

ASPIRING TO THE OFFICE OF BISHOP

I want you to know that I am really excited about 2014 and the prospects it holds for this church. I thoroughly enjoyed brother Mike Mazzalongo who was our guest speaker last Sunday, not just for the lesson that he brought on The Power of the Cross, but even more so for the preview that he gave the elders and myself of the seminar he will be bringing us on April 18, 19, & 20th. You also need to be aware that on Sunday morning, March 9th, brother Willis Hood will be here to bring the morning lesson and to talk with the elders regarding a training class that he would like to teach on how to share the gospel with other people. Now, I want you to understand, neither of these two men are being brought here to be considered as a new pulpit minister. That is something that is going to be happening this year, but we are not to that stage just yet.

But as we look to the future, as we think about the things that are developing before us this year, one thing becomes very obvious, and that is, we need to strengthen our eldership. For the past month or two, the elders have been asking us to be praying about finding additional elders. We may be looking about and wondering where we are going to find such men, but let us do so always trusting that our God will supply our every need, Philippians 4:19.

This morning I want us to look at some things that we need to think about whether we appoint additional elders at this time or not. I want us to think about what Paul meant when he wrote in 1 Timothy 3:1 about aspiring to the office of bishop, or overseer. Some people mistakenly believe that is one of the qualifications for being an elder or bishop. That is really an unwarranted interpretation placed on the text but when it is advanced and generally accepted, it has the effect of keeping good men from serving in this capacity. So this morning, let's consider what Paul did say and hopefully this will assist us in our effort to find and appoint additional elders. We are going to be looking at the words of Paul found in **1 Timothy 3:1-7**.

Before I do that, however, let me quickly point out three things that will aid our understanding of what we read and learn from the New Testament. First of all, the words bishop and overseer are just two different ways the same Greek word—*episkopos*—has been translated. In some versions the word is translated as bishop, and in other versions it is translated as overseer.

Secondly, we need to understand that an overseer or bishop is simply another word for what we most often refer to as elders. They are two different words, but they refer to the same work or office. The word for overseer or bishop is *episkopos*, and the word for elder is *presbuteros*. Now, we know that both words are used in several passages with reference to the same persons. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 we have the qualifications given for an overseer. In Titus 1, Paul refers to similar qualifications regarding elders, but in the process, in verse 7, he also calls them overseers. Thus we know that both words—overseers and elders, refer to one and the same work or office. The ISBE suggests that the term elder would have been the more familiar way these men were known by those of a Jewish background, while Gentiles would have more easily understood the word overseer, or bishop. In the NT, those same men are also

referred to as stewards, and pastors. Sometimes members mistakenly refer to me as their pastor but I am not your pastor. Brother John, and Art and Ed are your pastors.

There is a third thing that also needs to be pointed out and that is that in every congregation, where such is possible, God desires that there be a plurality of men to be appointed to serve in the capacity as elders or bishops. There is never an exception to this rule.

- In Acts 14:23 we read where Paul appointed elders (plural) in every church.
- In Philippians 1:1, Paul sent greetings to all the saints along with their overseers and deacons.
- In Titus 1:5, Paul reminds Titus that the reason why he left him in Crete was so that he might appoint elders in every city.

By insisting upon a plurality of men to lead each congregation as elders, God wisely distributed the task of leadership among several, keeping it from becoming a burden too great for one man. He was also proscribing a solution for the problem that always seems to arise, and that is, of one man becoming a dictator over the church. In 3rd John, we read about just such a person, a man by the name of Diotrephes; a strong-willed person who loved power and was hurting the church.

Now with those things in mind, let's read the words of Paul regarding the appointment of overseers or elders. **1 Timothy 3:1-7**

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2) Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3) not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4) He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, 5) for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? 6) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7) Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Now, my goal this morning is to take the idea of "*If anyone aspires to the office of overseer.*" What did Paul mean by that word, aspire? As I said earlier, some people mistakenly believe that this constitutes one of the qualifications. Is that what Paul meant? Obviously I do not think so, and let's look at the reasons why.

The word aspire as I have read it in my ESV, is also translated that way in the NASB, and NIV. It is rendered as desire in KJV and the NKJV, and in the ASV, it is given as seeks. Thus, if any man aspires, or if any man desires, or if any man seeks the office or work of an overseer.

Thayer's Greek lexicon says that the Greek word that is translated as aspire, or desire, or seek, is from the word *oregamai* and has the meaning of "*to stretch oneself out in order to touch or*

grasp something, to reach after or desire something.” It can also mean “*to long for,*” or “*to covet after.*” A good synonym might be, *ambitious.*

For many people, the words covet and ambitious are negative words. They are associated with someone driven by sinful desires. But it is possible to covet something that is good. We might say, “I covet your prayers.” We can also covet or be ambitious for someone else. For example, what do we want for our children? Usually it is something good, isn’t it? If we desire something for selfish or self-serving reasons, then it is not good. In **Jeremiah 45:5**, we find this warning, “*Are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them.*”

On the other hand, there is a kind of ambition and aspiration that is good and healthy, and if I correctly understand what Paul was saying there in 1 Timothy 3:1, it is good when a man aspires to the office of overseer. It is not necessarily a sign of sinful self-centeredness. It can be an indication of spiritual maturity.

- When it is ambition that has been cleansed of self-seeking, and one that seeks only the glory of God, it is a good thing.
- When it is an ambition that seeks not position or praise or power or prestige or popularity, but instead seeks service to God and others, it is a good thing.
- It is a good thing when one’s ambition and aspiration is marked by these three things:
 - exaltation of God
 - edification of the church
 - evangelism of the lost

So when a man has a desire or ambition to serve as an overseer in the church in that way, Paul says that it is a noble, or good thing he desires to do. And pay attention to what Paul says there. In my ESV, he says “*it is a noble task*” that he desires. The KJV has “*he desires a good work.*” The word translated work or task is used throughout the NT with reference to work, some deed, or action, or some undertaking. God is not looking for, and the church has no need of men who are looking for a position. God is looking for men who are willing to work, who have it in their heart to take on that noble work, humbly putting themselves into the position as a servant, having a desire to serve so that God may be glorified and the church built up.

The work that is in view here, that is derived from this word, *episkopos*, is that of providing oversight to the church. As we well know, any good work, any worthwhile undertaking is going to require leadership. Those persons who will do their best to make sure that the work is done correctly, that the undertaking is completed successfully. Probably what we need to understand from this work can best be related to in one of two ways.

- First there is the idea of a shepherd. In **1 Peter 2:25**, the apostle writes about Jesus being the shepherd and overseer of our souls. That is, He is the one who is keeping watch over us. An overseer is like a shepherd who keeps watch over the sheep
- Secondly, an overseer is like a manager. A manager is a person who is assigned the responsibility of making sure that a task is done. Probably all of us have had jobs where

there was someone who was our manager. Their job was to make sure the rest of us did our jobs.

So, Paul is saying that a person who aspires to that kind of work, has a passion or desire for something that is truly good. If we take the word of God seriously, we cannot come to this passage and think that Paul is simply talking about a position, or title. He is talking about a responsibility that has its roots in humility and desire to serve God.

Was Paul saying that a person has to aspire to that office? No, he didn't say that. He did not even imply that. There is a big difference between one's aspirations or desire to do something and their willingness to do it. Obviously, it would clearly be wrong and a mistake to force one into that work. **1 Peter 5:2** would restrain us from doing something like that. There the apostle Peter, writing to elders, says this: "*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you....*" Notice Peter says this is something that men should do willingly. There are some things we do because we desire to do them, and there are some things we do because we are willing to do them. Do you recall Paul's point there in **2 Corinthians 9:7** with respect to our giving? He said, "*Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*" God doesn't want our money if it is something we give grudgingly. On the other hand, He doesn't require that we be "chomping at the bit" to give what we decide. He does want us to give it willingly, and when we do that, we have His approval.

In the same way, a man does not have to be "chomping at the bit" to be an elder or overseer, but of course he must have a willing heart.

Paul will go on in the rest of that passage there in 1 Timothy 3 and talk about a number of things that must be true of the man who is considered for the office of bishop, and that is why we often refer to those as qualifications. Let's also keep in mind that when you examine the 17 or so things Paul identifies in that passage, and the 17 things Paul mentions in Titus 1, many of those are things that can be true, more or less, of a man.

For example, how are we to measure a man against the qualification that he must be hospitable? Some are going to be more hospitable than others. Or how about the idea that a potential elder is one who manages his household well, and keeps his children submissive. One person might be judged by some people as too lenient in that respect, but other people might judge him as too strict. How recent is recent? Is it six weeks, or six months, or six years? You get my point, many of the qualifications that Paul does give necessarily are to be understood as things that are true of the man generally.

Now, these things being said, let us remind ourselves of what we are trying to do here.

We are a congregation of God's people. We are His people by virtue of being born again of the water and the Spirit. God has added us to Christ's church. This is not a club to which we join. We are God's people redeemed by the blood of the lamb and set apart for a great work—the

work of being a light to the world and the salt of the earth. Peter describes us in this way, in **1 Peter 2, beginning in verse 9:**

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10) Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Brethren, that's why we are here! That's why we exist. We who once were not a people, have now become a people. We are God's people with a job to do. Our job is proclaim the excellencies of God who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. Our job is to make known the gospel that has saved us so that still more people might be saved. This is going to be stressed over and over again throughout this year.

And as the church works and the church grows, we are going to need the best possible leaders we can find, and with the Holy Spirit's help we will do that. I want to leave you with these three challenges:

One, be praying about this. Please do not assume that just because you do not see how this is going to be possible that it cannot be done. God works in great and mysterious ways. We need to be praying that God will bless us in finding additional men to help serve the church as elders.

Two, let me encourage you to talk with some of the men that you think might possibly serve the church as an elder. Don't ask them if they are willing to serve, or if they have any objections to your submitting their name, talk to them about what they think about the church's work and mission is. Talk to them about any ideas they have regarding this church and its work. Who knows, you may get some brethren to thinking about these things more seriously.

Third, and this is for some of you men in particular. I want to encourage you to be praying about aspiring to the office of bishop. You may be reluctant to give that much thought. But why not you? Do you love the Lord? Do you love the Lord's people? Do you love the Lord's work? Do you love the Lord's word? Do you want to give the Lord the best you have to give? Paul didn't say that you have to aspire to that office, but are you at least willing to consider it, and if not, why not? If not you, then who?

In **Acts 20:28**, Paul told the Ephesian elders to "*take heed unto yourselves.*" The first person you need to oversee is yourself, and if you are not desirous, or at least willing to offer your humble service to God as an elder, you really need to ask yourself why.

I want to close the lesson this morning with a prayer that I hope all of us will continue to pray again and again. Let's be ceaseless in our petitions to God that He will grant our prayers and help us appoint some more men to this noble task. Shall we pray?