

Identifying Christian Leaders

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, let's turn for our Bible reading to the first letter of Timothy, and you'll find this on page 992 in the big hardback Bibles.

I'm going to read chapter 3, verses 1 to 13 today. Chapter 3, verses 1 to 13. And we have Paul's instructions to Timothy about the kind of people that need to be appointed to be overseers and deacons in the churches.

Timothy was working in Ephesus at the time, and there would have been probably a group of house churches or small fellowships that Timothy was responsible for, and responsible for seeing that the right kind of people were appointed to look after them.

So chapter 3, verse 1. The saying is trustworthy. If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

[1 : 20] He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?

He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Deacons, likewise, must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, and let them also be tested first. Then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.

Their wives, likewise, must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.

[2 : 29] For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves, and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Amen. The word of the Lord, and may the Lord add his blessing to it for us today. Well, now we're continuing our little series in, well, I'm thinking of it as a bird's-eye view of 1 Timothy.

And this week I want to look especially at the first seven verses of chapter 3, under the title, Identifying Church Leaders. But I don't want to pass over chapter 2, which we didn't look at last week, without making any comment at all upon it.

And you might just like to flick back a page to chapter 2. Chapter 2 is fundamentally about good order. Good order in both society at large and also in the church.

In its first section, verses 1 to 7, Paul is encouraging the Christians to pray for their national leaders, kings and people in high positions, so that, as verse 2 puts it, we, which I think means the church, or perhaps all of us, but so that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

[3 : 45] Why? So that evangelism may prosper. Because, verse 4, God our Savior desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

In other words, if there is good order, in society, promoted by wise and humane political leadership, the gospel agenda is able to go forward much more easily.

But where national government is ineffective or corrupt, it's much harder for the church to spread its message. We can think of examples of this in the world today. It's much easier today, for example, to preach the gospel in Glasgow than it would be in Mogadishu or in Baghdad.

Now, if verses 1 to 7 are about good order in society, then verses 8 to 15 are about good order in the life of the church.

And in this passage, 8 to 15, Paul highlights two main dangers which may have been causing problems in the fellowships at Ephesus. First, a danger to men, and secondly, one for women. [4 : 49] So first of all, men, in verse 8, tend characteristically to get angry and to be quarrelsome. So Paul teaches that they should channel their energies into prayer rather than into fighting.

And then secondly, the women, verses 9 to 15, will characteristically be tempted to rule over the men, which Paul teaches is contrary to God's creation order.

And they will do this, as verse 9 suggests, by, how can I put this, over-presenting their female charms in terms of clothing and jewelry and hairstyles.

That's what Paul is hinting at here. After all, and I think not all the ladies quite understand it, but we men are weak and susceptible to that kind of influence more than is sometimes realized.

So then what Paul is saying is that having cowed the men by their beauty, the ladies will then be tempted to take the role of church teachers and leaders. And, says Paul in verse 12, that is not appropriate for them to do.

[5 : 51] So chapter 2 is about good order, godly, dignified life in wider society and in the way in which the church operates. Pray for your leaders in the nation, says Paul, and instruct your Christian men and your Christian women to fulfill their roles appropriately in the churches, rather than giving way to temptations, which are the characteristic pitfalls of each gender.

All right, well, that's just a brief word on chapter 2. Let's turn now to chapter 3, to the first paragraph, where Paul teaches Timothy about the qualities or qualifications for men who are to be church leaders.

And you'll perhaps know that there is a passage in Titus, chapter 1, which is almost identical to these first seven verses of chapter 3. Remember, Timothy's position is not to be permanently there in Ephesus.

He's there as a kind of apostolic representative or delegate looking after the churches temporarily, and one of his jobs is to appoint the right kind of leaders for the churches.

So let me say a little bit about the passage before we look at its details. We know that every kind of human organization needs good leadership, and the quality and life and work of any organization will largely depend on the quality of its leaders.

[7 : 07] Now, our head leader is, of course, the Lord Jesus himself, the head of the church. And he leads and governs the church through the Bible, which is the written record of his will and purpose.

But he expresses his leadership through his servants, who are responsible for putting his will into practice in the local congregations. Now, the Apostle Paul says very little about church structures in his letters.

He doesn't give us a blueprint for exactly how churches are to organize their decision-making processes. What is important to Paul is not so much the structures or the shape of the structures, but rather the godly quality of Christian leaders.

He's much more interested in people than in methods. Which is not to say that he has nothing to say about methods or structures. So, for example, in our chapter 3 here, I think he's making it clear that a church is to be led not by a single leader.

He doesn't have a one-man band approach to it, but rather by a group of leaders who are working together, even though one of them may be regarded as the senior leader or senior pastor. And Paul is also recognizing here that there is more than one type of leader.

[8 : 22] He clearly distinguishes between the overseers, as he calls them in verses 1 to 7, and the deacons in verses 8 to 13. The overseers are clearly the more senior leaders who carry the greater responsibility.

And the deacons are regarded as their assistants or helpers. And it's also clear when you read not only this passage, but other passages in Paul's letters, that the leaders that he describes as overseers or bishops in some translations are indistinguishable from those he describes as elders or presbyters.

Now, a little bit of Greek. The Greek word for overseer or bishop. Let me just test somebody out here. Do you know what it is? Episkopos. Thank you very much. A periscope is something that comes up and looks about, isn't it?

And episkopos is one who looks over. So overseer and bishop is the same idea. So that's the Greek word for the bishop or the overseer. The Greek word for the elder is presbyteros. Presbyteros, that's right. So the presbyter and the bishop and the overseer and the elder, in Paul's thinking, are all the same person. The deacon occupies a different position, and that's a more junior or assistant role.

[9 : 35] But Paul's view of how churches actually function on the ground is very flexible. You'll know that elsewhere in his letters, he speaks of a great variety of gifts and ministries.

In fact, Paul expects every Christian person to take responsibility at some level and to make a contribution to the welfare of the whole body of the church. But the senior leadership of the churches is vitally important, and that's what Paul is talking about here in the first seven verses of chapter 3.

So I think we could describe these seven verses as Paul's profile of the right kind of person to be an overseer or elder. And we'll look at this profile under two headings.

First, Paul shows his concern for the good opinion of the world. And secondly, Paul shows his concern for the healthy growth of the church.

First then, Paul makes the point that the right kind of church leader needs to enjoy the good opinion of the world, at least at one level. Now, you might say immediately, but surely the world's opinion ought to carry no weight at all.

[10 : 47] Are we going to allow the world standards to govern the way in which we select our church leaders? Well, Paul's answer would be, we certainly don't select our leaders according to worldly standards, but we do bear in mind the way in which the world will regard them, because we have an evangelistic responsibility towards the world.

If the world can see the church appointing unsuitable pastors, it is quickly going to dismiss the church and the church's message, and God will be dishonored. Look with me at verse 2.

The first quality of the overseer is that he is to be above reproach. Above reproach. Isn't that unexpected? Wouldn't you expect Paul to say that the first quality of the church leader should be that he's a great prayer warrior, or a brilliant preacher, or a gifted evangelist?

It's almost an anti-climax to see what Paul actually does say, that he needs to be above reproach. But so important is it to Paul that he not only begins his list with it in verse 2, he ends his list with very much the same idea in verse 7, where he says he must be well thought of by outsiders.

Now, one of the problems at Ephesus, and we saw this last week from chapter 1, was that Timothy had to counter false teaching. There were clearly a number of people who were making themselves prominent in the church and were teaching false doctrine, and it may well be that some of these false teachers were bringing the church into disrepute, and they were not being regarded by outsiders as being above reproach.

[12 : 24] I guess we've all known of churches where the church has been dismissed by the local community because its pastor has not been above reproach. And if you look through the list of qualities from verses 2 to 7, you'll see that they all concern observable behavior, measurable behavior, the kind of behavior which the local community knows about.

Let me focus on one or two aspects of this. First of all, Paul speaks about the family life of the overseer. Look at verse 4. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity, keeping his children submissive.

Now, Paul knows that the local community soon becomes aware of what goes on behind the pastor's front door. If there is significant bad behavior in the pastor's home, it will become known about in the community.

So if the pastor is treating his wife roughly, or if his children are in trouble with the police or are being expelled from the local school, the reputation of the gospel is bound to be tarnished.

The family here is very important, the pastor's family life. Now, we live today in an age where the family is being downplayed. In fact, the whole institution of the family is in crisis, and many people are regarding the family as being a kind of dead duck or a thing of the past, and we have a number of alternatives that are now being offered.

[13 : 51] So we have, for example, the advocates of what you might call serial monogamy. That sounds like a contradiction in terms, doesn't it? But I guess it means having a number of marriages or long-term relationships over a few decades.

Then we have the advocates of gay and lesbian marriages or relationships which bring up children. If you've been driving on the motorway where the M77 and the M8 join in recent weeks, you'll have seen a big hoarding up there which pictures two young men holding up a little boy. One of them has a little boy. And it's, you know, we are Ben and Joe or whatever, and this is our little son Luke. This is the new family. Accept it. Get used to it. That's the message there. And we know that there are other departures from the biblical ideal, the biblical teaching of children being raised within the secure framework of heterosexual marriage. Now, the point about verse 4 is that the pastor must not simply be preaching about family life lived in God's way. He needs to exhibit it in his own family. And in the 21st century, with family life disintegrating in Western culture as it is doing, the pastor's family, if it is organized along the pattern of verse 4, the pastor's family is going to be a powerful witness to the truth of the gospel. [15:11] People will notice it. But if the pastor's family departs from the pattern of verse 4, we're in trouble. So Timothy has to appoint verse 4 type people to be the pastors and overseers.

Now, just think of how this would work out in practice. Think of the way in which job appointments are made these days in industry and in schools and so on. It would be politically very incorrect to ask job applicants about their family situation, wouldn't it? Some of you, I'm sure, sometimes interview people for jobs. If you're interviewing somebody for a job and if you start asking questions about their marital situation and their family, you're likely to get a pretty frosty response, aren't you?

The idea being that a person's sexual behavior or inclinations or a person's children or lack of children have absolutely nothing to do with their ability to do their job properly. Not so with your pastor. That's what Paul is saying to Timothy. 1 Timothy 3 forces us to ask these sort of questions about our pastors. If you ever find yourself on an interregnum committee, a sort of committee that has to appoint a new pastor for your church, you cannot afford not to probe such a person about his wife and family if he's a married man.

[16:33] I remember some years ago when I was a senior pastor down in England, I would from time to time be interviewing young men who were applying for the job of assistant minister or curate, as we would call it in our churches down there.

Whenever I had a young man sitting there in the study and I was interviewing him, I would look him in the eye and ask him point blank, do you love your wife? Are you faithful to your wife? Do you intend to be faithful to your wife?

The marital life, the family life of the pastor has got to be sound, because if it's not, the gospel will be discredited in the non-Christian community.

And then you'll see Paul focuses on several other aspects of the pastor's makeup. Just look at verse 3 for a moment. Again, when I used to be interviewing prospective assistant ministers, I would ask them point blank, Do you have a problem with drink, my brother?

Or with bad temper? Or with money? Have you had money problems? There's something about the stresses and strains of the pastor's life which is bound to expose weaknesses at these points.

[17:42] A bridge that has cracks in its structure can stand up to the pressure of light traffic passing over it. But when the traffic gets heavy, that bridge will begin to totter.

I'm not suggesting that a pastor's life is the only stressful way of life. Many other ways of life are pretty stressful as well. But where a ministry comes unstuck, it is almost always because of drink, bad temper, financial impropriety, or something to do with marriage and family life.

So the pastors of the churches need to be the kind of people who hold the reputation of the gospel untarnished in the opinion of the surrounding community. That's why Paul says the overseer needs to be above reproach.

Above reproach doesn't mean without sin. There'd be nobody who fitted into that bracket. But above reproach means that nobody is able with justification to point a finger at that person and say, don't you know about him?

Then secondly, Paul has in view the healthy growth of the churches. The healthy growth of the churches. The overseers and the deacons need to be people who are going to help the church to grow.

[18:56] So let me again pick out two aspects of this. First of all, at the end of verse 2, the overseer must have ability as a teacher. And if you'll just flick over the page or page or two to Titus chapter 1 and verse 9, Titus 1 verse 9, I think we can see what Paul has in mind when he speaks of teaching ability.

So Titus 1 verse 9, he, the elder, the pastor, must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it.

Now this verse, Titus 1, 9, is really the classic verse on the three main aspects of being a Bible teacher. First of all, the teacher must hold the message firmly. He has to know the message and he needs to keep getting to know it better and better as the years go on.

And he needs, therefore, to have strong convictions about it. This is why he mustn't be a recent convert. The recent convert may have great joy and love for the Lord and great zeal for evangelism, but he won't have depth of conviction.

That only comes with time. And secondly, in Titus 1, 9, he must be able to instruct in sound doctrine. He's got to hold the church to the teaching of scripture.

[20 : 18] So if the church, or if members of the church, want to do something which is against the teaching of the Bible, he has to be strong enough to say, no, my brothers and sisters, no, because the Bible says not to.

So his understanding of the Bible has to be strong enough to enable him to say no when no needs to be said. And thirdly, from Titus 1, 9, he has to be able to rebuke or refute those who oppose Bible doctrine and argue against it.

Wrong teaching is always going to threaten the churches. And therefore, the pastor teacher has to be able to show members of the congregation why and how wrong teaching is wrong. Let's turn back to 1 Timothy 3, 2.

And let's notice also this, that the pastor, or the overseer, needs to be sober-minded, there it is in verse 2, sober-minded and self-controlled.

Now you might think that was rather unexciting, sober-minded, especially in a world that greatly values the adjective exciting. If you read the church papers and you look at job advertisements for pastors and assistants and that kind of thing, the sort of thing you generally read will be exciting new opportunity, exciting new ministry, exciting new hymn book, an exciting new program of evangelism in the area.

[21 : 43] Everything today has to be exciting. But Paul says that the pastor teacher, the overseer, has got to be sensible, sober-minded and self-controlled. In other words, free from excess or rashness.

He's got to be a steady person who can hold a church firm in the face of upheavals and exaggerated teachings, which might emphasize one part of the Bible at the expense of other parts. So Paul's description of the overseer and the deacon has in mind, first, the good opinion of the world and secondly, the healthy growth of the churches. So there's a challenge to us here.

The overseers and deacons of the next generation are only going to come from ordinary churches like ours and like yours. Under God, then, it is up to people like us in our generation to be providing a steady stream of workers and leaders for the future.

We need to be constantly looking at our own number and encouraging those who fit this description. If you have growing children or perhaps growing grandchildren, what are your dreams for them?

[22 : 54] Would you like them to get good, well-paid jobs in industry or perhaps the legal profession or something like that? Or do you think in your dreams how wonderful it would be to see them working full-time as evangelists and pastors and assistants in gospel work or missionaries?

Has the Bible's agenda really begun to shape your dreams and vision for your children's and grandchildren's future? Or are those dreams molded simply by the agenda of the world and its wealth?

Paul the Apostle teaches us to value highly the work of the deacon and of the overseer. The world is never going to value it very highly. The world regards this kind of work as rather ridiculous.

But God shows us in verse 1 of our passage that the work of the overseer is a noble task.

Interesting phrase. If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

Maybe people were saying in Timothy's day in Ephesus that only a fool would be a church leader.

People certainly say that today. The secular world looks with a certain scorn at Christian leaders and thinks of them as people who only work one day a week and eat nothing but cucumber sandwiches.

[24 : 09] But Paul reminds us here in verse 1 that this kind of work and responsibility is, in the sight of God, a noble task. So friends, let's look around in our own fellowships for the right kind of people to be the overseers and deacons of the next generation.

Let's, where we can, speak to such folk individually and encourage them to think of taking on this work and the training that might go with it as long as they fit the profile that Paul draws for them here.

The task of Christian leadership is demanding and difficult but by the grace of God it is not impossible. And where there is good leadership under God, the churches are greatly strengthened and there is a great deal of thanksgiving given to God for those that he sends to strengthen us and teach us.

Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, all of us can think of wonderful people that we know or have known in the past who have taught your word clearly and faithfully, who have been able to refute and rebuke wrong teaching, who have lovingly strengthened the churches in their care.

We thank you so much for that numberless band of people who have taught the Christian churches now for nearly 2,000 years. And we do pray for those who are engaged in this work today and ask that you will strengthen them, especially at times of discouragement and weakness.

[25 : 44] And we ask you as well, dear Father, to provide the right people to be leaders for the generations to come. Please help us to identify them according to Paul's teaching and profile here.

And please help us to encourage them into this work so that there will be much thanksgiving to you. And we ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.