

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time*

The Call to Lead the Church: Elders (Part 1)

INTRODUCTION

The character and effectiveness of any church is directly related to the quality of its leadership. That's why the Bible stresses the importance of qualified church leadership and delineates specific standards for evaluating those who would serve in that sacred position. Failure to adhere to those standards has caused many of the problems that churches throughout the world currently face.

That was the problem Timothy faced in Ephesus, so Paul gave him a detailed explanation of the qualifications for elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7).

A. The Excellence of Previous Leaders at Ephesus

The Ephesian Christians were well acquainted with high quality leaders. Several years prior to writing 1 Timothy, Paul had started the church at Ephesus and had spent three years there training a group of godly men to serve as elders (Acts 18:19; 20:17, 31). Those men had such a deep love for Paul that they openly displayed their affection and sadness when he told them they would not see him again (Acts 20:37-38). At that time the Ephesian church was a strategic church with solid leadership.

B. The Problems with Current Leaders at Ephesus

The last thing Paul said to the Ephesian elders was, "I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). Paul knew Satan would attack the church by sending false leaders to teach lies and heresies, and that is what happened. Upon returning to Ephesus after his first Roman imprisonment, Paul decided to leave Timothy there to take care of the situation while he traveled on to Macedonia. He was not gone long before he wrote back to Timothy with instructions regarding several issues in the Ephesian church.

1. Some weren't qualified

Unqualified leadership was the major issue confronting the Ephesian church. Apparently each of the qualifications Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 is in direct contrast to what that church had tolerated in their leadership. For example, in verses 2-3 he says that an elder must be "blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober minded, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy of filthy lucre, but patient, not a brawler, not covetous." The implication is that some of the leadership at Ephesus lacked those Christian character traits.

2. Some departed from God's Word

Some of the leaders had departed from God's Word, and when that occurred, His standards for leadership were set aside as well.

Paul said to Timothy, "I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions rather than godly edifying which is in faith . . . From which some, having swerved, have turned aside unto vain jangling, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say, nor that about which they affirm" (1 Tim. 1:3-4, 6-7). Apparently some of the leaders were teaching false doctrines and had no understanding of the Old Testament law or the New Testament gospel (vv. 8-11).

First Timothy 6:3-5 says, "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and disputes of words, of which cometh envy, strife, railings, evil suspicions, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness." Their message and motives were perverse. They had "erred concerning the faith" (v. 21).

3. Some were women

Apparently some women had usurped the role of leadership in the church. In response Paul said, "I permit not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (1 Tim. 2:12).

4. Some were apostates

First Timothy 4:1-3 says, "The Spirit speaketh expressly that, in the latter times, some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving by them who believe and know the truth." In contrast Paul said to Timothy, "[Be] nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, unto which thou hast attained. But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. . . . Take heed unto thyself and unto the doctrine; continue in them" (vv. 6-7, 16).

5. Some weren't dealing with elders correctly

First Timothy 5:19-20 says, "Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." Apparently some of the elders were in need of public rebuke because of their sinfulness. As a safeguard Paul warned Timothy not to

ordain a man to the ministry too quickly. He was to be cautious about whom he placed into leadership (v. 22).

All the problems in the Ephesian church were related to the main issue of its spiritual leadership, so it was essential for Paul to give Timothy instruction and encouragement for dealing with that issue forthrightly.

Paul instructed Titus, a contemporary of Timothy ministering on the isle of Crete, to "ordain elders in every city" (Titus 1:5). That was necessary because the Cretian churches didn't have any elders at the time. But that was not the case at Ephesus. By the time Timothy began his Ephesian ministry, elders had been ministering there for several years (Acts 20:17, 31). Timothy's task was to insure that those elders were qualified according to God's standards (1 Tim. 3:2-7).

The Importance of Godly Leadership

A church is only as godly as its leaders. A pastor once said to me, "I think I've discovered why my church is not as effective as I want it to be: half of the men on my elder board are unsaved!" That may seem like an extreme example, but many churches fail to uphold the biblical standard for spiritual leadership. Such failures always impact the quality and integrity of a church's ministry.

Quite often a church that is failing to have an impact on the world or that is experiencing strife and conflict within its membership will look to new programming or other peripheral things for answers, when the real issue may be unqualified leaders. That's the first thing to check.

In his description of the qualifications for elders, Paul focused on the character rather than the function of an elder. A man is qualified because of what he is, not what he does. If he commits sin, he is subject to discipline in front of the whole congregation (1 Tim. 5:20). The church must carefully guard that sacred office.

Are You Called to the Ministry?

How do you know if you're called to the ministry? In the Old Testament God spoke out of heaven or sent angels to deliver His call, and in the New Testament the call often came directly from Jesus Christ. Today it is different. I believe that the call to the ministry now comes by the Holy Spirit's compelling a man's heart in that direction. Paul said, "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work" (1 Tim. 3:1, emphasis added). If you sense a strong desire to participate full time or extensively in ministry, that may be God's call to serve Him in that capacity.

Another key element of God's call is qualification. All who desire spiritual leadership must also meet the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3:2-7.

LESSON

In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul delineates six facets of the call to spiritual leadership.

I. AN IMPORTANT CALLING (v. 1a)

"This is a true saying."

A. The Formula

Paul used the formula this is a true saying five times in his writings: 1 Timothy 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:11; and Titus 3:8. It means that the point being made is an axiomatic, believable, or an obvious fact, and in each case it introduces something of great importance.

B. The Creeds

That formula is used only in the pastoral epistles, which means it didn't come into use until late in the ministry of Paul, and after the churches had been well established.

It is apparent from its usage that it was a common way in the early church to introduce a very important fact or creed. For example in 1 Timothy 1:15 Paul says, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." That is the basic truth of Christianity.

C. The Contrast

1. A sacred trust

In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul uses that formula for the call to be an elder. The contrast between the work of Christ (1:15) and the work of leading the church (3:1) points out the importance that Paul and the early church placed on church leadership. It is a lofty and honorable calling a sacred trust.

2. A difficult task

Even though church leadership is a sacred task, some people enter the ministry with impure motives such as money, job security, or prestige. There were a few people like that in the early church (1 Tim. 6:5, 1 Pet. 5:2-3), but I believe that the especially difficult nature of the ministry at that time discouraged many from assuming leadership for the wrong reasons. In those early years the church

experienced much persecution. Its leaders were more apt to face great dangers and difficulties than they were to gain prominence or prestige.

The difficulty and sanctity of the ministry is probably what motivated the early church to develop the creed, "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work" (1 Tim. 3:1). It exalts the role and encourages men who are called to think seriously about the ministry as a life career.

3. A strategic task

Church leaders have always been strategic people. That's why it is so important that they be called by God and qualified to serve.

Beginning in Acts 14 we see the rising profile of elders in the New Testament church.

a) Acts 14:23

On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church.

An elder is a spiritually mature man who leads and teaches the church. Such a man is also referred to as a pastor, overseer, presbyter, shepherd, and bishop. "Elder" refers to the spiritual maturity of the individual; "bishop" and "overseer" refer to his leadership responsibility; and "shepherd" and "pastor" refer to his responsibility to nurture the flock. Each term describes a different facet of the same office (cf. Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:1-2).

b) Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23

Those references illustrate the prominent role of the elders at the Jerusalem Council.

c) Acts 20:17-38

Paul admonished the Ephesian elders to guard carefully their sacred responsibilities very carefully.

d) Philippians 1:1

Paul addressed his Philippian epistle to the overseers and deacons of the church at Philippi.

e) 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

The Thessalonian elders had charge over the church and diligently labored on its behalf. Consequently the believers there were to love and esteem them highly for their work.

f) Hebrews 13:17

Elders are held accountable to the Lord for their guardianship of the people entrusted to them, so the people were admonished to obey their leaders.

g) 1 Peter 5:1-4

Peter instructed the elders to shepherd the flock by providing a godly example and exercising proper motives.

h) 1 Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-9

In these passages Paul listed the qualifications for elders.

The ministry is a worthy and important calling, and the sacred task of an elder requires that he be spiritually qualified.

II. A LIMITED CALLING (v. 1b)

"If a man."

The office of an elder is limited to men. That conclusion is supported by Paul's use of the masculine gender in this context and his instruction on the woman's role in the church.

A. The Masculine Gender in the Text

The pronoun translated "a man" (Gk., *tis*; lit. "anyone") is in the masculine form, thereby indicating that men are in reference here. In addition, each of the descriptive qualifications listed in verses 2-6 is in the masculine form, and thus refer to men. Furthermore it is impossible for a woman to be "the husband of one wife" (v. 2). It's obvious that this calling is limited to men.

B. The Woman's Role in the Church

1. Her limitations

In 1 Timothy 2:11-14 Paul says, "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman, being deceived, was in the transgression."

Women are not to teach men in church, and since elders are the teachers in the church,

women are not allowed to be elders. Men and women have equal spiritual privileges, capacities, blessings, and promises, but their roles within the church differ. God has ordained the principles of authority and submission to function within the church just as He has within all society.

2. Her contributions

Women have the wonderful privilege of teaching other women and children. They can also exercise their spiritual gifts through evangelism, counseling, helps, and other crucial ministries. But when it comes to preaching in the church, that is reserved for men.

The balance comes in 1 Timothy 2:15, where Paul says, "[Women] shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and love and holiness with sobriety." For most women, their greatest impact on society comes from raising godly children. If a woman is godly and if God chooses to give her children whom she raises in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, she will have a profound influence on a new generation. Men may have the outward, overt leadership, but women have just as great an influence.

III. A COMPELLING CALLING (v. 1c)

"Desire [Gk. oreg[ma]o] . . . desireth [Gk., epithume[ma]o]."

A. Defined

Oreg[ma]o (lit. "to reach out," "stretch," or "grasp") refers to external movement. We can see that as pursuing the ministry by external means such as discipleship and schooling. Epithume[ma]o (lit. "a passionate compulsion") refers to an internal drive or desire.

B. Described

1. A godly passion

A man who is called to the ministry has an internal desire so strong that it motivates him toward external pursuit of that goal. His desire to minister is so strong that he doesn't have any other option ministry is his consuming passion, and he pursues preparation and qualification for that task.

One whom God calls does not have a passion for position or rank, but for the work of the ministry itself. Commentator Patrick Fairbairn said, "The seeking here intended . . . must be of the proper kind, not the prompting of a carnal ambition, but the aspiration of a heart which has itself experienced the grace of God, and which longs to see others coming to participate in the heavenly gift" (Pastoral

Epistles [Minneapolis: James & Klock, 1976], p. 136). Some men seek the pastorate for financial gain (1 Pet. 5:2); others, like Diotrefes, "loveth to have the pre eminence" (3 John 9). But those who are truly called have a God given compulsion to serve the Lord. That compulsion may be stronger in some than others, but it is present nonetheless.

Biographer C.W. Hall quoted Salvation Army Commissioner Samuel Logan Brengle as saying, "The final estimate of men shows that history cares not for the rank or title a man has borne, or the office he has held, but only the quality of his deeds and the character of his mind and heart" (Samuel Logan Brengle [New York: The Salvation Army, 1933], p. 274). If a man has ambition for position or rank only, he is likely to be corrupted in his pursuits, but if he desires to serve God, that desire tends to purify his actions and guard his motives. Paul said, "Though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16). Paul was a driven man: he was compelled to preach the gospel.

A Lesson from the Devil

Hugh Latimer, a popular preacher of the sixteenth century English Reformation who was martyred for his faith, couldn't restrain himself from preaching. The lostness of men and women and the emptiness of the clergy of his day compelled him to speak out.

His "Sermon of the Plow" was directed at preachers who lacked passion and used their pastoral office for self promotion rather than proclaiming God's truth. In it he said, "I would ask a strange question: who is the most [diligent] bishop and prelate in all England, that passeth all the rest in doing his office? I can tell, for I . . . know him well. But now I think I see you listening and hearkening that I should name him. . . . I will tell you: it is the devil.

"He is the most diligent preacher of all other; he is never out of his [diocese]; he is never from his [curate]; ye shall never find him unoccupied. . . . The diligentest preacher in all the realm; he is ever at his plough: no lording nor loitering can hinder him; he is ever applying his business, ye shall never find him idle, I warrant you. . . ."Where the devil is resident, and hath his plough going, there away with books, and up with candles; away with Bibles, and up with beads; away with the light of the gospel, and up with the light of candles, yea, at noon days. . . . Up with man's traditions and his laws, down with God's traditions and his most holy word. . . .

"Oh that our prelates would be as diligent to sow the corn of good doctrine, as Satan is to sow cockle and darnel! . . . There was never such a preacher in England as he is. . . ."The prelates . . . are lords, and no labourers: but the devil is diligent at his plough. He is no unpreaching prelate: he is no lordly loiterer from his [curate], but a busy ploughman. . . . Therefore, ye unpreaching prelates, learn of the devil: to be diligent in doing of your office, learn of the devil: and if you will not learn of God, nor good men, for shame learn of the devil" (Sermons by Hugh Latimer, edited by George Elwes Corrie

[Cambridge: University Press, 1844], pp. 70-77).

Latimer was calling for passion in the ministry. The church needs leaders who are compelled to minister out of love for God's Word and a passion for lost souls. Do you have that kind of passion?

2. A godly perspective

A spiritual leader must have a heart for that which matters most to God.

a) 1 Samuel 13:14 Samuel told Saul, "The Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart." God wants men with submissive, obedient hearts.

b) Ezekiel 22:30 God said, "I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land." God wants men who will represent Him who will share His interests and passions.

God calls to the ministry the kind of person that only He can produce. Bible schools and seminaries can help equip a man for ministry; church boards and pulpit committees can extend opportunities for him to serve, but only God can call a man and make him fit for the ministry.

The call to the ministry is not a matter of analyzing your talents and then selecting the best career option, or taking some kind of personality profile. It's a Spirit-generated compulsion to be a man of God and serve Him in the church.

Pastor J. Oswald Sanders wrote, "The real qualities of leadership are to be found in those who are willing to suffer for the sake of objectives great enough to demand their wholehearted obedience" (Spiritual Leadership [Chicago: Moody, 1980], p. 20).

Samuel Logan Brengle challenged the people of his day who wanted to go into ministry by outlining the road to spiritual leadership: "It is not won by promotion, but by many prayers and tears. It is attained by confessions of sin, and much heartsearching and humbling before God; by self-surrender, a courageous sacrifice of every idol, a bold, deathless, uncompromising and uncomplaining embracing of the cross, and by an eternal, unfaltering looking unto Jesus crucified.

"It is not gained by seeking great things for ourselves, but rather, like Paul, by counting those things that are gained to us as lost for Christ. That is a great price, but it must be unflinchingly paid by him who would be not merely a nominal but a real spiritual leader of men, a leader whose power is recognized and felt in heaven, on earth and in hell" (The Soul Winner's Secret: [London: The Salvation Army, 1918], p. 22). Sanders added, "That is the type of man God is searching for and on whose behalf he desires to show himself strong (2 Chron. 16:9)" (Spiritual Leadership, p. 20).

IV. A RESPONSIBLE CALLING (1d)

"The office of a bishop [Gk., episkopos]."

Oversight of the church is an enormous responsibility.

A. Defined

"Bishop" is an unfortunate translation of episkopos because it carries modern ecclesiastical implications that are not consistent with its biblical meaning. I prefer the translation "overseer" because it more accurately reflects the idea of a leader or ruler.

In the Greek culture an episkopos was a city administrator or finance manager. Some scholars believe that the New Testament usage of episkopos is based on that usage. But also there was a monastic group of Jews known as the Essenes or Qumran community who lived at that time near the Dead Sea. The men who preached, taught, and exercised care and authority were called episkopoi.

It is likely that the biblical meaning of episkopos got its definition from the Qumran community rather than the Greek culture because in that community the word reflected a wide range of spiritual responsibilities, whereas in the Greek culture its definition was limited to a narrow administrative role (L. Coenen, "Episkopos," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Colin Brown [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979]. I:189-90).

The biblical overseer had the responsibility of leading, instructing, and shepherding the people. They also received contributions from the people, heard and verified accusations against believers, and administered church discipline where appropriate.

Those responsibilities still belong to every pastor and elder, and they are directly accountable to God for the quality of their leadership (Heb. 13:17). James 3:1 well says, "Let not many of you become teachers . . . knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment" (NASB).

B. Delineated

An elder's responsibilities are multifaceted.

1. Leading the church (1 Tim. 5:17)

The Greek word translated "rule" (proist[ma]emi) in this verse means "to be ranked first" or "stand first." Christ gives elders the authority to rule in His behalf using His Word. **The church is not to be**

ruled by its congregation, but by those whom God calls for that task.

2. Teaching the church (1 Tim. 5:17)

Elders are to preach and teach "labor in the word and doctrine."

3. Praying for the church (James 5:14)

James instructed those in the church who were sick to call for the elders to pray for them.

4. Caring for the church (1 Pet. 5:2)

This involves giving oversight and setting a godly example.

5. Setting church policy (Acts 15:6-29)

The elders at Jerusalem established important ministry policy for the early church.

6. Ordaining elders (1 Tim. 4:14)

It was the presbytery or elders who ordained Timothy by laying their hands on him.

If you think you might be called to the ministry, remember that it is an important calling. Are you willing to do something that important? It is also a limited calling. Are you the right sex to serve in that capacity? Additionally it is a compelling calling. Do you feel a strong compulsion toward the ministry? And it is a responsible calling. You will be taking on a great responsibility. God will hold you accountable and you will be publicly disciplined if you sin.

V. A WORTHY CALLING (v. 1e)

"A good work."

The Greek word translated "good" (kalos) refers to that which is noble, excellent, honorable, or of high-quality. That is a high estimate of the pastorate. It is of great value, and in fact I believe it is the most worthy task in the world!

Pastor Martyn Lloyd Jones said, "To me the work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called" (Preaching and Preachers [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973]). Not every elder is the primary preacher or spokesman in a church, but whatever his role may be, it is the highest calling to which anyone can ever be called. It is indeed a

worthy work.

VI. A DEMANDING CALLING (v. 1f)

"Work."

If you're faithful in the ministry, you will find it to be a difficult task. The Greek word translated "work" (ergon) implies an expenditure of energy, effort, and zeal. As used here it carries the idea of a lifetime commitment to a never ending task. It's the same word Paul used to exhort Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:5: "Do the work of an evangelist." For Timothy that was not a temporary task it was his life's work. That's why we are instructed to esteem those who oversee us (1 Thess. 5:12). They have committed themselves to a demanding task.

The ministry is not like an assembly line that stops and lets you walk away. So when you consider your own call to the ministry, you must ask yourself if you are willing to tackle such a life long occupation. Paul understood that kind of commitment, and he suffered greatly for his work (Acts 9:16). Men who sense that kind of calling must then be examined according to the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3:2-7.

Focusing on the Facts

1. _____ was the major issue confronting the Ephesian church.
2. Why did Paul leave Timothy at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3-4)?
3. What instructions did Paul give Timothy to help him avoid the errors made by the false teachers (1 Tim. 4:6-7, 16)?
4. What is the proper way to deal with a sinning elder (1 Tim. 5:19-20)?
5. A church is only as godly as its _____.
6. What are two elements of God's call to the ministry?
7. What formula did Paul use to introduce important doctrines?
8. What was especially difficult about pastoral ministry in the early church?

9. What are synonyms for the word elder?
10. To whom was the Philippian epistle addressed (Phil. 1:1; see p. 8).
11. How did Paul support his position that the office of an elder is limited to men (1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:1-2)?
12. Explain the difference between the words translated "desire" and "desireth" in 1 Timothy 3:1.
13. One whom God calls does not have a passion for _____ or _____, but for the work of the ministry itself.
14. How did Hugh Latimer portray Satan in "The Sermon of the Plow" and what was his point?
15. According to Samuel Logan Brengle, what is the road to spiritual leadership?
16. Define "bishop" as used in 1 Timothy 3:1.
17. What are the responsibilities of an elder?
18. What was Martyn Lloyd Jones's estimation of the ministry?
19. Define "work" as used in 1 Timothy 3:1.

Pondering the Principles

1. We have seen that church leadership is a sacred task that requires the highest level of spiritual credibility and maturity. Sadly, some people pursue church leadership for wrong motives such as money, job security, or prestige. If you are in a position of spiritual leadership, what are your motives? Peter said, "Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2-3, NASB). Guard your motives carefully so that you will receive an "unfading crown of glory" (v. 4) when Jesus returns.
2. Diligent qualified leaders are a precious commodity in any church. Paul said, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17, NASB). Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (NASB). Your leaders have a difficult task for which they are personally accountable to the Lord. Be sure to honor them by supplying their financial needs and add joy to their ministry by submitting to their oversight. Pray for them and encourage them often.

Take time to send them a note of encouragement.

3. Hugh Latimer vividly addressed the lack of passion among the ministers of his day (see pp. 11-12), and what he said is just as appropriate today. No matter what area of ministry you serve in, the subtle threat of complacency or compromise is always present. Read 2 Timothy 1:6-14. How did Paul encourage Timothy when Timothy's zeal was apparently waning? How might you encourage others in that situation? If you are lacking passion for your ministry, fervently pray that God will give you a renewed sense of urgency and commitment to His work. Remember, "God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7, NASB).

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