



LESSON THREE

The Function of the Church

Scripture Reading:

1 TIMOTHY 3

- 3:1** Faithful is the word: If anyone aspires to the overseership, he desires a good work.
- 3:2** The overseer then must be without reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, of a sober mind, orderly, hospitable, apt to teach;
- 3:3** Not an excessive drinker; not a striker, but gentle; not contentious; not fond of money;
- 3:4** One who manages well his own house, having *his* children in subjection with all gravity
- 3:5** (But if one does not know how to manage his own house, how will he care for the church of God?);
- 3:6** Not a new convert, lest being blinded with pride he fall into the judgment *suffered* by the devil.
- 3:7** And he also must have a good testimony from those outside, that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.
- 3:8** Deacons *must* similarly *be* grave, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for base gain;
- 3:9** Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.
- 3:10** And these also must first be proved; then let them minister if they are unreprouvable.
- 3:11** Women similarly *must be* grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.
- 3:12** Deacons must be husbands of one wife, managing *their* children and their own houses well.
- 3:13** For those who have ministered well obtain for themselves a good standing and much boldness in faith, which is in Christ Jesus.
- 3:14** These things I write to you, hoping to come to you shortly.
- 3:15** But if I delay, *I write* that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth.
- 3:16** And confessedly, great is the mystery of godliness:
He who was manifested in the flesh, / Justified in the Spirit, / Seen by angels, / Preached among the nations, / Believed on in the world, / Taken up in glory.

QUESTIONS:

SECTION 1:

1. What is the difference between an 'overseer' and an 'elder'? What does this difference lead into?
2. What is the difference between 'aspiration' and 'ambition'?
3. What is the function of a deacon? What are the blessings on a good deacon?

SECTION 2:

4. What must be practiced continually in order for the Church to reach the standard shown in 1 Timothy 3:15-16
5. What should the church life today be?
6. How can God be manifested in His house as the living God?

SECTION 3:

1. What is God's dwelling place and His family in the New Testament?
2. As the pillar and base of the truth what is it that the Church upholds?
3. What is the mystery of Godliness?

SECTION 4:

1. Who is the mystery of Godliness?
2. Why must we live and behave in our spirit?
3. How can we say that not only Christ is the manifestation of God in the flesh but also the Church is the manifestation of God in the flesh?

OVERSEERS AND DEACONS FOR THE CHURCH'S ADMINISTRATION

In 3:1-13 Paul speaks of overseers and deacons for the church's administration. In verses 1 through 7 he covers the overseers, and in verses 8 through 13, the deacons.

I. OVERSEERS

A. Aspiration for Oversight

In verse 1 Paul says, "Faithful is the word: If anyone aspires to oversight, he desires a good work." Paul begins with the expression, "Faithful is the word." This expression indicates that what he is about to say is very important.

In verse 1 Paul speaks of oversight, and in verse 2, of overseers. The Greek word rendered oversight is *episkope*, from *epi* meaning over and *skope* meaning sight; hence, oversight, denoting the function of an overseer. The Greek word translated overseer is *episkopos* from *epi* and *skopos* meaning seer; hence, overseer (bishop, from Latin *episcopus*). An overseer in a local church is an elder (Acts 20:17, 28). The two titles refer to the same person: elder, denoting a person of maturity; and overseer, denoting the function of an elder. It was Ignatius in the second century who taught that an overseer, a bishop, is higher than an elder. From this erroneous teaching came the hierarchy of bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the pope. This teaching is also the source of the episcopal system of ecclesiastical government. Both the hierarchy and the system are abominable in the eyes of God.

In verse 1 Paul tells us that if anyone aspires to oversight, he desires a good work. Aspiration with a pure motive differs from ambition with an impure motive. It is the Lord's desire that many brothers have the aspiration spoken of here. For the Lord's recovery and for the building up of the local churches, there is the need of the proper leading ones. Hence, aspiration for oversight is not only justifiable, but even admirable. On the one hand, we condemn ambition; on the other hand, we appreciate the fact that many brothers have the aspiration for oversight. A brother with this kind of aspiration truly desires a good work.

II. DEACONS

A. Qualifications of a Deacon

In verse 8 Paul says, "Deacons must similarly be grave, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not seeking gain by base means." Deacons are serving ones. The overseers take care of the church; the deacons serve the church under the direction of the elders. These are the only two offices in a local church.

B. Blessing on a Good Deacon

1. Obtaining a Good Standing

In verse 13 Paul mentions the blessing on a good deacon: "For those who have ministered well obtain for themselves a good standing and much boldness in faith which is in Christ Jesus." The word ministered here means served. The expression "a good standing" refers to a firm and steadfast standing as a believer and a saint before God and man. To serve the church well as a deacon strengthens one's Christian standing.

2. Obtaining Much Boldness in Faith Which Is in Christ Jesus

By serving well, a deacon will also be blessed with much boldness in faith which is in Christ Jesus. The word boldness also means confidence. To serve the church well strengthens the boldness, the confidence, of the Christian faith. Faith here is subjective and refers to our act of believing.

III. DEACONESSSES

Verse 11 says, "Women similarly must be grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things." The word women in this verse refers to deaconesses (Rom. 16:1), not to the wives of the deacons. Sisters who are serving ones in the church are deaconesses. Such ones must be grave. Furthermore, they should not be slanderers. This corresponds to "not double-tongued" in verse 8. The Devil is a slanderer (Rev. 12:10). To slander is to practice the nature of the evil slanderer. A sister who is a deaconess, a serving one in a local church among many other sisters, should flee slander, the evil act of the Devil.

Deaconesses must also be temperate and faithful in all things. We have pointed out that to be temperate is to be self-controlled, moderate. The charge to be "faithful in all things" corresponds to "not seeking

gain by base means” in verse 8. A sister as a deaconess needs to be faithful, trustworthy in all things, especially in things concerning gain.

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THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

First Timothy 3:14-16 is the most crucial portion in the four books of 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Paul has covered the matters of the differing teachings, the dispensation of God, the need for the leading ones to have a prayer life so that all the other brothers may follow, and the charge to the sisters to remain in faith, love, and holiness with sobriety. Furthermore, the elders have been established and the deacons have been appointed. A church that has all these characteristics is certainly wonderful. Now in verse 15 Paul tells us that the church is the house of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth. Then in verse 16 he goes on to declare: “And confessedly, great is the mystery of godliness, Who was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.” In these verses Paul presents an extremely high standard for the church.

Among Christians today the standard of the church is far below God’s standard revealed in 3:15 and 16. In order to reach this standard, the church must have all the characteristics described in the first two and a half chapters of 1 Timothy. There must be no differing teachings, and God’s economy must be practiced continually. The leading ones must have a prayer life, and all the other brothers must follow them to pray in every place. Furthermore, the sisters should remain in faith, love, and holiness with sobriety. Then the government of the church must be established with the two offices of elders and deacons. It is our expectation to practice this kind of church life. We praise the Lord that in His recovery we have seen such a church life at least to a certain extent. Whenever God’s standard for the church is attained as outlined in 1 Timothy, the church will function as the house of the living God and the pillar and base upholding the truth. This is also the great mystery of godliness, the manifestation of God in the flesh. Not only was the Lord Jesus the manifestation of God in the past; the church today should also be the manifestation of

God. This is the goal, the aim, of these four Epistles written by Paul.

Even though Paul witnessed the beginning of the decline of the church, he was not disappointed or discouraged. Because he had both insight and foresight, he could be encouraged. He knew that some day and somehow the church would reach God’s standard. The majority of the believers may decline, but a small number at least would be chosen, preserved, and established to practice the church life according to the divine standard.

This standard is that the church should function as the house of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth, and as the great mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh. The church life today must be the manifestation of God in the flesh. When visitors, including those who have not yet believed in the Lord, come to the meetings and behold such a manifestation, they will no doubt be greatly surprised. They may say, “What is this? It is different from anything we have seen elsewhere. It is even different from the church services in religion.” Yes, the church is different; it is the house of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth, and the manifestation of God in the flesh. Every local church must reach this standard and continue according to it. There should be no decline; rather, we should maintain God’s standard until the glorious appearing of our Head, the Savior, Jesus Christ.

In 3:14 Paul says, “These things I write to you, hoping to come to you shortly.” By “these things” Paul means all he has covered thus far in this Epistle. When he wrote this book, he was hoping to come shortly to see Timothy.

I. THE HOUSE OF THE LIVING GOD

Verse 15 continues, “But if I delay, that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth.” The words “know how one ought to conduct himself” indicate that in this book Paul gives instructions concerning how to take care of a local church.

According to Paul’s word in verse 15, the church is the house of God. The Greek word rendered house may also be translated household. The same word is used in 3:4, 5, and 12. The household, the family,

of God is the house of God. The house and the household are one thing—the assembly of the believers (Eph. 2:19; Heb. 3:6). The reality of this house as the dwelling place of the living God is in our spirit (Eph. 2:22). We must live and act in our spirit so that God can be manifested in this house as the living God.

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As God's dwelling place, the church is both God's house and His household, His family. In the Old Testament, the temple and God's people, His family, were two separate things. But in the fulfilment in the New Testament, the dwelling place and the family are one. The family is God's dwelling place, and God's dwelling place is His family. As we have indicated, the Greek word for house may be translated either as house or household. According to God's New Testament economy, God's family is His house. These are not two separate things; they are actually one. We are God's family and also His temple, His dwelling place.

In speaking of the church as the house of God, Paul specifically refers to God as the living God. The living God who lives in the church must be subjective to the church rather than merely objective. An idol in a heathen temple is lifeless. The God who not only lives but also acts, moves, and works in His living temple, the church, is living. Because He is living, the church is also living in Him, by Him, and with Him. A living God and a living church live, move, and work together. The living church is the house and the household of the living God. Hence, it becomes the manifestation of God in the flesh.

II. THE PILLAR AND BASE OF THE TRUTH

Speaking metaphorically, Paul goes on to say that the church is "the pillar and base of the truth." The pillar supports the building, and the base holds the pillar. The church is such a supporting pillar and holding base of the truth.

The truth here refers to the real things which are revealed in the New Testament concerning Christ and the church according to God's New Testament economy. The church is the supporting pillar and holding base of all these realities. A local church

should be such a building that holds, bears, and testifies the truth, the reality, of Christ and the church.

The church as the house of the living God is both the pillar which bears the truth and the base which upholds the pillar. As we have pointed out, the truth is the reality and the contents of God's New Testament economy. This economy is composed of two mysteries: Christ as the mystery of God (Col. 2:2) and the church as the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4). Christ and the church, the Head and the Body, are the contents of the reality of God's New Testament economy.

III. THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

Verse 16 begins with the words, "And confessedly, great is the mystery of godliness." The conjunction "and" in verse 16 indicates that Paul has not finished speaking about the church in verse 15. Oh, the church is a great matter! It is the house of the living God and the pillar and base of the truth. Paul's use of the conjunction at the beginning of verse 16 indicates that the church is something even more than the house of the living God and the pillar and base of the truth. The church is also the mystery of godliness. The church is the house, the pillar and the base, and the mystery of godliness.

According to the context, godliness in verse 16 refers not only to piety, but to the living of God in the church, that is, God as life lived out in the church. This is the great mystery confessed universally by believers in Christ.

The church as the house of the living God and as the pillar and base of the truth is not so mysterious. But the church as the manifestation of God in the flesh certainly is a mystery. A mystery always goes beyond our understanding. It refers to something which cannot be explained. If we are able to explain a certain matter, it is not a mystery.

The church is not only the house of the living God and the pillar and base of the truth, but also the mystery of godliness. Godliness refers to God expressed. What are we doing in the church life? We are expressing God. Human beings may not realize this adequately, but the angels recognize it and appreciate it. On the one hand, the good angels rejoice when they behold the expression of God in the church. On the other hand, the evil angels and

the demons tremble in fear. They realize that eventually those in the church life will condemn them to the lake of fire.

When the Lord Jesus was born, a host of angels praised God (Luke 2:10-14). If the angels rejoiced at the birth of the Lord Jesus in Bethlehem, the city of David, will they not also rejoice to see God manifested in the church, which is Christ's increase and enlargement? Furthermore, when the Lord Jesus, living out God and manifesting Him on earth, confronted the demons, the demons cried out. In at least one case they begged the Lord Jesus not to send them into the abyss (Luke 8:31). If the demons trembled at the presence of the Lord Jesus, will they not also tremble at the manifestation of the living God in the church? No doubt when the church is living out God and manifesting Him, the demons and the evil angels will be terrified. Every local church must be a place where Christ is born anew in the saints. Furthermore, every local church must live out God in such a way that the Devil's time is shortened. On the one hand, when the churches come up to God's standard, the angels will sing and rejoice; on the other hand, the demons and the evil angels will tremble.

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It may come as a surprise that in verse 16 Paul suddenly uses the relative pronoun "who," when he says, "Who was manifested in the flesh." In Greek the antecedent of this relative pronoun is omitted, but easily recognized, that is, Christ who was God manifested in the flesh as the mystery of godliness. The transition from "the mystery..." to "Who" implies that Christ as the manifestation of God in the flesh is the mystery of godliness (Col. 1:27; Gal. 2:20). This mystery of godliness is the living of a proper church, and such a living is also the manifestation of God in the flesh. The portion of verse 16 from "Who was manifested" to "taken up in glory" may have been a church song in the early days.

The first part of verse 16 speaks of a matter—the mystery of godliness. Hence, we would expect Paul to use the relative pronoun "which" to refer to the mystery of godliness as a matter. However, the fact that he uses the relative pronoun "Who" implies that the mystery of godliness is a person and not merely a matter. As we shall see, this person is Christ as the Head with His Body.

Through incarnation and human living (John 1:1, 14), God was manifested in the flesh. "In the flesh" means in the likeness, in the fashion, of man (Rom. 8:3; Phil. 2:7-8). In the form of man Christ appeared to people (2 Cor. 5:16), yet He was God manifested in a man.

Christ was also "vindicated in the Spirit." The Greek word also means justified. The incarnated Christ in His human living was not only vindicated as the Son of God by the Spirit (Matt. 3:16-17; Rom. 1:3-4), but was also justified, proved, and approved as right and righteous by the Spirit (Matt. 3:15-16; 4:1). He was manifested in the flesh, but vindicated and justified in the Spirit. He appeared in the flesh, but He lived in the Spirit (Luke 4:1, 14; Matt. 12:28) and offered Himself to God through the Spirit (Heb. 9:14). His transfiguration (Matt. 17:2) and His resurrection are all vindications of the Spirit. Furthermore, in resurrection He even became the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17) to dwell and live in us (Rom. 8:9-10) for the manifestation of God in the flesh as the mystery of godliness. Hence, now we know Him and His members no longer according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (2 Cor. 5:16). Since the manifestation of God in the flesh is vindicated in the Spirit, and the Spirit is one with our spirit (Rom. 8:16), we must live and behave in our spirit that this vindication may be accomplished.

Paul also says "seen by angels." Angels saw the incarnation, human living, and ascension of Christ (Luke 2:9-14; Matt. 4:11; Acts 1:10-11; Rev. 5:6, 11-12).

Christ was also preached among the nations. Christ as God's manifestation in the flesh has been preached as the gospel among the nations, including the nation of Israel, from the day of Pentecost (Rom. 16:26; Eph. 3:8).

Furthermore, Christ has been "believed on in the world." Christ as the embodiment of God in the flesh has been believed on, received as Savior and life, by people in the world (Acts 13:48).

Paul concludes verse 16 with the phrase "taken up in glory." This refers to Christ's ascension into glory (Mark 16:19; Acts 1:9-11; 2:33; Phil. 2:9). According to the sequence of historical events, Christ's ascension preceded His being preached among the nations. However, it is listed here as the

last event of Christ being the manifestation of God in the flesh. This seems to indicate the church taken up in glory. Hence, it implies that not only Christ Himself as the Head, but also the church as the Body, is the manifestation of God in the flesh. When a church is well taken care of according to the instructions given in the first two chapters, with the oversight of the elders and the service of the deacons fully established, as revealed in chapter three, the church will function as the house and household of the living God for His move on the earth and as the supporting pillar and holding base of the truth, bearing the divine reality of Christ and His Body as a testimony to the world. Then the church becomes the continuation of Christ's manifestation of God in the flesh. This is the great mystery of godliness—Christ lived out of the church as the manifestation of God in the flesh!

I wish to emphasize the fact that although Christ was taken up in glory (Acts 1) before the preaching of Him began in Acts 2, Paul mentions this last, not only after the preaching, but even after being believed on in the world. This indicates that “taken up in glory” may include not only the ascension of Christ, but also the rapture of the church. The Head, Christ, was taken up before the preaching of Him began; however, the Body, the church, will be taken up only after Christ has been preached and believed on in the world. Therefore, in verse 16 there is a definite indication that this verse refers not only to the Head as the manifestation of God in the flesh, but also to the Body as the continuation of this manifestation. This is indeed logical, for how can a person's head function in isolation from his body? The Head, Christ, has been taken up in glory, and the Body, the church, will also be taken up in glory. Both the Head and the Body are the mystery of godliness. This is the manifestation of God in the flesh.