

Biblical Qualifications for Elders and Deacons: The Importance of Insuring that All Church Officers are Qualified Men

Dann McCreary, Grace Bible Church, Escondido, California

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I give thanks to God for Grace Bible Church, and for His mercies towards us in the realm of understanding the importance of leadership to the congregation. God has been very gracious to us by rescuing us from at least one of the gross errors in church leadership which are so prevalent in the modern age. However, I believe that we are nonetheless in danger of falling short of His leadership ideals for us. Therefore, I have considered it important enough to study this matter extensively and to attempt to put what I have learned as clearly as possible in writing.

Why is the question of leadership in God's assembly of such importance to me? I have observed first-hand the painful failures of leadership in church after church, the sad consequences of error in the teaching and practice of church governance. My prayer to God is that He spare Grace Bible Church from the same fate.

My personal history and experience with churches has influenced my understanding. My parents took me to church from an early age. My grandmother taught me about Jesus and instilled in me a veneration for the Bible as God's word. My maternal grandparents attended a Brethren church, and I remember noticing that different men in the congregation, including my grandfather, would stand and teach from the Word of God. This differed from the Baptist church which I attended with my parents.

On my 12th birthday, we moved to the Virgin Islands and soon joined a local missionary Baptist church (Baptist General Conference). At around this time God awoke in me a greater zeal for His service. I studied the Word, taught Sunday School, and became a counsellor at Carib Bible Camp.

Up until this time, the principal model of church leadership which I had to observe was that of "The Pastor" (and his wife) valiantly leading the congregation. I was somewhat "taken under the wing" of the local pastor and his wife. Their son, Mark, was still a young child, and I think that, in me, they felt they had somewhat of a protégé.

When I went away to college, I continued to seek churches in which to serve. I began, however, to be faced with some of the issues of life, as well as also doing more independent Bible reading. I started to see what I thought to be variances between what the Bible taught about leadership

and what I had experienced to date in the churches which I had attended.

I returned to my home church with some excitement at the prospect of sharing what I had learned with the pastor and his wife. Much to my dismay, rather than finding acceptance and love, I was greeted as a heretic. My Biblical insights were discounted as dangerous teachings which I had been exposed to when I went away to school, when in truth, none of what I had presented was received from any school or group.

As a result of this confrontation, I made the error of "forsaking the assembling" for a time; looking back and integrating my subsequent experiences with other congregations, I can generalize a number of ills in the modern church as well as observe what I believe to be clear Biblical antidotes.

One other congregation of note in my history was a small church known as "Grace Bible Fellowship" (no relationship whatsoever to Grace Bible Church) which flourished briefly in the early 1980's.

Grace Bible Fellowship was pastored by a young man who, in the course of our membership there, fell into an adulterous relationship. This sin, along with the feeble response of the elders, brought great distress to the church. A few men in the church at that time tried to present a more biblical view of leadership and elder qualifications; their counsel was ignored. Unqualified men were elevated to leadership, and ultimately the flock was scattered.

What are the greatest errors of leadership in the 20th century church? Probably topping the list is a failure in the area of plurality; second is the failure to recognize and apply Biblical qualifications.

Grace Bible Church was born, to a great degree, in the crucible of a controversy over leadership. When one strong-willed man "lords it over" the congregation, God's design for the proper function of the body is impaired. The only Lord of the congregation is the Lord Christ, our Chief Shepherd. To a greater degree than any other congregation of which I have been member, Grace Bible Church recognizes and practices this truth, for which I am truly thankful.

I have observed, however, an ongoing failure to take the matter of Biblical qualifications for leadership as seriously as I believe they must be taken if Grace Bible Church is to survive and thrive as an effective servant of Christ in the world. I have raised this issue repeatedly during the history of GBC as various candidates have been presented to the congregation.

I have assented or dissented with greater or lesser degrees of vigor depending on how suited I have believed a candidate to be, or how radically I perceived a particular candidate to depart from Biblical

qualifications. It is once again incumbent upon me to present what I believe to be Biblical principles for GBC to follow. As well as I am able to evaluate my own heart, my motivation is the health and well being of God's church.

In times past, God began the leadership of his church with Apostles - those who had been direct witnesses of the Lord Jesus, and who were sent by Him to preach the gospel to the world.

Presently, there are but two "offices" in the church; the office of overseer/shepherd/ elder, and the office of deacon. These are positions of service which are officially recognized by the congregation. The elder is charged with the spiritual leadership of the congregation, while the deacon is charged with the physical/temporal leadership.

That the elder, shepherd, and overseer are all one and the same person can be seen clearly from Acts, Peter, etc. These titles are simply different aspects of the same job; each title describes a different aspect of the man's quality or function. The congregation is to be lead by a plurality of elders. In the multitude of counsellors there is safety.

What guidelines do we have for selecting church leaders?

Why are these qualifications and not simply guidelines? What evidence do we have of this?

- linguistic
- historic
- logic

Summary: The lists in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not vague guidelines for elders, as in the present watered-down popular view, but rather lists of specific requirements. The views we adopt today will be embodied in our eldership tomorrow and will thus have a profound and ongoing affect on the lives of all those within Grace Bible Church.

Why is this an important, very serious issue? There is not a huge, repetitious volume of directives written on the matter; therefore, it is all the more important to carefully heed and interpret what is written.

What means "must" (δεῖ)? More than 100 occurrences of the word in the New Testament. I fail to find any which are not prescriptive, which do not carry the force of a requirement, an obligation, an essential, compulsion, necessity, must.

- Lk 2:49 - I **must** be about my Father's business
- Lk 24:46 - Christ **must** suffer....
- Jn 4:24 - **must** worship in Spirit...

- Ac 4:12 - one name by which we **must** be saved
- Ac 5:29 - **must** obey God rather than men
- 2Cor 5:10 - **must** all appear before judgement seat
- Heb 11:6 - he that comes to God **must** believe
- John 3:7 - you **must** be born from above

Lest any think that there was no other option in Greek, weaker terms could certainly have been used, for example the words *πρεπον εστιν*, (e.g. Matthew 3:15, I Corinthians 11:13), meaning "fitting", or *θελει εναι*, (e.g. Acts 17:20) "wants to be". Or, alternatively, the term "if" could have been made explicit as it is in I Peter 1:6 ("ει δεον εστιν", "if necessary").

What means "let be" (*εστοσαν*)? 3rd person singular present **imperative**. More than 30 occurrences. Which ones would you like to remove from the imperative?

- Jas 1:19 Wherefore, my beloved bretheren, **let** every man **be** swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

- 1Pe 3:3,4 Whose adorning **let it not be** that outward adorning of plaiting the hair and of wearing of gold, or of putting on apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart...

- Gal 1:9 But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, **let him be** accursed.

Even the participles may carry the force of command, just as participles are used in Romans 12:9 in place of the imperative mood.

Are the lists **conditional**, with the imperative having an implied "if" or concession, as spoken of by Blass and Debrunner p. 195 (e.g. Jn 2:19, "**Destroy** this temple, and in three days I will raise it")?

- If so, masculinity would be conditional - e.g., "if" the elder is a man, he should be the husband of one wife, etc.

- If so, would have different structure (dependent conditional clause)

I. The lists in Timothy and Titus present qualifications, not mere qualities.

* The lists are prescriptive, not descriptive.

- Timothy (must & if) & Titus (if & must) set conditions

Cross-reference evidence

Internal evidence: I Timothy 3:5 reinforces v. 4.

Objections: Paul an elder (not- Peter was) Timothy and Titus not elders.

Proper qualifications are **so important** that Paul did not even appoint elders, choosing rather to delegate authority and wait for the fullness of time.

While **ALL** have a role in the body..., only **SOME** hold office.

* The intent of the lists is to **exclude** the unqualified. This is a **filter** function.

- Examples:

- Could I ever qualify as a widow in the congregation?
- Are young widows discriminated against? I Tim 5:9
- "a one woman man" must at least exclude women
- "not a new convert" discriminates against new Christians
- "able to teach" leaves out non-teachers

* "Not all are teachers, are they?" I Cor 12:29, Jas 3:1

* We may debate the meaning of some qualifications, or to what degree they must be met, but they are still standards for selection.

* Those who meet the qualifications have demonstrated outwardly, publicly, and visibly in their life experience the required character traits for being elder/overseer/shepherd (e.g. Jas 2:18, faith demonstrated).

* Does this mean we have a danger of a different standard for leaders than for everyone else? If in some respects it is different, so be it.

- is masculinity a "higher standard"?

- **must** widows be women? Or is that optional?

* What about forgiveness, are the forgiven now qualified?

* Would forgiveness qualify women for eldership?

* Sins, even if forgiven, continue to have consequences.

- children, reputation, visitation rights, etc.

* Marriages & divorces are matters of public record (reputation)

* The leader always carries with him a **personal history**

IV. We must be aware of potential dangers in settling this issue.

* Danger of being swayed because we are too close to an issue

- Example: my children v eldership qualifications

- Titus 1:6

- Example: children of divorce

- Example: those presently divorced, remarried, etc.
- I Timothy 5:21,22 - "Without partiality" - we cannot choose because "what a great guy he is! Surely it would be OK to bend the rules for *him*, wouldn't it?"

* Danger of Pharisaism

- Mat 23:4 "burdens greivous to be borne"
- Do not go beyond what is written (I Corinthians 4:6)

* Danger of haste

- To say today "husband of one wife" unequivocally does not apply to a divorced man may be presumptuous
- I Tim 5:22, Prov 18:17, I Cor 14:29-32, Acts 17:11

* Consequences of a wrong decision

- For the potential leaders involved
- I Cor 12
- For our children
- a long-term legacy
- For the congregation

* Precedents are hard to change

- Mat 19:22-24

* It is harder to go back than to wait; even so, determining to go back may be an occasion for grace.

Conclusion: If there is a potential of error through either rapid action in the absence of adequate knowledge or presently restricting some rights through delay engendered by further study, let us (at least initially) err on the side of caution.