

WHAT HEALTHY CHURCH LEADERSHIP LOOKS LIKE

This is one way to consider Paul's first letter to Timothy in the New Testament. Paul's beloved church at Ephesus—the one he personally spent three years nurturing after its troubled beginning (Acts 19)—was in more trouble. Just as he had foreseen (Acts 20:29-31) “wolves” even from their “own number” had arisen to “distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.”

Unable to go himself, Paul sent young Timothy to counter these false teachers and restore the Ephesian church to health. It was a tough task. In the letter Paul continually urged Timothy to “fight the good fight;” to not “let anyone look down on you because you are young;” to “command, and teach;” and to “set an example” to the church. Paul knew Timothy needed such encouragement. To counter established and embedded leadership within in a church—especially if that leadership is unhealthy—took courage and persistence. Timothy struggled. The task even seemed to make him ill, but Paul prodded him to persevere.

Truth had been distorted by the unhealthy leaders in Ephesus. Their worship time was affected. Certain restrictions were being enforced that were unhealthy and unauthorized. Some women of the congregation had been negatively influenced, exploited and were acting out in unhealthy ways. Benevolence was being mishandled and taken advantage of. People in general were being mistreated. Leadership's love for money was a driving force in the unhealthy spirit.

Timothy was to avoid all of this, speak soundness into it, while living out a contrasting healthy leadership style before the church. This was Timothy's task—to teach about and to live out what healthy church leadership looks like.

The Character of Healthy Leadership

Since the church in Ephesus had such a distorted and unhealthy leadership structure, they needed clarification on the kind of character God values in his leaders. This is where Paul's instructions in 3:1-12 are so important. Paul shares character sketches of the kind of people God is calling to lead his church both as shepherds and special servants. Leading God's people is noble—highly needed and valued, but only for those who feel called and those who have the right heart and character.

Paul first speaks to elders. He outlines how those who desire to shepherd the flock must have a character beyond reproach. This character must be seen not just at church but also at home—in his commitment to his wife and family—and in the community. He must have the right temperament; the ability to discipline himself in all situations; know how to treat and welcome people and know how to teach. He should have healthy motivations; not given to addiction, extremes or flattery. He needs experience and sound judgment. These are the kind of men God needs—healthy and servant-minded—to shepherd God's flock. Healthy leaders who will produce healthy churches—something not happening at Ephesus.

Next Paul offers a similar description of the healthy character of deacons (and either their wives or deaconesses). Those who serve the church in this way are also to be people who are

worthy of respect; self-controlled, honest, clear minded and properly motivated, experienced in serving, trustworthy, not trouble makers—demonstrating their faith at home within their family.

All of this is what healthy church leadership looks like. It is the way leadership “ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth,” Paul remarks.

Again, contextually this is not what leadership looked like in Ephesus. Again, Timothy’s ministry there was to change that. To take Paul’s teaching, live it out, teach it, and bring about the changes needed within that church,

In our context we read and learn; we also are to live it out and teach it. Healthy church leadership is all too vital. As leadership goes, so goes the church. Ephesus is an example of what happens when it all goes bad. We do not ever want to be there. That is why Paul’s teaching remains ever crucial. It remains crucial when churches look to identify and add leadership. It remains crucial for those who are called to leadership. It remains crucial if churches are to be healthy.

Practical Applications

Lived out, this kind of healthy leadership also includes being:

- Purposeful. Healthy leadership understands their purpose—to shepherd the flock—and intentionally lives that out. They are purposeful in protecting, nurturing, guiding, loving and caring for the sheep.
- Progressive. In that, they have vision for the sheep and plan for ways to continue the growth of the sheep. They are forward thinking. They do not let the sheep remain in same pasture until there is no more food to sustain them.
- Present. Shepherds stay with the sheep. The only reason they leave is to go find the one lamb that has wandered away. This is the only way the shepherd will know the sheep and they will recognize his voice.
- Prayerful. This may be obvious, but it still needs stating. Healthy leaders spend much time in prayer for those they lead.

Healthy leadership like that Timothy was to teach and demonstrate (and what we continue to need in churches now) is to be:

...diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Preserve in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. (4:15-16).

This is what healthy church leadership looks like.