

**“The Office of Overseer” (1 Timothy 3:1–7)**

**May 27, 2018**

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As a leader goes, so goes a country, a company, a sports team, or any institution or organization. We realize that with our country, which is why we put so much emphasis on who is the president. The last election was only a year and a half ago, and people are still talking about it, but in a year or less, people will start campaigning for the next election in an effort to be the next president. We probably give too much weight to the presidency, blaming or praising him for almost everything that happens in this country. But we realize that if the president is a bad one, the country is in trouble.

The same is true of corporations. A company needs to have a good CEO to thrive. We don't own a house right now, so we have some money invested in stocks. I've used one stock recommendation service to get some tips on how to invest, and one of the ways they evaluate companies is by evaluating their CEOs. A company with a wise and innovative CEO is more promising than one that has an incompetent leader.

The same is true in sports. Today, the Celtics play Game 7 of the Eastern Conference Finals against the Cavaliers. Despite whatever happens today, the Celtics have done better than most people would have imagined, since their star player, Kyrie Irving, has been injured for the last two months and won't play again until next season. The Celtics also acquired another star, Gordon Hayward, last year, but he only played five minutes and scored two points before breaking his ankle. Since he's getting about \$30 million this year, that's a bad investment. Most people credit the Celtics' success to their coach, Brad Stevens. The Patriots have had some great players over the last seventeen years, but if you took away Bill Belichick, I don't how many Super Bowls they would have won.

Leaders are important. And they're important in churches, too. And that's why the Bible has some important things to say about the leaders of churches.

Today, we're continuing our study of 1 Timothy, a letter written by the apostle Paul to his younger associate, Timothy. This book of the Bible teaches us “how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God” (1 Tim. 3:15).<sup>1</sup> Paul had left Timothy

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

in the city of Ephesus, an important city within the Roman Empire. The church there was threatened by the presence of false teachers. So, Paul wrote to Timothy to make sure that Timothy did his best to protect the health of the church. One way to protect the health of the church is to make sure its leaders are healthy.

And that brings us to today's passage, 1 Timothy 3:1–7, which discusses the “office of the overseer.” First, we'll read the passage, and then we'll explore what it and another passage in the Bible say about leaders of the church.

But before we read this, I want to say to those who are visiting, or perhaps those who are not yet Christians: This text of the Bible may not seem like it pertains to your life at all. It is about the nuts and bolts of church life, after all. But what I'll talk about today will give you a sense of what Christianity is all about, why the church is important, and why leaders of a church are important. And perhaps all of that will teach you more about the values of Christianity, the failings of Christians, and why those failings don't mean that Christianity itself has failed.

Without further ado, let's read today's text. Here is 1 Timothy 3:1–7:

<sup>1</sup> The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. <sup>2</sup> Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, <sup>3</sup> not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. <sup>4</sup> He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, <sup>5</sup> for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? <sup>6</sup> He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. <sup>7</sup> Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

I want to ask a few basic questions of this passage. The first one is, what is an overseer? That's not a term used in churches, though it does appear a few times in the Bible. The King James Version translates the Greek word as “bishop.” But when we Protestants think of “bishop,” we think of the Roman Catholic Church, or perhaps the Anglican or Episcopal Church. (The Episcopal Church is named after this Greek word, *episkopos*.) In those churches, a bishop is an authority over several churches in an area. Is that what Paul is talking about?

No. We can see that by comparing a few different passages. Let's look at a very similar passage in another one of Paul's letters, his letter to Titus. In Titus 1:5–9, Paul writes,

<sup>5</sup> This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— <sup>6</sup> if anyone is above

reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. <sup>7</sup> For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, <sup>8</sup> but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. <sup>9</sup> He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

Here Paul tells Titus that he had left him on the island of Crete so that he could appoint elders in every town. Then, after giving a few qualifications of an elder, Paul writes, "For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach." That's what Paul writes in 1 Timothy, too. But Paul had first started by talking of elders, so it seems that overseers are elders. The two words refer to the same office.

Some churches use the word "elder," but some do not. So, we might not be very familiar with this term. It calls to mind older people, though in the Bible an elder was generally the head of a family, not someone who is a senior citizen. And the leaders of churches are not necessarily very old. But the point is that elders are overseers, and overseers are elders. And, before we look at other passages, it's important to see this: Paul told Titus to appoint elders—note, this is plural—in every town—this is singular. That suggests that in every place, perhaps every individual church, there should be multiple elders, or overseers.

Let's continue to look at other passages to figure out what "elder" and "overseer" mean. We'll look more at this passage next week, but in 1 Peter 5, another apostle, Peter, writes,

<sup>1</sup> So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; <sup>3</sup> not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup> And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:1–4).

Peter begins with that same term, "elders." He calls himself "a fellow elder." And then he says, "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight." "Oversight" reminds us of the term "overseer." It's the verb form of the Greek word translated as "overseer." But notice that other verb: shepherd. Now we're getting on familiar ground. The verb could be translated "pastor the flock of God." The word "pastor" comes from a Latin word that means "shepherd."

So, now we're getting somewhere. An overseer is an elder is a pastor. These three terms refer to the same office. That might be confusing, but it's not different than referring to the President as Commander in Chief. Those two terms can be used of the same office. The President is not someone different than the Commander in Chief. Those titles refer to the same person, or the same office. In a similar way, overseer, elder, and shepherd (or pastor) refer to the same office.

We'll also see this in a moment when we look at some of Acts 20. When Paul was traveling back toward Jerusalem, he made a stop in Miletus, on the western coast of the province of Asia Minor, and he called the "elders of the church" of Ephesus to come to him. In part of his speech, Paul says, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." Again, Paul is addressing the elders, and now he says that they are to care, "or shepherd," the flock, because the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. The ESV says "to care for the church," but it really should be "to shepherd the church" (as in the CSB and the NASB; the NIV has something similar). So, the elders are overseers, and they are to shepherd the church.

So, that answers our question. Overseers are elders or, more familiarly, pastors. That is one of two ongoing offices in the church. The other is deacon. That's why Paul mentions both the "overseers" and the "deacons" at the beginning of his letter to the Philippians (Phil. 1:1). It doesn't appear that there are any other ongoing offices in the church. There is no indication that there should be a pope, a head over the whole universal church. There is no mention of ongoing "bishops," who govern all the churches in one city or province. The only priests in the new covenant, the church, are all Christians (1 Pet. 2:9, for example). The multiple levels of hierarchy that one sees in the Catholic Church developed in the centuries after the Bible was written, but they are not themselves part of God's Word to his church.

Now, let's answer a second question: what are the qualifications for an overseer, an elder, or a pastor? Let's go back to 1 Timothy 3. Paul says that "an overseer must be above reproach" (v. 2). This does not mean that a pastor must be sinless or perfect. If that were the case, there would be no pastors! But it means there must be no major moral defects in a pastor. Many commentators believe that what follows in Paul's list provides the definition of what it means to be "above reproach."

Paul says he must be “the husband of one wife,” or, more literally, a “one-woman man.” Some people think this means a pastor must never have been divorced, or that pastor couldn’t remarry if his first wife died. Paul could have used words like “divorce” to describe a pastor’s qualities. But he didn’t. It’s more likely that Paul means a pastor should be faithful to his wife. Divorce in many cases is a sin, but it’s not an unforgivable sin. Yet the pastor must have a track record of being faithful to his wife.

He should also be “sober-minded” and “self-controlled.” That seems self-explanatory. A pastor should be level-headed, with the ability to control emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.

He must be “respectable,” worthy of respecting, as well as “hospitable.” Literally, this means a “lover of strangers.” He must be willing to open his life and his home to new people, which is true of all Christians (Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9).

He also must be “able to teach.” Besides the fact that Paul calls these leaders “overseers,” which suggests what the job is about, this is the qualification in the list that suggests what overseers do. They must be able to teach. Specifically, they must be able to teach God’s Word. As we study other passages related to overseers/elders/pastors, we’ll see that not every one of these is a regular teacher. But every overseer must be *able* to teach. Why is that necessary?

Often, we think of leaders as different from teachers. Think of the Patriots. I don’t know how much Bob Kraft knows about football. I’m sure I wouldn’t want him coaching the Patriots. But he’s the owner and if he wanted, he could fire Bill Belichick. Belichick is more of the teacher. We tend to separate these functions when we think of leadership. But the Bible doesn’t. According to the Bible, the church’s leaders are teachers, even if they aren’t always engaged in teaching. Why is that necessary? Because leaders of a church must lead biblically. They must lead according to what the Bible says. And I have seen that many people don’t know how to interpret the Bible well. That’s why God has given the church some people who can. But it’s often the case that some leaders in a church are not teachers, and that’s probably why many churches are not healthy.

In verse 3, Paul says that an overseer is “not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” Much of that is self-explanatory. A pastor can’t be sober-minded if he is drunk. Violence, or being a very argumentative person, is not what Christianity is about. Gentle does not mean never disagreeing, or never saying a strong word. We can say that Jesus was gentle, but he was not afraid to rebuke, to cry out in a loud voice, or to overturn some

tables and crack a whip to drive sinful practices out of the temple. But being gentle must be the opposite of being violent and quarrelsome. He must be careful how he treats people. He must be patient and gracious. Again, this doesn't mean he puts up with just anything, or puts up with problematic people forever. See all of Paul's letters. He was not afraid to remove people from churches and speak strong words.

A pastor or overseer must not be a "lover of money." I'll speak a bit about this next week, too, but it doesn't hurt to be a bit repetitive. Pastors who are "in it for the money" will be far more likely to do anything to get people into the church, so that the church can grow and more money will come in. Those pastors won't preach unpopular passages. They may not contradict what the Bible says, but they won't preach the fullness of what the Bible says. Though, of course, it may be the case that pastors who are in it for the money change their doctrine so that it matches with what the people want to hear. They may refuse to correct or confront people who are wealthy, because the church might lose a significant donor.

This is true of not just pastors, but all of us. Whatever we love the most will dictate the course of our lives. If we love Jesus most, we'll love truth. We'll obey Jesus' commandments. We'll love God with all our being and we'll love our neighbor as we love ourselves. But if we love money or power more than we love God, we'll be willing to make all kinds of compromises. The same is true if our treasure is comfort or entertainment or a relationship. What we love the most is our object of worship, our functional god. And if we worship anything other than the true God, we'll bend moral rules to keep our god.

The world has many pastors and priests who have compromised in order to please people or to earn money. The world has many priests and pastors who have made sex their god, and have cheated on wives or who have sexually abused children. None of this means Christianity is false. It means that people are sinners, even within the church, and that at any given moment any of us can do what is wrong. That is why we must all be careful to watch what we love the most, what we believe to be true, just as much as we must watch our behaviors. Our desires will dictate our lives. Pastors must love God, and the truth of God, found in God's Word, more than they love pleasing people, earning accolades, or making money.

There are three more things that Paul says about overseers, or elders or pastors. First, a pastor "must manage his own household well." The reason is simple: "if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" This shows that an

overseer is a leader, one who manages the church. If he can't first manage his own home, including his children, why should we expect him to do better with the church? If his children are unruly, if his home is a mess, if his finances are out of order—well, who would want that for the church?

This does not mean that every pastor must have a wife and children. If that were so, Jesus couldn't be a pastor, and neither could Paul! But it's generally expected that pastors will be married and have children. This, too, shows that the Catholic Church is wrong to forbid its leaders to marry. Marriage is a good thing, something that teaches us many lessons about faithfulness and forgiveness and loving someone else when we don't feel like it, or when that person doesn't seem particularly lovable. Having children teaches many lessons, too, and both are gifts from God. A pastor must handle these gifts well if he wants to handle the gift of leading a church well.

In verse 6, Paul says, "He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil." I suppose "recent" might be a bit relative. When the church was young, elders must have been appointed to churches not long after becoming Christians. But the point is that the new converts can be proud of their spirituality, or proud of their doctrine. Life has a way of humbling people and tempering their pride over time, and this is true of pastors, too. It's best for them to have time being led after becoming a Christian instead of jumping into a position of leadership. If not, pastors may become like Satan, whose pride led him to rebel against God and therefore fall into condemnation.

Finally, Paul says that an overseer "must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil." Paul is concerned about the reputation of the church. An overseer who has a bad reputation outside of the church makes the church, and therefore Jesus, look bad. Satan would love nothing more than to destroy the church, to ruin its reputation. So, he has laid many snares, many traps for pastors. Some involve money, some involve marriage and sex, some involve compromising their theology. All lead to a bad reputation for Jesus and his church.

So, those are the basic qualifications for pastors. But, if you think about it, most of these qualities should apply to all Christians. The only one that doesn't is the ability to teach and, if people are single, the descriptions of marriage and a home life. In other words, pastors should be

ideal Christians—not perfect Christians, because there’s no such thing. But they should be model Christians.

These qualities are probably the very opposite of the qualities that the false teachers have. If you read this letter carefully, it’s not hard to see that they were lovers of money (1 Tim. 6:3–10). It’s possible they were sexually promiscuous (2 Tim. 3:6). They were certainly not able to teach, and it seems they were quarreling over foolish things, like myths and genealogies (Tit. 3:9). In order to protect the health of the church, churches first need to have healthy leaders.

Paul knew this well, that’s why he had warned the elders in Ephesus about this several years earlier. We have already asked, “what is an overseer?” and “what are the qualifications of an overseer?” Now we should ask, “what does an overseer do?”

I’ll answer this in more detail next week. But for now, I want us to look at that passage in Acts 20, when Paul addresses the elders of the church in Ephesus. I preached on this a couple of years ago, and you can find the whole series of sermons on Acts online.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, I won’t dig into the details. But I want us to see a few important things in this passage. So, I’ll read Acts 20:17–31:

<sup>17</sup> Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. <sup>18</sup> And when they came to him, he said to them:

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, <sup>19</sup> serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; <sup>20</sup> how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, <sup>21</sup> testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup> And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. <sup>24</sup> But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. <sup>25</sup> And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, <sup>27</sup> for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. <sup>28</sup> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://wbcommunity.org/acts>.

disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.”

I could go on, but for the sake of time, I'll stop there.

I want to point out four things. First, Paul emphasizes his teaching. He says declared “what was profitable . . . the whole counsel of God.” He probably doesn't mean he literally preached the whole Bible. After all, the entire Bible hadn't been written yet. But he taught the fullness of God's plan for his creation. He taught about who God is, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the perfect, eternal, holy, righteous, loving, merciful, gracious, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient deity. He taught that God made the universe for his glory and that he made human beings in his image, to reflect his glory, to represent who he is, to worship him, to rule over the world, and to love and obey him. He also taught that from the beginning human beings have rebelled against God. They have failed to love and trust him. They have rejected his word. In short, they have sinned. But he taught that at the right time, God sent his unique Son, Jesus, who lived a perfect human life and died in place of sinful human beings. Anyone who turns from sin to Jesus can receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

That brings us to the second thing Paul mentions: his message. He taught “the gospel of the grace of God.” He taught “of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” He taught that “the church of God” was “obtained with his own blood.” That verse, verse 28, shows that Jesus is God. And it shows that he redeemed a people through his sacrifice on the cross. He made them his own. Jesus died to pay the penalty for their sin. As a righteous judge, God cannot let the guilty go free without someone paying the penalty for their crimes. Jesus paid that penalty in full on the cross for anyone who would turn to him in faith, trusting that his life, death, and resurrection is what reconciles us to God.

The third thing that Paul says is also found in verse 28: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” He tells the elders to pay attention to themselves. Later in 1 Timothy, Paul tells Timothy, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching” (1 Tim. 4:16). He tells them to shepherd the flock, to care for them. He also says that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers.

The fourth thing Paul says is “be alert.” He says that “fierce wolves” will attack the flock. These “wolves” will include people within the church, even some elders: “from among your own

selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” False teachers, people who “speak twisted things,” can destroy the church. These people may not look fierce at all. They may be the nicest people you know. But anyone who rejects God’s Word, or leads people away from following it, is a “wolf.” People who attack the sheep or who attack a faithful shepherd are wolves.

From this passage in Acts, we get a good sense of what overseers do. They teach God’s Word—the fullness of it, not just popular passages. They care and protect the flock. And they watch out for false teachers or other enemies. Of course, they exercise oversight, too. They lead, teach, and protect.

The reason I spend so much time reading Scripture in my sermons and showing where I get my ideas from is because I want to teach “the whole counsel of God.” Some churches don’t spend a lot of time with Scripture. Some churches focus only on the more “practical” passages, the ones that seem to apply to everyone, not just pastors or people concerned about church leadership. But I think it’s important to teach all of God’s Word to all of God’s people. I think we should view all of God’s world through the lens of all of God’s Word. And that means focusing on the Bible, not spending a lot of time on my opinions or on cute stories.

So, we’ve looked at a lot of Scripture and thought a bit about overseers/elders/pastors. What should we do with this information?

First, I want to speak to anyone who might not be a Christian. Thanks for being here. Today’s passage may not seem to apply at all to you. But I hope it’s given you some insight into what’s important about Christianity. You’ve heard the central message of Christianity: Jesus came to save sinners, people who have been enemies of God. You may not see yourself as an enemy of God, but if you don’t love God more than anything else, and if that isn’t truly apparent in your life, you’re at odds with God. The fact is that all of us start out as rebels. We don’t love, trust, and obey God the way that we should. We have all sinned. And therefore, we deserve condemnation. But God sent his Son, who came willingly, to die on our place, if we would only trust him. I would love to talk to you more about what it means to follow Jesus. Being a Christian doesn’t mean you first have to be perfect. But when we come to Jesus, we must do life God’s way, and that means living the way a model Christian should live. We will not all be pastors, but many of the qualities of a pastor should be apparent in a Christian’s life.

Second, I want us a church to think about what all these passages say. There are two offices of the church: overseer/elder/shepherd and deacon. The two are not the same. They don't perform the same roles. Deacons aren't junior pastors or assistant pastors. Deacons are not shepherds or overseers. We need to have a correct understanding of both offices, and this should be reflected in our by-laws. Right now, they are not. If you look at our by-laws, nowhere in the description of the pastor's role does it include the language of leading, overseeing, shepherding, or watching over. Yet in the description of the deacons, we're told they should "watch over" the congregation and serve as "overseeing" members of committees. I'll have more to say about all of this, but the by-laws of this church are not fully biblical, and therefore, they need to change.

Three, I would like to see this church have multiple overseers/elders/pastors. This does not mean the church has to hire more staff. Many healthy churches that are similar in doctrine have multiple elders, some of whom are paid staff, and others who are lay leaders. They all have the same office, though perhaps they don't all devote as much time to the job. The paid staff do more of the teaching and do more administrative oversight. But all the elders are responsible for shepherding the flock. The role of the deacons is to serve in practical manners, often through physical acts of service, but also through distributing financial aid to those in need. I'll say much more about these roles over the coming weeks. For now, I just want to have us think about that model, because it's biblical.

We should all care about the leadership of the church because the church is "the household of God . . . a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). Being part of God's family means being part of a church. And a healthy church needs faithful leaders. Please pray that I would be a faithful shepherd and that we would all follow the chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ.