

Message #7

Kurt Hedlund

1 Timothy

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DEACONS, WIVES,
AND THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD

1 TIMOTHY 3:8-16

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Bill George, professor at Harvard Business School, writes, **“If ever there was a time when America needs leaders, it’s now. The litany of problems is all too familiar--- ...healthcare, schools, energy, the seemingly endless series of corporate scandals. What’s nowhere to be found, however--- or almost nowhere--- is the leadership needed to fix things. The problem isn’t the lack of potential leaders, however, but a wrongheaded notion of what exactly a leader is. This misguided notion of leadership often results in the wrong people attaining critical leadership roles. Search committees and voters alike fall into the trap of choosing leaders for their style rather than their substance, for their image instead of their integrity. Given this way of doing business, why should we be surprised when our leaders come up short?”** (*U.S. News & World Report*, 10/30/2006)

Laurence Peter developed a variation of this theme in what he called “the Peter Principle.” He argued that in an organization or business every employee tends to rise to his or her level of incompetence. People over time get promoted until they eventually reach a position where they can no longer do the job. Work is accomplished by those employees who have not yet reached their level of incompetence. Peter’s Corollary is that, in time, every position tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out his or her duties.

This view of organizations and leadership may have a certain measure of wisdom but is a bit too cynical. In dealing with churches and Christian institutions we should have a conviction that God is at work in raising up and equipping people for positions of leadership. We do need leadership, and we do need integrity. We also need the right models of leadership. Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger and John Wayne may make good heroes on the movie screen, and business executives like Neutron Jack Welch of General Electric may be admired in the business world, But the model which the New Testament presents for church leadership is significantly different.

Our best example of leadership is Jesus Christ. One of His instructions (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 20:26-27) about leadership was this: **“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave...”** (Matthew 20:26-27)

Service, or servanthood, is what the church of Jesus Christ needs. This is what Bethany Church needs. In a time of sharp partisanship divide, this is what our country needs. In a week when another Las Vegas Convention Authority leader admitted guilt in corruption charges, we are reminded that this is what local government needs. It is also what good businesses need. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In our study of 1 Timothy we have seen that the Apostle Paul’s representative in the church at Ephesus was faced with a fair set of problems. He needed help in dealing with these challenges. So Paul in #3 told Timothy about what kind of qualities to seek in those who would be leaders in the church. Last time we looked at what it takes to be an elder or overseer in a local church. We saw that the primary responsibilities of the job involve governing and teaching and shepherding the congregation. There are other ingredients, and other kinds of people, who are needed in Christian leadership. Such is the focus of the passage before us this morning.

I.

Verses 8-10 and 12-13 of 1 Timothy #3 (which are found on p. 992 of the black Bibles under many of the chairs) introduce us to the subject of DEACONS. (PROJECTOR ON--- DEACONS) Paul writes, **“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.”**

The Greeks had a couple of words which were used for “servant.” The most common word for servant in the New Testament is *doulos*, (PROJECTOR ON--- DOULOS) which is often translated as “slave.” A *doulos* was legally bound to his master. The word for deacon--- *deakonos*--- (DOULOS/DEAKONOS) refers usually to voluntary service of a menial type.

In John #2, for example, mention is made of deacon servants who were present at the wedding in Cana where Jesus and His disciples were present. The use of *deakonos* rather than *doulos* suggests that these workers were not slaves but were volunteers who were helping out at the wedding.

The basic meaning, then, of this word translated as “deacon” in the New Testament (PROJECTOR ON--- DEACON DEFINITION) is **“one who voluntarily serves others, prompted by a loving desire to benefit those served.”** Most often this word and its various forms are translated as “serve or minister,” “service or ministry,” and “servant or minister.”

The general view of Greek culture was that people were created to rule, not to serve. From the beginning, Jesus followers had a different perspective. It is the verb form of this original word for “deacon” that is used by Jesus in Mark #10 v. 45 (MARK 10:45) when He declared, **“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”** Jesus provided voluntary service prompted by a loving desire to benefit others.

This is the kind of service that is provided by our volunteers on the praise team. It is the kind of service provided by people who work on our grounds and buildings. It is the kind of service that is provided by our volunteers who work with prisoners. It is the kind of service provide by those who help out with our Christian education program. It is the kind of service that is provided by people who serve on our church boards. It is the kind of service that is provided when we help people move. It is the kind of service provided when people quietly put in donations to our Deacons’ Fund in the church foyer. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Deakonos in its noun and verb forms appears 100 times in the New Testament. It is only in 1 Timothy #3 and one or two other passages that it has the technical meaning that it does in our passage. For Paul here is describing a position, or office, in the church. He doesn’t, however, give us details about what it means to be a deacon.

Some trace the beginning of the office of deacon to Acts #6. There in the very early church there was an argument that arose in Jerusalem between the Greek-speaking Jews, who came originally from other parts of the Roman Empire, and the native Aramaic-speaking Jews about the distribution of food to widows. The twelve apostles called the Christians together and told them to pick seven spiritual men to oversee this food distribution. (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 6:2) In Acts #6 v. 2 the twelve apostles said, **“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.”**

These seven men are nowhere called “deacons,” and immediately after this incident, we find one of them preaching and performing miracles. So it is doubtful that they held the office of deacon as such. But we can see the principle developing of having other men available to assist the leaders of the church in carrying out their jobs.

One other place in the New Testament where there appears to be a reference to the office of deacon is Philippians 1:1. (PHILIPPIANS 1:1) There Paul addresses the church at Philippi in Greece, saying, “**Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons...**”

So let’s look at the qualifications that Paul lays down for these office holders. First, Paul says that they should be **dignified**. These are to be men who are respected and who have a reputation for being responsible people. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Secondly, they are not to be **double-tongued**. They are not to say one thing to one person and to tell a different story to another person. They need to have integrity of speech. John Bunyan warned about this kind of individual in his *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The hero of the story, Christian, came to the city of Fair Speech. There he ran into conflict with Mr. Facing-both-ways and a parson by the name of Mr. Two-tongues.

Deacons are also **not** to be **addicted to much wine**. The same qualification was listed for elders of the church. Furthermore, they are **not** to be **greedy for dishonest gain**. Perhaps the deacons in the church at Ephesus had involvement with financial matters. Perhaps they distributed financial aid to needy families and individuals. A church would want people with this responsibility who were not inclined toward greediness, and who were not tempted in this area.

Verse 9 adds that the deacons **must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience**. We tend to think of a mystery as some kind of secret information that is being withheld. In the New Testament, the term “mystery” refers to information that was previously hidden but has now been revealed. Paul uses the term a number of times to refer to the Christian faith. It has to do with the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and various implications which stem from that, such as the reality that Jews and Gentiles become united in the body of Christ by their joint faith in Jesus.

We saw last week that elders, or overseers, were required to have an ability to teach the truths of the Christian faith. Here deacons seem only to be required to have an understanding of the Christian faith plus a life that reflects faith in those truths. Probably teaching was not a primary responsibility of deacons.

Verse 10 says that candidates for the position of deacon must **be tested first**. The particular Greek verb which is used here as a nuance of being tested with a view to approval, with a hope of proving to be genuine. At Ephesus some of the false teachers may have been brought on before they were properly tested. Paul was talking about observation of a candidate's life over time. As was true of the qualification for elders, the emphasis is upon character, not education or achievements.

At times I have heard people suggest that a particular individual should be appointed to a church office as a means of getting him or her more involved in the life of the congregation. The thinking is that this appointment might help someone who is marginal in his commitment to become more committed to the church. That might be OK with some jobs in the church. Paul says that this thinking doesn't work when it comes to appointing men to be elders or deacons. In the case of elders, the church needs to have men who are already functioning as pastors in the congregation, who are already acting as shepherds. In the case of deacons, the church needs to choose men who are already serving and helping and demonstrating integrity and trustworthiness and a certain level of spiritual maturity.

We are going to come back to v. 11 in a minute. In vv. 12 & 13, we read, **"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."** As was true of the qualification for elders, the deacon is to be a one woman man and is to have demonstrated that he manages his own family well. As I pointed out last week, there are various interpretations of the phrase "husband of one wife," but probably it is talking about a Christian guy who is truly committed to his wife. The idea in v. 13 seems to be that faithful service will result in influence and respect in the church and in deepened faith and a strengthened relationship with Jesus.

There is no specific description of the duties of deacons here or elsewhere in the New Testament, but we can make reasonable deductions about their role in the early church. The meaning of the word "deacon" suggests the idea of voluntary service or helping. Then also the absence of reference to governing or teaching ability suggests that the deacons had a role of assisting the elders. Reference is made to integrity in handling money. Perhaps they helped to distribute aid to the needy. The reference to not being double talkers points in the direction of people contact--- perhaps suggesting that deacons helped congregants in practical ways.

According to our church bylaws, our deacons are responsible to help the pastor and elders with communion and baptism, to administer the Deacons' Fund, to be involved in shepherding, to assist the sick and needy, and to aid in the spiritual care of the church. We also have a Christian education committee, a missions committee, and a property and maintenance committee. There are a few other

positions, or offices, prescribed, also. The work of these committees and individuals may once have been included in the responsibilities of deacons and elders. Certainly the people on these boards are involved in service to the Lord and to the church.

II.

Verse 11 in our text describes the responsibility of WIVES. (PROJECTOR ON--- WIVES) Our ESV translation reads, **“Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.”** A few translations use “deaconesses” instead of “wives.” The Greek text literally says, **“Women, or wives--- the word can be translated either way--- must be dignified...”** It is doubtful that Paul is describing a responsibility for Christian women in general. So it would appear that he is talking about either deacons’ wives or a female position of deaconess. Why didn’t he just use the term “deaconess” if he was talking about deaconesses? It turns out that the word had not been invented yet. We don’t find evidence of the word ever appearing in Greek literature until after the time of Paul.

Those who favor the idea that a formal church office of deaconess is in view argue that if Paul was talking about wives of deacons, he would have used a possessive pronoun and called them “their” wives. Also the requirements for an elder are stricter than those for a deacon. It does not seem reasonable that deacons’ wives should meet certain qualifications when nothing is mentioned about the responsibility of elders’ wives. We do find evidence outside of the Bible that there were deaconesses early in church history. In a letter to the Emperor Trajan about 112 AD the Roman governor Pliny (PLINY LETTER) wrote, **“I have judged it necessary to obtain information by torture from two serving women, called by them deaconesses.”** Furthermore, proponents of the view that Paul is describing an office of deaconess would point to Romans #16 v. 1 (ROMANS 16:1), where Paul writes, **“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [deacon] of the church at Cenchreae...”**

I am more inclined to think that Paul is simply describing deacons’ wives in our passage. Phoebe in Romans 16:1 is called a *deakonos*, but the most common meaning for that word in the New Testament is simply “servant,” not a church officer. This is not to minimize Phoebe’s contribution. Paul in the New Testament invents a number of words that previously had not existed in Greek literature. He could easily have used a feminine form of “deacon” if he really was wanting to establish an official church position of that name. For elders and deacons and widows of the list, whom we will meet in #5, there is an extended description of the position involved. This mention of wives falls in the midst of a description of deacons. It seems more likely that Paul is talking about the wives of deacons. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Why would he have some kind of requirement for them and not for elders’ wives? Perhaps because elders devoted more of their attention to teaching and overseeing and praying. Involvement of wives

was not quite so essential to these tasks. But if deacons had primary responsibility for meeting the needs of the poor and needy and widows, then having a godly wife in these personal interactions was really important. Early in the history of the church the role of these wives developed into a separate position of “deaconess.”

So this is not to say that there is anything wrong or unbiblical with having this church position of deaconess. We have lots of other church positions and roles that are not specifically identified in the New Testament but which are essential to the effective operation of a church. We have Sunday school superintendents and Christian education committees and treasurers and building and maintenance people and many others. We do have deaconesses in our church, and they do a lot of good work, much of it behind the scenes.

Notice then the qualities which these women are to have. Like the deacons, they are to be **dignified**. Also they are **not** to be **slanderers**. This is a word that is often used of Satan in the New Testament. Deacons’ wives, or deaconesses, become involved with the personal problems of people, especially women. It is important that they not break confidences or spread gossip about the people whom they are helping. Then also these women are to be **sober-minded** and **faithful in all things**.

We need to keep in mind that we don’t need an official position of deacon or deacon’s wife or deaconess to help people. It is a responsibility of every Christian to be a servant to others. We should also note that in 1 Corinthians #12 v. 28 helping is listed as a spiritual gift. So there are some Christians who may have a special joy and ability to help others in practical ways.

Most of us have some familiarity with Isaac Newton (PROJECTOR ON--- ISAAC NEWTON) He was the famous English astronomer and mathematician and physicist. We perhaps remember him best for his observation about falling apples. Few of us know anything about Edmund Halley (EDMUND HALLEY), although we know the comet that was named after him. Edmund Halley was a great server. It was Halley who coaxed the hesitant Isaac Newton to write his great work *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. It was Halley who corrected Newton’s mathematical errors. It was Halley who edited and supervised and even financed the printing of the book, even though Newton was the wealthier man.

Historians call Halley’s service one of the most selfless examples in the history of science. Newton quickly began to reap the rewards of prominence. Halley got little credit. But Edmund Halley didn’t care about who received the credit as long as the cause was being advanced. Such is the spirit of service which we always need in the church of Christ.

III.

In vv. 14-16 the apostle adds some observations about THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD. (III. THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD) Commentators often regard vv. 14 & 15 as the key verses in the book, because they express the basic purpose of Paul's letter. He writes, **"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."**

A.

The thing to notice here is the Bible's view of the church. The church in the New Testament is never a building. It is not a business. It is a HOUSEHOLD. (III. THE CHURCH A. THE HOUSEHOLD) It is a family. This means that each church member ought to treat other church members as family members. This has nothing to do with whether someone is an official member of the local church or not. It has to do if someone is a Christian, if he or she has put faith and trust in Jesus for eternal life and the forgiveness of sins. Paul's instructions to the household at Ephesus have to do with proper behavior and basic structure.

Paul calls the local church "the church of the living God." Ephesus, remember, was the home of the temple to the goddess Diana. This goddess was worshipped throughout much of Asia Minor and southern Europe. Her temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. But Diana was nothing more than a statue made of rock. Paul says that we Christians are participants in the church of the living God.

Karl Marx is dead. Mohammed is dead. Buddha is dead. Jesus Christ is alive. He rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God the Father. He is living and active. He is accomplishing His purposes in the world. He is using the church to further His plan upon the earth. He is changing the lives of His people. We are part of the church of the living God.

B.

This church of the living God is not only a family, it is also THE PILLAR AND BUTTRESS OF THE TRUTH. (III. A. B. THE PILLAR AND BUTTRESS...) The Ephesians knew about pillars and buttresses. The temple of Diana had 127 magnificent pillars. The church of Jesus Christ also has many individual pillars and buttresses. These pillars and buttresses are the local churches. Each local church has within it power to support and strengthen and protect the truth. It does so by its faithful witness to God's Word and by the

lives of its members--- and by the proper leadership of the church. That is why Paul was writing to Timothy--- so that people would know how to conduct themselves in the church.

C.

Finally, in v. 16 we come to THE CHURCH'S CREED. (III. A. B. C. THE CHURCH'S CREED) Paul writes, "**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.**" The apostle quotes from what may have been a popular hymn of the day. In the introduction to the hymn he says, "**Great is the mystery of godliness.**" Perhaps this was a kind of creedal statement that early Christians used. The Jews had, and have, a creedal statement known as the Shema. The Moslems have Allahu Aqbar--- God is great. The Ephesians had the statement "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." Artemis was the Greek name for their goddess.

According to Acts #19 two of Paul's companions were hauled into the stadium in 'Ephesus one day because people were upset that the trade in idols was declining due to the influence of the Christians. For two hours the people in the stadium shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." Paul was outside of the stadium somewhere. No doubt he heard the cry of the Ephesians. Now he declares. "Great is the mystery--- the revealed truth--- of godliness." Christianity reveals true godliness.

The words that follow in our text are regarded by the scholars as the lyrics of a hymn, which also functioned as a kind of creedal statement. The first line talks about the incarnation, about how God became a man. The meaning of the second line is a bit obscure. There is clearly a contrast between flesh and spirit. Christ was watched by the angels and proclaimed to all the nations. There was a response of faith by many, according to line 5. Line 6 speaks of the ascension of Christ into heaven.

I claim very little knowledge of opera. But I have read that Giacomo Puccini was a great composer of operas. He came down with cancer in 1922. He was determined to write a final opera, entitled "Turandot," which many critics consider to be his best. His students urged him to rest and to save his strength. But he kept at his task. At one point he proclaimed, "**If I do not finish my music, my students will finish it.**"

In 1924 Puccini was taken to Brussels for surgery. He died two days after the operation. Nevertheless, his students finished his opera. In 1926 the premiere of this opera was held in Milan, Italy, under the direction of Puccini's best student, Arturo Toscanini. Everything went well in the performance. When the

orchestra came to the point in the music when the master had been forced to stop, Toscanini, his face wet with tears, stopped the music, put down his baton, turned to the audience, and cried out. **“Thus far the master wrote, but he died!”**

After a few moments, his countenance changed, and he took on a smile. He took up the baton again and cried out, **“But his disciples finished his work!”** Thus they completed the opera.

Our conductor and composer likewise died, but he was raised from the dead, and He ascended into heaven. He has left us with the important job of finishing His work, proclaiming the message of the gospel among the nations. To do that, each one of us must commit ourselves to a living relationship with the living God. We must commit ourselves to our fellow household members. We must commit ourselves to defend, and live by, the truth of God’s word. We must also strive to display a servant spirit toward one another and toward the world around us.