

Biblical Qualifications for Elders, Overseers and Shepherds

The qualifications of an elder, overseer, or shepherd (pastor) in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 can be summarised under three main headings: character, family life, and ministry competence.

Elder, Overseer and Pastor/Shepherd: One Office, Three Descriptions

The New Testament uses three terms to describe the same church leadership office:

- Elder (presbuteros) emphasises spiritual maturity and character.
- Overseer (episkopos) emphasises leadership and governance.
- Pastor/Shepherd (poimen) emphasises caring for and nurturing God's people.

The clearest examples are found in Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5, where the same group of leaders are called elders, overseers, and shepherds. In Titus 1:5-7, Paul moves directly from discussing elders to discussing overseers, indicating that he is referring to the same office.

Term	Focus
Elder	Who the leader is (maturity)
Overseer	What the leader does (leadership)
Pastor/Shepherd	How the leader leads (care and nurture)

Character

- Above reproach
- Self-controlled
- Sensible and wise
- Respectable
- Hospitable
- Gentle, not violent
- Not quarrelsome
- Not arrogant
- Not quick-tempered
- Not a lover of money
- A lover of what is good
- Upright, holy, and disciplined

The emphasis is not perfection, but a life that consistently reflects Christian maturity and integrity.

Family Life

- Be a one-woman man (faithful to his wife)
- Manage his household well
- Have children who are respectful and not known for rebellion or reckless living

Paul's reasoning is clear: if a person cannot lead and care for a family well, it is unlikely they will shepherd God's church well.

Ministry Competence

- Be able to teach
- Hold firmly to sound doctrine
- Encourage others with healthy biblical teaching
- Refute false teaching
- Not be a recent convert
- Have a good reputation with outsiders

The elder's role is not only to model Christian character but also to protect and nurture the church through faithful teaching.

A Simple Summary

A spiritually mature disciple whose character is respected, whose family life demonstrates godly leadership, and who can teach and defend the gospel.

Character first, family second, competence third.

The majority of Paul's qualifications focus on who the elder is, not on leadership skills, charisma, business ability, or ministry success. The central concern is godly character that has been proven over time.

As the New Testament presents it, an elder is a one-woman man of proven character who leads his household well, shepherds God's people faithfully, oversees the church wisely, and teaches sound doctrine.