

1 Timothy 3:1-7 “God’s Standard for Church Leaders”**1

Main Idea: In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, God's Word spells out two issues concerning the subject of leaders in the church.

- I. God’s Word defines the position of the leader (1).
 - A. The terms are significant.
 - 1. "Overseer" refers to his purpose.
 - 2. "Elder" refers to his position.
 - 3. "Pastor" refers to his practice.
 - B. The task is significant.
 - 1. It is a good work.
 - 2. It is to be done God's way.
- II. God’s Word defines the people who should lead (2-7).
 - A. Area #1: There are moral qualifications (2a).
 - B. Area #2: There are ministry qualifications (2b).
 - 1. He loves people.
 - 2. He can teach the Word.
 - C. Area #3: There are personal qualifications (3).
 - D. Area #4: There are family qualifications (4-5).
 - E. Area #5: There are qualifications concerning his maturity (6).
 - F. Area #6: There are qualifications concerning his reputation (7).

Implications: What do we learn about the Lord from this instruction?

- 1. God loves His church.
- 2. God is serious about His church.
- 3. God has a good plan for His church.
 - Option #1: We can reject God’s standard and create our own.
 - Option #2: We can reject part of God’s standard and keep what we like.
 - Option #3: We can add personal opinions to God’s standard.
 - Option #4: We can follow God’s standard as sufficient.
- 4. God has a special place for us in His church.

Franklin Roosevelt had to work hard to persuade Harry Truman to be his running mate in the 1944 presidential election. Truman wanted to go to the Senate, but incumbent vice-president Henry Wallace was unpopular with many Democratic leaders. So Truman was approached, and accepted the job with extreme reluctance. On April 12, 1945 he was summoned to the White House. There he was shown into Eleanor Roosevelt's sitting room, where she told him that President Roosevelt was dead. After a moment of stunned silence Truman asked her, "Is there anything I can do for you?" She shook her head. "Is there anything we can do for you?" she said. "For you're the one in trouble now."²

It’s not easy to be a leader, yet leaders are vital. Everything rises and falls with leadership. Without leadership, families flounder. So do school systems, ball teams, and companies. Without leadership, nations are in trouble. So are churches.

There’s been a lot said about the current leadership vacuum in our country. The presence of corrupt leadership is rocking the corporate world these days. We read about leaders in the professional athletic world getting arrested for unethical behavior. Government leaders fail to maintain standards of morality. And closer to home we’re hearing about sex scandals by church leaders.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ Adapted from material used on 11/8/98.

² *Today in the Word*, April 27, 1992.

We need good leaders. But it takes more than a warm smile and good intentions to be a leader. Who is qualified to be a leader? Let me narrow the scope of that question. What type of person is qualified to be a leader in God's church?

That's a critical question for us for several reasons. As we approach the new fiscal year, we're getting ready to nominate individuals for leadership positions in the church. We're also continuing to search for an Associate Pastor. And next week we'll be voting on three key proposed amendments to our church constitution that have to do with leadership qualifications.

Answer this. By what criteria are leaders often selected in churches? In many cases it goes like this, "Oh, Steve is a good guy. The kids on his Little League team really like him. Let's make him a deacon in our church." And so Steve becomes a deacon.

"You know, Joe's really good at public speaking. And his grandpa was a preacher, too. He really should be a pastor." So Joe heads off for seminary to pursue the ministry.

"We need more board members in our church. What about Sam? He's got a good business sense and has the experience of serving on two other boards in the community. Let's nominate him."

So should Steve, Joe, and Sam be placed in leadership positions within the local church? Maybe, maybe not. But the above-mentioned reasons have very little to do with the issue. To make Sam a church board member merely because he has good business sense is to *think like the world*. How should we think? Our aim ought to be to think God's thoughts about all issues including this one.

"But how can we know who God wants to lead His church?" you ask. Thankfully, He told us. Where? In His Word. Yes, God loves His church. He knows His church needs leaders, and He graciously revealed His mind to us concerning who He wants to lead His church. That's what the text before us is all about. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, God's Word spells out two issues concerning the subject of leaders in the church.

I. God's Word defines the position of the leader (1).

"Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task." Timothy had a job to do in Ephesus. There was a decade-old church there that needed his help. The letter we call 1 Timothy was written by Paul to instruct Timothy on how to address a series of church issues facing the Ephesian church (3:14-15).

Timothy wasn't the pastor per se. The church already had leaders in place, which was part of the problem. Paul had been the church's founder, and during his ministry he trained a team of godly elders (Acts 20:17ff.). But after his departure, some false teachers apparently rose to power (just as Paul had warned in Acts 20:29-30). After release from prison Paul went back to Ephesus to deal personally with the ringleaders of the problem, Hymenaeus and Alexander (1:20). He left Timothy to finish matters.

An obvious question faced Timothy and the Ephesian church. *How should a church choose its leaders?* The Ephesian church was still feeling the sting of having the wrong kind of leaders in their midst. It needed a divine checklist for choosing the right kind of leaders. That's what the Holy Spirit led Paul to give in 1 Timothy 3.

So the background for this teaching concerning church leader qualifications was the presence of *unqualified* leaders in the Ephesian church. A church is largely a reflection of its leaders, so it's essential that a church chose its leaders based on God's standard, not the

world's. In fact, all who serve as elders in the church must meet this standard or face public discipline (5:20-24). Let's explore the position itself, as defined by God.

A. The terms are significant. "Here is a trustworthy saying." What Paul's about to share is self-evident truth that doesn't need proof, and had perhaps become an established creed in the 1st century churches. "If a man desire the office of a bishop," the KJV reads. The NIV uses the term "overseer." Apparently, the Ephesian church had two offices: overseers (1-7) and deacons (8-13). The term "overseer" (or "bishop") comes from the Greek term *episkopos*. It's basically synonymous with the terms "elder" and "pastor."

In 1 Peter 5, Peter utilizes all three terms in his exhortation to the leaders of the church: "To the *elders* among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings...Be *shepherds* [i.e. "pastors"] of God's flock that is under your care, serving as *overseers*--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (5:1-3)."

In Acts 20:28 Paul himself, likewise, mixes the terms. According to verse 17, Paul sent for the "elders" of the Ephesian church and gave them this charge: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*. Be *shepherds* [from the same root as the term "pastor"] of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."

So the terms "overseer" and "elder" and "pastor" basically refer to the same office. How do they relate?

1. "*Overseer*" refers to his purpose. One commentator suggests that the NT use of the term *episkopos* closely parallels that of the Essene Jews of the Qumran community (MacArthur, 98): "The overseers among the Essenes preached, taught, presided, exercised care and authority, and enforced discipline." "Overseer" depicts the man's purpose.

2. "*Elder*" refers to his position. It is quite likely that there was a plurality of elders overseeing the work of each local church. In 5:17 Paul explains, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." The elders of the church are godly men who have proven themselves as being worthy of respect. They are spiritually mature.

3. "*Pastor*" refers to his practice. The terms "pastor" and "shepherd" are closely related ("pastor" comes from the Latin term "pascere" which means "to feed"). Pastor is a functional term which describes what the man does. He *shepherds* God's people under the direction of the Chief Shepherd. He feeds them the Word. Ephesians 4:11-12 indicates that the Lord gave pastor-teachers to His church for the purpose of equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry.

So when it comes to the role, the terms are significant. So is the task.

B. The task is significant. By very definition of the terms, overseers are to give oversight, to set the pace for the church. They are to rule (1 Tim. 5:17), to preach and teach (1 Tim. 5:17), to pray for the sick (James 5:14), to care for the church and be examples for others to follow (1 Pet. 5:1-2), to set church policy (Acts 15:22ff.), and to ordain other leaders (1 Tim. 4:14).³

Or to put it more simply, the task of overseeing involves *leading*, *feeding*, and *weeding*. You say, "That sounds like a heavy assignment. Why would anyone want it?" We learn two things about the task in verse 1.

³MacArthur, p. 98.

1. *It is a good work.* "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task." Pastoring is a *good work*, as the KJV puts it. The 14th century English reformer John Wycliffe wrote, "The highest service that men may attain to on earth is to preach the Word of God." In the 17th century, the Puritan Cotton Mather observed, "The office of the Christian ministry, rightly understood, is the most honourable, and important, that any man in the whole world can ever sustain; and it will be one of the wonders and employments of eternity to consider the reasons why the wisdom and goodness of God assigned this office to imperfect and guilty men!"

It's a good work to be a pastor. I am thankful that my home church recognized this truth. The summer before I entered college, with plans already in place for me to pursue studies in medicine, my pastor invited me into his study and challenged me with these words, "Brad, I think you should consider being a pastor." I'm eternally grateful for Pastor Dernlan's encouragement to consider this *good work*.

2. *It is to be done God's way.* What is God's way when it comes to "doing church?" God's way is for churches to select biblically qualified, spiritually mature men for positions of leadership. Then He expects those men to *lead* the church.

The writer of Hebrews gave these exhortations, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you (13:7). Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." And "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you (13:17)."

If that's true, if the role of the overseers is to lead, you can understand why it's absolutely critical who is given that role. You can understand why Paul would give Timothy this warning (5:22), "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands," that is, don't be in a rush to ordain men to pastoral ministry. Be very careful who you put in leadership positions in the church.

Which brings us to issue #2. First, God's Word defines the position. Secondly...

II. God's Word defines the people who should lead (2-7).

Again our text (1), "If a man desire the office of a bishop." That doesn't mean that if a man desires it, he's in. It does mean that if he doesn't desire it, he's not qualified.

Have you ever noticed what typically happens when you arm-twist someone into taking a ministry in the church. You may think, "Oh, it will be good for so-and-so if he takes the position." And that may be true, but if he doesn't "desire" it, he will probably do more harm than good to the fellowship and to himself.

The present tense of "desire" indicates this is no whimsical decision, but a continuous aspiration, one that he won't chuck when the arrows start flying.

But it takes more than desire to be qualified to serve in God's church. Paul lists some 16 qualifications which a person must meet if he is to be an overseer. The first thing that strikes me is how different God's standard is from the one often used in our day. Just because a fellow has a seminary degree doesn't necessarily mean he should be a church leader. Nor administrative skills, nor personal charisma. According to God's Word, he must "measure up" in six areas.⁴

⁴ I realize we studied this text in 1995 and again in 1998, but a return trip will help us keep growing in our ability to think God's thoughts about the subject of leadership.

A. Area #1: There are moral qualifications (2a). "Now the overseer must be above reproach ("blameless," AV)." The Greek term means "not able to be held." If the man were arrested and placed in jail there wouldn't be any evidence against him to hold him there.

It's a high standard, beloved. John MacArthur is right when he observes: "The all too common practice today is to forgive a leader who sins and immediately restore him to his ministry. The church, like God, must not hesitate to forgive those who truly repent. To immediately restore them to the ministry, however, lowers the standard that God expects leaders to follow."

The issue is character. To qualify to lead in God's church, there must be no pet sins, no loopholes. Does God require perfection? No, the issue is not perfection, but it is direction. Is the man a model worth following? If you followed him, would he take you to Christ?

Notice the first inspection point Paul identifies to test if a man is above reproach: "the husband of but one wife (2)." What does that mean? The Roman Catholic view says the man is married to the Church. Another view suggests that marriage is required, that a single man is disqualified from being an elder. Another view interprets this as being one woman in a lifetime (so if an overseer's wife dies, he cannot remarry).

The phrase literally means a "one woman man." Remember Paul is writing in a day when there was a flippant attitude towards marriage. Prostitution was practiced in the name of religion. The issue is moral purity and marital faithfulness.

It's significant that Paul uses the same benchmark for deacons in verse 12. We'll look more carefully at the different ways people have interpreted this phrase in our next study.

Why would Paul put this mark right at the beginning? Perhaps it's because it was (and is) the area where leaders seem most prone to fall. The failure to be a one-woman man has put more men out of the ministry than any other sin.

In 1982 *Leadership Journal* published an article "The War Within," a candid description of a Christian leader's struggle with pornography and lust. The Journal later reported that this article generated more mail in response than any other single article, either before or since. The Journal stated, "Though responses were diverse, their sheer volume showed how troublesome the problem is for many Christian leaders."

When choosing its leaders, a church must give careful attention to moral qualifications. But sexual purity isn't the only aspect of morality Paul addresses. Verse 2 continues, "He must be *temperate* (literally "wine-less")." The term means clear-headed, not intoxicated, free from the control of external factors, whether alcohol or anything else.

In addition, he must be *self-controlled* [sober-minded], literally translated, "to save the mind." He must be a man who grasps what is really important in life. His values are in order. A man who constantly misses church or family time because of the lure of making money is not "sober." The term describes a man who is well disciplined and knows how to order his priorities.

He also must be *respectable* [of good behavior]. Literally, "orderly." He must be organized. His life is not in chaos. The word also carries the sense of "modest" in 2:9. When God gave us a yardstick to measure a potential leader, God said to start here, with *moral qualifications*.

B. Area #2: There are ministry qualifications (2b). *Hospitable* is next. You can't be a hermit and be a church leader. Nor can you narrow your associations to your friends. The term means "a love of strangers."

But it takes more than people skills to be a shepherd. Here's another ministry qualification. He must be *able to teach*. To be an overseer he must be a man who works hard at studying and then proclaiming God's Word. And when he teaches, people grow. There are lots of "nice" people in churches who simply are not qualified to be elders because they are not gifted by God to teach. And why does this requirement follow the section on moral qualifications? Perhaps it's because what a man says cannot be separated from what he is.

This, then, is true of a potential overseer. He possesses two ministry qualifications.

1. *He loves people*. He is "hospitable."
2. *He can teach the Word*. He is "able to teach."

C. Area #3: There are personal qualifications (3). In verse 3, Paul lists several things which must *not* be present. *Not given to drunkenness*, for obvious reasons. A church leader must set the example when it comes to a substance that has destroyed countless lives and families. *Not violent but gentle*. The literal rendering is "not a giver of blows." A hothead isn't qualified to lead God's church. Nor is a man who is *quarrelsome* [a brawler]. He must be a peacemaker, not a troublemaker. Wiersbe is right, "Short tempers do not make for long ministries." *Not a lover of money* [not covetous]. The love of money is the root of all evil (5:10).

So who qualifies to serve as a leader in a church? Not just any warm-blooded man with the gift of gab. God says we must examine a man's moral, ministry, and personal qualifications. Then examine a fourth area...

D. Area #4: There are family qualifications (4-5). "He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)"

How can you tell if a man is competent to lead in the church? Look at his home. Is he leading his wife and children towards godliness? Is he a leader there? A man who has a dominant wife is not qualified to lead in the church. Indeed, the fact that his wife is dominant reveals that he is negligent as a leader.

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan has a character named "Talkative" who is depicted as "a saint abroad, and a devil at home." It's in the home that a man proves whether he's ready to lead in the church.⁵

E. Area #5: There are qualifications concerning his maturity (6). "He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil." *Not a novice*, is how the KJV puts it. Or stated positively, he must be a man who has been tried, tested, and proven faithful in other areas. It does more harm than good to put a man into leadership prematurely, harm for the man and for the church.

So look for maturity, not perfection but spiritual *maturity*. And just because a man is not ready today does not mean he will never be ready. Give him time to grow. And if you are such a man, resolve that you're going to take the steps to grow.

⁵MacArthur: "Throughout history there have been those who advocated celibacy for spiritual leaders. Such a faction existed in Ephesus (cf. 4:3). In contrast, however, the Word of God assumes that a leader will be married and have a family. Although that does not eliminate single men, it is nevertheless the norm." p. 116.

F. Area #6: There are qualifications concerning his reputation (7). "He must have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap." A man's reputation is critical. It's not that people will never criticize him. They criticized Paul (some said he shouldn't be a leader). And you know they criticized Jesus. Criticism is inevitable for a leader. He cannot prevent that. But he must make sure there's no grounds for it. He must be so committed to teaching and living God's truth that even unsaved people recognize his impeccable reputation.

Spurgeon once described a man he knew as a good preacher but a bad Christian. He "preached so well and lived so badly, that when he was in the pulpit everybody said he ought never to come out again, and when he was out of it they all declared he never ought to enter it again."⁶

By this time you're probably thinking, "Wow! God's standard is certainly a high one!" Indeed it is. But why? Yes, it says something to us about the nature of the church, but there's something else here.

The Bible is more than a moral code book. True, it teaches us how to live. This text teaches us how to choose leaders, but fundamentally it does something more than that. It enables us to know God. It equips us to think God's thoughts rather than the world's. So let's address an important question.

Implications: What do we learn about the Lord from this instruction?

I see four basic truths about our God in 1 Timothy 3.

1. *God loves His church.* Why are God's standards are so high for church leaders? It's because God's church is so important to Him. Beloved, God's church is so important to Him that He gave His only Son, Jesus, for it. John wrote, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us (1 John 3:16)."

I love my children. That's why as a father I'm involved in their lives. That's why I give them direction. If I didn't love them, I'd let them do whatever they wanted to do. Why does God give such specific guidelines to His church? Because He loves His church.

2. *God is serious about His church.* Listen to these words from Ephesians 5:25-27: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her [Why? Here's the purpose...] to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

God wants a holy church. He is serious about His church. Are you? Can you say with Isaac Watts: "Alas! And did my Savior bleed? And did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I! Was it for crimes that I have done He groaned upon the tree? Amazing pity! Grace unknown and love beyond degree! But drops of grief can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe; Here Lord, I give myself away, 'tis all that I can do." Have you accepted Christ as your Savior, and then have you given your life away, given it to Him? You can't see Christ, but you can see His Body. It's the church. God is serious about His church. Are you?

3. *God has a good plan for His church.* That's what 1 Timothy is all about. He doesn't want His church to flounder. That's why He gave us His Word, His good Word. He knows best how the church should function. He knows a church needs leaders (and

⁶Lectures to My Students, 1:12-13.

what kind of leaders). He knows a church needs followers, too. It's part of His good plan.

We've seen God's standard today. Think of it as a yardstick. God has spelled out exactly the type of person He wants leading His church. Now we have a choice to make. What are we going to do with God's standard? We have four options.

Option #1: We can reject God's standard and create our own. Many do that. When selecting a leader they look for the following: a good talker, someone with business savvy, a person who is smart, from "good stock," and the bottom line, someone they consider to be a "good guy." That's one response. We can chuck God's yardstick and make our own.

Option #2: We can reject part of God's standard and keep what we like. It's the "pick and choose" approach. "Sure, we believe in the Bible, but this is the 21st century! Paul was living in a male dominated world when he wrote this. There's nothing wrong with women being pastors. And Paul didn't know what we know about genetics, so homosexual clergy is okay. Integrity is optional. So is family leadership. It doesn't matter what shape the individual's personal and family life is in as long as he gets the job done." That's a second possible response, to reject part and keep part.

Option #3: We can add personal opinions to God's standard. Option #2 says God is too strict. If we choose option #3 we are saying God is too soft. So we help Him out, thinking, "What God says in 1 Timothy 3 isn't enough. We need to make the standard higher." So we add requirements to the list, not from God's Word but from our own opinions. "The leader must be married," some say. "He can't be a widower who remarries," still others say. "He must have a seminary degree and know how to function as a CEO and not just as a shepherd. That's the kind of leader we want." This response adds things to God's yardstick. But there's a better way.

Option #4: We can follow God's standard as sufficient. God put the bar where He wanted it. We must not lower it, nor should we try to raise it. We must affirm it and follow it. When we do things God's way, we have God's supply to help us.

I'll be honest. The reason we're taking action to revise our church constitution is because it utilizes option #3 when it comes to deacon, trustee, and treasurer qualifications. It adds some unbiblical marks to the yardstick God gave us. It currently says that certain men are not qualified to serve that God says *are* qualified.

I urge you to look carefully at the biblical text this week, not to defend a position but to see what it actually says. Where did God put the bar? Let's find out and accept that standard. It's good, part of a good plan God has for His church.

4. *God has a special place for us in His church.* Some He calls to lead. Others He calls to follow. God has a special place for each of us in this church. It's a beautiful thing, too, when leaders and followers work together to know the Savior better, and make Him better known.