

# Leadership among New Testament Christians

Thomas Robinson, *Gifts for Spiritual Leadership 2*, February 25, 2018

## Scriptures for Study

### Romans 12:4-8

<sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many different body parts, and not all the parts have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. <sup>6</sup> We have gifts of grace (*charisma*) that differ according to the grace (*charis*) given to us:

if it's proclaiming encouragement (*propheteia*), in proper relation to faith;

<sup>7</sup> if it's ministry (*diakonia*), in that ministry;

if you're one who teaches (*didaskhein*), in the teaching;

<sup>8</sup> if you're one who exhorts (*parakalein*), in encouraging;

the one who shares resources, in simple generosity;

the one who stewards/leads (*proistanaï*), in diligence;

the one who shows mercy, in gladness.

### 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Cf. Titus 1:5-9

<sup>1</sup> The word is faithful (*pistos*): "If anyone aspires to oversight (*episkopê*), they desire an excellent work. <sup>2</sup> Therefore the overseer/supervisor (*episkopos*) must be without reproach (*anepileptos\**), husband of one wife (\*), moderate in drinking (*nephalios\**), self-controlled (*sophron*), respectable (*kosmios\**), a lover of strangers (*philoxenos*), an able teacher (*didaktikos\**), <sup>3</sup> not addicted to wine (*paroinos\**), not pugnacious (*plektes\**), but gentle/tolerant (*epieikes*), not contentious (*amachos\**), not loving money (*aphilarguros*). <sup>4</sup> being a good steward (*proistanaï*) of their own house (*oikos*), having children in subjection (*hypotage*) with all dignity (*semnotes*). <sup>5</sup> But if anyone does not know how to be a steward (*proistanaï*) of their own house, how will they take care of God's assembly (*ekklesia*)? <sup>6</sup> They must not be a new plant/recent convert (*neophytos\**) in order that they may not, having become puffed up, fall into a judgment (*krima*) of the accuser (*diabolos*). <sup>7</sup> but they must have a good testimony (*martyria*) from those outside in order that they may not fall into a disgrace (*oneidismos*) and a trap of the accuser/prosecutor (*diabolos*).

<sup>8</sup> Servants (*diakonos*) likewise:

dignified (*semnos*), not double-tongued (*dilogos\**), not given to much wine, not greedy for shameful gain (*aischrokerdes\**), <sup>9</sup> holding to the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience (*syneidesis*). <sup>10</sup> And these also must be evaluated (*dokimazein*) first and then let them serve (*diakonein*) if they have no charges against them (*anenkletos*).

<sup>11</sup> Women (servants) (*gyné*) likewise:

dignified (*semnos*), not accusers (*diabolos*), moderate in drinking (*nephalios\**), faithful (*pistos*) in all things.

<sup>12</sup> Let servants (*diakonos*) be

husbands of one wife, being good stewards (*proistanai*) of children and their own houses. <sup>13</sup> For those who have served (*diakonein*) well are gaining a good step forward for themselves and great boldness (*parresia*) in faith that is in Christ Jesus.

## **1 Corinthians 7:32-34**

<sup>32</sup> I want you to be free from anxieties: The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; <sup>33</sup> but he who has married is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, <sup>34</sup> and he is divided. The unmarried woman or one never married....

## **1 Timothy 5:17-18**

<sup>17</sup> Let elders (*presbyteros*) who are good stewards/leaders (*proistanai*) be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard in word (*logos*) and teaching (*didaskalia*). <sup>18</sup> For the scripture says, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," [Deut 25:4; 1Cor 9:9] and, "The worker deserves his pay." [Luke 10:7; 1Cor 9:14]

## **1 Timothy 5:9-10**

<sup>9</sup> Let a widow be selected/enrolled (*katalegein*) when she has reached at least sixty years old, wife of one husband, <sup>10</sup> testified to by good works, if she has nourished children, if she has welcomed strangers, if she has washed feet of holy ones, if she has gone to the aid of those suffering, if she has followed as a disciple in every good work.

## **Hebrews 10:32-34**

<sup>32</sup> But remember ... when you endured a harsh conflict of suffering <sup>33</sup> At times you were publicly exposed to abuse/reproach (*oneidismos*) and afflictions, at other times you came to share with others who were treated in that way. <sup>34</sup> For in fact you shared the sufferings of those in prison, and you accepted the confiscation of your belongings with joy ...

## **Hebrews 13:17**

<sup>17</sup> Have confidence (*peithein*) in those who lead (*hegesthai*) you and defer to them, for they are keeping watch over your lives (*psyché*) as those who give account, in order that they may do this with joy and not groaning, for that would be of no benefit to you.

## The Message

### The Guidance of New Testament Churches

We talked last Sunday about how in our own tradition in Churches of Christ we're seeking the ideal of restoring New Testament Christianity. The New Testament always has a central role of authority. It's the reason that I preach the way I do, focusing on the New Testament and Old Testament scriptures and trying to deal with a piece of text that's substantial so that it controls the discussion rather than just looking at a verse or a phrase, which would be much easier to shape or redirect to my own ideas. And so also this morning, we're looking at extensive texts. It's so much more illuminating when we really submit to the text and let it shape what we need to see. I want to be part of the learning process, always learning from scripture.

### Paul Writes to Rome about Gifts of Grace

In Romans 12:4-10, we hear Paul describing the situation in the church in Rome: various gifts of grace, gifts of *charis*, of God's grace that is unfolding within the church there.

He describes a variety of gifts:

"Prophecy" is the first, or as I translated it, "proclaiming encouragement." I'm using here Paul's description of "prophecy" in 1 Corinthians 14:2 – "The one who prophesies speaks to people for upbuilding and encouragement and consolation."

Then comes "ministry," *diakonia*, or "service." It could be translated either way.

Then follows "teaching" and "exhorting" and "sharing resources" and "being stewards" or "leading" and "showing mercy."

All of these are parts of the ways in which the community functioned. These are the roles of service we find when we go to the New testament seeking its authority for the way to do things in the communities of believers. We rightly want such authorization, because our tradition, our movement, developed in part out of a response to the many struggles over hierarchy and the roles of clergy in many different denominations. We have tried to focus on a very simple, direct understanding of roles of leadership, one that is based in the New Testament.

### Challenges in Reading about Leadership

One of the passages that has been especially important for our understanding is 1 Timothy 3:1-13 because of its list of qualifications. Actually, as we go through the New Testament, there are many passages that are relevant and important, and what one finds is that there's a wide range of descriptions of leadership, different forms of leadership, and different ways that leadership structure is put together.

As you think about different communities in the New Testament, there is not one pattern that really emerges in all the churches as though there were one set way that everyone knew leadership should be set up.

## The Shift of Ordinary Words to Special Religious Words

In our study of these descriptions, a problem that arises is the way the language describing leadership in many of our translations has been turned from everyday language into technical “religious” language. When we read Paul or Acts or Peter or Hebrews, the words they use to describe various roles had an ordinary, everyday meaning to them. In the course of history, the words evolved into a special church meaning. And that change can very much shift what we hear when we read these descriptions.

For example, one of the key words that especially comes up in 1 Timothy 3:1-13, is the word *episkopos*, from which we get “episcopal” and many related words. *Episkopos* in Greek is just as ordinary a word as it can be. It’s the word for the “supervisor” on your job and it’s widely used in that way in Greek. It’s the Greek form *epi-skopos* meaning “over-see.” *Skopos* means “seeing” and *epi* meaning “over.” Thus, “oversee.” In the rich vocabulary of English, if you use an Anglo-Saxon-rooted word you get “overseer.” If you shift it into a Latin-based word, you get “supervisor.” But gradually evolved to be translated as “bishop,” of all things, a thoroughly “church” word rather than “overseer” or “supervisor.” Meanwhile the roles of “bishops” evolved into powerful, wealthy, aristocratic roles in Christendom. And that has had a big effect on what people hear when they hear a text like 1 Timothy 3:1-3.

The word *episkopos* had a long history and the church had a long history evolving structures of leadership in the late Roman empire and through the Middle Ages. But for us who are English-speaking heirs of the Reformation the King James Version of the Bible has been a decisive influence. The KJV was produced and published under King James I of England in 1611. King James was not reared as what we would call an Episcopalian or Anglican, that is, in the Church of England that had just broken away from the Roman Catholic Church. He was reared mostly in Scotland under Puritan leadership, but he didn’t like it. And when he became King of England, he knew that his best support for his strong ideas of the divine right of kings was the whole structure of the bishops in the Anglican Church as over against those presbyters of the Scottish Presbyterians or the Puritan factions of the church. So he insisted that the word bishop be used every single time that the word *episkopos* or *episkopé* comes up in the translation that has his name as part of its nickname, the King James Version of the Bible. So we have the special religious/church word “bishop” coming into the translation in place of the ordinary meaning of the Greek word.

And then there’s the word *presbyteros*, which in Greek just means “an old person,” an “elder.” That’s all it means and it’s one of the commonest concepts in the ancient world for a leadership group. If you think about Rome, its elite governing body was the Senate. What does Senate mean? *Senatus* in Latin means old person. So the Senators are the old people, the old guys. And so also you have over and over again. In Israel, you have a council of elders in every town and city. Later though, the word *presbyteros* evolves as it is used in relation to *episkopos* within a hierarchy. It gradually even becomes transmuted into the word “priest.”

Similarly, *diakonos* in Greek means servant. It's associated with serving tables or serving in any way. When Jesus says, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 8:45), this is the word that he uses in its verbal form. But often, of course, instead of being translated as "servant" or even "minister," the word *diakonos* is transliterated into "deacon," and takes on the role of a title for an office.

### **The Growth of Hierarchy and Turning against Hierarchy**

In the translations that I've provided here, I've tried to use the everyday meanings that these words have. But we live at the end of a long tradition of multifarious transformations of the whole structure of leadership in the church. As the church went through the process of bringing the hierarchical structure of the Roman Empire into the church, it created a pyramid hierarchy in the church that one does not find in the New Testament. In the course of history people have rebelled against that hierarchy and have come up with other kinds of structures. You have controversies between episcopal structures and Presbyterian structures and congregational structures, and others. We in our tradition in Churches of Christ are at the very "low church," informal end of that spectrum. We have wanted to disassemble these hierarchical structures completely.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries the church developed the strict division between clergy and laity. The clergy alone had the right to do certain really important things in church, especially all of the sacraments of the church. By contrast, we, in our tradition, have nothing that only I as the minister of this congregation am permitted do that. Everyone who is a member of this congregation is permitted do all the things in worship that I do. It's only a matter of gifts and preparation that determines ministry.

### **Unfolding Leadership in New Testament Times**

And when we go back into the New Testament, we find various descriptions that give us hints of how the church was organized. The most basic pattern in the ancient world, for Jews, Greeks, and Romans alike, was that idea of having the older people, the older men especially, be the ones that are leaders, the elders. And so when the church first is established in Jerusalem, we see first of all the apostles taking a special role as a kind of elder-leaders, those who've been with Jesus from the start and are particularly commissioned to bear witness to Jesus.

### **The Desire for Inclusive Leadership**

One of the first developments was to try to make the leadership more inclusive, not really ethnically, since all were Jews, but culturally. In Acts 6, when there's a disagreement between those who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic and those who spoke Greek, the leaders of the church, the apostles, guide the church to choose seven people. Seven who can lead the Greek-speaking part of the church. All of them have Greek names and they often get the tag of the first deacons, though that word is never used about them in the New Testament. But as one watches, they lead the Greek-speaking believers, and they're the ones that generally go out from

Jerusalem, away from the Aramaic-speaking center of the church there. They lead the church as it goes into Antioch and Alexandria and the wider world.

### **The Emerging Role of James and the Elders in Jerusalem**

The church in Jerusalem organizes itself around the apostles, as long as they're still there. But as the apostles travel, elders arise, presided over by James, the brother of Jesus, and they become the leaders (as in Acts 15 and 21). When Paul goes to the church in Jerusalem and meets with the elders, James is the one who speaks for the whole group.

### **The Prophets and Teachers in Antioch**

When Paul goes to Antioch, Acts 13 tell us that the church in Antioch is organized around prophets and teachers, and they're the ones who send Paul out on his first missionary journey. Among Paul's early letters, only Philippians uses any of the special terms for leadership that we find later in 1 Timothy. Paul writes to the Philippians greeting them "with their overseers and servants," or "their bishops and deacons" as it is in the King James Version. And that's the only time that we find a reference to "overseers" in Paul's early letters. There's no mention of "elders" at all.

### **The Church in Someone's House**

Many of the assemblies that we find all the way through the New Testament seem to be led by those in whose house they met. So that you have a church in Mary's house in Acts 12:12. Or in Lydia's house in Acts 16:40. Or in Priscilla and Aquila's house in 1 Corinthians 16:19 or Romans 16:3-5. Or in Titius Justus' house in Acts 18:7. Or in Chloe's house as when Paul refers to Chloe's people in 1 Corinthians 1:11. And so on it goes as you read and find such references.

### **The Importance of Gifts of Grace**

Whenever Paul writes about leaders in these early communities, as we've seen, he usually does so in terms of various gifts of grace, the *charismata*, with a range of functions such as one sees in the passage that we've read in Romans 12. He speaks of the gift that God gives to people to proclaim encouragement and consolation to people in *propheteia* "prophecy." The idea of "service" as a function that needs to be expanded within the church, the ideas of "exhorting" and of "teaching" are all important as manifestations of God's gracious gifts. Someone like Paul and probably many others experienced a number of these gifts.

Paul strongly encourages the believers in Corinth, for example, to speak in tongues and prophesy in the most effective ways. In fact, as he talks about "prophecy" in 1 Corinthians 14, he speaks as though he wants everybody in the whole assembly to be prophets. "You can all prophesy one by one," he says, "in order that all may be encouraged." (1 Cor 14:31) And he says, "I speak in tongues more than all of you, but I would rather speak five words with my mind than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Cor 14:18-19). Paul urges them to see that God is working in all of these gifts.

## The Importance of Elders or Shepherds

The term for leadership that is so important to us in our tradition is that of the “elders” of the church. We also use the synonym “shepherds” and occasionally for the sake of being inclusive will use the word “bishop.” It is interesting that Paul never uses the word “elder” (*presbyteros*) in any of his early letters until one gets to 1 Timothy and Titus, which are written near the end of his life. We don’t know exactly when 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy and Titus were written. If the kinds of travels that are described in 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy and Titus are taken into account, they show that these letters come well after the end of the book of Acts. That’s why we don’t know exactly where and when to place them. We don’t know whether Paul went all the way to Spain as he intended and then came back. Was he there a year, two, three? Did he come back after that? Did he suffer setbacks there? We just simply don’t know. He has traveled again in the Aegean area, he’s traveled to Crete, and he finds himself at one point in Nicopolis on the Adriatic and so on. There’s a lot of traveling, and so those events push the date for the letters late in Nero’s reign, after the great persecution in Rome.

Paul’s ministry has been going on a long time. Though Paul in early letters didn’t write about elders, the book of Acts indicates that he used the structure of elders. For example, in Acts 14, as he’s just established a series of churches, he goes through them with Barnabas and appoints elders in every place. These people have just been converted a few weeks ago, but it’s basically the only traditional structure that one can use – take the older people of the community there and appoint them as the ones to hold everything together and to guide the others, because he and Barnabas cannot stay there with them. It’s the best that one can do. It’s a structure that’s well known in so much of society, and people understand it and know how to try to make it work.

But when you read 1 Corinthians with all of the challenges and the problems that are going on in the church in Corinth, it’s striking that there don’t seem to be any elders in the church there. There’s not anybody to whom Paul can say, look, this is your task. Deal with these problems. And when he writes his great letter to the church in Rome, he does not refer to any bishops, elders, or shepherds in the church, though in later times people would argue that the line of Roman bishops went back to Peter.

### The Importance of 1 Timothy 3:1-13 as Pattern

In our own tradition, 1 Timothy 3:1-13 has had a great impact in the way we think of leadership in the church, along with the much smaller version of similar instructions in Titus 1:5-9. These descriptions of elders have functioned, not to put too fine a point on it, as a law for us, rules about how to organize the church.

The text begins with the idea of the oversight: *episkopé* is the term that’s used in 1 Timothy. Later in the book he also speaks of “elders” (*presbyteros*), and he seems to be talking about the very same thing. In Titus, the terms seem to be used interchangeably, *episkopos* and

*presbyteros*. And so he seems actually to make these term interchangeable. It's only later, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, that they get distinguished as separate offices.

In our tradition, this text has become, especially around the selection of elders, a kind of checklist to identify people that are qualified to be elders. It has been much discussed, much debated. I know that every church in the Churches of Christ is independent, but in my experience over many years, this text has served as a very important "pattern." In our tradition we've always looked for patterns, for binding patterns. And these texts were explicit enough and could function as a kind of checklist, so that they tended to override the very many descriptions of leadership in other parts of the New Testament and in other letters of Paul.

### **What is Paul Doing in this Text?**

And so I want for us to think about what's going on in this text, and to ask the question, What is it that Paul intends to do in this text? What's he trying to accomplish by writing this to Timothy? Is the way in which this scripture has often been used, really what Paul is trying to carry through?"

If you don't mind, just go through it with me. In printing out the text for you at the beginning of this message, I've put in parentheses key Greek words and I've marked with an asterisk the words that don't occur anywhere else in the New Testament except in 1 Timothy and Titus in these descriptions of elders. These are not the normal words that Paul had used in earlier letters to describe the virtues or gifts of leadership for the church. Not that they're unrelated to them, but they're a rather distinctive set of words. As you look over the text, you'll see that quite a number of the words have asterisks showing that Paul uses these words only in this distinct context. That's one of those things that has challenged my thinking as I've studied these texts over many years about whether I've really understood what it is that's going on in the text as I've read it in the past.

### **Reading the Text: Overseers**

"The word is faithful," Paul says to Timothy. "If anyone aspires to oversight..." The word's usually translated "the office of a bishop." Or in a more modern translation, "the office of an overseer," but literally it's just *episkopé*, meaning oversight. "...They desire an excellent work."

Therefore, because it's an excellent work, the overseer or supervisor must be "without reproach" (*anepileptos*\*) Paul adds. The very idea of being without reproach sets a very high standard. If taken at face value, it basically excludes all of us here. Including me. This is the only passage where this word occurs in the NT. The list continues:

"Husband of one wife\*",

"moderate in drinking" (that's not the translation we would normally want that but that's what it means) – *nephalios*\*,



self-controlled,  
respectable or admirable (*kosmios\**),  
a lover of strangers,  
an able teacher (*didaktikos\**),  
not addicted to wine,  
not pugnacious (*plektes\**) or could be also translated “not a bully.”  
But gentle or tolerant,  
not contentious (*amachos\**), a “non-fighter” is a bit more literal.  
Not loving money,

Being a good steward. This is one of those words that’s really important here – being a good steward. The Greek *proistanai* is the verb that’s used here and it means literally “to stand before.” A lot of times you’ll find it translated as “ruling” or “governing” and so forth. But if you actually look it up and see how it’s used, it has the idea of being in charge, but it’s often used of slaves who are in charge of some particular thing. They are in charge of the wheat in the house of their master, or they’re in charge of the wine of the master or something like that. They are stewards of a particular thing. So Paul himself used this back in Romans 12:8, “the one who stewards or leads (*proistanai*), in diligence.” Here it means to be a good steward of one’s own house: “Having children in subjection with all dignity. But if anyone does not know how to be steward of their own house, how will they take care of God’s assembly?”

“They must not be a new plant.” This phrase almost always gets translated as “a recent convert,” but literally it’s *neophytos\**, new plant. “In order that they may not, having become puffed up, fall into a judgment of the accuser (*diabolos*). If you translate that with a traditional translation, instead of “accuser,” you get “devil,” and a lot of translations use that here. But *diabolos* has a much wider sense. It just means an accuser or a slanderer or something like that.

But they must have “a good testimony from those outside,” that is non-Christians, the Pagans of the world, “in order that they may not fall into a disgrace or a reproach (*oneidismos*) and the trap of the accuser” again (the *diabolos*).

### **The Description of Servants**

Then the instructions turn to servants (*diakonos*) with a brief description. “Servants likewise:

dignified,  
not double-worded or double-tongued (*dilogos\**),  
not given to much wine,

not greedy for shameful gain,  
holding to the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.

And these also must be evaluated first, and then let them serve if they have no charges against them.” That’s usually not translated that way, but it’s literally what the word means - *anenkletos*. Here *anenkle* means to bring up on charges. Thus, the word means “without any charges against them.”

### **Women Servants**

Then it has the word “women” – *gyné*. “Likewise:

dignified,

not accusers,” – Again the word *diabolos* is used, but here it clearly doesn’t mean “devil.” They are not to be accusers of others.

Moderate in drinking,

faithful in all things.”

Now with regard to the word “women” here, you’ll find a lot of translations translate it as the “wives,” that is, the wives of the deacons. Such a translation has always been a puzzle since nothing is said about the wives of the overseers or elders. There are no qualifications for them, and so it seems strange that there would be qualifications for the wives of the deacons. Most recent commentaries argue that “women” is more likely referring to women who are deacons/servants, people like Phoebe whom we meet in Romans 16:1 and others like her. They had servants who were men and servants who were women as well. And Paul gives for both the same kind of description: dignified, not accusers, moderate in drinking, faithful in all things. And then he comes back to probably the larger group, namely the men who are servants.

“Let them be husbands of one wife.” Why one wife? What does that mean? That’s also always been a puzzle. “Being good stewards of children in their own houses. For those who have served well are gaining a good step forward for themselves and great boldness in faith that is in Christ Jesus.”

### **Listening Carefully to the Text**

This is a remarkable passage, a great passage, and we have so much to learn from it! One reason it’s important is because Paul here is dealing with a very specific, concrete situation. We get to watch what he does in that situation. And we ask ourselves, “What are we to learn from it?” Why was it written the particular way that it was? Why does he say that?

### **Why is This Written to Timothy and Titus?**

And for me the puzzles start with the question, why are these things being written to Timothy and Titus? Timothy had joined Paul’s mission team sixteen to eighteen years before this

letter is written. He's been with Paul for a long time. He's been in situations where Paul dealt with leadership over and over again. So also Titus, maybe even longer. So why does Paul need to write these things to Timothy and Titus, who've been his representatives in really difficult situations, such as dealing with the church in Corinth and other challenging places? Don't they know the kinds of qualifications that leaders should have? They've seen Paul deal with these kinds of things often enough. Why does Paul feel the need to write these things to these men experienced in dealing with problems?

### **Surprising “Qualifications”: Husband of One Wife**

And then there are the surprises along the way in Paul's description of overseers. He gives almost no attention to the spiritual character of the leaders or to their understanding of the Gospel that was so emphasized in his earlier letters. Instead he specifies a surprising qualifications, “the husband of one wife.” Why is that mentioned? Later on in 1 Timothy we find reference to widows who are “the wife of one husband.” (1 Timothy 5:9) That's often been debated in churches that try to use this as a kind of checklist. What does it mean? Is a man disqualified as an elder if his wife dies, for example, and he later remarries? What's the virtue of having only one wife in a world in which so many people so commonly died of diseases and childbirth? Does it mean just one wife at a time? How does being married to only one wife effect anything the overseer does?

But after some study one learns that, well, being husband of one wife was actually something that was quite valued among the Romans. There are lots of tombstones for Romans that highlight that a person was the husband of one wife or wife of one husband. It was something that was highly respected in that world of so much change and so many destroyed marriages. It was a symbol in that society of respect and stability.

### **Why Married?**

But why do the overseers need to be married at all? The question is especially pointed, when we read Paul's own words in 1 Corinthians 7:32-34. There Paul writes to the Corinthians: “I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but he who has married is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife. And he is divided.” Then Paul continues about the unmarried woman just the same. “The unmarried woman or the one who's never married, is concerned about the things of the Lord.” Whereas the married woman is concerned about the things of the world. Is Paul in 1 Timothy in effect saying that he wants to exclude from leadership those who are concerned about the things of the Lord, and to include as leaders only those who are divided and concerned about things of the world? A little strange! What is this about?

### **Why a Good Report from Pagans?**

Then we read another surprising description in verse 7: The overseer must have “a good testimony from those outside.” Why should Pagans need to think well of the elders or overseers

of the church? What's that about? And who is this *diabolos* that Paul refers to? Is this the devil? Is it some other kind of accuser? Or maybe are the two merged together? What kind of danger does Paul have in mind?

## **Discovering the Dangers that Hold the Text Together**

I want to share of way of understanding this important text that has been helpful for me in grasping it and in dealing with all of these questions. As we read all of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus together, we learn that the churches in Ephesus and Crete were faced with dangers on two very important fronts. Two different kinds of danger deeply affected their life.

### **The Danger of Heresy**

One danger is discussed several times throughout the letters. It is the danger of heresies that are penetrating the church. At the beginning of 1 Timothy, Paul says that he left Timothy in Ephesus to deal with these false teachings. Counteracting the heresy was the principal reason for Timothy's work in Ephesus. A principal element of this heresy is that its proponents forbid believers to marry. (1 Timothy 4:3) Several heresies over the next centuries after Paul followed the same prohibition. That prohibition which was pushing its way into the church allows us to see why it was important at this time in these churches for the leaders to be married. It was important for the leaders by their own lives to show that they had not been deluded by the heresy. Other important characteristics of this heresy were that its proponents also denied the resurrection and forbade the eating of certain kinds of foods. (1 Timothy 4:3; 2 Timothy 2:18)

### **The Vulnerability to Persecution**

The second danger, in that particular time, was the growing danger of sporadic persecution from the state. The persecution under Emperor Nero had taken place and the Christians were really hit hard by that – especially the believers in Rome. But that official persecution gave permission for smaller attacks on the community to grow more dangerous and more common in other places. After Nero, the people in the churches were always vulnerable to accusations from pagans and Jews. They were vulnerable to abuse, to disgrace by outsiders.

This is something that Paul knew well. He had faced it. When he and his companions entered the Greek-Roman cities of Philippi or Thessaloniki: they were accused of advocating practices unlawful for Romans to adopt (Acts 16:21). Their accusers said that “These people who have turned the world upside down are coming here also” (Acts 17:6). He and Silas are thrown into the inner prison in Philippi and locked in stocks. In Corinth, there was a major attack on him before the Roman governor. He chose not even to listen to the attack and sent the whole group away from his judgment seat, but still the attack was fearsome. In Ephesus, in Acts 19, you see the same kind of thing. There could so easily be attacks made on Christians for what their pagan neighbors considered their superstitions, their “false” beliefs, and the fact they did not support the state.

We can see the way such dangers became generalized if we look at a passage like Hebrews 10:32-34. The writer urges a group of Christians to remember when they endured a “harsh conflict of suffering. At times you were publicly exposed to reproach.” He uses the word *oneidismos*, the same word Paul uses in 1 Timothy – meaning “abuse” or “reproach.” In other words, charges were brought up against you, and you suffered those charges, those abuses, those reproaches and afflictions. “At other times you came to share with others who were being treated that way. For in fact you shared the sufferings of those in prison, and you accepted the confiscation of your belongings with joy.” He’s describing the kind of danger that seemed to be present all the time since anyone who was angry at a Christian could be an “accuser” (*diabolos*).

Now usually the commentaries on this passage in 1 Timothy tend to reflect on it more in terms later times and the kind of the ongoing life of the church when such dangers did not press in. They hardly imagine the concrete situations that the church faced in that time. So the term *diabolos* is translated as “devil” rather than as an “accuser” or a “prosecutor” who might bring a Christian into judgment in court and cause them to be imprisoned or have their goods confiscated.

When we as readers put ourselves in those early believers’ shoes and feel the dangers they faced, we can understand why it’s important for their leaders to have “good testimony from those outside in order that they may not fall into a charge of reproach” – dangerous within that society – “and the trap of the accuser / prosecutor.” The “devil” can certainly be behind such charges, but the danger has a very visible face for the church community. The face of danger is in their city neighbors, magistrates, and tradespeople who feel threatened and outraged by what they saw as the impious superstition and rejection of the gods by the Christians.

A family could have all their goods confiscated and some of them be sent to prison. That would challenge us pretty quickly, wouldn’t it? If every Sunday when we came to church, we talked about who was arrested this week? Who had all of their goods confiscated this week? Paul is concerned about such things as he writes this letter, and he says that the church needs to have leaders with the kind of respect and standing before outsiders so that they can deal with these dangers.

### **What is Paul Doing? Finding Leaders for Ephesus’ Dangerous Times**

And so we come back to the question: What is Paul doing in this text? Paul writes this to Timothy and Titus on the assumption that they already know the spiritual characteristics of those that should be leaders. They know the understanding of the Gospel that the leaders need to have. Paul doesn’t need to talk about those central things. Rather what he’s talking about in this description are the particular challenges that he sees that these troubled groups in Ephesus and in Crete face and that their leaders must deal with. They face danger and they need leaders who can present a face to the threatening world that can protect the existence of the church, the existence of the community.

Thus they need to be the kind of person that a Roman or a Greek would recognize as an upstanding individual in the society. Have a family, a good family. Husband of one wife, like Romans would put on their own tombstone. They don't get drunk, and they don't fight, and they don't get into brawls or anything like that. They don't bully and they're very peaceable. And they protect the life of the church so that it can thrive. And so that the spiritual gifts that are alive within it really can continue to function.

And so Paul, as he writes this, is writing to the special needs of those situations. The other-worldly heresy in Ephesus that forbade marriage and encouraged various kinds of asceticism apparently continued to grow, and this was a very real problem. In 2 Timothy 1:15, Paul says that practically all the church in the Roman province of Asia, where Ephesus was the capital, had abandoned him. The gospel and the church were under dangerous attack. And Paul is trying to deal with that situation. Our text is part of the guidance that he gives to Timothy in that intense situation.

### **The Impact of Danger on Diversity of Leadership**

In that situation with its external pressures pushing in, the ideas of diversity of leadership, especially in the spiritual gifts of women that Paul had implemented earlier in Corinth, Rome and elsewhere, all are dealt with in a roundabout way. When Paul speaks of the servants or deacons, he speaks of "the women" who have these qualifications as servants, who thus serve as women deacons. I think that it's also very significant that later on in 1 Timothy 5:9-10, we have a special description of "widows" and we have a list of their qualifications. Now widows are by definition women whose husbands have died. Some may be young, but others are mature women – Paul mentions the age of 60 – who are no longer under the legal control of a particular man according to Roman law. Thus they have the legal freedom, perhaps for the first time in their lives, freely to use the spiritual gifts that God has given them and to serve the believers without restraint. And thus, Paul says, if they have reached the age of being elders and have a life of service, then they are enrolled and they are paid by the church, taken care of by the church and they exercise their gifts as widows. Now in Churches of Christ, so far as I know, we don't ever enroll widows like this. These widows are testified to by good works. They've nourished children, welcomed strangers, washed feet of the saints. They've gone to the aid of those suffering, those in prison, those that are going through persecution, confiscation of their goods and so forth. They have followed as disciples in every good work.

And so we see a real flexibility at work within the situation of the church within that time in that place. What we hear when we read the text in its context sounds rather different from the way, in my experience, these passages have traditionally been read among us. Doesn't it? Paul is not giving a universal, every-place, every-time kind of list that we've often read the text to be. This reading helps explain why there are some points on the list that are rather strange and thus have been problems all along the way.

## **Doing What Paul Did in Discerning Leadership**

What I most want us to see is that if we are to restore New Testament Christianity, we need to restore what Paul did in a text like this. Not to take it as a checklist to apply in every situation. What did Paul do? He looked at the situation in Crete and in Ephesus, and he gave guidance to Timothy and Titus about what the particular needs of those churches were. As he thinks from the gospel, as he thinks about care for the people, about deep love for them, about the dangers that they face, he gives them guidance as to how they can discern leadership that will meet the needs of the congregations in Ephesus and Crete.

Restoring the New Testament, restoring the life of the early church is not done by treating this text as a checklist but by studying what Paul did for Ephesus and then doing that for our congregation in New York City. We have that responsibility to evaluate our life together, to evaluate the needs, the challenges, the gifts, the possibilities, the gifts of grace, the gifts of the Spirit that are in our congregation, and take all these things seriously. We have the responsibility of looking at it as clearly as we can. Paul from his story can tell us: There were situations in which he obviously did not try to be quiet. He stirred things up. He turned the world upside down. But the situation in Ephesus is one in which they need people who will be not getting into strife, who are being quiet so that the church under threat can survive. And so these letters to Timothy and Titus speak to a different time and a different place than Paul's letters to Corinth.

### **The Responsibility of Following the New Testament in our time**

And Paul challenges us to take that same responsibility. Think about the gifts that we have, the community we have, the needs we have, the opportunities we have, the ways we can see God working among us. Think about how it is that we can be true to the Good News of what God has done in Jesus, to his incarnation, his teaching, his loving service, his crucifixion, his resurrection, to life in his Kingdom.

Now all of the passages we've studied show that there is a living process that we are engaged in. I want us to think about that very seriously as we think and reflect on our community here in New York City. What does it mean to take the scriptures really seriously? What does it mean live this Gospel?