

## 1 Timothy 3: Qualifications for Elders and Deacons

### Basic Outline

- I. Qualifications for Elders (3:1-7)
- II. Qualifications for Men and Women Deacons (3:8-13)
  - A. Qualifications for Deacon Men (3:8-10)
  - B. Qualifications for Deacon Women (3:11)
  - C. More Qualifications for Deacon Men (3:12-13)
- III. Reasons for Paul's Instructions (3:14-16)
  - A. Written Instructions to Show Proper Conduct in the Church (3:14-15)
  - B. Foundational Confession about Christ (3:16)

### Issues for Discussion

1. **“Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task”(3:1)**

“Here is a trustworthy saying” – We find this expression use elsewhere in 1 Timothy 1:12-17, expressing that Christ came to save sinners, in 1 Timothy 4:8-10, expressing the great value of godliness, in 2 Timothy 2:11-13, expressing that God remains faithful, and in Titus 3:1-8, expressing salvation by grace that leads to eternal life, and here in 1 Timothy 3:1, expressing the noble task of aspiring to be an overseer. This may have been a precursor to later Creeds or Statements of Faith in the Church. These sayings were normally concise and memorable and held significant truths for the life of the church.

“Noble task” is *NIV*'s interpretation of the simple words “good work.” While all good works in the Body of Christ are important and honorable (1 Timothy 12:12-27), not all carry the same significance (1 Timothy 6:17). Those that involve doctrine (i.e. preaching and teaching) hold both greater responsibility (1 Corinthians 4:16) and judgment (James 3:1). That there is a list of qualifications for the role also suggests its greater significance in the church. While the *NIV* tries to bring out this nuance by using the word “noble,” one might also consider the word “weighty.” Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a weighty task.

Paul used two different Greek words to convey a similar idea: “aspires” (*oregomai*) and “desires” (*epithumia*). The first word is also used in 1 Timothy 6:10 of those who “want” to get rich. It is also used in Hebrews 11:16 of those OT Patriarchs who “were longing for” heaven. It carries the idea of strong inclination, a “stretching oneself out” (always of middle voice). As you can see from the various passages, it can be used of a noble pursuit or an ignoble one. For example, the aspiration to lead in the church carries a heavenly reward (“an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus” – 1 Timothy 3:13) while the aspiration for riches carries earthly trouble (“fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction” – 1 Timothy 6:9). The other word (*epithumia*), translated as “desires” in the *NIV*, is also a morally neutral term and variously translated as “lust” or “desire” depending on the context. It carries the meaning “to set the heart upon, i.e. long for (rightfully or otherwise)” (*Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*).

2. **“Now the overseer is to be...” (3:2-7)**

The word “overseer” (or “bishop” in some translations and traditions; Gk. *episkopos* – *So Episcopalians*) is used interchangeably with the word “elder” (Gk. *presbyteros* – *so Presbyterians*; Titus 1:5-7 and Acts 20:17, 28) and “pastor” or “shepherd” (Gk *pastoras*; 1 Peter 5:1-2; Acts 20:17, 28). Paul provided a list of qualifications for the overseer here and in Titus 1:5-7. That the two accounts differ may suggest that these qualifications were not designed to be exhaustive but representative of the kinds of things the church should look for in an overseer. Paul provided further instructions regarding “the elders who direct the affairs of the church” in 1 Timothy 5:17-20. Since the word for “elder” can simply mean “older man” (1 Timothy 6:1), context needs to be considered to discern who Paul is referring to.

Here is a unified list of qualifications for the overseer from 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-9 (descriptions taken in large part from Steven J. Cole - [link](#)):

1. “Above reproach” (1 Timothy 3:2; same Gk word as “blameless” in Titus 1:6,7) - Paul isn’t demanding perfection here. The Greek word has the idea of not having anything in your life that the enemy might lay hold of. In other words, an overseer must not be living a double life. In his home life, personal life, and business life, he is living in obedience to God’s Word. When he sins, he judges himself and seeks forgiveness from God and others. He is a man of integrity.
2. “Faithful to his wife” (literally “a one-woman man”; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6) – Since the other qualities deal with moral or spiritual characteristics, I think the best view is that a “one-woman-man” is a man who is intimately related only to his wife. He is a faithful husband. This does not mean single men are disqualified as Jesus, Paul and Timothy were single, and Paul commended the unfettered ministry of unmarried men (1 Corinthians 7:32-35).
3. “Temperate” (1 Timothy 3:2) - The word means to be clear-headed, mentally alert, able to make sound judgments. It originally meant “not mixed with wine,” and came to mean “sober, someone who is able to think clearly.” The verb is associated with alertness in view of the enemy (1 Pet. 5:8) and the end times (1 Thess. 5:6, 8), so it points to a man who has sound spiritual discernment in this evil world.
4. “Self-controlled” (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8) - It means “to be of sound mind,” especially in the sense of not being impulsive. He doesn’t live by his feelings, but by obedience to God’s wisdom as revealed in His Word. Plato defined it as “the mastery of pleasure and desire” (in William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*[Westminster Press, p. 80).
5. “Respectable” (1 Timothy 3:2) - The word means “orderly, decent, modest.” The NASB translates it “discreetly” with reference to a woman’s apparel (1 Tim. 2:9). It points to a person who lives in a well-ordered, decent life in every area.
6. “Hospitable” (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8) - Literally, the original means, “a lover of strangers.” He is quick to open his heart and home to others. He is not afraid to meet new people. He’s able to make them feel relaxed and welcome. All Christians are exhorted to pursue hospitality (Rom. 12:13) and to be hospitable without complaint (1 Pet. 4:9). This must especially be true of an elder.
7. “One who loves what is good” (Titus 1:8)
8. “Upright” (Titus 1:8)

9. "Holy" (Titus 1:8)
10. "Disciplined" (Titus 1:8)
11. "Able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2) - Since the other qualifications for elder can be developed, I do not take this to mean that an elder must have the spiritual gift of teaching. In 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul indicates that some elders should concentrate on preaching and teaching, while others do not. By "able to teach" Paul means that an elder must know Scripture well enough to be able to set forth sound doctrine and to refute error in a kind manner without quarreling (see 2 Tim. 2:24 where the word is also used). He must be a man of the Word who also understands people so that he can guide people into God's truth.
12. "Must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught..." (Titus 1:9)
13. "Not given to drunkenness" (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7) - The Bible does not prohibit all drinking of alcoholic wine. Every indication is that Jesus drank wine, not just grape juice, although it was diluted wine. But the Bible warns of the dangers of strong drink: "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise" (Prov. 20:1). Drunkenness is clearly a sin (Gal. 5:21). I believe that in light of the widespread problem of alcohol abuse, total abstinence is best, especially for a man in a position of leadership. If a new Christian who has had a problem with alcohol sees you as a mature Christian drinking an alcoholic beverage, and because of your influence goes back to drinking himself and falls away from the Lord, you have caused him to stumble. It is better not to drink any alcohol than to lead a weaker brother into sin (Rom. 14:21; 1 Cor. 8:11-13).
14. "Not violent but gentle" (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7) – Literally, "not a striker." An elder must control his anger so that he doesn't respond to provocation by decking the other guy. In the home, he doesn't hit his wife or beat his children. If he has to spank them, he uses control and does not abuse them. There are several Greek words translated "gentle." This word points to a man who is gracious and does not demand his rights. He is not harsh in demanding extreme penalties. An elder must be a man softened by God's grace so that he deals with people as God has dealt with him.
15. "Not quarrelsome" (1 Timothy 3:3) - The Greek word is *amacho*. Our slang term "macho," refers to a man who has to prove how tough he is. That's the opposite of amacho. An elder should not get into fruitless quarrels, whether over theology or anything else. He is not out to prove his manhood by force or authority. He's not a spiritual bully or an angry man.
16. "Not a lover of money" (1 Timothy 3:3) - The Bible has much to say about money. It definitely does *not* say that God wants every believer to prosper financially as the current heresy teaches. Riches are not wrong per se, but they are spiritually dangerous. Paul warns, "... those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction" (1 Tim. 6:9). Every Christian, but especially the men who lead the church, must be clear that you *cannot* serve God and money (Luke 16:13-15).
17. "Not pursuing dishonest gain" (Titus 1:7)
18. "Not overbearing" (Titus 1:7)
19. "Not quick-tempered" (Titus 1:7)
20. "Must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him..." (1 Timothy 3:4; "whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient" in Titus 1:6) - This includes all aspects of a man's family life--his relationship with his wife, their finances, etc. But

especially Paul singles out having his children in submission. The phrase, “with all dignity,” may refer to the man’s manner in dealing with his children or to the children’s proper (dignified) behavior toward their parents (the NIV translates it this way; both are required, of course.) This is an important qualification which has been ignored by many churches in our day. Many pastors should not be in leadership because they have grievously failed on this point. Paul does not mean that an elder’s small children should never disobey or that they must always be perfect little examples. There are no children (except Jesus) born without sin natures. Paul does mean that an elder’s family life should be exemplary. If a man’s children are rebels who reject the Lord, don’t increase his area of responsibility to the entire church. The same weaknesses that made him a poor father will make him a poor church leader. If his own children disrespect him, he will not have the respect he needs to shepherd the church. This verse demands that I and the other elders have a priority that comes before ministry to this church, namely, ministry to our families. It is a tragedy for a man to be so involved in church work that he neglects his family, with the result that his children grow up to hate the church and the Lord because of it.

21. “Must not be a recent convert...” (1 Timothy 3:6) - Obviously, a new convert could not have had the time to develop these qualities. It takes time to obtain a thorough grasp of the Scriptures. This is another common error in our day, that of pushing new converts into the limelight, especially if they were well-known as non-Christians (movie stars, musicians, athletes, etc). Or, a guy who is a successful business executive becomes a Christian and immediately is asked to become an elder in the church. Paul says, “Don’t do it!” Why not? He will become conceited (the original means, “puffed up or clouded with smoke”) and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. Spiritual pride is a subtle but serious sin. When Satan grew proud, he fell from heaven (cf. Isaiah 14:12-17; Ezekiel 28:12-15). When a man who is elevated into a position of leadership too quickly grows proud, he will fall from his position and perhaps even from the faith. Part of Christian growth involves God’s humbling us through trials. A recent convert hasn’t yet learned that lesson.
22. “Must have a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Timothy 3:7) - He should be recognized in the community as a man of moral character and proper conduct. His business dealings should be honest and right. This should be true of all Christians, but especially of leaders. Non-Christians should not be able to bring the charge of “hypocrite” against a church leader. We may be maligned by non-Christians for our godly behavior, and they often will slander us because our lives convict them of sin. But we should not give cause for reproach by our ungodly behavior (cf. Titus 2:7-8). The “snare of the devil” (v. 7) probably refers to the trap which the devil sets for church leaders by getting them to ruin their testimony.

Elders (as an office) are referred to again in 1 Timothy 5:17-21. From there we learn that not all elders have the work of “preaching and teaching,” but they all “direct the affairs of the church” (1 Peter 5:17). Paul also spoke of their pay (1 Timothy 5:18) and their discipline (1 Timothy 5:19-21). We will address these topics when we come to them.

The Overseers (Bishops, Elders, Pastors) represented the leaders of the local church: In Jerusalem (Acts. 15:22); in Ephesus (Acts 20:17); all the towns of Crete (Titus 1:6); all the churches James wrote to (James 5:14); all the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 5:1); all the churches Paul founded in his 1<sup>st</sup> Missionary Journey (Acts 14:23). They constitute the primary leadership of the Church.

As an aside, elders were all and only men. There were no women elders. Paul’s explanation of the role for women as subordinate to that of men in the church, particularly with respect to leadership and teaching, is relevant here (1 Timothy 2:12-14).

Also, there appeared to have been a plurality of elders in each church, as suggested by Acts 20:17 (church in Ephesus) and Acts 15:4 (church in Jerusalem)

Finally, elders were not “voted” into office but appointed in view of their fulfilling certain qualifications (cf. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Therefore, it ought not to be a popularity contest.

3. **“In the same way, deacons...” (3:8-10, 12-13)**

We first learn about this role (from *diakonia* meaning “service” or “ministry”) in Acts 6:1-6, when seven men were chosen to help the disciples in “the daily distribution (*diakonia*) of food” so that the disciples could focus on “prayer and the ministry of the word.” These men came alongside the disciples to help in their ministry. So also, deacons are listed with overseers in their ministry to the church (cf. Philippians 1:1). The title of “deacon” is only found in six passages, three of which are in Timothy (1 Timothy 3:1,8,10,12), once in Philippians 1:1, and probably in Romans 16:1 (Phoebe).

There are 27 references to the same Greek word (*diakonos*) in the New Testament, but most of these are to be simply understood as “servant” rather than the office of deacon. Again, like we said of “elder,” context determines usage. While there is a limited calling for the office of deacon, every Christian is called to be a servant, and this was what Jesus both exemplified and commended (cf. Mark 9:35; 10:43-45; John 12:26).

Only 1 Timothy records the qualifications for deacons. This office is noticeably absent from the letter to Titus. Only the appointment and qualifications of elders was commanded by Paul to Titus (Titus 1:5-9). It may be because while every church required an elder (or elders), not every church required deacons. Remember, the first deacons were installed as a response to the need of a growing and ethnically diverse church in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 6:1-4). Deacons were appointed as needed.

**Here are the qualifications for deacon men (taken largely from Steven J. Cole [here](#)):**

1. “Worthy of respect” (1 Timothy 3:8) – The word is the opposite of being a goof-off or clown. A deacon should have a seriousness of purpose about him, so that those he serves sense that he is concerned for them and so they trust and respect him.
2. “Sincere” (1 Timothy 3:8, literally “not double tongued) – He cannot be a man who tells one person one thing, but another person the opposite in an attempt to please everybody. Since the deacon was involved in handling church finances, he had to be a man of his word.
3. “Not indulging in much wine” (1 Timothy 3:8) – Since wine was commonly served as a gesture of hospitality, it was important for a deacon, making his rounds from house to house, to exercise control or else he could become a drunkard.
4. “Not pursuing dishonest gain” (1 Timothy 3:8) – Since a deacon’s duties often involved the distribution of money and gifts to the needy, there was always the possibility for embezzlement. A deacon could not be a man who would pursue dishonest gain.
5. “Must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Timothy 3:9) – (the NIV’s “deep truths” is misleading). The “mystery of the faith” is Paul’s term for Christian truth, especially the gospel and the Church (Jews and Gentiles united in Christ). It points to that which once was hidden, but now has been revealed in Christ. A deacon must be a man of conviction regarding the central truths of the Christian faith. In addition to sound doctrine, he must be sound in obedience (“clear conscience”).
6. “Must first be tested and then if there is *nothing against him...*” (1 Timothy 3:10) – “Nothing against him” literally means “not called to account.” This is to be determined by “testing,” which means that a man has an observed track record before he is put into office. You don’t put a man into office and then test him to

see if he's trustworthy. Test him first and then recognize him.

7. "Must be faithful to his wife" (1 Timothy 3:12, literally "one-woman man") – As we saw in the case of elders, the term refers to a man of moral purity. A deacon often ministers to widows and single women, and thus it is especially important for him to be a man who is pure in thought and deed.
8. "Must manage his children and his household well" (1 Timothy 3:12) – As in the case of the elder, the home is the proving ground for the deacon. If he fails there, don't increase his responsibility.

#### 4. "In the same way, the women... (3:11)

This is not necessarily a reference to the wives of deacons, as there is not a similar reference to the wives of elders; however, these women may have been married to men deacons or to elders or any other men, or they could have been widows or single women devoted to serving the Lord (5:3-16). They probably assisted the deacons in their duties, particularly in ministering to women in the church (Titus 2:2-5). Phoebe in Romans 16:1 may be an example of a woman deacon in the church. Thus, there were likely women deacon (or deaconesses) in the early New Testament churches.

Consequently, First Baptist Church of Dallas does not recognize or practice the ordination of women deacons. Here's the official statement: "The Southern Baptist Convention also passed a [resolution](#) in the early 1980s recognizing that offices requiring ordination are rightly addressed to men. However, the Baptist Faith and Message and resolutions are not binding upon local churches. Each church is responsible to prayerfully search the Scriptures and establish its own policy" ([source](#)).

#### Qualifications for Women Deacons (again from Steven J Cole – [link](#)):

1. "Worthy of respect" – This is the same word used for the men (3:8). They couldn't be goof-offs.
2. "Not malicious talkers" – If they went from house to house with juicy tidbits of private information, they could ruin a church very quickly. They must be able to control their tongues.
3. "Temperate" – the same quality as mentioned for elders. The word means clearheaded, able to make sound judgments. It refers to someone who does not live by emotions, but by obedience to God's Word. Note that women leaders, as well as men, are required to have this quality. If she is swayed by emotion, she will not be able to lead needy women to God's truth, which is the only source of true healing for their problems. A woman needs to be able to discern truth from error if she is to serve effectively.
4. "Trustworthy in everything" – She must follow through on assigned tasks. If an elder knows of a family that needs care of some kind, and assigns it to a deaconess, he needs to be able to trust her to follow through.
5. **"Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus"**

While the most immediate context may suggest applying these rewards to deacons only, the verse also closes the larger section of qualifications for both overseers and deacons, so that it might also be applied to overseers. These promises are echoed specifically for elders in 1 Peter 5:1-4, especially in verse 4: "And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you [elders] will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

For the meaning of "gain an excellent standing," Jamison, Fausset & Brown suggests "a well grounded hope of salvation against the day of judgment. This idea may also be seen in 1 Timothy 6:19, where Paul gives the

outcome of rich people, who put their hope in God and excel in good deeds: "In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of life that is truly life"). Again, this "excellent standing" likely refers to standing before God, as captured in 1 Corinthians 3:12-13, where Paul wrote,

If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, **their work will be shown for what it is**, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work.

For the meaning of "great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus" consider 1 John 2:28, where we read, "And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears **we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.**" Again, this kind of boldness, confidence and assurance may be seen in 2 Peter 1:10-11,

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, **make every effort to confirm your calling and election.** For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Again, we find this expression of great assurance of faith in Paul's testimony:

And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, **because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day** (2 Timothy 1:11-12; cf. Hebrews 3:6).

6. **"How people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (3:14-15).**

Paul wrote to Timothy instructions in lieu of his personal presence. He made clear hear that his instructions pertained to the conduct of believers in God's church. The expression "living God" contrasted the dead idols of Ephesus (e.g. the goddess Artemis). The church as "the pillar and foundation of the truth" suggests its importance laying out and supporting true doctrine (cf. 1 Timothy 3:9; 4:3, 6; 6:5; 2 Timothy 2:15, 18, 25; 3:7, 8; 4:4).

7. **"Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great..." \*3:16)**

It is not unlikely that some formula of **confession** or hymn existed in the Church and was generally accepted, to which Paul alludes in the words "**confessedly** great is the mystery," &c. (to wit), "He who was manifested," &c. Such hymns were then used (compare Eph 5:19 Col 3:16 ). PLINY [1.10, *Epistle*, 97], "They are wont on a fixed day before dawn to meet and sing **a hymn in alternate responses to Christ, as being God**"; and EUSEBIUS [*Ecclesiastical History*, 5.28]. The short unconnected sentences with the words similarly arranged, and the number of syllables almost equal, and the ideas antithetically related, are characteristics of a Christian hymn. The clauses stand in parallelism; each two are connected as a pair, and form an antithesis turning on the opposition of heaven to earth; the order of this antithesis is reversed in each new pair of clauses: **flesh and spirit, angels and Gentiles (or nations), world and glory**; and there is a correspondence between the first and the last clause: "**manifested in the flesh, received up into glory**" [Jamison, Faussett and Brown – [link](#)].

**"He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit"** – as the antithesis to "was manifest in the flesh" requires, He was justified in the Spirit *at the same time* that He was manifest in the flesh, that is, He was vindicated as divine "in His Spirit," that is, in *His higher nature*; in contrast to "in the flesh," *His visible human nature*. This contrasted opposition requires "in the Spirit" to be thus explained: not "by the Spirit," as ALFORD explains it. So Rom 1:3, 4, "Made of the seed of David according to the flesh, and *declared to be the Son of God*

*with power*, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead." So "justified" is used to mean *vindicated in one's true character* ( Mat 11:19 Luk 7:35 Rom 3:4 ).

**"Was seen by angels, was preached among the nations"** – What angels came to know by *seeing*, the nations learned by *preaching*. He is a new message to the one class as well as to the other; in the wondrous union in His person of things most opposite, namely, heaven and earth, lies "the mystery" [WIESINGER]. If the *English Version*, "Gentiles," be retained, the antithesis will be between the *angels* who are so *near* the Son of God, the Lord of "angels," and *the Gentiles* who were so utterly "afar off" ( [Eph 2:17](#) ).

**"Was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory"** – "Received up (*so as now to be*) in glory," that is, *into glory* ( Mar 16:19 Luk 24:51 Act 1:11 ). His reception in heaven answers to His reception on earth by being "believed on."