

The Qualifications of an Overseer  
1 Timothy 3:1-7

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## 1. Introduction

1 Timothy 3:1-7 has been proven throughout the church age to be an invaluable tool for understanding who should lead the church. Truly, no other New Testament book has more to say on the subject than 1 Timothy. Given the author and setting of this pastoral epistle it is understandable why so much would be explained herein about the office of elder. Paul, the self-ascribed author is writing to Timothy, a young pastor whom he has appointed to minister in Ephesus with the burgeoning church in that region (1 Tim 1:1-3). Written around A.D. 62, Paul is addressing a church fraught with heresy and doctrinal confusion. This was primarily due to the deception of Judaizers as evidenced in the text by those wanting to be “teachers of the law” consulting “myths and endless genealogies” (1 Tim 1:4, 7).<sup>1</sup> Paul is also nearing the end of his life, so sound doctrine and strong leadership for the church moving forward was of utmost importance to him. For these reasons, “Paul’s solution to the problem is the appointment of church leaders especially qualified to address the heresies spreading in the church.”<sup>2</sup>

The themes of false teaching and healthy church life are juxtaposed throughout the entirety of 1 Timothy. The book begins with Timothy’s charge to confront false teaching (ch. 1), shifts to the proper functioning of the church (ch. 2-3), returns to characteristics of false teaching (ch. 4), shifts back to proper functioning of the church (ch. 5), and ends with a similar charge to confront false teaching (ch. 6). 1 Timothy 3:1-7, found in the first section of proper church functioning, is structured as follows:

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<sup>1</sup>Frank E. Gaebelin, J. D. Douglas, Walter C. Kaiser, Bruce K. Waltke, Ralph H. Alexander, James Montgomery Boice, Merrill C. Tenney, and Richard P. Polcyn, ed, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible (Ephesians-Philemon), Vol. 11. 12 vols* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978) 346.

<sup>2</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 606.

- I. Introduction to overseers (3:1)
- II. Personal characteristics of overseers (3:2-3)
- III. Family life of overseers (3:4-5)
- IV. Snares of the devil for overseers (3:6-7)

## 2. Exact Translation

<sup>1</sup>The saying<sup>a</sup> is trustworthy. If someone aspires to the office of overseer, he greatly desires a good work.

<sup>2</sup>Therefore the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, honorable, hospitable, and skillful at teaching,

<sup>3</sup>not a drunkard, not violent, but gentle, peaceable, not a lover of money,

<sup>4</sup>one who manages his own household well himself, having children in submission, with all dignity

<sup>5</sup>(but if someone does not know how to manage his own family, how will he care for God's church?)

<sup>6</sup>He must not be newly converted, so that he may not become puffed up and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

<sup>7</sup>And it is also necessary to have a good witness from those outside, so that he may not fall into disgrace, a trap of the devil.

<sup>a</sup>This is the only text critical issue of this passage, and it is an [A] certainty, so I maintain the UBS ruling

## 3. Exegesis

1 Timothy 3:1 begins with the phrase, "the saying is trustworthy," which could either be the conclusion of chapter two or the beginning of chapter three. Paul uses this phrase four other times in the pastoral epistles and it most often provides a transition in thought, placing emphasis on what is about to come, and so it is in this case. Paul is transitioning his thoughts, having just explained the role of women in the church he now moves on to the qualifications of elders, a very notable and weighty matter.

The next issue in 3:1 that must be addressed is the meaning behind the word *ἐπίσκοπος*. This word, typically translated either bishop or overseer, carries with it the question of exactly

which office Paul is referring to. Paul also uses a similar word, πρεσβύτερος, to denote the office of elder. Some scholars such as Bavinck<sup>3</sup> see the textual evidence for bishop and elder to be two distinct offices, the former with authority over the latter. However in Acts 20, verses 17 and 28, Luke uses the two terms interchangeably in describing a group of church leaders from Ephesus, coincidentally being the same church that Paul is addressing in 1 Timothy. Similarly it seems that if the two were separate offices, Paul would have addressed both in his discussion of qualifications for church leaders. It must be concluded then that the office of overseer and the office of elder are two titles for the same role, that of shepherd to the flock.

Finally it is worth noting that ἐπιθυμεῖ, translated “greatly desires” can also be translated lust<sup>4</sup> according to the DBL. In Matthew 5:28, this word is used for the lust that grabs a man’s heart as he breaks the seventh commandment. Paul could have picked many words of duty or obligation to describe the call of an overseer, but he chooses a word of deep, almost uncontrollable feeling instead. The semantic domain of this word allows for an interpretation that an uncontrollable feeling should grip the heart of those called to this noble office, and a good work it is indeed.

1 Timothy 3:2 then reminds the aspiring overseer that this deep desire should not be rash, for as Calvin notes, “Ignorance is always rash,” but instead they “should carefully consider with themselves, whether or not they were able to bear so heavy a burden.”<sup>5</sup> The first of fifteen qualifications is mentioned in verse 2: above reproach. Scholars suggest that this, being the first

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<sup>3</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume 4: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, Edited by John Bolt, translated by John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 341-342.

<sup>4</sup> James A. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*, (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.)

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon. Vol. XXI.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) 74.

of the qualities, is meant to be a summary for the entire list denoting that if any of the other fourteen are found to be in question then the first has been breached as well.<sup>6</sup> The husband of one wife defies polygamy, practiced only within Palestine at the time, and protects against secret adultery and bigamy as well. Furthermore, being a faithful husband would have done well to oppose the false teachers in Ephesus who forbade marriage (4:3).<sup>7</sup>

The final five qualities found in verse 2 are all adjectives marking the qualities of an overseer. They are presented in the Greek text in quick succession with no punctuation between them, increasing the weight that a candidate should feel in regards to what is required of their character. The first, *νηφάλιον*, or temperate, is only used in Biblical text to describe the conduct of men in church leadership (1 Tim 3:11, Titus 2:2). While it does seem to have the careful use of alcohol in mind, the meaning of the word can also be “clear-headed”, idiomatic for the opposite of a drunken state of mind.<sup>8</sup> Second, *σώφρονα* or self-controlled, is yet another word only used in the pastoral epistles of 1 Timothy and Titus to describe godly men and women, meaning sensible.<sup>9</sup> Third, *κόσμιον* or honorable is only found in 1 Timothy in regards to both men and women in the church. This word meaning orderly is used of women in chapter 2 to mean modest and of men in chapter 3 to mean respectable. Fourth, *φιλόξενον* or hospitable carries with it some historical context. In the ancient world, inns also functioned as brothels and

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<sup>6</sup> Frank E. Gaebelin, J. D. Douglas, Walter C. Kaiser, Bruce K. Waltke, Ralph H. Alexander, James Montgomery Boice, Merrill C. Tenney, and Richard P. Polcyn, ed, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible (Ephesians-Philemon), Vol. 11. 12 vols* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978) 364.

<sup>7</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 612.

<sup>8</sup> J. P. Louw & E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

were unfit for godly people to dwell in. In addition, widespread persecution sometimes lead Christians to be frequently on the move.<sup>10</sup> Therefore hospitality became an early Christian virtue not only because of its politeness but also because of its sheer necessity. Finally, διδακτικόν or able to teach is only found in 1 and 2 Timothy and is yet again a characteristic unique to the specific office of overseer. Since right doctrine was such a ripe issue for Paul, the need for men apt to teach was paramount. All of these characteristics together begin to set a foundation of the character becoming of an overseer.

1 Timothy 3:3 shifts primarily from what an overseer should be to what he shouldn't be. Five more adjectives are presented in the same fast pace as verse 2, continuing the succession. Also similar to verse 2, the majority of these adjectives are only used in the pastoral epistles in discussions of church leadership. The first two translated “not a drunkard” and “not violent” are connected, evidenced by the lack of punctuation between them, in that the former leads to the latter. A drunkard here literally means someone who “lingers with the cup” and such a person is often prone to violence as well.<sup>11</sup> Both of these words are then contrasted with their very antithesis, gentleness and peacefulness.<sup>12</sup> The Greek word translated “gentleness” is defined as “not quarrelsome but forbearing” and “peacefulness” literally means “lacking conflict.”<sup>13</sup>

Violence is produced by forgiving little and quarreling much, while forgiving much leads to

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<sup>10</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 612.

<sup>11</sup> Frank E. Gaebel, J. D. Douglas, Walter C. Kaiser, Bruce K. Waltke, Ralph H. Alexander, James Montgomery Boice, Merrill C. Tenney, and Richard P. Polcyn, ed, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible (Ephesians-Philemon), Vol. 11. 12 vols* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978) 364-365.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon. Vol. XXI.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) 81-82.

<sup>13</sup> J. P. Louw & E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996).

quarreling little. Finally this verse warns against a primary issue that causes contention and quarrel, the love of money. The contrasts drawn between these characteristics emphasize a struggle common to men but is most unbecoming of a church leader, in particular one who will have much conflict and little money.

1 Timothy 3:4 transitions from personal characteristics of overseers to the man's family life and slows down considerably to explain the implications of these qualities. Contextually, family in the ancient world was often viewed as a microcosm of society and leaders were often weighed based on their ability to care for their family well.<sup>14</sup> "To manage" or προϊστάμενον means "to so influence others as to cause them to follow a recommended course of action."<sup>15</sup> A related question arises in this verse as to the placement of the phrase μετὰ πάσης σεμνότητος or "with all dignity," as a modifier of the man's parenting or the child's obedience. Because the definition of σεμνότητος is "dignity leading to respect," I agree with the ESV and NAC Commentary that it should be used "as a description of the overseer's manner in the discipline of his children."<sup>16</sup> This evidence all points to the primary thrust of verse 4, that leadership in the home and in the church is based more on winsome guidance than oppressive dictatorship.

1 Timothy 3:5 takes the argument one step further in clearly defining the link between leadership at home and in the church using a lesser to greater argument common among Jewish writers. Since a home is like a little church, if you can't be trusted with little you won't be trusted with much. Again emphasizing the type of church leadership being advocated by Paul,

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<sup>14</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 613.

<sup>15</sup> J. P. Louw & E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> T. D. Lea & H. P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus (Vol. 34)*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992) 112.

the verb ἐπιμελήσεται used in “care for God’s church” is the same verb used twice in Luke to explain the way the Good Samaritan sacrificially loved the dying man on the side of the road (Luke 10:34, 35). In the same way that Paul speaks of husbands loving their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Eph 5:25), right leadership in the church is done after the example of the head of the church, Jesus Christ.

1 Timothy 3:6 begins the last section of this passage: snares of the devil for overseers. It maintains the same pace as the previous section thus continuing to methodically explain the reasons for these cautions. The first snare is that of pride. A new convert, νεόφυτον, literally someone who is “newly planted,”<sup>17</sup> whose roots are not deep in fertile soil yet, are in danger of thinking “they could fly beyond the clouds.”<sup>18</sup> In the time Paul was writing to Timothy there were many men of great aptitude and skill being converted to Christianity but Paul knew that “haughtiness and ambition [would] drive them headlong” into foolish confidence.<sup>19</sup> This same haughtiness is what Satan is guilty of as he has great aptitude and power but is bent towards his own purposes, not the glory of God. Therefore the somewhat ambiguous genitive διαβόλου should be taken as subjective, meaning the same judgment that the devil is under will be the consequence for any such pride found in an overseer.

1 Timothy 3:7 brings about yet another snare of the devil for overseers: disgrace. The characteristic that began this passage, being above reproach, now creates a bookend with its antonym, public shame. To have a good witness, μαρτυρίαν καλήν ἔχειν, means for a person to

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<sup>17</sup> J. P. Louw & E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon. Vol. XXI.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) 84.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

be evaluated in terms of their conduct and found favorable.<sup>20</sup> A better translation of τῶν ἑξωθεν is a figurative extension of the adverb meaning outsider.<sup>21</sup> Christians are constantly being watched by a world confounded with their worldview. Therefore it is Paul's astute observation that an overseer represents the church and it should be his goal to live in such a way that "even unbelievers themselves shall be constrained to acknowledge him to be a good man,"<sup>22</sup> thereby upholding the aforementioned "above reproach" characteristic. If a concerted effort is not made in this direction, it could result in ὀνειδισμὸν, defined as being spoken of in a disparaging manner, even if unjustified.<sup>23</sup> The meaning of this word denotes that even a small infraction of an overseer's witness could result in an unjustified backlash of gossip being thrown out of proportion. This certainly seems like something set up as a παγίδα τοῦ διαβόλου, the objective genitive phrase denoting a trap that the devil has deliberately set and is waiting for the overseer to fall into to ruin their ministry.

#### 4. Final Translation

<sup>1</sup>The saying<sup>a</sup> is trustworthy. If someone aspires to the office of overseer, he greatly desires a good work.

<sup>2</sup>Therefore the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, and skillful at teaching,

<sup>3</sup>not a drunkard, not violent, but forbearing, peaceable, not a lover of money,

<sup>4</sup>one who manages his own household well, with all dignity having children in submission,

<sup>5</sup>(but if someone does not know how to manage his own family, how will he care for

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<sup>20</sup> J. P. Louw & E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon. Vol. XXI.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) 84.

<sup>23</sup> J. P. Louw & E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996).

God's church?)

<sup>6</sup>He must not be newly converted, so that he may not become puffed up and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

<sup>7</sup>And it is also necessary to have a good witness by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, a trap of the devil.

<sup>a</sup>This is the only text critical issue of this passage, and it is an [A] certainty, so I maintain the UBS ruling

## 5. Observations

First, it is surprising that the great majority of qualification for the office of overseer are character traits not skill proficiencies. In popular culture today, even in church culture, we can tend to hone in on the skills necessary to be a successful leader. Millions of dollars have been made on books touting the 10 habits of great leaders. Pastors are assessed far more frequently on their work output than their character output. Paul is calling the church back to the foundation of effective pastoral ministry: godly character. A sacrificial love for people and a tempered heart will make for a much better shepherd than one with many vocational skills. As Calvin says, “Only those are to be chosen who are of sound doctrine and a holy life.”<sup>24</sup> Personally, I am consistently guilty of finding the validity of my call in the effectiveness of my work rather than the nature of my character. I rely on my natural proficiencies to “get the job done” as opposed to relying on the sufficiency of Christ to work power in my weakness (2 Cor 12:9). This both encourages and convicts me that my reason for being a pastor is not based on how much I can do for God, but how much he is doing in me. I pray that this seed would grow in my heart over time and bear the fruit of a heart that would overflow into the lives of others through sacrificial love and humble integrity.

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<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, Vol. 2. 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1063.

Second, it is notable how many of the character traits have to do with interpersonal relationships. Being above reproach and a good witness means that our relationships with non-believers should be vibrant and active. Being self-controlled, respectable, not violent or quarrelsome but forbearing and peaceable makes forgiving, bearing with one another, and conflict resolution great necessities. Certainly being the husband of one wife and managing a household and children with dignity heightens the importance of caring for one's family in the midst of the rigors of daily life and the hurt that often comes by those closest to you. All of this seems to be summarized in the word "care" used to describe the overseers work in the church like the Good Samaritans work with the wounded traveler. There is a sacrificial love for people that is at the center of a call to pastoral ministry. Personally I see both my great failures and great opportunities in this call. I do believe I am gifted relationally and I see the work of Christ as the basis for my love, but I also see my daily failures of love, especially with my family, as reason to realign my heart to what is truly important.

Finally, the rapid succession of character traits, the uniqueness of those descriptive adjectives to the New Testament, and the implications of the introducing verse noting the "good work" of the overseer brings a weightiness to bear on the call to the office. Calvin points out: "It is no light matter to be a representative of the Son of God, in discharging an office of such magnitude, the object of which is to erect and extend the kingdom of God, to procure the salvation of those which the Lord himself hath purchased with his own blood, and to govern the church, which is God's inheritance."<sup>25</sup> Calvin also observes that the purpose of the introductory verses is to cause those who believe themselves to be called into service to take pause and assess

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<sup>25</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon. Vol. XXI.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) 74.

themselves in light of the burden of the office. Through this long process of candidacy, internship, licensure, and now ordination, even in the writing of this paper, I have been pressed to make an honest assessment of my call in light of the trepidation with which it deserves to be approached. Nevertheless, with each rigor completed I only grow more to “greatly desire” the “good work” that it will be to shepherd the flock of God’s people and I hope and pray for this call to be confirmed and sealed for God’s glory and my joy.

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