The Old Paths

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"Selecting Bishops"

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A local church's selection of bishops is the most important decision that it will ever make. The congregation's fate likely depends on choosing qualified men whose desire for the office is borne not of personal ambition, but spiritual service.

Evangelists Encourage Church Members To Seek Elders Among Themselves

That each church should have its own eldership is firmly established in the New Testament description of Christ's body. Following his initial conversion work in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, the apostle Paul returned to appoint elders in every church (Acts 14:23). Surely, for a brief period of time, those churches existed without appointed overseers, but that condition was to be only temporary. Today, we conduct the church's work through a business meeting of the men, a far less effective and efficient method than the eldership, but the only means we have discovered that is not in violation of the scriptures.

Later, that same apostle left his colleague, Titus, on the island of Crete for the express purpose of setting in order the things that were lacking in the church there. Primary among them was the appointment of elders in every place.

From this it is clear that an evangelist was responsible for encouraging the selection of elders, as well as deacons. It should not be, however, a unilateral decision, in which he compels certain men to serve and the church to accept his appointments without their input. This would surely make the evangelist a higher authority than the elders, a prince of the church, and nothing is more inviting to apostasy than absolute power centralized in one man.

In selecting men to wait on the widow's tables for the Jerusalem church, the apostles told the saints to *"seek out from among you"* men worthy and willing to serve (Acts 6:4). If the apostles thought it necessary to consult the membership and give them a responsibility for selecting candidates, it seems scripturally logical that a mere evangelist would deem it wise to follow a similar course today.

Qualifications and Considerations

If you were told to look among the membership of this church for men willing and worthy to serve, there would be certain things to consider and certain things to ignore. First, a man's prosperity or success in business is nowhere mentioned in the Bible as an indicator of what kind of elder he would be. The church is not a business and often operates in exactly the opposite way a business would. For a business, financial profit is the bottom line and the product is altered to suit the consumer. In the church, pleasing God is the bottom line and the product, the gospel, cannot be reconfigured to draw more consumers, or members.

Five English words translate three Greek words in the Bible, describing the single office we generally call "elder." The synonymous terms include bishop, pastor, overseer and presbyter. Selecting elders is choosing men to rule over us and whose faith and example we can be confident in following (Heb. 13:7; I Pet. 5:4). Because they will be looking out for our souls, we will need to be able to submit to their rule (Heb. 13:17). They will be responsible for guarding us against wolves, false teachers and anything that would threaten even a single soul (Acts 20:25-31). They will have to take a leading role when it comes to disciplining the church, feeding the flock, and chastening individual sheep who stray (Titus 1:9).

All these responsibilities are revealed in the qualifications given by Paul to the younger evangelists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Any man considered for the eldership must meet every qualification. It is important to remember, that in choosing elders, we are attempting to find imperfect men to do an often difficult job. Were we to wait for a perfect man to come along, there would be no eldership. That is still no excuse for appointing a man who fails even one qualification, but allows us to realize that his aptitude may vary by degrees in certain areas from other men.

One last word of warning: the only thing worse than having no eldership is having an unqualified eldership. Then the church is doomed.

The following list is this writer's best attempt to consolidate the qualities listed in the two passages and explain how they can be met. Although it may seem a tedious exercise to some, the appointment of qualified men is important enough to warrant the effort in making certain that candidates meet the Holy Spirit's requirements for appointment.

Qualifications for the Eldership

1. Desire for the office: For an elder must serve willingly and not by compulsion (1 Peter 5:2).

2. Blamelessness: Fully penitent of all his sins so that no accusation of ongoing iniquity or unrighted wrongs could be sustained.

3. The husband of one wife: Not a polygamist or partner in an unscriptural union (Matt. 19:9).

4. Temperate personality, not quick-tempered: Able to handle contentious issues, debates and exchanges without becoming contentious himself or losing his cool.

5. Sober-mindedness: Able to take serious matters seriously and handle all his obligations with maturity.

6. Of good behavior: Not given to activities of dubious morality or propriety.

7. Hospitable: Open heart and home to brethren and others.

8. Able to teach: Ability to instruct the ignorant and wayward in the ways of Christ.

9. Not given to wine: A teetotaler.

10. Not violent: Not given to expressing anger through physical or verbal assault.

11. Not greedy for money or covetous: Able to overlook material considerations in favor of spiritual ones.

12. Gentle: Able to show compassion to the young and those in mourning.

13. Not quarrelsome: Not one who picks or provokes fights and arguments through a contentious attitude.

14. Record of having ruled household well: One having faithful and submissive children, not accused of dissipation or insubordination.

15. Not a novice: Not a newcomer to the faith.

16. Good testimony among outsiders: Just accusations by unbelievers can also be considered.

17. Not self-willed: The will of God and needs of others must be paramount in his life.

18. Love of what is good: Rather than a lover of worldly pleasure.

19. Just: Able to make fair and impartial decisions; not one who would favor friends and family over others in the church.

20. Holy: A record of a sanctified lifestyle.

21. Self-controlled: Able to overcome temptation.

22. Holding fast the faithful word: Not one who tends to stray toward error himself, but who knows the truth solidly enough to correct others.

Conclusion

Because the evangelist is generally newer to the church than many of the other members, he is not always able to know a candidate's complete record. For instance, how well he managed his household may be unclear since his children have been grown and gone so long. Other members with such knowledge can better vouch for his adequacy in this area and probably others.

Failing just one requirement is enough to disqualify a man. If he is perfect in every other way, but is a drunk, he cannot serve. If he is otherwise unblemished, but has not proven himself a good ruler of his house, he cannot serve.

Editor's Note: Brother Jeff Smith wrote a very good article. I commend it to you, dear readers. Seeing that we are studying this subject at the present time, I thought it would be good for us to read from his pen. Let us carefully and prayerfully study this article, and the points he has made. After doing so, men, examine yourselves and see where you stand. I believe we have several here with the potential to be elders (Some could serve as elders shortly, and others have the potential to fill the office in the coming years.) and I have made that known on more than one occasion. However, we need to be working toward that goal. It will not come by accident, nor will we have men appointed as elders who are not qualified to be such. Therefore, let us have resolve to conform our lives to the will of God and let us work to organize this congregation soon.

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