



First Timothy

Church Leaders

A Good Ambition

I Timothy 3:1

Lesson Ten

Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex Curriculum



First Timothy

A Study of the First Letter of the Apostle Paul to His Son in the Faith

Church Leaders

With this lesson we begin a study of church leaders and what God's Holy Spirit led Paul to believe about them. He listed two leadership positions in I Timothy 3:1-13, and he gave very specific instructions to Timothy about the kinds of people who should be in these positions.

Let's think with Paul about the work these persons do. Their jobs are sometime called offices. The person filling the office is sometimes called an officer. When we think of the word officer, we most often think of a police "officer." However, there are many more kinds of officers. Read I Timothy 3:1.

Most Bible translations use the word "overseers" or "bishops." The Bible also uses the titles "elders," "shepherds," and even, in Ephesians 4:11, "pastor-teacher." Later, in I Timothy chapter three (verse 8), we will find the title "deacon"... sometimes translated "servant."

So what do all these titles mean? It can be confusing, since many churches now only have pastors and deacons. But some also have bishops and priests. Are we not following what the Bible says about church officers? Let's look at it and follow Paul's guidance here.

We should notice that where the leaders of a church are referred to, the term elder is always plural. That means that the churches in Paul's day had more than one elder or overseer.

The titles overseers, bishops, elders, shepherds and pastor-teachers all refer to one kind of church leader. Reasons this seems obvious in the Bible can be found in Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7; I Peter 5:1-2, and of course I Timothy 3:1-7. Putting these together, Bible scholars have decided that there is a reason for so many different titles. First, the title elder means that the persons holding these positions were older men. They had experience and had grown in wisdom. Second, the other titles, overseer, shepherd, etc. refer to what they did.

There is some history behind the title elder. The Jewish synagogues of Paul's day were guided by elders. These were older men who were father figures, trusted by the people. The Roman congress of that day was called the senate, which comes from a Greek word meaning "older man." In our day, cities call their leaders aldermen, which means older men. So there is a long history behind the idea of elder leadership.

The person who was an overseer gave direction and guidance. They led the way. They provided correction when necessary. Remember, Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to "command" or "instruct" those who were teaching the wrong things to the church there. (I Timothy 1:3) The overseers were to care for the spiritual welfare of the church. Timothy was an overseer.

The word bishop describes men who carried out an assignment by leading others, or supervising others to do the work. It is related to the word commissioner which, in our day, is used for people who as leaders carry out the business of government. It speaks of someone who is given authority by someone else to see that the job is done right. So, the bishop or overseer is responsible to the church, that gives him the work to do, and ultimately to God who calls him to serve as a church leader.

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The title shepherd would say that the person is guiding and protecting the church. Jesus, who called Himself “the good shepherd,” was the model for this. What a high goal that is.

The title “pastor-teacher” is a good summary description for what a church leader should do. It includes the idea of shepherd. Also, church leaders should feel responsibility to see that every Christian is taught God’s Word and taught how to live a good Christian life. This is called discipleship. The Great Commission tells every Christian that we are to go and make “disciples.”

Paul introduces the chapter with the phrase “this is a trustworthy saying.” He had used the same phrase in chapter one, verse 15. There he said, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” When Paul said that something is trustworthy, he is serious about it. So, when someone is determined (“sets his heart”) to be an overseer (elder, shepherd, pastor-teacher), Paul is serious about that person committing themselves to a “noble task,” or a “good work.”

There are several thoughts in this verse that can help us understand God’s will for our life today. First, a person should feel in their heart that they must be a church leader. This is not about ambition to be popular, or power over others, or anything else that would make you look good to others. It is about God’s Holy Spirit speaking to your heart and leading you to commit your life to a ministry. This is about always being open to God’s leadership.

Second, being an overseer (elder, shepherd, pastor-teacher) is a “noble task.” That is, it requires the very best that a person can give to it, so that the position itself is honored. It is a position of accountability and responsibility. Think about it this way, if you drive a car with you alone in it, you can run into a tree and hurt only yourself. However, if you are driving a bus, you can hurt or kill many people if you hit a tree. Leading a church is more like driving a bus.

Third, we can see that wanting to be a church leader is something that connects us directly with God. We’ve already mentioned the fact that God’s Holy Spirit should be placing the desire in us, to be a church leader. Since Paul calls it a “noble task” we see that it is serious not only to humans but to God. As we shall see in the next few verses, God told us through Paul just how serious a task this is.

Fourth, we see in the words “sets his heart,” a strong desire. In Hebrews 11:16, the writer, talking about Abraham and his descendants said that they “longed for” a home. It is the same word. It was a strong desire. A church leader should have a very strong desire to do the work.

Is God calling you, giving you a strong desire to be a church leader?

*Underlined words and phrases are to be used in completing the Student Worksheet.

Lesson Goal: To give students awareness of God’s instructions for worship.

Scripture Memory: “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. | Timothy 3:1

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Student Worksheet—Following Through

Church Leaders

>Most Bible translations use the word “overseers” or “bishops.” The Bible also uses the titles “elders,” “shepherds,” and even, in Ephesians 4:11, “pastor-teacher.” What do these titles mean?

Overseer:

Bishop:

Elder:

Shepherd:

Pastor-Teacher:

>What four things does our verse say that can help us understand God’s will for our life today?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

>Is God calling you, giving you a “strong desire” to be a church leader? Can you, in His will for your life, give yourself to serve God in His church?

For Memory: “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.

1 Timothy 3:1

How to begin a Personal Relationship with God:

First, believe that the God of the Bible is the true God.

Second, believe that Jesus, God’s Son, was sent to earth to die so that you can have a relationship with God.

Third, ask God to forgive your sins in Jesus’ name. Jesus’ death on the cross paid the price of every sin you commit.