

Polity, Part 2: “Officers: What Are They To Be and Do?”

Various Passages

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Personal Introduction

Hi everyone. If you don’t know me, my name is Eric and I’m one of the pastors here, and it’s my privilege to preach the Word of God to us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

Last week, we began a new sermon series on “Polity.”

I know that this may be an obscure topic for many of us, but church polity, or church governance, deals with very important and practical questions like: Who is in and out of the church? What are the officers to be and do? How are decisions to be made in the church?

So last week, we looked at the *ordinances*; today, we’ll look at the *officers*; and next week, we’ll close by looking at *authority*.

So let’s get right into today’s sermon on *officers*.

Sermon Introduction

To begin, let me read the description of the trailer for *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast.

When Mars Hill Church was planted in Seattle in 1996, few would have imagined where it would lead. But in the next 18 years, it would become one of the largest, fastest-growing, and most influential churches in the United States. Controversy plagued the church, though, due in no small part to the lightning-rod personality at its helm: Mark Driscoll.

By 2014, the church had grown to 15,000 people in 15 locations. But before the year was over, the church collapsed. On January 1, 2015, Mars Hill was gone.¹

It’s heart-breaking to hear stories like this of how pastors fall and how the church collapses along with them. But at the same time, we need to also acknowledge in sober judgment and healthy fear that these stories could be our own.

In one of the episodes, the host of the podcast said:

This is hardly an isolated phenomenon. Why do we keep doing this? Why are we regularly platforming people whose charisma outpaces their character and who leave devastation in their wake? Something attracts us, we buy in, and then we watch the collapse like spectators at a demolition derby.²

The proper response to such devastating stories is not to lose hope in leadership or to just watch as passive spectators. Rather, we must learn how to *recognize* biblically qualified leaders and we ourselves should *aspire to be* biblical qualified leaders—even if we never lead and serve the church in a formal office.

¹ Mike Cosper, “Full-Length Trailer: The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill,” June 7, 2021, in *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, produced by Christianity Today, podcast, MP3 audio, 2:40, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/full-length-trailer-rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill.html>.

² Mike Cosper, “Who Killed Mars Hill?” June 21, 2021, in *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, produced by Christianity Today, podcast, MP3 audio, 1:03:19, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/who-killed-mars-hill-church-mark-driscoll-rise-fall.html>.

Leadership in the church is not meant to be *abused* or *abandoned*, but we need more biblically qualified leaders to lead and serve Christ's church.³

The One Thing

***We need biblically qualified leaders
to lead and serve Christ's church.***

Scripture Introduction

Each week, we usually preach expositional sermons through one passage of Scripture, but today we're going to take a different approach and look at various passages to address issues related to the officers of elders and deacons.

We should note that the terms "elder," "pastor," and "overseer" all refer to the same biblical office in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Pet. 5:1-5), so I'll be using those three terms synonymously and interchangeably.

Overview

We'll look at the officers in two parts:

- I. What are elders and deacons to *be*?
- II. What are elders and deacons to *do*?

I. What are elders and deacons to *be*?

I know that as we look at biblical qualification for elders and deacons, it'll be easy for many who are *not* elders or deacons and *not aspiring* to be to "check out" as if this doesn't pertain to you, but let me caution you *not* to do that for a couple reasons.

First, we *must* learn how to recognize biblically qualified leaders; there are devastating consequences when someone who is not biblically qualified is given a leadership office in the church.

Second, almost *all* the qualifications given for elders and deacons are *not* unique, but they are *ordinary* traits that Scripture *clearly* expects of *all* Christians. In other words, as you hear the biblical qualifications for elders and deacons and begin to realize that you're not qualified, that should *not* put you at ease, but that should be alarming!

So even if we *never* lead and serve as a church leader, we should *all* aspire to *be* biblically qualified leaders because, for the most part, it just means that you're a healthy Christian.

So with that preface, let's first look at...

A. Elder Qualifications

1 Timothy 3:1-7 = ¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

³ Trevin Wax, "The Answer to Bad Authority Is Good Authority," October 5, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/the-answer-to-bad-authority-is-good-authority/>.

There's a lot here and there's a lot of overlap between *elder* qualifications and *deacon* qualifications, so we'll spend significantly more time here and then move a bit more quickly through deacon qualifications. We'll broadly divide these qualifications into three categories related to motivation, character, and abilities.⁴

1. Motivation

a. Desires a noble task

[1 Timothy 3:1 = The saying is trustworthy: If anyone **aspires** to the office of overseer, he **desires a noble task.**]

Regarding *motivation*, an elder must *desire this noble task*.

Faithfully shepherding God's people is hard work and it will demand much from you. For myself...

- I've been lied to, slandered, cursed at, scammed for money by someone I've known and loved for over a decade, blamed for not being involved enough, accused of getting too involved;
- I've been at times the only person in someone's life confronting them of blatant sin;
- I've watched members go head first into sin despite multiple people trying to warn them and help guide them towards obedience;
- I've pursued every member I know of who has disappeared from our church;
- I've mediated conflicts between members who have thought the worst of each other;
- and after walking beside a member through struggles of faith for several months, I cried beside her as she told me she no longer believed.

If you do not freely *desire* the office, then you will probably burn out and want to quit. That doesn't mean that everyone who aspires to be an elder *should* be an elder, but if there is little desire for the role, you probably shouldn't be an elder. But that also doesn't mean that desires are static; desires grow and diminish. We should be looking for those whose desire to be an elder *grows* even as they experience all kinds of difficulties and disappointments in the life of the church.

Now given what I've just described, why would anyone in their right mind *desire* to be an elder? Because it is a noble task.

The office of elder is noble because it is following in the steps of our Lord Jesus who is the Chief Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (1 Pet. 2:25; 5:4). Elders are *under*-shepherds of the *Chief* Shepherd.

2. Character

a. Above reproach

[1 Timothy 3:1-2 = The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be **above reproach...**]

Now regarding *character*, first, an elder must be *above reproach*.

This is an umbrella qualification for the rest of the qualifications that will follow. In their outward conduct, they are blameless. That doesn't mean that they're morally perfect by any means—none of us are. But it means that they're overall godly.

By the way they live in private and in public, inasmuch as people can see, there's no serious charge of wrongdoing or immorality that people can make against them. It means that their overall demeanor and behavior have earned the respect and admiration of others. This should be true of all members of a church, but this is *vital* for an elder.

⁴ These three broad categories are from Alexander Strauch, *The Biblical Eldership Booklet* (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1997), 23-27, https://biblicaleldership.com/files/pdfs/BE_booklet.pdf. The specific breakdown of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 is from Thabiti Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 51-108.

Positively, that means that elders must be exemplary *members* long before the church ever recognizes them as *elders*. Are they in regular attendance of the church's gatherings? Are they discipling people around them—intentionally helping them to follow Christ? Are they faithful with the responsibilities already given to them? If not, we probably don't want to hold them up as an example to the church to follow.

Negatively, it means that when an elder who is held up as a model for Christian life falls, the ramifications are HUGE not just on their own relationship with God and their families—though that's bad enough—but on the entire church and its gospel witness to the watching world. We don't have to look far to find scandals among pastors that have damaged members' faith, torn apart churches, and ruined their gospel witness in the city. Elders *must* be above reproach.

So would any of your family members, friends, or co-workers be surprised if they heard that you're a leader in the church? Is there anything in your life that, if were exposed, would bring shame on you, the church, or the gospel that you proclaim?

b. A one-woman man

[1 Timothy 3:2 = Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, **the husband of one wife...**]

Second, an elder must be a *one-woman man*. That's a literal translation of the phrase "the husband of one wife."

This does *not* prohibit single men from being elders. It just means that *all* sexual activity was designed by God to be enjoyed *only* in an exclusive covenantal marriage relationship with one spouse. That means that *any* sexual act that is meant to be experienced *only* in that marriage context is forbidden *outside* that marriage context.

<pause>

I know that this text is referring specifically to men, but again, especially in terms of *character*, these qualifications are marks of a healthy *Christian*. And I know that this struggle of sexual lust is not only a struggle for *men*, but also for *women*. So even though I'll be unpacking this section for *men*, if you're a *woman*, please don't "check out." These principles still pertain to you on a *character* level just as much as it pertains to the men.

<pause>

Now sexual lust should never be thought of in a vacuum. Lust always has the context of *marriage* in view.

That means that you're *not* a "one-woman" man if you watch images of naked or sexually revealing women with lustful intent—explicitly pornographic or not—because those desires are meant only to be aroused and pursued in the context of marriage. You're *not* a "one-woman" man if you masturbate even with *no* images in mind because that sexual activity was designed to be enjoyed in the context of marriage—not selfishly by yourself. You're *not* a "one-woman" man if you're touching or being touched in a sexual way that should *only* be experienced in the context of marriage.

It doesn't matter if your wife, your pastor, your parents, or your friend says it's ok. *God* says it's not ok. It is *sin*.

But why is that? Why are these things sinful *outside* the context of marriage? Because Scripture says that marriage was designed by God to reflect *his* relationship with *his* people (Isa. 54:5-6; 62:4-5; Jer. 2:2; 16:9; Hos. 2:16-23); *Christ* is the husband and the *church* is his bride (Eph. 5:23-33; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:6-9). So when we look lustfully at women who are *not* our spouse, we lie about the relationship that is to exist between Christ and the church. When we selfishly stimulate ourselves or others rather than mutually enjoying such sexual experiences with our spouse only, we lie about the relationship that is to exist between Christ and the church.

When we do such things, we basically say that we are *not* in a special, exclusive, covenantal, loving relationship with Christ; rather, we are in a casual, open, noncommittal, self-seeking relationship with Christ where he's just an add-on to our lives inasmuch as he suits our desires, but it's totally fine to selfishly satisfy our own desires in any other way too.

If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you should know how *distorted* of a lie that is. That is *not* the gospel.

Don't misunderstand me though. I am not being any harder on sin than I believe the Bible is. My purpose is not to make you feel guilty and condemned, but I'm saying these things to awaken our sensitivity to sin and to help us recognize how much it distorts our functional understanding of the gospel. It's only when we can see sin as *utterly* sinful that we can begin to truly repent beyond the surface consequences but at the root level of our hearts, and it's only *then* that we can truly experience grace and a transformed life in Christ—and that's what I desperately want for us. I want us to fear for the state of our *souls* more than any potential consequences that may or may not be experienced.

The gospel tells us that we're all created by God and accountable to him, yet we've all sinned against him and rightfully deserve his wrath. But in love God sent Jesus Christ to live the perfect life that we could not live and die the death that we deserve, so that now, if we repent of our sins and believe in the resurrected Christ as our Lord and Savior, we are declared righteous in God's sight, we are being progressively made more righteous in our lives, and we will one day be completely righteous and glorified with our Lord. That's the gospel message.

In other words, the gospel tells us that God is *not* surprised by our sin. He *knew* all our past, present, and future sins—he knew how sinful we *were*, how sinful we *are*, and how sinful we *will continue to be*—and yet, “while we were *still* sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

Scripture gives us numerous examples of how our God is a God who saves murderers (Moses), adulterers (David), cowards (Abraham), liars (Jacob), hypocrites (Judah), and prostitutes (Rahab). No matter what your sin is, no matter how deep you're in it, no matter what the earthly consequences may be, if you repent of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, God will save you to the uttermost. He will save you from the *penalty* of sin, the *power* of sin, and one day even the *presence* of sin itself.

I *desperately* want us to know, trust, and live in this good news, but that begins with being honest about how sin is *utterly* sinful and how *we* are totally depraved in our sin.

If you're struggling with lust, please confess it willingly, fully, and repentantly to trusted brothers or sisters in Christ. I know how easy and tempting it might be to brush it off as something “minor,” but I have seen firsthand how destructive this struggle can be when it's kept in the dark.

We don't want to cultivate a culture of *dismissal* or *condemnation*, but we want a culture where *anyone* can come into the light with their struggles and can find that brothers and sisters around them will take their *sin* seriously and take God's *grace* seriously because they love that person and is willing to help them live in the light and find true freedom in Christ.

<Show morethanabattle.png>

I recommend reading a book called *More Than a Battle* by Joe Rigney within a group of trusted brothers or sisters in Christ, discussing it together and taking steps towards intentionally helping one another follow Christ in this area. The book is written primarily for men, but I think *women* who struggle with this would also greatly benefit from it. Even if you don't particularly struggle with this issue, it's a common enough sin issue that I'd encourage you to equip yourself to better help those around you who likely struggle with this.

c. Sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable

[1 Timothy 3:2 = Therefore an overseer must be... **sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable,** ...]

Third, an elder must be *sober-minded, self-controlled, and respectable*.

The word “sober-minded” can also be translated as “temperate” (NIV) or “vigilant” (KJV). It’s the idea of being watchful or cautious of himself. He does not give in to unchecked passions or emotions. Don’t mistake this for lack of authenticity or realness; this is about being wise. Simply put, it’s foolish to live in such a way where you’re just blindly following your passions from moment to moment. We’re called to be “self-controlled” and “respectable.” Anyone who lashes out in anger; anyone who doesn’t bridle their tongue but just says whatever comes to mind without any consideration for how it affects others; anyone who indulges himself in the latest trends, Netflix, games, shopping, pornography, alcohol, drugs, or any other addictive behavior is *not* “sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable.”

Again, that doesn’t mean that Christians don’t *struggle* with these things; we *do*. And in Christ, we trust that he is progressively sanctifying us more and more into his likeness. But in order for someone to be an elder, he must be sanctified to the point where he is not just foolishly following whatever he thinks and feels in the moment, but he wisely keeps his passions in check, so that he can conduct himself in a wise, loving, and respectable manner.

d. Hospitable

[1 Timothy 3:2 = Therefore an overseer must be... **hospitable**, ...]

Fourth, an elder must be *hospitable*.

Hospitality doesn’t necessarily mean that we host a lot of gatherings in our home. To be “hospitable” literally means to be a “lover of strangers.” That could mean greeting newcomers, building relationships with those who are different than you, generously supporting those in need, or sharing openly and inviting people into your life.

But the key is that you do this for people *regardless* if they reciprocate. There’s nothing special about loving those who love you; but it’s commendable when you love those who *may not* love you in return—and that’s the risk of loving strangers (you don’t know if they’ll reciprocate or not). But you *do* know that being hospitable is a way to *tangibly* share the love of Christ—and that should be all the motivation you need.

So after Sunday Celebration and during Life Group or in other informal contexts, let’s take bold steps to love those who are “strangers” *to us* and those who may *feel* like “strangers” in a group setting.

e. Sober, gentle, peacemaking

[1 Timothy 3:3 = **not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome...**]

Fifth, an elder must be *sober, gentle, and peacemaking*.

In the text, these are all stated negatively: “not a drunkard, not violent..., not quarrelsome.”

You could say that these are negatively stating what was said earlier positively as being “sober-minded, self-controlled, and respectable.”

I’ll focus on *not being quarrelsome*; to state that positively, he’s *peacemaking*. He can discern what hills to die on and what hills are just “foolish, ignorant controversies” that he shouldn’t get sucked into. He doesn’t “breed quarrels” but brings peace to them. He is “kind to everyone,” teaches patiently, and corrects with gentleness, in hope that *God* would be the one to grant repentance and faith and knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 2:23-26).

Would you say that describes you? Do you do everything you can to maintain unity in the church (Rom. 15:5-6; Eph. 4:3; Col. 3:15), or do you add fuel to the fire?

f. Not a lover of money

[1 Timothy 3:3 = not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, **not a lover of money.**]

Sixth, an elder must *not be a lover of money*.

Just like all Christians, elders should be free from greed and love for money, “for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils” (1 Tim. 6:10). This doesn’t mean that elders should struggle to financially provide for their families, but they should live according to their means, which—inasmuch as it’s up the church—should be fair compensation. And elders should be marked by their generous and sacrificial giving, which evidences freedom from the love of money.

So is he a good financial steward of the resources God has entrusted to him? Does he give generously to the work of the church? Does he support the needs of others when opportunities arise? When his income increases, does he increase his standard of *living* or his standard of *giving*? Does he make decisions that show more regard for money than for people?

g. Mature and humble

[1 Timothy 3:6 = **He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.**]

Seventh, an elder must be *mature and humble*.

This is not necessarily just a matter of time and age; you can be old and foolish, or you could be young and wise. Rather, this is a matter of spiritual maturity. And do not mistake *giftedness* for *maturity*. There are exceptionally gifted children who finish university before their teenage years even begin, but that does not mean that they’re ready to be parents. In the same way, there are exceptionally gifted preachers and teachers and communicators and leaders, but that does not mean that they have the spiritual maturity necessary to be a good pastor. In fact, we would be wise to recognize a *less* gifted preacher and teacher—as important as that is—for a pastor who has the spiritual maturity to bear the weight of pastoral responsibilities.

A man may be a successful entrepreneur and businessman but be a terrible father. And a man may be a *less* successful worker in the eyes of the world, but be a model father. Don’t be captivated by giftedness, but learn to recognize true spiritual maturity.

And one of the biggest markers of that is *humility*.

In fact, that’s the rationale that is given. Recent converts are prone toward *conceit*—or pride—when given leadership positions too early. They begin to think more highly of themselves than they ought (Rom. 12:3). They begin to lord it over the flock put under their care (Matt. 20:25; 1 Pet. 5:3), viewing themselves as *above them* rather than as *one of them*. They begin to develop an inability to submit to others, even fellow leaders, especially when they disagree with them. They become insecure to any criticism because their identity becomes attached to their leadership position and perceived competence. They begin to develop an overconfidence in the face of spiritual temptations and dangers, thinking that they can handle it themselves. And pride comes before the fall (Prov. 16:18)—and the higher the leadership position, the greater the fall will be.

h. Respected by outsiders

[1 Timothy 3:7 = Moreover, **he must be well thought of by outsiders**, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.]

Eighth, an elder must be *respected by outsiders*.

This is coming back full circle to being “above reproach.”

If an elder is well-respected *inside* the church but poorly regarded *outside* the church, something is amiss. Of course, the world hated and rejected Jesus, so there is a *right* kind of reproach that is borne by followers of Christ (Matt. 10:24-25), but that’s *not* what this is talking about. This is *not* talking about

people thinking poorly of you because of your *faithfulness* to Christ and the gospel; this is talking about people thinking poorly of you because of your *ungodly* character and behavior.

On some level, this means that an elder *should* be engaged with the wider community outside the church *enough* that those outside the church have an informed opinion about him. If he never engages with others outside the church, something isn't quite right either.

<pause>

Before we transition to the *abilities* category, again, notice that all these character qualifications are quite *ordinary* and what is to be expected of *any* Christian. In that sense, we should *all* aspire to be *character qualified* even if we never actually *become* elders.

3. Abilities

a. Able to teach

[1 Timothy 3:2 = Therefore an overseer must be... **able to teach**,]

Now regarding *abilities*, first, an elder must be *able to teach*.

Every other qualification so far has been fitting for *any* Christian. But this is one qualification that sets an elder apart from any other mature Christian; he *must* be able to teach. Not just “teach” in a generic sense, but he must be able to faithfully teach *God's Word*. In the Great Commission, disciples of Christ are formed and matured when the church takes seriously Christ's call of “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). Faithfully teaching God's Word is central to Christian discipleship and the mission of the church, so elders *must* be able to teach God's Word with clarity, coherence, and fruitfulness.

That means both being able to give instruction in sound doctrine and being able to defend it against false teaching (Titus 1:9). That doesn't necessarily mean that he needs to be a gifted *preacher* per se, but *teaching* can be exhibited in large-group gatherings, small-group gatherings, and one-on-one settings; and it can be in the form of sermons, classes, and counseling. The main point is that he faithfully *understands* and *wields* God's Word in a way that is *clear* and *edifying* to others. But that begins with being *teachable* himself—humbly and joyfully receiving the ministry of God's Word from others

b. Leader at home

[1 Timothy 3:4-5 = He must **manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive**, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?]

Second, an elder must be a *leader at home*.

If a man is not a good husband or father, he will not be a good elder because *if* he does not know how to manage his own household, how will he manage “the household of God” (1 Tim. 3:15)? If a man is a head of household, then this is a minimum requirement. This is “lesser to greater” reasoning—if he cannot manage a *smaller* household, he will *not* be able to manage a *larger* household.

Earlier when speaking of an elder being a “one-woman” man, the focus was on how he loved and cared for his *wife*. Here, the focus is on how he loves and cares for his *children*.

If you have children, would they say that you're an absentee father? An unaffectionate tyrant in the home? Or would they say that you're someone who exemplifies healthy authority in the home that they willingly submit to? Is your household one of law *without* grace, one of grace *without* law, or one of law *and* grace? Only the latter matches a proper working out of the gospel.

Of course, I'll be the first to say that *nobody* is “ready” to be a husband or father; we all grow *into* that role once we're in it. But don't expect your family life to improve if you don't *invest* in it. If you want to have a

great marriage and family, you need to *invest* in it. That’s just a universal principle in life. What you ignore or put little effort into will not grow but will wither and die.

And if that’s how you treat your *own* household, you should not be given leadership responsibility in the household of *God*. We need to invest in our family lives.

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So those are the qualifications of an elder given in 1 Timothy 3, but I need to mention one note.

Scripture is very clear that the office of elder is *only* open to biblically qualified *men*. I won’t be able to give a thorough explanation of this right now, but please allow me to give a few preliminary reasons.

In the passage we just read, we see that an elder is to be a “one-woman” *man* and is to lead his own household well before being qualified to lead the household of God; and in other parts of Scripture, God has called *men* to lead in marriage and parenting (Eph. 5:22-6:4).

Also, in the passage right before giving these qualifications of elders, the apostle Paul writes in...

1 Timothy 2:12 = I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man...

This is *not* a prohibition on *all* teaching, but specifically on the *authoritative* doctrinal instruction in the public assembly reserved for *elders*.⁵

Let me elaborate briefly. It’s important to distinguish between the *general* and *special* teaching offices.⁶

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General Teaching Office (All Believers – Men & Women)	<u>Colossians 3:16</u> = Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom...
Special Teaching Office (Elders – Men Only)	<u>1 Timothy 2:12</u> = I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man...

The *general* teaching office includes *all* believers and describes the general ministry of edification. For example, *all* believers are commanded to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, *teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom*, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). So that’s the *general* teaching office.

But the *special* teaching office is reserved only for biblically qualified *elders* (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-3) whom God equips and whom he calls his church to recognize, obey, and submit to (1 Cor. 12:28-30; Eph. 4:11; Heb. 13:7, 17). The office of elder is a leadership position of *authority*.

So when it says that women are *not* permitted to teach or exercise authority over a man, it is best understood within the context of *public worship* and in reference to the *special* teaching office of elder in the local church—not as an absolute *gender* distinction.

⁵ Douglas Moo (“What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men?” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, eds. John Piper and Wayne Grudem [Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1991], 181) explains: “The word teach and its cognate nouns teaching (didaskalia) and teacher (didaskalos) are used in the New Testament mainly to denote the careful transmission of the tradition concerning Jesus Christ and the authoritative proclamation of God’s will to believers in light of that tradition (see especially 1 Timothy 4:11: ‘Command and teach these things;’ 2 Timothy 2:2; Acts 2:42; Romans 12:7). *While the word can be used more broadly to describe the general ministry of edification that takes place in various ways (e.g., through teaching, singing, praying, reading Scripture [Colossians 3:16]), the activity usually designated by teach is plainly restricted to certain individuals who have the gift of teaching (see 1 Corinthians 12:28-30; Ephesians 4:11).* This makes it clear that not all Christians engaged in teaching. In the pastoral epistles, teaching always has this restricted sense of authoritative doctrinal instruction” (italics for emphasis are mine).

⁶ John M. Frame, “May Women Teach Adult Sunday School Classes?” May 21, 2012, <https://frame-poythress.org/may-women-teach-adult-sunday-school-classes/>.

So *brothers*, if a sister in Christ pulls you aside to *teach* or *admonish* you regarding something in your life, they are obeying Colossians 3:16 in the *general* office of teaching that we *all* hold as believers, and you would be wise to listen humbly and learn from them. Do not pull out 1 Timothy 2:12, which is regarding the *special* office of teaching, as an excuse not to listen to your godly sisters; that's a *misuse* of Scripture, that's *disrespectful* to your sister, and that's *detrimental* to your own spiritual well-being.

Now to be clear, men and women are *equally* created in the image of God—and have equal dignity, value, and standing—but they are still nonetheless created *differently* by God's good design. Both men and women are co-heirs of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7), who together reflect, in a *complementary* way, the beauty of the image of God.

When we look at other parts of Scripture, we see that women are given spiritual gifts without gender distinction (Acts 2:17), encouraged to teach sound doctrine to other women (Titus 2:3-5) and children (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15), permitted to teach sound doctrine to men outside public worship (Acts 18:24-28) and to speak prophetically inside public worship (1 Cor. 11:5), as long as it is *not* done in (or confused with) the *special* teaching office or function of elder.

<pause>

So those are elder qualifications; now let's look at...

B. Deacon Qualifications

And we'll go through these a bit more quickly.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 = ⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. ¹³ For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Since there is so much overlap with elder and deacon qualifications, I won't expound these in detail. Rather, I'll point out a general pattern and then make one important note.

In terms of general pattern, just like "above reproach" was an umbrella qualification for elders, here, "dignified"—or "worthy of respect" (NIV)—is the umbrella qualification for deacons. Also, there are three "negatives" and three "positives."⁷ Negatively, deacons are *not* to be double-tongued, addicted to much wine, or greedy for dishonest gain. Positively, they are to hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, be tested and proven, and have a faithful family life.

Now one important note that I want to make is that the office of deacon is open to *both* men *and* women.

If we look at verse 11, "Their wives likewise" can also be translated as "Women likewise" in reference to women deacons. This translation is more likely for a few reasons.

- First, the possessive pronoun "their" in "their wives" is not actually present in the text, but it's inferred, and "wives" can also be translated as "women."
- Second, the qualifications for women deacons in verse 11 are roughly equivalent to that of deacons in verse 8:
 - dignified / dignified,
 - not slanderers / not double-tongued,
 - sober-minded / not addicted to much wine,
 - faithful in all things / not greedy for dishonest gain.
- Third, if *deacons* were to have qualifications for *their* wives, then surely *elders* would *also* have qualifications for *their* wives, but that's not the case.

⁷ This breakdown of 1 Timothy 3:8-13 is from Matt Smetherst, *Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 62-69.

- Fourth, negatively speaking, Scripture *nowhere* prohibits women deacons as it does women elders.
- And fifth, positively speaking, a woman named “Phoebe” is called a “deaconess” in Romans 16:1.⁸

So those are deacon qualifications.

<pause>

So first, what are elders and deacons to *be*? And second...

II. What are elders and deacons to *do*?

In the big picture...

Elders *lead* ministry, deacons *facilitate* ministry, and the congregation *does* ministry.⁹

This gives us a good paradigm for how the officers function in the life of the church. Elders and deacons don’t *do* all the ministry, but they *lead* and *facilitate* ministry that the *congregation* does.

Let’s first look at...

A. Elder Responsibilities

When we look at the synonymous terms used for elder—that is, pastor, overseer, and elder—we can already begin to understand what elders are responsible for in the life of the church.¹⁰

<Show elderresponsibilitieschart-1.jpeg>

Synonymous Terms	Emphasis	Responsibilities
Pastor	Feeding, nurturing, protecting of the flock	Doctrine Discipline

First, the term “pastor” highlights the feeding, nurturing, and protecting of the flock.

In Scripture, pastoring is linked with *teaching*. When describing the gifts that the ascended Christ gives to his church, the apostle Paul pairs together “pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11), which is best understood as “teaching shepherds” or “pastor-teachers.”

That’s why elders must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). In another list of elder qualifications, it elaborates this qualification in...

Titus 1:9 = He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

Here, we see that pastors *feed* and *nurture* their flocks by faithfully teaching *sound doctrine* from God’s Word and they *protect* their flock by calling out false doctrine that isn’t in accordance with God’s Word.

As part of *protecting*, elders should *pray* for those entrusted to their care. The apostles told the church in Jerusalem that they must “devote [themselves] to *prayer* and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). And Jesus said to the apostle Peter in...

⁸ For summary defenses of both positions (against women deacons vs. for women deacons) but concluding for women deacons, see Matt Smetherst, *Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 135-152.

⁹ Jamie Dunlop, “Deacons: Shock-Absorbers and Servants,” *9Marks Journal*, March 31, 2010, <https://www.9marks.org/article/deacons-shock-absorbers-and-servants/>.

¹⁰ This overlapping paradigm of terms (pastor, overseer, elder) and duties (doctrine, discipline, direction, distinction) is from Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2014), 45-57.

Luke 22:31-32 = “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, **but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.** And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

So elders are to feed, nurture, and protect God’s people through the ministry of the Word and prayer.

Closely tied to teaching sound *doctrine* is also the carrying out of *discipline* when members’ lives do not align with the gospel we profess, for God’s Word is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

While church discipline is the work of the *entire* church (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Cor. 2:6-8; Gal. 1:6-9; 6:1-2), pastors must *teach* and *lead* the church in the healthy practice of discipline.

<Show elderresponsibilitieschart-2.jpeg>

Synonymous Terms	Emphasis	Responsibilities
Pastor	Feeding, nurturing, protecting of the flock	Doctrine Discipline
Overseer	Leadership and direction for the church	Direction

Second, the term “overseer” highlights the leadership and *direction* for the church.

Overseers have governing or ruling authority. The Greeks used this term (*episkopos*) to define an office that had superintending functions, whether in political or religious circles, and implied that they would care and watch over others, especially those in need. It was a title given to state officials who acted as supervisors in maintaining public order.

Hebrew 13:17 = Obey your leaders and submit to them, for **they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.** Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Elders are called to keep watch over the souls that are entrusted to their care. In this way, just as Christ is called the Chief “Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25; 5:4), elders are to be *under*-shepherds and *under*-overseers of their members’ souls in the authoritative office entrusted to them.

Since the elders are given this leadership responsibility of oversight, they are called to *direct* the affairs of the church *well* (1 Tim. 5:17 NIV), for the good of their members—and they will one day stand before God to “give an account” for how they carried out their responsibility.

<Show elderresponsibilitieschart-3.jpeg>

Synonymous Terms	Emphasis	Responsibilities
Pastor	Feeding, nurturing, protecting the flock	Doctrine Discipline
Overseer	Leadership and direction for the church	Direction
Elder	Spiritual maturity required for the office	Distinction

Third, the term “elder” highlights the spiritual maturity required for the office. This is needed because elders are to be exemplary models for the rest of the congregation of what it looks like to follow Christ in the fellowship of the church. Elders are called to be *distinct* as “examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3). That’s why much of their qualifications are related to their *character*.

Positively, the church is exhorted to “imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). Negatively, later in 1 Timothy, elders are to be publicly admonished and possibly even removed from office if they persist in sin, in order to serve as a negative *example* to the rest of the congregation (1 Tim. 5:19-21).

<pause>

So in summary, we can understand elder responsibilities as the four Ds, which are embedded in the three synonymous terms used to describe elders.

The four Ds are doctrine, discipline, direction, and distinction. “Pastor” encompasses doctrine and discipline, “overseer” encompasses direction, and “elder” encompasses distinction.

<pause>

One last thing I’ll say about elder responsibilities is that they were never meant to rest solely on the shoulders of a *single* elder. The responsibilities are too weighty, and no man can bear them alone for very long in a healthy manner.

Throughout Scripture, unless a particular elder is addressed, we see elders *always* used in the *plural* meaning that each local church had more than one elder (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 22-23; 16:4; 20:17, 28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1).

However, the plurality principle should *never* trump biblical qualifications. We should *aim* to have a plurality of elders to shoulder the leadership responsibilities in the church *together*, but *never* at the expense of only having biblically *qualified* elders. Better to have *one* biblically *qualified* elder than to have *three* biblically *unqualified* elders.

<pause>

Now let’s briefly turn to...

B. Deacon Responsibilities

In short, deacons are to be “shock-absorbers” and “servants.”¹¹ I’m sure that sounds a bit strange, so let me explain.

First, deacons are to be...

1. Shock-absorbers

In Acts 6, there was a potentially divisive issue that was brought up to the apostles. Within the church in Jerusalem, the Greek-speaking Jews began to complain “against” the Hebrew-speaking Jews because their widows were being neglected in the food distribution. Essentially, there was a tangible need in the church that was not being properly met and it was beginning to cause divisiveness within the church.

The seven were thus chosen to help preserve the unity by meeting this tangible need that had arisen in the church. In other words, they “absorbed the shock” of the complaints and problems in order to maintain unity in the church. The *aim* was to preserve the unity of the body, but the *means* was by stepping up to serve to meet the tangible need.

Many see the dynamics between the *apostles* and the *seven* in Acts 6 as a paradigm to understand the relationship between *elders* and *deacons*.

Therefore, *deacons* should be “shock-absorbers” who spot and meet tangible needs to protect and promote church unity.¹²

<pause>

¹¹ Jamie Dunlop, “Deacons: Shock-Absorbers and Servants,” *9Marks Journal*, March 31, 2010, <https://www.9marks.org/article/deacons-shock-absorbers-and-servants/>.

¹² Matt Smetherst. *Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 74-79.

Deacons are also to be...

2. Servants

The word “deacon” literally means “servant.” But they are a particular type of servant; they serve to support the ministry of the *elders* for the overall good of the *church*.

Again, in Acts 6, although this was an important and pressing issue, the apostles understood that the best way they could lead and serve the church was *not* by getting involved in coordinating all the tangible needs of the church, but by giving themselves more fully to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Therefore, the seven were appointed to serve as their “assistants”¹³ to coordinate the tangible needs of the church in order to support the ministry of the apostles.

In a similar way, *deacons* serve as “assistants” to the *elders* in order to serve and support them in carrying out their primary responsibilities.¹⁴

<pause>

Let me just note one difference between elders and deacons.¹⁵

Deacons are *never* called “overseers” in Scripture. They may have *some* oversight over a *particular* ministry or function of the church, but it is *subordinate* and *delegated* authority under the general oversight of the *elders* who have responsibility for and spiritual authority over the *whole* congregation.¹⁶

<pause>

Now if we pull out to see the big picture again, we see that...

Elders *lead* ministry, deacons *facilitate* ministry, and the congregation *does* ministry.¹⁷

Or in the language of Ephesians 4, Christ gives leaders to his church as gifts “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (vv. 11-12).

<pause>

Now before we close, let’s think about the situation in Acts 6 again, and I want us to notice how *discipleship* permeates the entire account.

The church was *making disciples* and the number of disciples *increased*, the problem *arose* because the number of disciples *increased*, the problem was *resolved* through *mature disciples* stepping up into the role of leadership, and as a result, the Word *increased* and the number of disciples *multiplied*.

They were a church effectively making disciples. When the church in Jerusalem needed *mature disciples* who were *qualified* and *willing* to serve, it doesn’t seem like they had problems finding them.

For us, I know there are a lot of problems in our church, but what I want us to see and understand is that the *biggest vacuum* in our church is *mature disciples* willing to commit to lead and serve.

So once again, we must learn how to *recognize* biblically qualified leaders and we *ourselves* should *aspire* to be biblical qualified leaders—even if we never lead and serve the church in a formal office.

Life Application

¹³ Alexander Strauch, *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God’s Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth, 2017).

¹⁴ Matt Smetherst. *Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 79-84.

¹⁵ Matt Smetherst. *Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 84.

¹⁶ Alexander Strauch, *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons* (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis & Roth, 2017), 53-54.

¹⁷ Jamie Dunlop, “Deacons: Shock-Absorbers and Servants,” *9Marks Journal*, March 31, 2010, <https://www.9marks.org/article/deacons-shock-absorbers-and-servants/>.

1. Pray that current and future church leaders would be biblically qualified.
2. Pray and ask others to help you to develop in biblical qualifications even if you never serve formally in a leadership office.
3. Pray about serving more formally to meet some of the tangible needs in our church.

So leadership in the church is not meant to be *abused* or *abandoned*, but once again...

The One Thing

***We need biblically qualified leaders
to lead and serve Christ's church.***

Conclusion

Can we all stand?