



Healthy Church

Session 5: Leadership

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

Imagine walking into your child's elementary school, expecting to see order and structure, but encountering chaos instead. In this school, each adult determined their role to care for the children.

The principal might decide to teach PE, the librarian might take up math, and perhaps no one signed up to cook lunch. It would be a disorganized mess, and the needs of the students would go unmet.

In the early church, rapid expansion and a record number of people coming to Christ meant leaders struggled to address all the needs. It felt, at times, chaotic. In Paul's letters to Titus and Timothy, along with Peter's letter to the scattered churches in Asia Minor, the apostles outlined the offices of the church as well as the character qualities of church leaders. As God's people work together, serving out of their giftedness and calling, the church's needs are met and the gospel spreads.

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5; 1 Timothy 3:8-10

THE MAIN IDEA

Scripture outlines offices for the church as well as character qualities of leaders. Whether pastors, ministers, overseers, shepherds or deacons, God's people are called to serve one another in love. How well churches respond to pastoral leadership, along with church members joining in willing service to others, are markers of a healthy church.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What character qualities does Scripture outline for those in church leadership? How should those same qualities be growth markers for all believers?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

Titus 1:5-9 In Paul's letter to Titus, the apostle instructed the young elder on how to minister to the churches that formed on the island of Crete. Paul instructed him in a ministry of multiplication and outlined the character qualities that should accompany leaders in the church.

1 Peter 5:1-5 In chapter five of Peter's letter to the scattered Jewish Christians in Asia Minor, he specifically addressed the pastoral ministry of church leadership. He reminded them to lead their flock compassionately and carefully. Church pastors are a blessing to their congregations as they emulate Christ.

1 Timothy 3:8-10 Paul's letter to Timothy instructed a young pastor on biblical leadership in the church. In this passage, Paul highlighted the essential work of deacons, the lay leaders who are vital to the service of the church. Their ministry blesses pastors and allows the church's ministry to multiply.

START HERE

Churches govern themselves in many ways. Some denominations have a hierarchical structure, relying on elders to provide important leadership decisions for local churches. Some operate from a strictly staff-led model, meaning a few key leaders make many decisions. Many Baptist churches follow a model of congregational polity, a leadership structure where church members serve alongside staff to lead committees, manage finances, and provide ministry to the people. Regardless of structure, Scripture outlines the character qualities essential to all individuals who would seek to serve God's people vocationally or as ministry volunteers. You will notice in today's lesson that the Bible highlights character over charisma or productivity. Biblical leaders teach God's people sincerely, shepherd God's people faithfully, and serve God's people diligently.

DISCUSS

According to Scripture, what are the qualities of a good leader, and how might those qualities differ from how culture might define leadership?

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. Biblical leaders teach God's people sincerely.

Titus 1:5-9: The reason I left you in Crete was to set right what was left undone and, as I directed you, to appoint elders in every town. An elder must be blameless, the husband of one wife, with faithful children who are not accused of wildness or rebellion. As an overseer of God's household, he must be blameless, not arrogant, not hot-tempered, not an excessive drinker, not a bully, not greedy for money, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, righteous, holy, self-controlled, holding to the faithful message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it.

Unpacking Titus 1:5-9

Imagine you are a parent planning to leave your older teenagers home alone for a weekend. What would you do? You would painstakingly prepare for your absence by making sure food is in the refrigerator, emergency contacts are written down, and instructions (i.e., house rules) are firmly established. At some point, you might consider sending a friend or neighbor to come by your house and check on them. While you trust your teens, you'd probably sleep better at night knowing everything is okay.

When the apostle Paul established churches during his missionary journeys, he knew he could not stay behind and pastor them all. God had given him the task of evangelizing the Gentiles and planting churches among them. Other leaders would need to shepherd those congregations, teaching them to follow Christ and continue the work Paul began. Titus, a Greek man, converted to Christianity during one of Paul's missionary journeys.

He later served as a traveling companion to Paul and Barnabas (Galatians 2:1-3). In 2 Corinthians, we see that Paul sent Titus as a special messenger to the church in Corinth, and he returned to encourage Paul during his service in Macedonia (7:5-7).

Through Paul's careful discipleship and interest, Titus's leadership capacity grew. Paul sent him to the island of Crete, an island off the coast of Greece, to oversee and support the churches there. This letter dates to approximately 64 AD, around the same time as Paul's first letter to Timothy. Like Timothy, Paul encouraged Titus to serve the churches faithfully and to establish additional leaders for each congregation.

In this short passage, Paul used two different Greek words to describe the types of leaders needed to support local churches. The first, *presbyteros*, used in verse 6, generally translated "elder," is where we get the words *presbytery* and eventually *Presbyterian*.¹ It refers to leaders of a particular church or leaders who oversee more than one church. The second, *episkopos*, in verse 7, comes from two Greek words, *epi*, meaning "over," and *skopos*, meaning a "watcher, lookout, or guardian."² We generally see this word translated as "overseer" and signifies a leader who is both watching over and watching out for a congregation. In Titus 1, the leader is described as watching over the congregation and watching out for false teaching that might creep into the church.

It is important to note here that the New Testament does not give an exact structure of how church government is built. "Elder," "overseer," and "shepherd" are often used interchangeably (Acts 20:17-28). Rather than consider them as individual offices or a hierarchy of power, it is appropriate to view these titles as similar roles in which God uses leaders to care for His church.

Not every member of a church is qualified to serve in a pastor, overseer, elder, or shepherd role. In Titus 1:5-9, we see a list of character qualities that denote the kind of individual God uses to lead His people. Notice that Paul focuses not on leadership qualities, but on character. In verse 6, he points out that an elder must be "blameless, the husband of one wife, with faithful children who are not accused of wildness or rebellion."

In other words, a person leading in the church should lead by example in his home as well. While the expression "the husband of one wife" has been understood in a variety of ways over the years, this indicates a church leader should not have more than one living spouse.

¹ *Blue Letter Bible*, "Strong's G4245 – presbyteros," accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4245/kjv/tr/0-1/>; *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, "presbytery," accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/presbytery>.

² *Blue Letter Bible*, "Strong's G1985 – episkopos," accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1985/kjv/tr/0-1/>; "Strong's G1909 – epi," accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1909/kjv/tr/0-1/>; "Strong's G4649 – skopos," accessed March 13, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4649/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

Additionally, an elder's children should reflect the godly example set in their home by believing parents. However, it is worth noting that adult children may make different life choices than their parents. Scripture teaches that we are all accountable for our actions (Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10). Parents of wayward children deserve our love, compassion, and encouragement, even if they need to step away from leadership temporarily to attend to their family. Our gentle concern and care for hurting members of the body could very well be the tools God uses to restore individuals to faith (Galatians 6:1).

Next, Paul gave individual characteristics of an elder. The first trait sets a high bar: the leader should be "blameless," one who cannot be called into account, unproveable, unaccused. If you are wondering how anyone can meet that high bar, 1 Corinthians 1:8 tells us God's Spirit sanctifies and strengthens us so that we will be presented as blameless before Christ. No Christian leader can live blamelessly apart from the grace of God working in individual hearts and lives. According to Titus 1:7, an overseer is a humble leader who exhibits a love of goodness and righteousness and demonstrates self-control. Additionally, this leader is committed to teaching Scripture with sincerity and to call out false teaching that could hurt the church.

It is the character, not the talents, financial resources, charisma, or production value, that make a person fit for the role of leadership in the church. As God told the prophet Samuel when he was examining the sons of Jesse in search of the next king of Israel, "Humans do not see what the Lord sees, for humans see what is visible, but the Lord sees the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

ADDING CLARITY

The character qualities identified here correspond closely to 1 Timothy 3:1–7. Yet differences should be noted. These differences help us see how Paul applied general truths to particular situations. Unlike 1 Timothy, no deacons were mentioned here, suggesting that the organizational structure was not as advanced in Crete. The leaders' character should be blameless, and their doctrinal commitments must be faithful to the biblical message.

DISCUSS

- *How do leaders in the church teach and lead beyond just their words in a formal teaching environment?*
- *What character qualities of an overseer seem out of step with the world's definition of leadership? In what sense are all church members called to live in these ways?*

2. Biblical leaders shepherd God's people faithfully.

1 Peter 5:1-5: *I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder and witness to the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory about to be revealed: Shepherd God's flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but willingly, as God would have you; not out of*

*greed for money but eagerly; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because **God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.***

Unpacking 1 Peter 5:1-5

In our modern, individualistic society, it's hard to appreciate the metaphor of the church as a flock and its leaders as shepherds. How does a flock behave? How do they travel together? What does a shepherd do for them, and how does the shepherd care for sheep that lag, are injured, or become sick? While we might not have a personal understanding of raising sheep, we can appreciate the picture of a caring shepherd tending to the needs of a vulnerable flock.

The apostle Peter wrote this letter to scattered Jewish Christians living in Asia Minor around 62–64 AD. Under the rule of Emperor Nero, the church had begun experiencing widespread persecution, including death, and many Christians fled Jerusalem. Peter, tasked by Jesus before His ascension to “feed my lambs” (John 21:16), wrote this letter as an encouragement to them and a reminder of the living hope we have in Christ (1 Peter 1:3-4).

In this passage, Peter called the elders “shepherds” and encouraged them to care for and concern for the people in their congregation (flock). In verses 2-3, Peter offered three different contrast statements to illustrate the work of overseer-leaders. First, he said they should “Shepherd God’s flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but willingly, as God would have you.” Peter framed shepherding as a blessing, and encouraged leaders to embrace God’s call willingly, “as God would have you.”

Churches need faithful shepherds who will answer God’s call to serve with gladness and sincerity. However, filling empty pulpits is an ongoing challenge. A 2022 article in *The Baptist Standard* pointed to an imminent pastoral shortage. It reads:

Based on the information provided, more than 300 Texas Baptist churches are without a pastor. In 2022, 288 students in BGCT-affiliated schools intended to pursue the pastorate. Admittedly, this is a snapshot, but it is a view that seems to confirm observations.

If all 288 students seek an open pastorate in Texas this year and each one is called by a Texas Baptist church, at least 12 pastorates still will be open in Texas Baptist churches. Who will fill them?³

³ Eric Black, “Editorial: Are We Entering a Pastoral Drought?” Baptist Standard, July 20, 2022, <https://baptiststandard.com/opinion/editorials/are-we-entering-a-pastoral-drought/>.

Who, indeed? Church members can support pastoral ministry in multiple ways. First, church members should pray for their pastors, that God would allow them to serve faithfully and joyfully. Second, they can pray that God will raise a new generation of called young people to say yes to serving the local church. We can encourage youth leaders to discuss a call to vocational ministry, and we can encourage our young people when they explore it. Finally, church members can financially support state conventions or individual seminaries to make theological education accessible and affordable. As the apostle Peter said, churches should be led by qualified ministers willing to faithfully shepherd God's people.

Second in Peter's list of contrasting attributes of a faithful shepherd-pastor, he said that shepherds should serve "*not out of greed for money but eagerly* (v. 2). Whether church leaders serve in full-time ministry or bi-vocationally, serving a local congregation is a commitment not just of a minister to a congregation but of one's whole family to join with and serve part of the body of Christ. Churches support their ministers financially by making sure that their families' material needs are met (1 Timothy 5:18). Peter said ministers should serve not just willingly but eagerly. Another way church members can support their pastors is by living in a gentle, loving community with one another, where serving is a blessing to the pastor, even as he and his family bless the congregation through their service.

Finally, Peter pointed out that ministers should not serve congregations in an authoritarian manner, but humbly (v. 3). Shepherd leaders should serve congregations willingly, eagerly, and sincerely, leading by the example of Christ, who "loved the church and gave himself for her" (Ephesians 5:25). In this way, shepherd leaders will receive a crown of glory when Christ, the Chief Shepherd, appears.

Peter also addressed leadership structure, encouraging younger shepherd leaders to learn from and submit to older leaders, and for all church members to live in humility and gentleness with one another as the body of Christ, reminding them that God "resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" (v. 5). When churches are led by leaders who serve willingly, eagerly, and sincerely, they model the grace-filled, humble leadership that should be a hallmark of all believers.

DISCUSS

- What does it mean to "shepherd" God's flock? Why do you think God so often uses sheep as a metaphor for His people?
- How does Christ, the Good Shepherd, set an example for pastors to follow?
- How can you and your family pray for, encourage, and bless the ministers who serve faithfully?

3. Biblical leaders serve God's people diligently.

1 Timothy 3:8-10: *Deacons, likewise, should be worthy of respect, not hypocritical, not drinking a lot of wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. They must also be tested first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons.*

Unpacking 1 Timothy 3:8-10

Ask any minister if he or she can do the work of the church alone, and they will give you a resounding no. Just as no one person can run a school, organization, or even a small business without the contribution of others, the church cannot, nor was it designed, to operate under the efforts of the church staff alone. There are too many people to be served and needs to be met for a few individuals to take care of it all.

Early in the New Testament church, we see this dynamic played out. In Acts 6, a problem was brought to the apostles' attention. "In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution" (Acts 6:1). Somehow, the church's care of its widows appeared unbalanced, and grumbling ensued.

Though the church was in a season of growth, the apostles did not ignore the problems. The solution was to call out, equip, and empower other leaders to step up and serve the body in this practical, yet necessary way. The church's need was met by the establishment of its first deacons (Acts 6:3-6).

The establishment of deacons solved the problem and allowed the apostles to carry on the work of "prayer and ministry of the word." At the same time these newly established lay leaders shouldered the task of caring for practical ministry needs (Acts 6:4). When church staff and volunteers work together, the work multiplies and burnout decreases. For the early church, the result was seen and felt almost immediately (Acts 6:7).

In 1 Timothy, Paul's letter served as a field manual for church leadership. He instructed the young pastor on how to live and serve effectively. In chapter 3, he outlined the qualifications for overseers and deacons. Concerning overseers, likely pastors, he instructed, "An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not an excessive drinker, not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy. He must manage his household competently and have his children under control with all dignity" (1 Timothy 3:2-4). Notice the similar language to Paul's letter to Titus and the instruction from 1 Peter. The early church leaders agreed on the character attributes of those who would serve God's people.

Paul continued in verses 8-9, "Deacons, likewise, should be worthy of respect, not hypocritical, not drinking a lot of wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience."



Deacons are primarily servants of a local congregation, as seen in Acts 6. They minister to vulnerable church members or those in need, they demonstrate spiritual maturity, they give generously, and they hold to God's word faithfully (1 Timothy 3:8-9). This role is not taken lightly. Paul advises Timothy that a vetting process should help determine those best-suited to serve. "They must also be tested first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons." (1 Timothy 3:10). While different churches may use deacons in a variety of leadership roles, the office of deacon is one of servant leadership and ministry to the body of Christ. As Mark Dever writes, "the concerns of the deacons are the practical details of church life: administration, maintenance, and the care of church members with physical needs."⁴

DISCUSS

- *How did the establishment of deacons in Acts 6 help the church members in practical ways? How did it help the apostles?*
- *The translation of the word for deacon, diakonos, is "servant." How should this inform our view of this role?*
- *How can all parts of the body (kids, teens, adults, senior adults) join to meet the real and felt needs of vulnerable members? How can serving together create community and multiply ministry?*

GOSPEL FOCUS

Whatever we call our church leaders—elders, overseers, shepherds, pastors, ministers, or deacons—servant leaders are vital for the work of the church. While today's passages highlight the character qualities of leaders, we best see the high calling of servant leadership in Christ, our great High Priest. In Him, we find not only the attributes of servant leadership but also the grace and mercy we need to develop into the people of God we are called to be.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need. Hebrews 4:14-16

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

- *Why do you think Scripture, in defining leadership qualities, looks at character more than aptitude? How does this differ from the world?*

⁴ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 243.



- *How have your pastors and ministers blessed you and your family over the years? What could you do to encourage them this week?*
- *How have you seen the church minister to vulnerable church or community members over the years?*

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

- *What leadership character traits do you most want to emulate in your life, family, work, or church service?*

APPLY

- *In examining your spiritual growth, what needs to develop in your life to align more with the description of biblical leadership? How could you pray or act towards that end?*

REFERENCES

Nine Marks of a Healthy Church by Mark Dever

Greek references from www.blueletterbible.com

<https://baptiststandard.com/opinion/editorials/are-we-entering-a-pastoral-drought/>