

Position Paper of the Elder Council of Nansemond River Baptist Church Concerning the Biblical Qualifications for Elders and Deacons

Amended by the NRBC Elder Council on December 21, 2023 & April 16, 2024

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 biblically qualified men and women serving in the office of 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 women who serve as deacons addressed separately.

Shared Inward Qualification

1 Tim 3:2, 6, 8, 10, 11; Titus 1:6

Elders and deacons are, above all else, supposed to demonstrate high Christlike character. All three qualification lists begin similarly, by describing the inward character of the candidate. 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 person's heart is himself and the Lord.¹ 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 Tim 3:2, 8; Titus 1:8

Elders and deacons must be 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 Tim 3:2, 3, 7, 8; Titus 1:7

Elders and deacons must 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

¹ Masculine pronouns are used in the Shared Qualification sections of this elder paper. However, we recognize that these shared qualifications should also be applied to women who serve in the office of deacon.

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 cannot 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. They should be known as people who speak life-giving words that build up others and not harmful words that promote disunity.

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

Shared Qualifications Concerning Financial Fidelity

1 Tim 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. They should demonstrate their financial fidelity in their personal finances. Anyone who makes poor financial decisions in their own home, will likely also make poor financial decisions with the resources entrusted to the church.

Shared Qualifications Concerning Alcohol

1 Tim 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 person who uses alcohol to excess, or who is not willing to sacrifice their 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 Tim 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. This call to marital faithfulness must be taken seriously in our culture of sexual promiscuity and no-fault divorce. However, we do not believe that a divorce in a candidate's past should necessarily be a permanent disqualifier. Candidates for the office of elder and deacon who have experienced divorce in their past will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

All elders and deacons, no matter their marital status, must be committed to the highest biblical sexual ethic. Married men who serve as elders or deacons must be solely committed to their spouse and love her as Christ loves the church (Eph 5:25–33). Likewise, married women who serve as deacons must demonstrate the characteristics

of a godly wife who submits to her husband as the spiritual head of the household (Eph 5:22–24, 33; Titus 2:3–5). 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 and deacons in how they raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Additionally, the testimony and faithfulness of a married candidate's spouse should also be considered. To evaluate how a candidate manages his household must include ensuring that an elder or deacon's spouse is also of good Christian character and conduct.

Unique Qualification for Elders' Ability to Teaching and a Deacons' Maturity in the Faith

1 Tim 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 Women who Serve as Deacons

1 Tim 3:11; 5:13, 14

Women who serve as deacons should be "dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things." Paul inserts these unique qualifications for women deacons in the middle of the passage addressing deacons. Later in his letter to Timothy, Paul addresses specific temptations faced by women in the church at Ephesus. The sins of idleness, gossip, and meddling have no place in the lives of women in the church, especially those who serve in the office of deacon.

Conclusion: The Necessity of Evaluation

1 Tim 3:6, 10; 5:20

It is clear that having qualified men serving in the office of elder and qualified men and women serving in the office of 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 candidates 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. Allowing unqualified people to serve in either office who have not been appropriately observed and tested can have dire consequences for the health and spiritual vitality of the church. With that said, having biblically qualified elders and deacons will be a blessing to the church as they faithfully lead and serve Nansemond River Baptist Church.