

God's Church: Structure & Stability

1 TIMOTHY 3:1-13

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This morning we return to our series of lessons from the book of 1 Timothy. Over the past few weeks, we have looked at this letter written by the apostle Paul to the young preacher Timothy. And as we have learned, Timothy is preaching in Ephesus, and the church in Ephesus has had some issues. A few weeks ago, we came to those verses at the end of Chapter 1 where we learned that two men had apparently been removed from the church for teaching something that was false. Hymenaeus and Alexander had rejected the faith and had suffered some kind of spiritual *“shipwreck,”* Paul says. And because of that, Paul explains in 1 Timothy 1:20 that he had *“handed them over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme.”* When we studied that passage a few weeks ago, you might remember how we made a note that Paul tells the church to remove the sinful man over in 1 Corinthians 5, but here, Paul does it. And one of the leading theories on this is that these two men were perhaps elders of the congregation. And this fits in with the warning Paul gave many years earlier (in Acts 20), the warning that perverse men would arise from within the eldership. There is a chance, then, that the church was somewhat hesitant to get rid of two of their own elders, and that is why Paul says that he had done it.

I bring this up again because of the subject matter in 1 Timothy 3. Today, I want us to look at 1 Timothy 3:1-13 (p. 1856), and in this passage we come to Paul's inspired advice concerning how to bring structure and stability to a church that had, in a sense, suffered some trauma. And he does this by explaining how to choose elders and deacons. And I hope we see why this is especially important. Maybe we can put ourselves in Timothy's place. Here is this young man, and he comes to this congregation to preach and teach, and there's a pretty good chance that two elders have just been removed from the church by the apostle Paul himself. We might imagine that there's a bit of chaos. We might imagine some people being disillusioned. We might think of a spiritual hero getting overtaken in a sin. And so we might also then imagine what's going on in Timothy's mind, “What in the world do I do now?” Paul, then, writes into this situation and he very calmly explains what needs to happen - preach the truth (in Chapter 1), pray - for everyone, but especially for authorities (in the first part of Chapter 2), make sure that everybody knows what they need to be doing - the special roles for men and women (in the second half of Chapter 2), and that brings us to 1 Timothy 3:1-13 - Paul's inspired advice for bringing structure or order into what might have been a congregation in turmoil. Notice, please, 1 Timothy 3:1-13,

¹ *It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.* ² *An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,* ³ *not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money.* ⁴ *He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity* ⁵ *(but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?),* ⁶ *and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.* ⁷ *And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.*

⁸ *Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain,* ⁹ *but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.* ¹⁰ *These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.* ¹¹ *Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.* ¹² *Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.* ¹³ *For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

As we look at this passage, I want us to do a fairly brief overview of the role of elders and deacons.

I. But we start with Paul's words concerning the OVERSEERS or ELDERS (verses 1-7).

And Paul starts with an interesting statement. Remember: In this context of some (perhaps) current elders being removed by the apostle himself for teaching what is false, he says, ***"It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do."*** In other words, "Please trust me. Despite what you have just been through as a congregation, it is good to want to serve as an overseer!" So, he is encouraging leadership to step up in the congregation. He is trying to overcome their skepticism.

And by using the word ***"overseer,"*** he reminds us of what we've learned elsewhere in the Bible, that there are three main terms used for this particular role in God's family: OVERSEER, SHEPHERD, AND ELDER. And back in Acts 20, when Paul spoke to the elders from the Ephesus congregation a number of years earlier, he uses these three terms interchangeably. In Acts 20:17, Paul calls the ***"elders"*** of the church together, and then in verse 28, he refers to the fact that the Holy Spirit had made them ***"overseers,"*** and he then also refers to the fact that these men had been called to ***"shepherd"*** the church of God. So, these three terms (SHEPHERD, ELDER, and OVERSEER) all refer to the same group.

- The word ***"elder"*** obviously refers to someone who is older; it refers to someone with experience. As we have discussed before, the Hebrew word for ***"elder"*** can be traced back to a word meaning "chin" or "beard." And the idea is: We can sometimes tell a man has some experience by looking at his beard! At Polishing the Pulpit (a series of lectures I attend every year), they have what they refer to as the "Graybeards Forum," where some older preachers share some of their experiences through the years. Some of you know Brett Rutherford who preached in Madison back in 1997-2000. I believe his dad, Rod Rutherford, was on one of these forums last year. And as soon as you walk in the room, you know just from looking at these men, that they have many years of experience.

- The word ***“shepherd”*** refers to the work these men do in leading, and guiding, and feeding, and caring for the flock. The Latin version of this word is “pastor.” Of course, the religious world has twisted this description into a title for the preacher. 1-2 Timothy and Titus, in fact, are often referred to as the “Pastoral Epistles,” the letters Paul wrote to two “pastors.” But of course, that is not the case. These letters were written to PREACHERS. Timothy was not a “pastor” of the church in Ephesus. Timothy was young, and could not have been an “elder.” But, he could be a preacher. The preacher’s job is to preach, not to govern or lead in the way that the shepherds lead. And yet, as we have also learned before, there is some overlap in the job descriptions, and some men in the Bible did fill both roles (Peter and John, for example).
- And then the word ***“overseer”*** refers to someone who “looks over” the congregation. Some translations might use the word ***“bishop,”*** but that word has some baggage these days, doesn’t it? What do we think of when we hear the word ***“bishop”***? We probably think of the hierarchy in the Catholic Church - the pope, and cardinals, and bishops, and so on. But the word is best translated as ***“overseer.”*** We think of the shepherd - he might walk in front of the sheep, leading them to food or water, but he also looks out over the flock and keeps an eye out for those who might be injured, he keeps an eye out for those who might be wandering, he keeps an eye out for danger. We think of the word “overwatch.” You can do a search and come up with thousands of hits for the video game, but the term “overwatch” was coined by the U.S. military back in the 1950’s, referring to someone from a superior position who looks out over the battlefield and provides some kind of cover fire or protection for someone making a move down below who might be in a more vulnerable position. That’s what an ***“overseer”*** does. He oversees. There is also a sense in which he manages. The word was sometimes used in the ancient world to refer to the work done by supervisors or managers in the secular business world. We think of the encouragement in Hebrews 13:17, where the author says, ***“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they KEEP WATCH OVER your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.”*** On the Day of Judgment, the elders will face God and will give an account. They will need to answer to the Great Shepherd for the sheep entrusted to their care.

So, these are the three terms used interchangeably to describe this “position” in the Bible, and in this passage, Paul explains that it is good and right to “desire” to serve the church in this role, but he also then gives some qualifications. In verse 2, he says, ***“An overseer, then, must be...,”*** and then he gives quite a list of necessary traits. We won’t go through those today due to time constraints, but as we have noted before, most of these are also required for all of us. All of us should be ***“above reproach,”*** and so on, but an overseer needs these qualities in a way that he can lead. He needs these qualities, not in a perfect way, but in a way that doesn’t distract from his mission. He needs these qualities in a way that he can serve as an example, in a way that won’t pull people away from the truth of the gospel.

I should also point out here that the leadership of a congregation is to be shared. This never falls on only one person, but instead, these elders, overseers, and shepherds are always mentioned as a plurality. And we see God’s wisdom with this. The burden of leadership is shared. They work together as a group. Something I read this week referred to an eldership as a “council of equals,” and I thought that was interesting. They balance each other’s weaknesses. They share their knowledge of the scriptures. They all have different life experiences that might help with various challenges. They all have differing strengths.

So, as Paul tries to bring some sense of calm and structure into the church in Ephesus, as he tries to help them recover from the trauma of surviving the false teaching they've just experienced, he starts with the overseers. Timothy is to appoint some men to shepherd the church, but they must meet certain qualifications.

II. In verse 8, Paul then continues by addressing the DEACONS of the congregation.

The word **"deacon"** simply means "servant." Many scholars believe that the word itself can be traced back to a word meaning "around the table," and it's the idea of a waiter or a server, someone who would walk around a table, checking on the needs of a guest at a restaurant or maybe serving around the table as a servant in someone's home. The word **"servant"** or **"deacon"** is found more than a hundred times in the New Testament, and the word seems to be used primarily in two ways: 1.) With reference to anyone who serves, and 2.) With reference to what appears to be the "office" of deacon. We might compare it to the word "elder." Sometimes it refers simply to those who are elderly, and sometimes it refers to the "office" of elder. And with both of these, I realize that "office" might not be the best way to put it, but I hope we understand that with one of these uses, there are qualifications to be met - there is some special kind of serving or eldering going on. Generically, Jesus refers to the **"servants"** at the wedding feast in Cana in John 2:5. Literally, those men carrying the waterpots were **"deacons,"** they were **"servants."** In Matthew 20:26, Jesus said to his disciples, **"...whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant."** That word translated **"servant"** is the same word we translate as **"deacon"** here in 1 Timothy 2. The word is used twice in Romans 13 as Paul speaks of those in government being **"servants"** or **"deacons"** of God. We could continue with more than a hundred passages like this, but the point is: Usually the term is used in a generic sense, in that all of us are to be servants - servants of God, servants to each other, and so on.

But what has surprised me in the past is that's the word is used with reference to the "office" of deacon only six times in the New Testament, and those references are found in only two passages. In Philippians 1:1, in a book we hope to start studying this Wednesday evening, Paul addressees that letter, **"To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons."** I hope it's obvious to you as it is to me that Paul seems to be referring not to servants in general, but to a group of men who were appointed to serve in that role. And I say that because of how they are listed in the greeting, along with the **"overseers."**

The word is not used in an official sense, but we seem to have perhaps the precursors to deacons in Acts 6. You might remember that the church had just been established, and a short time later, as the early church took care of the widows, the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. The text tells us (starting in Acts 6:2),

² *So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables."* ³ *Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.* ⁴ *But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."* ⁵ *The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.* ⁶ *And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.* ⁷ *The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.*

I would make a few brief observations, starting with the fact that these men are never described as “deacons.” However, they are appointed to do the work that deacons do. They are appointed to serve! I would also observe that they are appointed so that the apostles are not distracted from their primary mission of preaching and teaching. This work wasn’t “beneath” the apostles, but the apostles really needed to focus on teaching and preaching, and they were uniquely qualified. So, they gave the church a list of qualifications, the church put forward seven men who met those qualifications, and these men were then appointed by the apostles and were unleashed to get the job done. I would also point out that these seven men all had Greek names! And that tells us that they were uniquely qualified to take care of this issue. These Greek men were assigned the task of taking care of the Greek-speaking widows.

I would make another observation, and that is: The qualifications given in Acts 6 (like the ones given in 1 Timothy 3) are SPIRITUAL in nature. And this is why I point this out: Sometimes, people will suggest that elders take care of the spiritual needs of the congregation, and deacons take care of the physical needs of the congregation. And I understand the comment, but we also need to understand that everything the church does is ultimately spiritual! The qualifications given for deacons, then, are spiritual. Nowhere does it say that a deacon must be physically strong. Nowhere does it say that a deacon must be really tall so that he can change the church’s light bulbs. Nowhere does it say that a deacon must be a good cook or that he must be Serve-Safe Certified so that he can serve food! And I say this just to emphasize that the work of deacons is not just busywork. We’re not just looking for a warm body to fill a slot on a list somewhere. But deacons are appointed today (as they were back then) for the spiritual good of the congregation. Then, as now, we are looking for men of faith. I would also point out that at least two of those men appointed in Acts 6 went on to serve as preachers. I’m thinking of Stephen and his sermon in Acts 7 as well as Philip and the preaching he did in Samaria in Acts 8.

We don’t have time to look at the qualifications in detail this morning. We looked at this back in May 2016 before we appointed the first deacons here at the Four Lakes congregation. But I did want to emphasize that the role of deacon is a spiritual position, and although we might not always view a position of service as being a great honor, Jesus does, and so does Paul, as he points out in this passage (in verse 13) that those who serve well, “***...obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.***”

Conclusion:

We started this morning with the reminder that the church in Ephesus had probably just been through a very difficult experience. Maybe you’ve had a difficult church experience at some point in the past. In their case, they had some false teaching coming in, most likely from within their own eldership (just as Paul had predicted back in Acts 20). And to help get the church back on target, Paul has their preacher (Timothy) take them back to basics. He takes them back and tries to restore the structure of the congregation. He’s bringing stability. He establishes the importance of prayer (as we learned two weeks ago), he lays out the roles for men and women (as we learned last week), and now he continues by giving the qualifications for those who would serve as overseers and deacons within the congregation.

Next week, we hope to move along to the next two verses as he describes the church itself. Until then, let’s be thankful that we have overseers and deacons. Let’s pray for these men and their families. And let’s also be praying about appointing more in the future.

As we close, we want to give everyone here one more opportunity to get right with God. God sent his Son as our ransom. He died, he was buried, and he was raised up. To be saved, we repent of sin, we turn back to God, and we make an appeal to God for a good conscience through the act of baptism. ***“Baptism now saves you,”*** Peter says, in 1 Peter 3:21. If you would like to study it further, get in touch. But if you are ready to obey the gospel immediately, you can come talk to me now, as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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