

2 Timothy 2:1-7 (NRSV)

A Good Soldier of Christ Jesus

2 You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; ² and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well. ³ Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. ⁴ No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer. ⁵ And in the case of an athlete, no one is crowned without competing according to the rules. ⁶ It is the farmer who does the work who ought to have the first share of the crops. ⁷ Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things.

1 Timothy 3 (NRSV)

Qualifications of Bishops

³ The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. ² Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way— ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may be 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 and the snare of the devil.

Qualifications of Deacons

⁸ Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; ⁹ they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons. ¹¹ Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons be married only once, and let them manage their children and their households well; ¹³ for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

The Mystery of Our Religion

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, ¹⁵ if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth. ¹⁶ Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great:

He is revealed in flesh,
vindicated in spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among Gentiles,
believed in throughout the world,
taken up in glory.

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2 Timothy 2:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:1-16

Qualifications for Church Leadership

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How many of you have read a book or heard a talk on leadership before?

Leadership has become a buzzword in our culture. Teachers are to be leaders in the classroom. Athletes, leaders on the field. Business leaders. Political leaders. Managerial leaders. Entrepreneurial leaders. The list goes on and on. In America, we idealize those who are successful leaders, and we measure that success by the numbers. Is their business profitable? Can they achieve high test scores? How are they polling among younger voters?

This leadership-speak has also made its way into the church. Those who adore this model glom onto the passages in Acts where Peter spoke and the church added to its number by the thousands. We praise the leaders of “growing” churches even if the growth happens to be more about real estate values and convenient programs for families than it is about preaching the love of God shown to us in Jesus. Some of the fastest growing churches in recent years have been the ones that have preached that its members will be prosperous if they do certain things – sometimes things like give a large donation to that particular church entity or buy the preacher’s latest book.

Remember the recent story in the news of the poor widow that was sent a letter of dismissal from her church because she couldn’t give money anymore? The data points

that are important in the church's success model are also all about numbers and popularity. How many new members this year? How big is the budget? How many "likes" do we have on social media?

In this model, the qualifications for church leadership are good looks, charisma, and salesmanship. It's about having the right resume, or even more importantly the right connections. The leaders who rise to the top in this model tend toward having the characteristics of the privileged. They have known access to money and opportunity, and are often, though certainly not always, white and male. Success comes naturally to these leaders, and therefore failure becomes something to avoid at all costs. When the congregation's growth plateaus, or worse yet, an uncomfortable truth leads to division and dissent, these leaders tend to "hear God's calling" to move on.

I find it rather telling that the first "essay" question on the Presbyterian form for pastors to fill out when they are seeking a call is this: *Describe a moment in your recent ministry that you recognize as one of success and fulfillment.* The other questions are also about personal growth and leading change. How much do you think our denomination has bought into this cultural expectation for successful church leadership? Curious, isn't it?

But, thank goodness, this is not the only model for identifying the qualifications for church leadership. It just happens to be the one that is so prevalent that we almost have trouble seeing its impact. Looking back though to our texts for today, Paul makes the case to Timothy that the qualifications for bishops and deacons have a lot to do with moral behavior and depth of character. Our list might end up looking different from Paul's, but he identifies things like being above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, good at teaching, and did I say, not a drunkard? The bishops, he says, should not be violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and most certainly not a lover of money. This isn't a bad list, per se. Being temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, and good at teaching – those are great qualifications for church leadership. Gentleness, peacefulness, and not being swayed by money – also darned good qualities for those who are to be responsible for decision-making in churches. Now I'm a little concerned about the ongoing implications for what Paul has to say about being married only once and about having submissive children. However, I really like it and think it makes sense when he says that you might be able to tell a little bit about how someone will manage a church by looking at the care and concern they demonstrate within their own family. That analogy will preach.

The sad thing is that I've seen those individuals who get obsessed about the wrongness of divorce or single parenthood or who have gotten really worked up

about some kind of sexual sinlessness as an ordination requirement be the same ones who are found out for doing awful things in relationship to their own spouses and children. Not one of us has a household completely free from anxiety or even sin, and yet, you can tell a lot about a person's character if you see what their typical care and concern for their own household looks like. Do they treat their spouse with respect and kindness? Are their children well cared-for? Can he or she be both a leader and a servant at the same time? And... does the church who sets such leaders apart for service see to it that these bishops, deacons, and various other pastor/clergy types have "enough" to care for their own household, yet are not drawn too deeply into the consumer mentality of always wanting something "more" and "better?" It shouldn't come as a surprise to us that even then there was a concern that leadership in the church isn't quite compatible with status seeking behavior.

Which brings me to what Paul identifies as essential for the ministry of deacons. He instructs Timothy that they should hold fast to the mystery of our faith. And just what is that mystery? I dare say that it's the mystery of failure as the gateway to eternal life. The deacons were charged with holding on to the truth that God chose to enter this world as a baby, the illegitimate son of a poor, young, and single mother. They were charged to remember that Jesus was an ordinary human being, a rabbinic teacher who did a little fishing and a little carpentry work on the side. Then they were called to pass on those awkward teachings, the one about the last being first, and the

one that said that the one who tried to save their life in this world would lose it for eternity. They were called to live out the scandal that their designated holy person was a friend of sinners, a person who broke bread with those who would deny him and betray him. They were called to stand against the empire, the same empire who permitted the execution of Jesus on the cross. They were called to stand against the religious authorities, the same religious authorities that engineered the deception that would get Jesus nailed to that tree. They were called to believe the mystery that the grave could not hold Jesus, and that he was resurrected after three days to become the living Christ who still meets us in our own failures, and promises that God's love is the one thing that can restore us and give us hope for the future. Yeah, that mystery, the one that has inspired the faithful for generations but never promised us success, or prosperity, or even good character development.

So here's what I really think. I think that in today's world, we are most hungry to hear Christian leaders who are holding fast to the mystery of our faith. We want to know that even in our worst failures, God is holding us close. It's why people followed Jesus in the first place – to hear the amazing depth of God's love for us, to know that life was meant to be both abundant and eternal. Then, I think we'd like to have a few leaders that we can trust to be accountable, respectable, sensible, hospitable, good teachers, who aren't in it for the money, or fame, or even the security. We want to emulate Christian leaders who are loving to their families, the

ones they're related to, and the ones that become the family of the church. Then, if, when, and however success comes, it's a bonus. When we start out with numbers as the goal, we can way too easily lose sight of the rest. The story in Acts about the amazing growth of the church was that it was just that, amazing, a surprise, a shocking revelation that people really did need to hear about the mystery of faith and found it way too beautiful to resist.

So if I were in charge of our church leadership identification process, and there are probably many reasons why I'm not, here are the essay questions I'd really most like to read on either a church's or a pastor's information form:

Describe your most epic failure. What did you learn from it and how have you found the grace to heal in the time since?

What do you love about the people who are closest to you? And how do you love the people who drive you crazy?

What would your best friend say are your three most defining characteristics?

If you have found success in your work, how did it surprise you?

Do you think I should submit those for consideration? Amen.