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1 Timothy 3:1-7

Fifth Message

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HOW TO CHOOSE LEADERS

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

In this election year, it is evident that there is a certain sadness and frustration abroad over the character of many of our political leaders. Almost daily we hear revelations of new scandals. Some men of integrity in Congress are resigning because they feel there is no hope for change for the better. And there is a lot of confusion regarding the character traits that go into making a good leader. People are even confused as to whether a leader's personal life affects his ability to lead. Never in our history, it seems, has our country been so lacking in people of quality in leadership.

The issue of leadership in the church is the theme of the passage to which we come today in our studies in the apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy. To help set the stage for our study, it will be beneficial to learn something of the political life of the first century. I will read from Philip Schaff's *History of the Christian Church*:

When Christianity took its foothold on the earth, the pagan civilization and the Roman Empire had reached their zenith. The fairest countries of Europe, and a considerable part of Asia and Africa, stood under one imperial government with republican forms, and enjoyed a well-ordered jurisdiction...But this is only the surface view. This imposing show concealed incurable moral putridity and indescribable wretchedness...Never was there any age or any place where the worst forms of wickedness were practised with a more unblushing effrontery than in the city of Rome under the government of the Caesars. The pagan historians of Rome have branded and immortalized the vices and crimes of the Caesars: the misanthropy, cruelty, and voluptuousness of Tiberius; the ferocious madness of Caius Caligula, who had men tortured, beheaded, or sawn in pieces for his amusement, who seriously meditated the butchery of the whole Senate, raised his horse to the dignity of consul and priest, and crawled under the bed in a storm; the bottomless vileness of Nero, 'the inventor of crime,' who poisoned or murdered his preceptors Burrhus and Seneca, his half-brother and brother-in-law Britannicus, his mother Agrippina, his wife Octavia, his mistress Poppaea, who in sheer wantonness set fire to Rome, and then burnt innocent Christians for it as torches in his gardens, figuring himself as charioteer in the infernal spectacle; the refined wickedness of Domitian, who, more a cat than a tiger, amused himself most with the torment of the dying and with catching flies; the shameless revelry of Commodus with his hundreds of concubines, and ferocious passion for butchering men and beast in the arena; the mad villainy of Heliogabalus, who raised the lowest men to the highest dignities, dressed himself in women's clothes, married a dissolute boy like himself, in short, inverted all the laws of nature and of decency, until at last he was butchered with his mother by the soldiers, and thrown into the muddy Tiber. And to fill the measure of impiety and wickedness, such imperial monsters were received, after their death, by a formal decree of the Senate, in the number of divinities, and their abandoned memory was celebrated by festivals, temples, and colleges of priests! The emperor was at once a priest, an atheist, and a god.

The wives and mistresses of the emperors were not much better. They revelled in luxury and vice, swept through the streets in chariots drawn by silver-shod mules, wasted fortunes on a single dress, delighted in wicked intrigues, aided their husbands in dark crimes. Messalina, the wife of Claudius, was murdered by the order of her husband in the midst of her nuptial orgies with one her favorites; and the younger Agrippina, the mother of Nero, after poisoning her husband, was

murdered by her own son, who was equally cruel to his wives, kicking one of them to death when she was in a state of pregnancy. These female monsters were likewise deified, and elevated to the rank of Juno or Venus.¹

Reading this puts our problems with leadership in much better perspective, doesn't it? Now in the midst of this terrible moral decadence, presided over by the first century Roman Caesars, God through the cross of Jesus Christ was planting his kingdom of light and beauty and holiness. In this letter, Paul instructs Timothy, his young son in the faith, to look for men of impeccable character, who were devoted to godliness, to oversee the church in the city of Ephesus. It is hardly necessary to say that the kind of leaders Paul was recommending neither needed nor sought encouragement from their society to be godly. It is the cross, and the cross alone, that makes men and women holy. Further, the apostle's primary concern is not how church should be run, but who runs it. He begins his instructions, therefore, with a word on the biblical qualifications for elders and deacons.

I. What is an Elder? (3:1)

Faithful is the word, if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. (NASB)

Before we look at the qualifications of an "overseer," the word Paul uses here, it will be helpful to define the kind of office he is referring to. The New Testament uses three distinct words to describe three different aspects of the same office.

(a) A pastor-teacher who feeds the flock

First, an overseer is a pastor-teacher, a *shepherd* who leads the flock of God to good pasture. There, in an atmosphere of protection and rest, the sheep may be fed and strengthened. The life of Christ is mediated to such men by his word, thus as pastors their primary function is to feed the flock with God's word.

(b) An elder with experience and character

Second, he is described as an *elder*. This word speaks of the individual's experience and godly character. There may have been many gifted shepherds in the body at Ephesus, but there were some more experienced. In age of Spirit, however, maturity can come at a young age, thus Paul counsels Timothy, "Let no one look down on your youth [he was probably in his mid-thirties], but be an example."

(c) An overseer who watches

Third, the word *overseer* is descriptive of a shepherd's call to watch and guard the flock of God. This word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe God himself. He watches over Israel, his flock, with tender care, and intercedes from heaven to earth to "visit" his people with salvation or judgment (Ps 17:3; 65:9; 89:32; 106:4; Jer 29:10; Luke 1:68; 7:16).

Following the example of Acts 15, the elders of Peninsula Bible Church have adopted the principle of unanimity in their task of watching over the flock entrusted to their care. During the Council at Jerusalem, the apostles were trying to find the mind of the Lord so as to not impose their views on the church, but rather to discover what God wanted them to say and do. Thus we read in Acts 15:25,28, "it seemed good to us, having become of one mind" (25), "for it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (28). We have seen this principle of unanimity in decision-making

operate among our elders throughout the history of PBC as they seek to discover what the Lord would have them do in the many decisions they face.

Overseeing a flock requires not only gift and experience, but also calling, as Paul charged the Ephesian elders on an earlier occasion: “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Of course, we now know that a drastic change occurred later in church history when the Catholic church applied these three terms to three different offices. The concepts of equality and plurality changed, and the Catholic church became a hierarchy, with priests, elders and bishops, followed later by the popes. But this was not the original vision of the church in the book of Acts.

(d) An honorable work

Lastly, says Paul, “Faithful is the word, if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do” (3:1). Calvin believed that the phrase “Faithful is the word,” was an ancient proverb of Plato (“The difficult things are the good things”), meaning, things that are excellent are also arduous and difficult. Thus, if in chapter 2 Paul said it was not appropriate for a woman to pass judgment publicly on the teaching of men (“to teach or exercise authority over a man”), then it is not appropriate for most men either, for this is the job of elders, a select group of men chosen by the Holy Spirit. It is no light matter to represent God’s Son and to care for his church “which He purchased with His own blood.”

Paul therefore says the task of overseer is a fine work. But desire is not enough, for the office is a high calling, an arduous, demanding position.

So we move to his next point.

II. What are the qualifications of Elders? (3:2-7)

An overseer, then, must be above reproach, a one-woman kind of man, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine, or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money, managing his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Given the background of the decadent Roman Empire, which we referred to earlier, we can only imagine the impact that Paul’s list of qualifications for leadership in the church must have made on the Ephesian Christians.

(a) Personal character: Above reproach

Here the apostle uses 12 adjectives to describe the character requirements for leaders. (Perhaps the number 12 is symbolic of “leaders,” reminiscent of the 12 tribes of Israel.) The first character trait summarizes all of the others: elders must be “above reproach.” This is not speaking of perfection; rather it is referring to the set of one’s sail. Elders must be headed in the right direction in all of these areas. Unlike the Roman political leaders, elders were not to be marked by any kind of disgrace as this would limit their authority among the flock.

Second, an elder must be “a one-woman kind of man” (“the husband of one wife”), a man who is singlemindedly committed to one relationship. Neither sexually nor in his thought-life does he wander, but with faithfulness he is committed to one woman. Not many men fitted this category in Ephesus, a city whose economy was based on the lust of the eyes and sacred prostitution. Demosthenes wrote, “We have harlots for our pleasure, concubines for daily physical use, wives to bring up legitimate children and to be faithful stewards in household matters.” A faithful husband would certainly stand out in that decadent society.

The third and fourth character traits describe self-control in one’s thinking: an elder is to be “temperate and prudent.” “Temperate” was

used originally with respect to the use of drink, but because this topic is listed again later, I think Paul is saying here that an elder must be clear in his thinking. He must be clear-headed, and thus free from distraction and cloudy thinking. He is so well founded on the truth of Scripture that he is alert and stable. He must maintain vigilant watch over the flock, and he is keenly aware of Satan’s presence and malevolence.

Fourth, an elder is “prudent.” This word is used of the formerly demon-possessed man in the gospels. When Jesus healed him, he was said to be clothed and “in his right mind.” This word speaks of one who is in possession of his own thinking. He is not “tossed around by every wind of doctrine.” He thinks clearly, not irrationally; he is reasoned and realistic. In California, we have new systems for living and self-actualization being invented every day. There is always a new book available to help people accomplish this, but when an elder is given this book to read, he quickly discerns that this is old stuff dressed in new clothing to make it seem viable. Like a great gymnast who is constant control of his body during his program, since it is fraught with danger, an elder must always be in control of his thoughts as he exercises oversight over the flock; realizing the danger, he must be temperate and prudent.

Fifth, an elder is to be “respectable.” From the Greek word comes the word cosmos. An elder must be “well-ordered and organized.” Before the universe was created there was chaos, but when God began his creative work, the first thing he did was create order and beauty from the chaos. Order is a characteristic of anything that is beautiful. An elder must speak in an orderly way, his words well arranged. He pays his bills in an orderly way; his business is not run in a slipshod fashion.

Sixth, he is to “hospitable” (literally “a lover of strangers”). This does not mean having his best friends over for dinner to reciprocate their hospitality, but rather that he actively pursues strangers and newcomers, keeping his home open and ready to receive them. This would be particularly valuable in times of persecution in the first century when teachers could not lodge anywhere but in Christian homes. Even in our own day we experienced this in Romania, where the brethren placed themselves in danger on many occasions by housing us. Our space limitations here at PBC/Cupertino make this character trait an essential among many in the flock. If homes were not open to the body, we would not have home fellowships, newcomers classes, college or singles ministries. Hospitality, therefore, is a marvelous gift to the body of Christ. Church life grows and flourishes in the homes of the saints.

Seventh, Paul says that an elder must be “able to teach.” We will bypass this for the moment and return to it later.

Eighth, an elder is “not addicted to wine.” He may be free to drink wine, but he is free from alcohol’s claim on him. Thus he is also free from violence, immorality, abuse, and all the other tragic things that often accompany the lack of control and judgment that arise from drunkenness.

The ninth through eleventh traits refer to the manner in which an elder accomplishes tasks—his management skills, in other words. He is, first, “not pugnacious.” He is not a bully, a striker or a brawler. This word was used of a cock’s spur or a goad. In this context, it is describing someone who has his guns at the ready, filed to hair-trigger sensitivity, to blow away anyone who crosses his path. Whenever you ask someone like this a question, you get the whole book thrown at you. Once I was having a conversation with a friend, and another person joined us. My friend asked a question about theology, and this other man immediately began to dump an entire 12-point outline on him. When he finally finished his answer, my friend meekly asked, “Apart from that, you have no opinion, I take it?” An elder must not come on like this. And second, he is “gentle.” There is a sweetness about him that makes him approachable. He has a pleasant demeanor when someone knocks on his door. He is willing to yield to other points of view, and remains meek in the face of insults. Calvin wrote that an elder “bears injuries peacefully and with moderation, who excuses much, who swallows insults, who does not make himself dreaded for his harsh severity, nor rigorously exact all that is due to him.” And an elder is to be “uncontentious.” He is to be a peace lover, not a fighter. If a battle is brewing, he stays away. He avoids

conflict like the plague. He shuns fleshly controversy, contending only for the few things God has commanded Christians to fight for. Peaceful relationships are much more important to him than winning a battle of words. When emotions boil over in meetings, he chooses love rather than making a point. David Roper, a former pastor at PBC, exhibited this character trait better than anyone I have ever known. He refused to contend and enter into verbal battles if relationships were threatened. This is the kind of spirit an elder is to have as he leads. Perhaps this is not a very efficient management style. You can get things done by pushing through and steamrolling your viewpoint, but God is not concerned with efficiency in the church. Love relationships among the body are his concern.

The twelfth quality a leader must have is that he is “free from the love of money.” He is not greedy, but is content with what God has given him. He does not pervert the gospel by making people pay for it. He will not use his office for personal advancement. When Michael Green ministered among us recently, he made no financial demands of any kind during an entire week when he poured out his life among us. I noticed that his shoes were worn through and he did not have another pair, so I bought him a pair. He was overwhelmed at the gesture. When he and the team were getting ready to board the plane to fly back to Canada, he went through his briefcase to make sure he did not have anything that belonged to us, things like pens, notepads, etc. Elders must never use their office for personal advancement. They feed others, and then God feeds them.

Thus we have Paul’s list of a leader’s personal traits, which demonstrate an impeccable personal life.

(b) Divine gifts

The leader needs these character traits, but he also needs gifts. He is to be “apt to teach.” Paul amplifies this in his letter to Titus in these words, “in order that he might be able both to exhort in sound doctrine, and to reprove those who contradict” (1:9). He must have the ability through his gift to be able to communicate divine truth in both favorable and unfavorable circumstances. Paul is speaking in a much broader sense than merely referring to the gift of teaching. Leaders would be a very narrow lot if the gift of teaching was required of all of them. There are many spiritual gifts that are suited to teaching. Of the 21 spiritual gifts, 16 to 18 are speaking gifts—for instance, wisdom, leadership, knowledge, etc. All Christians are gifted, and most have some speaking gifts. I find it intriguing that the apostle places this gift of teaching in the middle of his list of personal character traits. Why is it not placed by itself and highlighted in a separate category? I wondered. I think it is because the Spirit has distributed his gifts liberally—everyone is gifted—but those individuals who are outstanding in character have worked diligently to develop their gift. They take time to study; they work hard, refusing to rely on intuition alone. Our worship team today led us marvelously, but they worked diligently to prepare for this service. They are gifted, but that in itself is not enough; they practiced hard. Communicating truth is demanding work. Elders and leaders are those who have worked diligently to develop their gifts. They have excellent habits of reading, studying and prayer. They refuse to be shoddy in their preparation, thus they are men of proven character. They are like Ezra: “the good hand of his God was upon him. For Ezra had set his heart to seek [study] the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:9b-10).

Thus we have here the character traits of elders, and a word on their speaking gifts which they have been studious to develop.

Finally, we have a section on their experience. Where are elders made? Where is their proving ground?

(c) The proving ground

Here is the apostle’s word: “managing his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)”

First, an elder’s household is well managed. What determines this is not how neat the home is, but the grace of his children, who should be “under control with all dignity.” “Dignity” suggests that his children are submissive because they honor their father. There is only one way to acquire honor: it comes because you have loved your children and spent time with them, as opposed to keeping them in control through bullying and brute force. Children are weak and defenseless. How you treat them will demonstrate how you will care for the weak, the orphans and widows in the church. An elder must ask himself, are my children afraid of me, or do they respect me?

Second, an elder has experience in years. He is “not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (3:6). Literally, this means an elder must not be a newly planted person. His roots must go deep into the soil of Scripture and experience. New converts, because they are zealous for Christ, can become proud if responsibility is given to them too early. We need to let people grow naturally. Para-church organizations sometimes make the mistake of taking well-known people who have come to Christ—athletes, for instance—and parading them all over the country in speaking engagements. A friend of mine at Stanford University saw through the hypocrisy of football players who were unconverted, yet they were giving their testimonies to groups. The result was that this man forsook his faith and has never returned. The elder needs experience in years.

And thirdly, he must have experience in the community: “And he must have a good reputation with those outside, so that he may not fall in reproach and snare of the devil” (3:7).

It is a trap set by the devil to have the leader’s behavior slandered so as to make people disinclined to hear the gospel. We hardly need to list any examples of this type of thing. In Ephesus, the greed and abusive conduct of false teachers was bringing disgrace on the church. This behavior so affected Paul that when he went to Thessalonica, he refused to take anything for his support in order to put an end to the rumors (1 Thess 2:9). A young man needs to spend time developing a good reputation in the community, paying his taxes on time, developing good work habits, spending time with his children, etc., before he becomes an elder. Any violation of this fosters great evil in the church.

Timothy is thus to recognize what God has already done in developing leaders in Ephesus through the ministry of his word. Leaders are men of impeccable character, divinely gifted, of proven experience, both in the home and in the community. When Timothy recognized such men in the church, he would know that they were already elders; all that was left for him to do was recognize what God had already done.

III. Implications for leadership

I will draw three implications for leadership in the church.

(a) The priority of character over gift

Here we find a theological development as we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament. In the book of Judges in the OT, the gift of the Spirit was frequently bestowed upon an individual unto a ministry (say, deliverance from Israel’s enemies), but that gift bore little or no relationship to the character of the individual in question. Take Samson, for instance. He was a lustful, Rambo-like beast of a man, yet the Spirit descended upon him for the task of delivering the nation from the Philistines. Saul, the first king in Israel, destroyed the nation’s enemy, the Ammonites, yet he ended his life as a paranoid maniac, committing suicide. Solomon ruled the nation in Israel’s glory days, yet he couldn’t rule his own life. But all of this changed in the cross of Christ and the pouring out of the gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Now the dominant mark of a Spirit-filled person is measured not by a charismatic ministry, but by his personal character. Paul understood that the power of the cross had so conquered the forces of darkness that the decadence and opposition of the Roman world posed no threat to the godliness of Christians living in Ephesus. Godliness was not mediated by means of the government, but through the cross of Christ and his word. Character is not only possible in leaders, it is mandatory. If it is not present, it is not

because God has not blessed, but because there is something wrong with one's theology or his obedience.

The world holds that personal integrity and morality don't matter in leadership, but this text says that in the church, character is everything.

(b) The priority of a plurality of leadership

This emphasis on character over gift prevents the error of one man having too great an influence over his peers. At times, everyone likes to gather around a popular, charismatic leader, but there is a great danger that pride will bring down such an individual. The early church shared leadership among a plurality of brothers. It is much better to have many leaders with strong character and mediocre giftedness than to build a ministry around one man with an outstanding charisma, who later falls through pride and immorality. This also tells us that what the flock responds to most readily is not merely teaching, but teachers who care; not merely truth, but truth coupled with love.

Godliness, therefore, is protected by a plurality of leaders whose only authority lies in their unanimity.

(c) The priority of relationships over programs

Paul is far more concerned with how godly a church's leaders are than the number or quality of the programs they are running. The way to train godly leaders is to allow them to develop spiritually in their natural settings. Don't take them out of these settings in order to become involved in religious programs. Let them be normal husbands, fathers and workers.

In the late '70's and early '80's, one of our best elders was Lynn Berntson. Ten years ago, he wrote this to me from his home in Oregon:

The simple idea of individual relationships is in marked contrast to our culture. We are a group culture from crib to grave, from the nursery school of 25 babies, to classes, rock concerts, Sunday School, mass evangelism, and committees to make them all function. Last summer, I met rather primitive Africans who walked two hours each day with their sons, passing on their tribal beliefs, while their mothers ground corn, teaching their daughters. We are the more primitive culture, totally given to the spectator-sport, television (12,000 hours between the ages of 6 to 17, on average). The art of individual relationship is rare indeed, particularly when it comes to purposeful conversation, passing on essential truths that make the difference between real life and death. I sort of expect most things will continue this way—glass cathedrals, professional clergy, more buses, Sunday Schools, and many more conferences, personality-centered leadership, with great, staged million-dollar projects. I met a man just the other day raising that amount for some great American evangelical punch. My joy is getting old, feeding ducks with my grandson. I took him canoeing the other day. We had a great talk. He has 17 nouns and two verbs, but he does quite well.

Churches should have a minimum of programs that take folk out of their natural settings. Instead they should encourage men and women to be godly at home and at work. This is how we will produce a generation of godly leaders who are in such contrast to our political and business leaders that they will stand out for all to see and God will be glorified. When the church promotes godliness along those lines, it produces jewels in the midst of decadent cities and countries throughout the whole world.

I will close by reading a short essay written by Chuck Swindoll about an elder who modeled his life on this biblical model. Chuck had the privilege of having this man as a mentor. He writes,

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 eggheaded profs, we need mentors like never before. Such rare finds are 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.

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 second generation not deviate from this godly legacy. Amen.

1. Philip Schaff, *The History of the Christian Church, Volume II A.D. 100-325* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

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