

## THE ELDER MUST BE "SOBER" AND "OF GOOD BEHAVIOUR"

**1 Timothy 3:2**, *“A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;”*

The next two qualifications of an elder to consider are “sober” and “of good behaviour.”

**Sober** -- It comes from the Greek word “*sophron*” which is made up of “*sozo*” (to save) and “*phren*” (the mind or cognitive faculties). The two words combined together means “safe or sound in mind.” The previous word “vigilant” focuses on a controlled passion whereas “sober” emphasizes a “controlled mind.” A person who controls both his passions (heart) and his mind will make a very able and stable leader. He is not rash in his decision making. He is a man with sound reason coupled with a controlled passion. He has the right motivation and coupled with the clear mind, he is a leader who makes careful and well considered decisions. His mind is guided by the Word of God and led by the Holy Spirit.

The Bible says that the mind is one of the first things in the believer’s life that requires renewal. **Romans 12:1-2**, *“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed **by the renewing of your mind**, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”* [Emphasis added] The mind controls the actions of the person. For example, if a person believes that there is no God he lives a life of debauchery as he believes that he is not answerable to anyone. He swears, drinks, takes drugs, gambles and commits all sorts of sinful acts and could not care less what consequences he has to bear because he believes that there is no God. The Bible says that God created man. The Bible also says that all who die in sin will go to Hell. If the truth is taught and believed that God exists and all deeds and thoughts of every man will be judged and punished by God. That man will change. A person whose life has been changed by believing in the LORD Jesus Christ who died for him would surely live his life very differently. The believer who has the mind of Christ will think and hence live like Christ. The reason is that all his decisions will be guided by the Word of God. The leader who decides the future of God's people and how God's people ought to grow spiritually needs the mind of Christ. He must be sober! The mind guided by the right teaching can transform lives, his own as well as others under his care.

A mind that is renewed by the Word of God will think godly thoughts. The one who has this mind will evaluate problems, situations, render help and make proposals that will be in accordance with God’s Word. He will make judgements that will be based upon God’s Holy Word. This is precisely what an elder is supposed to do. He has no right to make subjective opinions. He is to make judgements on matters and materials belonging to God with the intent to nurture, help and protect. If it is God’s money that he is handling, he must therefore use it wisely for God’s purposes, for God’s people and God’s projects. He cannot do this without having a renewed mind. The judgements he makes must be God’s judgements. **Deuteronomy 1:17** states clearly, *“Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; **for the judgment is God's**: and the cause that is too hard for you, bring it unto me, and I will hear it.”* [Emphasis added]

This renewed mind does not come about by wishful thinking or by prayer alone. It can come only through the constant study of God’s Holy Word. Therefore, every elder must have a consistent programme to study God’s Holy Word and this must go on because no Christian will

ever arrive at the point where he says, "I know all there is to know about the Word of God and I need not study further." Even the great apostle Paul had to admit that he could never stop learning. **Philippians 3:9-12**, *"And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."*

To be sober means to have a mind under control and it does not come about by wishful thinking. It can come only through a faithful and consistent study of the Word of God. The Holy Spirit will take the Word of God and sanctify the mind of the believer. Every elder must be sober, i.e. possessing a mind under the control of God's Word. To do that, the elder must keep on studying the Word of God.

**Good Behaviour** -- Literally, "*of good behaviour*" means "orderly arrangement". It comes from the Greek word "*cosmos*" from which the English word "cosmos" is derived. The world is designed by the all-knowing Creator in a most orderly fashion. Not an inch is out of place. Every star and planet is positioned in its precise location by His sovereign will. This is God's "cosmos." When God used this term to describe the overall demeanour of the elder, He wants to see a man with every part of him "in proper order". In modern terms today, it would describe a gracious gentleman. He should be immaculate in his words, behaviour as well as his appearance. He is a careful man in that he means what he says and says what he means. He does not mince his words with double talk.

His behaviour is beyond reproach. There is no action out of sorts. He is circumspect in his deeds. He knows where he ought to go and where he ought to stay away. He is no man pleaser. He does not go to places because it is "the thing to do". He will try his utmost to always go to places that will bring glory to His Lord, and not shame. Peer pressure will not faze him or compel him into doing something that dishonours God and brings shame to the Name of Christ, whose name he must bear dutifully and honourably. It is sad that there have been elders who were made elders because of their "seniority" and who have displayed shameful behavior. They behave like masters and treat the church members as slaves. They want to be greeted when they pass by; they get upset otherwise. They are callous in their behaviour and are easily seen by others as man-pleasers; they would swoon over those who are wealthy and influential. The status and philosophies of the world characterize their lives and conduct. Such individuals must never be made elders.

The elder of good behavior speaks words that are carefully chosen, seasoned with salt to bless, encourage, and sometimes even to rebuke when needed. His words are tactful, knowing when and what to say at the right time to build up the faith of believers and promote Christ.

He is not perfect but he is beyond reproach as an "all rounder". He is godly at home, in the work place and church. He is no hypocrite. He is the same person in control of his whole demeanour wherever he goes.

The world would describe him as "cultured". He may not attend the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and mix with the "hip ones" of today's society and enjoy fine dining; but he is a gentleman with an immaculate disposition. His attire need not be expensive but is neat and decent. He mixes well with people of all social status. He is not rude or quarrelsome. He speaks well and is well mannered.

Barnes describes him well when he wrote, “He should not be slovenly in his appearance, or rough and boorish in his manners. He should not do violence to the usages of refined intercourse, nor be unfit to appear respectably in the most refined circles of society. Inattention to personal neatness, and to the rules which regulate refined intercourse, is indicative neither of talent, learning, nor religion; and though they are occasionally--not often--connected with talent, learning, and religion, yet they are never the fruit of either, and are always a disgrace to those who exhibit such incivility and boorishness, for such men *ought* to know better. **A minister of the gospel should be a finished gentleman in his manners, and there is no excuse for him if he is not.** His religion, if he has any, is adapted to make him such. He has usually received such an education as ought to make him such, and in all cases ought to have had such a training. He is admitted into the best society, and has an opportunity of becoming familiar with the laws of refined intercourse. He should be an example and a pattern in all that goes to promote the welfare of mankind, and there are few things so easily acquired that are fitted to do this, as refinement and gentility of manners. No man can do good, on the whole, or in the "long run," by disregarding the rules of refined intercourse; and, other things being equal, the refined, courteous, polite gentleman in the ministry, will always do more good than he who neglects the rules of good-breeding.” [Emphasis added--**Albert Barnes’ Notes on the Bible**, Swordsearcher, 4.7]

Burkitt adds succinctly that “in his words, in habit and garb, in his deeds and actions, neither proud and supercilious, nor morose and sour, but affable and easy, kind and courteous, of a composed temper and grave behaviour” [**William Burkitt’s Expository Notes**, Swordsearcher, 6.2]

All elders must have these Christian qualities – "sober" and "of good behaviour"!