

Elders – Must All Have All the Qualifications?

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For the primitive church to be restored we must be concerned with restoring every feature of it as it appears on the pages of the New Testament. However, there are some aspects of the pattern for the church that are basic to others. By this statement I mean to say that if we go astray in certain parts of the pattern we will inevitably go astray in others because certain parts of the pattern are like a "fountain" from which other "streams" flow. Pure streams cannot flow from polluted fountains (Mat. 7:17-8; Jam. 2:11-12).

The pattern of church organization in the New Testament is one of those basic aspects of the overall pattern for the church. The pattern of organization may not only be compared to a fountain, but to the skeleton of the spiritual body of Christ. If the skeleton is not correctly formed and maintained the body will be crippled, deformed, and handicapped. It becomes immediately apparent that the matter of Scriptural church government must be scrupulously guarded. Indeed, if apostasy occurs at the point of organization this will sooner or later affect the work, the worship, the moral behavior, the entrance requirements, and every other aspect of the church. Significantly, historians generally agree that the first departures from the Truth which eventually led to the great apostasy of Roman Catholicism may be traced to corruptions of Scriptural church government.

“Church government” has many facets, including the independence of local churches, church discipline, matters pertaining to elders, and perhaps others. While all of these are important, I now direct attention to the subject of elders, and more particularly, to their qualifications.

Anytime there is a matter of obligation stated in Scripture that is restricted or narrow in its scope, men begin seeking some excuse to avoid compliance. This fact is well illustrated by the doctrinal dodging and darting observed in many brethren in an attempt to avoid the simple and obvious (and admittedly narrow) teaching of the Lord on marriage, divorce, and remarriage (Mat. 19:6-9). Men have also followed this procedure in seeking to avoid the teaching of 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:5-9, which give the Holy Spirit's qualifications for those who should Scripturally be appointed as bishops/elders in a local congregation.

Let us note that elders, when Scripturally appointed, are appointed not merely by men, but by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). If this is not a reference to appointing only men who meet

the qualifications prescribed by the Holy Spirit, I know not to what it refers. Obviously, therefore, to ignore or in any way reduce these qualifications will result in appointing men as elders by human rather than by Divine authority.

Among the clever and devious devices brethren have come up with to avoid the force and stringency of the pastoral qualifications is the claim that as long as the entire group of elders possesses all of the qualifications of Scripture, the qualifications are thereby satisfied without each individual elder's possessing them all. Consider some of the fallacies of this position:

1. This view violates the obvious intent of the qualifications, as well as the plain statement of the **qualifications** passages. Paul wrote, "**The bishop** (emph. DM) therefore must be without reproach..." (1 Tim. 3:2). He did not say, "the bishops" as a group or in the aggregate, but "the bishop," indicating that each bishop is to possess each trait. To Titus Paul's language is even more explicit: "If **any man** is blameless...**the bishop** must be blameless..." (emph. DM). Notice, Paul did not say, "if any eldership is blameless" or "the eldership must be blameless," but he clearly intended for the qualifications to apply to each individual.
2. This view allows some men to be appointed as elders who might have only one or two (or in a large eldership, none) of the qualifications, as long as among the other elders all the required traits exist. Practically speaking, it would follow that in an eldership of four men, only one would need to be married and three could be drunkards who were bachelors.
3. This view prevents the local church from having a group of men as a whole which is a model for the entire church to follow, respect, and to which they are to submit themselves (1 The. 5:12; Rev. 13:17)—the clear intent of the qualifications. It is not possible to have a group which wholly measures up to these qualifications unless **each member** of the group possesses them. It is apparent that the very means by which the eldership as a whole in any congregation is to possess these traits fully is for each individual elder to possess them.

The consequences of ignoring or, by such a procedure as herein described, bypassing the Scriptural qualifications for elders, are grave. When the leadership of any group—of whatever nature—is weak or corrupt, these traits will inevitably eventually characterize the group itself.

Doctrinal and moral corruptions abound in hundreds of local congregations today, and a principal cause of such is carelessness and/or willful avoidance of application of the qualifications for elders. The sorry result has been the appointment of men who have neither the will nor the ability to "exhort in the sound doctrine" or to "convict the gainsayers" (Tit. 1:9). There are those serving as elders who are themselves weak or impure on moral issues and who will not stand against social drinking, dancing, immodest apparel, and morally defiling and worldly behaviors, nor will they allow preachers and teachers to do so.

In like manner, neither will they allow the Truth to be taught on marriage, divorce and remarriage. With the increasing number of brethren capitulating to the convenient Bales heresy on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, some churches are now becoming havens for couples living in adulterous marriages. With the laxity now prevalent concerning qualifications of elders we can expect elderships (and deaconships) to contain increasing numbers of men who are themselves living in adultery. The egregious effects of such on the body of Christ are almost too sad to contemplate. Those who are devoted to the purity of the faith must guard the strict, individual application of the qualifications of elders with all our might.

[**Note:** The date and place of publication of this article is unknown. I likely wrote it in the early 1970s.]

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