

1 TIMOTHY 3:1

DESIRING A NOBLE TASK

“The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.”¹

Few things have given me greater pleasure than seeing God raise up heralds of holiness. I taught preacher boys in Texas for a brief period. Throughout the years of my service before the Master, it has been one of my great joys to witness men whom I tutored assume positions of leadership among the saints and building great works. Some students whom I taught are now seminary professors and presidents of major seminaries; most are building believers through pastoral ministries. I have served on multiple occasions as field supervisor for seminary students and as a doctoral mentor on other occasions. God has graciously permitted me to invest my life in some godly men who excelled anything I have ever accomplished in the Kingdom.

God still raises up men with souls aflame who cannot rest until they are declaring the Word. They are capable men, trained to work at myriad tasks, but they voluntarily choose to labour at preaching and teaching to the glory of God. Admittedly, there are charlatans who don the livery of the pastor. Such mountebanks see the position as a job, or abuse their appointment by lording it over the people of God; nevertheless, I believe most pastors long to preach the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, being unable to rest until they are occupying the sacred desk.

If pretenders wreak havoc among the churches while parading as pastors, who is at fault? Obviously, the fraud himself or herself is ultimately responsible for his or her own actions; however, the churches must bear a terrible responsibility for failure to apply what is written in Scripture. God has clearly stated His standards for pastoral oversight. If the churches accept those who are obviously unqualified, they must know that they shall give an accounting to Holy God—and there can be no excuse for failure to know His will.

In some instances, denominational serpents slithering across the Lord’s Zion share responsibility; they recommend and actively promote individuals whom they know to be unqualified for eldership, doing so because those whom they promote are denominational cheerleaders. In other instances, a church board—inevitably composed of compliant individuals under the domination of a few individuals—select an individual whom they imagine they can control or who is able to sell himself or herself as a scintillating speaker. In every case, especially when the congregation has a say in such selection, the ultimate responsibility lies with an untaught and spiritually ignorant membership moved more by emotion than by the Word.

I cannot remain at this post forever; one day, the inevitability of sin’s merciless grind that takes the toll of all mankind must exact the last measure of physical strength from my body, and I will go the way of all flesh. At that time, the congregation will be responsible to seek out God’s man to occupy this sacred desk. Whether the congregation honours God, or whether the congregation will become like thousands of other ruined assemblies bearing the frightful signature “Ichabod” over the door depends upon whether the congregation chooses to obey the Word, or do what is convenient. I think it right, so long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, declaring the will of the Master. Thus, we now initiate a multi-week study of elders and deacons, as the Lord has provided for His people.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

TRUSTWORTHY? SAYS WHO? — “The saying is trustworthy...” This is a recurring phrase in the Pastoral Letters.² The Apostle quotes hymns that glorified God and what were obviously commonly stated truths among the faithful; in each instance, Paul uses the phrase to mark a transition from what has just been discussed to initiate a new consideration. In this instance, he has been speaking of men and women at worship; now, he will speak of leadership among the saints. Obviously, without sound leaders, the previous discussions will become meaningless. Therefore, what is about to follow is of utmost importance to the churches.

However, the saying (literally, “Faithful the word”) requires that we think about what is said, asking who determines whether a saying is trustworthy or whether it is errant? Today, too frequently, conventional wisdom may be conventional, and yet fail to be either wise or accurate. Just because a statement is commonly bruited about does not make it true. For instance, it is commonly stated that the changing morality doesn’t hurt anybody. People will often grow heated, saying, “What I do with my own life is my business; it doesn’t hurt anybody else!”

When a civic leader is unfaithful to his wife, can we really trust that he will keep his word to the people he serves? If one is unwilling to maintain sacred vows spoken before the Lord, why should we imagine that the person will keep lesser vows taken before mere mortals?

Conventional wisdom says we cannot help loving whomever we love; but we know that such statements can’t be universally true. We are still repulsed by the thought that an adult, claiming that she couldn’t help loving whom she loved, would take advantage of a vulnerable child. We know that it is wrong to destroy a marriage just because one individual claims to love someone married to another person. Though people claim they no longer love the person they married, we know intuitively that love is a choice. Though morals may be changing, we know that our choices in love are not like genetics dictating skin colour.

Therefore, when the Apostle commends a saying as trustworthy, what is the basis for his claim? What determines whether a saying is faithful, or whether it is flawed? Let’s consider the instances when the Apostle states that a saying is trustworthy. “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” [1 TIMOTHY 1:15]. The saying is trustworthy because the Master Himself stated this was the reason He came into the world.

Here are a few instances demonstrating this truth. The first was spoken by the Master Himself. “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” [MATTHEW 9:13]. Jesus also said, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” [LUKE 19:10]. This accords with John’s statement, penned under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” [JOHN 3:17]. In this instance, the saying is trustworthy because of the testimony of Jesus and the testimony of the Word.

Another instance of a trustworthy statement is found in 1 TIMOTHY 4:7-9: “Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance.”

The passages affirming this truth are too numerous to list, though some will suffice to demonstrate that this truth is iterated throughout the Word. The Psalmist contends, “Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart” [PSALM 37:4]. In the ninth verse of the same Psalm, we read, “Those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land”; and the eleventh verse states “the ... meek shall delight themselves in abundant peace” [PSALM 37:9, 11].

² See 1 TIMOTHY 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 TIMOTHY 2:11; TITUS 3:8

Numerous other Psalms and statements provided in the New Testament testify to the same truth.³ However, one further statement delivered by Jesus Himself will suffice to demonstrate the accuracy of the statement that godliness is profitable. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [the necessities of life] will be added to you” [MATTHEW 6:33].

Consider another instance when the Apostle cited a trustworthy saying. “The saying is trustworthy, for:

‘If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—’

for he cannot deny himself” [2 TIMOTHY 2:11-13].

Recall the promise delivered to the Thessalonian Christians, “God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” [1 THESSALONIANS 5:9, 10]. The promise that we shall live with Him is stated for our encouragement in the Apocalypse. “I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” [REVELATION 20:4].

I will cite but one other instance of many that could be cited to demonstrate this truth. “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” [ROMANS 8:14-17].

The final instance I will cite of a trustworthy saying quoted in the Pastoral Letters is found in Paul’s Letter to Titus. There, he writes this promise, “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people” [TITUS 3:4-8].

By the mercies of Christ the Lord, we are made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. We do not have a “hope so” salvation; in Christ we have a “know so” salvation. Challenged by religious leaders, Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” [JOHN 10:27-30]. Later, the Apostle of Love would testify, “This is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” [1 JOHN 5:11, 12].

³ PSALM 84:11; PSALM 112:2; PSALM 145:19; PROVERBS 19:23; PROVERBS 22:4; MARK 10:30; 1 PETER 3:9

So, whatever Paul is going to teach in this passage, it is trustworthy because it is founded on the Word of God. God gave the Word, and because He is the author of this Word, we may be assured that it is trustworthy. Whenever we substitute our best thoughts for His Word, we base our ideas on that which is mortal, fallible, frangible. At best the ideas originating from the mind of a man are subject to every imaginable distortion. The saying is trustworthy because it is true. We know the saying is true because it has its genesis in God, who cannot lie [see **TITUS 1:2**].

When we build our Faith on the Word, we are building on that which is eternal, as the Psalmist has testified:

“Forever, O LORD, your word
is firmly fixed in the heavens.”

[**PSALM 119:89**]

THE ASPIRATION — “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” The Apostle begins with a first class conditional clause indicating that the saying it is assumed to be true. Desiring to serve as an overseer is a noble aspiration. Paul’s statement is not a blanket affirmation of every aspirant to the office. It is possible that an individual can desire service in a church for ignoble reasons. Perhaps an aspirant imagines the position will give him power, perhaps she feels compelled to prove a point or perhaps he imagines that eldership is a cushy job that demands little and gives much.

At the time he wrote these words, Paul knew that eldership was potentially costly. There were scant moneys for overseers in the early congregations—few Christians within the early congregations were wealthy and the churches themselves were usually impoverished. Elders worked long hours under daunting conditions. Christians, and especially the preachers, were despised outcasts constantly liable to mistreatment and abuse. Moreover, the early congregations were frequent targets of persecution, and those in leadership were at substantial risk.

The situation under the best of conditions was not unlike that in some modern situations. This week past, I read a couple of disturbing articles. I wish to share a portion of those articles as demonstration of the cost of eldership to this day. “It was just a normal Sunday. Around seventy-five people gathered in the house rented as their church building for worship. Praise music wafted out the door. Prayers lifted to heaven. Pastor Saman Perera stood behind the pulpit and asked the congregation to open their Bibles.

“That’s when ‘normal’ came to a crashing end.

“Local Sri Lankan authorities stormed in from every exit, demanding the church service stop. Church members sat in shock until a bald man in saffron robes appeared. With the entrance of the village’s head monk, people hid in back rooms, jumped out open windows or knocked chairs over to get out the door only to meet up with an angry mob of nearly 1,000 yielding sticks and stones.

“‘Leave or be killed,’ the mob chanted.”⁴

Asked by an American interlocutor about the persecution, one believer answered, “Sister, we are not persecuted. Oh, to be worthy of such an honour for our Lord and Saviour!” She continued, noting, “This is just the normal way of life for those who choose ... to follow Jesus.”⁵

⁴ Susie Rain, “Sri Lankan churches violently attacked, closed,” Baptist Press, Aug 7, 2013, <http://www.bpnews.net/printerfriendly.asp?ID=40865>, accessed 7 August 2013

⁵ Susie Rain, “Q&A: Sri Lankan believers discuss persecution,” Baptist Press, Aug 7, 2013, <http://www.bpnews.net/printerfriendly.asp?ID=40866>, accessed 7 August 2013

The case of Pastor Saeed Abedini, a thirty-three-year-old Iranian-American pastor sentenced to eight years in the notorious Evin Prison because of his faith is too well-known to ignore.⁶ Beham Irani, another Iranian pastor was sentenced to death for apostasy, though sentence has not been executed to date. He continues to sit in a 40 x 40 foot cell with thirty-four other men, mostly drug dealers and convicted murderers.⁷ I will mention but one other pastor charged with “apostasy,” facing the death penalty in Iran. Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani was arrested for having questioned Islamic education in schools.⁸ In spite of such persecution, it is estimated that at least one hundred thousand believers are now worshipping in Iran. In 1979, the estimate was that there were only five hundred believers in that darkened, Islamic nation.

Opposition to the Faith appears to grow even here in North America. Individuals opposed to the preaching of the Word are increasingly insistent that believers may not declare the Faith outside of their own church buildings. These opponents of the Faith have powerful and vocal advocates in federal, state and provincial governments, both in Canada and in the United States. One need not be a prophet to see a storm gathering on the horizon. Should the Master delay His return, it is a virtual certainty that persecution will come to North America. Though the injury arising from persecution will be great, it will cause a distinction to be seen between those who serve because God has appointed them and those who serve for lesser motives.

Under such conditions, I can only wonder how many of my brother preachers would choose to become an elder. I question whether I could embrace the life of an overseer should such persecution mark the life of a pastor in our nation. Facing persecution, it would be necessary that the prospective elder have a burning desire to serve. Without such desire, an individual is immediately disqualified from pastoral oversight. I have often advised young men considering the ministry, “If you can do anything else, don’t become an elder.” By that, I mean that if it is not a consuming desire, they will not likely stay at the task.

When the people of God are considering those who will shepherd the flock, they should be assured in their own mind that the individual under consideration is committed to his call. Lacking a burning desire to herald the Faith and to oversee the work of the Lord, the individual is immediately disqualified. Even in time of peace, the elder must have a consuming desire to serve as pastor for the flock, or he will not long continue at the task. Failure to aspire to the task assures that the individual will flee at the first sign of danger.

⁶ Recent news items include: Lisa Daftari, “Case of imprisoned American-Iranian pastor taken to U.N. council in Geneva,” June 01, 2013, Foxnews.com, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/06/01/case-imprisoned-american-iranian-pastor-taken-to-un-council-in-geneva/>, accessed 9 August 2013; “Iran sentences American pastor Saeed Abeedini to 8 years in prison,” January 27, 2013, Foxnews.com, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/01/27/iran-sentences-american-pastor-saeed-abedini-to-8-years-in-prison/>, accessed 9 August 2013; Heather Clark, “American Pastor Imprisoned in Iran Given Ultimatum to Deny Christ or Remain in Prison,” April 14, 2013, Christian News, <http://christiannews.net/2013/04/14/american-pastor-imprisoned-in-iran-given-ultimatum-to-deny-christ-or-remain-in-prison/>, accessed 9 August 2013; Joseph DeCaro, “Iranian-American Pastor Imprisoned in Iran,” December 31, 2012, Worthy News, <http://christiannews.net/2013/04/14/american-pastor-imprisoned-in-iran-given-ultimatum-to-deny-christ-or-remain-in-prison/>, accessed 9 August 2013

⁷ “Imprisoned Iranian Pastor Denied Medical Help,” August 1, 2012, CBN News, <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2012/August/Imprisoned-Iranian-Pastor-Denied-Medical-Help/>, accessed 9 August 2013; “Jailed Iranian Pastor in Urgent Need of Prayer,” April 9, 2013, CBN News, <http://blogs.cbn.com/globallane/archive/2013/04/09/jailed-iranian-pastor-in-urgent-need-of-prayer.aspx>, accessed 9 August 2013; “Imprisoned Iranian Pastor Update,” June 7, 2013, CBN News, <http://blogs.cbn.com/globallane/archive/2013/06/07/imprisoned-iranian-pastor-update.aspx>, accessed 9 August 2013

⁸ “Iranian Protestant pastor, held in prison for months, risks death penalty for apostasy,” 10/20/2010, AsiaNews.it, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Iranian-Protestant-pastor,-held-in-prison-for-months,-risks-death-penalty-for-apostasy-19768.html>, accessed 9 August 2013

Recall the words of the Master; though they were spoken of His own Person, they apply to him who would be an undershepherd. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep” [JOHN 10:11b-13]. Throughout the Word are found multiple statements condemning the hired hand, men obviously lacking godly aspiration.⁹

THE OFFICE — “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” The task is noble, not because it confers prestige or power. Neither does the task of eldership grant the individual stature in the community. It is a noble task because it fulfils the assignment of the True and Living God Who appoints to this holy service.

Two matters must be addressed concerning the office of eldership. Three terms are synonyms of the office in question. Those who stand behind the sacred desk are identified as pastors, as elders and as overseers.¹⁰ Older translations of the Bible spoke of them as bishops rather than overseers. It is generally acknowledge that the apostolic church had nothing resembling a hierarchy in its ministry. The term “overseer” spoke of the authority of office, while “elder” connoted the dignity of the office within the assembly.¹¹ The term “pastor” spoke of the labour of the office.

The three terms—overseer, elder and pastor—are used synonymously in the New Testament, often in the same statements. For instance, Peter writes, “I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” [1 PETER 5:1-3].

Peter is writing “the elders” among the churches of the Diaspora. He urges them to “shepherd the flock of God.” The term “shepherd” is often translated “pastor.” A pastor is a shepherd because the one leading the flock of God is responsible to shepherd that flock. A vital aspect of the shepherding ministry is exercise of “oversight”; this is the same word translated “overseer” in the Pastoral Letters. Therefore, elders are responsible to exercise oversight, or function as overseers or bishops. Thus, Peter uses all three terms when speaking of those who direct the affairs of the congregation.

Consider another portion of the Word that is found in the Book of Acts. Doctor Luke records a message Paul delivered to the Elders of Ephesus. Paul was speaking with the elders, as shown in this verse. “From Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him” [ACTS 20:17]. The heart of his message to these elders is given in stern words found in ACTS 20:28: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

The Holy Spirit has made the elders “overseers.” As such, they are responsible “to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood.” The word translated “to care” is the word translated “pastor” in other instances. Therefore, elders are responsible to provide oversight—serve as bishops, protecting the flock—and to shepherd, or pastor the church of God. Pastor, elder and overseer are the terms used interchangeably of this holy office.

⁹ See EZEKIEL 34:2-6; ZECHARIAH 11:16, 17; 13:7; 1 PETER 5:2

¹⁰ See R. C. H. Lenski, **The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon** (Lutheran Book Concern, Columbus OH 1937) 577

¹¹ See Lenski, op. cit.

In the Letter to Philippian Christians, Paul opens with this greeting, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” [PHILIPPIANS 1:1]. It is interesting to note that when writing Titus, the Apostle states, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” [TITUS 1:5]. Then, almost immediately, Paul refers to these elders as “overseers” [see TITUS 1:7]. The text before us addresses the appointment of “overseers.” So, obviously, the requirement for providing oversight loomed large in the Apostle’s view.

I have often noted that though the pastor must not abuse his office, it is nevertheless not without reason that he wields the bishop’s staff. The pastor is responsible to protect the flock against attack from without and from within. He is charged to “reprove, rebuke and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” [2 TIMOTHY 4:2]. The reason this charge is so significant is the warning that, “The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” [2 TIMOTHY 4:3, 4].

Paul was not hesitant about speaking of the elders within the assembly. The term was appropriated from the Jewish synagogue, where the oldest members were accorded respect and honour by virtue of their age. Among the saints of God, the elder does enjoy a measure of respect growing out of his maturity and out of his walk before the Lord. Thus, Paul warns against frivolous charges against the elders, while acknowledging that even elders must not be permitted to avoid accountability. “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality” [1 TIMOTHY 5:19-21]. Because the office is freighted with dignity and respect, Paul admonished, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure” [1 TIMOTHY 5:22].

What, exactly, is the responsibility of an elder? Perhaps no insight excels that provided by the Master Himself. When Jesus restored Peter to service, you will remember the conversation as recorded at the conclusion of John’s Gospel [see JOHN 21:15-17]. In three charges given to Peter, Jesus presented the primary tasks of an elder. The goals of eldership are to *teach the immature or new Christians*. Jesus charged Peter, and thus, all elders, when He admonished him, “Feed my lambs” [JOHN 21:15]. Appealing to Jesus’ words, we realise that the elder is also responsible to *teach adult, or more mature, believers*. Jesus charged Peter, “Feed my sheep” [JOHN 21:17]. The elder is also charged with *guiding the entire flock*, as evidence in this charge, “Tend my sheep” [JOHN 21:16].

The primary responsibilities of an elder are fulfilled through teaching and preaching the Word of God. Repeatedly, the Apostle stresses the need for an elder to be capable of teaching. One of the primary requirements for the individual appointed to eldership is that he be “able to teach” [see 1 TIMOTHY 3:2]. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul speaks again of the importance of teaching in the ministry of an elder. “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” [2 TIMOTHY 2:2]. Pastoral ministries are always to be conducted with an eye to the future; elders are to be looking out for God’s work as He raises up men who will be able to carry on the ministry of teaching the Word. Later, Paul would again write, “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth” [2 TIMOTHY 2:24, 25].

Writing Titus, Paul expands this requirement when he writes the missionary to Cretans, “[The elder] 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” [TITUS 1:9]. Harkening back to the role of an overseer to provide protection of the flock, Paul explains the reasoning behind this command. “There are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach” [TITUS 1:10, 11].

I confess that the role of an elder is in danger of being grossly distorted in this day late in the Age of Grace. Churches and entire denominations have forgotten what the primary role of a pastor is. The emphasis has been on administrative duties to the neglect of preaching the Word. Consequently, preachers are in short supply. It has become so commonplace that it has become a cliché to speak of three-year pastorates. Preachers are hired by a church, and their stay is for about three years, which is how long it requires before they have exhausted their repertoire of sermon material. They then claim to be dry, and ask for a transfer to another locale. Questioned by students as to what they could preach, I have frequently pointed out that they had an entire Bible given by the Infinite God. It is impossible to exhaust that which is infinite.

Let me speak a moment longer concerning the work of a pastor. His work revolves around preaching and teaching, heralding the message of life in Christ the Lord. I have sometimes used the Shepherd’s Psalm to illustrate the work of the pastorate.

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

“You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

[PSALM 23:1-6]

The wise shepherd models his life on that of the Good Shepherd. Thus he is responsible to provide nourishment, refreshment and rest. He is to guide the flock in righteous paths, protecting them from all assaults. He is to bless and encourage through pointing to the hope of the resurrection and the return of the Master. In brief, this is the work of the pastor.

THE NOBILITY — “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” Before concluding the message, I do believe it important to focus on the nobility of the eldership. Paul would write that he magnified his ministry [see **ROMANS 11:13**]; and well should he have done so. No less, however, should the elder who serves well exult in his calling and appointment to this service by the Master.

As he drew this particular missive to a close, Paul would write the young theologian, “As for you, O man of God . . . Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen” [**1 TIMOTHY 6:11-16**].

It is as though he is saying, “Timothy, you have a great calling; God has entrusted a great task to your oversight. Do not dishonour Him. Stay true to the charge you have received.” Paul would end the missive with this admonition, offered in the same vein. “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith” [**1 TIMOTHY 6:20, 21**].

He appears to have been always focused on encouraging Timothy to remain true to the charge he had received at the beginning of his service. Opening his final letter to Timothy, Paul would write, “By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” [**2 TIMOTHY 1:14**]. And as he drew the final epistle to a conclusion, he reflected on Timothy’s future and on his own pending death. On Timothy’s future, he wrote, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” [**2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5**].

On his own pending death, the Apostle would reflect, “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” [**2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8**].

The elder who remains true to the charge performs a good work—a noble task. It is noble because he honours God through performing the hard tasks. It is noble because he fulfils the appointment he has received. It is noble because he walks in the path of the Master, leading the flock in those same righteous paths. It is noble because he anticipates a reward for his service. We cannot know all that God shall do in rewarding his faithful servants; Peter does hint that God takes special note of faithful elders when he writes to the elders among the saints, “When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” [**1 PETER 5:4**]. I do not know what the “unfading crown of glory is; but I know Him who holds out that reward.

The congregation must always be alert for those whom God will appoint to eldership. This awareness is not merely to find people willing to administer the work of the congregation; we do not require a board (a most unbiblical invention of modern times) to “run” the church. Our sensitivity to the Spirit permits us to find those men whom God has appointed to this noble task in order that His people may be built up, encouraged and comforted. This responsibility will become even more essential as the age moves toward a dramatic end. We will either appeal to those seeking a job, or we will prayerfully seek the leadership of the Spirit to discover those whom He has equipped for this noble task. We are gathering those who are willing to receive the Word to hear the Master’s voice and to follow in the righteous path.

Perhaps I am speaking to such a person, even now. The appropriate preparation for this noble task is to consume the Word, familiarising yourself with what is written and studying from the great masters of the Faith to become an effective herald of the Faith.

Perhaps I am speaking to one who is strangely stirred as you have observed the people of God at worship. You are not a follower of the Master, but in your heart you know that you should be a follower. Your great need is to know Jesus as Master over life. The Son of God died because of your sin and was raised from the dead for your justification. This is the reason the Word of God plainly offers, “If you confess, saying it right out loud, ‘Jesus is my Master,’ believing with your heart that He has been raised from the dead and is alive, you will be set free. It is with the heart that one believes and is made right with the Father; it is with the spoken word that one admits God is right and is set free.” Paul sharply concludes that divine offer when he quotes the Prophet Joel, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Master, Jesus, will be set free” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].¹²

Are you a Christian? Are you now under the tutelage of a godly pastor who teaches the Word in truth? Are you walking in the righteous path? Our encouragement is for all who are willing, to place faith in Jesus the Son of God, being born from above. Then, having believed, we call on each believer to identify with Him in biblical immersion as He has commanded. The doors of this congregation stand open to all who confess Jesus as Lord and who have also been obedient to His call to identify through baptism. I pray that includes you. Amen.

¹² Author’s free translation