

Blameless character

The last 50 years testify to heated debates and changes in Baptist thinking about leadership and gender. Some have insisted that the Bible clearly



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teaches women may not be pastors or deacons. Others insist that the pastor is “God’s anointed” and a church should be obedient to the pastor. We all search the New Testament to discover a divine organizational blueprint for organizing and governing a church. What we discover instead is not corporate organization but a strong focus on the character of church leaders.

Paul deals with two key leadership roles in 1 Timothy 3:1-13: the qualifications for “supervisors” (CEB) or “bishops” (NRSV), a role we call “pastor.” The other leader is “servant” (CEB) or “deacon” (NRSV). Through the centuries, as the church grew and even became a central element in society and politics, these offices expanded and changed. Bishops became pastors to other ministers and congregations, and deacons became managers of programs and even adopted pastoral roles.

The results today are denominational structures, CEOs, governing boards and complicated bylaws. The problem with such large administrative structures is that we adopt societal ideas and standards that are disconnected from biblical teachings and often harm our witness to the world.

Paul writes to a church in infancy, knowing that leaders must embody the grace of God and clearly live by the example and teachings of Jesus. “Supervisors” (pastors) must demonstrate a steady and loving commitment to their family: “faithful to their spouse” (v. 2) and able to “manage their own household well” (v. 4). The same is expected of “servants” (deacons) (v.12).

Harsh debates have erupted over “faithful to their spouse” (v. 2, CEB), while the New Revised Standard Version translates that verse “married only once.” A more literal translation is “the husband of one wife.” With

polygamy common in the First Century, the focus was not divorce as it has been in our day.

In our zeal to be pure and orthodox we often forget that we are all sinners and that God’s grace can not only bring forgiveness but a new life. Likewise, the phrase does not exclude women from leadership or ministry in the church. Note Paul mentioning “women who are servants (deacons)” (v.11).

To back up the idea that women should not be deacons, some interpret “deacon” as an officer (leader) in the church as male, but interpret the same word as “volunteer” or “worker” when applied to women. This is an interpretation of preference or prejudice! The New Testament records women as prominent and ministering in various ways. In Romans 16:1, Paul begins by commending Phoebe the deacon, followed by a long list of other significant church leaders, including many women.

There are some passages in Paul’s letters where he restricts the role of women but those are specific situations or cultural contexts rather than blanket prohibitions or policies. Again, Paul’s teaching is not shaped by gender stereotypes, but by a concern for the foundation of Christian ethics and the testimony of each individual leader. In Galatians 3:28, Paul states clearly the equality and worth of each individual within God’s church: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (NASV).

We also err when we make the phrase “husband of one wife” mean a pastor or deacon must be married. So far as we know, Paul was not married and we are not certain about the marital status of all Jesus’ apostles. We are too often adept at adding our opinions to a biblical text, making them burdensome and even limiting what was originally intended.

Our real concern should be the integrity and faithfulness of any individual, whether pastor, deacon or any other leader in a congregation. I have personally known of people who were dishonest in business,

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Scripture: 1 Timothy 3:1-13

abusive of wife or children, addicted to pornography or drugs, and uncaring toward the poor and other races, yet they were leaders and pastors.

Paul is very protective of the reputation of a church in this unbelieving world. Pastors should be “faithful to their spouse, sober, modest, and honest...skilled at teaching...not addicted to alcohol, not a bully” (vs. 2-3). A pastor should be “gentle, peaceable, and not greedy” (v. 3)...“manage his own household well...raise “obedient” and “respectful” children (v. 4). Paul makes the honest point that a pastor who cannot take care of his own family will not be able to lead and care for a church (v.5). He also warns about the danger of power’s allure (the devil’s spell) to a pastor who is immature (v. 6).

Deacons are subject to the same standards. I look back over 50 years of ministry and celebrate so many deacons who served generously and lovingly, but I can also remember some who were “elected” because of their influence or wealth and brought division or embarrassment to their church.

Paul’s demands of deacons are equal to that of pastors. Deacons “should be dignified, not two-faced, heavy drinkers, or greedy for money” (v.8)... “hold on to the faith...with a clear conscience” (v. 9)... “tested and then serve” (v. 10). “Women servants/deacons must be dignified and not gossips”... “sober and faithful” in their actions (v. 11)... and care for spouse and children in an exemplary way (v. 12).

We all do well to check our lives by these carefully written standards, whether we are a pastor, deacon or serve in another capacity. No one is perfect. We are all dependent on God’s love and guidance. When we are dedicated to Christ in our living and service, our reward is a stronger faith and a deeper sense that Christ is with us (v.13).

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