

1 Timothy 3:1-2a

The most of 1 Timothy 3 is taken up with the important subject of leadership in the local church. Typical Paul, he tells it like it is, he pulls no punches – the comprehensive guidelines outlined in this section have stood the test of time; if they are followed to a tee, they are guaranteed to produce a crop of outstandingly excellent leaders.

The problem is that so often today we toss them out through the open window; we think Paul's checklist is a bit outdated and a touch irrelevant for life in the twenty-first century, and then we wonder why things are the way they are!

The difference between a good church and a great church is, in most cases, down to the quality of its leadership. Those at the top make a significant difference. Unlike many churches in the West, when it comes to key roles being filled, Paul doesn't have the mindset that says: 'I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine!' He's not into that kind of exercise – if we want good, godly leaders, we can do no better than pursue Paul's inspired agenda.

He's focusing primarily on elders and deacons – both have a huge contribution to make to the ongoing life of the assembly; one may be more intimately involved with the spiritual life of the people of God; the other, more immersed in making sure the machinery is well oiled – both are essential, however, and neither can be done without. When these folks work together as a team, it's a superb combination, and they are unbeatable. Yes, the standards are incredibly high; don't forget, it's a bit like the shopping mall, you usually get what you pay for. As they say, if you pay peanuts, you'll get monkeys!

When it comes to leadership issues and personnel, we are daft if we think we can rewrite the biblical textbook – these are the criteria that God has established for every local church. If we don't embrace them, we miss out and the church misses out – however, if we follow them and seek to apply them, then the Lord's blessing is

pretty much ensured. Why? Because we have done things God's way!

Before we dig into it, there's a couple of points worth noting; this list applies to male candidates for the office of pastor or elder. I realise that other people have different views, but on reflection, it seems to me that Paul clearly limits this particular role to men. The second point is, these qualifications are not optional, they are essential. These verses present a profile of a leader, they are not a pool of qualities from which to skim and pick. To qualify for the job in hand, the man has to fulfil all the criteria.

The bottom line is, as goes the leadership, so goes the church; that's why Christian character is mega important. I reckon, as followers of Christ, we can't settle for anything less.

When we shine the flashlight on this section which focuses on a man with an all-round ministry, it carves up very nicely. There is, one, his personal walk with the Lord in verses 1-3; two, his home life in verses 4-5; three, his church life in verse 6; and, four, his testimony in the community in verse 7.

Before we examine the various qualities that Paul has detailed, I think it might be a good idea for us to pause for a short music break.

MUSIC BREAK

Paul starts the ball rolling in verse 1 with another one of his so-called 'trustworthy sayings' – we read: 'If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.' There are five of these sayings in the Pastoral Epistles. Each time, it introduces a fundamental truth of huge importance among the believers. It's one of those self-evident truths, a glaringly obvious truth, that doesn't need proof. It stands on its own two feet.

An 'overseer' is someone who oversees, that's simple enough! In this context, he is someone entrusted with spiritual oversight in the local assembly of God's people. It's one of those terms that is self-explanatory, it's also synonymous with the terms, bishop, pastor, and elder – basically, they're all talking about the same office.

Paul reckons it is good when young men aspire after such a role – it's not something for them to covet, or to fight tooth and nail to secure; it's not a matter of reaching the top rung of the ladder and looking down on everyone else – there is no room for smug spiritual pride. The thought here is one of humility combined with a keen desire to be used by the Lord to lead his people into blessing. If the church is going to prosper and experience the green shoots of spiritual growth, it must be led by men with a heart for God, by men of passion who are compellingly called to the ministry.

You may be called an elder but, don't forget, your ministry is principally one of serving others. On the other hand, you may never make it into that role, and that's ok, but there's nothing wrong with making yourself available to the Lord. 'Aim High' is what Paul is saying. When all is said and done it is a 'noble task'; that is, there is an incredible beauty associated with it; a 'lovely thing' is how Paul sees it. You see, godly leaders are the backbone of the church.

When we compare scripture, we can cull together a number of responsibilities associated with being an overseer – they are to rule in 1 Timothy 5:17, they are to pray for the sick in James 5:14, they are to care for the church and be examples for others to follow in 1 Peter 5:1-2, they are to set church policy in Acts 15:22ff, and they are to ordain other leaders in 1 Timothy 4:14. That's just a snapshot of what awaits them!

Are you still keen? Are you up for it? Are you having second thoughts? No matter, this remains the greatest and most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called! By the way, it's a lifelong task – there's nothing here that tells me it is only from 9 to 5, five days a week! This is for the long haul!

MUSIC BREAK

The first item on Paul's checklist is found in verse 2 where he stipulates that an elder or pastor 'must be above reproach'. The fact that Paul used the word 'must' says all that needs to be said – this is something that is non-negotiable, it is imperative; it is absolutely

essential that the brother is a person whose integrity is beyond question.

On moral and spiritual issues, a church leader is to be whiter than white; the thought is, there are no skeletons hanging in the closet. This is a life that has no gaping holes in its character, no obvious flaws in the person's personality. We're not perfect, but we are to be blameless. Such a person cannot be arrested and held as if he were a criminal – there is no evidence against him, no man can point the finger of accusation at him. Such a person will be exemplary in their conduct and lifestyle; he is a paragon of Christian virtue, someone who models their faith in Jesus Christ.

John MacArthur outlines four reasons why those in pastoral leadership must take great care to remain above reproach. One, they are the special targets of Satan, and he will assault them with more severe temptation than others. It's a fact that those on the front lines of the spiritual battle will inevitably bear the brunt of satanic opposition. The devil has it in for those in any leadership position, especially those in the local church.

Two, their fall has a greater potential for harm. Satan knows when a shepherd falls, the effect on the sheep is devastating. It can wreck a ministry almost overnight! If that doesn't happen, the damage is often so great that churches and ministries rarely fully recover from the destructive impact.

Three, a leader's greater knowledge of biblical truth, and their accountability to live by it, brings greater chastening when they sin. If you sin, that is bad; if your pastor sins, it's not only bad, it is so much worse – it's like the pebble in the pond syndrome. There are massive ripples when a leader falls into sin.

Four, when an elder sins, they are more hypocritical than others because they preach against the very sins they commit. In other words, when a preacher falls by the wayside, he ought to know better and, apart from that, he should be walking the walk if he dares to talk the talk. Such men should have one face, not like Big Ben with four faces!

Now you can see why Paul makes this his number one priority for those in the eldership or pastoral ministry; we're on the look out for Spirit-filled men, men with nothing to hide; in a sense, we should be like the proverbial glasshouse in that people can see right through us.

Paul then widens the net in verse 2 and 3 when he zooms in on a leader's moral character – again, such qualities are not up for grabs, we can't pick and choose the ones we like and ditch all the rest. No, it doesn't work that way. Every one of these are biblical standards that we would be unwise not to embrace and follow.

Next on the list, Paul says that an overseer should be 'the husband of but one wife'. That, in itself, kicks the idea into touch that women can be elders – taking the phrase at face value, how can a woman possibly fulfil the role of a man and function as a husband in the marital relationship! It's nonsense to even think about it!

The Greek text literally reads: 'a one-woman man'. Paul is not referring here to the leader's marital status – it is possible for a man to be an elder or a pastor and be single, or even widowed; he may even have remarried because his wife has died; he may have been the innocent party if his wife was guilty of adultery or she was an unbeliever who initiated divorce proceedings as in Matthew 5 or 1 Corinthians 7.

That said, the apostle is referring to a man's sexual behaviour. The issue here is clearly one of morality. There are a number of married men who are not one-women men; I'm sure we all know guys who have a roving eye for other ladies! These guys have a reputation wherever they go!

In itself, that may appear harmless, they may never go to bed with them. They can't take their eyes off them, but they never put their hands on them; that, however, does not take away from the fact that their eyeing up of other women is detrimental to their relationship with their own wife. At the same time, it massively inhibits their ability to function as a godly leader in the local church. Such folks can't be trusted.

This is one of those areas in Christian ministry where, perhaps more than any other, men are easy meat for the enemy. We've all heard of cases where men have run off with other women in the local congregation, or wherever. It's terribly sad, but, it's a tragic fact of life in the twenty-first century. The statistics bear it out, the failure to be a one-woman man has put more men out of the gospel ministry than any other sin.

Let me spell it out: a one-woman man is totally devoted to his wife, he loves her for who she is through thick and thin – for him, she is his pride and joy. With God's help, he maintains sexual purity in both his thought life and conduct. He will do nothing that would ever undermine their relationship; he will not be found in any position of compromise; at no time will he deliberately embarrass or humiliate her.

Before we take a music break, let me say this: If a man can't keep his eyes off other women, he should not be in a leadership role in the local church. He automatically disqualifies himself from being an elder, or a pastor, or whatever name you want to give it. God can't bless those who go against his word.

MUSIC BREAK

Paul continues in verse 2 by saying that an overseer is someone who is 'temperate'. The Greek word throws considerable light on the phrase, it means 'wine-less' or 'unmixed with wine'. Bearing in mind that Paul has used the imagery of wine, we all know from Psalm 104 that it makes 'a man's heart glad'; it also has the potential for enormous harm – that explains why it was diluted with water in biblical times.

It seems, in this context, therefore, that Paul is referring to a person who has a clear head, someone able to think clearly, one who is alert and vigilant to what's going on around them. The leader is someone whose judgment is not impaired by the abuse of alcohol, or any other addictive habit. We desperately need men of this calibre in today's church – men like the children of Issachar that we read of in 1 Chronicles 12:32.

Third, a leader in God's church must be 'self-controlled'. This is one of the nine fruits of the Spirit that we read of in Galatians 5:22. It's a hugely important characteristic of any man, never mind those in leadership. Such an individual is prudent, and that comes naturally from him being temperate. Like so much in life, one thing leads to another.

He is a well-disciplined person; someone who can work on his own initiative and is possibly even seen as a self-starter; those around him can delegate stuff to him, leave him to get on with it, for they know he will ultimately deliver the goods. He has a firm handle on life and God's grace has a terrific grip on him. I reckon this person is serious about spiritual realities – he is one who views global events and personal traumas through the lens of eternity. He's not rash in judgment, but thoughtful, earnest, and cautious – he has a steady pair of hands, as it were.

Those in pastoral leadership are expected to be persons who are 'respectable'. We're not talking here about someone who is respectable in today's usage of the word, important though that is; the thought here is one of being orderly. Someone whose life is well-disciplined, he's not scatter-brained when it comes to running his own affairs. Such a person has his finger on the pulse of his own life – his life is not in a mess.

Homer Kent makes the point that 'the ministry is no place for the man whose life is a continual confusion of unaccomplished plans and unorganised activities.' Put simply, there is nothing chaotic about his life or lifestyle; for him, his life is, in a sense, uncluttered, everything is in its proper place. A leader is a man with a tidy mind, not someone who is constantly chasing after misplaced goods.

I'm sure you get the picture that preacher Paul is painting for us in this little section. He continues by informing us that a leader is someone who is 'hospitable'. So important is this virtue, we dare not overlook it. This person has the God-given ability to love strangers – he has a heart for those around him, he is truly a people-person. Even if he doesn't know them, he will show them generous

and gracious hospitality; and, if he does happen to know them, well, he should do it anyway.

The ministry of entertaining others was essential in the early church – there were no hotels or motels by the side of the road, most of the inns were nothing more than upmarket brothels run by unscrupulous individuals. We're talking here about those in leadership having big, open hearts as well as open homes – and that is not an easy thing to do. But, oh, what a tremendous joy and blessing it brings to many when we share our lives and our resources with others in need.

John MacArthur hits the nail squarely on the head when he writes that 'elders are not elevated to a place where they are unapproachable. They are to be available. A pastor's life and home are to be open so that his true character is manifest to all who come there, friend or stranger.'

What a wonderful ministry – I know, I've been on the receiving end of so much of it in the last ten plus years as I have travelled extensively around the UK and further afield. My life has been so enriched by the happy fellowship I've enjoyed with those in local churches who see it as their privilege to serve those on the frontline of ministry. Such folks are worth their weight in gold. According to Paul, that's what those in leadership are supposed to do – I just wish more would do it, as they are missing out big time when they don't.