Looking For A Few Good Men
By Mark Dever and Paul Alexander

How do you go about looking for elders, and what exactly is it that you're looking for? Answering this question requires us to consider what exactly an elder is not, and then what an elder is.[1]

WHAT AN ELDER IS NOT

A biblical elder is not simply an older male.

There are plenty of godly older men who do meet the character qualifications for biblical eldership. I hope the Lord blesses our church with more! But bare chronological advancement, even when married to upstanding church membership, is not sufficient to satisfy the requirements outlined in 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1. In fact, there are some thirty year old men (or even younger) who are more qualified to be elders than some men twice their age. Life experience alone does not qualify a man as an elder.

A biblical elder is not simply a successful businessman.

In fact, some of the very principles or character traits that get some businessmen to the top of the business ladder may actually put them on the bottom rung of the church leadership ladder.[2] We’re not looking for people who “know what they want and know how to get it.” Nor are we looking for people who know how to manage people, raise money, climb the ladder, or close the deal. Leadership in the church is fundamentally different than leadership in the business world.[3] The church is not simply a non-profit business. It is the body of Christ, and as such is the most unique corporate institution in the world. It operates on principles of distinctively Christian doctrine, servant-hood, holiness, faith, hope, and love. This is not, of course, to say that it is impossible to be a biblically qualified elder and a successful business man at the same time. It is simply to say that success and leadership in the business world do not always or necessarily bode well for eldership in the local church.

A biblical elder is not simply an involved community member.

Being elected to sit on a city or neighborhood council is a wonderful privilege and a unique evangelistic opportunity for any Christian. But again, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for meeting the qualifications of elder. A man can be the president of the PTA, coach little league, be an alderman, and lead a boy scout troop and still not be qualified as an elder. Serving the community in these ways certainly doesn’t preclude a man from qualifying. But as we look around to see who might meet the biblical requirements, community service alone cannot be our ultimate criteria.

A biblical elder is not simply a "good ole’ boy".

Living in the same location and having the same friends or even being a member of the same church for 30+ years doesn’t make a man an elder. Serving in the capacity of elder in a local church should not be dependent on whether a man is willing to "play ball", or whether he is a part of the right social network, or whether he’s from the right part of the country (or county, depending on where you live!). Likeability can often be deceptive.

A biblical elder is not a female.

The criteria laid out in 1Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 assume male leadership in the church. The office of elder is an office that requires the ones holding it to be able to teach. Teaching is an authoritative act, and women are forbidden to exercise authority over men in the church (1Tim 2:9-15). Paul roots that prohibition in the order of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 – Adam was created before Eve, revealing Adam’s God-given place of headship over her. Both are equally created in the image of God, but God has given them different yet complementary roles to fill both in the home and in the church.[4]
A biblical elder is not a politician.

The biblical office of elder is an elected office. But the man who fills it should not be one who subtly or overtly campaigns for it, or one who is noticeably vocal about promoting political positions in the context of the local church.

What, then, is a biblical elder?

WHAT IS AN ELDER?

Our question can be answered first in terms of the office and second in terms of the man. The office of elder is an office designed for the leadership of the church through the teaching of the Word.[5] The character of the man who qualifies to fulfill that office is described in 1Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. An elder is simply a man of exemplary, Christ-like character who is able to lead God’s people by teaching them God’s Word in a way that profits them spiritually. We are looking, then, for men who display this character and demonstrate both an aptitude for and fruitfulness in teaching God’s Word to others in an edifying way.[6] This definition might serve as a good spiritual snapshot or profile of the kind of men you’re looking for to be elders.

Qualification Quadrants

A helpful way to think about the criteria for choosing leaders might be in terms of the quadrants below. Again, the call to being an elder is a call to leadership through biblical teaching. This means that at a bare minimum, you need men who, first and foremost, share a deep, biblical understanding of the fundamentals of Christian theology and the Gospel. Areas to consider first are the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, God’s sovereignty, the divinity and exclusivity of Christ, and the atonement. No man who falters in the basics of biblical doctrine should be considered for eldership, no matter how gifted or likeable he may be. The Word builds the church, and as such it simply can’t be healthy for any of our elders to have reservations about fundamental Christian truths.

Once it’s been determined that a candidate is sound in the central Bible doctrines, it is our practice to confirm that the candidate shares our particular doctrinal distinctives; namely, the necessity of believers’ baptism for local church membership. These issues, while not saving, are nevertheless important for how we decide to conduct our life together as a church. Such distinctives will obviously vary depending on the convictions of the congregation. The principle, however, is simply that the leaders of a congregation should understand and be conscientious advocates of a local church’s distinctive doctrines. The elders need to be agreed on these matters so that their own unity doesn’t fracture, and so that they can provide a unified lead for the congregation to follow.

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<tr>
<th>Core Theology</th>
<th>Doctrinal Distinctives</th>
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<td>• Authority &amp; Sufficiency of Scripture</td>
<td>• Believers’ Baptism</td>
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<tr>
<td>• God’s Sovereignty</td>
<td>• Congregationalism</td>
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<td>• Divinity &amp; Exclusivity of Christ</td>
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<td>• The Atonement</td>
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Fig. 14.1 – Qualification Quadrants

Third, it is extremely helpful to ensure that the candidate is courageous enough to stand against the culture on certain clear biblical issues, such as the role of women in the church. An elder must model for the congregation both a strength and a willingness to live a counter-cultural lifestyle in areas where Christ and culture conflict. If, as an elder, a man caves in to the conforming pressures of the culture on well-defined biblical issues, his example and teaching will eventually lead the church to
look more like the world.

Finally, we need to be able to discern from the candidate’s relational involvement in the church that he loves the congregation. We want to be able to recognize his love for the other members of the church by the fact that he’s already involved in doing elder-type work, even before he’s given the title. So we might reasonably expect a man who is recognized as an elder to be attending regularly, initiating with others to do them spiritual good, and serving the church as faithfully as he can.

CONCLUSION

One of the most significant human dynamics in the church’s continuing spiritual growth and health is the kind of leadership it is following. When biblically qualified men are leading a church with character and skill, it is a deep and wide blessing for the unity, holiness, and spiritual growth of the church. Put somewhat negatively, so many potential mistakes and heartaches can be avoided simply by ensuring that only those men who are biblically qualified become elders.

1 With the exception of the opening paragraph, this entire article is excerpted from the chapter "Looking For a Few Good Men" in The Deliberate Church, by Mark Dever and Paul Alexander (Crossway, 2005).

2 E.g., being a lover of money, being argumentative, not being gentle, not managing his own household well (1Tim 3:1-7).


5 This is distinguished from the office of deacon, which is designed for the service of the church through tending to the physical and financial matters of the corporate body.

6 We will think more carefully about the practical necessity of this character in chapter 15, and what it means to be "able to teach" in chapter 16.

Mark Dever is the pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. Paul Alexander is the pastor of Fox Valley Bible Church in St. Charles, Illinois.