

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### 1 Timothy 3:1-16      *"In God's Household"*

Timothy, the leader of the church in Ephesus, is having trouble with "false teachers" among his elders, and Paul is giving him advice on how to deal with them. He has emphasized the need to maintain the "sound doctrine" of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He has said that the women who are causing trouble should not be teaching. Now he turns to the leaders, most or perhaps all male, and to the qualities they should exhibit if the Gospel is to be preached credibly in the city.

#### 1) *Elders, Overseers and Deacons*

Who are these leaders? We've noted that the very early church was led by people who were "full of the Holy Spirit" and recognized to be gifted, especially to teach. But there is also the note of "authority" derived from the "apostolic band" who had been with Jesus and had witnessed him in his resurrection body. As time went on, the question of how to institutionalize "the teaching authority," and thereby guard the truth of the Gospel, became more and more important in the face of "false teachers" and the gradual disappearance of the "apostolic" generation. So already by the 60s AD, when Paul is writing to Timothy, we can see the early signs of the structured leadership that would emerge by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

Teaching and preaching were always foremost in the ministry of the church. We

see that very early in the appointment of "the Seven" in Acts 6 - men like Stephen and Philip; the apostles recruit helpers to "run the church" while they remain focused on "the ministry of the Word of God." Most interpreters agree that out of the gifted *teachers* came the "elders, overseers and deacons" who would lead the church. Organizationally, the church adopted the pattern of synagogue Judaism, with a council of ruling elders.

Paul refers to them in this letter: the *presbyteroi*, a Greek word whose main connotation is age and maturity, and is therefore well translated by the English word *elders*. In this passage Paul focuses on two groups within the *presbyteroi*. One is the *episkopoi*, which meant overseers (in business or government); from this came the English transliteration "biskop" and so *bishops*. In the 1st century "bishop" did not have the connotation that came later of "a single ruler of a group of churches;" rather these *overseers* were "heads of households" in a period when Christians gathered in "house churches." Then there are the *diakonoï*, meaning servants, and transliterated into English as *deacons*.

By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, these three groups were solidified as "orders of clergy... bishops, priests and deacons;" an ordering that some churches maintain to this day. (Note, by the way, the English title *priest* is an abbreviation

of *presbyter*, and not a translation of the Old Testament Jewish “priest” – although it gradually came to have that connotation in the Roman Catholic Church and still holds it today in popular usage). Remember also that the English title *minister* is a linguistic equivalent of *deacon*: both mean “servant of the church;” one derived from Latin, the other from Greek. Finally, overseers in the 1<sup>st</sup> century were often instructed to “shepherd their flock,” from which came the title *pastor* – the Latin for shepherd.

Whatever their names and roles, what about the *qualities* expected of church leaders? Paul’s main thrust here is not on their “Holy Spirit-giftedness” as teachers, prophets, evangelists, miracle-workers; but on their inner lives and their outer behavior. His concern, no doubt growing from the behavior of the “false teachers” and the “wild women” in Ephesus, was that leaders should be exemplary in behavior, so that the church and the Gospel would not be brought into disrepute. It hardly needs emphasizing today that leaders “having a good reputation with outsiders” is essential if the church is to escape “disgrace and the devil’s trap.”

What specifically does Paul want to see in leaders? “*Aptitude for teaching; holding the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience,*” are clear and expected. But notice also the emphasis on behavior. Leaders must be “*temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable; not drunkards, not violent, not quarrelsome, not lovers of money.*” We might suppose that these things are so obvious that they would hardly need mentioning! But that would simply betray that we knew very little about human nature, or leadership in general, or the history of the church! Behavioral issues have arisen, do arise, and we suppose always will arise in particular ways among leaders in communities, in business, in government, and in churches. So it is never out of place to remind leaders at

every level in every organization that personal qualities matter in leadership! Notice also the emphasis on family life. Overseers and deacons should be “*husbands of but one wife,*” as the NIV translates a Greek phrase that says literally “*be a one-woman man.*” History is full of debates about the meaning of this – that leaders must be married, or that they must be faithful in marriage, or that they must only have one wife at a time, or that they must only ever have one wife. The weight of evidence points to the last as being Paul’s likely meaning – and for generations, churches did not accept leaders who had been divorced and remarried, or even (in the early church) bereaved and remarried. Leaders must also “*manage their households well*” – that included their children and their servants – because this was in many ways a model for “*pastoring their churches.*” They should also be mature believers, *not new converts; and tested*, so that they knew what they were doing and knew what the church was for.

There is a question over the sentence that in the NIV runs “*In the same way, their wives...*” The Greek says “*likewise, the women...*” and it may well have referred to “*female deacons*” or, if you prefer, “*deaconesses.*” Historians say that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> century, “*deaconess*” was a well-established leadership role in the churches, although it gradually disappeared after Constantine.

Why these qualities? To ensure that in “*the household of God,*” leaders should be “*above reproach,*” and “*of good reputation with outsiders*” – not that they should be perfect, or that they would be automatically disqualified for failing one item on these lists, or that churches should hold their leaders to standards that most believers would not attempt to meet – but that leaders should in some real sense be *exemplary in the*

eyes of outsiders. This would guard the church from disrepute.

And that mattered because the reason the church and its leaders exist is to proclaim and defend the truth of the Gospel. The church exists as God's chosen instrument to bring the story of Jesus Christ to the outsiders. To do that the community of the church must show within it the presence of the living God, and strive to preserve and proclaim the true Gospel; that is, it must pay attention to life as well as to truth; to "walking the walk as well as talking the talk," to "incarnating" the Gospel in the eyes of outsiders by their way of life. And there is, says Paul, much reward in this - because those who serve well as leaders gain reassurance in their faith, and a good reputation within and outside the Christian community.

## 2) The Mystery of Godliness

Paul concludes this section on leaders with an obscure but deeply felt passage on "the mystery of godliness." What is that about? Remember that "mystery" in the New Testament always means something that "was hidden but is now revealed." In Christ, the way to live a "godly life" has now been revealed: it is a Christ-like way.

What does that look like? Christ had, according to this early "hymn-fragment," followed the great arc of humiliation that led to exaltation, and his followers must do the same. As Paul wrote earlier to the *Philippians*, Christ did not consider "equality with God" something to grasp tightly, but "emptied himself" to become a man, and what is more, a man in the form of a *servant*. Because he "humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross" he was "exalted to the highest place... that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow." So here to Timothy, Paul quotes the same arc of Jesus' life: "appeared in a body, vindicated by the Spirit (in his resurrection), seen by angels (in his

exaltation to heaven)." Now his church must follow the same path - "preaching him among the nations," seeing him "believed on in the world," until he is again glorified through his church's ministry.

What has this to do with church leadership, or "how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household"? This is the arc of service. This, said Jesus, is what leadership looks like in my kingdom! "The leaders of the Gentiles lord it over them... it shall not be so among you! Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." So church leaders are ministers, deacons - "servants of the church and of her Lord, Jesus Christ."

## 3) Serving Christ in His Church

So if you want to be a Christian leader, says Paul, that is a good ambition! But know this - it will be humbling. To be a Christian leader is to *serve* - or if you want to be more graphic, to be a slave. You will do the dirty work that no-one else wants to do. You will spend hours and days and nights on invisible and literally thankless tasks. You will have to make sure that work gets done that other people assume "just happens."

Nobody but other people in leadership, and God your Father - for whom you are working - will ever have an idea of what you do. They will suppose that teaching your Sunday School class takes less than one hour a week. They will assume that a thousand pounds of donated food magically gets into the hands of hungry people. They will assume that the Thrift Store makes \$20,000 a year by someone standing at a cash register and taking the money. They will assume that heat, light, cleanliness, order, furniture, coffee and cake, flowers in the church "just happen." They will assume that Communion is ready to be served, prayers are ready to be

prayed, anthems are ready to be sung, without any work or time expended by anybody. All this will be assumed, and never appreciated, until sometime it's missing!

Being a Christian leader means serving with only God's "well-done," and *servoing graciously in a way that adorns the Gospel* and does not disgrace it. If you are a leader, you will feel inadequate - humbled and worn down - but you will be simply following the path Jesus trod. Your reward is that nothing is as worthwhile, nothing builds your faith and confidence in Jesus Christ like serving him and experiencing his grace and his strength.

Who is qualified to lead? None of us who know the depth of our hearts. And no-one at all if churches insist on applying *strictly and selectively* lists of qualities like those Paul sends to the Ephesian elders. I have seen churches riot over appointing a divorced (or even worse, a divorced and remarried) man to leadership. But I have never seen anyone disqualified for failing to be temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, not quarrelsome. (There are, in fact, way too many intemperate and argumentative leaders in churches - I know, I have been one at various places and times!)

The Church of Jesus Christ has one calling - to proclaim his Gospel by word and deed to people who have never heard it, to people who have forgotten it, to people who think they don't need it. That means guarding the reputation of the church in the community. "Who does what" in the church is a side-issue, and who gets the thanks is never the issue. The truth of the Gospel is the issue; and at times it takes slave-labor and sacrifice to credibly present it to a community.

Let us pray...