



1 Timothy

RBS
1 Timothy 3:1-16

Lesson 3: Elders, Deacons, and the Mystery of Godliness

“For those who serve well . . . gain a good standing”
(1 Timothy 3:13).

Doctrinal Focus: The power to serve in the church as a leader is the power of the mystery of godliness.

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-16.

In this third chapter of Paul’s first letter to Timothy, we encounter the qualifications for elders (i.e., bishops, overseers) and deacons who serve in local church leadership. This chapter is part of the larger discussion that began back in 1 Tim 2:8, with the description of appropriate conduct for men and women in public worship (vv. 8-10). This section of Paul’s letter continues all the way through chapter 3, concluding with the purpose for Paul’s instructions in this area. He clearly states, “I am writing these things to you so that . . . 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” (1 Timothy 3:14-16).

The New Testament prescribes only two offices for church leadership: (1) elders, also called bishops or overseers; and (2) deacons. In Acts 6, the origin of the office of deacon is recorded, and this account provides helpful background information for understanding the function of each leadership position. Consider Acts 6:1-6:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists [Greeks] arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we

should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

From these few verses, we come to learn that an elder is a man set apart for prayer and the ministry of the word of God. The deacon, on the other hand, is devoted to caring for the physical needs of the church, especially for those who cannot care for themselves. One office is not more spiritual than the other office. Each serves the body of Christ in different, but complementary ways.

Verses 1-7

We first encounter requirements for the office of overseer (i.e., elder or bishop; cf. Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 2:25). It begins with the second of five trustworthy sayings unique to the pastoral epistles.¹ This formula certainly highlights the

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significance of what follows. In this case, the one who desires to serve in the office of overseer desires "a noble task", or literally in the Greek, "a good work" (cf. Matthew 5:16; 26:10; John 10:32-33; 1 Timothy 5:10, 25; 6:18; Titus 2:7, 14; 3:8). As the preceding references demonstrate, the theme of "good works" appears several times in the pastoral epistles (i.e., 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus). It is important to understand that these "good works" must not be considered the means by which we merit God's favor. Remember 1 Timothy 1! The law of God was laid down for the sinner (cf. 1 Timothy 1:9). Rather, such works develop in the life of the believer as the fruit of God's grace and mercy in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the requirements for serving in local church leadership constitute the recognition of mature spiritual fruit in the life of a believer.

The requirements for an overseer (elder) appear in verses 2-7. These requirements appear in two parts: (1) in verses 2 and 3 we find a list of eleven attributes; and (2) in verses 4-7 we encounter three additional requirements with accompanying rationale and motive.

The eleven attributes located in verses 2-3 may be further divided into two parts. There are seven positive attributes in verse 2, followed by four negative attributes in verse 3.

The list is certainly not exhaustive, but it is fairly comprehensive. It begins with the statement, "*an overseer must be above reproach.*" It is perhaps helpful to think of this first attribute as a general heading for what follows. In what categories of life should the elder or overseer be "*above reproach*"? The attributes that follow answer this question. In these areas, he must be blameless. The elder must be the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, and able to teach.

Some of these requirements are easier to understand than others. For example, the sober-minded person is temperate with regard to the use of alcohol, but also level-headed. In this way, he is self-controlled, able to manage his temper and conduct in public. He is a respectable person, and he acts in an appropriate fashion. As someone who is hospitable, he cares for the outcast or stranger, and he is generous with his possessions.

If the overseer is married, he is faithful and devoted to his wife, "a one woman man." He is not an adulterer. Marriage does not appear to be a requirement or prerequisite for serving as an elder, but if a man is married, it is one way to measure his suitability for church office. It is also helpful to understand that a man may be lawfully divorced and remarried, and still serve as an elder or overseer. This requirement, however, would preclude the polygamist and the adulterer.

Lastly, the Bible records that the overseer must be "*able to teach,*" or a better translation of the Greek term, "*skillful in teaching.*" In other words, the elder must be a good or able teacher. This is an important characteristic for several reasons. First, the description of the role of the elder back in Acts 6 centers on prayer and the ministry of the word of God. In other words, the elder is someone set apart to teach God's word. The elder, a teacher, is someone who will guard the good deposit (cf. 2 Timothy 1:14).

In the next several verses (vv. 4-7), we encounter three additional requirements. The elder or overseer: (1) must manage his household well; (2) not be a recent convert; and (3) be well thought of by those outside the church.

In the first instance, the overseer must manage well his household, especially his children. The reason for this requirement is related to stewardship. One way to discover if a man will serve well in church leadership is to look at how he serves his family as a leader. Since the church is the household of God, there is certainly some overlap in gifts and qualifications.

Secondly, the elder or overseer must not be a recent convert. This injunction is intended to protect those who might become overly proud, puffed up, or conceited. In life, the young often aspire to positions of leadership for the sake of power and/or prestige. These motives would destroy both the elder and those he serves, and so Paul desires to protect both parties from the condemnation of the devil. When a man is wise enough to fear leadership and its responsibilities, then he begins to become ready for the task.

Finally, the overseer must be someone respected not just in the church, but also by those outside

the church as well. The elder must not live two lives—gentle, loving, humble, and pious in the church, but quarrelsome, conniving, and godless outside of the church. His life must exhibit a unity of God's grace that pervades marriage, the home with children, the church, and the local community outside of the church. Once again, this requirement protects both the prospective elder, and the church from suffering reproach and blemishing the name of Christ in the world.

Verses 8-13

Immediately following the qualifications for overseers (elders) in the local church are the qualifications for deacons. The two sets of qualification are linked by the key word "*likewise*." That is to say, the qualifications for each office are related and exhibit a measure of overlapping criteria.

The qualifications for deacon begin with four brief attributes, the first of which may serve as a heading for what follows. Deacons must be "*dignified*," that is, worthy of respect, serious, or honorable. As such deacons must be sincere, temperate with respect to intoxicating substances, and not greedy but rather generous as someone tasked with caring for the physical needs of those in the local church.

Deacons must also hold to the mystery of the faith with a good conscience. That is, they must understand and believe the gospel of grace—that we have been saved by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone; all for God's glory and our good (cf. Ephesians 2:4-9). In other words, the spiritual life of the deacon is just as important as the spiritual life of the elder.

Deacons must also be tested in order to demonstrate their ability to serve. This requirement is similar to that of the elder, who must demonstrate leadership both inside and outside the home in order to be qualified for service in the church. There is much common sense and wisdom displayed here. Look at how someone conducts himself or herself in life, and let this serve as a test for service in the church.

Verse 11 represents a bit of a challenge when it comes to interpretation. We read in the ESV translation, "*Their wives likewise must be dignified*." This verse, according to this translation, may indicate that a deacon's wife must be evaluated before a man may serve as deacon. However, the verse

may also be translated, "*Likewise, women must be dignified*," introducing specific qualifications for women who would serve as deacons—reverent, not slanderous, self-controlled, and faithful in everything. Either interpretation is possible, but the latter is perhaps more probable. Women are clearly prohibited from teaching men in the context of the local church, and so precluded from serving as elders or overseers (the elder is, by definition, a good and capable teacher). However, the office of deacon does not include teaching, but rather the care and service of the material and physical needs of those within the church. As such, there is no clear prohibition from women serving as deacons, and the grammar of the Greek text leans in favor of women serving as deacons (cf. Romans 16:1, "*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant (deaconess) of the church of Cenchreae*").

The final two requirements relate to the family and repeat certain qualifications encountered for the office of elder listed earlier in this chapter. Like elders, deacons must be faithful in marriage, managing well their children and their household. We must assume that the rationale is the same for both offices. How a person serves in the home is indicative of how that person serves in the context of the local church, or God's household. It is, therefore, wise and helpful to consider this context before appointing someone to the office of deacon in the local church.

This important section on deacons and their qualifications comes to a conclusion with a statement of grand encouragement. It is worth repeating here in full, "*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*" (1 Timothy 3:13). Here we come to understand that the office of deacon is by no means inferior to the office of elder. It is a position of honor before the Lord. Too often deacons have been made out to be junior varsity elders, the second string team, the understudies. Not so according to the biblical text. Both offices constitute positions of servant leadership. Elders serve with prayer and teaching, while deacons serve by caring for the unmet material needs of those in the church.



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Questions for Discussion

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-16.

1. How does 1 Timothy 3:14-15 help us to understand why and what the apostle Paul is writing to Timothy and the Ephesian church?
2. How does Acts 6:1-6 help us to understand the function of the elder and deacon in the life of the local church?
3. In your own church, there may be numerous people who serve in a variety of capacities. How would each service area in your own local congregation fit into the categories of elder (teaching and prayer) and deacon (material and physical needs)?
4. Consider the qualifications for an elder listed in verses 2-7. Are there any men in your own local congregation that appear to meet these requirements? How are these qualities and characteristics developed in the Christian life?
5. According to 1 Timothy 3:5, why is it important that an overseer (elder) manage well his own household? According to 1 Timothy 3:6, why must an elder be a mature Christian and not a recent convert?
6. Why is it important that an elder be skilled in teaching?
7. If you compare the list of qualifications for elders and deacons, what qualifications are the same? What qualifications are different?

8. Is it possible for a woman to serve as an elder in the local church? May a woman serve as a deacon? Why or why not?

9. What is the mystery of faith that Paul mentions in 3:9?

10. In 1 Timothy 3:10 Paul talks about the testing of deacons in order to determine if they are able to serve. However, Paul does not mention how this testing should occur. Have you seen such testing in your own local church? How would you propose to do this?

11. What is one benefit or reward for serving as a deacon that Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 3:13?

12. How is leadership in the home related to leadership in the church?

13. What is the mystery of godliness that Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 3:16? How does the mystery of godliness fit into Paul's overall message to Timothy and the Ephesian church?

14. Based upon 1 Timothy 3, the requirements and standards for serving the local church in leadership are high. How can the local church encourage its current leadership, and also cultivate the next generation of leaders?