

1 Timothy 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Timothy chapter 3. The saying is trustworthy. If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive. For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, and let them also be tested first, then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.

Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves, and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you, so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness. He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

1 Timothy chapter 3 continues 1 Timothy chapter 2's concern with organisation of the life of the people of God in their congregations. More especially, it speaks to the setting apart of persons to exercise specific roles within the Ephesian church. The roles mentioned in this chapter, the overseer and the deacons, have excited considerable debate over the centuries, as the proper manner of church government has been a matter of dispute within and among denominations and different Christian traditions, the interpretation of passages like 1 Timothy chapter 3 has been a matter of great concern. In 1 Timothy chapter 3, we have a statement concerning the overseer.

We find a similar sort of statement in Titus chapter 1 verses 5 to 9. This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained in order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you. If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.

For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He 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.

[3 : 30] There are great similarities between these statements, but there are also some differences. The overseer seems to be spoken of as a singular character, whereas the elders are spoken of in plural ways. It seems that the form of church order within the early church was something that was evolving over time, perhaps most notably after the apostle's death. As the apostles and other figures who had provided unity to the church on a broader organisational level were martyred or died or were imprisoned, other figures and roles had to take their place. By the time of Ignatius in the first half of the second century, we see an order of the church with bishops, elders and deacons.

However, it is likely that this was not the order of the church in the apostolic era. Such an order seems to have been developing in certain parts during the apostolic era, but only became the universal norm later on, and even then the evolution of church government from its initial form varied somewhat from region to region. During the apostolic era, the church seems to have been organised primarily by households, with an order starting to develop at the city level. Such an order seems to have come more quickly in places like Jerusalem, where James would have occupied a role similar to that described later as that of the bishop or overseer, and also in cities like Antioch. In other locations, perhaps especially in rural ones, the church mostly operated on the domestic level, perhaps with some interaction among the leaders of those churches on a local level. R Alistair Campbell, in his book *The Elders' Seniority Within Earliest Christianity*, writes, When we take seriously the household context of the earliest congregations, attested to us both for Pauline and Jewish Christianity, a rather uniform pattern of church organisation becomes evident.

The household has its head, who functions towards the believers as an overseer, presiding at the table, offering prayer, inviting one or another to speak, handling monies perhaps, because it is natural that as a person of seniority, means and education, he should do so. As the little congregation grows, others assist him, whether in teaching or in serving tables. It will be natural to call such people helpers or deacons. As the house churches multiply, the leaders need to confer. Perhaps a Paul or a James needs to address them. These are the elders of the Christian community, owing their prestige to their leadership of their households, as the elders have always done. At some point, as when the twelve cease to be a force in Jerusalem, or Paul's personal supervision is removed from his churches, the need for a local overseer is felt, to safeguard the unity of the churches in the face of threats from inside or outside, and the congregations come together in one place under one overseer, with a consequent loss of status by the elders, who no longer lead their own meetings.

We have a window into something of this organisation of the early church in figures like Gaius, who is mentioned in Romans chapter 16 verse 23, as a host to Paul and the whole church. The organisation of the church that we see develop is not something that seems to arise from direct divine command. Rather, it seems to be a result of spirit-directed evolution of the church's structure, and human wisdom in organisation. In the initial household structure, the elders would have had their role almost by default.

They were the heads of a household hosting a meeting, the ones who in many cases would have started the church, and would naturally be the ones perceived to be its guardians. In the original domestic context of the church, the role of elders and deacons would be far more organic. The elders wouldn't have a particular office, they would just be those recognised as the natural community leaders.

[7 : 08] This domestic setting also explains some of the challenges that Paul deals with in the preceding chapter. Where a wealthy woman, for instance, was the patroness of the church, and the one who hosted the church in her house, it would be understandable for a situation to arise where one might find such a woman leading a domestic congregation. As Alistair Stewart observes in his book *The Original Bishops*, the rare instances of women in church leadership in the early centuries of the church seemed to involve such domestic settings. As the church developed beyond the original domestic setting, and started to assume a broader associational structure, such exceptional cases soon vanished. What we likely see in 1 Timothy chapter 3 is a stage in the development of the church beyond this initial household organisation, to a form that is more locally centralised within a single city, or something like that. Where once you had a number of different house churches with their various leaders, who would have been the elders, who would occasionally assemble together as the broader church of the area, now the more formal office of the overseer emerges. With the rise of the town church leader, you would have a decrease of the status of the house church leaders. Many of the house church leaders would now function more as presbyters under the leadership of the overseer. While the house church leader might be the de facto leader of that congregation by virtue of the fact that he hosted the congregation in his house, the overseer or town church leader is more of an office to which people must aspire, as we see in verse 1. Suitable men for this role were supposed to be people of good repute, well respected in their own household and in the wider community. A leader without such respect would lack important moral authority.

A suitable overseer was a sort of head of household for the local church, and the characteristics that would render someone suitable for such a role would largely be demonstrated in the context of his own household. The role of the overseer was a fatherly role, the role of managing a household, of ensuring that it is provided for, of upholding its good order, of teaching and training, and of exercising discipline where wrong has been done. The role of the pastor, as we tend to think about it, tends to be quite narrowed from that of the overseer, in large part because churches no longer tend to think of themselves or to function as households. Like a good father, the overseer is in many respects someone who leads his household by virtue of his character, by setting the tone for everyone else. For this reason it is so important that the overseer be of impeccable reputation, that he be noted for godly character, that his existing sphere of influence be one in which he has already proved himself to be good. He should be gentle, not someone who uses his strength to domineer over others. He must not be a lover of money, someone who will be corrupt and accumulate wealth for himself, fleecing the flock. He must be self-mastered, he must avoid the vices of drunkenness and other things like that. His family life matters too. He must have only one wife.

Presumably this is speaking to a situation where some converts might have had a couple of wives. Such persons would not be suitable for church leadership in the future. His children should be submitted to him, honouring him as a father. Where such honour is lacking, it might well be a sign that he is not a suitable leader for the church more broadly. Verses 6 and 7 both mention the devil. Verse 6 speaks of the danger of pride for a recent convert, presumably in the reference to the condemnation of the devil, speaking of that vice which is most characteristic of Satan. The devil also has his eye upon such leaders. He will seek to bring them down. It is important that church leaders have a strong reputation with outsiders, with non-Christians. Satan is seeking to destroy the church and one of the best ways to destroy the church is to take down its leaders. Consequently, the church should be very concerned about the reputation of those that are overseeing it. Similar instructions are given in verses 8 to 13 concerning the role of deacons. Deacons should be thought of as the assistants to the overseer. As we see in verse 12, the deacons seem to be heads of their own households, which suggests that many of the former elders or house church leaders are now functioning in this diaconal office. It is not clear whether the deacons ordinarily taught, although we are told that they had to hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Like the elders, they had to be tested and proved themselves to be of blameless character.

Those who, having been appointed, acquitted their office well would end up gaining a good standing. This is likely a reference to the honour that they would enjoy among the community of faith. One of the chief duties of the overseer was to be hospitable. He had an economic role to play relative to the wider church, ensuring that people's material needs were provided for.

The hospitality of the deacons is not mentioned in the same way, although some have seen in verse 11 a reference to their wives, suggesting that they would naturally have a part in their husband's ministry, mostly consisting of hospitality work. It is however interesting that apart from the instruction that he be the husband of one wife, there are no instructions given for the wife of an overseer. This curious contrast between the instructions for the overseers and the deacons, coupled with the fact that the instructions for testing the deacons are the same as those for testing the women in verse 11, has suggested to many that what we have in verse 11 are a reference to deaconesses. This seems quite likely to me. We should not presume that the deaconesses are interchangeable with the deacons. As we saw in the preceding chapter, ministry is conditioned by gender.

[12 : 37] Furthermore, the role of the overseer seems to be exclusive to men, and many of the deacons, as servants of the overseer, would become overseers themselves in time. Verse 12 also singles out deacons as husbands, fathers, and heads of households, all of which emphasize male dimensions of their office. Nevertheless, any healthy household has men and women involved, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, and so we should not be at all surprised to see the prominence of many women within the context of a church that's modeled after the household. The concluding verses of the chapter speak to this reality of the church as the household of God. Paul is writing to Timothy, hoping to come soon, but giving him instruction for how to organize this household. If this is written in the window of time in Acts chapter 20 verses 1 to 3, Paul's visit might only have been a month or two in coming. However, he is not certain of his plans, and there is the possibility of his being delayed. The church is the household of the living God, and this household is founded upon the truth, is founded upon a great statement with which Paul ends the chapter. The statement might be a hymn which could be divided into three sets of two statements. These three pairs of statements join together elements, flesh, spirit, angels, nations, world, and glory. As a sort of Christological hymn, it describes salvation history, what Christ has wrought within his coming. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness might remind us of a statement that we heard earlier in the context of Ephesus in Acts chapter 19 verse 28. When they heard this, they were enraged and were crying out, great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

Paul here gives us a counter statement, great rather is Christ. The mystery of godliness is the mystery of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ is a manifestation of God in the flesh. Flesh in Paul has all sorts of connotations of weakness, mortality, the realm of sin and death, all experienced in our bodily existence.

It was this realm that Christ entered, and it was in this realm that God was seen in him. He was vindicated by the Spirit. If the first reference is to Christ's existence under the condition of the flesh, the second is the reference to the resurrection. We have a similar statement in Romans chapter 1 verses 3 to 4 concerning his son who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. The flesh-spirit contrast also plays out in verses like Romans chapter 8 verse 11.

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. Who are the angels?

Are the angels a reference to human messengers, witnesses to the resurrection? That's a possible reading that some have suggested. Alternatively, it might be a reference to a triumphant appearance before the angelic powers, both good and evil. From this, Paul moves to the proclamation of Christ and his gospel among the nations, as the word went out by the power of the Spirit. The witnessing of Christ's glory by the heavenly hosts, by the angels, corresponds with the testimony born to his name before earthly powers. This testimony proved effective as many in the world believed upon him.

[15 : 59] Here the world is paired with glory, the heavenly realm into which Christ was taken, a realm in which he is seated at God's right hand until all of his enemies are placed under his feet. A question to consider, what are some of the different terms and images that are used to describe leaders of the church in the New Testament?