

## God's Standard for Leadership

Scripture: 1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9

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Not everyone is cut out for leadership in the church. That's why Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 expands on his instruction for men by describing the categories and qualifications for church leadership. In verse 1 he says, "It is a trustworthy statement; if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do."

An essential requirement for a church leader is that he be a man. Women have a vitally important role in the church, the home, and in society. That role, however, does not include leadership over God's people. While both men and women can serve in a variety of ways under the general and broad category of deacon (1 Timothy 3:8–13), Paul makes it clear that the leadership of the church is limited to men.

"Overseer" refers to those men who are called by God to lead His church. In the New Testament the terms *overseer*, *pastor*, and *elder* all refer to the same office (cf. Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Peter 5:1–2). Among their responsibilities are ruling, preaching, and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17), praying for the sick (James 5:14), caring for the church, setting an example for the people to follow (1 Peter 5:1–3), establishing church policy (Acts 15:22–33), and ordaining other leaders (1 Timothy 4:14).

The character and effectiveness of any church is directly related to the quality of its leadership. That's why the Bible stresses the importance of qualified church leadership and delineates specific standards for evaluating those who would serve in that sacred position. Failure to adhere to those standards has caused many of the problems that churches throughout the world currently face.

It is significant that Paul's description of the qualifications for overseers focuses on their character rather than their function. That's because a man is qualified by who he *is*, not by what he *does*.

And those spiritual qualifications are nonnegotiable. I am convinced they are part of what determines whether a man is indeed called by God to the ministry. Bible schools and seminaries can help equip a man for ministry. Church boards and pulpit committees can extend opportunities for him to serve. But only God can call a man and make him fit for the ministry. And that call is not a matter of analyzing one's talents and then selecting the best career option. It's a Spirit-generated compulsion to be a man of God and serve Him in the church. Those whom God calls will meet the qualifications.

Why are the standards so high? Because whatever the leaders are, the people become. As Hosea said, "Like people, like priest" (Hosea 4:9). Jesus said, "Everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). Biblical history demonstrates that people will seldom rise above the spiritual level of their leadership.

You might think these qualifications don't apply to you because you don't sense God's call. Yet the only significant difference between an elder's qualifications and those of a deacon is that an elder must be skilled as a teacher (cf. 1 Timothy 3:1–13). In addition, Paul applies most of these character

qualities to all believers in his other letters. So in that sense, whether you are male or female, these qualities ought to be the goals in your Christian life. But if you are a man seeking a position of leadership, you *must* meet the required qualifications.

While Paul begins by commending the man who desires the office of elder (1 Timothy 3:1), no one should ever be placed into church leadership on desire alone. It is the church's responsibility to affirm a man's qualifications for ministry by measuring him against God's standard for leadership as delineated in verses 2–7.

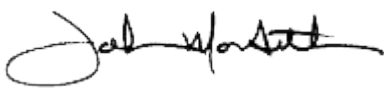
A fundamental, universal requirement for an overseer is that he “must be above reproach” (1 Timothy 3:2). It is an absolute necessity. The Greek text indicates that being above reproach is the man's present state—he has sustained a reputation for being irreproachable. There's nothing to accuse him of. It doesn't refer to sins he committed before he matured as a Christian—unless those sins remain a blight on his life.

A church leader's life must not be marred by sin or vice—be it an attitude, habit, or incident. That's not to say he must be perfect, but there must not be any obvious defect in his character. He must be a model of godliness so he can legitimately call his congregation to follow his example (Philippians 3:17). That is a high standard, but it isn't a double standard. Since you are responsible to follow the example of your godly leaders (Hebrews 13:7, 17), God requires you to be above reproach as well. The difference is that certain sins can disqualify church leaders for life, whereas that's not necessarily true for less prominent roles in the church. Nevertheless, God requires blamelessness of all believers (cf. Ephesians 1:4; Philippians 1:10; Colossians 1:22; 2 Peter 3:14; Jude 24).

A church leader disqualifies himself when his unrighteousness communicates to others that one can live in sin and still be a spiritual leader. Malicious people are always looking for ways to discredit the reputation of Christ and His church. A sinful leader plays right into their hands, giving them an unparalleled opportunity to justify their lack of belief.

It's not coincidental that many pastors fall into sin and disqualify themselves from ministry. Satan works hard at undermining the integrity of spiritual leaders, because in so doing, he destroys their ministries and brings reproach upon Christ. Therefore spiritual leaders must guard their thoughts and actions carefully, and congregations must pray earnestly for the strength of their leadership. An unholy pastor is like a stained-glass window: a religious symbol that obscures the light. That's why the initial qualification for spiritual leadership is blamelessness. As Paul delineates the other qualifications for overseers, he simply expands on the particulars of what it means to be above reproach.

We'll look at some of those particulars next time.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John W. Stott". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a stylized "W".

(Adapted from [Divine Design](#). All Scripture quotations are from the [New American Standard Bible](#).)

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