

1 Timothy 3:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.

Analysis

This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. Paul introduces the second "faithful saying" in the Pastorals, affirming that aspiring to church leadership is noble. "If a man desire" (ei tis oregetai, εἴ τις ὀρέγεται) suggests legitimate aspiration, not mere ambition. "The office of a bishop" (episkopēs, ἐπισκοπῆς) literally means "oversight"—the role of overseeing, shepherding, and leading the church. "Bishop" (episkopos) and "elder" (presbyteros) refer to the same office in the New Testament, used interchangeably.

"He desireth a good work" (kalou ergou epithymeī, καλοῦ ἔργου ἐπιθυμεῖ) describes leadership as "work"—active service requiring effort, not merely honorific position. "Good" (kalos, καλός) means noble, excellent, beautiful—leading Christ's church is glorious labor. This positive affirmation counters potential hesitation: aspiring to spiritual leadership, when properly motivated and qualified, is commendable.

However, the qualifications Paul lists (vv. 2-7) demonstrate that desire alone doesn't qualify someone for leadership. Godly aspiration must be matched by biblical qualifications, congregational recognition, and divine calling. The church needs leaders; noble aspiration to serve in leadership is good; but only those meeting rigorous biblical standards should be appointed.

Historical Context

The emerging church needed organized leadership to maintain doctrinal purity and practical order. While charismatic leadership (apostles, prophets) had guided the earliest churches, settled pastoral oversight became necessary as apostles died and churches matured. The offices of elder/bishop and deacon provided this ongoing leadership structure.

"Bishop" (episkopos) was used in Greco-Roman culture for civic officials who supervised public affairs. Paul adapts this term for church leaders who oversee congregations. The qualification list that follows would have been recognizable to ancient readers as similar to requirements for civic officials, though with distinctly Christian content—moral character and spiritual maturity matter more than social status or rhetorical skill.

Timothy's task in Ephesus included appointing qualified elders to counter false teaching and lead the church faithfully. Paul's affirmation that aspiring to this office is good encouraged qualified men to pursue it while the subsequent qualifications ensured only those truly prepared would be appointed. The balance between encouraging aspiration and maintaining standards remains relevant for churches today.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does your church identify, encourage, and prepare men who demonstrate calling and gifting for eldership?
2. What motivations drive your own ministry aspirations—godly desire to serve or ungodly ambition for recognition?

3. In what ways do you view church leadership as demanding work requiring divine enabling rather than honorific position?

Interlinear Text

πιστὸς	ὁ	λόγος	Εἶ	τις	ἐπισκοπῆς	ὀρέγεται
This is a true	G3588	saying	G1487	G5100	the office of a bishop	desire
G4103		G3056			G1984	G3713
καλοῦ	ἔργου	ἐπιθυμεῖ				
a good	work	he desireth				
G2570	G2041	G1937				

Additional Cross-References

Acts 20:28 (Parallel theme): Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Titus 1:7 (Parallel theme): For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre;

1 Timothy 1:15 (Parallel theme): This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.

1 Peter 5:2 (Parallel theme): Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;

Hebrews 12:15 (Parallel theme): Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;

2 Timothy 2:11 (Parallel theme): It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him:

1 Timothy 4:9 (Parallel theme): This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation.

Luke 15:10 (Parallel theme): Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

1 Peter 2:25 (Parallel theme): For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

Philippians 1:1 (Parallel theme): Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

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