

Shepherding the Flock

*"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."
(Acts 20:28)*



Qualifications of an Elder

The New Testament lists several qualifications of one who would serve as an elder. Some would say that these are qualities more than qualifications, but the list is specific, encompassing of the major areas of life, and demanding. Most men within the Lord's church will never serve as an elder, but those who do must meet the highest standards because their ministry is vital to the growth and health of the church.

For a man to do the work of an elder, he must first desire the work. 1 Timothy 3:1 says, *"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task."* The word translated as aspire has the idea of strongly desiring or longing for something. For a man to be an elder, he must truly want to do this work for Christ and the church. The church should never try to force, coerce, pressure, or draft anyone to be an elder against their will. Peter says that he should serve voluntarily and eagerly.

1. What might happen to a church that appointed men to serve as elders who did not desire the work?

Though it is necessary to aspire to be an elder in order to serve in this position, desire itself is not enough. The Scripture goes on to list a number of qualifications to serve as an elder.

QUALIFICATIONS OF ELDERS		
1 Timothy 3:1-7	Titus 1:5-9	1 Peter 5:1-3
1. Above reproach	1. Above reproach	1. Not serving under compulsion
2. The husband of one wife	2. Husband of one wife	2. Serving voluntarily
3. Sober-minded	3. Children are believers	3. Not serving for shameful gain
4. Self-controlled	4. Not arrogant	4. Serving eagerly
5. Respectable	5. Not quick-tempered	5. Not domineering
6. Hospitable	6. Not a drunkard	6. Examples
7. Able to teach	7. Not violent	
8. Not a drunkard	8. Not greedy	
9. Not violent	9. Hospitable	
10. Gentle	10. Lover of good	
11. Not quarrelsome	11. Self-controlled	
12. Not a lover of money	12. Upright	
13. Manages own household well	13. Holy	
14. Not a recent convert	14. Disciplined	
15. Well thought of by outsiders	15. Holds firm to the Word	

The qualifications of an elder are numerous and stringent because these men will be responsible to guard the flock against false teaching and to provide sound Biblical instruction within the church. Elders serve as examples for the rest of the church.

Both the list of qualifications in 1 Timothy and Titus begin with the term **above reproach**. This is say that the person who will be an elder has nothing in his character or his past that would cause people to bring a charge against him. He is known to be moral and ethical.

2. Why is being above reproach such an important qualification?

The next qualification has proven to be controversial so we will discuss it more thoroughly than the other qualifications. The Scripture says that the elder is to be *“the husband of one wife”* indicating among other things that the elder must be male. This phrase has been understood by different interpreters to also mean one or more of the following:

1. A man must be married before he can be an elder.
 - a. Some exclude all men who have never been married.
 - b. Some exclude all men who had once been married, but who are widowers.
2. A man must have only been married only one time.
 - a. Some exclude those who have been divorced.
 - b. Some exclude a man who has remarried after becoming a widower.
3. A man cannot be a polygamist.
4. A man must be faithful in his marriage.



The literal Greek phrase is that the elder be a *“one woman man.”* This statement doesn’t clear up the debate because we must still determine what is meant by a *“one woman man.”* **The first question we need to answer is this: Can a man who is unmarried serve as an elder?**

Paul went to great lengths to say that some are better off to never marry (see 1 Corinthians 7). In the light of this teaching, is it proper to exclude a man from the eldership simply because he has the gift of singleness? Paul and Timothy were unmarried, so even they would not be qualified if we were to take the view that the elder must be married.

In helping us decide this debatable issue consider the following:



1. We can say with certainty that it is permissible, if not required, that an elder be married. The Scripture says that he is to be the husband of one wife.
2. If one has the gift of singleness, there are ways to serve in the Lord’s church other than the eldership.
3. There are lessons that are learned in marriage that are learned no where else. These lessons are invaluable as elders encourage, teach, and mentor church members in their marriages.

4. Singleness as an evangelist or missionary can be an asset since it provides freedom of travel without the cares of a family. Elders do not need the same freedom of travel since they are settled in local congregations.
3. List some lessons that are learned in marriage and how these would benefit a man who would shepherd the church.

The second question is this: Can a man serve as an elder if he has been married more than once?

1. A man whose wife has died has been freed from his marital commitment. He is free to remain single or he is free to remarry. This does not disqualify him from being an elder.
2. A man who divorces and remarries does not have multiple wives. He is still the husband of only one wife since divorce breaks the marriage. While anyone can be forgiven of any sin, including divorce, this does not mean a divorced man is necessarily eligible to serve as an elder.
 - a. Even if divorce is not a disqualification to be an elder, men who have been divorced would sometimes be disqualified because they are not above reproach, self-controlled, or they have not managed their own households well.
 - b. People in the congregation may not want to be shepherded, especially in the area of marriage, by a man who has been divorced himself. If a man does not have the confidence of the congregation, he cannot serve as a shepherd.
 - c. “*One woman man*” indicates faithfulness to a spouse so a man who is divorced due to his own unfaithfulness would be disqualified from being an elder. He is also unqualified if he is unfaithful, but remains married.



We must make our decisions, with humility, after a thorough study of Scripture understanding that whatever views we take, there will be many sincere Christians who disagree. Many difficult questions arise from this study such as: “*What if a man was divorced prior to becoming a Christian and has been faithful to second spouse afterward?*” “*What if a man was divorced in his distant past, but has proven to be faithful over an extended period?*” “*What about a man whose wife leaves him due to no fault of his own?*”

Each congregation will have to come to their own conclusions on some of these debatable matters after a time in study and prayer. Our goal must be faithfulness to Scripture and the spiritual well-being of the Lord’s Church.

4. What questions do you have about this difficult subject?