

# Elder Examination

“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure...The sins of some men are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.”

~ 1 TIMOTHY 5:22, 24

WE BELIEVE that the examination process for elder selection is *rooted* in a four-fold biblical criterion (doctrine, character, calling, compatibility), that this process must be deliberate to *cultivate* the elder prospect in all four, that it must gradually and rigorously *test* for all four, and that the biblical standard for disqualification is an *insisting* or *persisting* in the opposite of any of those four.

The bulk of our position is that there are three positive elements to elder examination at The Well which revolve around a four-fold biblical criterion. First, we need to see the root of the criteria (so we need to show that such is the case from the biblical text); Second, we need to cultivate these four things in any prospective elder; Third, we need to test that out over time with the utmost care for the whole body. So—*root, cultivation, testing*. Any church that does not have this vision toward reproducing leaders lacks vision as a whole.

Our final consideration will be to look at what the apostle Paul actually meant in the “qualification / disqualification” passages in the Pastoral Letters. There are two bad extremes that one can fall into with respect to these texts. The one is to view them through the lens of legalism while the other is to see them through the eyes of easy-believism. Since those are the two extremes that the church as a whole lives on, it is natural to impose those total frameworks on these principles as well. What this amounts to is that one group is all about disqualification, supposing Paul’s search for those “above reproach” as a search for the unscarred champions of suburbia. The other group is all about nothing. Therefore, the reason that they do not screen carefully for elder character is that such character is treated as a kind of superstition anyway—not having to do with the normal Christian life. In a real way, both groups misunderstand the entire nature of the church.

Reasserting the biblical view of eldership is going to be rough treading from where we stand in culture. The dominant views are completely unhealthy, and they produce unhealthy people who have fled their churches—often due to abuse. Our

contention is not that we have an “abuse-free” system. Wherever there are sinners, there will be such imbalances. Our contention is that we must obey Scripture, and part of the rationale for the model we find in Scripture is to curb such abuses. At any rate, the biblical view will not be popular in the culture in which we live. Truth be told, it was never popular. It has always been a dog-fight, with intense spiritual warfare thrown in to boot. I have always found it slightly amusing (and reaffirming) that Paul sandwiches in a parenthetical tip to his spiritual son to keep a stash of wine for this very thing! That is why verse 23 is where it is—in between the command to be deliberate in elder selection and the rationale for it.

**1) The examination process for elder selection is rooted in a four-fold biblical criterion (doctrine, character, calling, compatibility),**

**DOCTRINE:** The elder candidate must grasp, accept, cherish, be willing and able to defend the essential/overarching doctrines of the faith—the authority, inerrancy, and sufficiency of Scripture, the classic framework for the existence and attributes of God (including the Trinity), the total inability of man in sin to accurately know, obey, please, or seek God, the convicting / tutoring function of the Law, the unity of the covenants, the person and the work of Christ, the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone, imputed righteousness, the difference between justification and sanctification, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the church, the second coming of Christ, and the eternal conscious reality of heaven and hell.

**CHARACTER:** The elder candidate must exemplify the positive traits listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and he must reject the negative traits listed. In short, his being “above reproach” or “blameless” concerns two questions of a negative sort: Is the elder’s life characterized by besetting sins in any of these areas?

- infidelity to his wife in thought, word, or deed [1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:6]
- any other form of sexual impurity (applied to single men as well, since being married per se was not the ultimate point—Paul himself was single)
- undisciplined in thoughts, passions, or decisions [1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:8]
- addicted to alcohol, including spiritual addiction to it (not just chemical), so that any drunkenness is a sign of using a substance to fill a spiritual void [1 Tim. 3:3, Titus 1:7]
- violent or harsh in word or action [1 Tim. 3:3, Titus 1:7]
- greedy or materialistic [1 Tim. 3:3, Titus 1:7]
- divisive, contentious or power-jockeying [1 Tim. 3:3, Titus 1:7]
- arrogance—i.e. attention-drawing action, speech [1 Tim. 3:6, Titus 1:7]
- carelessness in, or neglect of, children’s disciplinary, educational, emotional or material needs [1 Tim. 3:4-5, Titus 1:6].

In other words, does he ***insist on*** or ***persist in*** any of these disqualifiers? We will get more specific on the need for that phraseology later on. Conversely, we are looking for certain fruit:

- Love of/Plan to shepherd his family first [1 Tim. 3:4-5, Titus 1:6]
- Ability to teach true Christian doctrine [1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:9]
- Gentle firmness in shepherding [1 Tim. 3:3, Titus 1:7]
- Hospitality – Welcoming all to the gospel feast [1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:8]
- Lover of all that is good – God, heaven, gospel, revival, the church [Titus 1:8]
- Eagerness to oversee/passion for the vision [1 Pet. 5:1-5]

We are after the positive producing of the right fruit in a man, and only watching the negative as a military commander would look for missing limbs. If the Lord should miraculously grow back the limb, so much the better. But the context of our motivation is to raise up an army for war, not to have a merit-badge shining contest. We seek to qualify, not disqualify. Yet our zeal must never blind our discernment.

“Keep a close watch on *yourself* and on the *teaching*. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

~ 1 TIMOTHY 4:16

CALLING: However much we want to “raise up” men to be the kind of men that lead, the fact of the matter is that we cannot twist arms. It must be a sensed calling by the individual first. Only after he approaches the elder team can his calling be *confirmed*. This does not mean that we cannot discuss it with a man in the church who we believe to be elder-material. It doesn’t mean we cannot “plant seeds.” It simply means that we (as elders) are not the ones who call—it is God—but we do confirm the calling through the examination process. 1 Timothy 3:1 says “If anyone *aspires* to the office of overseer, he *desires* a noble task.” Acting upon a sense of one’s calling is called “aspiration” and “desire.” Hence, a man’s belief that he ought to be an elder cannot be used against him by false-humility-mongers as a sign that he is over-ambitious. Such a sin can and should be judged by other means.

COMPATIBILITY: Any church that has an examination process that does not carefully screen for compatibility with its vision has no vision. It’s as simple as that. Conversely, any church that is serious about their vision will be most serious about screening for compatibility. It’s a matter of integrity; and quite frankly, it’s the neighborly thing to do for the person who has different ideas. Either he is warped in trying intentionally to chart a different course, or he just flat out doesn’t get it. Either way, he needs to be informed. It does the dissenter no favors to share the steering wheel with him when you don’t really think it belongs there. One can be qualified as an elder *per se*, yet not be compatible with a leadership position at *this* local body because he either explicitly disagrees with the vision (Why would that person be attending at all?), or, is to date unfamiliar with the components of the vision (Why would that person want to lead at this time? He may desire to serve in other ways.). Some people who see diversity as a biblical virtue mistakenly apply that to an allegedly “healthy diversity of perspective.” That is not only wrong, but

deadly poison. On an elder board, a diversity of accountability is mandated. A diversity of gifting is powerful. A diversity of personalities and sensitivities is even redeeming in nature. But ***diversity of perspective*** is just a nice politically correct way we have devised to hail the virtue of severing the connection between worldview and mission.

**2) ...that this process must be deliberate to cultivate the elder prospect in all four,**

At The Well, we have a little something we like to call the “Mission Grid” that spells out exactly who we are and why the elements of our total systematic theology matter to philosophy of ministry. Hence the Mission Grid is a doctrinal grid. It is made up of seven layers that deal with every sector of our mission:

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|----------------------------------|--|
| 1. Reformed Theology             | (God-Centered – Worldview Objective Element)     |
| 2. Christian Hedonism            | (God-Driven – Worldview Subjective Element)      |
| 3. Classical Epistemology        | (Truth-Bound – Worldview Foundational Element)   |
| 4. Gospel Shepherding            | (Eternally-Shaped – Pastoral Counseling Element) |
| 5. Revivalist Corporate Practice | (Spirit-Empowered – Worship Need Element)        |
| 6. Incarnational Ecclesiology    | (Mission-Driven – Cultural Engagement Element)   |
| 7. Multigenerational Planning    | (Family-Integrated – Community Identity Element) |

From a purely practical perspective—one which any real prospect will find obvious—these seven things do not ordinarily go together in the modern West. They will at The Well. And therefore any elder in training must begin to gravitate to the threads that weave these ideas together. He will simply call it Christianity with as much familiarity as his own name. If he cannot articulate those threads then he does not see the vision. We are shepherding people into something, not nothing. We are leading with a vision, not a vapor.

Toward the end of reproducing this “something,” when a prospect has been identified, he will be pursued to attend all of our Wednesday morning worldview and ministry courses. If he cannot attend due to his work schedule, then we will set up a regular time of one-on-one study. Such a course load will be selected by an elder, combining audio, video, and books. The material will be chosen to build up the prospect’s grasp with the seven elements of the Mission Grid. See the end of this paper for a “vision-building” library of books if you are interested in getting started on your own.

**3) ...that it must gradually and rigorously test for all four,**

<sup>1</sup> Timothy 5:22-24 is no superstitious proof-text. It reflects a principle of prudence commanded in other circumstances—with would-be deacons [1 Tim. 3:10], with testing out the early conversion of a prospective elder [1 Tim. 3:6], for young pastors to set a long-term example to all [1 Tim. 4:12-16], for widows to be enrolled

for charity [1 Tim. 5:10], and with testing out all of our own gospel conversion [1 Cor. 15:1-2]. Many more examples could be given. Some of these passages command the church to test someone else; others command individuals in the church to persevere in something. Yet the principle is the same: Prudence dictates rigor, and this kind of rigor needs time. We expect this scrutiny from others, and we ought to apply it ourselves.

The testing period at The Well will be a minimum of one-year after the existing elders have determined that this one-year of testing has begun. The one year does not begin when the prospective elder senses the calling. It also does not begin when the elders first begin to plant the seed in that particular man. It begins by a definitive decision of all existing elders, signaled by a specified curriculum of doctrinal training and duties to test for service and character. Such curricula will include no less than one book per month (12 total) and no less than two audio or video teachings per month. In addition, a thorough examination on the seven-point Mission Grid will be given toward the end of this one-year period. Finally, he must be able to articulate and defend the substance of our vision statement, statement of faith, and all position papers of the church.

**4) ...and that the biblical standard for disqualification is an insisting and persisting in the opposite of any of those four.**

The phrase “insisting and persisting” was coined in the first few weeks of The Well, as we were going through the opening chapter to Titus. Here is an excerpt from my commentary on Titus with respect to 1:6-7 on the elder’s character:

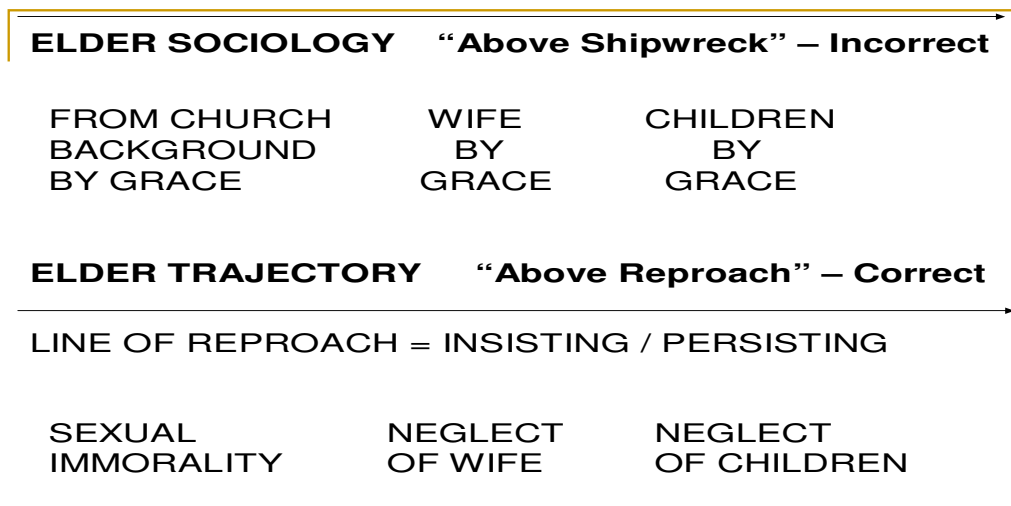
Being “above reproach” is quite a broad category. And this is so because it is the “thesis virtue” that encapsulates all of the others mentioned. He is saying that they must be blameless, not in the sense of sinless, but in the sense of trusted character. It also does not mean one who is never attacked (since both Paul and Titus were always attacked!), but one who it would be shameful to attack. Stott is helpful here: “This does not of course mean that candidates must be flawless or faultless, or we would all be disqualified. The Greek word used is *anenkletos*, not *amomos*. *Amomos* means ‘unblemished.’ It occurs in the New Testament only in eschatological contexts; that is, it looks forward to our final perfection. *Anenkletos*, however, means not ‘without blemish’ but ‘without blame’, ‘unaccused’. So candidates for the pastorate must be people of ‘unquestioned integrity’ (JBP), of ‘unimpeachable’ (REB), or ‘irreproachable’ (JB) character.”<sup>1</sup>

We ought to think visually here, borrowing from Stott’s helpful exegesis. Paul has in mind: If anyone is *above something*—something that he calls “reproach.” I have chosen the buzzwords “insisting and persisting” when considering elder disqualification. These disqualifiers are aimed to be gotten “above,” not that the elder is to get above the above! In other words, elder disqualification is about ruling out immorality, not establishing divinity. The leaders of the early churches had just spent their previous several decades of existence with temple prostitutes, multiple wives, and as murders of Christians. God was doing something new with them, and it is

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<sup>1</sup> Stott, p. 175

this new creation that Paul is concerned to establish—*he deals in elder trajectory, not elder sociology*. Notice the below representation of the two ways of viewing this:



The passion and program to raise up men to be elders has absolutely nothing to do with how unscathed the men are from the various conditions of sin—except to the degree that they insist and persist in them. Paul was simply not concerned about whether the Cretan Inquirer could “expose” the candidate in his past condition. This has to do with present qualification. To the degree that the past effects the present, of course the elder board should be on guard. But short of that, the search for an elder is not a search for those whom God has had enough mercy on that no legalist would dare squirm in their presence. The above diagram contrasts “reproach” with “shipwreck” because what Paul is saying is that the elder must not actually *be about* any of these reproachable things, not that he has not fallen in the past, nor even that he has not fallen to the uttermost: “the righteous falls seven times and rises again” [Prov. 24:6]. The author of this passage was public enemy number one for the early church, and yet he was an elder of elders. I call it “shipwreck” after the Roman Catholic doctrine of *mortal sins* in which one’s forfeiting of the grace of baptism must be won back through a sacramental system that never quite takes. If we would take grace seriously, then we must challenge the modern American church’s legalistic interpretation of such things.

On marriage, the emphasis is on the “one,” not on the wife! The Jews had made a practice of polygamy by this point in their history, and though tolerated, it was not God’s design for marriage. But this is a character test, not a test of whether one is called to marriage or singleness. The author of this letter was single himself, in spite of being one of the *de facto* elders of the early church. So there is simply no warrant for this text being used by legalists to hammer single men, or widowers. Some might argue that Paul was in fact married due to the following passage: “Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?” [1 Cor. 9:5-6]. But three things are sufficient to refute this: First, Paul was arguing about apostolic freedom, and uses the taking of a wife as one example among several—not that he in fact had one. Second, he then renounces the rights that he claims to have access to [9:12]. Third, the same Paul holds himself up as an example of what is today called “the gift or calling” of singleness just two chapters earlier [7:7-8]. Did Paul get married in between writing chapters 7 and 9? It’s possible. But so are aliens and unicorns. The reason why the state of the elder’s family matters is that he is a priest and pastor of his home. If he shows evidence of not caring for four or five sheep that are

closest to him, much less should he be trusted to shepherd the many. As to the man who is young and single—and though Timothy was young, we cannot say whether he or Titus were married—it should be stressed that while the home is probably the clearest or even highest analogy to the church, it is not the only one, and therefore should never be used as a singular disqualification (I mean if the candidate is unmarried). On the more practical side, the home is the best possible training for the church. If one can manage the fires of running the domestic ship—particularly when legalists from all sides watch your every move!—then the pastoral character has been sufficiently molded. The home is more like the church than we tend to think. And, in agreement with Stott, I insist that this test is applied to parents as they are parenting, not years later when many children have fled the church in spite of a godly example in the home. But, in agreement with Baucham, we must also insist that resolute attention must be paid to the character of the children and the way in which the prospective elder relates to them.<sup>2</sup> You see all the extremes we must sail between!<sup>3</sup>

It takes little imagination to see how both the legalistic church and the easy-believest church make themselves enemies of restoring biblical eldership. We are concerned to correct both extremes. That means that any prospective elder must understand what I just said, otherwise he is in no position to select subsequent elders by biblical standards. He would be ignorant of what those standards are.

Lastly, any elder candidate must be familiar with the truth taught in Romans 14. By definition we are after some “stronger brothers,” since, by “strong” [15:1]—*dunatoi*, able to—Paul does not mean some will-power category. Rather, he means one who is mature in the sense of being comfortable in his own skin. The climax of the chapter is that the apostle is not interested in merely removing stumbling blocks for some disinterested, gooey-eyed, “some-day” Christian charity. He is flatly implying that there is a stronger brother who is the picture of ideal Christian maturity now. This stronger brother is precisely the person who treats every secondary issue as a secondary issue *in the same local church*. Nowhere in the chapter does Paul solve the problem of quarreling by segregation into denominations. There can be no exceptions to this. An elder at The Well will know full well *what* the essentials of the faith are, *why* they are essential, and *how* the non-essentials can all be held to and practiced in the same building as their alternatives.

The following are some references on the subject of eldership in general:

MATT MARINO, “The Restoration of Biblical Eldership” [www.lightandheat.org](http://www.lightandheat.org)

MATT MARINO, “The Character of an Elder” (Titus 1:6-8), “The Doctrine of an Elder” (Titus 1:9), and “Silence of the Wolves” (Titus 1:10-11)—3 sermons in Titus, CDs in The Well Library

ALEXANDER STRAUCH, *Biblical Eldership* (Lewis & Roth, Littleton, CO 1995)

<sup>2</sup> cf. Voddie Baucham, *Family-Driven Faith* (Crossway, Wheaton, IL 2007); pp. 14-15

<sup>3</sup> Matt Marino, *Biblical Commentaries* (Matt Marino, 2008); pp. 14-17