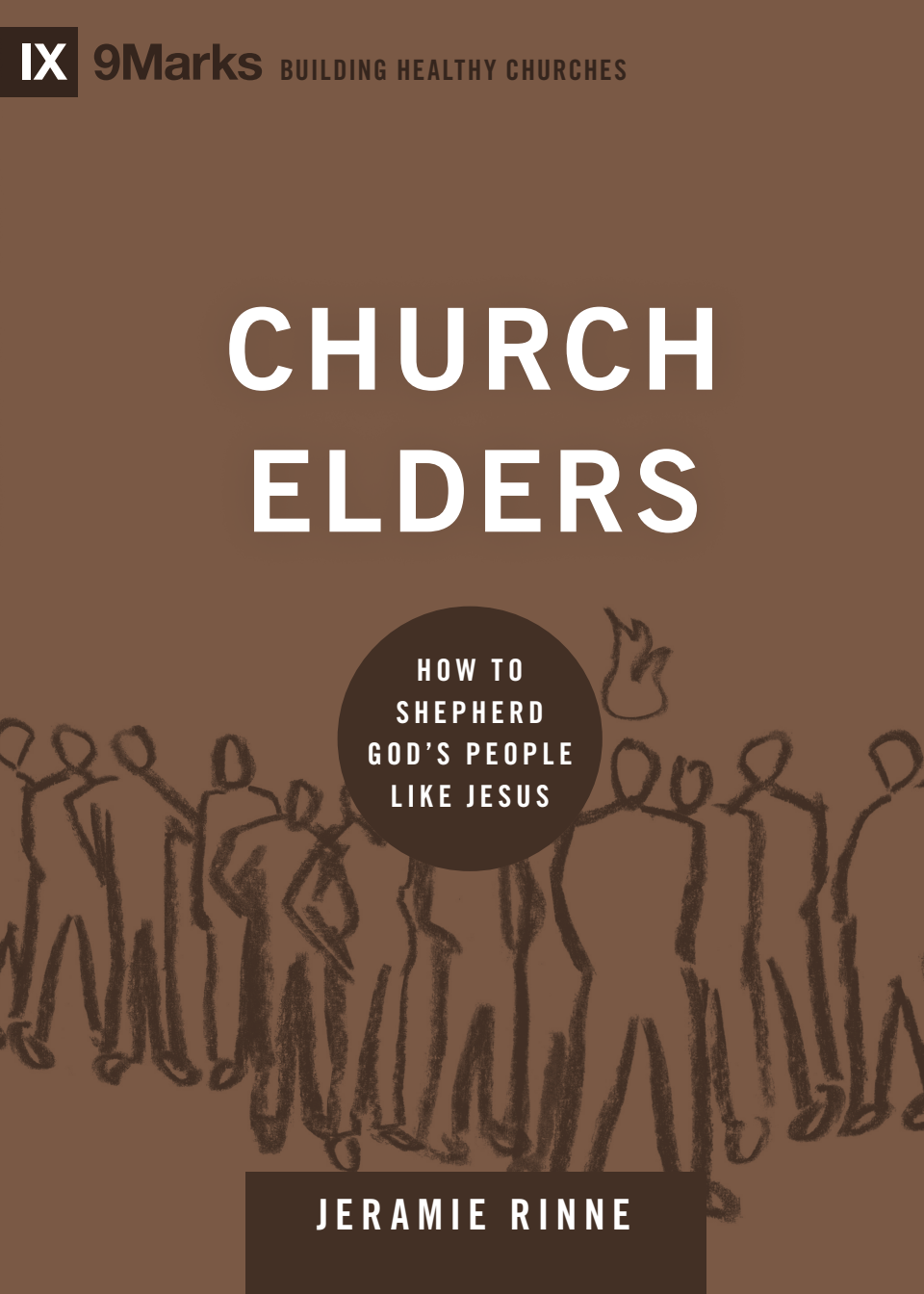


IX

9Marks BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

CHURCH ELDERS



HOW TO
SHEPHERD
GOD'S PEOPLE
LIKE JESUS

JERAMIE RINNE

“Leadership, like the other gifts of the Spirit, is for the edifying of the body of Christ. Paul made it plain to Titus that things were not in order in a church until proper leadership was established. Most unsolved problems in church life can be traced back to defective leadership. Jeramie Rinne unpacks what the Bible has to say about the identity and activity of the local church elder with a freshness and clarity that is profoundly helpful. This is a book that elders can read together to their profit and one that will help a congregation to pray for and support its leaders so that their work will be a joy and not a burden.”

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BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

CHURCH ELDERS

HOW TO
SHEPHERD
GOD'S
PEOPLE LIKE
JESUS

JERAMIE RINNE

 **CROSSWAY**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus

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To the elders of South Shore Baptist Church,
my band of brothers

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SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

9Marks plans to produce a short, readable book on each of what Mark has called nine marks of a healthy church, plus one more on sound doctrine. Watch for books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, and church leadership.

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with

Series Preface

God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,
Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman
Series editors

INTRODUCTION

“I’m an elder. Now what?”

Many pastors could write a book entitled “What They Didn’t Tell Me in Seminary about Pastoral Ministry.” That book would probably have some painful, heavy chapters, such as “How to Survive an Ugly Business Meeting” or “What to Say at the Funeral for a Three-Year-Old.” Pastoral ministry involves forms of suffering, discouragement, and heartbreak for which no school can prepare a man.

But ministry also holds happy surprises. No one in seminary told me that I would fall in love with my congregation or that I would have a front-row seat to watch God’s faithfulness and the gospel’s power at work in people’s lives.

And no one tipped me off about the joy and satisfaction I would receive from working with lay elders.

I love lay elders.¹ I am awed by men who, despite demanding work schedules and busy home lives, sacrifice time and money, tears and prayers to lead their local churches. I love watching them wrestle together through challenges, make mistakes, and mature in the process. It is like hanging out with the twelve disciples: ordinary, flawed men fulfilling an extraordinary calling by God’s grace. The elders in my congregation have truly been a band of brothers for me; I cannot imagine ministry without my fellow shepherds.

Introduction

I love elders for another reason: they are God's plan for leading his churches. God has always provided shepherds for his people. He gave Moses, Samuel, and the judges to Israel. He raised up Israel's shepherd *par excellence*, King David. And yet, all these men, including David, failed in one way or another. The kings after David increasingly led God's flock into idolatry and injustice. And so the prophets began to speak of a coming shepherd, a new "David" (for example, Isa. 9:1–7; Ezek. 34:20–24).

God made good on his promise by sending Jesus, the Son of David, the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep and rose again. But it did not stop there. Jesus gave apostles and then *elders* to tend his flock as under-shepherds until he returns (Eph. 4:7–13; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). Elders are Jesus's assistants for shepherding his churches.

GODLY, WELL-INTENTIONED, AND . . . CONFUSED

As much as I love elders for these reasons, I have noticed a recurring problem. Though elders are typically godly and well-intentioned, they are often confused about what being an elder entails. They don't always have a complete grasp of what they are supposed to *do*. And, to be honest, we paid pastors often share their confusion.

Consequently, elders tend to import other leadership paradigms into church oversight, typically drawing from their own experiences and careers. Without a clear, biblical job description for elders, these men naturally fall back on what they know. They assume eldering is like:

Introduction

- Administering a school
- Running a company
- Commanding a warship
- Managing a project
- Directing operations
- Overseeing subcontractors
- Serving on a board of trustees

Aspects of these life experiences always prove useful in elder leadership. Yet overseeing a church is a unique task.

“I’M AN ELDER. NOW WHAT?”

This book is intended to provide a concise, biblical job description for elders. I wanted to create an easy-to-read, inspiring summary of the elder task that could be given to a new or potential elder who needs to know what an elder is and does. I hope the book will answer a godly, well-intentioned man who asks: “I’m an elder. Now what?”

But this book is not just for current or aspiring elders. It’s also for church members. The whole congregation needs to understand God’s plan for the local church, including his plan for leadership. Church members can be just as confused about an elder’s job description as the elders are.

So I pray that this book will bring health to congregations as members and leaders unify around a biblical vision for ministry and leadership in the local church. I hope that spiritually lethargic, pew-warming Christian men might read this book and experience an awakening desire to shepherd their families and churches. Finally, I’m praying God will use this little book

to change the course of a few men's lives by calling them into pastoral ministry as a vocation.

ELDERS, OVERSEERS, AND PASTORS

A quick word about vocabulary: I will be using the terms *elder* and *overseer* interchangeably because the New Testament uses them interchangeably.² The eldership is one job with two titles.

Well, actually there are three titles. I will argue in chapter 2 that the term *pastor* (i.e., “shepherd”) refers to the same church position as *elder* and *overseer*. Biblically speaking, elders are pastors, who are overseers. The person in a church we typically call a “pastor” is a paid elder, and the person in a church we typically call an “elder” or “overseer” is an unpaid, lay pastor.

Elder or shepherd, overseer or pastor, paid or volunteer. It's all the same job. *But what is that job?* What are elders supposed to do in a local church? What are Jesus's marching orders for his under-shepherds? How do they know if they are completing the mission?

Before we answer those questions, we must do something more basic. We need to understand the biblical qualifications for being an elder. If you are considering taking on the office of elder, your first task is to discern whether you are ready!

DON'T ASSUME

I became a disciple of Jesus as a preteen through the faithful gospel ministry of a little elder-led Baptist church outside of Las Vegas, Nevada. At age twenty-six, I became the senior pastor (or senior elder, you could say) of a little Baptist church in the suburbs of Boston, Massachusetts. So you might assume I understood what elders are all about. But believe it or not, it was only *after* I became an elder that I started really studying what the Bible says about elders.

When I did, two things surprised me. First, I was amazed at *how much* the Bible has to say. Almost all of the New Testament authors address elders. There are more than a dozen texts. It became clear to me that Christlike elders are not an optional church feature; they are central to God's plan for shepherding his churches. How had I missed it?

Second, I was startled by *how different* both the biblical job description and the qualifications for elders are from what I had assumed. I had thought I was qualified to be a pastor and elder because I loved Jesus, had a seminary degree, and could preach decently. What more does it take?

Maybe you assume you should be an elder too, but for different reasons. Perhaps you believe the time has come for you

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to join the elder board because you have been a faithful church member. You have served two terms on the missions committee, hosted a home Bible study, and even taught second-grade Sunday school when they couldn't find a teacher. You have paid your dues, and now it is your turn to lead.

Or maybe you assume you are elder board-bound because you make large donations. The church would not have ended the fiscal year in the black without the check you wrote. Big donors deserve to have a big say and sit on the big boards. Those are the rules. Besides, your church could use a leader with a little business sense.

It is also possible you think you should lead in the church because you lead outside the church. Maybe you manage a successful company, sit on the board of a nonprofit, chair a department, command a battalion, or coach a team. It's safe to assume your leadership skills, experience, and gifting make you an ideal elder candidate.

Right?

As I noted in the introduction, your first elder-related duty is to investigate whether you should in fact be an elder, based on the Bible's qualifications. Don't assume. Even if you have served as an elder before, allow God's Word to vet your candidacy.

Below are six elder qualifications gathered from the New Testament. Read through them prayerfully. Stop and reflect often. Invite others into the conversation. Show this section to your wife, some friends, or an elder, and ask, "Do these qualifications describe me?"

YOU KNOW YOU'RE QUALIFIED TO SERVE AS AN ELDER IF . . .

1. You Want to Be an Elder

In one of the New Testament's longest teachings about elders, the apostle Paul began by saying, "This saying is trustworthy: 'If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work'" (1 Tim. 3:1). Peter put it this way: "Shepherd God's flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but freely, according to God's will" (1 Pet. 5:2).

Aspiration. Desire. Freedom. You've got to want it. Faithful shepherding demands much of you. If you don't have an inner hunger for the role, you can burn out. Of course, that doesn't mean that everyone who wants to be an elder is qualified. But it does mean a lack of desire is a problem.

There is a man in my church who is solid elder material. Our nominating team asked him to serve as an elder. In fact, we asked him three times. Apparently the third time was the charm because he finally consented. But as I talked with him more, it became apparent he lacked a strong desire to be an elder. He had agreed to serve in part because he had turned the offer down twice before. Finally, a sense of duty to his church compelled him to agree to serve—the very thing Peter warned against.

He also told me about his desire to free up time in his schedule in order to engage his neighbors and town with the gospel. I could only imagine his likely frustration if he invested himself in shepherding the flock when he longed to be out adding to the flock. So after further prayer, he changed his mind and courageously declined the nomination a third time. We had almost confused an evangelist for an elder.

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While not all motivations are godly, you must have an inner desire to be an elder. Has the Holy Spirit placed a godly yearning in your heart to shepherd the local church? What is motivating you?

2. You Exemplify Godly Character

You might assume that the most important characteristic for an elder would be skill in running an organization. While management ability is a part of being a church overseer, the New Testament writers put far greater emphasis on holy character. Jesus's under-shepherds must reflect Jesus's character. Better a godly elder with mediocre leadership gifts than a charismatic leader with glaring moral flaws.

Read over these portions of two overseer qualification lists from Paul. These virtues should fit an elder like a custom-tailored suit:

An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an able teacher, not addicted to wine, not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy. (1 Tim. 3:2–3)

For an overseer, as God's administrator, must be blameless, not arrogant, not hot-tempered, not addicted to wine, not a bully, not greedy for money, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, righteous, holy, self-controlled. (Titus 1:7–8)

Given the importance of Christlike character, let's slow down and consider a few of these qualities in more detail.

Above reproach. Paul began his virtue lists with “above re-

proach” and “blameless.” These descriptions don’t mean an elder has transcended sin and leads a morally impeccable life. If that were the case, churches would need to fire their elders— all of them. Rather, a man who is above reproach displays an exemplary degree of Christlikeness, free from conspicuous sin. Being “above reproach” is akin to being “respectable” (1 Tim. 3:2), “righteous,” and “holy” (Titus 1:8).

In his book on elder qualifications, Thabiti Anyabwile puts it well: “Being above reproach means that an elder is to be the kind of man whom no one suspects of wrong-doing or immorality. People would be shocked to hear this kind of man charged with such acts.”¹

Nominating men who are above reproach to be elders stokes the congregation’s trust in its leaders. Further, church leaders who are above reproach safeguard the church’s witness to the community, for as Paul said, “He must have a good reputation among outsiders, so that he does not fall into disgrace and the Devil’s trap” (1 Tim. 3:7).

Self-controlled. According to Paul’s profiles, elders must be self-controlled, sober-minded, temperate, and disciplined. Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:23) and a mark of the Christian life. In short, a Spirit-filled man is a self-controlled man.

Interestingly, in both lists, Paul warned against a particular manifestation of lack of self-control: addiction to wine. Drunkenness destroys lives and sucks people into further sin. I know a man who gave up drinking when he became an elder. He wanted to be above reproach when it came to drinking and a model for church members who battled alcoholism.

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While Scripture does not require elders to abstain from alcohol, they must possess the capacity for self-denial that this brother displayed.

Do you conceal a secret addiction to alcohol, drugs, pornography, or gambling? Do you lose control with anger, spending, swearing, or gossiping? Do you need to postpone eldership for a season in order to devote yourself to crucifying some habitual sin and cultivating self-control?

Gentle. There is a famous Swahili proverb that says, “When the elephants fight, the grass is trampled.” Likewise, when a church’s shepherds are combative and aggressive, the sheep get hurt. That’s why Paul described the qualified elder as “not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome” (1 Tim. 3:3) and “not arrogant, not hot tempered” (Titus 1:7). Egotistical, domineering, argumentative, pushy, gruff, hotheaded, explosive overseers crush church members.

Instead, elders must be gentle giants. Gentleness does not mean weakness or cowardice. Gentle elders exercise their authority with the tenderness of a shepherd and the sensitivity of a loving father. I once watched a television program in which a tortoise crawled up next to an elephant that was drinking at a watering hole. The elephant looked down and gingerly moved the tortoise to the side with its toe so that it wouldn’t crush the reptile accidentally. I was amazed to see that massive creature take such care. People are similarly amazed when they experience gentleness from a church leader.

Are you gentle or heavy-handed? Are you a peacemaker or a fire-starter? Do you listen well or talk over others to express your opinions? It is difficult to gauge these things in yourself.

Don't Assume

Be brave and ask a few insightful church members to give you candid assessments.

Not greedy. Elders must not be “greedy for money.” Peter said that elders must serve “not for the money but eagerly” (1 Pet. 5:2). These words offer a stinging rebuke to pastors who use their ministries to get rich and live large. Beware of shepherds who fleece the sheep.

Greed isn't a problem just for paid pastors. Lay elders who live to make money have difficulty investing time and energy into caring for the congregation. Sometimes greedy lay elders manipulate churches with their donations. They may control church budgets and steer funds toward pet ministries. They assess the church's health and success by the monthly treasurer's report. When money-loving men lead a church, spending toward the poor, church planting, and global evangelism dries up. Why invest heavily in causes that don't directly enrich the greedy elder's little fiefdom?

How do you relate to money? Do you love it and live to amass it? Or do you delight to give to the local church, the spread of the gospel, and the needs of others? Do you give a tithe or a token, a sacrifice or a symbol? Does your giving come with strings attached? Examine yourself carefully, “for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10).

Before we move on, stop for a moment and think about Jesus. When the religious leaders accused him of being in league with the Devil, the charges didn't stick because he was *above reproach*. When the sword-brandishing Peter offered him an opportunity to avoid his captors, he remained *self-controlled*, determined to fulfill what he and the Father had

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planned at the cross. When dealing with the weak, hurting, and sick, he was *gentle*. When the Devil offered him the kingdoms of the world, he was not *greedy*. In all of these moments, Jesus was acting as God's perfect shepherd of the sheep, as well as marking out a pattern for elders in churches today.

3. You Can Teach the Bible

Paul said an overseer must be “an able teacher” (1 Tim. 3:2). Teaching the Bible is central to the elder's shepherding work. We will explore teaching more in chapter 3. But for now, simply reflect: “Have I instructed others from God's Word with notable effect?”

Over the years, our church's elders have discussed potential elder candidates. At times, someone has suggested a man who has been a believer and faithful church member for years. We talk about the man's godly character and his happy marriage. We list ministries and committees on which he has served, and realize this man has volunteered hundreds of hours. The more we talk, the more obvious it seems the man should be an elder.

Then someone asks, “Can he teach the Bible?”

Certainly the man in question has taught us by his godly example. But that's not what Paul meant when he required an elder to be able to teach. He meant fruitful verbal communication of the gospel and biblical doctrine. An elder must hold “to the faithful message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9).

In some cases, we realize the brother has never taught,

even in a small setting such as a home group. So we put the elder nomination on hold and explore the issue with the man in a follow-up conversation.

Elders shepherd the flock like Jesus. Just as Jesus proclaimed God's Word with authority, so potential elders must be known for teaching the Bible well.

4. You Lead Your Family Well

American society paints a bright line between public and private, work and home. We evaluate a business leader on his or her ability to increase profits and meet company goals, not on the quality of his or her personal life. The leader's home world—children, marriage, sex life—is no one else's business.

But in the family of God, an elder's home life matters immensely. In fact, marriage and parenting act as a proving ground for elder fitness. Consider three ways in which a man's family leadership qualifies him for church leadership. An elder must be:

A one-woman man. Most English Bibles translate Paul's words as "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6), but some render them as "a one-woman man." It's difficult to know precisely how to interpret this phrase.² But at the very least, it conveys the idea of a faithful husband who honors the sacred covenant of marriage.

Have you been sexually faithful to your wife? Do you frequent pornographic websites? Have you ever been divorced? How are things between you and your spouse right now? No one has a fairy-tale, friction-free marriage. But if your marriage is limping (or worse) or if you've had a marriage failure in the

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past, you should talk with a few wise elders and pastors before seeking eldership. How you handle your bride matters very much if you would care for Christ's bride.

Does the requirement that an elder be “a one-woman man” disqualify unmarried brothers from eldership? Given Paul's clear teaching elsewhere on the ministry advantages of singleness and his own example of being an unmarried apostle (1 Cor. 7:7, 25–38), it seems singleness itself should not bar a man from the office of overseer. Still, if you are unmarried, ask yourself: “Am I maintaining sexual purity? Am I above reproach in my dating relationships?”

An effective father: Management skill *does* matter for elders. Overseers should possess leadership ability, as implied in the title “overseer.” However, we typically associate “management” with employees and policies, financials and strategic plans. Paul had in mind a different management venue: children and the home.

An elder is “one who manages his own household competently, having his children under control with all dignity. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of God's church?)” (1 Tim. 3:4–5).

Can you see similarities between being a dad and being an elder? In both cases, a man takes on a leadership role. In both, he bears the primary responsibility to help those under his care grow up and live together in harmony. Both parenting and eldering are about guiding people toward maturity within a community context. Learn to shepherd God's family by shepherding yours first.

Are your children well-behaved or out of control? Are you

instructing your children at home about God's Word and the gospel? Or are your children exasperated by either your excessive harshness or deficient engagement (Eph. 6:4)? Is the atmosphere of your home predominantly nurturing and orderly or toxic and chaotic?

Does this text exclude childless brothers from eldership? No, not on principle. However, if a married man refuses to have children in order to enjoy a certain lifestyle without kids getting in the way, we should be concerned. Has a love for the world kept him from obeying that basic marital command, "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28, ESV)? But if a man is childless for reasons beyond his control, he should demonstrate fruitful disciple-making somewhere in his life. Here's the principle: nominate men as shepherds who are *already* engaged in effective shepherding.

Hospitable. Paul twice commanded that overseers be "hospitable" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8).

Hospitality can reveal kindness, compassion, and care for the needy, lost, and lonely, all qualities befitting an elder. But hospitality does something else: it allows others to see your family in action.

What do others see when they come over for dinner at your place? They don't see a flawless family, of course. But do your guests detect warmth and mutual respect in the tones and nonverbal signals between you and your wife? Between you and your kids? Do they see children obeying you, and you responding appropriately when your kids disobey? If your house were a church, would your dinner guests want to come back for another visit?

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5. You Are Male

It should be obvious by now, but let me say it plainly: God has called men, and only men, to be church elders.³ Consider a few observations:

- As we have seen, Paul said twice, in different contexts, that an overseer must be a one-woman *man*.
- Immediately before discussing overseers, Paul said, “I do not allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man” (1 Tim. 2:12). Given the immediate context, this verse, at the very least, must apply to the role of overseer, which is fundamentally defined by both teaching and exercising authority.
- Paul linked leading a church to leading a family. Just as God has called men to lead in marriage and parenting (Eph. 5:22–6:4), so he calls men to lead in the church family.

Does this mean that women can never teach or shepherd, confront sin or model godliness? Of course not. You can probably think of godly women whom God has used to shepherd and shape you, as can I. But the eldership is more than a gifting or a ministry. *Elder* describes a specific office, a divinely appointed role, a distinct position within the organizational structure of a local church, just as *father* is a distinct, divinely appointed position in the family. And as with the role of father, so God has sovereignly summoned qualified *men* to the role of elder.

6. You Are an Established Believer

Paul cautioned against new Christians serving as elders: “He must not be a new convert, or he might become conceited and fall into the condemnation of the Devil” (1 Tim. 3:6).

Don't Assume

Sometimes newly saved Christians amaze us by their spiritual enthusiasm, rapid transformation, and fearless evangelism. But be slow to put that energetic new Christian into eldership quickly. He has much growing and testing ahead. The term *elder* implies wisdom and experience, things a new believer lacks.

If you are a recent convert, focus on sinking your roots more deeply into Christ. Watch out for spiritual pride. In fact, let's walk it back a step: be sure you are truly converted. Don't assume! Have you repented of your sins and put your faith in Jesus to pardon you? Do you believe that only Jesus's death and resurrection can rescue you from hell and reconcile you to God? Are you born again? Nothing ruins churches like installing unconverted pastors and elders. How can someone serve as Jesus's under-shepherd and reflect Jesus's character if he isn't even a Christian?

Our church elects elders at an annual meeting. At that meeting, we ask elder nominees to tell the story of how they came to repent and believe in Jesus. The nominees are often men whom we have known for years and who have served as elders before. But the church wants to hear these men once again confess faith in Jesus. I'm not sure when our church started this practice, but I hope we never stop.

IS THAT YOU?

I want you to do something right now. Before turning to the next chapter, I want you to read 1 Timothy 3:1–7. Read it out loud. I'm totally serious. Go somewhere private if necessary, and read these verses aloud:

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This saying is trustworthy: “If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work.” An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an able teacher, not addicted to wine, not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy—one who manages his own household competently, having his children under control with all dignity. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a new convert, or he might become conceited and fall into the condemnation of the Devil. Furthermore, he must have a good reputation among outsiders, so that he does not fall into disgrace and the Devil’s trap.

That’s what a man asked me to do when I was being examined for ordination to pastoral ministry. So I opened my Bible and read 1 Timothy 3:1–7 aloud to the man and the others in the room. When I finished, the man said to me: “Thank you for reading that. I have only one question. Is that you?” Then he sat down.

We must resemble Jesus if we want to lead his churches, and Jesus embodies all of these characteristics. The sheep should detect strong traces of the Chief Shepherd in the lives and character of would-be under-shepherds. So may I ask, based on the description of an elder you just read, “Is that you?”

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