

# 1 TIMOTHY: LEADERSHIP

*(1 Timothy 3.1-13)*

Well now, in a week that has seen appalling lewdness in the private conversations of a candidate for the US presidency, and our main parliamentary opposition party is largely declining to serve under its leader and two British members of the European parliament reportedly had a scuffle that put one of them in hospital, the theme for today's talk is leadership.

The New Testament has little to say about the qualities necessary for political leadership. But it does say much about the qualities required for leadership in the church. And the letters to Timothy and Titus is where we find a lot of what it says.

A vicar was leaving his parish and he was saying farewell to his congregation at the church doors for the last time. He shook the hand of an elderly lady called Mavis as she walked out. She said, "Your successor won't be as good as you." This was, he thought, the first encouraging word he'd had in all his ten years in the parish.

But it was a nice thing to say, and he was very flattered. But vicars have to be modest and self-effacing don't they? They can't let praise go to their heads. So he said, "Oh, nonsense Mavis!" "No, really", she said, "Your successor definitely won't be as good as you. I've had five different ministers since I've been here, and each new one has been much worse than the last."

We're looking at Paul's first letter to Timothy again this morning and we're particularly interested today in what it has to say about leadership.

Listening to some of my clergy colleagues I sometimes get the impression that the secret of leadership is to keep the four guys who hate you away from the five who are still undecided.

Trip Lee once said "You cannot follow Jesus and be liked by everybody at the same time." Which is true, but giving gratuitous offence just because you're the vicar doesn't always help either!

In the letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul uses four different words to describe church leaders in the earliest churches. The words in Greek are -

*Apostolos, episkopos, presbuteros and diakonos.*

The *apostoloi* were church-founding pioneers, who never stayed in one place all that long. Their job was to get a church started, appoint leaders, then move off and start another one somewhere else. They always worked in apostolic teams and in our Bibles they are called apostles.

The *episkopoi* were spiritual supervisors of a local congregation and are always referred to in the plural because they too always worked in leadership teams. In our Bibles they are called overseers.

The *presbuteroi* were also spiritual leaders of one congregation and, once again, they only worked in leadership teams. In our Bibles they are called elders. It doesn't mean they had to be old and decrepit; it means they had experience and were mature in outlook.

In point of fact, *episkopos* and *presbuteros* were one and the same thing; the two words describe the same people; *episkopos* describes what they do (they provide oversight) and *presbuteros* describes what they're like (they are mature Christians of good character).

Finally, *diakonoι* were also recognised leaders who excelled in practical tasks. They too were always local church based and, yet again, always worked in teams. In our Bibles *diakonos* is translated deacon.

These terms (apostle, overseer, elder and deacon) all sound rather official but, in fact, these words were not theological-sounding titles. They were every day, non-technical terms, which simply meant envoy, supervisor or foreman, mature person and helper or support.

| Greek                    | NIV Bible Translation | Basic Meaning                |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| apostolos                | apostle               | envoy                        |
| episkopos<br>presbuteros | overseer<br>elder     | supervisor/foreman<br>mature |
| diakonos                 | deacon                | support worker               |

There are two important things to say about all these words.

Firstly, all New Testament ministry, without exception, was *team-based*. There is not the faintest hint anywhere in the New Testament of one-man or one-woman ministry. Jesus sent his disciples out in twos. Paul was always with Timothy, or Silas, or Barnabas; never alone. Every church had several leaders. Healthy church leadership means teams.

One thing that should be said to every newly ordained minister as soon as the Bishop's hands have left his or her head is this: "God has already appointed his Messiah, and it's not you."

In fact, I am so against this one-person-doing-it-all model that I decided to write a poem against it.

*Mary had a little lamb, 'twas given her to keep,  
It got ordained a parish priest, then died for lack of sleep.  
The sermons that it preached each week were a total waste of bleating  
And Mary's lamb spent endless hours attending every meeting.  
It preached and sang and cooked and typed and cleaned and served the  
Lord  
Not seeing there were other lambs available and bored.  
So when your vicar's burning out and splitting at the seams  
Show from the New Testament, how they always worked in teams.*

Not exactly Tennyson, but it got a round of applause and made me feel much better...

The second important thing to say about these words is that there is no hint whatsoever that New Testament church leaders were ever called, or considered to be, priests. In fact, the Apostle Peter made it crystal clear

that all Christians, not just the leaders, are equally part of a new, royal priesthood.

The word *episkopos* evolved into our English word *bishop*, and *presbuteros* morphed into our English word *priest*, that's why we still use that word.

But I am not a priest in the sense of an intermediary standing between God and the people. I have been ordained a priest in the sense of "elder;" an experienced, mature leader. Speaking amongst friends, if I'm totally honest, I think it's a confusing and misleading business and, if I had my way, we would ditch the word "priest" for all ordained ministers today. I never use the word. And while I'm at it, I also think we should scrap calling bishops "My Lord." There is only one Lord - and his name is Jesus.

What is clear is that God calls leaders to serve in his church and they are each given authority to provide direction and organisation.

The emphasis in the New Testament is on church leaders, not controlling the church, but releasing it, so that everyone can excel in using the gifts they have been given by God.

To finish my poem on a happy note:

*Mary had a little lamb, who trained the local church  
So all the lambs could use their gifts, not one was in the lurch  
Everything grew wonderfully, the flock was doing fine  
And Mary's lamb lived to the ripe old age of ninety-nine.*

As you must have noticed in the reading, 1 Timothy 3 sets out some qualifying criteria for church leadership. There is no mention whatsoever of natural talents. (You might be thinking, "Well, that explains a lot!") There is nothing here about academic qualifications either. All the qualities listed here are about good character. That's what God is looking for.

In v1 it says it is good to have an ambition for church leadership. It is a noble task. It is an excellent thing. It certainly is. Two years ago, The Office for National Statistics compared hundreds of different careers and occupations. Vicar came out as the number one occupation for job satisfaction, the most enjoyable and rewarding occupation of all. Incidentally, pub landlord was rock bottom at 274th out of 274.

In v2-7, the personal qualities include integrity, moderation, insight, an open home to people with needs, and the ability to teach. Negatively, it says that a leader in church should avoid four "a"s. They should not be alcoholic, aggressive, argumentative or avaricious (greedy doesn't begin with a!)

That's personal qualities. There are domestic qualities too: leaders in church should, if married, have a married life that is in line with God's pattern, be respected outside church, be seen to be able to manage the more limited sphere of the family first, and not be recent convert – lest they let it go to their heads and become proud.

Those are the kinds of qualities you should expect to see in bishops and clergy.

In v8-13 it talks of deacons, or servant helpers in church. Again, it is all about character. They should be serious (that doesn't mean lacking a sense of humour, it means not flippant). They should be sober, satisfied with their lot, discreet (not gossips), stable, trustworthy and have a sound grasp of Christian teaching.

That's an impressive list. But it's not an impossible standard. It may be demanding, and it should be, but it is not unattainable. You don't have to be the Archangel Gabriel to qualify.

Let me end by talking about the ancient Romans and a tradition they had because it illustrates very well the serious responsibility and the humble servanthood that I think characterise Christian leadership.

Whenever one of their engineers constructed an arch, as the capstone was hoisted into place, the engineer assumed responsibility for his work in the most profound way possible: he stood underneath.

May the Lord bless his church with leaders who build carefully, do a proper job, take responsibility for their work and give Christ the glory.