

1 Timothy 3 • New Testament Organizations

Introduction

There seem to be no end of books and ideas of how a church should be organized and operated. Sometimes the sentiment is expressed that we need to “do it” like the Early Church originally operated, which begs the question, “How does the Bible say they did it?” In the New Testament the church is repeatedly described as “the body of Christ”, something that is living and growing together under Christ the Head. The analogy is to a body, a living organism composed of a lot of various parts, but all of them organized to function ultimately as a single machine. If the local church is to effectively carry out its tasks, therefore, it must have leadership, which implies organization.

¹It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. ²An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. ⁴He 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?), ⁶and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. ⁷And 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.

[Read v.1-7]

Q: What exactly is “the office of overseer”? What does it mean to be an “overseer”?

A: The Greek word is “episkopos”, which some translations render as “bishop”. Its usage in the Bible is associated with “elder”, “overseer”, “guardian” or “shepherd” and corresponds closely to the term “pastor”.

Observation: The word conveys the idea of someone in authority who is watching, directing, and protecting their master’s interests, such as overseeing the flock or running a business. Within the context of the church, such would be working on behalf of Christ their Master.

Q: What is the ultimate example given to us of this office?

A: Christ.

For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

1 Peter 2:25

Q: How do we know that “bishop” and “elder” actually refer to the same office?

A: In Titus 1:5 and 7 Paul tells Titus to appoint “elders in every town” and then refers to these same individuals as “bishops”.

Application: How would this be different from the way we choose leaders, say, for a board of directors? Why would someone good at their secular job not automatically be qualified for higher church leadership? How is this really speaking more of someone qualified as a pastor than a board member?

Q: What are the personal qualifications listed in v.2-3? What does each one actually mean or describe? (Encourage group discussion of each.)

1. “...above reproach...” (v.2) This doesn’t mean “sinless” but rather “blameless”, someone whose witness and character cannot be compromised by something the enemy can get hold of and use against them.
2. “...the husband of one wife...” (v.2) It has long been debated as to whether Paul was making a statement about polygamy and/or divorce. What is definitely clear, however, is that there should be no question as to one’s marriage standards and moral commitment.
3. “...temperate...” (v.2) This alludes to sober judgment and action. (Ever notice how anti-drinking groups use the word “temperance”?)
4. “...prudent...” (v.2) This describes being “wise” more than being “smart”. It’s the ability to apply God’s Word to behavioral situations.
5. “...respectable...” (v.2) This would indicate that reputation **does** matter, especially in regards to the quality of one’s Christianity.

6. "...*hospitable...*" (v.2) Not only in demeanor, but remember that the biblical definition of "hospitality" is often used to express how one treats strangers or those in need. This may indicate someone able to enfold visitors or the needy into the flock, someone who genuinely enjoys the company of people even to the point of bringing them home.
7. "...*able to teach...*" (v.2) It's interesting to note that in Ephesians 4:11 the roles of "*pastor and teacher*" appear to refer to one office, painting the picture of an "Overseer-Teacher", so to speak.
8. "...*not addicted to wine...*" (v.3) Probably just one example of the greater requirement not to be personally addicted to **ANY** earthly element as exemplified by alcohol.
9. "...*not pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable...*" (v.3) The word "*pugnacious*" depicts someone who uses physical force to get others to agree with them. This office requires we reject "heavy shepherding" because as James points out, "*The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God*". (James 1:20)
10. "...*free from the love of money.*" (v.3) Self-explanatory, but it makes you wonder how so many of the money-preachers have been allowed to arise to prominent, television positions.

Q: How do the qualifications in v.4-5 now differ from those listed previously?

A: They're family qualifications.

Q: And how would you characterize the final set of qualifications in v.6-7? How are they different from all those which came before?

A: They're church qualifications.

Q: What might be the commonality desired in an overseer's church qualifications?

A: It alludes to the issue of pride, both in someone who might favor the title more than the actual office, and ultimately influenced by Satan's favorite tool.

Q: Why do you suppose "he must have a good reputation with those outside the church"?

A: Pastors are the visible representation to the community at large of the church. If they leave behind bad debts and unfulfilled promises the testimony of the church at large is damaged, sometimes irreparably.

Q: This is a bit tricky, but what must we do in order to select our pastors-overseers-shepherds? What is required of us?

A: We have to evaluate them, measure them against the standards of God's Word.

Q: But isn't that "judging" another person?

A: No, we're not "judging" whether they're going to end up in heaven or hell, but assessing whether they meet the minimum requirements of God's Word.

Application: How might normal candidating processes today prevent discovery of someone's compliance with each of these requirements? How closely does your local church follow these guidelines? How important are educational or seminary credentials to this list?

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

[Read v.8-13]

Q: What is important about the fact that Paul uses the word “likewise” here?

A: He’s indicating that God’s standards for deacons are as equally important as those for pastors. This is not a “step down” to a lower office which allows for lesser standards of personal spiritual character than what some might perceive as the higher office of “pastor”.

Q: How is a “deacon” different from an “overseer”?

A: The Greek word means “servant” or “minister”. It generally denotes someone with specific tasks or areas of service such as the choosing of the seven in Acts 6 to care for the church’s widows. The goal is to not allow pastors – “overseers”, to become distracted from their primary calling to preach the Word. It doesn’t mean they themselves don’t preach the Word (as Stephen and Philip obviously did as members of the seven chosen), but that they assume duties and responsibilities that will free up pastors to concentrate on the Word.

Q: What are the personal qualifications for a deacon/deaconess? (Notice how they’re related.)

1. Him: “...men of dignity...” (v.8) Her: “...dignified...” (v.11)
2. Him: “...not double-tongued...” (v.8) Her: “...not malicious gossips...” (v.11)
3. Him: “...not...addicted to much wine...” (v.8) Her: “...temperate...” (v.11)
4. Him: “...not...fond of sordid gain...” (v.8) Her: “...faithful in all things.” (v.11)

Q: What are the family qualifications for deacons?

1. “...husbands of only one wife...” (v.12)
2. “...good managers of their children...” (v.12)
3. “...good managers of...their own households.” (v.12) This would include household staff, servants, employees, etc.

Q: What are the church qualifications for deacons?

A: “...holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience...” (v.9)

Q: What is the additional step specifically identified as part of the overall qualification process?

A: They must “*first be tested*”. (v.10) It’s important to note that successful completion of such testing is to be found “*beyond reproach*”. Again, this doesn’t mean “sinless”, but rather “blameless”, someone whose witness and character cannot be compromised by something the enemy can get hold of and use against them.

Application: Why is it that someone with great skills in a given area may actually **NOT** be qualified to be a deacon? (Hint: They’re not “above reproach”.) How might the role of deacon mean putting more hours into hands-on ministry than conducting meetings **about** ministry? Why might this actually be that part of the congregation that carries out “programs” within the church?

¹⁴I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; ¹⁵but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. ¹⁶By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness:

He who was revealed in the flesh,
Was vindicated in the Spirit,
Seen by angels,
Proclaimed among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
Taken up in glory.

[Read v.14-16]

Q: What is Paul trying to teach by calling the “church of the living God” the “household of God”?

A: It's most likely Paul's way of grounding Timothy in the importance of the local church as the visible representation of the greater, worldwide body of Christ referred to as “the church”. In other words, these instructions are for practical application at the local level.

Q: What does the image of the church as “the household of God” convey?

A: It describes the dwelling of a family. Paul is expressing church as a family not only in their relationships with each other but in their combined pursuit of the family business. It would also express a closeness to God that goes far beyond simply maintaining a temple or meeting place.

Q: What does the image of the church as “the pillar and support of the truth” convey?

A: Now Paul is using architectural language. As the local church is faithful to preserve, preach, and practice the Truth, God's work prospers on earth, whereas the unfaithful Christian weakens the very foundation of God's truth in the world. It's an indication of how the family of God goes about their Master's business by adhering to and putting into practice God's Word.

Q: What is the biblical definition of a “mystery”? How does this related to “the mystery of godliness”?

A: A “mystery” is something previously hidden which has now been revealed by God. In this case, it expresses the goal of the church in both Paul's example of it as a household and a pillar, that this is the means by which God intends godliness to be achieved on earth both in upholding the Truth and putting it into practice in personal relationships.

Q: How is this connected to the hymn quoted here by Paul?

A: This hymn summarizes the Person and work of Christ, the idea being that the local church now continues the work which He began. It's important to note how strongly the church is supposed to cling to the foundational doctrines of the work of Christ in His ministry, death, and resurrection as expressed by this hymn.

Application: *The offices specified have roles in line with familial duties within the church as “the household of God” and for establishing the church in the world as “the pillar and support of the truth”. They are supposed to produce biblical godliness in both our relationships with each other within the body of Christ proper and as a testimony of Christ to the world at large. Why is it that these offices are often only implemented as serving **INSIDE** the church? How should they also reflect the **INSIDE** of the church to the world outside?*