

Voices: Finding a Christian leader of integrity, Part 1

May 30, 2023

It is no secret: White evangelicals have a leadership problem. The moral deficiencies of some religious superstars have made for splashy headlines, but the truth is many churches have found it difficult to find leaders of integrity.

One might surmise that, in such a context, churches would turn again to 1 Timothy 3:1-7, looking for guidance as they seek to avoid the mistakes of the past. Too often, however, churches only consult such texts when they want to exclude women from their search for a pastor or other ministry position.

Those churches who do look to 1 Timothy 3 often do so in a cursory or excessively literal way. This is unfortunate, for I am convinced many of our leadership problems could be mitigated if we took seriously the counsel of Scripture.

Wanting to lead can be a good thing

Wanting to hold the position described in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 is a worthy aspiration (v. 1). Given our experience in the contemporary church, this fact may not be immediately obvious to everyone. After all, do we really want more people in positions of ecclesiastical leadership who see such positions as their life's ambition?

Perhaps it would help us to remember what pastoral ministry is really about. The language used in 1 Timothy makes it impossible for us to deny church officials have a certain amount of authority.

But Jesus is clear that leadership in the kingdom of God is about service (Mark 10:35-45 and parallels). It is about being the first to follow him, and the first to lay down our lives for him and for our fellow believers.

For those who aspire to this kind of leadership, it is not a sign they are a wolf in sheep's clothing, hoping to satiate their own twisted desires by feeding on God's people. Rather, it is a sign they understand the person and work of Christ.

It is a sign they have lifted their eyes above mere personal safety, comfort or enhancement and have seen exactly what Jesus saw—a world in desperate need.

Sanctified ambition is not enough

A person will not survive as a minister unless he or she has the commitment and the drive to push through the many professional setbacks and personal adversities that come with serving Christ's church.

Nevertheless, 1 Timothy 3 teaches us that desire—even when it is properly directed, structured and constrained—is not enough. We must possess a wide variety of other qualities if we are going to be the kind of “overseers” 1 Timothy describes.

Perhaps that is a significant portion of the problem search committees, ecclesiastical officials and other decision-makers have when they come to our text.

Reading 1 Timothy 3 confronts us with more data than we are able to process. And on top of its sheer volume, some of the data is difficult to interpret, a fact that becomes painfully obvious when one surveys the available English translations of 1 Timothy 3:2.

What we need are some conceptual categories that will help us organize

and analyze the data before us. We need language that makes sense to our modern, scientifically-trained minds, but also resonates with the narratives, experiences and emotions that shape us.

Reputation

The list of qualities required of an “overseer” begins in 1 Timothy 3:2. The note struck there is similar to the one struck in verse 7. In both cases, Paul asserts reputation matters.

The venerable apostle does not explain why a person’s reputation is an important factor to consider when evaluating their fitness for leadership, but it is not hard to guess. Choosing bad leaders reflects poorly on the group.

More to the point, the things a person has done to upset people—either within or outside of the Christian community—may reflect an immaturity—or even a predilection to evil—incompatible with the model of Christian leadership articulated above.

As late-modern people from the Western world, we are not used to thinking in terms of a person’s reputation. Sometimes, people are not what their press clippings indicate, and we do not want to pass by an otherwise qualified candidate on the basis of mere gossip.

These reservations are understandable, and I am not at all certain, in the current legal and social environment, we can appraise a person’s reputation without bias. But Scripture is clear that we need to take seriously a person’s public persona, and our shared experience as evangelicals demonstrates we fail to do so at our own peril.

Disposition

While many ministerial job descriptions focus on the skills a candidate must possess and the tasks he or she must perform, 1 Timothy 3:2-3 focuses mostly on the candidate's disposition. For some readers, the word "disposition" may seem frustratingly vague, but only a term with such a broad meaning can capture the broad array of characteristics enumerated in these verses.

What kind of disposition was Paul looking for in potential overseers? We can describe it as follows:

Emotional stability: Overseers should be aware of their feelings, intuitions and desires, and they should understand how those feelings, intuitions and desires are—or are not—compatible with Christian identity and character. They don't have to be dower, but they should be a source of stability, strength and insight for those around them.

Interpersonal warmth: Hospitality and gentleness are manifestations of a deeper reality—a sincere love for and appreciation of people. Overseers do not have to be extroverts, but they will be called upon again and again to act on the basis of their love for their congregation, their community and humanity as a whole.

Committed to service: Speaking of gentleness, people qualified to be overseers do not resort to the forcefulness of their personality, the superiority of their social status, or physical violence in order to get their way. One would think this would go without saying, but there are examples of church leaders throughout history who were more comfortable throwing a fist or wielding a weapon than they were serving the needy or comforting the weak.

Free of maladaptive coping mechanisms: Every person experiences

trauma, and it can be tempting to cope with that trauma by drowning it in booze. Or we might choose to distract ourselves with illicit pleasures, or satisfy ourselves by the accumulation of money or power. Paul is clear that these patterns of behavior are unacceptable for anyone who wants to be an overseer.

The astute reader may look at the forgoing list and wonder who could meet these qualifications. Perhaps there is a bit of idealism in Paul's description of a qualified candidate for the task of overseeing God's flock.

Perhaps, however, we simply have become too comfortable with our own sin. There is no way our leaders can avoid being "wounded healers," but they won't be able to heal anyone if they don't possess a disposition like their Master's.

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