I teach biblical studies at a seminary. One of my favorite courses to teach is hermeneutics, the principles and practice of discovering a written text’s enduring meaning. Near the end of the course, I guide students to put into practice the principles they have learned. We spend at least one class period examining a set of biblical passages that relate to a contemporary issue. We work to understand the meaning of the selected passages in their original contexts and then discuss appropriate ways to apply the biblical truths today.

Since most of my seminary students are future (if not current) church leaders, one issue that always generates a lot of discussion in the practice session is church organization. Students want to know the Bible’s guidance regarding church leadership. Quite often at the start of the practice sessions, students defend the leadership model they have seen operating in their churches as youths and young adults. In hermeneutics, however, they suspend those passions until they have searched the Scriptures for guidance.

When Paul addressed the issue of church leadership in 1 Timothy 3, he focused primarily on two groups of leaders, overseers and deacons. In the context of the Ephesian church, Paul’s greater concern was not organizational structure but rather the potential leaders’ character. Churches may thrive under different leadership approaches, but they cannot thrive without leaders of Christian integrity, faith, and love.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 TIMOTHY 3:1-13; TITUS 1:6-9

As noted in the introduction, Paul probably wrote 1 Timothy and Titus around the same time period, the first letter going to Timothy in Ephesus...
and the second going not long after to Titus on the island of Crete. Paul had sent both of these young coworkers to help strengthen the churches in those locations, and both men had to confront the destructive influence of false teachers in the respective churches. Timothy and Titus needed to correct the situations by identifying and installing church leaders whose genuine Christian character was evident and consistent. Titus 1:6-9 is included as additional background text regarding the character qualifications of pastoral overseers or elders.

In 1 Timothy 3:1, Paul commended the role of overseer as a noble work. He then identified in 3:2-7 the personal qualities and abilities required to fulfill such a crucial role in the church. These qualities and abilities included integrity, faithfulness to family, self-control, ability to teach others, patience, humility, competence in leadership (at home as well as in the church), and an honest reputation in the wider community. To Titus, Paul identified similar personal qualities, adding that an overseer (also called an elder) needed to be able to recognize and refute false teaching (see Titus 1:9).

In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Paul addressed the qualities to look for in selecting deacons. Many Bible students locate the origin of deacon ministry in Acts 6:1-6. As the early church in Jerusalem multiplied in number, the apostles recognized that they needed help in carrying out certain ministry activities, in particular caring for needy widows. In response, the believers selected “seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom” to continue the care ministry. That same division of ministry between overseers and deacons but similarity of needed character qualities was evident among churches Paul established during his missionary journeys. Interestingly, Paul did not mention deacons in his letter to Titus. Perhaps the gospel work among believers on Crete was so new or progressed so slowly that Titus’s primary work was getting basic pastoral leadership in the churches (see Titus 1:5).

In the middle of Paul’s instructions to Timothy concerning deacons, he also mentioned the qualities needed in women who serve (1 Tim. 3:11). Bible scholars debate whether Paul was referring in this verse to deacons’ wives or to a separate group of women who served in certain care ministries.

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

**A PASTOR’S HEART (1 Tim. 3:1)**

**VERSE 1**

This saying is trustworthy: “If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work.”
As he did in 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul affirmed the validity and importance of a truth by attaching the words **this saying is trustworthy** (“true,” KJV). In this instance the saying emphasized the crucial value of pastoral leadership in the church: **If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work.** Evidently, the Ephesian church was reaping tragic results from allowing false teachers to arise and gain influence in the congregation. Paul knew that the false teachers not only spouted false doctrine but also demonstrated serious character flaws. To correct the situation, Timothy would need to set the example, exemplifying Christlike qualities in his own leadership.

The Greek word rendered **overseer** (“office of a bishop,” KJV; office of overseer,” ESV) comes over into English in the term **episcopate**. The word can refer to watching over someone in the sense of visiting or being present with them (see Luke 19:44; 1 Pet. 2:12). The term can also refer to the office, or position, of one who gives oversight or care. By the beginning of the second century AD, the word was used in reference to a Christian leader who had oversight of multiple churches within a region. Paul, however, used the term in his day in reference to the primary spiritual leader of a local church.

The Greek word translated **aspires to** literally means “to stretch oneself” or “to reach out one’s hand.” Did Paul expect potential overseers to compete for the office similar to the way someone today might compete as a candidate for election? Probably not. More likely, he was simply impressing on the Ephesians the value and importance of pastoral leadership in the church. It was (and is) a noble **work** that demands excellence in Christian character and conduct.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Bishop” on page 222 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What are the most inspiring qualities you see demonstrated in your church’s pastoral leader(s)? How has your pastor’s leadership and character motivated you to serve Christ?

**A PASTOR’S CHARACTER** (1 Tim. 3:2-7)

**VERSE 2**

An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

This particular form of the Greek word for **overseer** appears four times in the New Testament to refer to leaders in the church (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1;
1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7) and once to refer to Jesus as the “Overseer of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25). The word was used in the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) to refer to both religious and military leaders (see Num. 4:16; Judg. 9:28). In Paul’s day, the word usually referred to someone who had a definite function or office. In the New Testament, the overseer’s character is discussed more often than his specific duties in the church.

The first characteristic, **above reproach**, may have been intended as a summary of all the subsequent characteristics. The word referred to conduct that was above criticism. In other places in 1 Timothy, Paul used the word to refer to expectations concerning widows (1 Tim. 5:7) and Timothy (6:14). Such excellent behavior would be observable by members of the community at large and would ensure that no credible charges could be brought against a church leader.

The next characteristic listed by Paul, **the husband of one wife**, has been the source of much debate among Bible interpreters. The phrase can be translated literally as “a one-woman man.” A few verses later, Paul used almost identical wording when addressing the character of deacons (3:12). Some interpreters have suggested that Paul was condemning polygamy. However, polygamy among rank and file citizens was not common in Paul’s day, making such a command unnecessary. In addition, an admonition against polygamy would not fit the nearly identical phrasing addressed to widows (“the wife of one husband,” 5:9). Other interpreters have contended that Paul’s intention was to eliminate those who were single from consideration as overseers or deacons. Given Paul’s own marital status (1 Cor. 7:7-8) and his positive attitude toward singleness (7:32-35), however, it is also difficult to conclude that Paul was eliminating unmarried men from leadership positions.

Another proposed interpretation of this text relates to remarriage. Some Bible students have argued that Paul was forbidding marriage after the death of a spouse. Again, given Paul’s stated approval in other Scriptures of marriage after the death of a spouse (Rom. 7:2-3; 1 Cor. 7:39), it is unlikely that he forbade it for church leaders in Ephesus.

Still other Bible interpreters conclude that Paul’s main point was an overseer’s faithfulness in marriage. Unlike polygamy, marital infidelity was all too common in Paul’s day. In light of a culture that did not always value faithfulness to marriage vows, as well as false teachers who denigrated marriage as a whole (see 1 Tim. 4:3), the marriages of overseers and deacons needed to be exemplary. Churches today need to prayerfully seek God’s leadership in understanding and applying this text. However, we must be careful that, in debating issues such as divorce and remarriage, we do not lose sight of Paul’s call for faithfulness and fidelity in marriage.
The next five positive characteristics are each single Greek words. The first two words are closely related and refer to the idea of self-control or prudent behavior. The first word, translated self-controlled (“vigilant,” KJV; “sober-minded,” ESV; “temperate,” NIV), describes someone who is levelheaded. It appears also in 3:11 as a needed quality in a deacon’s wife (or a woman who serves in the church). The next word, translated sensible (“sober,” KJV; “self-controlled,” ESV; NIV), describes someone who, through careful deliberation, seeks to take wise, responsible action.

The Greek word translated respectable (“of good behaviour,” KJV) refers to people whose consistent good conduct inspires the respect of others. Being hospitable was the duty of all believers (see Heb. 13:2); but overseers were expected to lead by example in showing hospitality. In Paul’s day, Christian travelers often counted on the hospitality of fellow believers for overnight accommodations and food.

The Greek term translated able to teach occurs only twice in the New Testament, here and in 2 Timothy 2:24. This term does not appear in Paul’s letter to Titus, yet the apostle urged Titus to remind overseers in the churches of Crete to give instruction “with sound teaching and to refute [false teachers] who contradict it” (Titus 1:9).

VERSE 3

not an excessive drinker, not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy.

Paul continued to describe a lifestyle that was “above reproach” by adding four qualities that church leaders should avoid. The Greek word translated excessive drinker (“given to wine,” KJV; “drunkard,” ESV; “given to drunkenness,” NIV) occurs in the New Testament only here and in Titus 1:7. Paul used similar language a few verses later in addressing deacons (1 Tim. 3:8). While Paul was aware that alcoholic drink could be used as medicine for certain ailments (see 5:23), he consistently condemned drunkenness. Excessive use of alcohol clouded one’s judgment and led to sinful behavior. Some believers in the Corinthian church got drunk during worship gatherings—even during the Lord’s Supper—leading to selfish behavior that humiliated the poor in their midst (1 Cor. 11:21-22).

The next two negative qualities Paul noted, acting as a bully (“striker,” KJV; “violent,” ESV; NIV) and being quarrelsome, often are linked to excessive drinking. On the other hand, some people who rise to leadership positions simply become intoxicated by an improper sense of power. They justify—especially to themselves—that bullying and quarreling are the qualities needed to get things done. The Greek term rendered bully describes
a pugnacious, quick-tempered person who forces his will on others. Paul instructed that a Christlike approach to leadership, by contrast, was to be gentle. This Greek word describes a person who displays a humble, courteous spirit—one who displays self-control and is patient in dealing with others.

Fourth, Paul directed that an overseer must not be characterized by greed. Evidently some of the false teachers in Ephesus were using their positions of authority as a “way to material gain” (see 1 Tim. 6:5). An obsessive pursuit of wealth can lead Christian leaders to lose focus on their calling and bring about much grief for themselves and for churches (1 Tim. 6:10).

**VERSE 4**

_He must manage his own household competently and have his children under control with all dignity._

In selecting a church’s overseer, Timothy first needed to be sure of the potential leader’s Christlike character. That requirement was basic; no church could thrive under an overseer who did not exhibit a Spirit-filled life. Also crucial, however, was to validate a potential leader’s administrative skills. Timothy needed to ensure that the leader could actually lead others well.

One good way to gauge a potential overseer’s leadership skills was to observe how he managed his own household. In Paul’s day, a household could include not only a man’s immediate family but also extended family as well as servants and others who worked for him. The Greek word translated manage can also mean “preside (or rule) over,” “give attention to,” and “direct.” It can emphasize the responsibility of protecting, caring for, and superintending others.

Paul counseled Timothy (and the Ephesian church) to observe whether a potential overseer of the church led his household competently (“well,” KJV; ESV; NIV). If he had children, did he have his children under control with all dignity (“with all gravity,” KJV; “in a manner worthy of full respect,” NIV)? The phrase rendered with all dignity could refer either to the children’s respectful submission to their father’s authority or to the father’s dignified, patient exercise of parental authority. Either way, the family’s home life gave evidence of a potential overseer’s Christlike leadership skills.

**VERSE 5**

_(If anyone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of God’s church?)_

To make sure that Timothy and the Ephesian church did not miss his reason for mentioning a church leader’s home life, Paul clarified the reason in an aside. Many English Bible translations signify Paul’s intent by putting his
rhetorical question in parentheses. The question itself probably was meant to motivate Ephesian believers to pay closer attention to the false teachers’ lifestyles. If the false teachers’ conduct at home was consistently selfish, excessive, and quarrelsome, how could anyone think they would take care of God’s church? The assumed answer was clear: they would not.

VERSE 6

He must not be a new convert, or he might become conceited and incur the same condemnation as the devil.

Paul further instructed that an overseer must not to be a new convert (“not a novice,” KJV). The Greek word translated a new convert is the basis of our English term neophyte [NEE oh fight], which literally means “newly planted.” The term was used in the sense of being newly planted into the Christian community. Paul’s concern was that one who rose too quickly to a position of leadership might become conceited (“puffed up with conceit,” ESV). Paul accused the false teachers of being conceited (1 Tim. 6:4; 2 Tim. 3:4).

Interestingly, Paul did not include this qualification for an overseer in his letter to Titus. Perhaps the reason for the omission in Titus’s letter had to do with the newness of the churches on Crete. Most of the believers there likely were new converts. Paul’s other instructions regarding overseers still applied.

Paul warned that conceited overseers would be in danger of incurring the same condemnation as the devil (literally, “into judgment of the devil”). This phrase is open to two interpretations. First, Paul may have meant that selfish, rebellious church leaders would find themselves under the same kind of divine judgment that Satan received when he was thrown from heaven and later completely defeated by Christ’s death and resurrection. Second, Paul may have been referring to the damage Satan can inflict on false teachers who become spiritually blind, especially through conceit.

VERSE 7

Furthermore, he must have a good reputation among outsiders, so that he does not fall into disgrace and the devil’s trap.

Finally, Paul instructed that a potential church overseer must have a good reputation (literally, “a good witness”; “a good report,” KJV; “well thought of,” ESV) among outsiders. Business and community leaders often know when a church leader fails to pay debts, expects favors, engages in shameful behavior, or has a tendency to tell lies. Such a leader quickly brings disgrace (“reproach,” KJV) on himself, having fallen into the devil’s trap. Moreover, a disgraced church leader can bring discredit on the entire church congregation in the eyes of the community. Spiritual seekers may question
whether the gospel is truly life-transforming and if church is any different from the world.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

What is the difference between a believer’s character and reputation? How do the two qualities connect and interact? How does a church pastor’s reputation in the broader community impact the church’s reputation?

**A DEACON’S CHARACTER (1 Tim. 3:8-13)**

**VERSE 8**

Deacons, likewise, should be worthy of respect, not hypocritical, not drinking a lot of wine, not greedy for money,

The term *likewise* indicates that Paul considered *deacons* to be an important part of a church’s leadership. Consequently, *deacons* needed to be carefully selected, and potential deacons needed to embody the same Christlike qualities as overseers. Their tasks and roles in church life might differ from the overseer’s role, but their spiritual character and reputation were just as vital.

The Greek word translated *deacons* literally means “to kick up dust” in the sense of hastily and readily completing an assignment. New Testament writers used the term in reference to those who served in special ways or ministries. The word appears eight times in the Gospels, where it is usually translated “servant.” It occurs more than twenty times in Paul’s writings, where it was used of Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), Apollos (1 Cor. 3:5), Tychicus, (Eph. 6:21), Epaphras (Col. 1:7), and Timothy (1 Tim. 4:6), as well as of Paul himself (1 Cor. 3:5; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23,25). In 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (as well as in Phil. 1:1), the term refers not to a particular individual but to a church office of servant-leaders. As with the office of overseer in the preceding verses, Paul focused more on deacons’ character than their specific functions in the church.

The Greek word rendered *worthy of respect* (“grave,” KJV; “dignified,” ESV) can also mean “honorable” or “serious-minded.” It emphasizes that deacons are to behave in such a manner as to earn the respect of others inside and outside the church community. Their demeanor shows they take seriously Christ’s demand for holy living.

Paul then listed three qualities that must be avoided if the deacon is to garner the respect of others. First, the deacon must not be *hypocritical*. The Greek word rendered *hypocritical* literally means “double-tongued.” It describes people who are not trustworthy in their speech. The term also
could be used to describe those who spread gossip. Deacons must guard their speech if they are to gain the respect of others.

Second, deacons, as with overseers, must not be given to drinking a lot of wine. A person under alcohol’s control loses the capacity to think clearly and often behaves foolishly if not sinfully. Deacons, like all believers, should live under the Spirit’s control.

Third, deacons must not be greedy for money (“not greedy of filthy lucre,” KJV; “not pursuing dishonest gain,” NIV). This particular Greek word described someone who not only was consumed by greed but also thrived on pursuing wealth dishonestly. Such people could not be trusted to serve others!

VERSE 9

holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

Although first-century deacons might not have been tasked with teaching the Scriptures, they were nevertheless to understand the gospel and hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. The phrase mystery of the faith referred to God’s truth that had been revealed in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection (see 1 Cor. 2:6,10; 1 Tim. 3:15). A clear conscience indicates not only mental affirmation but also ready obedience to the gospel’s moral and ethical demands.

VERSE 10

They must also be tested first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons.

Paul did not exclude new converts from serving as deacons. However, the demand that deacons also be tested first accomplished a similar result. Paul did not specify who was to do the testing or what the testing would cover. Probably, the content of the testing related to whether a potential deacon exhibited the character traits mentioned in 3:8-9,12. The term rendered blameless (“nothing against them,” NIV) sets a high standard. No Christian will live a sinless life this side of heaven. However, there needs to be a track record of holy living for those who take on leadership roles in the church.

VERSE 11

Wives, too, must be worthy of respect, not slanderers, self-controlled, faithful in everything.

The Greek word translated wives (“the women,” NIV) can also mean “women.” Thus, it is not certain whether Paul was addressing deacons’ wives or Christian women in general. Most English Bible translations indicate that
Paul was addressing the wives of deacons. Still, the instructions are valid for every woman in the church, whether married, single, or widowed.

The four characteristics required of Christian women are similar to those concerning overseers and deacons. Like their husbands, deacons’ wives must strive to be **worthy of respect**. They must carefully guard their speech, refusing to become **slanderers**. They must be **self-controlled**, a quality that Paul also required of the Christian men of Crete (Titus 2:2). They must be **faithful in everything**. Deacons’ wives—indeed all Christian women—should strive to be trustworthy and reliable in every aspect of their lives.

**VERSE 12**

Deacons are to be husbands of one wife, managing their children and their own households competently.

Returning to requirements for **deacons**, Paul indicated that these church leaders, like the overseers, needed to exhibit stable leadership in their homes. This included faithfulness to their spouses (**husbands of one wife**) and competence as a Christian father and manager of a household. A deacon’s track record at home was a good indicator of how he would serve in the church.

**VERSE 13**

For those who have served well as deacons acquire a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Paul began and ended his instructions regarding church leaders with words of encouragement. To be an overseer was “a noble work” (see 3:1). Similarly, **those who have served well as deacons** gain true spiritual rewards. First, they **acquire a good standing for themselves**. They gain respect and approval from the believing community. Second, they develop **great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus**. The phrase can refer to spiritual confidence exercised before God or before people. Boldness in the area of Christian faith increases the deacon’s confidence before God, which in turn manifests as bold service to God’s people and others.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

In what ways can effectively serving as a deacon increase a mature believer’s boldness in faith? How can that boldness lead the deacon to achieve even more effective ministry?