

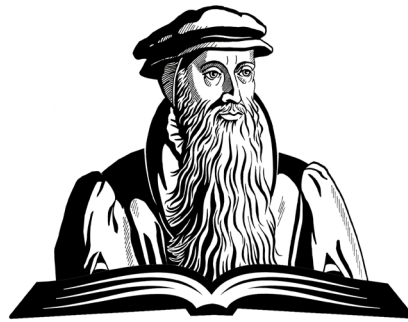
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

Biblical Eldership

by Rev. Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture #3

Qualifications



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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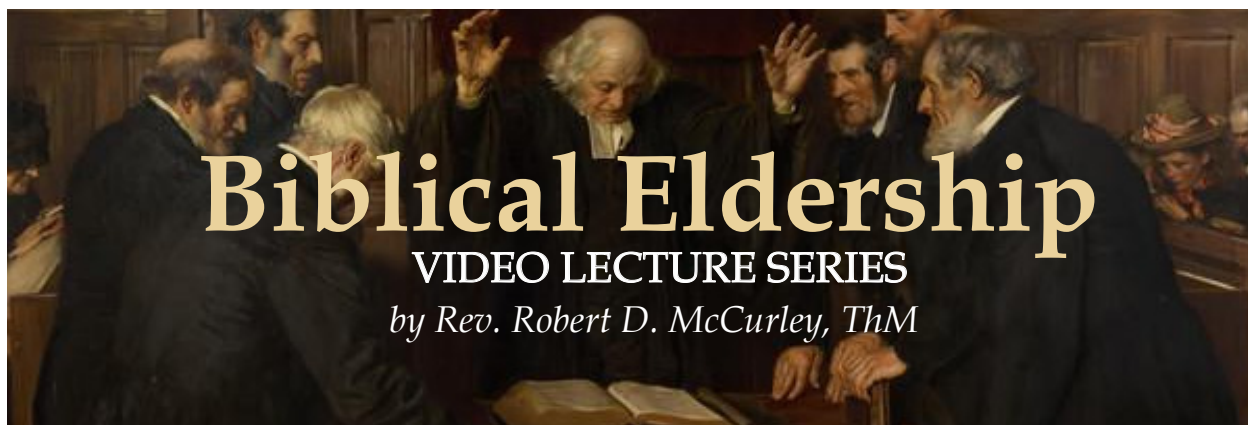
Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Authorized King James Version.

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Rev. Robert D. McCurley, ThM, is minister of the gospel at Greenville Presbyterian Church, in Taylors, South Carolina, USA, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Presbytery of the United States.

www.greenvillepresbyterian.com

Cover image: “The Ordination of Elders in a Scottish Kirk,” 1891, John Henry Lorimer



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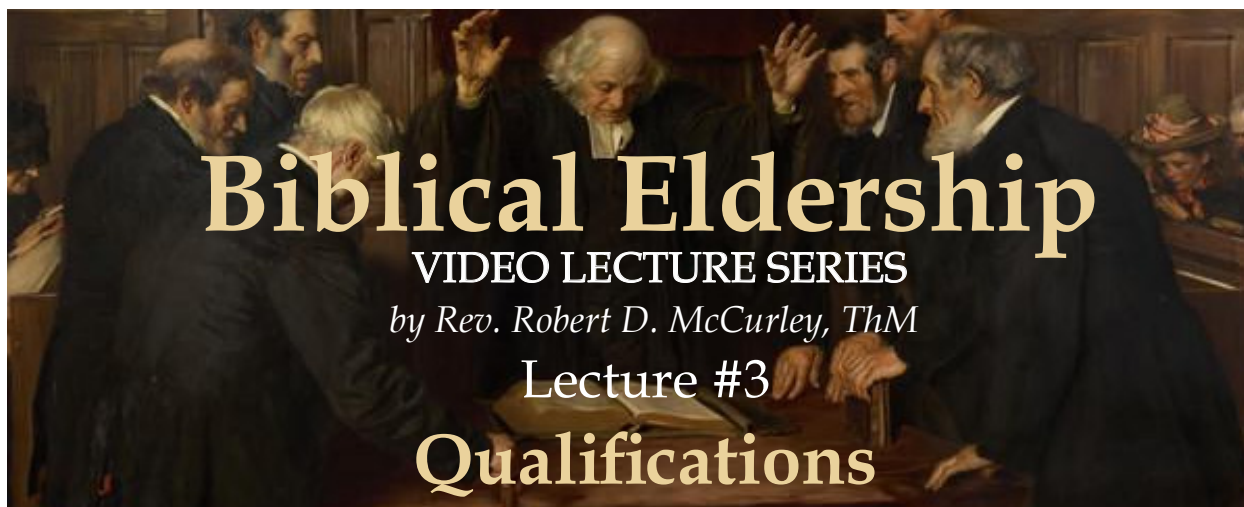
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When an employer needs to hire new personnel, they often advertise the job opening with a description of what the job entails, and qualifications necessary to be selected for the position. A person interested in the job would fill out an application, and include their credentials, training, work experience, and related matters, in order to demonstrate their competency and qualifications for the position. We would not expect anything else. If a person applies for a job as a skilled stone mason, but they've never used a chisel, or built an intricately interwoven wall on a slope, we would rightly consider them unqualified for that role. The same could be said for a person applying for upper management in a company, who has never even led a small team or overseen any projects. Well, if that is true with regards to worldly employment, how much more for service in Christ's kingdom? We should expect that the Lord would provide criteria and qualifications for men to serve as Elders in Christ's church. And that is exactly what he does in the Scriptures.

In this module, we're considering what the Bible teaches about the New Testament office of Ruling Elder. In the previous two lectures, we've considered some biblical foundations regarding Christ's headship over the church, his divinely prescribed government for the church, and the offices he appointed to serve in those governmental structures. In this lecture and those that follow, we will turn our considerations specifically to the office of Ruling Elder itself. In this lecture and in the next lecture, we'll begin with the biblical qualifications that the Lord requires in them who are called to serve as Elders.

Well, first of all, we'll speak about this calling. First Timothy 3, verse 1, tells us, "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." Remember, the word "bishop" could be translated "overseer." That's the meaning of the Greek word. And as we saw in the last lecture, the words "elder" and "overseer" are synonymous in the New Testament, describing the same position with two different words. Paul states here that the desire to serve in this capacity is a good desire—a desire to be engaged in an important work on behalf of the Lord and his people. What follows, in 1 Timothy 3, verses 1 to 7, as well as in Titus 1, verses 5 to 9, are God's biblical requirements to qualify for this service.

But before we turn to those details, we should ask to whom this applies? The answer is that these qualifications apply both to the office of Ruling Elder and the office of ministers, who also serve as Elders. Remember that Peter, who was an apostle and minister of the gospel, calls himself a "fellow elder," in 1 Peter chapter 5, verse 1 and following, which shows clearly that the apostles

were also Elders, or overseers. So the qualifications that we're going to look at in 1 Timothy 3 do not apply only to pastors or ministers, but also to Elders, because if the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 or in Titus 1 are not the qualifications for the office of Elder in the church, then what are the qualifications for this office? Why would Scripture give the qualifications for deacons and ministers, as if that's all that's being referred to, and who were also Elders, but not give any qualifications for the office of Ruling Elder, especially since the office of Elder is one of the most important special offices for the well-being of the church. Clearly, the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3, verses 1 to 7, apply to all Elders, both to the ministers of the Word, and the other Ruling Elders who shepherd with them the flock under their care.

Furthermore, you'll notice at the beginning of these qualifications, in 1 Timothy 3, verse 2, Paul uses the word "must." So the word "must" means that these qualifications are essential. "A bishop must be blameless." They're essential. They're not merely helpful guidelines. All of these qualifications are mandatory. They are requirements which God has laid down for the office of Elder in his church. No man may be an Elder in the church of God, unless he meets all of these qualifications. Christ determines the criteria, as Head of his church. It's the church's God-given duty to receive and follow what he prescribes, which includes keeping all unworthy men out of the office of Ruling Elder and minister. The church must uphold the honor of Christ, and ensure that the church is edified for greater peace, purity, and unity. We need to give careful attention and diligent care to understanding precisely what Christ had specified as qualifications for Elder. In what follows here, and in the following lecture, will be a study of the details laid down in 1 Timothy 3. So let's consider then the qualifications for the office of Elder.

First of all, the first qualification is that a bishop or overseer "must be blameless"—verse 2. By "blameless," the Scripture does not mean that a man must be sinless in order to be an overseer in the church of God. To be blameless is to be above reproach. No one should be able to lay a charge against an Elder and make it stick. This is true, it's true that a man is blameless when a man's words and conducts conform to the holy commandments of God in Scripture, so that he can't be justly accused of living in flagrant disobedience to God's standards of holiness. The Scripture says that Job "was perfect"—which can be translated blameless—"and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil"—or shunned evil (Job 1:1). We should be able to say that about every Elder in the church. The overseer's reputation should be above reproach. No one should be able to attack him or reproach him because of his sins, whether in speech, conduct, or doctrine. Every Christian, of course, sins, and will never be without sin until death. But an overseer or Elder must maintain a good name of walking in faith and repentance without sinful scandal in his life. There should be no question as to the integrity of his upright character. An Elder must be of mature integrity before God and men, so that he is without reproach. Otherwise, he cannot be a godly example to those under his care in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, and purity. And any man who does not live a consistent godly life does not meet this qualification, and should not be an Elder.

Well, what exactly does that look like? What does a blameless reputation and character look like? The subsequent qualifications address specific areas in which the Elder must be above reproach. And so that brings us, secondly, to the fact that he must be a "husband of one wife"—again, verse 2. Well, first of all, this means that an Elder must be a man. Only a man can be a husband of one wife, which precludes women from this office. In God's order, men are appointed to lead. Later, in the qualifications, we learn that an Elder must be apt to teach. But Paul said a few verses earlier, in chapter 2, verse 12, "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." We see something similar in 1 Corinthians 14, verses 34 and 35. So we learn that

only men may be Elders.

But then he also must be the husband of one wife. So contrary to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, it is not required that officers in the church remain unmarried, or that they be celibate. Hebrews 13, verse 4 says, “Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled, but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.” But we are told that an Elder must only have one wife. Well, does this mean that a man must be married to be an Elder? Or does it mean that if he is married, he must be married to only one wife? Well we know from 1 Corinthians 7, verses 8 and 9, that the Apostle Paul, who wrote both 1 Timothy and Titus, was unmarried. He tells us that. So this requirement clearly means that if a man is married, or has been married, he must not have had more than one wife in God’s sight. So this is an expressed prohibition of polygamy for an Elder. And especially at the time when Paul was writing, some men had more than one wife. The New Testament confirms God’s command, from the time of creation, that a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife, and the two shall become one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

Well, it also raises other practical questions. For example, with regards to divorce, those who divorce their wives unbiblically—without just grounds—and marry another woman, then there’s a problem, because before God, they have more than one wife at the same time, contrary to God’s law. And therefore, they may not be officers in the church. If a man has an unbiblical divorce, and he is remarried without biblical grounds, the Bible says that’s adultery, and it is equivalent to not being married to one woman. So the point here is that the Elder must be blameless with respect to the law of God concerning marriage and matters of divorce and remarriage. If a man can justly—that is, keeping the precepts of Scripture—put away his wife with the approval of God, and remarry, then he is still qualified to hold office as an Elder, because he’ll have a biblical divorce and remarriage. Paul is not barring from office absolutely anyone who is remarried. I mean, if a man’s wife dies, and he marries another, he is still qualified to be an Elder in the flock of God, because he only has one wife before the sight of God.

So whether married or unmarried, the Elder must be an example to others of faithfulness and chastity in obedience to the seventh commandment. A married Elder must be faithful to his one wife as long as she lives. Sexual immorality and marital infidelity cannot be tolerated among office bearers in the church. If there are two or three witnesses that a man has committed such sins, he may not hold office in the church. Well, Paul assumes that the Elder will normally be married, and that’s generally the case, both for office bearers and with people generally. Though to some, it is given to be unmarried, and given the gift of celibacy, even what Jesus describes as eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God, or by birth, or by an act of men, in Matthew 19, verse 12.

So it’s important to know what the law of God forbids and allows concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In some cases, that will determine whether a man who aspires to the office of minister or Elder has only one wife or not. Men who are unfaithful, or who divorce unlawfully, who marry unlawfully, or who do not shepherd their wives as they ought, should not become overseers. The office bearers of the church ought to live in the married estate in holiness and obedience to God, as an example to all the flock. And of course, their experience as head of their own home will be useful in their oversight of their congregation.

The third qualification is that an Elder must be vigilant—vigilant or temperate, we could say. So this is actually the first in a series of three character traits. And the Greek word can mean “clear-headed,” “self-controlled,” “moderate,” “frugal,” “sober-minded,” “prudent,” “reasonable.” Vigilant is at the beginning of a list of qualities that have to do with the general character of an Elder’s behavior and of his attitudes. This qualification means to be watchful. To be vigilant is to be

on guard against turning aside from the truth of the gospel of Christ. And so the idea here is that we must pay attention, be serious, thinking clearly. We must be able to give diligent heed to the truth of God's Word. An Elder must be on guard, just as a shepherd has to watch against threats to the sheep, so the Elders have to be equipped to watch for wolves and anything that might endanger his flock. That means the Elder has to have a sound mind. He has to discern the times, and to discern truth from error, and to discern the needs of his own flock. He must watch carefully over his own life, and his own heart, so that there's not all sorts of sins that arise there. He has to also have the maturity and experience of exercising his senses to discern between good and evil, as Hebrews 5, verses 12 to 14 say. This character trait is really central to the work of the office of Elder. You can read about it in Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, verse 28 and following. And Elder who is not vigilant over his own life, both in private and in public, will not be able to be vigilant and watchful over the care of God's people. So he has to keep the Lord always before his eyes, and his law always upon his heart, in order that he might be vigilant in caring for the flock.

The fourth qualification is to be sober, and this is very closely related to the previous qualification of being vigilant. The Greek word here can mean "prudent," or "thoughtful," or "self-controlled." The word refers to wisdom, to good sense, to a sound mind, to good judgment. Whereas the previous qualification of vigilance entails an Elder being clear-headed and of sound mind in order to be alert and watching himself and the flock, this qualification of sobriety is that an Elder must have wisdom in order to exercise good judgment. So it's really impossible to overemphasize that an Elder must be guided by wisdom in his work. He must have good judgment in dealing with people and their problems. He must be reasonable and sympathetic, and yet serious and straight forward. As we'll see in a future lecture, one of the tasks of an Elder is to judge in disputes and in the exercise of church discipline, and this requires wisdom and seriousness. A judge has to be in control of himself, not given to prejudice that might cloud his thinking or affect his discernment. A person who is unstable, who is without wisdom, without sound judgment, who is not sober or able to deal with issues, does not meet this qualification.

The fifth qualification is "of good behavior," and the Greek word means "respectable," or "honorable." His life must be in order. A man with bad behavior cannot be respectable or honorable. A respectable man deserves to be treated with deference, and esteem, and honor, and high regard, because of his qualities and his decent character.

The sixth qualification is "given to hospitality." And really, this is the first of two abilities or gifts that God requires of an Elder or overseer in the church. The Greek word for "hospitable," is a compound word, consisting of two parts. The first part of the word means, "one who loves," and the second part of the word means "a host." So an Elder must be one who loves to be a host. Now, being a host does not necessarily involve providing a meal for guests. It's a means by which we can use whatever our gifts are to minister to others in the body of Christ. And so, hospitality is sharing what God has given us with other Christians for their edification and mutual encouragement. That may be having people stay in our home, or come to a meal in our home, or a whole bunch of other ways in which we care for them. It's the friendly and generous reception and treatment of guests and strangers. The passage in 1 Peter 4 teaches that being hospitable is one way we are to express our love for the people of God; something we're to do cheerfully and willingly. So every Christian must be hospitable, but especially an Elder in the church. An overseer is to be an example to the people of God. And the Lord has given Elders for the edification of his church. Elders should therefore be willing and glad to share their gifts with others, especially those under their care. That could mean providing food or lodging, or using one's place for meetings, or even making oneself

available for visitors, or in providing counsel and other things. But Elders are not to be cold toward strangers, but warm, and gracious, and friendly, and kind, seeking to meet their needs in a way of showing love and compassion to them. And so the Lord provides us with this qualification of being given to hospitality in caring for the needs of those entrusted to us.

The seventh qualification is to be apt to teach. Now there is a difference between teaching and preaching. Elders are to be apt to teach—all Elders. But ministers are also called by Christ to preach. In the New Testament, teaching is a much broader activity than preaching. Preaching is the public proclamation of the Word of God. All preaching, of course, should teach the congregation, but teaching includes many things that are not preaching. The man born blind taught the Pharisees about Jesus, in John 9, verse 34. Jesus taught us that the Holy Spirit would teach us all things—John 14:26. Paul says that he taught in Ephesus from house to house—Acts 20, verse 20. Paul commands all believers to teach one another “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”—Colossians 3, verse 16. Paul tells the Thessalonians to stand fast, to hold the traditions that they had been taught, “whether by word or epistle”—2 Thessalonians 2, verse 15. Well, teaching someone by writing a letter is not preaching. When Paul says, in 1 Timothy 2, verse 12, “I don’t permit a woman to teach,” he’s not referring exclusively to preaching. When Hebrews 5, verse 12 says that “By this time, you ought to be teachers, and instead you need someone else to teach you the first principles of the oracles of God,” it doesn’t mean that all believers should be preachers. Furthermore, parents teach their children, and teachers teach their students, and none of that teaching is preaching. So my point is simply that teaching is not equivalent to preaching.

An Elder may be skillful in teaching, and not called or able to preach. And so, within the Reformed churches, we’ve always insisted that the preacher of God’s Word should be able to read the original languages in Greek and Hebrew—the original languages in which the Bible was written—so that he can rightly divide the Word of truth. Well, Ruling Elders do not need to meet this standard, because they’re not ordained to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments. And so, the requirement of Scripture for every Elder is not that he be able to preach, but that he be skillful in teaching. And the Greek word here is used two different times in the New Testament. The other place is in 2 Timothy 2, verses 23 to 25. And that passage is not about preaching the Word of God, but about patiently, humbly correcting those who oppose sound doctrine, by teaching them the truth. And Timothy is to do this, rather than embroiling himself in foolish and ignorant arguments. Well, we see the same thing in the qualifications for Elder given in Titus 1, verse 5 to 16. An Elder must hold fast the faithful word, according to the teaching that he has received. Why? So that he may be able to both convict and exhort those who speak against the truth by sound instruction.

Well, we know that those who are going astray, and have come to the point where they’re speaking against the truth, and they’re subverting whole households, and so on, they need more than just public preaching. That’s still important for them to hear, but if that were all that was needed, there would be no need for the Elders to visit people in their homes, just as a shepherd goes after straying sheep. No, there are times where Elders come alongside and sit people who are straying from the truth, and sit them down and help instruct them in the ways of the Lord’s Word. This is the work of watching over the flock, shepherding them, so that they remain in the truth, and aren’t destroyed by wolves and false teachers. So Elders go and seek them out in order to restore them, and exhort them, and teach them the truth. And the Elders are to teach and exhort the faithful sheep who aren’t wandering so that they don’t go astray. In order to do this, an Elder needs to know well what the Scripture says about doctrine and life. He needs to be able to discern error in doctrine or error in life, to show a man his error from Scripture, and to teach him the truth in a simple way.

That doesn't require the gifts necessary for preaching, or even for public speaking. Yet, that is the essence of the work of a shepherd, overseeing the church of God, which is purchased with His own blood, and that is the most essential part of ruling in the church. And so an Elder may be wonderfully gifted, and he can one-on-one instruct precious souls, or he can meet in threes and fours with people in order to lead them in the truth, and be perfectly qualified, and be exemplary in his service.

But this in no way denies that God has gifted, called, and set apart some men to preach his Word. And so Paul commanded Timothy, "Preach the word"—2 Timothy 4, verse 2. Jesus, and the apostles preached the Word. The truth is that some Elders rule, and there are some Elders who both rule and labor in the Word, in the work of preaching, and the sacraments—1 Timothy 5, verse 17. Such men are called "ministers of the word," or "pastors." God hasn't called all Elders to preach, but he has gifted some ministers for preaching, and these he calls to that work.

And so the congregation must call men to work according to the gifts God has given them. God calls all Elders to rule, to shepherd, to oversee, to watch for and care for the church. They all share in a parity, in plurality, in equality that responsibility. And the Elder's rule, all that goes with it, in its very nature, involves teaching. So that's why the Scripture requires that an Elder must be apt to teach. To rule over the people of God is not merely to set the times of when worship services will be held, but to encourage and exhort God's people to believe and live according to the Bible, and to convict those who stray from the truth. That requires skill in teaching people privately in patience and gentleness. And Elders need to make sure that the congregation not only hears the preaching, but also is living in obedience to God's Word, and he should be able to exercise himself accordingly.

Well, this gives us some of the qualifications in 1 Timothy, chapter 3. So in this lecture, we've considered some of those biblical qualifications for being an Elder in Christ's church, and it brings us about halfway through the list of qualifications. In the next lecture, we'll turn our attention to the remaining qualifications that are specified in 1 Timothy 3, and in Titus 1. And once we have explored the qualifications, we will take up the responsibilities that God commits to Elders in his church.