

Christian Relationships: Church Leadership Part 2

Peter E. Childs - MSH 3/10/10

1 Timothy 3:1-13

Overseers and Deacons

¹Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. ²Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. ⁵(If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) ⁶He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. ⁷He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Titus 1: 5-9

⁵The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. ⁶An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. ⁷Since an overseer^[b] is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁸Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. ⁹He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

Introduction

Last time we looked at the descriptions of church leaders in the New Testament and we saw that there were two types of leaders: elders (also known as overseers and shepherds or pastors) and deacons (or servants). It is essential that the local church have recognised, properly qualified leaders and this is part of God's provision for a healthy church. What I want to do today is to look more closely at the qualifications for leadership in the early church. One of the big questions, of course, is whether leadership is confined solely to men. This is a controversial and divisive issue and there are totally opposite views even among evangelicals: some would see church leadership as only open to men; others would see leadership as also open to women in the modern world. Each view has its protagonists and its own organisations and literature and there is a fairly close link with one's theology. The men-only view is held by Roman Catholic church, the Orthodox church, the Open Brethren but also by many Reformed churches. Their position is often referred to as **complementarism** (men and women have different but complementary roles) and is represented by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. (www.cbmw.org/) The shared ministry view is held by many churches including Anglicans, Methodists and many Pentecostals. This position is known as **egalitarianism** (men and women are equally eligible for leadership) and is represented by Christians for Biblical Equality. (www.cbeinternational.org/) Both positions can and are defended from Scripture and are thus represented within the spectrum of evangelical belief. Some of the difference lies in different interpretations of difficult passages but mostly it lies in the difference between exegesis and application. Exegesis means finding out what the Bible means in its original context and what it meant to its first readers. Application then involves translating that meaning to today. There are several possibilities for application even when we know what a bible passage teaches. First, we can apply a passage directly to today without any change. Second, we can identify the timeless principles in a passage and apply these while ignoring the local and temporal emphases. Thirdly, we can decide that the Bible was speaking to a totally different situation and problem in a particular section and decide that it is not relevant at all today. As Scott McKnight puts it:

“That was then and this is now.” These need not be all or nothing positions – in practice we use all three approaches and apply them to different passages, and sometimes we are inconsistent. We will apply literally one part of a passage and ignore the next section completely as not being relevant. What we do is often determined by our church tradition and our theology or the position of our favourite preachers or authors. Often we never think about the issues involved or whether we are reading the Bible properly, because we just accept the status quo and go along with what our church practices. One thing is important, the local church – leaders and congregation – should have an agreed view of this issue - the role of leaders and the place of women in ministry - otherwise there will be division, dissension and infighting. We need to recognise that this is an area of church life where there is a legitimate difference of view amongst evangelicals and that it is not a salvation issue. I liked this agreed statement from a group of evangelicals who came together to write *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (Zondervan, 2nd. ed., 2005, p.15).

“We believe one can build a credible case within the bounds of orthodoxy and a commitment to inerrancy for either one of the two major views we address in this volume, although all of us view our own positions on the matter as stronger and more compelling.”

I believe that individually and as a local church we have to work out our position on this matter and then seek to apply it in a way that is faithful to the Scripture.

The qualities of church leaders

Some of the traditional arguments for male leadership are: Jesus was a man, therefore the church leaders must be men; the twelve apostles were all men, therefore church leaders must be men. This argument is used most where churches see leadership as a priestly function, which cannot be defended from Scripture. It would also lead to the logical conclusion that church leaders must also be Jewish. If we want to find out what the early church’s model of leadership was we have to look at passages that tell us explicitly or implicitly about how the local churches were run. Thus we have, for example, the passages in 1 Timothy and Titus which lay out the qualifications for elders and deacons. (A list of other relevant passages is given at the end for study.) These passages tell us how the early church was structured and the qualities to look for in leaders. It is clear that Paul appointed elders in the churches he planted, sometimes within a few months of evangelising an area. The early churches (often house churches) were run by a group of elders, with the help of deacons, even when the apostles were still around. It is also clear from the relevant passages that the elders were men. This followed the tradition in the Jewish synagogues, except that in the early church the elders could be from a Jewish or Gentile background. Elder implies older (not old) men in contrast to young men, as eldership was a position that required maturity, experience and wisdom. Let us list the qualities needed for elders listed in these two passages.

1. Exemplary behaviour in personal and public life
2. Hospitality
3. Good teacher
4. Husband of 'but one wife' (i.e. not a polygamist)
5. Ability to control his own family and home
6. Self-controlled.
7. Gentle character not quarrelsome
8. Not a recent convert
9. Reputation outside the church
10. Not taken up with materialism, honest in money matters
11. Sound in doctrine, able to refute error.
12. Humility.
13. Not a drunkard.

Most of these qualities should be true of all Christians, men or women, as they are working out in life of the fruits of the Spirit. Notice the mix of character requirements, personal skills (particularly in the

family), reputation in society and Christian maturity in relation to sound doctrine and ability to teach. The list is a very practical, down to earth one – it does not describe someone who is super-spiritual. However, it is a formidable list of requirements and some of these would have been in place before people were converted, particularly in the early church. Some of the elders appointed in the early church must have been fairly recent converts, given the missionary situation, and maybe this means a few days or weeks, rather than a few months – it cannot mean years. Experience in practical matters as well as spiritual maturity are required of elders and one might ask: is anyone able for the task and fully qualified in all areas? The elders are also known as overseers, and as shepherds of the flock, but the head of the church is always Jesus Christ and he is the great shepherd of the sheep. Elsewhere we are told that the leaders are to be servants, not domineering over the church.

Another important point about leadership in the early church is that it is always plural – it is a group of elders who have the responsibility, under Christ, to run the church, not just one man. As church history unfolded this early model of church government changed into three orders: bishops (overseers), elders (presbyters) and deacons, separating the role of elders into two, and leading to one man rule and eventually to a priestly, or sacerdotal, view of leadership. The leaders in the early church are never singled out and called priests. The Jewish priesthood and sacrificial system were abolished at the cross of Christ. The development of the role of priests (versus lay people), the sacraments and ordination, together with all the associated church structures, is not found in the Bible or in the early church. So if we want a biblical model we have to go back to the early church as described in the pages of the New Testament. We may still need to apply or adapt it to the modern world.

You will also notice that it is assumed that the elders will be married and have families. This would be the normal state of affairs for mature men in both Jewish and Roman society, and the experience of marriage and bringing up a family are valuable in church leadership. Peter was married and it is likely that Paul was the exception among the apostles in being unmarried.

What about deacons?

1 Timothy 3:8-13

⁸*Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁹They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.*

¹⁰*They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.*

¹¹*In the same way, their wives (or the women) are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.*

¹²*A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well.*

¹³*Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.*

There are many parallels in this passage listing the qualities of deacons (servants) with those of elders, with one main exception from v. 11. This passage talks either about the wives of deacons or it talks about women who are deacons. Remember that the same word is used in Greek for both woman and wife, just as the same word is used for man and husband. We have to decide from the context which meaning is correct. If it were important for the wives of deacons to have certain qualities, then it would be even more important for the wives of elders to have suitable qualities – but these are not mentioned. There is evidence in the New Testament of women deacons (Phoebe in Romans 16:1), and the frequent reference to women as co-workers may also indicate a recognised role in the church. In the records we have of the early church outside the Bible we find women deacons, at least in the first few centuries until the three-tier priestly system was established, at which time women appear to have been excluded from leadership roles.

The deacons are servants of the church, dealing mainly (but not exclusively) with practical matters. They should have good characters and personal lives, and to be well-grounded as believers. In terms of personal qualities there is a lot of overlap with those required for elders, though for deacons does not specify a teaching role.

A leadership model

Perhaps I can summarise my view on the leadership model found in the early church. Each church would have in place a group of men recognised and acting as elders and overseers. The elders have the responsibility for teaching and pastoral care (in their roles as shepherds), but are to function as servants of the church, not as dictators. The Bible does not specify how many men there should be in leadership – I suggest a minimum of three, but the number depends on the size of the church. Under the elders are a group of recognised deacons, men and women, dealing with practical matters, including pastoral matters. Widows, who were usually mature and experienced women who had brought up families, are often mentioned in the letters as having an important place in the church e.g. in teaching younger women. I think it is likely that some of the women deacons were chosen from these widows, and some would be the wives of elders or male deacons. This view of leadership agrees with scripture and allows a role for women, without perhaps going to the extremes of the all or nothing positions. It is what we are operating at the present in Mallow Street Christian Fellowship. Leadership is shared between the elders and deacons, although the elders have the final responsibility under God.

I think there is still room to ask whether we have to apply every detail of the New Testament with regard to the role of women in the church, or whether we need to translate the teaching from its first century context to the modern world. Are we trying to follow the letter of the law rather than the rule of the Spirit, and failing to distinguish rulings that were appropriate for a first century culture but are no longer relevant? The early church raised the status of women compared to either the Jewish or Roman worlds, but still operated within a first century culture and adapted to some extent to it: for example, in the discussion of head coverings in 1 Cor. 11. But how far are these instructions, given to allow the church to fit into a particular culture in a particular time, still relevant today? How far do we go in adapting to the modern world in our application of Scripture?

Galatians 3:28 says: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

This is the ultimate statement of equality in Scripture. How does this work out in church life and in the family? Equality of status before God does not rule out different roles in society, in the family and in the church, but this verse should guide our views on society, family and church – we should not be locked into positions just because they are traditional, as they may reflect an adaptation to an earlier culture e.g. the 19th. century, which is not relevant today.

In my next talk I want to look at the work of church leaders in more detail and how we should go about recognising and appointing them.

Main bible passages on church leadership:

Mark 10:42-45	Acts 20:17,28-31	James 5:14-15
John 10 (the role of the shepherd)	Acts 24:23	1 Pet. 5:1-4
Acts 6:1-6	1 Tim. 3:1-7 and 8-13	1 Thess. 5:12-13
Acts 11:30	1 Tim. 5:17-20	Phil 1:1
Acts. 14.23	2 Tim. 2:23-26	
Acts 15:6	Titus 1:5-9	
	Hebs. 13:7,17,24	