to presbyters who rule well. This encourages deacons to continue their good work and excel still more in it, for the glory of God and the good of God's people.

4. The church also profits greatly from faithful deacons who serve well.