

Holding to the Truth: An Officer's Beliefs  
Titus 1:9; 1 Timothy 3:9

*"No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."*  
17<sup>th</sup> century poet John Donne wrote those words in his poem titled No Man Is an Island. He coined that phrase to communicate how much humans need one other. We don't thrive in isolation.

We need relationships. We need people to speak truth into our lives, to encourage us and correct us and spur us on. God designed us to need friendship and accountability. We bring each other back to reality. So much of life provokes irrational thinking and behavior. We naturally begin to believe things that aren't true and let those things shape our lives.

This is why it makes sense that God's plan includes the formation of communities of believers that the Bible calls "churches." If you are born again, you have a personal relationship with God through union with Christ, but you also have a union and connection with other believers. And God established a structure for the local church to sustain it and cause it to grow.

The apostle Paul and his protégé Timothy established a church in the ancient city of Philippi. Eventually they moved on, but not before the installation of this structure for that church. The church at Philippi followed the biblical model of church government, and Paul references it in the first sentence of his letter to them which we call the book of Philippians in the NT. Paul writes, *"To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons."*

In another one of his letters – the book of Titus – Paul uses the word "overseer" interchangeably with the word "elder." Elders and deacons are God's appointed way of caring for and leading His church. Today, and for two more Sundays in January, we are going to look closely at the Biblical qualifications for these two God-ordained offices.

Paul refers to them as offices in 1 Timothy 3. They are public positions to which someone is appointed. But we do not rush to install men in these offices, or install men simply because they are popular or well-liked, or have a dynamic personality, or because they hold great influence or enjoy great worldly success in their careers. Rather, the Scriptures give certain criteria which helps us determine if a man is qualified for office.

The Bible addresses their beliefs, their character, and their responsibilities. Today we begin today with the issue of beliefs. Why are beliefs so critical? Because the people of God are vulnerable to a host of lies and false teachings that contradict or misinterpret His Word. And doctrine affects behavior.

This is why God commands that the body of Christ be guided, protected, and served by men who hold firmly to the truth of Scripture. And so potential elders and deacons must be examined and trained before being installed into office to ensure that they hold, first of all, to sound Biblical beliefs.

God's Word describes the two offices as each having a different focus. The office of elder focuses primarily on what we call "word ministry," and the office of deacon focuses on what we call "deed ministry."

"Elder" is an office of shepherding, ruling, and teaching. They lead the way in caring for the spiritual needs of the people: in preaching and teaching, giving wisdom and oversight related to the Word, guarding the church against false teaching, and confronting with truth those trapped in sin.

"Deacon" is an office of sympathy and service. They, on the other hand, lead the way in caring for the physical needs of the people. They handle issues related to the church's resources, and lead us in caring for those in need

But how do the beliefs of these men affect their ability to carry out these responsibilities? What is the connection between their doctrine and their office? God's trustworthy Word must guide the men who lead in Word ministry and God's glorious deeds must guide the men who lead in Deed ministry.

Now, in Titus 1:9 Paul writes that an elder or overseer "*must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*" I don't know how the importance of doctrine could be made clearer. An elder clings to and is devoted to God's reliable message as proclaimed in Scripture.

If an elder does not hold to the whole message, he cannot do with the information what he has been charged with doing, which is the "Word ministry" of the church. An elder must be orthodox in his beliefs. What do I mean by "orthodox?" The word is formed from two old words. The Greek word "orthos" which means "straight" or "right" and the Greek "doxa" meaning "to think." In Latin, the word "orthodox" was formed to mean "right thinking" or "right belief."

The Old and New Testaments obviously contain a great deal of information. They are sufficient by themselves, but some things are harder to understand than others. The apostles understood this. At the end of 2 Peter, the apostle Peter says this about Paul's writings. Peter states, "*There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.*"

"Other Scriptures" at that time, referred, in large part, to the OT – to the Hebrew Bible. Notice that Peter put the apostles' writings on par with the OT. Some things are more difficult to understand, therefore we benefit from the study and interpretation of Scripture throughout the history of the church.

Take for instance, the doctrine of the Trinity – the three-person nature of the one true God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This reality is not as immediately clear as, say, the doctrine of salvation in Jesus Christ. Creeds were later produced to clarify those things. But it became

apparent as time went on that the church needs more than a few creeds to summarize the key teachings of the Bible for God's people.

That's where the Westminster Standards come in. The long document called the Westminster Confession and the question/answer documents called the Larger and Shorter Catechisms are summary documents to which Good Shepherd holds as a congregation in the Presbyterian Church in America. Those documents are not on the level of the Bible by any means. They simply seek to summarize the Bible's teachings so any church member can understand.

As an ordained minister in the PCA, I was examined to ensure that my whole body of belief aligns with the beliefs of those summary documents. It was a strenuous examination. Those who become elders at Good Shepherd will face a similar, though not as strenuous, examination.

And to explain why, I want to point out a differentiation that we see in the Scriptures between two kinds of elders. Same office, not two different offices. But some elders labor in preaching and teaching to the extent that is their livelihood. Paul mentions this in 1 Timothy 5. He describes the "*double honor*" for "*those who labor in preaching and teaching.*" And in the next verse, he quotes the OT, writing, [18] *For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."*

The idea is that those who perform this core work of the church can be employed and give themselves full-time to this work, earning their living in this way. Paul calls it a "double honor" for someone like me as a pastor. Why "double?" 1. I receive the office and 2. the salary. But clearly in 1 Timothy 5 the implication is that some elders don't earn their living this way. We don't need as many preachers as we do shepherds of the people.

And so, in the PCA we recognize this distinction as Teaching Elder and Ruling Elder. I'm a Teaching Elder; Tim Bell, Jack Marchette, and Andy McInville are Ruling Elders. They still must be able to teach, and I must also rule and shepherd, but they don't go through the same rigorous training and examination that I did. We still cover all the essential doctrines of the faith.

And they must take a vow that they adhere to the whole of the Scriptures and specifically to the summary of belief laid out in the Westminster standards. It takes months to cover it all with these nominated men. But at the end, the goal is to identify men who, as Paul says, "*hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.*" Even though TEs do the bulk of preaching and teaching, ruling elders must be able to test and approve what teaching elders preach and teach. And so what you see here is a healthy system of accountability. God designed the church to have this kind of accountability.

And in the verses after Titus 1:9, Paul explains why doctrine is so important for an elder. He describes those who are teaching lies, and he says, "*they are upsetting whole families.*" They were destroying families. The families were not "upset" like you're upset if the shirt you wanted to wear didn't get washed. They were not "upset" like you get upset when someone cuts you off

on the highway. They were “Upset” like what happens when your boat gets turned upside down in the middle of the lake.

Sound Word ministry is not just a good idea. It is a vital aspect of the church. And to that end, it should be primary when deciding what church you will call home. Weak and worldly doctrine will capsize your life. God’s trustworthy Word must guide the men who lead in Word ministry.

Do you see your own continual need for healthy Word ministry? God has given the ordinary means of the Word, sacraments, and prayer to bring you back to reality. We need voices outside of ourselves speaking the Word of God to us. Otherwise, we find our way to an echo chamber to hear what we want to hear. An elder can fulfill his God-ordained role only if he holds to sound doctrine.

So, think of “elder” as one side of a coin, and “deacon” as the other side. Notice 1 Timothy 3:9 again. Paul writes that deacons “...*must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.*” The mystery of the faith.

What examples come to mind when you hear “mystery?” Stonehenge, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster? A mystery is something which remains unclear. So how do you hold to a mystery? The Christian faith is a mystery which has been made clear.

In Ephesians 3, Paul describes the mystery of God’s will, and he says, [6] *This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*” It was puzzling to Jews that non-Jews could have equal standing as the people of God, though they weren’t blood descendants of Abraham and didn’t keep the ceremonial laws of the OT. God revealed through Jesus and to the apostles, and related back to God’s promise to Abraham that through Christ all the peoples of the earth would be blessed. This was a mystery.

But we can think about the mystery in even broader terms – to the whole of God’s revealed truth in the Christian faith, to all that is revealed by God to us which we should believe. How we would be saved was hidden from view, but God made it clear. His plan for fulfilling the covenant with Abraham was hidden from view, but God made it clear. God’s mysterious plan of redemption had been revealed through words, yes, but also through deeds.

God had done so much. So much of Scriptures describes His works. The doctrinal requirement for deacons is the same as elders, although, here different wording is used, and for good reason, because the role of deacon is different. It is deeds-based. A good deacon must hold to the revealed will of God which He has shown us not only in what He has said, but also in what He has done. Deacons, like elders, must hold to the essential doctrines of the faith,

13<sup>th</sup> century Italian friar Francis of Assisi is often quoted as having said, *“Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words.”* However, the quote doesn’t exist in any of his writings. There’s no evidence that he said this, although he did say that we should preach by our deeds.

But he never elevated deeds above articulating the truth of God's Word. In fact, Francis' first biographer, Thomas of Celano, who wrote about Francis just three years after his death, points out that Francis was passionately devoted to telling the gospel message.

Deeds matter, of course. James says that faith without works (or deeds) is dead. And so, deacons are also vital to the work of the church. Deed ministry is not secondary, and so deacons are not JV. They aren't the B team.

So much deed ministry goes into the worship and fellowship we enjoy here at GS. This is why our deacons are examined and trained to understand and adhere to the whole of Scripture and to its summary in the Westminster documents. Our deacons – Jason Grimsley, Adrian Langley, and Dan Scofield – hold to these in full.

Christ said that He came into the world to serve us, and serving is part of church ministry. No one is self-sufficient. Self-reliance, hard work, and personal responsibility certainly have a place in life, but no man is an island. You need to let others do for you sometimes. Our deacons lead the way in this. God's glorious deeds must guide the men who lead in deed ministry.

When we look at these two offices together, as two sides of the same coin, we see how they reflect the work of God in the world. From the beginning, God has been performing word ministry and deed ministry. This is what Scripture contains from start to finish.

God began history with trustworthy words and glorious deeds. These have continued throughout history. And the pinnacle of the triune God's word and deed ministry was the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nowhere is God's Word ministry on better display than in the preaching, teaching, shepherding and ruling of Jesus. And nowhere is God's deed ministry of service and sympathy on better display than in life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This one man – the God man – embodied what the church needs. The officers of His church should point to Him. Above all, the elders and deacons of the church should magnify the person and work of Christ. But we worship and trust in only Him.

Have you trusted in Jesus? Trust in Christ is the belief that His Word and deed ministry was all that could make you right with God and that it was enough to make you right with God. Also, trust in Christ is submission to His rule over your life. It involves trusting Him enough that You will follow His path for you wherever it may lead. This is what we mean when we call Jesus both Savior and Lord.

As we go to His table this morning, we encounter His trustworthy words and glorious deeds.

Let's bow in prayer together.