



Catalog No. 1609

1 Timothy 3:1-7

Seventh Message

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May 4th, 2008

WHO LEADS GOD'S CHURCH?

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

Today we resume our studies in the apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy. After Paul had planted the church in Ephesus, following his release from prison he returned there with Timothy and found that several false teachers from within the elders had "shipwrecked" the faith of many and upset entire house churches. In response, Paul left Timothy in Ephesus as his representative and subsequently sent this letter as a mandate to be read before the entire church to ensure its restoration to sound doctrine and holy living. In chapter 1, Paul addressed the false teaching and the importance of sound doctrine. In chapter 2, he addressed how men and women ought to conduct themselves in worship so that they would reflect the harmony of the created order.

In chapter 3, to which we now come, Paul turns to the qualifications for those in leadership. This seems quite appropriate on the day when we say goodbye to Bill Hyatt, who has served faithfully as an elder for thirty years.

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. (1 Tim 3:1-7 TNIV)

I. The Function of an Overseer

Before we look at the qualifications for church leaders, it will be helpful to have a clear understanding of the nature of the offices Paul is describing. The apostle distinguishes between two offices in the church, the "overseers," whom he alternately calls "elders" (5:17-20), and the "deacons." Both require similar qualifications in character and experience, but differ as to function. The former require divine calling and teaching gifts, while the latter, using service gifts, assist the elders in more specialized ministries.

The interchangeable titles of "elder" and "overseer" point to different aspects of the same office. The term "elder" (*presbuteros*), meaning "old" or "older," which was Jewish in origin, reflected the maturity of the individual, while "bishop," "overseer" (*episkopos*), which was a common Greek title for governmental supervisors and municipal leaders, spoke of an elder's function as providing "watchful care" for the congregation. Its verbal form, "to visit," has a rich heritage in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where it is used to describe God's constant and watchful care over his people. It manifests itself in concrete "visitations," when God leaves his natural abode in

heaven and comes to earth to bring comfort or salvation, as in a gift of pregnancy to an infertile wife, or the announcement to the end of Israel's exile and the initiation of her return. These "visitations" could also signal a frightening judgment, as God's arrival on earth would result in a thorough examination those to whom he had given responsibilities, bringing them into account for their actions.

The fact that Paul uses this term as the office title suggests that exercising "oversight will be a major aspect of the position."¹ This does not imply that elders are to micro-manage the congregation. Like our Heavenly Father, they are to give people dignity and freedom to initiate ministries, engage in evangelism, and exercise their spiritual gifts, while maintaining a bird's-eye view of the congregation; then at the appropriate time, intervening to offer concrete support or comfort, and when necessary, rebuke and discipline to restore erring sinners.

II. The Priority Issue for Selecting an Overseer (1 Tim 3:2, 7)

Paul says the task of overseer is an honorable work, for an overseer is entrusted with the nurture, care, and protection of God's flock "which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). Such honor should heighten one's desire to seek the office. Yet because of the importance of the task, it should never be filled indiscriminately. Leadership in the church should never be based solely on desire or availability, but on gift, calling, and character that models the life of the gospel we preach. As Tom Wright exhorts: "The leaders must, as it were, be on the leading edge of that new humanity which the church is supposed to be. Because we're all 'on the way,' rather than having 'made it' into the complete new humanity God desires, it's important that there are role models, especially that leaders should play that sort of part."²

To emphasize the point, Paul's brackets his list of qualifications in verses 2 and 7 with the absolute *necessity* (the Greek verb *dei* = "must be") that a leader's public image be impeccable. The list opens with "above reproach" and concludes with "a good reputation with outsiders." Being "above reproach" or "blameless" does not imply perfection, but that there be no observable ground for reproach or blame in his way of life. The final characteristic broadens an individual's reputation beyond the scope of the church to the wider public sphere. Those outside the church may belittle the gospel message we preach as foolishness, but a life of integrity always draws praise, even from one's enemies. "The leader's reputation must be able to withstand assault from opponents inside or outside the church. But each broad concept requires concrete explanation, for which the intervening specifics of character and behavior are provided."³

III. The Character of an Overseer (1 Tim 3:2-3)

A. His Fidelity in Marriage

Paul's list of qualifications begins with seven positive attributes of an elder's character. Following "above reproach," the initial summary of his character, Paul lists "the husband of one wife." The ambiguity of the phrase has been variously interpreted, from a prohibition against polygamy to being married only once, and/or unblemished by divorce. Most scholars understand the phrase in the broader sense of fidelity in marriage, that an elder be a "one-woman kind of man," single-mindedly committed to his wedding vows. His feet do not wander into the strip clubs on business trips, nor does he allow his mind to be assaulted by pornography that has invaded our world. He establishes practical, protective barriers to guard his thought life from anything that would damage his affections for his wife.

There were not many men who fit this category in Ephesus. The city was the Las Vegas of the ancient world, with an economy based on sacred prostitution. Demosthenes wrote, "We have harlots for our pleasure, concubines for the daily needs of the body use, and wives so we may have legitimate children and a faithful steward of our houses." While infidelity was accepted among Greeks and Romans, sexual purity before marriage and fidelity within marriage were expected to be normative in the church, because of the cross of Christ that cleansed from past sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit that empowered every believer to live a holy life.

B. His Self-mastery

The next three attributes speak to an individual's self-control. The first, "temperate," was normally used with respect to drink. But because this is specifically addressed in verse 3, Paul is most likely using the term metaphorically, suggesting that an elder be clear-headed and free from anything that might cloud his thinking or impair his vision. Just as a pilot must be in total command of his faculties so that he is observant of everything going on around him, so it is necessary for an overseer to be "temperate" in his oversight of the flock. When he enters a room he is to have an awareness of the people present, and the afflictions that could be pressing in on them, and not be solely concerned to push forward his agenda. Like Jesus' sensitivity to the hemorrhaging woman, he should be keenly aware that interruptions to his daily "mission" might in fact be divine doorways to greater things.

To compliment "temperate," Paul adds "prudent," meaning "one of sound mind." Mark uses the term to describe the formerly demon-possessed man. After Jesus had healed the man, he was said to be clothed and "in his right mind." Thus a leader is one who thinks clearly, not irrationally; he is reasoned and realistic. Paul uses the same term for the realistic view we should have regarding our capacity to serve the body of Christ according the measure of faith and the spiritual gifting that God has given us:

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with *sober judgment*, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. (Rom 12:3)

This kind of thinking is critical for leaders so that they don't over-tax individuals in ministry beyond what they are capable of doing.

Paul rounds out the trio with *kosmos*, "respectable." From this term we get our English word "cosmos," which describes the attractive dignity that arises from a harmonious and orderly life. An elder's demeanor must not be haphazard or chaotic, but well ordered and

beautifully organized. Before the universe was created, "the earth was formless and empty." With no structure, chaos reigned, making life impossible. The first attribute of God's powerful and creative word was to create order out of chaos by establishing fixed boundaries to separate spatial entities in the first three days of creation. Once these spatial boundaries were permanently placed, he then filled the emptiness with the abundance of life on the next three days. The result was a harmonious, well functioning universe whose awe-inspiring beauty continues to captivate scientists, poets, and painters.

This is how we as God's new humanity are to reflect his image on earth. As we are remade into God's likeness through the Spirit of Christ, we are to grow into this divine art of creating order and beauty out of the physical and moral chaos that surrounds us. An elder must speak in an orderly way, with words that are thoughtful and well arranged, to give grace to those who hear. His finances should be in order; he should pay his bills and taxes promptly. He should not be plagued by debt from impulsive spending, but be disciplined to save so that he can give generously to those in need. He is not to treat his work in a slipshod fashion, but to bless his co-workers and employees with grace and care.

C. His Gifts and Ministry

The next two qualities, "hospitable" and "able to teach," give voice to a leader's record in ministry. Being "hospitable" (literally "a lover of strangers") does not refer to putting on expensive dinner parties to entertain friends, but rather keeping one's home open to welcome and care for strangers. In ancient times, hotels were non-existent and wayside inns were often unsafe and unsavory. Therefore it was critical that Christians open their homes to traveling teachers and evangelists to further the work of the gospel. Today, with our space limitations at church, the gift of hospitality is critical to our outreach and training of young adults and discipleship of adults in home fellowships.

Linked with an overseer's hospitality is his ability to teach, which implies a divine gift (Eph 4:11). Overseers are pastors called by God to nurture the flock by feeding them God's word. The priority of teaching can be seen in Jesus' threefold command which he gave to Peter at his ordination: "Feed my lambs...tend my sheep...feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17). To be skilled at teaching encompasses not only instruction in sound doctrine, but also discipline and correction, as Paul amplifies in his letter to Titus: "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). To teach and communicate clearly and effectively requires not only divine gift but also years of discipline and hard work to sharpen and hone one's skill (Ezra 7:10; 1 Tim 4:13-15; 2 Tim 4:2). It not only takes time to understand "what" the text means, but also skill and effort to know how to communicate it in such a way that it is clear and relevant. Even after thirty years of teaching and preaching, I find sermon preparation more arduous than when I was young. To ensure God's people are well fed, Paul instructs the church to give double honor (i.e. to financially support) those elders whose leadership is outstanding, especially those who are laboring hard at "preaching and teaching" (5:17).

D. The Way He Relates to Others

Following these seven positive qualities Paul lists four negative traits that can potentially destroy lives and ruin communities. They are artfully arranged in a chiasm around a single positive antidote, "gentle," that stands out "like a jewel in a dark setting."⁴ The outer

ring addresses the dangerous addictions of alcohol and money that are often associated with the aggressive behaviors of the next ring, whether it be physical abuse or verbal intimidation.

a not *addicted* to wine

b not physically *abusive*

x *but gentle*

b not verbally *abusive*

a' not *addicted* to greed

Regarding alcohol, Paul does not require total abstinence; rather, as Tom Wright suggests, leaders

...should know when to stop – which, as experience shows, frequently means ‘one drink before you think you should.’ In Paul’s world, as in some parts of our own, clean and healthy drinking water would be hard to come by, and wine would be the natural, cheap and appropriate option for many people much of the time...But as with many good things, there are dangers lurking round the corner, in this case that of self-indulgence. There is an essential immaturity about heavy drinking: someone who treats their own body in that way is hardly likely to be the sort of person you’d trust to treat other people and their property in a responsible fashion.⁵

Another addiction that wrecks havoc in lives is greed, thus overseers must be “free from the love of money.” Even in the ancient world, teachers were widely criticized for being tempted by greed and getting rich with their “traveling shows.” One of their writers lauds the older generation of Romans, who led lives freed from avarice, and then complains, “For in our lifetime this people has, it appears, acquired a strong tendency to want more and more.”⁶ The memory of Judas’s tragic betrayal kept the danger fresh in the apostles’ minds, so much so that Paul would often forsake his right to financial support if the reputation of his ministry was ever called into question (Acts 20:33-35; 2 Thess 3:6-12).

In the next ring, “violent” and “quarrelsome” reflect the way those with addictions attempt to control people. The terms, which are anything but polite, range in meaning from a bully, who is not afraid to be physical, to those who emotionally intimidate with their words. Like a loaded shotgun with a hair trigger, it takes very little to set off their emotions and unload both barrels of their opinions. Even long after they have left, the residue of emotion keeps their words echoing in your heart chamber. When such an individual is in leadership it is very difficult to cultivate a safe and protective environment that fosters honesty and vulnerability – something that is vital for spiritual growth.

In contrast to lording it over others, the Christian leader is to be “gentle.” George Knight defines it as “gentle, kind,’ with a concomitant note of graciousness.”⁷ Someone who is “gentle” is approachable because he is more eager to listen and learn from others rather than expressing his own point of view. Not forsaking honesty, gentleness grants such a person the ability to give way to others so that they may be granted the stage. Gentleness grants an infectious graciousness that draws others. It is not the most efficient way to get things done, but when was God ever concerned with efficiency?

Paul concludes the qualifications for elders with a section addressing his experience. Where are elders made? Where is their proving ground? In contrast to the modern selection process for pastors, where the first and primary qualification is most often an academic

degree from a seminary, the authentic training ground for elders is not seminary; it is life itself.

IV. The Proving Ground for Overseers (1 Tim 3:4-7)

A. The Home

He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) (1 Tim 3:4-5)

In contrast to the world’s insistence that a leader’s private life should have no bearing on his public ability to lead in government, Paul insists that the home life of the overseer is the exact measure of his ability to lead in the church. The reason for this is that God’s people are to be cared for with the same love and nurture as in the home. The church is not a business; it is a family. The only other time this verb is used in the New Testament is in Luke’s description of the tender, thorough care which the Good Samaritan gave to beaten bystander:

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ (Luke 10:34-35)

Just as a good father evokes affection and respect from his children, because he has “taken care” of them and maintained his dignity even when he has had to discipline them, so to a good overseer will evoke affection and respect from God’s people because he takes care of them. Last month, Emily and I were invited to dinner by one of our church families. During the meal I was impressed with the way their two young boys respected and honored their parents. Though both boys were active, playful and possessing of mountain of energy, they were keenly responsive to their parents’ gentle words of correction. It was obvious to me by their mutual affection and respect that here was a father who had given time to nurture and “care for” his children.

B. Time and Experience

He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. (1 Tim 3:6)

The requirement of maturity that is gained by experience is added to the list. An overseer is not to be a *neophytos*, meaning, “newly planted.” His roots must have had sufficient time to penetrate deeply into the soil of Scripture and have weathered the storms of life. Because of new converts’ zeal, it is often tempting to promote them too quickly. But fame fans the flame of pride, and pride once ignited is seldom doused before a tragic fall ensues. In contrast to our modern world, which heaps fame and fortune on the young beyond what they are capable of handling, Jerome Quinn reflects how the ancient world was just the opposite: “Aristotle had noted the reluctance of any government to permit a citizen a ‘disproportionate increase’ of honor, ‘but to give moderate honors for long time rather than great honors for a short time. For men are easily spoiled; not everyone can bear prosperity.’”⁸

Young men who are uniquely gifted to preach are especially prone to this danger, as the adulation they receive for their “gift” is not commensurate with their character. Later in the letter, Paul will again exhort Timothy to exert great patience in his selection of elders, al-

lowing time to reveal a man's true character : "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure" (5:22).

C. The Community

He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. (1 Tim 3:7)

Along with a good home life and experience, an elder must also have a good reputation in the community.

A "trap" is a life-threatening danger designed by the devil that can come upon someone suddenly without warning. Paul says that "those who want to get rich" are especially prone to such traps (6:9). Therefore it is vital that potential leaders be given ample time not only to devote to their families but also to their jobs, to first establish a godly reputation in the community prior to leading in the church, to protect them from the snares of the devil.

For a second time the devil is mentioned. The devil's most powerful weapon to hinder the spread of the gospel is not persecution, for "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." No, the most effective weapon is to bring the church into disrepute through the public reproach of its leaders. Therefore Paul charges Timothy to restore the leadership in the church from the damage created by the false teachers. Those who teach and give oversight in the church are to be men of impeccable character, divinely gifted, and with experience that is credible both in the home and in the community.

Where do we find such leaders? Some years ago, Chuck Swindoll wrote of one such a man who had become his mentor:

There we sat, a cluster of six. A stubby orange candle burned at the center of our table. Flickering, eerie shadows crossed all our faces. One spoke; five listened.

Every question was handled with such grace, such effortless ease. There was no doubt that each answer was drawn from deep wells of wisdom, shaped by tough decisions and nurtured by time. Like forty years in the same church. And seasoned by travel. Like having ministered around the world. And honed by tests, risks, heartbreaks, and failures. But, like the best wines, it was those decades in the same crucible year after year that made his counsel invaluable. Had those years been spent in the military, he would have a chest full of medals.

His age? Seventy-two? His face? Rugged as fifty miles of bad road. His eyes? Ah, those eyes. Piercing. When he peered at you, it was as if they penetrated to the back of your cranium. He had virtually seen it all; weathered all the flack and delights of the flock. Outlasted all the fads and gimmicks of gullible and greedy generations. Known the ecstasy of seeing many lives revolutionized, the agony of several lives ruined, and the monotony of a few lives remaining unchanged. He has paid his dues – and he had the scars to prove it. A creative visionary!

But this is not to say he's over the hill. Or to suggest that he has lost his zest for living, his ability to articulate his thoughts, or his keen sense of humor. There we sat for well over three hours, hearing his stories, pondering his principles, questioning his conclusions, and responding to his ideas. The evening was punctuated with periodic outbursts of laughter, followed by protracted periods of quiet talk. All six lost contact with time...

Thirty years ago he was a model; last week I realized he had become a mentor. Thoroughly human and absolutely authentic, he has emerged a time-warped, well-worn vessel of honor fit for the Master's use. I found myself profoundly grateful that his shadow had crossed my life.

In a day of tarnished leaders, fallen heroes, busy fathers, frantic coaches, arrogant authority figures, and egg headed geniuses, we need mentors like never before – we need guides, not gods. They are approachable and caring souls who help us negotiate our way through life's labyrinth without shouting or dictating. Mentors know how to stretch us without insulting us, affirm us without flattering us, make us think without requiring their answers in return, release us without abandoning us. They're always right there, even though they may be a thousand miles away. They become invisible partners, whispering hope and reproofs on the journey toward excellence.

As we said goodbye, I walked a little slower. I thought about the things he had taught me without directly instructing me, and about the courage he had given me without deliberately exhorting me, and I wondered how it had happened. I wondered why I had been so privileged to have had my "face" reflected in his "water" or my "iron" sharpened by his "iron." A nostalgic knot formed in my throat as I forced myself to realize that, at age 72, he doesn't have much more than a couple of decades left, if that. I found myself wanting to run back to his car and tell him again how much I love and admire him. But it was late, and after all, I'm a 55-year-old man...

But as I stood there alone in the cold night air, I suddenly realized what I wanted to be most when I grow up.⁹

Chuck Swindoll was writing about Ray Stedman, our first pastor at PBC. Through Ray Stedman's ministry, a generation of godly elders was raised up who operated under these principles laid down by the apostle Paul. May we in the coming generations appreciate and follow their legacy. Amen.

¹ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles, A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 150.

² Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone, The Pastoral Letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 30.

³ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 250.

⁴ Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 258.

⁵ Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 35.

⁶ Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 259.

⁷ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 160

⁸ Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 264.

⁹ Charles Swindoll, "What I want to be when I grow up. When I saw him, I knew." *Christianity Today Inc./Leadership Journal* (Summer 1996) Vol. XVII, No. 3., 54.