

THE OFFICE OF AN ELDER IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY: EXEGESIS OF 1 TIMOTHY 3:1-7 AND ITS ECCLESIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE TODAY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the office and character requirements of an overseer (elder/bishop) through an exegetical study of 1 Timothy 3:1–7, situating the passage within its historical and literary context in early Christianity and drawing out its ecclesiological relevance for the contemporary church. It argues that the qualifications outlined by Paul are not merely administrative criteria but deeply theological markers of spiritual maturity, moral integrity, and communal responsibility, intended to safeguard sound doctrine and promote effective church leadership. By analysing key Greek terms and the broader New Testament usage of leadership titles, the study demonstrates the functional interchangeability of roles such as bishop, elder, pastor, and overseer, while emphasizing the primacy of character over charisma or institutional authority. The paper further contends that many modern challenges in church leadership stem from a neglect or misapplication of these biblical standards, and it calls for a renewed commitment to scripturally grounded leadership formation in the twenty-first-century church.

KEYWORDS: Exegetical study, Eldership, Church Leadership, Ecclesiology, and Qumran community.

INTRODUCTION

Effective spiritual leadership is key to effective church growth. The church in the twenty-first century is in dire need of spiritual leaders who will receive and hand over the baton of leadership to the next generations, just as it was in the past. Jesus is the owner, the head, and the ruler of the church. According to George Knight, Jesus has, through the work of the Spirit, given to his church men as officers to equip believers for service, so that the church may more faithfully serve Christ in maturity and love [Eph 4:11f-16] (1). The word of God has set a standard as a guide for selecting and appointing church leaders. Richard Mayhue alludes that both the Old and New Testaments agree on some fundamental qualities that identify true spiritual leadership and expose the counterfeit of any kind of leadership in whatever sphere (215).

It is, therefore, God's design in the New Testament for each local congregation of the Lord to strive for spiritual maturity. Opportunity abounds everywhere where spiritual leaders are groomed and appointed in every church (Acts 14:23) to take charge of the day-to-day administrative running of the church on earth. Timothy was in Ephesus to nurture the church in sound doctrine. This involves training and appointing elders for the church. The terms 'bishop,' 'overseer,' 'elder,' 'presbyter,' 'pastor,' and

‘shepherd’ are used interchangeably in the New Testament (Acts 20:17, 28). The question is, how should the twenty-first-century church understand the concept and functions of the church’s elders or overseers in an era where biblical concepts seem almost misunderstood and misapplied? Therefore, this paper seeks to trace the historical/literary setting of this periscope (1 Tim 3:1-7), offer some exegetical insights on how some of the concepts are used in the text, and help the contemporary church discover the relevance of the text today.

The word “elder” is from the Greek word *presbuteros*, which connotes “older in age.” It is perhaps used in contrast to the younger one in age. According to Ed Glasscock, what exactly constituted an “older” man is open to debate, but obviously, it contrasts with a young man (67). He maintains that Arndt and Gingrich suggest 50 to 56 years of age as the minimum age for leadership. Collaborating this view, Justin Rogers states, “In ancient Israel, the Levites were to serve as priests until age fifty and then retire (Num 8:25)” (40).

Meanwhile, Glasscock states that an example from the Qumran community sets the age of 30 as the minimum required years for a man to serve as an elder in the community. And “since Qumran’s background and roots are thoroughly Jewish and its existence was close to the apostolic period; it is a reliable example of what that culture viewed as the minimum age for leadership” (67). He continues that age 30 seems to have been generally accepted as the time when men are considered to have garnered enough experience, wisdom, and maturity required for leadership roles (70). No wonder Jesus at age 12, despite his wealth of knowledge and wisdom, his superior knowledge did not set him out for public leadership responsibility but waited for an additional 18 years during which period he “kept increasing in wisdom and stature” (Luke 2:52 NASB) before venturing into the public leadership role (Glasscock 67). Nevertheless, Samuel Ngewa argues that even though the title “elder” seems to emphasize someone’s age and maturity, the title “overseer” focuses attention on the office being held (60).

Paul listed the qualifications of Christian men who can be appointed as elders in the church in the pastoral letters of 1 Timothy and Titus. David Mappes holds that Paul’s purpose in listing the qualifications of elders in 1 Tim 3:1-7 is to help Timothy differentiate between true and false teachers by emphasizing the teaching that must be accompanied by personal godliness (212). He further states that “these leadership qualifications present a code of conduct that enhances and illumines sound teaching” (214).

Text and Translation

Πιστὸς ὁ λόγος. Εἴ τις ἐπισκοπῆς ὀρέγεται, καλοῦ ἔργου ἐπιθυμεῖ. ²δεῖ οὖν τὸν ἐπίσκοπον ἀνεπίλημπτον εἶναι, μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα, νηφάλιον σώφρονα κόσμιον φιλόξενον διδακτικόν, ³μὴ πάροινον μὴ πλήκτην, ἀλλὰ ἐπεικῇ ἄμαχον ἀφιλάργυρον, ⁴τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου καλῶς προϊστάμενον, τέκνα ἔχοντα ἐν ὑποταγῇ, μετὰ πάσης σεμνότητος ⁵(εἰ δέ τις τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου προστῆναι οὐκ οἶδεν, πῶς ἐκκλησίας θεοῦ ἐπιμελήσεται;), ⁶μὴ νεόφυτον, ἵνα μὴ τυφωθεῖς εἰς κρίμα ἐμπέσῃ τοῦ διαβόλου. ⁷δεῖ δὲ καὶ μαρτυρίαν καλὴν ἔχειν ἀπὸ τῶν ἑξωθεν, ἵνα μὴ εἰς ὀνειδισμόν ἐμπέσῃ καὶ παγίδα τοῦ διαβόλου (1Tim. 3:1-7 BGT).

It is therefore translated as:

¹ Faithful (is) the saying. If anyone aspires to overseer-ship, he desires a good work. ² Must, therefore, the overseer be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not given to wine not a quick-tempered, but gentle peaceable not loving money, ⁴ managing his own household well, having children in submission, with all dignity ⁵ (but if someone does not know (how) to manage his own household, how will he care for (the) church of God?) ⁶ not a recent convert, lest being puffed up he might fall into (the) judgment of the devil. ⁷ But it is necessary also to have good testimony from the ones outside, so that he may not fall into the disgrace and trap of the devil.

Considering the text-critical insights from the textual apparatus, it is obvious that the pericope has 'πιστὸς' as the major textual variant, and it has an A-rating. This simply means that there is a high level of certainty that the word was there in the original manuscript and not a later addition or interpolation as a result of the scribal activities. The word *πιστὸς* is an adjective–nominative masculine singular, and its lexical form is still *πιστός*. It functions adjectivally to *ὁ λόγος*. Some of the early manuscripts, such as Sinaiticus (4th century), Alexandrinus (4th century), and several other uncials manuscripts and lectionaries, Vulgate (4th century), and some early church fathers support the variant reading that has *πιστὸς*. Another variant reading is *ανθρωπινος*, and this reading is only supported by Codex Bezae (5th century), and this attempts to parallel 1 Tim 1:15. While minuscule 256 omits *πιστὸς ὁ λόγος*. R. C. H. Lenski states that Zahn rejects the reading *πιστὸς* even when it is overwhelmingly attested by most of the earliest and most reliable manuscripts and prefers *ανθρωπινος*, which is but weakly attested and found only in the Western text and in some Latin versions (576).

Commenting on this, Bruce Metzger also states that the origin of the variant reading *ανθρωπινος ὁ λόγος* supported by some western witnesses, including Codex Bezae (D) is puzzling (572). Metzger carefully explains the variant in this passage when he argues:

If the evidence were confined to Latin witnesses (as is the case for the similar variant at 1:15), the translation *humanus* could be taken as a very free rendering of *πιστὸς* (*hum.* = *benignus*), but this leaves unexplained the origin of the reading in D* [the theory that the Greek text of this manuscript was influenced by the Latin translation is disputable] (572).

Metzger maintains that perhaps the variants in the Greek text arose when the translators or copyists mistakenly or deliberately substituted *ανθρωπινος* for *πιστὸς* (573). Whatever the case may have been, Metzger thinks that the committee was so impressed by the overwhelming weight and variety of reliable “witnesses that support *πιστὸς*, and thought it improbable that *πιστὸς* was introduced as a substitute for *ανθρωπινος* by the copyists who recalled the expression *πιστὸς ὁ λόγος*” as the phrase reflects in some passages including 1 Timothy 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:11; Titus 3:8 (576). Metzger additionally asserts that after *πλήκτην* in 1 Tim 3:3, the Textus Receptus, as well as some minuscules, insert *mē aischrokerdē*. These words are a gloss obtained from Titus 1:7. However, these words are not supported by some major manuscripts such as

Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, and Codex Bezae (of the 4th and 5th centuries, respectively), and other uncial texts (573). Incidentally, it is *πιστὸς ὁ λόγος* that impacts the English translation.

HISTORICAL/LITERARY CONTEXT OF 1 TIMOTHY 3:1-7

Elders have occupied sensitive positions of leadership in the Old Testament (Num 11:16-30). Moses was given wise counsel to appoint elders from the people to help in judging matters among the people, and only the most difficult issues were to be brought to him to handle (Ex 18:27). In a like fashion, the Sanhedrin, which probably had its beginning during the Second Temple Judaism, consisted of elders of the Jews. Glasscock opines that “the apostles probably appointed elders and deacons in the church soon after Pentecost [Acts 6:1-6 implies so]” (71). Glasscock maintains that the first-century Christians had probably “inherited from Judaism the ordinances of the Jewish Church. To administer these, there was the Sanhedrin.... Congregations which consisted chiefly of Jewish Christians had ‘elders’ analogous to ‘elders’ among the Jews” (71). Glasscock insists:

This point clarifies the origin of the office and perhaps explains why qualifications were not given until Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus, who were appointing and training elders in Gentile churches. Gentiles did not have the same understanding of the office because in their society, it was a secular post filled by greedy and untrustworthy men. By contrast, New Testament elders were godly men who were to take spiritual responsibility for their congregations (Acts 20:28). The elders in the Jerusalem church knew their role in God’s program in the church (Acts 15). They worked along with the apostles and James to settle the dispute over circumcision (71).

Lenski states that Paul is not giving a new instruction to Timothy or Titus to arrange for elders’ offices or even to define functions for their scope for at the time of Paul’s writing such offices were already in existence and in use, hence Timothy is not merely to ensure that only the qualified men are appointed to such offices but also to engage in the proper training of such men. Paul and Barnabas, in the first missionary campaign, went to various cities and towns and preached the gospel, established churches, and appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:22-23). Soon after Paul left Ephesus and elders were appointed in the congregation, a year later, he summoned them to meet with him at Miletus when he stopped over on his way to Jerusalem (576). The concept of elders in the local congregation shapes and greatly influences the vocabulary of Paul and other New Testament writers (Glasscock 70).

FUNCTIONS OF OVERSEERS IN A LOCAL CHURCH

According to Jacobie M. Helena Visser, the Greek word *ἐπίσκοπος* literally means “overseer.” While on one hand, the term indicates a function of “taking care of” or “looking after.” On the other hand, overseeing indicates the notion of exercising authority over others (124). August Hardt, in his view, posits that these qualifications enumerated by Paul in 1 Tim 3:1-7 may be grouped under the following five headings:

Moral integrity; Emotional stability; Aptness to teach; Spiritual maturity, and Success as a parent (799). The primary duty of elders is service, service, and service. Elders are to see to “the general welfare of the church and its members (Ngewa 71).” Spiritual and qualified leaders look for opportunities to serve others and not to be served. Jesus, a leader *par excellence*, “teaches the perfect model of servant-leadership” (Rogers 39). Carson and Douglas state that the qualities that are to be sought in overseers are an indication that elders are honoured people who need to be treated with respect and, if possible, be paid, considering the enormous nature of service they offer [1 Tim 5:17-20] (564).

Types of Virtues Required of an Overseer

Kevin Smith holds that the qualifications of an overseer begin with a general requirement that an elder “must be above reproach” or blameless (*δεῖ οὖν τὸν ἐπίσκοπον ἀνεπίλημπτον εἶναι*). This entails that the candidate must be beyond criticism, i.e., not give room to an opponent to seize an opportunity in his life to base charges against him (28). Similarly, Ngewa posits that this requirement is the most important one because all other requirements can be summarized in this one. He agrees with the view of Smith that someone who is “above reproach” is “not open to attack” and lives a life that is “not open to censure.” An overseer should not have an obvious defect in character or conduct, either in the past or at present life, which will allow the malicious men, whether within or without the church, to exploit to his discredit (60-61). Ngewa argues further that not leaving a loophole for criticism does not mean that an overseer is completely free from “both internal and visible sin. If this were the requirement, then no one in Ephesus or anywhere else would qualify, for the New Testament explicitly states that we all sin” (61) and if anyone claims that he has not sinned he makes God a liar and the truth is not in him (1 John 1:10).

Another character requirement or qualification is that of being “the husband of one wife” (*μῑᾱς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα*). David Smith states that the Greek words on this can be rendered literally as “a one-woman-man” or “a one-wife-man.” He further argues that whether the idea of “husband of one wife” refers to one wife at a time or one wife for a lifetime is an issue that generates dispute or debate among scholars (13). Elisha Kwabena Marfo posits that scholars are widely divided over the interpretation of the phrase “husband of one wife.” For instance, “while some hold the view that remarriage after divorce makes one ineligible to serve as an elder, others think that a man who wishes to serve as an elder or deacon must be married” (117-18). For instance, Ngewa states that one possibility of interpreting this is that “an overseer must not be a bachelor. He must be married.” The very possibility he seems to dismiss when he states that if marriage is a requirement, then that would have disqualified Paul and Timothy because they were not married (61).

Michael Eaton also holds that 1 Pet 5:1 seems to suggest that “apostles were elders” (857). With this view, it seems Ngewa is going off the point because Paul and Timothy were not overseers in the church rather they were doing the work of either an apostle or an evangelist or both but not serving in the capacity or office of an overseer even though one can admit that to some extent there is an overlap of the roles of apostles and that of elders (Acts 6:1-4). Marfo observes correctly that some scholars

stress that a bishop or an elder must be a man, implying that women are excluded from this office (125). God has always desired that leadership in the church be handled by men.

Again, Smith states that at least five interpretations may be assigned to these requirements. Firstly, this term may refer to the necessity for an overseer to be married. Secondly, the meaning may be that the candidate is not a polygamist. Thirdly, he must be faithful to his wife, not possessing a concubine or a mistress. Fourthly, he must not be divorced and remarried, and lastly, he must not be a widower who has remarried (13-14). In view of this complexity, Hardt thinks that the “husband of one wife” is the best view that fits in properly to this pericope and is nothing but “one wife at a time.” Invariably, “this is the view of the Greek Church, which requires all priests to be married men, but forbids a second marriage” (800). Smith thinks that the emphasis is on one wife. Hence, this could be understood to mean that a prospective elder should not have more than one wife now (32) and must be legitimately married to his wife, especially in the eyes of God, whether he was formerly a widower or not, but certainly not a divorcee.

In his submission, Kevin Smith suggests that the meaning of this phrase *μἰᾱς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα* can fit into one of the following five proposals: “1. Prohibiting divorce 2. Prohibiting remarriage: married only once 3. Prohibiting polygamy: a husband of only one wife 4. Requiring marriage: a husband of one wife, and 5. Requiring fidelity: a faithful husband” (31). Marfo concludes that “the husband of one wife” in the pericope points to the quality of the marriage institution and not the number of wives one has. Hence, the phrase intends to point out marriage fidelity in the character of the person who desires the office of eldership and not the marriage to only one wife per se. (130). However, this paper argues that just as marital fidelity is very important, so is the legitimacy of marriage. Hence, one must be married to only one wife at a time, in the case of a widower. It also means that since an elder in the church is expected to be a good example to others, Christian men are to learn how to be married to one wife, as this depicts the quality of fidelity in them.

On the requirement that an overseer should be “able to teach” (v. 2), Daniel Stevens states that the term implies that the “person is so prepared in knowledge and personal deportment that he is ‘instructive’ as an individual” (16). To capture the aptness of the Christian leaders, Stevens maintains that this primarily demands that overseers “must be the type of people who, by their character, mould students after the model of Jesus Christ.” But it also implies that they are prepared with an appropriate and effective methodology (16-17). Benjamin Merkle collaborates with this view when he states that “it is clear from the New Testament that an elder or overseer is primarily a teacher” (187). Jesus demonstrates what it means to be a spiritual teacher and a leader through his lifestyle (Luke 2:44-47) and humility. God also expects overseers to possess a deeper knowledge of the scriptures and to know how to respond swiftly to false teachings that may secretly creep into the church. Elders of the church must be trained in the word and, through their education and moral power, impart sound Christian teaching to the church and oppose false teachers that impact the church negatively (Ngewa 64). The elders are “responsible for both feeding the flock of God and convicting the gainsayer” (Stancliff 134).

Knight recognizes the need for the plurality of elders in the church as it is clearly required by the Scripture and goes further to add that all the elders are to rule together and are together responsible for the teaching of the church, even though all may not have the same gifts. This means that some elders will be more experienced and gifted to teach than others, and therefore, in distinction to those others, they can make the ministry of teaching their vocation, and together with those others who may not be gifted in teaching like them, will possess the same authority of overseeing the flock of God (11). Knight maintains that the recognition of the different manifestations of gifts, especially that of teaching, within the unified eldership exalts the sovereignty of Christ's Lordship, who gives gifts as he wills for the good of his church and also helps to ensure that that most needed gift of teaching Christ's Word has a full impact and free course in the body of Christ, the church (11-12).

One other area in the qualifications that seems disputable among the scholars is the requirement that a would-be elder should not be "given to wine" in v. 3. This is one of the qualifications stated in the negative. R. C. H. Lenski states that the Greek word *mē paroinon* carries the idea of someone who lingers long beside wine, a winebibber, or a tippler (585). Ngewa submits that "Paul's repetition of this command in 1 Tim 3:8; Titus 1:7 suggests that drunkenness was a problem in Ephesus and in Crete, where Titus served." He goes on to suggest that if that is the case then this explains why Timothy decided to abstain totally from wine (1 Tim 5:23). He however argues that some have used this passage to argue that Christians should not drink at all, but the point here is not about drinking but a "warning against being drunk, which would have been seen as a vice and a disgrace in Ephesians society" (65). On this, Stancliff offers the following advice, "The best solution for a man who serves as an elder ... today is to abstain from alcoholic beverages completely. This will leave no question whatever" (135).

The list also requires that a would-be elder should have first demonstrated his ability to lead the church by being a successful parent at home. This requirement is crucial and a prerequisite to being able to manage the church of God. Benjamin Merkle alludes to this when he states, "Paul declared that an overseer's children must be submissive because managing a household has many similarities to caring for God's church." He goes on to say that having submissive children at home and managing them well is crucial to the tasks overseers carry out (178). The question that re-echoes is, "For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" The "one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity" stands a better chance of effectively managing the church of God. This means that an elder must have children, whether biological or not, whom he can train in the fear of God. As a parent, he "must lead them in such a way that they are respectful and submissive" (Merkle 184).

Other requirements highlighted in the pericope include temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome but one with a good reputation from both within and without the church, not a lover of money, and also not a recent convert lest he puffs up and falls into the trap and disgrace of the devil. The list of qualifications in 1 Tim 3:1-7 is not to be regarded as exhaustive. Charles Erdman states that these qualifications demand moral character rather than mental excellence. "They refer more to temperament, tact, experience, reputation than to

intellectual gifts” (47). His character is the most important consideration and not his mere personal achievements (Glasscock 70).

CONCLUSION

Since the command to appoint elders in the church is timely and is for the good of the church, caution must be exercised in obeying this biblical injunction to avoid the mistake of appointing unqualified men. Leon Stancliff rightly observes, “It is true that serious damage can be done to a congregation if men are appointed to the office without meeting the qualifications God has set up. Men who are immature, greedy, or impulsive can scatter God’s sheep and destroy their souls” (129-30).

Notwithstanding this warning, concerted and deliberate steps should be taken by each local congregation to train prospective elders or members who will help qualify those desiring to serve as elders in the local churches. In the first century, it did not take too long for elders to be appointed in the local congregations because those early Christians did not see these qualifications as only what the would-be elders would pursue in isolation from others, but these are basic requirements for all Christians as long as salvation is the primary goal of each Christian. The only difference between being a faithful Christian and being an elder in the church is being married and having children. Elders are to be married and have children (either biological or not). One can choose not to be married or even not to have children and will make heaven if he/she remains faithful to Christ and obeys the other requirements in the text. But for being an elder or a deacon in the church, one must be married.

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