

A Day for Choosing  
I Timothy 3:1-13

Today, we will elect a slate of elders and deacons, as we do every year. But instead of looking at this as just another constitutional requirement, let's take the opportunity to think once about how the leaders of a congregation are supposed to contribute to our common life. What are they supposed to do? And what are their qualifications supposed to be? Let's take a look.

First, what is a deacon supposed to do? Acts chapter 6, from which we read responsively this morning, tells us. Back then, First Jerusalem had a problem in making sure that all the widows, women who had no husbands to provide for them, were fairly taken care of. It turned out that the Greek-speaking widows, whether because of a language barrier or a cultural barrier, weren't getting their fair share.

So, what did the church do to solve this problem? The apostles knew they didn't have time to handle all the logistical details themselves. So they recommended that the church elect seven honest deacons, full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom, to oversee the daily distribution to the truly needy members of the congregation.

Okay, so what does that tell us about a deacon's job today? Well, deacons should basically do the same things that they did back in the first century. Deacons are still in charge of the benevolences of the church. Deacons still bring to the attention of the church the needs of the community and of the wider world around us.

And then, under the direction of the session, deacons still provide a ministry of organization, giving the members concrete ways to help meet those needs, whether by giving funds or by giving service. In other words, now just as then, deacons should lead the membership in serving the church and the community.

How do they do this today? By encouraging us to give to missionaries and church planters like those listed in our bulletin every week. By organizing folks to lock and unlock the church every day and to clean up the grounds when needed.

But in addition to all this, deacons also oversee all the financial and physical needs of the church. They oversee the budget, reviewing the church's finances to make sure that the money the members give is used wisely and in accordance with the donors' wishes.

A deacon serves the church and the community, and so lives out the call of Christ. A deacon leads by example in stewardship and service, in word and in deed, in wisdom and in love.

But if deacons do all that, what are elders supposed to do? We find that also explained in our responsive reading for today. In Acts chapter 6, we see that the office of deacon was created in order to free the apostles to devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. This

of course means that the apostles, and the elders who succeed them today, have a job description that is focused on Scripture and prayer.

How do elders conduct the ministry of the Word? Well, as a teaching elder, that's my primary job. But the session as a whole shares in that ministry by holding me accountable, and by providing other opportunities for learning about the Word in depth. The elders in session set up the Sunday School and approve its curriculum. We set times for midweek Bible study. And if any of this ministry of the Word takes place outside a context of prayer, we can be confident that it will have very little good effect.

But there's another part of the elder's job that is hinted at in the passage from I Timothy that we just read – an elder isn't just called to teach and to pray. He's called to be a bishop, and that word means overseer.

But why do adult Christians need overseers? Well, we may not like to admit it, but we Christians are all bound by a common confession of sin, and that means we should all confess at the same time our tendency to self-deception, and thus our need to be held accountable for our actions. If we are honest with ourselves we will admit that we all need elders to keep us honest, lest the remnants of sin deceive us, and we end defying the Word of God even while we think we are being faithful to it. No matter how old we are, we all need ruling elders to watch over us.

Yes, we need deacons to oversee the Church's finances and benevolences, and we need elders to oversee our spiritual health and progress. And it's this common idea of oversight that lies behind the striking similarity between the characteristics Paul tells Timothy are necessary for both elders and deacons.

For if we read this passage simply as a list of spiritual qualifications for godly people they seem a bit arbitrary, and are certainly downright daunting. But looking at these as lists of qualifications for overseers, which elders and deacons both are, albeit in different ways, these traits just make good sense.

Think about it. Paul says that both elders and deacons are to be blameless – that means they are to be above reproach within the church. That just stands to reason, doesn't it? Elders must be so respected within the church that people will seek their advice and listen to their judgment and do what they say. An elder who doesn't have the trust of his people just can't be their shepherd. Likewise, deacons must also be respected enough for people to entrust the church funds to them. Without being thought blameless, they couldn't possibly do their job.

But because an elder's job is more directly tied to the proclamation of the Word, in no small measure the entire church will be judged by outsiders according to each elder's character and consistency. The elders must command respect outside the church so that the witness of

Christ is not compromised. In order for an elder to do his job of spiritual leadership, it goes without saying that he must be above reproach in the eyes of the church as well as of the world.

It is this need to command respect that leads Paul to deal at length not only with individual characteristics, but with family relationships. In order to tell whether someone would be a good elder or deacon, Paul says, look at how his children behave.

For after all, an elder's relationship to the members of the congregation is quite similar to that of a father to his children. A father disciplines his children, just as elders are supposed to discipline the church. A father teaches and leads his children and sets a good example for them, and an elder does all these things for the church members. So if a man's not an effective father, he probably won't be an effective elder.

Deacons are no different. If a deacon can't handle effectively all the details of managing a family, from putting food on the table to making sure that enough time is spent with each child and with his wife or her husband, how in the world can a deacon also take on the leadership of caring for the needs of the broader church family? No, it's no accident that Paul links success as a family man to success as a church officer.

A man's relationship to his wife is especially important – Paul literally says that each elder and deacon should be “a one-woman man.” Now, commentators disagree on whether Paul is talking about divorce or polygamy, but either way, the requirement makes perfect sense if you look at it like this: remember that an elder is to be a judge and a counselor. You want a judge who takes his vows seriously, right? A deacon is a steward who looks after the weak and oversees the church's benevolences. You want a steward who is faithful to his promises, right? And since we have so many marital problems in modern America, in fact since most of modern America's social problems stem from the collapse of the institution of marriage, it's all the more important that the overseers of the church take marriage seriously. Today it is imperative that a church officer should be a one-woman kind of man.

And what about drinking? Paul says that neither elders nor deacons should be given to much wine. Would you really trust the spiritual advice or counsel of a man who is drunk? Would you entrust your gifts to him?

And Paul says that neither elders nor deacons should be greedy for money. After all, a greedy man might withhold or temper his honest judgment if he thought it might reduce the amount of money you put in the plate. And would you imagine making a thief the guardian of the church's treasury?

No, all these characteristics make perfect sense – that is, if we understand our church officers to be overseers of our souls and our service. And that means that both of these passages form a great challenge for us today.

For those of us who have been chosen to be officers in the Church, we should be humbled as we are reminded of the great requirements and responsibilities of our office. We should pray that God would make us fit to be deacons and elders, that He would draw us close to Him in the Word and in prayer, that He would purge us of our sins and mold us ever more into the likeness of Christ. And we should be honest in asking all the members of the church to pray the same things for us.

But these passages are also a challenge to the membership, a challenge to embrace the Biblical model of discipline and oversight. It's a challenge for all of us to admit that we need elders to hold us accountable for our holiness, that we need deacons to hold us accountable for our service. It's a challenge not just for us to elect wise and godly leaders. It's a challenge for us to follow them.

For let's face it. If you aren't really planning to follow the spiritual leadership of the elders you elect, it really doesn't matter who sits in the session room. If you think elders just serve on the board of a local non-profit organization, if all you expect elders to do is to serve communion and approve programs, then it really won't matter whom you choose.

Likewise, if all you expect your deacons to do is to open the church doors and turn on the lights and walk down the aisle to take up the collection every Sunday morning, then it really won't matter whom you choose. If you aren't planning to allow the deacons to spur you to greater giving and to greater service, then it doesn't matter who your deacons are.

In a few minutes, you are going to elect deacons and elders. That's one of the great gifts that we Presbyterians have been bequeathed from our fathers in the faith. We don't have bishops appointed over us by other bishops. We don't have pastors assigned to us in spite of our wishes. We Presbyterians get to pick our own leaders.

But the real challenge comes after the election, after the installation. Will you follow those you elect? Will you ask your elders for spiritual advice and counsel? Will you agree to serve when your deacons call on you? Will you let your leaders spur you on to greater love and service of God and of your fellow men? Will you let your leaders help you, both as individuals and as a congregation, grow into the likeness of Christ?