

The Pillar (Part 1 of 4)

Who Should Lead the Church?

1 Timothy 3:1-7

Mark Vroegop

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ²Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil (1 Tim. 3:1-7).

The church in the city of Ephesus was a special place for the apostle Paul. The church was likely founded during his second missionary journey and flourished when he returned in the spring of 54 AD. While in the city of Ephesus, Paul taught for three months in the local synagogue (Acts 19:8) and then for two years in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9), a famous teacher in the city. This season was marked by some exceptional ministry. The gospel spread throughout the entire region (Acts 19:10), Paul performed extraordinary miracles (19:11), there was spiritual warfare (19:18-20), and there was physical opposition which led Paul to flee the city (Acts 19:21-20:1). Ephesus was a city deeply impacted by Paul's ministry.

But it wasn't just the ministry activity that Paul loved. He loved the people, especially the leaders. There is a very rare and precious account in Acts 20:17-38 where Paul had a final meeting with the leaders of the Ephesian church knowing that he would likely never see them again. There was a ship waiting for Paul to take him to Jerusalem, but before he left them Paul gave them a very personal charge:

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰and from

among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears (Acts 20:22-31).

And this scene ends with this statement: "And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him" (Acts 20:36-37). There is no other moment like this in the New Testament. This church and these church leaders were special to him.

So it is no wonder when Paul writes to Timothy about five years later that he would be concerned that Timothy assist the church in choosing the right leaders. Paul knows what you know: **the right people in the right positions making the right decisions makes all the difference in the world.** This is especially true in the church.

Who Guards the Truth that Leads to Life?

Today we begin chapter three in our study of 1 Timothy. Chapter one was primarily about doctrine and, in particular, the problem of false doctrine which was being taught by some Elders in the church at Ephesus. Chapter two was primarily about how the church should worship together, especially about the roles of men and women.

Over the last two weeks, we've been able to observe an important interpretive principle: command and context. There are some things that translate directly from the Bible to our present situation without any change, and there are other things that need to be seen through a lens of cultural context. Last week we walked through a very challenging text, and I showed you why I believe the Bible teaches that ultimate spiritual authority and responsibility is laid upon the shoulders of men.

In chapter three we find the theme verse for 1 Timothy: "I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:14-15). I summarized the theme of the book with this phrase: **"guard the truth that leads to life."**

While everyone in the church – men and women – are called to guard the life-giving truth of the gospel, it is particularly a calling upon the lives of church leaders. Central to guarding this life-giving truth well is having the right leaders in the right positions. The selection of qualified men for spiritual leadership positions is one of the most important tasks that a church and church leaders do.

Therefore, Paul identifies for Timothy the positions of church leadership and the qualifications that qualify a person for those roles. While the means by which a person is chosen for these roles may change (context), the qualifications transcend time and culture. The right people in the right positions making the right decisions is critical for the church to collectively guard the truth that leads to life. Spiritual leadership is extremely important.

Two Roles: Elders and Deacons

Chapter three introduces two distinct roles within the church ministry, and verse one sets the tone: “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Tim. 3:1). Verses 1-7 describe Elders, and verses 8-13 describe Deacons. The qualifications are similar but not completely identical. Both are important and needed positions of spiritual leadership. Both involve a sense of calling from God, qualifying character, and a conviction to serve in this capacity.

The distinction between the roles is in regard to function and priorities. It is likely that the concept of two offices emerged in Acts 6 when the scope of the church grew, and there was an inability to serve the expanding practical needs of the people. Faced with the problem of two important but not equal priorities, the apostles made the following decision:

Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word (Acts 6:3-4).

This seems to be a familiar pattern as churches grew. During his missionary journeys, Paul appoints Elders in new churches (Acts 14:23) and instructs Titus to do the same on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5-9). But when he writes to the established churches of Ephesus and Philippi, deacons are part of the church governance (Phil. 1:1, 1 Tim. 3:8-10). It seems that churches were started with Elders, and Deacons were added as the needs of the church grew.¹

Both Elders and Deacons are to lead, but the platform through which they lead is different. The primary calling upon Elders is spiritual governance while the primary calling upon Deacons is spiritual service. Every church needs godly, qualified Elders and Deacons in order for the body to live out its God-given calling. Next week we will fully examine the ministry of the Deacons. This week we are specifically looking at Elders.

The Noble Task of Eldership

Verse one identifies the high value of the office of Elder: “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” (1 Tim. 3:1). We learn a number of things from this opening verse.

First, we see Paul introduce a statement with **“the saying is trustworthy.”** He did the same thing in 1:15 as he introduced a summary of gospel: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” So this tone introduces very important statements. I’m sure you know that the church easily fails when the gospel or godly leadership are lacking.

¹ William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles – The Word Biblical Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 163

Secondly, the word “**aspire**” means to “set his heart on” or “stretch oneself in order to attain,”² and the word “**desire**” means “a passionate compulsion.”³ Paul is not suggesting that one approach Eldership as a position for personal campaigning or to reach for it with selfish intent. But he is saying that there is nothing wrong with desiring to be qualified and living in such a way that one would be qualified the role. “Taken together the two terms describe a man who outwardly pursues the ministry because of a driving compulsion on the inside.”⁴

Third, to serve in this way is a “**noble task.**” Spiritual leadership of a body of believers is a worthy and glorious calling. Cotton Mather, an American Puritan, said the following about the value of church leadership:

*The office of Christian ministry [Eldership], rightly understood, is the most honourable, and important that any man in the whole world can ever sustain... The great design and intention of the office [of Elder] are to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men, to display in the most lively colours, and proclaim in the clearest language, the wonderful perfections, offices, and graces of the Son of God; and to attract the souls of men into a state of everlasting fellowship with him.*⁵

Now I don’t want to diminish the importance of any kind of work done for the glory of God. But I do want stress to you the importance of the work of Elders. Once a year I remind our Elders that beyond being a godly man, husband, and father, there is nothing more important than what they do in life. Elders are charged with the care of the church – the entity through which the gospel is declared in the world. Therefore, I’d like to call young men to aspire to this office. Aspire to be an Elder. And if God calls you and burdens your heart to devote your entire life to this calling as a full-time Elder/pastor, don’t settle for anything less. Again, Cotton Mather:

*It is such an honourable, important, and useful office, that if a man be put into it by God, and made faithful and successful through life, he may look down with disdain upon a crown, and shed a tear of pity on the brightest monarch on earth.*⁶

Finally, Paul uses the term “**overseer,**” and we need to understand what this means in 1 Timothy and in the broader context of the New Testament. The Greek word used here is *episkopos*, and it has been translated as overseer or bishop. The word seems to point toward the function of the office as someone who supervises, leads, and manages as seen in Greek culture. In other passages, the word used for this office is *presbyteros* (see 1 Tim. 4:14), and it appears to have more of a Jewish flavor, having its origin in the governance model of the synagogue. This also likely indicates a plurality of leadership which means an equality of authority among the Elders. The nuance of the words is slight. Bishop or overseer (*episkopos*) probably denoted function, while Elder (*presbyteros*) denoted the dignity and value.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996), 92.

³ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Commentary – 1 Timothy*, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 1995), 95.

⁴ MacArthur, 96.

⁵ MacArthur, 99 citing John Stott’s book – *Between Two Worlds*

⁶ *Ibid*

There is one other term used for this office: **pastor**. This title is found in Ephesians 4:11, and it literally means “shepherd,” likely capturing the full reality and heart of what church leadership is to look like. The image that closely fits with what leading the church is like is shepherding. It involves caring, leading, instructing, nurturing, defending, and loving. Gratefully there is one verse that captures all of this. It is 1 Peter 5:1-4. I’ll add the Greek words so you can see it more clearly:

*So I exhort the **elders** (presbyteros) among you, as a fellow **elder** and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² **shepherd** (poimano) the flock of God that is among you, exercising **oversight** (episkopos), not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*

This passage helps us greatly in that it contains some many important ideas. In four verses Peter is able to capture 1) the authority of Jesus as the Chief Shepherd, 2) the role of governance, 3) the word picture of a shepherd, and 4) the plurality of the elders.

I’ve taken this much time because it is important for you to understand the office of Elder. Entire denominations are named from these Greek works (Episcopal and Presbyterian Churches). How a church is governed is extremely important. Without Elders who lead and, as we’ll see next week, Deacons who serve, the church is not effective, whole, or vibrant.

The Qualifications

What follows in verses 2-7 is a list of the qualifications for those who would serve in the office of Elder. As Timothy considered men in the congregation of Ephesus, he needed to use this list as an overlay to help him discern who was truly qualified. There is another list for Eldership in Titus 1:5-9, and it is remarkably similar to what we have in 1 Timothy 3. The list of qualifications has one overarching trait or character quality with ten areas of application, and it seems that the list was to be used as a filter for men who might be considered for service.

It is noteworthy that this list is entirely character-based and not activity-based. Other passages tell us what overseers are to do. They are to rule (1 Tim. 5:17), to preach and teach (1 Tim. 5:17), to pray for the sick (James 5:14), to care for the church (1 Peter 5:1-2), to be examples for others to follow (1 Peter 5:1-2), to set church policy (Acts 15:22ff), and to ordain other leaders (1 Tim. 4:14).⁷ But this list only contains one skill-oriented trait – “able to teach.” The vast majority of what we find here is all about a man’s character, and it begins with the most important one.

Above Reproach: The General Requirement – The list of qualifications begins with the word “therefore,” linking it to the previous verses about the importance and the value of the role of Eldership. Since this role in the church is so vital and important, there are a number of traits that should define the men who are considered for church leadership.

⁷ MacArthur, 98.

The pre-eminent quality that serves as a general and over-arching requirement is that he be “above reproach.” Since the church’s reputation is directly related to the people in it and the leaders of it, the elders needed to be morally credible men. But it is not just the church’s reputation that is at stake here; the message of the gospel is on the line. It is rather simple: those who talk about righteousness should themselves be righteous.

“Above reproach” does not mean without sin, perfect, or that he has no short-comings. No one would fit that bill. It means that a person’s reputation and behavior is such that he would be a credit to the church – someone who would make you proud in all the right sense of that word.⁸ It means that he is a man who has a blameless reputation and irreproachable conduct.⁹ An Elder is not a perfect man, but he is very clearly a godly man.

What follows in verses 2-7 is a list of ten other areas in which being “above reproach” should be lived out.

1) Marital Faithfulness – Verse two says that an Elder must be “**the husband of one wife.**” Now there has been a great deal written on the subject, and there are a number of options as to who Paul is referring to: 1) those who have never married, 2) those who are polygamists, 3) those who are divorce and remarried, 4) those who were widowed and remarried, or 5) those who are unfaithful in marriage. The Greek text here literally reads “a one-woman man,” which leads me to believe that Paul is not talking about marital status per se. Rather, as is the case with the other traits, he is talking about a character issue. He is talking about a man’s sexual morals, so I believe that he is referring to the fifth option.¹⁰

That said, let me emphasize to you the importance of this area for church ministry. Although marital status may not be the determining factor for a man’s qualification, make no mistake in thinking that his sexual morals are not important. This phrase means that a man is to be marked by sexual purity in every arena of his life.

2) Disciplined – The next three qualities are related to man’s self-mastery: sober-minded, self-controlled, and respectable. They refer to different aspects of the same character trait. To be “**sober-minded**” means that a man is clear-headed in his judgment and his actions. To be “**self-controlled**” meant that a man was able to rule his passions, desires, and drives (especially his sexual desires). And to be “**respectable**” meant that he was dignified. You could think of this as the outward expression of self-control.

Putting these together, we get the picture that Elders should have their act together. They should be men who are controlled by the Spirit and the Word. They should model godly behavior.

⁸ Mounce, 170.

⁹ Stott, 92.

¹⁰ The others, in my view, fall short for these reasons: 1) Paul commended singleness and was himself single (1 Cor. 7:8). 2) Polygamy was unusual in Ephesus since sexual sin was so rampant, and considered immoral by the church. 3) The Bible allows for divorce and remarriage (see Matt. 5:31-32) in certain situations, and if this was Paul’s intent to exclude divorced men he could have stated it very plainly. 4) Finally, the remarriage of widows is clearly permitted (1 Cor. 7:39).

3) Hospitable – The word (philoxenia) literally means a love for strangers. During the biblical times with no safe or reputable places to stay, overseers needed to be willing to open their homes. Elders are to have an orientation toward strangers that is positive, warm, and inviting. Their lives and homes should be open – not closed and cloistered.

4) Able to Teach – An Elder must be able to teach others. Sometimes this is formal teaching, but it can also include informal teaching. This is especially true in light of Paul use of the word in 2 Tim. 2:24 and Titus 1:9 where an Elder is called to refute those in error through teaching. An Elder must be able to use the Word.

5) Not an Addict – The text says “**not a drunkard,**” and the meaning is fairly obvious and straightforward. While Paul does not require total abstinence (see 1 Tim. 5:23), it is clear that a man who is addicted to wine is not qualified to lead the church. He is to be controlled by the Spirit – not substances.

6) Temperate – The next two words refer to the way a man is able to rule his spirit, especially in the midst of conflict. “**Not violent but gentle**” refers to gentleness, graciousness, and a willingness to yield. You can imagine what a violent man, by virtue of his actions or his tongue, could do. “**Not quarrelsome**” means that this man is not constantly looking for a fight, an argument, or that he is known as being disagreeable. His character shines in conflict. This is a direct contrast to the false teachers who were constantly quarrelsome and created strife (see 1 Tim. 6:3).

7) Not a Lover of Money – In 1 Timothy 6:10, Paul will say that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and an Elder should not be guilty of this misplaced affection. His motivation for leading the church should not be for financial gain, and he should not live a covetous lifestyle. Instead, he should have a generous heart, and he should model how to use money for God’s purposes through giving.

8) Solid Family Leadership – Paul makes a fairly lengthy statement in light of the others qualifications here: “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (1 Tim. 3:4-5). Paul makes a direct connection between a man’s ability to manage and lead his own home with his ability to do the same with the church. A church leader inept at home will not be able to lead the church. Not that his children are perfect or that all of them always follow the Lord into adulthood. Even the best parents have children who make bad decisions. The issue here is whether the man is managing his home well with the spiritual dignity fitting for a spiritual leader.

9) Maturity – Paul gives a word of caution next about the danger of moving someone too quickly into a ministry leadership role. “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1Tim. 3:6). There is real danger that a new believer could begin to use the ministry for him or herself. Too much advancement, too many compliments, too much power can make a person “spiritually clouded” – that’s what conceit means. Elders need to be humble men who have a deep respect for the church and a clear sense of their own unworthiness.

10) A Good Reputation – This qualification is very specifically addressed to what people outside of the church think of the man who may become an Elder. “Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.” (1 Tim. 3:7) If a person has a terrible reputation in the community, he and the ministry become an easy target for the devil to create a snare. Therefore, his life inside and outside the church must be above reproach.

This is quite a list, isn't it? It is a sober reminder of why I said last week that most men are not even qualified to be an Elder. It is an important list because it holds up a high standard for what church leadership should be like. For some of you it may bring back really bad memories of a time in your past when the church was in trouble because church leadership was in trouble. It really is scary how directly connected the health of a church is connected to the godliness of her leaders. Every church in every generation needs the right people in the right position to make the right decisions for the glory of God.

Last weekend our Elders held our annual spiritual retreat – a time for spiritual refreshment, relationship building, and planning. I think you'd be happy to know that most of the time was spent in spiritual refreshment. We did some planning, but we know that what matters most is what happens inside of all our souls. That is why we not only have Elder Council meetings once a month, but we also have Elder accountability meetings once per month. And let me just tell you what a wonderful group of godly men with whom I'm honored to serve. While they are not perfect, they are wonderful examples of godly men, and I, for one, am very grateful for them.

Next week, I'm going to take some time to talk about a congregation's responsibility to church leadership, but today let me close with two pastoral admonitions:

- Grow and be godly so that you might one day be eligible to be an Elder. Guard your heart and your life from patterns that will not only rob you of the honor but rob the church of qualified leaders.
- Pray often for your church leaders. The spiritual battles are very real, the church can be a hard place, and the enemy would like nothing more than for us to fail.

Godly leaders were a great joy to Paul. And no wonder. When the right people are in the right positions, church is a beautiful thing. May God help us to be a beautiful church filled with spiritually mature people led by godly, qualified leaders.

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com

Scriptural Citations: Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version.