

**“The Noble Task of Leadership”**  
**1 Timothy 3:1-16**  
**September 27, 2009**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The chapter before us today contains Paul’s primary strategy for bringing order back to the chaotic and disordered church in Ephesus. Remember that this church had fallen into some serious false doctrine, leading to numerous breakdowns in the order that should have characterized the church. Things were getting so bad that unbelievers were hearing about these troubles, with the result that the gospel itself became tarnished. Though Paul was unable to be there to set things straight, he had a strategy for doing so. Leadership would be the key. His young protégé Timothy would be a leader, and he would help raise up other leaders. It would be these leaders who would be used of God to restore health to the church.

Leadership has always been the defining element in the church. As go the leaders in the church, so goes the church itself. I was reading this week an interview with Wayne Pederson, president of a mission organization known as HCJB Global. When asked why his organization has recently changed their emphasis to that of leadership training, Pederson replied, “It’s taken us 200 years of missiology to learn this, but we are much more effective in missions by developing leadership among local believers who know the language to produce local media and health-care ministries.”

Paul begins this discussion of leaders with another of his trustworthy sayings. **“If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task”** (v. 1). Church leaders are noblemen in the best sense of that word, engaged in the noble task of leading the institution that God came down to establish in order to bring his reign of peace throughout the world. Church leadership is honorable because the church is honorable. Of course, this work is not always viewed as noble or honorable, even among those within the church. We sometimes think of church leadership as something to be avoided, rather than an honor to which one aspires. God says it’s a noble task. If it is, then we need to be careful in selecting leaders. Most of this chapter addresses the issue of the qualifications needed for those occupying offices of leadership in the church. And it is a noble task to lead the church because of the institution being led, the church that Jesus has bought with his own blood. In our second point, we are going to look at the honorable nature of the church.

**I. Church Leaders**

There are two church offices spoken of in this passage. One is called the “overseer” and the other the “deacon.” It is almost certain that these overseers are just another name for elders. For example, in Acts 20, we read that Paul called together the “elders” of the church Ephesus and said to them, **“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”** (20:17, 28). These two offices, elder and deacon, are the same two and the only two we have in our church. Our elders constitute the Session of the church. Elders are charged with the task of leading the church through the ministry of the Word and prayer. Deacons are charged with responsibility for the deed ministry of the church.

One of the striking things about this passage is that there is very little information about the duties of each office. Almost all the attention is given instead to a description of the character of the leaders. I think the reason for this is clear. The duties and skills of leadership can be acquired in a relatively short period of time, whereas character takes much longer to develop, and never develops in many. Furthermore, character flaws within the leadership are devastating to the whole church, while the lack of skills will be less harmful and more easily remedied. So when the church selects its officers, it is to value character more highly than anything else.

We won’t have time to look at all the character qualities listed here, but let’s look at a few of them. First, we are told that he must be **“above reproach”** (v. 2). Obviously, this doesn’t mean that he is to be perfect. Rather, it means one who is trustworthy. If you had five hundred dollars cash that you wanted to give to the church, but couldn’t be present to give it yourself and needed to find someone to give it in your place, you would want to find someone “above reproach” to be your courier. This is a person for whom you would have every confidence that the entire five hundred dollars would find its way into the church offering. One who is beyond reproach acts in a trustworthy manner even when he thinks no one is looking.

Another qualification is that of being “sober-minded” (v. 2). Some translate this “temperate.” It means to be clear-headed and realistic. I find that it takes a mature person to be sober-minded. One of the marks of this maturity that I look for is to be able to deal with the reality that is rather than living in the unrealistic world of reality as we want it to be. For example, a married couple comes to you for counseling. The husband says to you that their problem as a couple is the behavior of the wife. As you talk to them, you find out that what he really wants is for you to help him change his wife. Among other things, this husband is not being sober-minded. He is living in unreality, in the reality he wants there to be rather than the reality that is. Anger will be one of the qualities of living in his unreality, because he will be angry at his wife for not cooperating with his agenda for her life. And he will be angry at his counselor for not helping him in his program to change his wife. A sober-minded husband should not be asking, “How can I change my wife”, but “How would

God have me to love the wife he has given me?” Instead of anger, this response breeds faith and humility. Ironically, if in fact his wife does need to change, this sober-minded and humble approach make such change more likely.

Several of these verses seek to prepare the leader for the risks that are inherent in a leadership role in the church. For example, **“He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil”** (v. 6). Pride does to a church and a church leader what termites do to a house—secretly destroy it. If a church begins to be impressed with itself, it is in serious trouble. The termites have eaten its foundation and it will soon fall. A church is protected from this through having humble men in positions of leadership.

Another risk of church leadership is the one inherent in all leadership. Leaders have to lead, and almost always will not have adequate input to do so with certainty. The word “manage” (v. 4-5) is the one Paul uses for leadership. It means to rule and to care for. Church leaders are to care for people through leading them. Anyone who has ever stepped forth to lead knows about the risks of leadership. A leader has to make decisions about future directions, and none of us knows the future. To be a leader is to accept this responsibility. The contrast to this is the kind of passivity symbolized to me in a sports analogy. I sometimes turn my radio dial to call-in sports shows as I am driving around town. Almost all the callers on these shows are men, and many of them are quick to criticize some player or coach. Such criticism is much easier than actually playing. Anyone can watch and critique. It is far safer and easier to sit on the sidelines and watch others lead, all the while pretending that we could do it better than they. Leaders have to get in the game and actually lead, putting up with the criticisms from the spectators when they misstep, as they certainly will at times. This risk takes us to God, trusting in him as our leader, the one who never falters and the one who is full of grace for us when we do.

## **II. The Church They Lead**

What gives nobility to church leadership is the nobility of the church. Our task is noble because the institution we lead is noble. In the last verses of this chapter, Paul describes the church with three different phrases. First, the church is called “the household of God” (v. 15). A household is a family that lives together. God is the Head of the family, and we are brothers and sisters together in this family. A family is a place of growth and nourishment, and the church is designed to be precisely that for us. And in most families, everyone has duties to perform. There is dignity in serving in the church, no matter how small the duty you perform. It was the duty of the Levites in the Old Testament to take care of the tabernacle. While Israel was in the wilderness, the camp would move from time to time, and the Levites were responsible for the taking down and setting up of the tabernacle. Every last detail was thought of. The

tabernacle is just a tent, and tents have such things as frames and pegs. The clan of Merari was assigned the duty of carrying these things. Numbers 4 lists their duties. **“And this is what they are charged to carry, as the whole of their service in the tent of meeting: the frames of the tabernacle, with its bars, pillars, and bases, and the pillars around the court with their bases, pegs, and cords”** (v. 31-32). Imagine an individual member of this clan whose duty was to carry a tent peg. When viewed in isolation, the carrying of a tent peg doesn't seem to have much significance. But when the context is considered, and it is remembered that this is a tent peg anchoring the tabernacle of God, everything changes. Our duties in the household of God have significance not in themselves, but in their context of serving God himself.

Second, we are the “church of the living God” (v. 15). When the Bible uses the phrase “the living God,” it means to distinguish God from lifeless idols. He is not dead, but active and lively. And he alone is God. And where does this living God choose to live? Amazingly, he stoops to live in the church. Just as he chose to live in the Old Testament tabernacle and then the temple, so he now chooses to live in the church, for **“we are the temple of the living God”** (2 Cor. 6:16). Let me mention two applications of this truth before we move on. First, when we gather for worship each week, we need to remember that God has chosen to live among us. We should expect to find him, not in this building but in the presence of his people gathered. To be bored in church is to fail to perceive this reality.

A second application is to challenge the attitude of anti-institutionalism that sometimes exists even among Christians. This attitude believes that any institution, including the visible church, is inherently bad, and what really matters are individual relationships with other people and with God. I think this contrast between the church and relationships is a false contrast, because the two are designed to support one another. Individual relationships are strengthened as the church is strengthened, and the church is strengthened as relationships are strengthened. Imagine a group of one-hundred people sailing across the ocean on a large sailboat. Everyone begins enjoying one another so much that no one bothers to mind the condition of the ship or even where it's headed. A few people understand that the condition of everyone on board depends on the health of the boat itself and its ability to remain seaworthy. But when they ask others for help in doing such things as mending the sails and keeping the ropes in good shape, most everyone else on board tells them they are wasting their time with such matters. The really important thing, they say, is to enjoy the journey. The church is very much like that ship of which we are all onboard. While it would be wrong to focus only on its condition while ignoring the relationships among the passengers, it would be destructive to all on board to so ignore the ship that it loses its seaworthiness. To be anti-institutional with regard to the church is to attack the very thing that God has chosen to be our ship of refuge during our journey through this life.

Third, the church is the **“pillar and buttress of the truth.”** Two architectural terms are used here. The word translated “buttress” may mean either foundation or buttress or bulwark. Regardless of whether the translation should be foundation or buttress, both serve to stabilize a building. When the foundation becomes unstable, the whole building will soon fall into ruin. One of the chief duties of the church is to protect this truth against all heresy and unbelief. Foundations are not glorious parts of buildings, and the defense of the truth is often not the most glorious work. But it is essential work, and today we must protect God’s truth against the relativism that is washing over our culture. Not only is the church the foundation of truth, but also the pillar. The pillars of a building hold up the roof and display the splendor of the building. The church is not to defend the truth in such a way that makes people hate the truth. Unfortunately, that has been the case from time to time. We are both to defend it and to beautify it.

How do we beautify the church? Paul tells us in verse 16. **“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness.”** A mystery is something that was hidden previously but has now been revealed. The mystery concerns the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We beautify the truth by declaring the greatness of Jesus. I would like for us to consider how we are to do that as we move into the Lord’s Supper.

## **CONCLUSION:**

One way of declaring the greatness of one’s deity was very familiar to Paul and the Ephesian church. When Christianity was first introduced to Ephesus, those who worshipped other gods felt threatened and stirred up a riot. During this riot, the worshippers of the goddess Artemis shouted in unison for two whole hours, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19:34). I find that when someone has to declare something too much, it usually indicates that the declaration is empty. Several weeks ago someone said to me when the topic of age came up, “Oh Brad, you’re still a young man.” No one ever said that to me when I was actually a young man because it was obvious that I was a young man. When a goddess has to propped up with two hours of shouting her greatness, it indicates that she is not in fact great. The best way we can beautify the truth of Jesus’ greatness is not to shout it for two hours, but to appeal to his greatness. The greatness of a miracle medicine that will heal your body is best seen not by putting it on a trophy case in your house and declaring its greatness, but by using it to bring healing. As we partake of the Lord’s Supper, let us take this medicine Jesus provides us here, the medicine of the gospel. It is by this medicine that sinners like us are forgiven and invited into friendship with God.