

The Qualifications for Being a Christian

Written by Raymond Stiner

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Part I

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When we hear the term "qualifications" our mind usually begins to think about the qualifications for elders. And it is indeed these qualifications that we write to you about today. But we are making a little different application. I believe that they are not only the lifestyle of the elders but the majority of the qualifications would apply to every Christian. And so I begin to wonder when people say that the reason that we don't have elders today is because it is too difficult to meet the qualifications. Does that mean that we can't have Christians today because it's too hard to meet God's standards?

Before we get into the actual qualifications, I would like to say a few things about the eldership. I believe that this is one area of church government that needs some attention. God has a good plan, I don't know why we don't use it. We live in America where we have a democratic form of government. And as far as a government for the physical life in which we live, I am satisfied that there is no greater. But we are inclined to think that the church should be run by a democratic form of government. But it is not. The church is a Monarchy with a supreme king ruling over it. Jesus said all power was given unto him in heaven and in earth. He has a territory which is this world. He has subjects which are Christians. He has a law to govern us which is the Scriptures. But even in a Monarchy, the king will appoint officers to take care of certain things within his kingdom. And this is what Jesus does in the church. There are officers that he set up to do the work of the King in the absence of his physical presence.

These officers are pointed out to us in Eph. 4:11: "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers."

The apostles were the first group of officers in the church. To be an apostle you had to have been chosen directly by the Lord, so as soon as the last apostle died there were no more apostles.

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The next position within the church was the prophets. These men were endowed with the special gift of the Holy Spirit to reveal God's Word. These men were those whom the apostles had laid their hands on to do this work. Again, as soon as the last of the prophets were gone there was no such office in the church as a prophet.

The next office was that of the evangelist. These were men who had been sent forth to preach the gospel. They were instructed to ordain elders in every city (Titus 1:5). Since it did not take a special manifestation of the Holy Spirit to make one an evangelist, this office is still ongoing. But they are not the authority in a congregation. It was their job to appoint elders in every congregation to take the position of leadership.

Then the next office was the pastors. Here is a word that is so misunderstood in the religious world. Some think that the word pastor means the paid preacher who lives in a congregation doing all of the members' work. The Scriptures nowhere allow for the paid preacher (pastor) system common today. The word pastor is another word for elders. And these were the men who would ultimately rule the church and feed the flock of God (Acts 20:28).

Then there was the office of teachers or another word is deacons. These were the younger men of a congregation who were developing themselves, having basically the same characteristics as the elder only lacking experience and wisdom which comes through age. They could eventually be the elders of the congregation.

Elders direct the affairs of the church, and the deacons are to work under the elders, not over them.

Elders have the highest calling of man. They can make or destroy the church. Elders failing in the past ages has caused the church to apostatize. It takes a great man to be an elder. Many who would be leaders are not willing to pay the price of leadership. It takes a lot of self-denial to be a leader, and not everybody is willing to deny himself. Many would rather engage in trivial things than in a hard study of God's Word. They would rather amuse themselves than engage in serious hard work. They would rather keep certain bad habits instead of so disciplining themselves to be an example unto others.

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Being a leader means he will have to work when he doesn't feel like working. It means passing up pleasure when it conflicts with duty. It calls for giving up association with some in order to spend time with others. It costs to be a leader, but there are satisfactions also. Just knowing that you have helped someone to become a Christian, or you have helped to solve someone's problems has to be a good feeling. However leadership does not exist for mere satisfaction. It is not engaged in for the glory it brings the individual. A leader is a person who has a worthwhile task to do and who has the ability to get others to cooperate with him in doing it.

Many of the problems we have in the church today are because we did not have men in this leadership position who were willing to stand for the right and not back down from the truth. But the coin is two sided. You can have good elders but you also need a congregation that will listen to them. Listen to Heb. 13:7: "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." Also Heb. 13:17: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you."

From these verses we see the tremendous responsibility these men have. They watch over our souls as they who will give an account. I think we certainly need to study this issue and get back to God's plan that the church be ruled by the elders in every congregation.

Having said this about the elders I now want to go on to the qualifications because, as I have said, they are basic principles that all of us need to meet, with the exception of just a few we will notice in this study. These qualifications are actually found in three places in the Bible. They are found in 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4. I would encourage you to read these passages as you read this article.

1. Desire the Office — This is a principle that is true with any endeavor. If a person does not desire to be what he sets out to be he will not be very good at it and in fact will not succeed. This is not only true of the elder it is also true of every Christian. We must desire to be a Christian. Jesus put it this way in Matt. 16:24: "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." Before there is any following of Christ or denial on your part to follow Christ, he said: "if any man will" which simply means that you have to have the desire before you will do anything else. I am of the conviction that once the desire is created nothing can stop you from being the Christian you want to be.

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We need to create this desire within ourselves as well as in our children. I am alarmed at how many of our children we are losing to the world. And this has to be one of the major reasons, that is, they just do not have the desire to become a Christian and remain faithful. I think this begins with us as parents, and even with the congregation to create this desire.

I came across a bit of information the other day that somewhat surprised me. We were visiting the Amish country in Lancaster, PA, and we watched a narrative of the Amish lifestyle. I found out that the children in what is called the old order of Amish, when they reach the age of 16 through the age of 21, can do as they please. They can sow their wild oats so to speak. They can even have a car but are not allowed to drive it on the family farm. They have to park it at the end of the lane. They in fact are encouraged to test the world. But it is within this age frame that they have to make a decision as to whether or not they want to join the Amish faith or go the way of the world and leave their heritage. It is strictly up to the young individual. As I said I was surprised to find out that after all this they still retain 80% of their youth, even after they are allowed to go test the world. There has to be something said about the family influence upon these children which has created a desire to remain Amish when they had the chance to leave it.

Somewhere brothers and sisters we are missing the mark in creating within our children a desire to remain Christians. We haven't kept 80% of our children in the church. We need to look at this thing seriously because we are doing something wrong. First and foremost we need to create a desire, and then everything else will follow.

2. BLAMELESS — This is an interesting word. Does this mean that we are to be sinless? Does it mean that we cannot make a mistake? The word blameless here simply means one who is honest, morally fit, and dependable.

The apostle Peter would be a good example of one who was blameless. We know that he was an elder of the church which was at Jerusalem. We are told in 1 Pet. 5:1: "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed." But we also learn that there was an episode in Peter's life that needed to be corrected.

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In Gal. 2:11 we read: "But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed." The thing that Peter was blamed for and in fault of was that he was two-faced. He would associate with the Gentiles until his Jewish friends were around, then he would have nothing to do with them. And Paul confronted him with this. Paul said: "He was to be blamed."

But the beauty of the life of Peter was that he repented of this injustice just as he did when he denied our Lord and was once again blameless. He was honest enough to see his mistake and take care of it. He was morally inclined to stay as pure as his knowledge led him to be pure.

We are all growing individuals, and as the growth process brings us to higher levels of knowledge we must be of the nature to accept these truths and adjust ourselves to meet the will of God.

3. VIGILANT — One who is vigilant is one who is alert to danger or watchful. One who has the ability to determine the end of a course that is being pursued. In the case of an elder it was the ability of watching over the souls of those under his charge and making sure that they were walking down the right path.

But it also has its application in all of our lives. We are told to watch and pray for we know not the day that the Lord shall come. That is simply being vigilant. Peter said in 1 Pet. 5:8: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:" So vigilance is needed to guard against the wiles of the devil, simply meaning that every Christian is to be alert to danger.

Speaking of the advent of Christ to bring this world to an end and usher the righteous into glory, Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica and told them of the times and seasons that would surround these things. And then he said in 1 Thess. 5:6, "Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober." People live today as if the Lord isn't coming back. But he is and we need to be vigilant, watchful and ready for his return.

4. SOBER — In connection with this he used another word in the qualifications to be an elder and I believe to also be a Christian, and that is the word sober. In both the preceding references to be vigilant, the word sober was also used (1 Pet. 5:8, 1 Thess. 5:6). So these are two

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qualities that accent each other. Some would think that sober is the opposite of drunkenness. But that is not the usage of the word in this passage. To be sober simply means to be cool, collected, and grave. It refers to a person who is of sound mind, follows sound reasoning, and is not under the influence of passion.

In the eldership this would eliminate any man who would base his opinion and decision on friendship or sympathy or pity. It would eliminate the man who cannot make up his own mind or is influenced by others' decisions, or claims he "misunderstood" the meeting or question after he talks to his wife about it. An elder needs to be able to base his judgement on the Bible and not on the circumstance. A lot of elders and leaders of the church, as well as preachers in the past, have made decisions based on friendship and family ties. For instance, many people have changed their stand on the marriage question because some member of their family is now in an adulterous situation. These kind of people are not very sober minded.

As Christians we must make our decisions based solely on the Word of God. We must collect our evidence from the Scriptures to formulate an action that we would proceed in. This is what it means to be sober. —Box 4, LeContes Mills, PA 16850