

QUESTION 3

What Essential Qualities Must Be Present in a Christian Pastor?

Without exaggerating, character is everything when it comes to the pastor/elder. It's not that gifts, abilities, training, and experience play no part in the work of the Christian pastor. Rather, without godly character, all gifts and abilities mean nothing. Without evidence of the character described in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9, a pastor exercises his ministry as a hypocrite, causing far more harm than good for the body of Christ.

Amazingly, aside from the requirement to teach and the restriction on being a new convert (1 Tim. 3:2, 6; Titus 1:9), Paul does not ask for anything that shouldn't be present in any Christian. Above reproach, temperate, prudent, hospitable, gentle, peaceable—all of these characteristics picture the regenerate person walking with the Lord, serving others, and demonstrating the effects of the gospel. Faithfulness to the marriage vows, good home management, self-control, eschewing addictions, and not bullying others ought to be the norm for followers of Christ. As D. A. Carson states, “The most remarkable thing about these characteristics is that there is nothing remarkable about them.”¹

So why does Paul detail the kind of character needed in elders/pastors? First, pastors need to live like those redeemed by Christ. They are Christians before they are pastors. No amount of oratorical, leadership, or administrative skills can compensate for a lack of godly character. Second, they must be models for other believers to follow. Peter wrote that elders need “to be examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). One can imagine that new Christians, living without any previous example of a godly Christian life, particularly needed

1. D. A. Carson, at a joint Sunday school gathering, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC, as reported to me in a conversation with Mark Dever and Matt Schmucker, who were present.

the model of faithful elders living before them as “an example of those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:12). Today, believers who are confused by the messages of a post-Christian world still need pastoral examples to follow. Therefore, focusing on godly character precedes shepherding responsibilities.

To consider the essential qualities of pastors, we will look at Paul’s prescriptive outline to Titus for elders’ character (Titus 1:5–9), interspersed with some of the similar qualities listed in 1 Timothy 3:1–7.

The character qualities Paul lists to Timothy and Titus overlap, with a few exceptions,² most notably, the Titus list says nothing about the elder not being a new convert (1 Tim. 3:7). Presumably, with most Cretan converts as new believers, Paul did not include the same requirement he made with Timothy at the longer established Ephesian church.³ We will follow Paul’s list to Titus, breaking it into four categories to think on necessary character qualities for pastors: examples at home, examples in personal conduct, examples in relationships, and examples in corporate life.

First-generation Cretan Christians had little idea of what it meant to live like Christians. They had “liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons” as examples (Titus 1:12). So how would these believers understand how to treat families, employers, employees, slaves, masters, and fellow believers? Paul offered the key for elders living as examples of Christ’s disciples: the pastors must have a godly home life.

Examples at Home

The statement “the husband of one wife” or, better, “a one-woman man” (*mias gynaikos anēr*, Titus 1:6) shows the pastor’s singular devotedness to his wife. Debates on whether Paul meant the elder (a) must be married, (b) cannot be divorced and remarried, or (c) cannot be a polygamist miss the major point that the pastor/elder must be “a one-woman man.”⁴ His faithfulness to love his wife as Christ loves the church, treating her with gentleness, kindness, and sacrificial love, proclaims the power of the gospel in the marriage relationship (Eph. 5:22–33).

2. For a helpful chart comparing Timothy and Titus, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *Forty Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2008), 110.

3. For more consideration on why Paul left off the “not a new convert” requirement with Titus, with implications in developing pastoral leaders in hard places, see Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2014), 233–40; see also Benjamin L. Merkle, “Ecclesiology in the Pastoral Epistles,” in *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul’s Theology in the Pastoral Epistles*, eds. Andreas Köstenberger and Terry Wilder (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 185.

4. See Merkle, *Forty Questions About Elders and Deacons*, 124–29. If a pastor/elder shows unfaithfulness to his wife, then he faces immediate disqualification in his office since the marriage relationship is to model Christ and the church, as described in Ephesians 5:22–33. See a similar position in John. S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019), 195–97.

He's devoted to his children as well. His children recognize his faith in Christ as he lives out the gospel in his home (Titus 1:6). There's debate on the meaning of the adjective modifying "children," that is, "children who believe" (*tekna echōn pista*). The Pastoral Epistles, most naturally and prominently, use it as "faithful" ("having faithful children," lit.). Andreas Köstenberger explains *faithful* "probably means 'obedient and submissive to their father's orders' (cf. 1 Tim. 3:11; 2 Tim. 2:2, 13)."⁵ John Piper concurs: "So the idea seems to be of children who are well bred, orderly, generally obedient, responsible, and reliable."⁶ Brian Chapell notes, "We are not necessarily looking at the beliefs and actions of one child but at the character of the family as a whole." The translation of *faithful* rather than *believing* "better communicates the intended meaning that our assessment is to be based on observations of children's conduct and convictions made over time, not on isolated statements or actions."⁷

This interpretation finds further confirmation in Paul's explanatory note, "not accused of dissipation or rebellion" (Titus 1:6). Köstenberger remarks, "Paul isn't referring to occasional disobedience but deep-seated rebellion against parental authority."⁸ In other words, they are not out of control. Their father exercises judicious oversight, carrying out teaching, training, instruction, and, as necessary, corrective discipline. Their faithfulness is shown by the way they respond to his fatherly leadership.

Examples in Personal Conduct

"Above reproach" is the umbrella characteristic of an elder (Titus 1:6; 1 Tim. 3:2). It controls the whole of his life. Paul does not call for perfection, or else no one could ever serve as an elder. But he does mean that pastors will be conscientious about the way they conduct their lives. They seek to make sure they have no dangling areas to dishonor Christ or detract from the gospel. They have no reason to constantly cover up or lie about their behavior. What you see in them at church will be the same at home, at work, in the community, and even when no one watches them. Elders lead by demonstrating Christian character, becoming an example for all the church (Heb. 13:7).

What does it look like to be "above reproach"? Paul fills this out by providing some examples.

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5. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Commentary on 1–2 Timothy and Titus*, BTCP (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2017), 314.
 6. John Piper, "Biblical Eldership: Shepherd the Flock of God among You," *Desiring God* (website), Sermons, May 1, 1999, sec. 8, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/biblical-eldership-session-1#Qualifications>.
 7. R. Kent Hughes and Brian Chapell, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*, PTW (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 296–97.
 8. Köstenberger, *1–2 Timothy and Titus*, 314.

(a) “Not self-willed” (Titus 1:7): The pastor is not obstinate and arrogant in the way he acts, refusing to live as though the world revolves around him. He avoids the unteachable spirit of one using rather than serving others and refuses to trample over others to achieve his own desires.

(b) “Not quick-tempered” (Titus 1:7): The pastor is not hotheaded or short-fused. Relationships matter to him, so he demonstrates patience and longsuffering with others.

(c) “Not addicted to wine” (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim. 3:3): On the island of Crete, the prominent Dionysian cult included drunkenness as part of its worship. These Christian leaders were never to be mistaken for leaders in the Dionysus cult. Self-control and restraint in their appetites distinguishes them.

(d) “Not pugnacious” (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim. 3:3): Pastors are not to be bullies or given to fighting or heavy-handedness. Their self-control does not quickly seek to defend self, or battle to get the last word in a tense conversation. Here we see the example of Christ: “while being reviled, He did not revile in return” (1 Peter 2:23).

(e) “Not fond of sordid gain” (Titus 1:7; cf. “free from the love of money,” 1 Tim. 3:3; 1 Peter 5:2): Pastors must guard themselves in the areas of covetousness and greed. They demonstrate a strong work ethic yet refuse to gain things indiscreetly or dishonestly or through crass manipulation.

Examples in Relationships

In one sense, everything in Titus 1:7–8 has to do with both personal behavior and relationships. But the characteristics of Titus 1:8 particularly exemplify faithful relationships.

(a) “Hospitable” (Titus 1:8; 1 Tim. 3:2): Rather than being a bully or using people for selfish gain, the pastor practices hospitality. The word literally means “love for strangers” or “love for foreigners.” He willingly opens his home to others. Two of the elders at my church have the reputation for opening their homes so often that we’ve thought of putting “Bed & Breakfast” signs at their doors. Hospitality befits Christian character (Rom. 12:13).

(b) “Loving what is good” (Titus 1:8): Some translate this phrase as loving those who are good or loving good things. More pointedly, elders must have an affinity for good rather than dark, evil, or questionable things. That should be evident in what they read or watch or discuss. It “denotes devotion to all

that is best.”⁹ That also involves how they spend their time and resources, as well as what they seek in relationships with others.

(c) “Sensible” (Titus 1:8): The pastor keeps his head about him; that is, he disciplines his life with an aim toward wisdom. The NASB translates the same word in 1 Timothy 3:2 as “prudent” (*sōphrona*), which we think of as “acting wisely.” Paul uses the word in Titus 2:2, 5, and 6 to imply one engaging his mind, thinking soberly with a heart of wisdom, and seeking to speak or act wisely.

(d) “Just” (Titus 1:8): The pastor has a keen sensitivity to upholding right standards of conduct and honoring God’s laws. He values integrity. He treats all in the same conscientious way, regardless of a person’s status in life, level of involvement in the church, or contribution to the overall ministry.

(e) “Devout” (Titus 1:8): Pastors take seriously personal piety. While sometimes construed negatively, it simply means one is concerned to live a holy, devoted life to Christ as his Lord in all things. Holiness means something to him (1 Peter 1:13–16).

(f) “Self-controlled” (Titus 1:8): As a word meaning living under “divine restraint,” or living a disciplined life, it gives a clear picture of a life that dies to self or *mortifies* the flesh (Luke 9:23; Rom. 6:6). No careless word or act confuses his testimony as a follower of Christ. It means “having one’s emotions, impulses, or desires under control.”¹⁰ Rather than giving way to folly, foolish living, sensual desires, or thoughtless language, pastors must rein in the natural impulses of the flesh.

Examples in Corporate Life

The primary distinguishing mark between elders and deacons is that the former must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2).¹¹ While two of the deacon prototypes,¹² Stephen and Philip, gave clear evidence of teaching and preaching gifts (Acts 6–8), Paul lays no mandate on deacons for teaching (1 Tim. 3:8–13). They must hold “to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.” Mounce explains, “and as that gospel works its way out in their lives, their consciences should not condemn them of sin.”¹³

9. *LEKGNT*, 508.

10. *BDAG*, ἐγκρατής, 274.

11. The distinction “able to teach” does not require elders to preach, although some do (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:17).

12. Merkle, *Forty Questions About Elders and Deacons*, 227–29.

13. William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Waco, TX: Nelson, 2000), 199.

But pastors hold the distinct priority of proclaiming God's Word. The primary place the congregation sees a pastor will be in the ministry of teaching and preaching. In the corporate setting, the congregation finds a critical, threefold example shown by faithful pastors.

(1) Pastors demonstrate to the congregation what it means to be diligent students of God's Word, who give careful attention to properly interpreting and applying it. Their example spills over into the way that the congregation learns to read, study, interpret, and apply God's Word. The ability to teach (1 Tim. 3:2) and to exhort in sound doctrine (Titus 1:9), models the appropriate way of reading and applying the Word in daily life. Rather than church members thinking it permissible to read their own interpretations and applications into the Word, faithful pastors, week after week, expose the congregation to sound interpretations leading to healthy applications of biblical doctrine.

(2) Pastors committed to teaching sound doctrine instill a love of good doctrine in the members of their congregations (Titus 1:9). Failing to grow up hearing sound doctrine taught from the pulpit left me jaundiced. Thank God, that changed as I began to study God's Word, realizing it is a lively doctrinal book (2 Tim. 4:1–4). When pastors regularly expound God's Word and explain the doctrines in the biblical text, then the church starts to grasp the importance of doctrine as foundational to the whole of the Christian life. They begin to see that any talk of the person and work of Christ, sin, salvation, judgment, heaven, the Holy Spirit, and the church requires consideration of biblical doctrine. When they witness their pastors' excitement in preaching sound doctrine, it becomes wonderfully contagious in the congregation, as they see the bigger picture of God's Word and how doctrine connects every detail.

(3) Pastors' ability to defend the faith and "refute those who contradict" God's Word (Titus 1:9) will challenge and inspire members of the congregation to better understand their Bibles. It happens regularly that as church members face false teaching and receive help from their pastors in being able to give a faithful answer, they grow in hungering to know and apply the Word. Pastors modeling clarity in biblical interpretation, appropriately responding to those trying to contradict the faith, will likely have members asking the pastors to teach them how to do the same. It provides a wonderful opportunity to disciple the body in properly handling God's Word, not as a tool to win wars but as the message of truth that changes lives.

Summary

The apostle made clear, as apostolic delegates Timothy and Titus led congregations toward elder plurality, that they were to give attention to character above all else in candidates for the office. With the modern tendency of some churches just to look for a nice man or pleasant mannerisms or a loaded

ministry résumé, Paul would have nothing of that. Character stands tall when considering those shepherding Christ's flock.

Yet in the character qualities, other than teaching and not being a new convert, Paul simply called for pastors to live like true disciples of Jesus Christ. If pastors remember they are first Christians and church members it will keep them focused on living holy lives, building relationships, and setting an example for the church as believers. Apart from this kind of intentional faithfulness as disciples, men have no warrant to serve as pastors of Christian churches.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why should pastors pay attention to character in their lives?
2. What kind of character issues does Paul raise about marriage and family in Titus 1?
3. How does “above reproach” serve as an *umbrella* term in personal conduct for pastors?
4. What does Paul mean when calling for elders to exercise “self-control”?
5. How does the preaching and teaching of pastors affect the members of their congregations?