

The Church of the Living God

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] 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 dignities, 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 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, or dishonest gain.

[1 : 39] He must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first. Let them serve as deacons, if they prove themselves blameless.

Their wives' like wives must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

Let them 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 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.

[3 : 13] Amen. Well, friends, let us turn to 1 Timothy chapter 3 on page 992.

And my title for this evening is The Church of the Living God. Let's bow our heads for a moment of prayer.

We thank you, dear Heavenly Father, for the church. And we pray that you will help us this evening as we read the words of the Apostle Paul to understand more truly what your church is and what a great privilege it is to belong to it.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. So 1 Timothy chapter 3, and I'd like to start by noticing a phrase that comes there in the middle of verse 15 in our chapter.

And that's the phrase that I've just quoted, the church of the living God. Now, this means that if you and I belong to Jesus Christ, we belong to the church of the living God.

[4 : 22] Now, this church is a unique institution because its origin is in God's will and God's purpose. Every other institution you can think of is human.

Think of the great engines of government and learning and science, the arts, commerce, medicine, technology. They're all human in origin and purpose.

At their best, they are, of course, a great blessing to us. But they're organized by human beings and for human beings. The church, however, belongs to God, is nourished and taught by God, has been redeemed at great cost by God, and is loved by God.

To belong to it is a unique privilege. Now, I know it doesn't always appear quite like that. At times, the church looks weak. It can become corrupted and compromised.

Sometimes it behaves badly, and we're grieved by it. And these things happen because of human sin and willfulness. But the church itself is loved by God and created by him.

[5 : 33] And as Jesus has reminded us, the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. Now, the church is Paul's great concern here in 1 Timothy.

Paul's urgent and immediate reason for writing this letter is that false teaching, corrupting teaching, has been creeping into the churches at Ephesus. And that's why he writes in chapter 1, verse 3.

He can't restrain himself, but begins his very letter by saying this. Now, different doctrine means false doctrine.

And Paul keeps coming back to this subject of false doctrine throughout the letter. But while this poisonous teaching was Paul's immediate reason for writing the letter, Paul was also instructing Timothy in how to organize the church at Ephesus, how to structure it so as to enable it to teach the truth and to guard it against the influence of false teaching.

So Paul deals with a number of important features of church life in the letter. And here in chapter 3, he's teaching Timothy about the character and qualities of those who should be appointed to leadership in the churches.

[6 : 51] But Paul is never interested in structures for the sake of structures. He's interested in structures that will keep the church true to the gospel. Structures which will enable the church to stand firm against the incursions of false teaching.

So this is not structures for the sake of beauty or for the sake of some pretty pattern. This is structures for truth and strength and effectiveness. We've already seen in chapter 2, Paul's teaching about men and women.

And the point of that section is that the church mustn't get out of kilter with the way God has designed men and women. That second half of chapter 2 could be subtitled, Men Must Behave as Men and Women as Women, so as to express the way that God has ordered the human race.

Well, let's turn now to chapter 3 and we'll see what Paul teaches about three things. First, about the servants of the church. Second, about the identity of the church.

And third, about the Lord of the church. First, then the servants of the church in verses 1 to 13. Now, the reason that Paul includes this section on the leaders, the servant leaders of the church, is to help Timothy to make the right choices of leaders for the house churches in Ephesus.

[8 : 12] It is also possible that Paul includes this section to help Timothy to stand down leaders who don't match this profile. As you know, false teaching generally infects a church through leaders rather than through foot soldiers.

And if Timothy has this blueprint to hand, with all the authority of the apostle Paul behind it, he's to dismiss leaders who were corrupting the fellowships that they were leading.

Not only do good leaders need to be appointed, bad leaders sometimes need to be dismissed. The Church of England today and the Church of Scotland today would not be in the sorry state that they're in if they had had the courage to dismiss leaders who were corrupting the doctrine and the ethics of their denominations.

And an independent church like ours needs to be very careful, needs to be ready to stand down leaders whose lives no longer conform to these apostolic standards.

The fact is that churches need good discipline, and when necessary, tough discipline. It's the only way for a church to be happy and godly. In the same way, a well-disciplined school will be a happy school, as long as the staff as well as the pupils are well-disciplined.

[9 : 30] A well-disciplined family will be a happy family, as long as the parents discipline themselves as well as their children. If a church has the right kind of leadership, the whole fellowship will flourish and will take its color from those who lead it.

Now, in our passage here, I don't want to work through every phrase. I want to focus on the central quality that Paul is insisting on in leaders.

I wonder if you can see what that central quality is. I'll name it in just a moment. Now, you'll see that Paul divides his leaders into two categories.

The first he calls overseers. That's the more senior group described in verses 1 to 7. And then secondly, he speaks of deacons, and he describes them in verses 8 to 13.

Many of the qualities required in the two groups overlap, and it's possible that men who served well as deacons for a while would later be asked to take the more senior role of overseer.

[10 : 33] Now, Paul is not giving us some kind of cast-iron system, as though we should woodenly read off an inflexible structure of leadership for all churches everywhere.

He's giving us guidelines. He uses the term overseer in verse 1 to describe those with a more general pastoral responsibility. And then he speaks of deacons in verse 8.

Literally, that means servants, which describe those whose work is to assist the overseers. So Paul is recognizing the obvious truth that some people are better fitted for senior responsibility than others.

There are some who can serve very ably and faithfully in less prominent ways. It may well be wise for them always to be deacons, to be assistants. Others, who perhaps have greater ability and greater vision, are cut out for a bigger level of responsibility.

And as you know, churches use various words to describe their leaders. Overseers and deacons, but we also speak of pastors and ministers, bishops, elders, superintendents, and one or two others as well.

[11 : 39] Though I think perhaps we should forget monsignors and archimandrites. As I say, Paul is not laying down hard and fast rules here. For what it's worth, I think that the overseer of verses 1 to 7 is probably best identified today with the senior minister of a modern church and the deacons with those who help him to pastor the flock and to have a recognized role.

But, now here's the big question. What is the central quality that binds together all these different qualities which Paul writes about between verse 1 and verse 13?

It's the quality of self-control or self-discipline. You'll see that Paul uses that phrase partway through verse 2. But as you look at all these requirements in verses 1 to 13, I think you'll see that self-control is at the heart of each characteristic.

Let's look at some of them at least. First, in verse 2, the man must be above reproach. Now, that does not mean perfect or sinless, because nobody would qualify if perfection was required.

Being above reproach means that there's nothing about the man's life that even hints at immorality or bad behavior. Nothing that could give anybody even the smallest opportunity to charge him with being a drunkard or a womanizer or greedy or using what the films might call strong language.

[13 : 08] Paul then becomes more detailed in verse 2. The overseer, he says, must be the husband of one wife. That doesn't rule out the widower who marries again or the single man who never marries.

Some of the finest Christian leaders have been single men. The point is that if the man is a married man, his heart is to be given to his wife and not to be shared with any other woman.

So it's to be obvious that he's devoted to her, that he's a faithful husband. So he is to exemplify to other Christians a faithful, loving marriage. And that is a way of life that requires self-control.

Next, he's to be sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable and hospitable. That means he needs to be steady, not an emotional roller coaster, not over-elated when things go well and not unduly depressed when times are tough.

He's steady. He's willing to talk to people and welcome them hospitably, not only to food and drink and a comfortable bed, but also welcoming people to a real sharing of life and concerns, a sharing of joys and sorrows, loving people, not being afraid of people.

[14 : 25] Next, we'll come back to teaching at the end of verse two in just a moment. But after that, not a drunkard. That requires self-control.

British people are notoriously inclined to drink too much. That is as true of the English as it is of the Scots. The overseer, therefore, must restrain himself carefully.

Next, not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome. I once knew a parish church down in England. They were near neighbors of ours, where I discovered that the congregation had shrunk down on a Sunday morning to the vicar, the organist, and at the most, two other people.

So I asked what had been going on in this congregation, and I discovered that this vicar frequently lost his temper at church meetings and shouted at people, even on Sunday services. So his behavior had destroyed the congregation.

That's why Paul speaks like this. Next, says the apostle, not a lover of money. Some ministers can become greedy for money, and when that happens, it's a problem that cannot be hidden.

[15 : 35] A minister becomes more interested in his bank balance than in the members of the congregation. Now, when you think of it, all these things are aspects of self-control.

The task of being an overseer, as Paul tells us in verse 1, is a noble task, and we know that when it's well done, it is an enormous blessing to a church.

But if the overseer is to carry out this noble task in a noble fashion, he has to learn self-control, which is really a matter of saying no again and again to temptation.

No to adultery and the flirtatiousness that can lead to it. No to unsteadiness of behavior. No to overindulgence in alcohol. No to fierce and aggressive words.

No to an appetite for money. Every human heart is a potential cauldron of vice. So Paul is saying to Timothy, choose men who are able to control themselves, men who can offer a good example of wholesome, attractive, godly life.

[16 : 44] Now, verse 4 gives another feature of self-control. 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?

Now, you might say, is that self-control? Isn't that control of children? Well, it is about control of children, but at a different level, it is about self-control, because it's about a man taking responsibility himself for training his children and, of course, supporting his wife, rather than being an irresponsible slob.

A man who behaves in a verse 4 fashion, lovingly managing his own family, will only do so if he is willing to manage himself. So it is about managing naughty master Jones, but naughty master Jones will only behave well if Mr. Jones is prepared to instill discipline and good order into family life and set an example to his children of how to live.

So it's a very searching standard. But Paul is saying to Timothy, don't make a man a pastor unless he is a grown-up human being and is willing to discipline himself for the sake of the church.

As for teaching, which is mentioned at the end of verse 2, I used to think that teaching ability was the one intellectual quality amidst a cluster of moral qualities required in a pastor.

[18 : 13] But I've come to think rather differently. Teaching really is a matter of moral courage as well as of intellectual ability. The pastor teacher needs to be able to show the church not only the truth of the gospel, but also the falsehood of positions and trends that deny the gospel.

The teacher needs to be able to demonstrate from the Bible why the truth about the gospel is true and why and how false positions are false. And that demands more than intellectual ability.

It demands courage because the teacher is then tackling the opposition. And whoever tackles the opposition must be prepared to be unpopular. This again is why the older denominations have lost their strength and their integrity.

Their senior leaders have not been willing to say no to the onslaught of worldly thinking and behavior. So you can see why Paul sets this passage in the heart of this particular letter.

Timothy's great problem at Ephesus is the influence of false teaching. And the best way to counter false teaching is to multiply the number of true teachers. It's a daunting prospect for a man to fashion his life according to verses 1 to 7.

[19 : 33] But it's a lovely prospect too because where the churches are led by men like this, the churches flourish. Let's notice, by the way, that both the overseers and the deacons of the churches are to be men.

This ties in exactly with what Paul has been writing in the second half of chapter 2. And if we hold to this position, to Paul's teaching in today's world, we will be dismissed and scorned by those who listen to the world more than they listen to Paul or to Christ.

But when you carefully read everything that Paul has written and carefully read the account given of him by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, you realize just how much Paul valued the powerful contribution to the work of the gospel made by his senior women workers.

He not only respected them, he greatly loved them and honored them. Anyone who dismisses Paul as a misogynist does not know Paul. You cannot come to that conclusion when you've read Paul many times and have pondered his work and life deeply.

Friends, let's be content to take the teaching of Paul as the teaching of Christ because that is what it is. Now, I shan't linger on verses 8 to 13, but you'll notice that the qualities required in deacons are almost identical to those required in overseers.

[20 : 59] We don't have two different standards of morality. Well, so far then, we've looked at the servants of the church in verses 1 to 13. That's the overseers and deacons.

Let's look now at the identity of the church in verse 15. Now, verse 15 is a precious and wonderful verse, but we only have it, in fact, we only have the whole of this letter because of the quirks of Paul's diary.

Verse 14, have a look at that. It's very informative. I'll give it a kind of paraphrase. Verse 14, I'm hoping to come to you at Ephesus soon because, ideally, I would like to sort out all these problems myself.

I am, after all, the Lord's apostle, but I anticipate possible delays. Now, those delays could have been health problems for Paul himself or problems in Macedonia, where he was writing from.

So he says, if I'm held up here a bit longer, you've got to grasp these nettles, brother Timothy. You're my representative and you carry my authority. And I want you to know how people should behave in...

[22 : 06] in what? Paul now uses three phrases which beautifully describe the church. The household of God, the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

Let's look at each of these phrases and we'll better understand what kind of an institution we've been received into through baptism and confession of faith. First, then, the household of God.

We here tonight are a small representative chunk of the worldwide household of God. It means God's family. To become a Christian is to become a member of God's family.

God is the father of all Christians. And Jesus is our brother as well as our savior. That's what the New Testament teaches. Now, it takes time, it takes years for us to learn gradually what a wonderful thing it is to belong to God's global family.

But it's where our real identity lies if we're Christians. It's the center of our human life. Now, of course, we have other lesser identities on the human level.

[23 : 19] We have identities of nationality. So each of us would say I'm Scottish or Irish or Iranian or Ugandan or whatever. We have identities with our families.

We identify with our mothers and fathers and our siblings. Your surname might be McDonald, for example, or Morrison. That says something. And then we develop identities with our work and our sporting interests and our hobbies, even our party politics.

But to belong to the Lord's family is far more important than any of these secondary identities. Let me especially encourage our Iranian brothers and sisters at this point.

You've come here to Scotland from your own country of Iran. That is a country of great beauty. It has ancient and highly developed cultural traditions.

Many of you, I know, have had to leave Iran under painful, traumatic circumstances. You've come here to Britain hoping to find acceptance, security, work, and a new start.

[24 : 25] For some of you, the process of finding a secure place in Britain is proving traumatic and difficult. Some of you came to Britain already as Christians.

Some of you have come to Britain not as Christians, but now to your surprise, you've found Christ and his people. But in coming to Christ, you've come to a family as well as to a savior.

To become a Christian is to find a new identity that leaves all other identities in the shade. Try to think of yourself not primarily as a displaced Iranian, but as a Christian, a member of God's household.

And as time goes on, you will discover more and more the joy of loving your brothers and sisters and of being loved by them. Iranians, we honor you.

The Lord brought you to himself and we and you are in the same family and that family is the household of God. Secondly, in verse 15, Paul tells us that the church is the church of the living God.

[25 : 37] Now that phrase, the living God, is often used in the Bible to contrast the true God with dead idols. Other gods are lifeless. They're created simply by human beings, but the true God is the living God.

And where is he to be found? Joshua once said, the living God is among you. He's not far away. He's among us.

He dwells here. Not so much in this building, but in our hearts and our family fellowship and our work of proclaiming the gospel. We are his people and he is our God and he dwells in our midst.

And because he's the living God, we can trust him to keep all the promises that he's given us in the Bible. All real life, all real power belong to him.

And then thirdly, in verse 15, Paul speaks of the church as a pillar and buttress of truth. Now at one level, it's the truth that supports the church.

[26 : 42] It's the truth which is the foundation of the church. Jesus Christ is the great cornerstone on which the church is built, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians. But Paul is expressing something a little different here.

In this final phrase of verse 15, he's showing us that the truth, which is the foundation of the church, is at a different level supported by the church and is to be proclaimed by the church.

A buttress, we haven't got one in this building, but you know what a buttress is. If we had one, it would be a big piece of stonework that comes out and sticks up against the wall holding it up. That's the purpose of the buttress, to support a building.

And the purpose of a pillar is to lift something right up and display it to the world. And this is the daunting and yet glorious responsibility of the Lord's church, to buttress the truth, in other words, to defend it and show to the world its strength and beauty, but also to be its pillar, to lift it up, to display it to the world and to say to the world, come to Christ, for there is no other savior.

How do we proclaim the truth? Well, let's use every means available. The personal conversations that we get into every day, group meetings we can be part of in the workplace or the university, street preaching, books, blogs, any and every form of media.

[28 : 12] For example, you younger folk, you're constantly sending messages to your friends, aren't you, on your little gadgets. I see you flicking your fingers out. Don't just tell them how you managed to cook lasagna for five friends last night and what a success it was or how much you enjoyed listening to Beyoncé in Hamden Park.

Yet, do tell them those things as well, but why not give them a Bible verse every week as well with your own personal explanation of the verse. That sets your colors to the mast, doesn't it?

You're acting as an evangelist then, a pillar of the truth. Be a pillar, not a hoarder. These three short phrases in verse 15, they tell us so much about the church, the household of God, that speaks of the joyful responsibility we have towards each other, the church of the living God, and that speaks of our responsibility to God himself and the pillar and buttress of the truth and that speaks of our responsibility to defend and proclaim the gospel.

But Paul hasn't quite finished. He's been speaking of the servants of the church, then of the identity of the church, and finally, he speaks of the Lord of the church in verse 16.

Now, verse 16, as I think you can see, is a little poem. It might have been a short song or hymn which was regularly used in the gatherings of the early churches. Almost certainly, Paul did not write these words himself.

[29 : 43] He's quoting this little poem as something which would have been widely known and recognized. But there is something very surprising about this verse 16. He begins, Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness.

Now, how would you expect him to continue after beginning like that? I'd expect him to say, the mystery of godliness is prayer or service or obedience or trust.

But he says nothing of the sort. He says, the great mystery of godliness is Christ. Christ. Not anything that we do, but Jesus Christ himself.

He is the great mystery. The word mystery means the truth which was long concealed but is now fully revealed. The great revelation from heaven is Christ himself.

And he will always be the final answer to false religion. False teaching will always veer towards human activities, promoting rules and regulations, diets and disciplines and abstinences, that kind of thing.

[30 : 53] But real Christianity is Jesus himself, knowing him, delighting in him and loving him. This little poem is very concise. It's condensed.

But in six very brief phrases, it says so much about Jesus. First, his incarnation manifested in the flesh.

The word became flesh. human flesh. Only a man, a real human being, could representatively bear the sins of humanity.

Second, his cross and resurrection, vindicated by the spirit. The resurrection of Jesus is the vindication of the cross of Jesus. Think of it, if Jesus had simply died and decomposed in the grave, never been seen again, there'd be no assurance that his death had achieved anything.

but his resurrection and the fact that he was seen by hundreds of people before his ascension, his resurrection publicly vindicated him, demonstrating that everything that he had said beforehand was true and reliable.

[32 : 01] Thirdly, testimony from heaven seen by angels. Remember how angels appeared at his birth, at his resurrection, and at his ascension.

In each case, they spoke and their words about Jesus testified to the truth of his identity. Fourth, evangelism, proclaimed among the nations, not just amongst the Jews, but right across the globe, bringing countless people from all over the world to membership of his family.

Fifth, his authority, believed on in the world, not just proclaimed, but believed on. This gospel is not just an idle tale.

Christians don't just believe it with their minds. We believe on Jesus with our whole hearts. It means that we stake everything on him. He is our anchor, our rock, our king, and our master.

We believe on him. And then sixth, his destiny, taken up in glory. He is now seated in glory at the right hand of God.

[33 : 08] And every Christian will one day see his glory and share his glory and be made like him in his glory. If we're Christians, our final destiny is not the southern necropolis, but the glory of our Savior Jesus.

So Paul is saying, Timothy, my brother, keep Jesus at the heart and center of the churches in Ephesus. His incarnation, his cross and resurrection, his testimony, his gospel, his authority and his destiny in glory.

But Paul is our teacher, not just Timothy's teacher. And Paul's message to us is the same. Jesus, the king of glory.

Jesus at the center of everything. Always Jesus. Jesus. Let us pray together. how we thank you, dear Heavenly Father, for this glorious and wonderful family, this greatest of all institutions, the Church of God, which you have loved, which you have called into being from before the foundation of the world.

And we are able to play our part in it and because of your grace and goodness be members of it, not just now, but for eternity as well. Therefore, dear Father, we ask you to encourage, to strengthen and to bless your Church, not least this one that we belong to.

[34 : 43] Give us joy as we love each other and serve each other as we proclaim this wonderful good news about our Lord Jesus. And may your name and the name of our Lord Jesus, his fame, his reputation, his wonderful achievements be covered with glory and we ask it for his sake.

Amen. Amen.