

STUDY 5

ELDERS AND DEACONS

OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to give the reasons why the qualifications for an elder of church are character traits rather than purely skills-based.
2. To compare and contrast the requirements of an elder with that of a deacon.
3. To be able to explain why *testing* is a necessary phase for appointing a leader within a church.
4. To describe why a church needs elders and deacons.



BACKGROUND

While Paul had lived in Ephesus and ministered there, he had encountered much cultural backlash from idolaters and resistant Jewish leaders. Even though what appears to have been a coalition of householder church leaders had emerged (note Acts 20:20) from Paul's time there (as seen in Acts 20:17 when Paul summons these men to meet him at the nearby port town of Miletus). It was during this meeting with the various elders of the householder churches of Ephesus that Paul prophetically stated that some of these elders would be disqualified as elders because they would embrace and

teach false doctrines (Acts 20:29-30). It seems that near the time when Paul's life was drawing to an end, that this prophecy was beginning to be fulfilled. This was why he had left Timothy as his delegate to address this. To correct the drift into deception involved the appointment of good, godly, genuine, Spirit-filled, leaders who exhibited certain necessary qualities. These leaders were to cooperate together to form a type of elders' council of the various householder churches in Ephesus. It appears that Paul's directives were successfully carried out by Timothy and that by AD 65 when the Apostle John wrote and sent his Revelation to the church at Ephesus that he himself had relocated there as a resident apostolic coordinator of this elders' council.

Paul's instructions to Timothy (and the later involvement of the Apostle John) about establishing the appointment and overseeing of qualified leaders highlights that "a church" is not merely a loose gathering of believers. For any group of believers to be constituted as *a church* there had to be qualified leaders, a leadership structure, membership, discipline, ordinances (such as the Lord's Table and water baptism), the sound teaching of God's Word, and a cooperative external connection with other similar churches.



INSTRUCTION

Objective #1. To be able to give the reasons why the qualifications for an elder of a church are character traits rather than purely skills-based.

1. Based on First Timothy 3:1, how did the apostle Paul feel about those who aspired to be leaders within a church, and why might he have felt this way?

Paul describes the primary leaders of a church as ‘overseers’ (the Greek word is *episkopos* from which we get the English word, *Episcopalian* which is what the Anglicans are called in America). The King James Version renders this word as *bishop* which is, as one commentator stated, “It seems preferable to avoid the translation ‘bishop,’ since this term carries so much later ecclesiastical baggage with it” (NICNT).

2. Note the foremost requirement for an elder mentioned in First Timothy 3:2 and compare this with Titus 1:6-9.
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In the Greco-Roman world, polygamy was lawful until the influence of Christians eventually led to it becoming illegal. Some modern readers, perhaps unaware of this cultural background, have assumed that Paul was saying that an elder could not be a *divorcee*.

3. Based on First Timothy 3:2 why might they assume this?
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Most job advertisements emphasise what the job involved. But Paul’s requirements for an elder didn’t. There seems to be three reasons for this:

- (1) Godly c _ _ _ _ _ r was more important than the skills needed.
- (2) An elder was likened to the familiar role of a h _ _ _ _ _ r .
- (3) The requirements of an elder seem to have been f _ _ _ _ _ depending on the culture in which the church was located.

4. While most of the qualities needed in an elder were *character* qualities rather than functional skills (the ability to do something within the church), in First Timothy 3:2 Paul does list two skills that an elder must be able to do. What is it, and why might this be important for an elder?
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A *good* Christian leader does not have to know everything, but they must be *teachable* in order to be qualified to *teach*. This is a necessary *character* trait. *Skills* can be learned, but *character* requires a series of decisions that shapes who a person really is even when no-one is watching them.

5. Why are the five character traits for an elder listed in First Timothy 3:3 important for them to have as a leader within a church?

6. What previous experience was helpful for someone aspiring to be an elder based on First Timothy 3:4-5? What might this look like today?

Like a householder, a church elder served as an overseeing *shepherd* over the church along with the other elders. While all elders had to be able to teach, not all elders were *gifted* as teachers. But those that were, Paul writes, were worthy of *due* honour (1Tim. 5:17).

7. A Christian becomes an elder long before they are *officially* appointed. But before they can be appointed, two things are necessary. According to First Timothy 3:6-7, what two things are necessary before someone could be appointed as an elder?

Objective #2. To compare and contrast the requirements of an elder with that of a deacon.

In Philippians 1:1, Paul writes to elders ('overseers') and deacons. It seems that the early church functioned largely on the basis of these two groups of leaders. The word *deacon* comes from the Greek word *diakonos* which means "servant" or "minister". It is the word that the apostle Paul uses most commonly to describe himself (note Ephesians 3:7).

8. Read through the requirements for a *deacon* in First Timothy 3:8-13 and then note how these requirements differ from the requirements for an elder.

We generally consider that *elders* oversee the governing and spiritual care of a church while *deacons* oversee more of the practical needs of a church.

Objective #3. To be able to explain why *testing* is a necessary phase for appointing a leader within a church.

Being a Christian leader, especially within a local church, is both a privilege and a responsibility. Church members should be able to *trust* their leaders. But *trust* requires a confidence that takes both time and transparency where it is then earned.

9. Why then would the apostle Paul require his instructions for any leadership appointment as described in First Timothy 3:10? Discuss.

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10. What possible risks are there for a church if they do not *test* a candidate for leadership before appointing them?
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For a deacon to pass the testing required by their church involved them being proven to be *blessed* — this didn't mean that they were expected to be *perfect*, rather, it required them to have demonstrated a consistent Christian walk where no *accusation* of unethical or immoral conduct could be warranted against them.

Objective #4. To describe why a church needs elders and deacons.

- 11. What two benefits for serving as a deacon in a local church are noted in First Timothy 3:13?

The coalition of elders and deacons within a local church provides a means by which a congregation can be *governed* and administered well. Not all elders are spiritually gifted the same or expected to be able to accomplish the same ministry roles. A team of elders complements each other with their various gifts and abilities. They enable a church to keep its focus on its mission of reaching *out* in *evangelism*, reaching *in* by care and *tending*, and reaching *up* in *worship*. But this cannot be at the expense of not being organised and mindful of practical matters which deacons take care of. The ministry synergy of elders and deacons within a church is a means by which a local church can be *healthy*.

APPLICATION

- 12. If you were in a position to nominate and/or consider someone for the position of an *elder* within your church, on what grounds would you consider someone for the position of an elder and what aspects of their life would you be wanting to know about?

13. Since the Scriptures command that a deacon should be tested before being appointed as such, what kind of testing would you wish to see? Would you tell them that you are about to “test” them for the role of a deacon? Could someone be a deacon and not be referred to as such?

14. If someone asked you why your church has elders and deacons, what would you say to them and how would you explain their different roles?
