

SETTING THE EXAMPLE

1 Timothy 3:1-13

How often have we heard or asked the question “Why would anyone want to be President of the United States?” There are people who really **do** want to have that position. Every four years many people enter the race hoping to be chosen for the job. During such campaigns, we evaluate “those who run” against a set of criteria we have for a person in that position. We may not be able to list all the items that make up our criteria but somehow we reach a conclusion (it may be described more as a “feeling”) about each candidate. One of the problems in politics is that we have a lot of uncertainty about “what is the truth” regarding each of the candidates. One of the more heavily weighted inputs to our decision is how the person has operated or performed in the past.

Some people are involved in hiring or choosing people for a job in the work place. Usually, we will have a set of specific minimum criteria for candidates. These minimum criteria are typically easy to measure (or verify) facts. There are many other more difficult to measure or verify criteria that we use to make a decision whether to hire or not. As in the case of choosing an elected official, we might put a lot of reliance on how a person has operated or performed in the past or in other situations.

What about positions of responsibility in the Church? I think each of us has in mind a set of requirements we believe a person should have to function in the role of pastor or deacon. In addition to our own ideas, we have the Word of God to guide us. A familiar passage on this subject is Paul’s first letter to Timothy.

A Pastor’s Heart – 3:1

¹ It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. 1 Timothy 3:1 (NASB95)

Just as an editorial note, the first part of verse one (literally “Faithful the word”) is thought to be the concluding remarks of chapter two. We could certainly argue that all the Scriptures could be described as “faithful sayings or words.”

The subject of chapter three is about leadership roles in a local body of believers and enumerates a significant number of qualifying criteria for those who fill those roles.

As we typically find, various translations use a variety of common expressions to take the Greek text to an English equivalent expression. This variety includes such expressions as office of bishop, being an overseer, position of a bishop, and the oversight. It appears that the term “bishop” is an evolved word that started out as a transliteration of the Greek word “episkopos” and because of the lack of availability of manuscripts for centuries, the “p” sound became corrupted to a “b” sound and the transliteration evolved to “bishop.” Roman Catholic tradition recognizes the idea of “oversight” in using the “evolved word” but it does not limit it to a local body but, instead, expands it to oversight of a collection of local bodies. That practice is alien to how the first century churches functioned.

Based on other passages which mention elders and pastors most scholars agree that the “role” of overseers is equivalent to the role of elders and pastors. These roles align with our ideas regarding what the pastor of a church is expected to **do**: Supervise, Manage, Lead. Paul assured Timothy this was a “noble task” or a “good work.”

What do we do with the two verbs “aspires” and “desires” used in this first verse? (Some translations use “desires” in both places in the sentence.) Aspire could be better translated as “seeks after” or “reaches out to attain” which could imply preparation to put oneself in a position

of being appointed or chosen for a particular position. At the end of this verse the word rendered “desires” indicates an “eagerness or enthusiasm” to have.

We can certainly appreciate that the above description does not address the motivation for the enthusiasm or determined preparation to be in a leadership role in a local church. It is ideally motivated by what we (as Baptists) describe as a “call from God” which could be defined as a persistent urging by the Holy Spirit to go in a particular direction. Some might be motivated by other reasons that may be less noble such as fame, egotism, power, or family tradition.

An important lesson to be learned is that whatever the motivation may be, there needs to be active participation in diligently applying oneself to prepare and be enthusiastic about it. Beyond wanting to fulfill such a role and beyond preparation for such a role in a local body, there is the subject of character that must not be overlooked by the church.

A Pastor’s Character – 3:2-7

² An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. ⁴ He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity ⁵ (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), ⁶ and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. ⁷ And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. 1 Timothy 3:2–7 (NASB95)

The overseer, elder, or pastor (as we understand the role) is, not only to **do** a certain job, he is also expected to meet certain personal characteristics. Paul gave Timothy a fifteen-item list from which we can learn. The first item on this list (**above reproach**) speaks of the issue of personal integrity. It is hard to imagine a person trying to lead church members in paths of righteousness if the leader doesn’t walk there in his own life. Excursions from the “right path” usually will be revealed. It may be just a “one-time” excursion. But even a one-time incident harms the reputation of the person engaged in such a “noble task.”

The criterion of being “the husband of but one wife” has been argued from many sides. Some will claim that a pastor must be married. Others will claim that those who have divorced and remarried are not eligible. Some commentaries will say this is just a prohibition against polygamists being pastors. We don’t know if Paul ever married. There is no evidence that Timothy was married. I believe that the general situation was that most of the mature men in a local body of believers were married and had children; therefore, Paul was addressing criteria that would apply in most situations.

Many of the other traits would come under the category of “generally regarded as vital” criteria for pastors: temperate, sober, or vigilant; self-controlled or discreet; respectable, decorous, or well behaved; hospitable; able to teach; not given to wine or drunkenness; not violent but gentle; not quarrelsome or contentious, not a lover of money. How could anyone argue with such a list of desirable characteristics? In fact, the world expects these qualities to be the hallmarks of Christians, in general. Because they haven’t seen these behaviors in every Christian, many reject the validity of the Gospel.

Beyond the issue of *character* is the question of *proven experience*. The proving ground that God inspired Paul to reference was that of the home. In the fourth verse, Paul wrote of properly managing a home environment. The word manager (Greek, *proistemi*) literally means “to set or place over or before.” We perhaps have several ideas captured in this word. If the person is in a place “over” a function, then we would think of a role of supervisor or manager. If the person is in a position of being “before” others, then we might see a role of leadership.

Should the home be the most difficult or the easiest challenge a person has when it comes

to demonstrating leadership or managerial capability? Ideally, it should be the easiest. Practically, it may be **the** most difficult. The answer to the question depends on many factors. The point that Paul was making is that we should not try to export something that doesn't work at home. Whatever problems one might imagine in a family, these are multiplied in the church setting since we have such a multitude of personalities and problems (situations) involved. This is almost like saying, "If you can't do it right during practice, what makes you think you can do it right during the game."

We can add to *character* and *proven experience* the next requirement of *spiritual maturity*. Sometimes organizations will have their members rate their own abilities in order to do an assessment of their capabilities. Some have observed that those who are most knowledgeable about a topic will often rate themselves much lower than a novice in the area. It takes a certain level of understanding to realize how little we really know. Maturity and humility often go together.

The idea of a "good reputation" may be a way to summarize all Paul has related to Timothy regarding the requirements for an elder or overseer. If a person does not have excellent character (integrity), proven experience, and spiritual maturity; then those outside the church will know about it and will use that to criticize the work of the church and Christians in general.

A Deacon's Character – 3:8-13

⁸ Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, ⁹ but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. ¹¹ Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. ¹² Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. ¹³ For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. 1 Timothy 3:8–13 (NASB95)

The Greek word from which we derive the word "deacon" is used about 100 times in the New Testament. It is translated as "deacon" only five times. It shows up as the word "serving" or "servant" 20 times. The majority of the time (72) it is translated as "minister" or "ministry." The term "minister" creates a somewhat different picture than the term "servant." The term "minister" communicates more responsibility for initiative and being trained and prepared than the word "servant."

Paul's statement related to those who would minister (as deacons) shows similar characteristics as those would be an overseer or a pastor. The need for integrity, proven experience, and a good reputation are specifically mentioned. We might see that those in the role of elder would have broader responsibilities or areas of concern while those fulfilling the ministry leadership role of a deacon would be more focused and closer to help guide members of a local body in carrying out their work of ministry for which they were saved.

Besides the word "politician," how would you describe a person who tells one person one thing and another group or person something that doesn't agree with the first story? The Greeks had a word for this which means "double tongued" (*dilogos* in the Greek). It is obvious that any organization would wind up in chaos if those in roles of leadership are not consistent in what they said to various members. Sometimes deacons find themselves attempting to minister to different people who may have disagreements with each other. In fact, the original need for having someone in such a ministry role came about because of controversies over the daily distribution of food in the early church. If a church leader needs to help resolve differences between two groups or two people, then he cannot tell both sides that he agrees with their position in an effort to be liked by all. That is what a politician would do.

Most Baptist would fully agree with the requirement of “not given to much wine” and would want to draw the line at total abstinence from any alcoholic beverage. Sobriety needs no defense when it comes to being involved with any activity that has responsibility associated with it.

Fondness for sordid gain or being involved in any questionable financial scheme should be a no-brainer for every Christian and especially for pastors and deacons.

What does “holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience” mean? The easiest part of this is the word “holding” which (in today’s way of saying things) might be called “adhering to” or “sticking to” which would simply imply being faithful. I struggle with the use of the term “mystery” since I do not want people to think that Christianity is a “mystery” religion that has anything to hide from outsiders. Of the various translations I could readily access, the NIV has perhaps the best word for this in rendering it as the “deeper meaning” of the faith. This is exactly what we are attempting to discover as we study the Bible and as we meditate upon God’s word and apply the principles in our everyday lives. Many people know the story of Job, Jonah, the baby Moses, the deliverance from Egypt, the journey through the wilderness, the parting of the Red Sea, and many other stories but they do not have a clue as to the spiritual significance of why those accounts are included in the Scriptural record. In fact, perhaps the best description of the “mystery” would be the “spiritual significance.” Such an understanding is needed by deacons in order to be able to apply these principles in their own lives as well as being able to minister to the needs of others in effective and sound ways.

Just as Paul had mentioned in verse five of chapter one, we see the importance of the conscience coming up again. In the previous reference Paul used the adjective “good” which is rendered in the Greek as *agathos* which literally means untainted. In this current mention of “conscience” the adjective Paul used is the Greek word *katharos* from which we derive the English word “catharsis” which implies cleaning to make pure which may be the equivalent of “untainted.” The implication of adhering to the spiritual significance of the faith with a pure conscience is that those in such positions need to have their own lives properly ordered before attempting to minister to others.

A person who lives in such a way will certainly show evidence of his character which will be beyond reproach. When it comes to how to walk out our salvation in real life situations, all of us would do well to follow the rule of “when in doubt, leave it out” when it comes to participating in questionable activities.

In addition, Paul recognized the benefit women are in ministry situations that are likely to occur in churches and the importance of good moral character and faithfulness is for anyone (men or women) who has ministry roles in a church.

As we are well aware, there are arguments from various Christians that are made that Paul was referring to the “wives of deacons” and others who argue that Paul was referring to “women deacons.” It has seemed to me that the concern is mainly about recognition via a title that is the concern. If our reward or our motivation is “recognition” by being “named” as being in a certain “position,” then we need to go back to square one and have an “attitude adjustment” regarding the purpose for which we are saved. This applies equally to men as well as women.

Some “wives of deacons” may be blessed with ministry gifts that are useful in a local church body and yet we don’t think we need a “title” of “deacon’s wife” in order to “recognize” the ministry of the person. It may be that only a few people even know that the ministry is being done. That is OK, since God knows and His awareness is all that really counts. Some women who are not the wives of deacons or not necessarily married may be similarly blessed with gifts

that are useful to what God is doing in and through the church body. Does it really matter that these have a title or that anyone else even knows about what is done or who is doing it?

A similar argument can be advanced about men in a church who may have been divorced and remarried or not remarried. In many local bodies these men cannot be titled as deacons, but may be gifted in several ministry areas. The lack of a title should not prevent the ministry of that person from being carried out in a local church body.

Having advanced the argument of “recognition by others of God working through us should not be our motivation nor our reward,” we do see that some in the early church did have such titles and that it is good for the local church body to give proper respect and to show appreciation for those who do minister effectively. If we are involved in a ministry that is evidently helping others, then that evidence should instill greater boldness in that ministry. Such evidence is much better than titles or recognition.

All of us can profit from Paul's advice to Timothy: mediate on these things, pay close attention to the example you set and what you teach others, and keep yourself on a sound foundation in what you believe.