

Leadership, Character and the Early Church:
A Social and Cultural Texture Analysis of 1 Timothy 3:1-7

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Abstract

The debate surrounding a leader's character has gone on for millennia. In the early church and in modern times, we see a great need for leaders with strong character and deeply held values. This article examines the desired character of early church leaders through a social and cultural texture analysis of 1 Timothy 3:1-7. The results indicate that early church leaders needed to have integrity, discipline, commitment to their household and the ability to teach from competence and experience. The description written by Paul is strikingly similar to the ideal leader for the modern organization.

The issue of character and leadership is not exactly new (Guinness, 2000). From the ancient Greek and Hebrew texts to the very public questions about the character of elected officials in the United States, people have long debated what role values and character have in leadership. In the wake of modern corporate scandals, many are reasserting the need for character and values in leadership. However, the character debate has created a few causalities, among them the issue of what values constitute a leader's character. Even within the Bible, one encounters various and competing ideas about what values should be required of leaders. In the New Testament, one encounters a leadership debate similar to the one experienced in modern times.

As the early church grew, it became necessary for the apostles to install new leaders at various levels in the churches spreading throughout the known world (DeSilva, 2004). In the midst of this, Paul writes to Timothy, his disciple, about the values needed for these leadership roles and how to find men and women to fill them. This article examines these values using a social and cultural texture analysis and explores whether or not this ancient text may solve a modern leadership dilemma.

Social and Cultural Texture

Social and cultural texture is the third of five textures analyzed when using Robbin's (1996) Social-Rhetorical Interpretation model. The social and cultural texture of a text considers the nature of the text as a part of a larger society and culture. Social and cultural texture emerges from taking into consideration how the text perceives the world (specific social topics), how it reveals cultural attitudes and norms (common social and cultural topics) and how it uncovers the dominant cultural system (final cultural categories). Within the text selected from Paul's first letter to Timothy there are various textural insights.

The words of Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 contain a “reformist” discourse. This type of discourse believes in a corrupt world because of the corruption of social structures (Robbins, 1996). If these structures can be redeemed, then the entire world can be redeemed. Paul writes Timothy as another working to redeem the world. Timothy’s church is working to redeem Ephesus and Paul is writing to instruct Timothy on what values are needed to lead this reformation.

Among the common social and cultural topics, the issue of honor is overtly apparent. Honor is a social acknowledgement of worth. It represents a person’s social rating and affects how that person interacts with superiors, peers and subordinates. Honor can be ascribed (through birth or connections) or acquired (through active work and achieving certain precepts). Paul is writing Timothy concerning how those in the church can be promoted to bishop or elders. Paul writes, “whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task,” (1 Timothy 3:1 NRSV) and proceeds to establish the traits and values those leaders must possess in order to be honored.

Equally intriguing is how social and cultural topic is absent from this passage. The Jewish culture had strict purity codes; among them a social status structure placing priests at the top, followed by Levites, then Jews, with converted Gentiles at the very bottom. As a Pharisee, Paul would have been well aware of this social structure (DeSilva, 2004). Yet, he makes no mention of ethnic requirements in his list. Paul appears to be shunning these purity code norms.

This shunning is one element of the countercultural rhetoric found in the text of this passage. Counterculture rhetoric rejects the explicit characteristics of the dominant culture (Robbins, 1996). It is meant to evoke a new and better future by reforming the dominant society. As mentioned above, one piece of evidence of this rhetoric is the shunning of lineage as a status symbol. Likewise, Paul rejects the traditions of installing people in leadership roles because of

social status, birth-order or inheritance and instead creates a system where promotion to leadership is based on character and behavior.

Discussion

After considering the social and cultural texture of the selected text, one begins to get a picture of the character traits and values that Paul demanded early church leaders demonstrate. The picture Paul paints stands in contrast to the dominant ideas of the day. Similarly, the leader Paul describes would likely not be recognized today. Yet it is this description that both the past and the present desperately need. This section will explore excerpts from the selected passage and discusses their importance, both then and now.

“A bishop must be above reproach [...] Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders,” (1 Timothy 3:2-7).

This excerpt deals with the integrity of leaders. The early church needed to establish credibility in the community (DeSilva, 2004). Therefore it needed to promote leaders who would bring credibility to the church, not through status but through integrity. The integrity of their leaders would keep the church from such a scandal that would have rocked its foundation. Paul emphasizes this twice in the passage, writing first that leaders need be above reproach and second that the community outside the church must think well of them. In the same way, many modern organizations, even presidential administrations, have been brought down from a scandal of integrity and fading public opinion.

“A husband of one wife [...] he must manage his household well,” (1 Timothy 3:2-5).

Paul stressed the importance of church leaders running their household well. In the time of the early church, men were considered to be the head of the household (Gower, 1987). Paul’s rationale is that if God has first placed them in charge of a household, then an easy way to gauge

their leadership ability to is examine the way they lead in their current role. Portions of this verse are often used to justify a requirement of marriage for all church leaders. Biblical scholar John Gill (1999) disagrees with this. He argues that this text refers to a prohibition on polygamy and promiscuity. Modern society has shown a disregard for inspecting the home life of leaders. It is agreed that family values are important, but to actually examine the home lives of leaders is considered overzealous. Yet leaders in business, government and the church are falling because of an unmanaged household and lack of commitment in marriage.

“Temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable [...] not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money (1 Timothy 3:2-3).

Paul compiles quite a large list of character traits and values in these excerpts. Gill (1999) believes much of these qualities relate to discipline. Church leaders would need to show moderation in food and drink, but also in the words they chose when angry. Likewise, the text carries connotations of someone who is diligent in his trade (without being greedy) and has developed respect within the community for his diligence. In the modern world, we often respect leaders who can show diligence or moderation in food, drink and wealth (even if we disagree about how much is moderate). Yet how often is the issue of moderation in anger discussed? In the increasingly open world that technology is creating, care with words and actions is becoming even more important.

“An apt teacher [...] He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit,” (1 Timothy 2-7).

Much of the church in Ephesus were early converts (DeSilva, 2004). As a result, they were in need of sound instruction and example. As such, competence was almost a given, but Paul required more than just competence. Tenure in the faith was also vital. Gill (1999) asserts

that Paul was describing those who had the ability to explain and defend scripture and who were in line with sound doctrine. Tenure was vital in order that promotions would not result in the leaders ego expanding. In modern organizations, ego and conceit are still ever-present issues. Some who have analyzed the debacle of Enron have even theorized that, besides unethical actions, one reason for the downfall was a program that ensured early promotions for competent, yet ego-laden young professionals (Gladwell, 2002).

Paul gives no mention of a way for Timothy to develop these traits in leaders. Instead, he presents the idea that you have to hire for values by giving Timothy a job description based on values, not skills. This stands in contrast to many of the HR practices in modern organizations. Organizations typically hire by creating a job profile and finding someone with the skills to fill the needs of the position. The organizations then develop programs to highlight their core values and develop the character traits they desire from leaders. However, there are organizations who have developed ways to hire for values. Restaurant chain Chic-fil-a interviews not just their potential franchisees, but also their families in order to gain an impression of the person's character before making a decision (Cathy, 2002). Renowned online retailer Zappos.com puts their new employees through initial training, and then offers them \$2,000 to quit if the employees don't feel they have the ability to live up to the values Zappos demands (Hsieh, 2010). These strategies are in line with what Paul's opinion appears to be: hire for values, train for skills.

Conclusion

The young professionals who were victim to the war for talent Gladwell (2002) describes bare little to no resemblance to the description of church leaders Paul writes in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. In fact, very few leaders resemble this description in its entirety. Through a social and cultural

texture analysis of the selected text, we find a description that ran counterculture to the world of Paul's time, and to our world today. Yet both the early church and many modern organizations would benefit from the type of leader Paul describes. Perhaps more HR directors should include Paul's list within the core competences of a leader's job description.

References

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