

"Called to Service" - 1 Timothy 3:1-13

Last Sunday, we saw what Paul had to say about ministry roles within the local church. Every Christian has a role in ministry, but we don't all fill the same roles. We are not gifted in the same way. While we are all essential to the life and ministry of the Church, we are not interchangeable.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, uses the human body as a metaphor to illustrate this fact.

For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. (1 Corinthians 12:14-18)

God gives each of us a different set of spiritual gifts so that the body of the Church has everything she needs to carry out her holy mission. And to the Ephesians, Paul wrote:

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

You are a gift to the Church. Every one of you. And you are called to do your share to cause growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love!

Now, last week, Paul taught us that the role of spiritual leadership falls to the men in the Church. That does not mean that women are second-class citizens. Not at all! Women have complementary roles to play that are every bit as important as the roles men are to play. And women, you too are to learn, to grow, to become spiritually mature so you can pass the way of the Lord on to the next generation.

In this week's passage, Paul gets really specific about the qualifications for spiritual leadership within the Church. Church leadership must not be chosen in a popularity contest. Church leaders are called by Almighty God and are only confirmed by the church at large.

Let's get to our text.

This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. (1 Timothy 3:1)

Now, first of all, we need to understand what Paul means by a bishop, because of denominational politics, the term "bishop" has taken on some unfortunate baggage. A bishop is not some sort of regal office and a bishop is certainly not to be worshipped, or bowed down to. The word in the Greek is *episkopē* (ἐπισκοπή). It simply means an

“overseer”. It refers to the office of elder. It is one of the presiding officers of a Christian church. And if a man desires this position, Paul says it is a good thing, but his motivation must come from a desire to serve, not to dominate, not to press his own carnal agenda.

Remember what Jesus said:

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. (Matthew 20:25-26)

It is a good thing when the Spirit of God lays this desire on someone's heart, but desire alone is not sufficient. That person must be qualified, and Paul gives us a list of the qualifications for elders.

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (1 Timothy 3:2-7)

Well, that's a pretty long list, and we could probably spend an awful lot of time drilling down into each of the qualifications. But the first thing I want you to notice is that all of these are character qualifications. None of these speak to a person's ability to do the job, with the exception of the ability to teach. Paul doesn't once mention that an elder must be a good administrator.

There is a tendency in the world to overlook character flaws if an individual is effective in a particular position. I heard an interesting statement this week; “Not all great men are good men.” And I suppose you can make a strong case for that if you look at human history. It doesn't work in the kingdom of God. *A bishop must then be blameless. (v.2)* Character does matter!

Already you might say this is an impossibly high standard. Doesn't the Bible say that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God? It cannot mean that an elder has to be sinless because nobody is sinless except for Jesus. So, what is Paul talking about?

The word translated blameless is *anepilēptos* (ἀνεπίληπτος) and it means someone who is irreproachable. There's nothing to accuse him of, nothing you could use to bring an accusation against him. And it is in the present tense. So, we're not talking about a past transgression or a corrupt lifestyle before he found salvation. A bishop or an elder must simply be a guy who is not presently corrupted by some habitual sin or evil habit. It doesn't mean he must be sinless. That would be impossible.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)

So, an elder must be in the habit of confessing and repenting when he becomes aware of his sin. Yes, he will sin, but he will not continue in sin. In general, he must not have some obvious sinful defect in his character. He should be someone others can emulate.

Blamelessness is the general character trait of a bishop and from this point on, the rest of the characteristics Paul mentions here, are merely expansions of this, or examples of what it looks like to be blameless before the church.

And so, a bishop must be the husband of one wife. Boy, this has been a point of controversy in the church. Obviously, this would disqualify someone who is a polygamist. But what about a guy who has a divorce in his background? Does that mean he could never serve as an elder? Well, again, I personally don't think what our lives looked like before we came to Christ should ever be a disqualifier. Is there a sin that is so great that the blood of Christ is insufficient to cover it? None, except the sin of persistent unbelief.

I know Village Missions does not place couples if one or both of them have previously been divorced, but that is more pragmatic than doctrinal. A pastor with a divorce in his background can be a stumbling block in some small-town churches. That's for sure. So the mission had decided to not go there.

But within the local church, I think we need to treat this one with a fair amount of grace. What's in the past is in the past. Let's just make sure our church leaders, if married, are faithful to their marriages. Someone who continues to mess around on his wife is definitely not a candidate for eldership, but let's let the past be in the past.

An elder must be temperate, sober-minded and of good behavior. I'm lumping these three together. Basically, an elder needs to exercise good judgment at all times. He's not one to act rashly, or fly off the handle. He is somebody who behaves appropriately in all situations.

An elder must be hospitable. In the first century, this was very important. Elders were expected to open their houses to guests, especially traveling missionaries. This doesn't look quite the same in our culture, but an elder still needs to be willing to entertain visitors, especially those who have questions about the church and her teachings. And they need to be willing to provide a hand up to those who need it.

Then there is the last characteristic in verse 2, an elder must be able to teach. Remember that passage I read from Ephesians? Our goal as a church is to reach a point where we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. To do that we need teachers and this primarily falls on the elders. By the way, a pastor is a teaching elder. He has the job of feeding Christ's sheep from the word of God. But all elders must be able to teach.

Then in verse 3, we see that an elder must not be given to wine. That doesn't mean that a guy with a beer in the icebox is automatically disqualified. There is no Biblical prohibition against the moderate consumption of alcohol, but alcohol must not be a controlling influence in his life. And the elder must never allow his freedom in this matter to trip up a weaker brother or sister. (1 Corinthians 8:9) As Paul said,

Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:13)

You could say the very same thing about alcohol. Kris and I do not drink alcohol because we never want to take the chance of tripping someone up. And really, what's the big deal about drinking anyway? If you don't think you could give it up for the glory of Christ, maybe it's become a problem. Maybe it's become an idol. So, although the moderate consumption of alcohol is not forbidden, it can be a problem, so why not just abstain?

And an elder must not be violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; Those are self-explanatory, aren't they? They describe someone who is above reproach, one who is blameless before the church.

Verses 4 and 5 talk about the necessity to manage one's own household well. Guys, your first ministry, your first priority must be your own family. You are to be the spiritual leaders of the family and if you cannot step up to the plate there, you have no business being an elder in Christ's Church. Now, this does not mean that your family life must be without drama. It doesn't mean your children must be perfectly behaved at all times. Adult children who have wandered away from the faith are not disqualifiers. Every family is going to have their own tribulations. But as a husband and a father, you need to be with them, leading and praying your wife and children through every crisis.

And an elder must not be a novice. Because there is such a vacuum of leadership in many churches, it is really tempting to throw every available warm body onto the board. We must not do that. We certainly don't want to put a new convert or an immature believer into a position of leadership. Raising an individual up too quickly will cause them to be either frustrated or prideful. Neither one is good. Both can lead to serious spiritual failure. It is far better to have vacancies on the board than to fill it with unqualified leaders. In Village Missions, it's not unusual for pastors to arrive on their fields and find that some of their board members aren't even saved. They're not authentic Christians. Unbelievers cannot possibly shepherd the Church of Christ!

Finally, a bishop or an elder must have a good testimony outside the church as well as inside. (verse 7) It is important for every Christian to be the best neighbor, the best citizen, the best worker, the best friend he or she can be. If we are to suffer shame or persecution, it must be for our testimony of the gospel, not because we are inconvenient jerks. This is even more important for our church leaders. People are watching. We need to adorn Christ with our good testimony.

In verse 8, Paul turns his attention to the qualifications of deacons. A deacon, or *diakonos* (*διάκονος*) is literally a servant, or a waiter of tables. But it has come to take on a more general meaning as an office holder within the church. It can also be translated as "minister". This office was instituted in the early church as it grew beyond the capacity of the Apostles to administer to all the human needs, specifically the distribution of food gifts to the needy. We read about it in Acts, Chapter 6, where seven men were chosen for this office. Among them were Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and Phillip, who served as an evangelist in Samaria and to a certain Ethiopian eunuch. So, you see, these guys did more than just distribute food. In most churches today, deacons are called on to look after the physical needs of folks within their congregations. They take care of benevolence. They do visitation. They may also serve on church boards, assisting with administration. And the lines between elders and deacons are often pretty blurry.

But notice how verse 8 begins: *Likewise deacons ...* In other words, like the elders, deacons are to be above reproach. They share the same character traits. And Paul continues to list these traits. Some are duplicates, but I think it is safe to say, with the possible exception the gift of teaching, both elders and deacons are characterized by both lists.

Let's take a quick look at the deacon list:

Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise, their wives must be reverent,

not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 3:8-13)

A deacon must be reverent – that corresponds to sober-minded, but specifically in respect to God and the Church. Not double-tongued – In other words, they need to be sincere in what they say. Not given to much wine – there’s a direct duplicate as is the requirement of not being greedy for money.

Verse 9 is interesting:

holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. (1 Timothy 3:9)

A good deacon understands that he is serving the Church, the bride of Christ. He is attentive to duty for Christ's sake. So, a good deacon is going to do all in his power to maintain his union with Jesus. That requires diligent prayer and Bible study. A good deacon, like a good elder, is a good example to the rest of the church.

Verse 10 corresponds to the requirement that elders not be novices. We never want to place someone in a position they are not ready for. We need to watch them over a significant period of time to see if they exhibit these character qualities.

Verse 11 could lead us down a long and winding rabbit trail because, if you notice in our New King James version of the Bible, the word “their” is in italics. There is no corresponding word in the Greek manuscripts. And the word translated wives, is often translated as “women”. So, literally, what this verse says is:

Women--in like manner grave, not false accusers, vigilant, faithful in all things. (1 Timothy 3:11, YLT)

So, are we talking specifically about the wives of deacons, or are we talking more generally about women who are serving in a similar capacity? Is it Biblical to have deaconesses, that is, women who serve as deacons? Many would not agree with me, but my answer is “yes” and it’s not just this verse that makes me say so. In closing his letter to the Romans, Paul writes:

I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, (Romans 16:1)

Guess what the Greek word translated “servant” is? Yep. It’s *diakonos* (διάκονος), the very same word that is translated “deacon” here in First Timothy. So, I believe verse 11 is a short parenthesis by which Paul is saying, “Hey, these qualities should be displayed in our deaconesses too.”

Neither deacons or deaconesses have the primary responsibility of teaching doctrine in the Church, but they are to lead by example as they serve their congregations. And they are to display the character traits Paul lists here.

Well, I’ve managed to spend a lot more time on the individual character traits of church leaders than I had intended, but let me just sum up by saying that holding an official church office is not a vocation, nor is it an avocation. It is certainly not a hobby. It is a calling that comes from Almighty God and it is to be taken very, very seriously. So, if you feel a desire to serve in church leadership, that’s a good thing. It’s a very good thing because what is said of deacons in verse 13 applies to everyone who serves in church leadership:

For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 3:13)

But church leadership must never be a means to a carnal end. You don't become a deacon or an elder because you covet the status. You must not become a deacon or an elder because you have a private agenda. You become a deacon or an elder because you are answering a call from Almighty God and you want to serve.

I praise God for our deacons and our elders. And by the way, some that I consider elders and deacons are not actually on our church board. But everyone on the church board is there because they were called to service and everyone on your church board remembers what Jesus said:

Whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. (Mark 10:44)