

Voices: Finding a Christian leader of integrity, Part 2

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In [Part 1](#), we learned it is a good thing to want to lead God's people, so long as one understands what Christian leadership entails. We also learned a good reputation and a good disposition are essential for any overseer.

Now, we will turn our attention to other attributes Paul requires of those who want to do this work.

Skills

Only one skill is mentioned explicitly in 1 Timothy 3:2-3—the ability to teach. It is difficult to know what Paul had in mind when he wrote this part of the list, but it is likely he was thinking about more than a person's ability to be a lecturer who holds people's attention.

Indeed, the context—as open to debate as it is—suggests Paul was focused on whether a person actually knew anything worth teaching.

But what about other skills? Surely Paul knew being an overseer is about more than teaching, right? In response to such questions, we need to remind ourselves Paul was writing to a specific church facing specific problems.

Just like the various lists of spiritual gifts found in the New Testament are not comprehensive, so also this list does not include every quality an overseer will need to possess.

Nevertheless, there also may be something providential in how this list was put together. There are many skills a pastor or other minister will need if

he or she is going to be successful, but fidelity to the word of God—and the ability to communicate that word to others—is chief among them.

Relationship with family

In 1 Timothy 3:4-5, Paul directs attention to a practical means by which people who desire to become overseers can be evaluated.

Paul asserts that overseers should administer the affairs of their household well, and they should have children who obey them. For the apostle, the logic behind this requirement is clear. If someone does not have a healthy family life, why should we trust them to lead the family of God?

One may wonder whether this criterion has any validity in our culture. For one thing, many candidates for the position of overseer do not have children—including my wife and me. Are we to be excluded from this means of Christian service, especially since Paul—as far as we know—was both childless and unmarried?

Moreover, is it really fair to judge people on the basis of their children's behavior? We all know good and faithful people whose children rebel against their leadership and reject the Christian faith. Does that fact, by itself, make them unfit for leadership?

These are serious questions, and they deserve our careful attention. Nevertheless, interpersonal neurobiology and family systems theory have shown there is wisdom in Paul's warning.

Sometimes, the struggles of a family are the proverbial "canary in the coal mine." They are the first sign something may be amiss in a potential candidate's spiritual, emotional or social life.

Before we leave the issue of family, there is a final point that needs to be made. Family order is not enough. The second half of 1 Timothy 3:4—as

translated in the New International Version—indicates this order must be achieved in a way worthy of respect. If this is the proper way to translate this part of the verse, it may be a limit on the exercise of parental power similar to what we find in Ephesians 6:4.

Experience has taught the church the wisdom of such restrictions, for some will resort to the most barbaric means to present a particular version of themselves to the public and thus to gain access to the prestige and power of the pastorate.

Longevity in the faith

In 1 Timothy 3:6, Paul raises another practical concern. He asserts a new convert should not be named as an overseer. He contends such a rapid promotion could lead the new convert to become arrogant, and his concern was well-founded.

But there is at least one more reason we should refrain from naming new converts as overseers. It takes a long time to learn how to walk with Jesus. We cannot expect someone who has been a believer for only a few months to understand the way of the disciple, much less live it with any level of proficiency.

Paul's own life bears witness to the importance of taking time to become all God wants us to be (see Acts 9:1-30; 11:19-30; Galatians 1:11-2:14). Paul began witnessing to the truthfulness of the gospel as soon as he was called to faith by the risen Christ, but it was more than a decade until Barnabas recruited him to help lead the church at Antioch.

If Paul needed time to grow into his newfound faith in Jesus—in spite of his rigorous preparation as a biblical scholar and his obvious intellectual ability—then so do we.

The importance of Paul's advice

Restructuring the values of decision-makers so they conform more closely to the biblical witness undoubtedly will help churches recruit and develop better leaders. It not only gives search committees a clear vision of what they ought to be looking for in applicants for leadership positions, but it challenges churches to confront how their values have been misshapen by their culture and their desire to be comfortable.

Perhaps we ought to make one more observation at this point. There is no room for an entitlement mentality in our selection of overseers. No one is owed the honor of being a church leader, no matter how gifted they are or how badly they want to do the work.

Assisting Christ in the shepherding of his flock is serious business, and it requires those of us who do that work to be men and women of character, commitment and competence.

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