

Follow the Leaders (1 Timothy 3)

Everything rises or falls with leadership, whether it be a family or a local church. The Holy Spirit imparts gifts to believers for ministry in the local church, and among those gifts are “pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11) and “helps” and “governments” (“administration,” 1 Cor. 12:28 NIV). As we noted before, even though the church is an organism, it must be organized or it will die. Leadership is a part of spiritual organization.

In this section, Paul described the bishop, the deacon, and the church itself. By understanding these three descriptions, we shall be able to give better leadership to the ministry of the church.

1. The Pastor (3:1–7)

According to the New Testament, the terms “bishop,” “pastor,” and “elder” are synonymous. Bishop means “overseer,” and the elders had the responsibility of overseeing the work of the church (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1–3). “Elder” is the translation of the Greek word *presbutos*, which means “an old man.” Paul used the word *presbytery* in 1 Timothy 4:14, referring not to a denomination, but to the “eldership” of the assembly that ordained Timothy. Elders and bishops (two names for the same office, Titus 1:5, 7) were mature people with spiritual wisdom and experience. Finally, “pastor” means “shepherd,” one who leads and cares for the flock of God.

When you compare the qualifications given here for bishops with those given for elders in Titus 1:5–9, you quickly see that the same office is in view. Church organization was quite simple in apostolic days: There were pastors (elders, bishops) and deacons (Phil. 1:1). It seems that there was a plurality of elders overseeing the work of each church, some involved in “ruling” (organization and government), others in teaching (1 Tim. 5:17).

But these men had to be qualified. It was good for a growing believer to aspire to the office of bishop, but the best way to achieve it was to develop Christian character and meet the following requirements. To become an elder/bishop was a serious decision, one not treated lightly in the early church. Paul gave sixteen qualifications for a man to meet if he expected to serve as an elder/bishop/pastor.

(1) Blameless (v. 2a). This word literally means “nothing to take hold upon”; that is, there must be nothing in his life that Satan or the unsaved can take hold of to criticize or attack the church. No man living is sinless, but we must strive to be blameless, or “above reproach” (NIV).

(2) The husband of one wife (v. 2b). All of the qualifying adjectives in this passage are masculine. While there is ample scope for feminine ministry in a local assembly, the office of elder is not given to women. However, a pastor’s home life is very important, and especially his marital status. (This same requirement applies to deacons, according to 1 Tim. 3:12.) It means that a pastor must not be divorced and remarried. Paul was certainly not referring to polygamy, since no church member, let alone a pastor, would be accepted if he had more than one wife. Nor is he referring to remarriage after the death of the wife; for why would a pastor be prohibited from marrying again, in the light of Genesis 2:18 and 1 Timothy 4:3? Certainly the members of the church who had lost mates could marry again, so why penalize the pastor?

It’s clear that a man’s ability to manage his own marriage and home indicate ability to oversee a local church (1 Tim. 3:4–5). A pastor who has been divorced opens himself and the church to criticism from outsiders, and it is not likely that people with marital difficulties would consult a man who could not keep his own marriage together. I see no reason why dedicated Christians who have been divorced and remarried cannot serve in other offices in the church, but they are disqualified from being elders or deacons.

(3) Vigilant (v. 2c). This means “temperate” or “sober.” “Temperate in all things” (2 Tim. 4:5, literal translation). Or “keep your head in all situations” (NIV). A pastor needs to exercise sober, sensible judgment in all things.

(4) Sober (v. 2d). He must have a serious attitude and be in earnest about his work. This does not mean he has no sense of humor, or that he is always solemn and somber. Rather it suggests that he knows the value of things and does not cheapen the ministry or the gospel message by foolish behavior.

(5) Of good behavior (v. 2e). “Orderly” would be a good translation. The pastor should be organized in his thinking and his living, as well as in his teaching and preaching. It is the same Greek word that is translated “modest” in 1 Timothy 2:9, referring to women’s clothing.

(6) Given to hospitality (v. 2f). Literally, “loving the stranger.” This was an important ministry in the early church when traveling believers would need places to stay (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2; 3 John 5—8). But even today, a pastor and wife who are hospitable are a great help to the fellowship of a local church.

(7) Apt to teach (v. 2g). Teaching the Word of God is one of an elder’s main ministries. In fact, many scholars believe that “pastors and teachers” in Ephesians 4:11 refer to one person but to two functions. A pastor is automatically a teacher (2 Tim. 2:2, 24). Phillips Brooks, famous American bishop of the 1800s, said, “Apt to teach—it is not something to which one comes by accident or by any sudden burst of fiery zeal.” A pastor must be a careful student of the Word of God, and of all that assists him in knowing and teaching that Word. The pastor who is lazy in his study is a disgrace in the pulpit.

(8) Not given to wine (v. 3a). The word describes a person who sits long with the cup and thus drinks to excess. The fact that Paul advised Timothy to use wine for medicinal purposes (1 Tim. 5:23) indicates that total abstinence was not demanded of believers. Sad to say, some of the members of the Corinthian church got drunk, even at the love feast that accompanied the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:21). The Jewish people diluted their wine with water to make sure it was not too strong. It was a well-known fact that water was not pure in those days, so weak wine taken in moderation would have been healthier to drink.

However, there is a vast difference between the cultural use of wine in Bible days and supporting the alcohol industry of today. Paul’s admonition and example in Romans 14 (especially Rom. 14:21) would apply today in a special way. A godly pastor would certainly want to give the best example and not be an excuse for sin in the life of some weaker brother.

(9) No striker (v. 3b). “Not contentious, not looking for a fight.” Charles Spurgeon told his Pastor’s College students, “Don’t go about the world with your fist doubled up for fighting, carrying a theological revolver in the leg of your trousers.”

(10) Not greedy of filthy lucre (v. 3c). Paul will have more to say about money in 1 Timothy 6:3ff. It is possible to use the ministry as an easy way to make money, if a man has no conscience or integrity. (Not that pastors are paid that much in most churches!) Covetous pastors always have “deals”

going on outside their churches, and these activities erode their character and hinder their ministry. Pastors should “not [work] for filthy lucre” (1 Peter 5:2).

(11) Patient (v. 3d). “Gentle” is a better translation. The pastor must listen to people and be able to take criticism without reacting. He should permit others to serve God in the church without dictating to them.

(12) Not a brawler (v. 3e). Pastors must be peacemakers, not troublemakers. This does not mean they must compromise their convictions, but that they must “disagree” without being “disagreeable.” Short tempers do not make for long ministries.

(13) Not covetous (v. 3f). You can covet many things besides money: popularity, a large ministry that makes you famous, denominational advancement, and so forth. This word centers mainly on money.

(14) A godly family (vv. 4–5). This does not mean that a pastor must be married or, if married, must have children. However, marriage and a family are probably in the will of God for most pastors. If a man’s own children cannot obey and respect him, then his church is not likely to respect and obey his leadership. For Christians, the church and the home are one. We should oversee both of them with love, truth, and discipline. The pastor cannot be one thing at home and something else in church. If he is, his children will detect it, and there will be problems. The words rule and ruleth in 1 Timothy 3:4–5 mean “to preside over, to govern,” and suggest that a pastor is the one who directs the business of the church. (Not as a dictator, of course, but as a loving shepherd, 1 Peter 5:3.) The word translated “take care of” in 1 Timothy 3:5 suggests a personal ministry to the needs of the church. It is used in the parable of the good Samaritan to describe the care given to the injured man (Luke 10:34–35).

(15) Not a novice (v. 6). “Novice” literally means “one newly planted,” referring to a young Christian. Age is no guarantee of maturity, but it is good for a man to give himself time for study and growth before he accepts a church. Some men mature faster than others, of course. Satan enjoys seeing a youthful pastor succeed and get proud; then Satan can tear down all that has been built up.

(16) A good testimony outside the church (v. 7). Does he pay his bills? Does he have a good reputation among unsaved people with whom he does business (see Col. 4:5 and 1 Thess. 4:12)?

No pastor ever feels that he is all he ought to be, and his people need to pray for him constantly. It is not easy to serve as a pastor/elder, but it is much easier if your character is all God wants it to be.

2. The Deacon (3:8–13)

The English word deacon is a transliteration of the Greek word diakonos, which simply means “servant.” It is likely that the origin of the deacons is recorded in Acts 6. The first deacons were appointed to be assistants to the apostles. In a local church today deacons relieve the pastors/elders of other tasks so that they may concentrate on the ministry of the Word, prayer, and spiritual oversight.

Even though deacons are not given the authority of elders, they still must meet certain qualifications. Many faithful deacons have been made elders after they proved themselves.

Grave (v. 8a). A deacon should be worthy of respect, a man of Christian character worth imitating. A deacon should take his responsibilities seriously and use the office, not just fill it.

Not double-tongued (v. 8b). He does not tell tales from house to house; he is not a gossip. He does not say one thing to one member and something entirely opposite to another member. You can depend on what he says.

Not given to much wine (v. 8c). We have discussed this in our comments on 1 Timothy 3:3.

Not greedy of filthy lucre (v. 8d). Deacons handle offerings and distribute money to needy people in the church. It may be tempting to steal or to use funds in selfish ways. Finance committees in churches need to have a spiritual attitude toward money.

Doctrinally sound (v. 9). The word mystery means “truth once hidden but now revealed by God.” The great doctrines of the faith are hidden to those outside the faith, but they can be understood by those who trust the Lord. Deacons must understand Christian doctrine and obey it with a good conscience. It is not enough to sit in meetings and decide how to “run the church.” They must base their decisions on the Word of God, and they must back up their decisions with godly lives.

I have noticed that some church officers know their church constitutions better than they know the Word of God. While it is good to have bylaws and regulations that help maintain order, it is

important to manage the affairs of a church on the basis of the Word of God. The Scriptures were the “constitution” of the early church! A deacon who does not know the Bible is an obstacle to progress in a local assembly.

A pastor friend of mine, now home with the Lord, took a church that was a split from another church and constantly at war with itself. From what he told me, their business meetings were something to behold! The church constitution was revered almost as much as the Bible. The people called it “the green book.” My friend began to teach the people the Word of God, and the Spirit began to make changes in lives. But the enemy went to work and stirred up some officers to defy their pastor in a meeting.

“You aren’t following the green book!” they said.

My friend lifted his Bible high and asked, “Are we going to obey the Word of God, or a green book written by men?” This was a turning point in the church, and then God blessed it with wonderful growth and power.

A deacon who does not know the Word of God cannot manage the affairs of the church of God. A deacon who does not live the Word of God, but has a “defiled conscience,” cannot manage the church of God. Simply because a church member is popular, successful in business, or generous in his giving does not mean he is qualified to serve as a deacon.

Tested and proved (v. 10). This implies watching their lives and seeing how they conduct themselves. In most churches, a new member or a new Christian may begin serving God in visitation, ushering, helping in Sunday school, and numerous other ways. This is the principle in Matthew 25:21: “Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things.”

It is worth noting that quite a few leaders mentioned in the Bible were first tested as servants. Joseph was a servant in Egypt for thirteen years before he became a second ruler in the land. Moses cared for sheep for forty years before God called him. Joshua was Moses’ servant before he became Moses’ successor. David was tending his father’s sheep when Samuel anointed him king of Israel. Even our Lord Jesus came as a servant and labored as a carpenter; and the apostle Paul was a tentmaker. First a servant, then a ruler.

It always weakens the testimony of a local church when a member who has not been proved is

made an officer of the church. “Maybe Jim will attend church more if we make him a deacon” is a statement that shows ignorance both of Jim and of the Word of God. An untested Christian is an unprepared Christian. He will probably do more harm than good if you give him an office in the church.

Godly homes (vv. 11–12). The deacon’s wife is a part of his ministry, for godliness must begin at home. The deacons must not be men who have been divorced and remarried. Their wives must be Christians, women who are serious about the ministry, not given to slanderous talk (literally “not devils,” for the word devil means “slanderer, false accuser”), and faithful in all that they do. It is sad to see the damage that is done to a local church when the wives of elders or deacons gossip and slander others.

Some students think that 1 Timothy 3:11 refers not to the wives of deacons, but to another order of ministers—the deaconesses. Many churches do have deaconesses who assist with the women’s work, in baptisms, in fellowship times, and so forth. Phebe was a deaconess from the church at Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1, where the word is diakonon). Perhaps in some of the churches, the wives of the deacons did serve as deaconesses. We thank God for the ministry of godly women in the local church, whether they hold offices or not! It is not necessary to hold an office to have a ministry or exercise a gift.

A willingness to work (v. 13). He is to use the office, not just fill it. The Greek word translated “degree” means “rank (as in the army), a base, a step, or rung on a ladder.” What an encouragement to a faithful deacon! God will “promote” him spiritually and give him more and more respect among the saints, which means greater opportunity for ministry. A faithful deacon has a good standing before God and men, and can be used of God to build the church. He has a spiritual boldness that makes for effective ministry.

Certainly a part of this blessing could include the possibility of a “spiritual promotion.” What a joy it is to a pastor to see deacons become elders, and then to see some of the elders called into pastoral ministry on a full-time basis. (It should be remembered that, in the New Testament churches, the elders were called from out of their own local congregations. They were not usually imported from other places.)

It is a serious matter to serve the local church. Each of us must search his own heart to be certain that he is qualified by the grace of God.

3. The Believers (3:14–16)

Elders, deacons, and church members need to be reminded of what a local church is. In this brief paragraph, Paul gave three pictures of the church.

(1) The house of God (v. 15a). God’s church is a family, so “household” might be a better translation. One of Paul’s favorite words is “brethren” (see 1 Tim. 4:6). When a sinner believes in Jesus Christ as Savior, he immediately is born again into God’s family (John 1:11–13; 1 Peter 1:22–25). Paul advised young Timothy to treat the members of the local church as he would treat the members of his own family (1 Tim. 5:1–2).

Because the local church is a family, it must be fed; and the only diet that will nourish the people is the Word of God. It is our bread (Matt. 4:4), milk and meat (1 Cor. 3:1–2; Heb. 5:12–14), and honey (Ps. 119:103). A pastor must take time to nourish himself so that he might nourish others (1 Tim. 4:6). A church does not grow by addition, but by nutrition (Eph. 4:11–16). It is tragic to see the way some pastors waste their time (and their church’s time) all week long and then have nothing nourishing to give the people on the Lord’s Day.

Like a family, a church needs discipline in love. Children who are not disciplined become rebels and tyrants. The spiritual leaders of the assembly should exercise discipline (1 Cor. 4:18–5:13; 2 Cor. 2:6–11). Sometimes the children need rebuke; other times the discipline must be more severe.

Children also need encouragement and example (1 Thess. 2:7–12). Spiritual leaders must have the gentleness of a nursing mother and the strength of a loving father.

(2) The assembly (v. 15b). The word church is a translation of the Greek word *ekklēsia* (ek-klay-SEE-a), which means “assembly.” It referred to the political assemblies in the Greek cities (Acts 19:29, 32) where business was transacted by qualified citizens. But it is used about one hundred times in the New Testament to refer to local churches, assemblies of believers. The Greek word means “those called out.” (It is used in Acts 7:38 to describe the nation of Israel, called out of Egypt, but Israel was not a “church” in the New Testament sense.)

Paul wanted young Timothy to know how to “conduct himself” as a leader of a local assembly. The Pastoral Epistles are guidebooks for conduct of a local church. Scores of books have been published in recent years purporting to tell us how to start, build, and increase a local church, and some of them contain good counsel. However, the best counsel for managing a local church is found in these three inspired letters. The young pastor in his first church, as well as the seasoned veteran in the ministry, should saturate himself with the teachings Paul shared with Timothy and Titus.

There are many different kinds of “assemblies,” but the church is the assembly of the living God. Because it is God’s assembly, He has the right to tell us how it ought to be governed. The church has been purchased with the blood of God’s Son (Acts 20:28); therefore, we must be careful how we conduct ourselves. Church officers must not become religious dictators who abuse the people in order to achieve their own selfish ends (1 Peter 5:3–5; 3 John 9–12).

(3) The pillar and ground of the truth (vv. 15c–16). This is an architectural image that would mean much to Timothy at Ephesus, for the great temple of Diana had 127 pillars. The word ground suggests a “bulwark” or a “stay.” The local church is built on Jesus Christ the Truth (John 14:6; 1 Cor. 3:9–15), but the local church is also itself a pillar and bulwark for the truth.

It is likely that the pillar aspect of the church’s ministry relates primarily to displaying the truth of the Word, much as a statue is put on a pedestal so all can see it. We must hold “forth the word of life” so the world can see it (Phil. 2:16). The local church puts Jesus Christ on display in the lives of faithful members.

As a bulwark, the church protects the truth and makes sure it does not fall (for elsewhere “truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter,” Isa. 59:14). When local churches turn away from the truth (1 Tim. 4:1ff.) and compromise in their ministry, then the enemy makes progress. Sometimes church leaders must take a militant stand against sin and apostasy. This does not make them popular, but it does please the Lord.

The main truth to which a church should bear witness is the person and work of Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 3:16—it is probable that this verse is quoted from an early Christian hymn). Jesus Christ was God manifest in the flesh, not only at His birth, but also

during His entire earthly ministry (John 14:1–9). Though His own people as a nation rejected Him, Jesus Christ was vindicated in the Spirit, for the Spirit empowered Him to do miracles and even to raise Himself from the dead (Rom. 1:4). The very presence of the Spirit in the world is itself a judgment on the world (John 16:7–11).

Seen of angels suggests the many times that the elect angels were associated with the life and ministry of our Lord. (The word *angelos*, translated “angels,” also means “messengers.” See James 2:25. Perhaps Paul was referring to the chosen messengers who witnessed the resurrected Christ.) However, Christ did not die for angels, but for lost sinners, and so He was preached unto the nations. This reminds us of the commissions the Lord gave to His church to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, where He is believed on in the world. At the ascension, He was received up in glory (Acts 1:2, 22), and He will return one day to take His church to share that glory.

What an exciting challenge it is for your local church to witness of Jesus Christ to lost sinners at home and around the world!

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