

**Position Paper of the Elder Council of Nansemond River Baptist Church Concerning  
The Biblical Qualifications for Elders and Deacons  
Adopted by the Elder Council on February 4, 2020**

## **Introduction**

Recognizing that it is essential for the health and faithfulness of our congregation to have biblically qualified men serving in the offices of elder and deacon, the elder council has drafted this position paper to serve as a guide for evaluating nominees for both offices and for accountability purposes for those who have already been set apart for the office of elder and deacon. This position paper is not intended to be seen as an exhaustive treatment on the subject but should give clarity to our understanding of those traits described in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Because many of the qualifications listed for these two offices are similar, they can be seen as "shared qualifications" for both groups. Therefore, all shared qualifications will be handled together, with the elder-specific qualification of teaching and the qualifications for deacons' wives addressed separately.

## **Shared Inward Qualification**

*1 Timothy 3:2, 6, 8, 10; Titus 1:6*

Elders and deacons are, above all else, supposed to be men of high Christlike character. All three qualification lists begin similarly, by describing the inward character of the man. Elders and deacons must have a heart that is actively seeking after God. That is the only source of true Christlike character. To be "dignified" and "above reproach" means that there are no obvious areas of disobedience to God's Word. While we can test the outward obedience to Christ, the only one who truly knows a man's heart is himself and the Lord. Ample time for personal evaluation must be given so that each candidate for elder or deacon may judge for themselves if they meet this qualification. Consequently, it is important to not appoint a new convert to either position as they must first demonstrate spiritual growth before taking on such a task.

## **Shared Qualifications Concerning Decision-Making Ability**

*1 Timothy 3:2, 8; Titus 1:8*

Elders and deacons must be men who are both sober-minded and self-controlled. To be sober-minded is to be able to make decisions with a clear mind. Therefore, elders and deacons must be able to, with biblical wisdom, judge truth from error. They must be able to keep outside influences from clouding their judgment and decision-making ability. To be self-controlled is to be able to control one's actions while making wise choices. Elders and deacons cannot be rash, hot-headed, or quick to act when wisdom dictates wise, controlled decision making. Even in cases where a quick decision must be made, they must be able to do so in a way that is not controlled by their flesh but by a renewed mind guided by the Holy Spirit.

## **Shared Qualifications Concerning Interpersonal Relationships**

*1 Timothy 3:2, 3, 7, 8; Titus 1:7*

Elders and deacons must be men who relate well with others. This means that they must be well thought of by people both inside and outside of the church and hospitable to the saved and the lost. While God has uniquely created each of us to relate to people in different ways, those who serve as elders or deacons can shut themselves off from people. Both offices require regular, long-term connections with both saved and unsaved people. They not only need to foster those relationships but must also use their homes and resources, when appropriate, to further their interpersonal investments.

Elders and deacons must be honest men. They should be known as men who speak life-giving words that build up others and not harmful words that promote disunity.

Elders and deacons demonstrate the spiritual fruit of gentleness. They cannot be quarrelsome, violent, or quick-tempered. Plainly stated, these men cannot be bullies. They must demonstrate patience with those they lead and minister.

### **Shared Qualifications Concerning Financial Fidelity**

*1 Timothy 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7*

Elders and deacons will often be in the position to manage the financial resources of the church. Therefore, if an elder or deacon loves money or desires dishonest gain, he will find himself tempted by this kind of access. These men should demonstrate their financial fidelity in their personal finances. If a man regularly makes poor financial decisions in his own home, he will likely also make poor financial decisions with the resources entrusted to the church.

### **Shared Qualifications Concerning Alcohol**

*1 Timothy 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7*

Paul writes about alcohol in all three lists. He states twice that an elder must not be a "drunkard" and writes that a deacon must not be "addicted to much wine." These terms, on their own, do not forbid any use of alcohol but do forbid elders and deacons from excessive use of alcohol. The Scriptural warnings on the dangers of alcohol and the sin of drunkenness are abundantly clear. These warnings become even more important in a culture like ours which has embraced beer, wine, and liquor as a regular, even necessary, part of society. Any man who uses alcohol to excess, or who is not willing to sacrifice his freedom to consume alcohol for the sake of weaker brothers, should not be considered for the office of elder or deacon.

### **Shared Qualifications Concerning Marriage and Family**

*1 Timothy 3:2, 4, 5, 12; Titus 1:6*

While elders and deacons are not required to be married, it is necessary that they be faithful in their marriages. The term "husband of one wife" appears in all three qualification lists. This term literally translates as "a man of one woman." Historically, this term has been

interpreted in many different ways ranging from the strict exclusion of anyone who is remarried for any reason to the exclusion of anyone who practices polygamy and many positions in between. In our church's history, this term has generally been used to exclude anyone from the office of elder or deacon who has experienced divorce in their past. Among our current Council of Elders, there are differences of opinion over how best to interpret and apply this passage. Some hold that Paul is calling for marital faithfulness while not excluding those who may have experienced divorce in certain circumstances. Others hold that any divorce excludes a man from either of these biblical offices while not restricting a divorced person any further within the church. Because we desire unity, clarity, and to uphold biblical marriage, we have, at this time, agreed to not recommend any man who has been divorced for either office. This is seen by some of our elders as the biblical standard and by others as an acceptable extra-biblical requirement left to the local church.

All elders and deacons, no matter their marital status, must be committed to the highest biblical sexual ethic. Married elders and deacons must be solely committed to their wives and love her as Christ loved the church. Single elders and deacons must remain sexually pure and honor the marriages around them.

Elders and deacons with children must manage their families well. Their children, while not individually held to a higher standard than other children within the congregation, should show respect to their parents, be disciplined, and, while living under their parents' authority, should faithfully participate alongside their parents at church. The emphasis here should not be as much on the actions of kids but on the example set for the congregation by elders, deacons, and their wives in how they raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

### **Unique Qualification for Elders' Ability to Teaching and a Deacons' Maturity in the Faith** 1 Timothy 3:2, 9; Titus 1:8

One of the primary functions of the office of elder is to guard the church against false doctrine and rightly teach the Word of God. Therefore, any man serving as an elder must be able to judge between right and wrong doctrine and be able to clearly communicate biblical truths in such a way that those they shepherd can understand them and draw application. This qualification does not demand every elder be a preacher. It also does not necessitate that every elder will have a regular teaching role within the body (although most probably will). But every elder must be willing and able to instruct the church in sound doctrine and correct those who embrace false doctrine.

Deacons are not required to be able to teach. However, they are to "hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." This means that they, just like elders, must know the Word of God and be committed to its truth. They cannot be shallow in their faith or taken in by false doctrine.

### **Unique Qualifications for a Deacon's Wife and Why No Mention of Elders' Wives** 1 Timothy 3:11

Who this qualification applies to is heavily debated. Paul is either addressing the wives of those who serve as deacons, or he is addressing women who serve as deacons. The ambiguity of this text primarily stems from the Greek word for "woman" and "wife" being the same word. Both sides of this debate have good arguments from the structure of the text for why they hold the position they do. While we can see how a church with an established plurality of elders can have women serving as deacons and not be in contradiction to Scripture, the majority of our current Council of Elders believe the best understanding of this verse is that Paul is addressing the wives of those serving as deacons. Because we desire unity and clarity, we have agreed to only recommend men for the office of deacon. This is seen by some of our elders as the biblical standard and by others as an acceptable extra-biblical requirement left to the local church.

Deacons' wives should be "dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things." Paul inserts this qualification for deacons' wives in the middle of the passage addressing deacons likely because of the vital role that their wives may play in their ministry as deacons. Deacons meet the physical needs of the congregation. Because of this, their wives will often join in their ministry with them as they will be meeting the physical needs of women in the congregation. This does not mean that a deacon must be married, but if he is, then his wives can be an essential part of how he conducts his ministry. Therefore, a deacon's wife must be an example of godly womanhood to those she ministers alongside her husband.

The elders' wives are not addressed in either elder qualification list. This does not mean that an elder's wife should not also be a faithful example to the church. The exclusion of elders' wives from the qualification list is most likely due to the nature of the elder's ministry just as the inclusion of deacons' wives in their list was due to the nature of the deacon's ministry. We should hold elders' wives to the same standard as deacons' wives, even though they will be less involved in the work of their husbands due to the specific nature of that work.

### **Conclusion: The Necessity of Evaluation**

*1 Timothy 3:6, 10; 1 Timothy 5:20*

It is clear that having qualified men serving in the office of elder and deacon is a biblical mandate. The majority of these qualifications are characteristics which all Christians should strive for in their lives. However, the testing of men nominated for the office of elder or deacon must be a high priority to the elders who prayerfully put nominees before the church for approval, and for the congregation as a whole as they seek the Lord's guidance in approving nominations. Putting men into either office who have not been appropriately observed and tested can have dire consequences for the health and spiritual vitality of the church. We must heed the warnings of Scripture to "not be hasty in laying on of hands." With that said, putting godly, biblically-qualified men into these offices will be a blessing to the church as they faithfully lead and serve Nansemond River Baptist Church.