

Apt to Teach

Do you sense that you are being called to eldership? Are you qualified for it? I'd like to begin by pointing out that eldership is NOT a calling. We are NOT called to the ministry at all, despite all we've heard and been taught – despite the way that Puritan Richard Baxter has written about it. If you do a search throughout the NT for “call”, “called”, and “calling” you'll find that all of us have been generally called to follow Christ, but none of us is called to an office in the church. The way the word is used, both inside and outside the Bible, it refers to our employment, our service. When asked if eldership is our calling, we are being asked if it is the *place* in which we **want** to serve the Body of Christ with our giftings. Everyone in the Body is asked to serve someplace with his or her gifting. That's a given. And eldership, like any other place of service, requires us to be qualified for it. We must be *gifted* for it; and we must *want* it.

Now, in 1Tim 3:1 it says, “This is a trustworthy statement: if any man **ASPIRES** to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he **DESIRES** to do.” And then it lists the qualifications. It is a “fine work”, a thing done, a service rendered. Not one of the qualifications in this passage speaks of being gifted by the Spirit in the areas listed. What I mean is that none of the things listed in verses 2-7 is included in the list of the gifts of the Spirit in any part of the NT. It doesn't say that he must have the *gift* of teaching, or the *gift* of preaching, or the *gift* of knowledge. It says that he must be *apt* to teach, or as some translations have it, *able* to teach. If you think about them, every one of the qualifications listed here is a **character** trait, not a skill. They all deal with reputation, not with inherent talent. They all deal with some aspect of relationships, not with personality.

We all recognize that *teaching* is the big bugaboo for anyone who aspires to the office. Does it seem to you, as it does to me, that teaching is an exception in this list, that it doesn't fit, that it's out of place as translated? It seems to be the only thing that requires either the *gift* of teaching, or the *skill* to teach, or a *talent* for teaching, or some aspect of personal *capability* that is divorced from character. I find it hard to believe that this was Paul's intent: that teaching is the deal-breaker. You either have it or you don't. What does he mean by “able to teach”? He repeats it in 2Tim 2:24 as a qualification for... who? Is that passage directed at elders only? Is he referring to Timothy only? Or is Paul speaking to anyone who would be a worthy servant of Jesus Christ? I think it's the latter. We all have something to teach with our life, our walk, our testimony of personal transformation. And here is where we begin to get a feel for what Paul probably meant when he threw teaching in the middle of all those other character traits. A literal translation of 2Tim 2:24 might read, “an instructor to patience.”

Let's do a little grammatical study. Patience is in the accusative case. It receives the action of the verb. But the verb here, curiously, is not “instruct”. Instruct is an adjective. The verb is “be”. So, does this mean he must **BE** an instructor? No, because instruct, or teach, is an *adjective*, not a *noun*. Is that how “teaching” is used in 1Tim 3:2? As a matter of fact, it is. It's an adjective there too. It's descriptive. That's why it is translated “*apt* to teach” or “*able* to teach”. Except that we don't see any qualifier like *horme* (inclination or tendency) or *dunamis* (power or ability). Now,

hold onto your seat. It could just as well have been translated, “teachable.” THAT is a character trait. THEN this qualification fits perfectly with the rest of the list.

In both First and Second Timothy, it comes at the end of a list of adjectives which describe the elder’s character. Being *teachable* is core to being a good disciple (2Tim), and it is also essential to being a good elder (1Tim). It governs our relationships. Every good teacher is first a good student. But if the elder is to be *able* to teach, by being teachable himself, then *how* does he teach? And the answer likewise fits with all the other traits that are listed in 1Tim 3: he is to be *exemplary* in ALL these things, demonstrating them, and having a reputation both inside and outside the church of being a man of character in these aspects of his life. A man who is not teachable is rebellious, inconsiderate, rude, arrogant, self-centered, and prideful. Such a man cannot exhibit the sort of loving consideration that pervades every other character trait listed here. And therefore his teachability itself must be exemplary. He may not know *everything*, but he can be taught *anything*, because he is a humble man who knows his limits; he is willing to submit to instruction.

That being said, what are we to do with the qualifications given to Titus? Is the meaning there supposed to be “teachable” as well? Obviously *not*. It is clear in Titus that the *purpose* of the qualification is “so that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict.” But notice where this “ability” comes from: “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word *as taught*.” In other words, if he is teachable, then he will receive his proper instruction from those gifted with teaching in sound doctrine. And because of that, he will be able to stand firm against the naysayers, those who deny the truth, and oppose sound doctrine. He is not the one who must come up with sound doctrine, and be first and foremost a systematic theologian, someone grounded in the original languages, and having an extraordinary facility with language. He must be exemplary in his doctrine, just as he is exemplary in his life. And that’s because the way that we live flows from our doctrine. Right *orthodoxy* leads to right *orthopraxis*; sound doctrine leads to sound practice; right thinking leads to right living. The elder is to be a man grounded in sound doctrine so that it pervades his life. And that’s all ANY of these passages mean. The *gift* of teaching, I submit, is therefore independent of the office. And that’s why, throughout church history, some of our finest teachers have been deacons.

I hope that puts to bed some of the doubts and reservations you may have had about this need to be apt to teach. Are you teachable? Will you submit to sound doctrine, and live it out, and defend it against any and all who would undermine it? Are you willing to help correct those in the flock who might stumble, or who have difficulty understanding and applying sound doctrine – because you’ve already wrestled through these things yourself, and are therefore “apt to teach” them? If so, then I believe you have met this particular standard of Scripture in regard to eldership.