

Fact Sheet for **“Overseers”**
1 Timothy 3:1-7 A

Pastor Bob Singer
06/03/2018

^{3:1} ¶ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

We have come to a critical passage for the church today... one that needs to be carefully thought through. Here are four questions. **Why is this passage important for the church today? Who are overseers? What is their relationship to the church? What character qualities should they have?**

Why is this passage important for the church today?

Churches in America and around the world today identify a wide variety of leaders with a wide variety of titles. I grew up with pastors (called ministers), deacons, deaconesses, and trustees. One of my boyhood acquaintances was Catholic and grew up with priests, monks, nuns, cardinals, bishops, and a pope. There are churches today that follow those they call apostles. A couple of churches in Cottage Grove have theology based on the teaching of recent prophetesses. Our Baptist church now identifies elders. There are words like clergy, laity, reverend, and ordination. The Southern Baptist church ordains their deacons. Then you have all those non-profit corporate titles... president, directors, registered agent, treasurer, chairmen. We have constitutions, by-laws, declarations of faith, annual business meetings, Robert's Rules of Order, boards, commissions, committees. And the authority structure, or polity, of churches is arranged in a variety of ways. Some pastors are “the authority” in the church. The main board's role is to follow their lead. In other churches the pastor is only an advisor to the main board. Some congregations vote on nearly everything. Some vote on absolutely nothing. Many churches do not own their own buildings, the denomination does. Several churches can't even vote on their own declaration of faith. That is set by the denomination. Some churches choose their own pastors. Other churches have their pastors assigned to them, or removed from them, by the denominational higher-ups. Presbyterian pastors aren't even members of their own congregation. There are some churches that have either male or female pastors. Some even have gay or lesbian pastors.

Here's the problem. The further you get away from a biblical understanding of church leadership the more difficulties the church will have. Go back to the biblical text. Be faithful to God's Word first. Whatever else a church does with their structure should never be in conflict with the biblical text! This passage is important because it is one of the critical NT passages on church leadership. It can help you cut through the weeds and see God's design for the local church.

Who are overseers?

There are so many titles for local church leaders today, but there are only four that are found in the NT that are still active (overseers, elders, shepherds {pastors}, and deacons {deaconesses, ministers}).

Two weeks ago we looked at Romans 16:1. The word there for “servant” is actually the word for “deacon”. Although it impossible to know for sure from that passage whether Phoebe had the role of deacon or not, 1 Timothy 3:11 does suggest that there were women deacons (we call them deaconesses).

Wait a minute. What about apostles, prophets, and evangelists? Here is a passage from Paul, also directed to the Ephesian church where Timothy was (Ephesians 2:19-21). Apostles and prophets had to be followed. They taught with God’s authority. But those gifts were foundational to the church in a time when the NT was still being written. Besides, since the first century there have been no apostles or prophets that have been universally recognized by the church. There remains today a role for evangelists, but as a gifting for ministry instead as a leadership role in the local church (Ephesians 4:11-12). By the way, Ephesians 4:11 is the only NT verse in most translations where the word “shepherds” is translated “pastors”. This is because the word “pastor” means “shepherd”. And there is a reason here from Greek grammar to identify one of the key roles of a pastor as teaching. This can either be formal, or informal, or both.

Look again at that list of biblical church leaders today. Do you notice something right off the bat? The word “minister” is a translation of the word “deacon”, not “shepherd”. It means “one who serves”. Our culture only identifies pastors as ministers. do serve, but that word is biblically more appropriate for those who are deacons and deaconesses.

Here’s another observation. In this list of local church leadership there are really only two offices... that of elder, overseer, pastor and that of deacon/deaconess. In the mid-1980’s I did a study of biblical local church leadership. I looked up every occurrence of the Greek words for elder, overseer, shepherd, and deacon. What I found was that the first three words (elder, overseer, and shepherd) were used interchangeably of the same individuals. Those who were deacons (and by extension deaconesses) were different individuals. Here are a couple of key passages I came across (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:1-2).

Here’s another observation. That office is only open to qualified males. The previous verses in 1 Timothy 2:8-15 make that abundantly clear. Here is still another observation. That office is not limited only to “clergy”, those who have gone to seminary and have been ordained. That office is open to any qualified male. And here is still another observation. The person we, in our culture, typically identify as “the pastor” is just one of the elders. He is not the boss of the elders. He should appropriately be the lead of the team, but it is the whole group of elders that should lead with a unified voice.

What is their relationship to the church?

Should the elders make all the decisions for the congregation (“elder rule”)? Should elders instead put everything to a congregational vote? The concept of “elder rule” comes from an incorrect understanding of 1 Timothy 5:17. The word translated “rule” here does not convey an autocratic type of authority. It literally can be translated “to stand before” and speaks of leadership. And the broader congregation was evidently involved in some of the decisions of the church Acts 6:3-5; 15:22). There is balance you will hear in our church’s documents: “elder led, congregationally affirmed”. This balance retains congregational authority over its own affairs, but allows those entrusted with leadership to lead.

Next Sunday we will consider the fourth question...

What character qualities should they have?