

The qualities of godly leaders

1 Timothy 3:8-16

In this section of chapter 3 Paul explains to Timothy his purpose in writing: to set out how Christians should ***behave in the house of God which is the church of the living God, pillar and support of the truth.***

Our new corporate identity: house of God, church of the living God

There is a danger that we assume Paul talking about how Christians should behave when they gather together in a church building. He isn't. Church is not something we go to or something we do, it is what we are. Paul is talking about our new corporate identity.

The house of God is not a building. It is people, with a particular focus on house as an 'administrative unit'. When Jacob had his famous dream of a ladder set up between earth and heaven and angels ascending and descending, he responded by saying "This is the House of God, it is the Gate of heaven". There was no building in sight. Rather Jacob found himself at the centre of God's administration. The 'gate' was where the elders of a town would sit in administration and government. So when we think of 'house' we are thinking of God's administration and government: the community over which God rules. If you are a Christian you are part of God's house(hold), his family, his church: that's your new, corporate identity.

Identity is not something we are to put on when we come through the door of a church building and then, chameleon like, put off as soon as we leave. Identity is who we are. Whether gathering with other believers, or scattered in our various places of work, or in our homes, or with our friends we are representatives of God, members of his church, under his government 24/7.

The function of the church: Pillar and support of the truth

Some English versions translate this as "pillar and foundation of the truth". That is misleading. The church is founded on the truth; it is not the foundation of the truth – Christ is. It is better to translate this as: pillar and support, or perhaps even "pillar that supports". Paul may well be thinking of the bronze pillars that stood out in front of Solomon's Temple. Their function was not to hold up the temple, but to support the beautiful capitals that marked out and attracted people to the Temple. These capitals were shaped to look like lilies, carved with fruit, festooned with an intricate network of chains. This is what the church is in its function: as the pillar and support its function is to hold up the truth before the eyes of the world so that people can see at least something of its beauty and attractiveness.

The truth we hold up is the truth of the **living God**. In Solomon's Temple no stonework was visible on the inside. Instead there was cedar wood, with flowers, fruit, palm trees, cherubim, overlaid with gold: life everywhere! And in the courtyard were carved lions

and oxen, the flower shaped capitals: artistic representations of life in all its variety and beauty. This makes sense because the temple, or the house of the Lord as it was also known, was the earthly dwelling place of the living God.

Church is church of the living God! We are not talking now about a stone or brick or wooden building. We are talking about people, built together to form an earthly dwelling place for the living God by the Spirit (see Ephesians 2:20ff). The church is designed to be a community of life, not a morgue and not a monument to the past. Of course there have to be some rules and regulations that enable that life to be expressed – God is a God of order, not chaos, and there is to be a beauty in how things are done. But we must constantly return to this: God is the **living** God. We are called to hold up this truth to the world in a way that attracts folks to its beauty and life.

The character of servant-leaders

This explains the particular focus on those who serve/lead in the church: the elders/deacons, for as well as being living examples to the insiders, they are the most **visible** to outsiders! When folks look at these servants of the church, should learn something about the life of God – his goodness, his grace, his strength, his truth. On the down side, if they behave badly, they taint and damage the view people have of God – and the more senior the leader, the more damaging it is.

When it comes to honouring and reflecting the beauty of the living God: the first issue is not role but **character and lifestyle**. This is as challenging to today's thinking as it was in the first century because much of contemporary leadership focus is on **competence, charisma** but not so much on **character**. Good character is admired but not expected. We don't ask if so-and-so is a good man, we ask "Is he a good principle, is she a good manager, is he a good Prime minister etc." After all, we reason, being a good man does not guarantee being a good Prime Minister. That is true. But so is the fact that the exercise of power or skill without good character is dangerous: a leader who compromises in his private life is more likely to compromise in his public life and leadership. **In the church we start with character.**

The list of qualities

The list of qualities is not exactly startling: it does not describe a level of moral behaviour or spirituality to which others can't really aspire – it is hardly a spiritual elite. Almost everything in each list is mandated of all Christians. The difference is not so much in quality: it is in consistency and maturity: Christian servants and leaders are required to be consistently Christian! Christian leaders must exemplify the virtues that are demanded of all Christians.

Mature Christian character is not a collection of occasional behaviours – it is what is characteristic of a person. In the spiritual arena it is what we allow the Spirit to forge into the consistent texture of our lives: "Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny."

Deacons

Basically the word means “one who serves”. In a very real sense every believer ought to be a servant: but the way the term is used here and in Philippians 1:1,2 it clearly refers to those who have been designated as appointed servants in the church, in addition to and under the authority of the elders/overseers. The focus is not on their role but on their character and lifestyle as examples, representatives of the life of God to the world.

There are two main approaches to the reference to women in this chapter and these are reflected by various translations: either a) Paul is talking about deacons and their wives, or b) he is talking about deacons, male and female. Sincere, intelligent believers take different views here. The Greek can be taken either way. It is clear from the evidence of the rest of the New Testament that women had significant roles in spiritual ministry in the church. I am following the approach that understands the reference to women include women in appointed positions of service: women deacons. While most of the qualities refer to both, some are specifically directed at women and some specifically directed at men.

Highlight a few things from the list.

Respectable: so obvious it is often overlooked! Before appointing someone to a position of service in the church we need to ask if people actually respect this person? Without that the rest is froth.

Then 3 negatives are given, although the first seems like a positive in the NIV as it is translated ‘sincere’. The phrase actually means “**not double tongued**”: i.e. not talking out of both sides of their mouth – not saying one thing to one and another to another! No respect for a person like that – never know where you are with them – can’t trust them: they are devious and manipulative.

Not indulging in much wine: not heavy drinkers – never under influence of alcohol: people may publicly applaud you for being ‘one of the lads’ but privately you will lose respect.

Not pursuing dishonest gain – **not seeking to get rich in wrong ways, outside or inside the church.** Christian service often involves handling money and material resources: Paul himself involved in raising money for hard pressed believers: need for honesty, integrity – danger of greed and abuse of position to line one’s own pockets: US Senate Committee on Finance currently investigating 6 television evangelistic ministries:

Hold the ‘mystery’ of the faith with a clear conscience

The NIV translation – deep truths - is misleading, giving the impression that the deacon must have a very profound grasp of Christian theology. The ‘mystery’ of the faith is an open secret: it has been revealed in Christ. It really refers to the core truths of the Gospel. There was a time when this was hidden - the prophets didn’t know exactly when what they were writing about would happen, or how it would happen – not even

angels knew about it. But it has been revealed to us by the Spirit through the coming of Christ and through the Word.

Deacons need a firm hold on these core truths. In order to do that they need to know them. That demands some work! It is vital because these are the things that inform, encourage and shape service. In addition they need to hold these truths with a **clear conscience**. It is perilously easy to hold a theory: to understand something and believe it in theory. It is living out the belief that is demanding. We not only need to hold beliefs, they need to hold us. It is easy, for example to believe in theory in the importance of forgiveness, but do we forgive? It is easy, for example, to believe in the authority of Christ over all of life, but does that impact our financial life?

Test before appointing:

We need to assess the person against these qualities. Do people actually respect them? Do they have a good grasp of the truth? Does the person have these qualities?

Do they have the credibility to lead?

It is also helpful to test folks out with a little responsibility, in a context where they can't do too much damage to themselves or others and where there is plenty of support and feedback. This allows not only for competence to emerge, but reveals character. The basic principle is: Basic principle: those who are faithful in little things can be entrusted with more. Those who aren't, can't. Some folks have great skill: but do great damage – can't be relied on, or use their skills to further their own ambitions.

Feedback is vital: credit where due, criticism where necessary, care at all times. Often it is here that the true character emerges. Does the person have a servant attitude – or is it all about personal ambition? Is the person teachable? Can he/she take guidance, criticism, authority, redirection? We are all naturally defensive: but it is dangerous if we are “always right”, never admit fault, never learn to see ourselves as others see us – lack humility that comes from true self-awareness, from opening up to the deep work of the Spirit.

Women

Like men they are to be worthy of respect – third time in these lists - but the qualifiers specifically for women are different.

First, they are **not to be malicious talkers**. In addition to the general warning about **double talk**, women are warned about **malicious talk**: gossip (sharing what you believe to be true) and slander (sharing what you know to be false). Both are incredibly destructive.

Second, they are to be **temperate and trustworthy in everything**. This is a vital consideration: if the person cannot be self-controlled, reliable, able to be trusted with often sensitive information, she must not be appointed to a position of service.

Home life:

Paul turns to the men and to their home life. If married they must be faithful to their wives, sexually pure.

They must also be able to manage their children well. NB – not managed by their children. Love must not descend into sentimentality where the children grow up not knowing about authority and respect. They must also manage their household well: chaos at home is likely to be followed by chaos in the church

The reward of serving well

Those who serve well benefit by it. First, they gain an excellent standing – they are trusted, esteemed, enjoy an earned spiritual authority as confidence in them grows. They also experience increased personal confidence in their faith in Christ, no doubt as they see God at work both in them and through them.

Often the reason we do not grow in faith is that we are simply not serving: we are coming to get – and wondering why we don't seem to be developing, why we seem to be getting less out of it: consumerism never satisfies – more is less. Yet some persist, never committing to a local church – always remaining visitors.

A challenge: how do we do this? How do we serve well, reflecting the truth of the living God to the watching world? What is the secret of living a godly life?

The mystery of godliness

The mystery of godliness is a person: Christ himself. It does not consist of rules, personal disciplines, techniques, special feelings and experience. It lies in Christ, and in our response to him as we honour who God is as revealed in the life of Christ and allow this to impact and shape our own character, actions and lifestyle. It is life lived in daily relationship with the Son of God. It is living to reverence God well in every aspect of life. And the more we come to know him as revealed in Christ, the more it shapes our thinking, our values and our actions.

Paul sets before us the lifestyle of Christ, the supreme, perfect example of godliness, in six phrases expressed in couplets – perhaps part of an early Christian song. (Not a creed: there is no mention of his atoning suffering or of his resurrection.) Paul is thinking of Christ in his public life: the principles by which he governed and led his life, the impact and result of his life. This is the secret that lies behind our godliness.

He appeared in a body

The very phrase implies that he was God: he had a pre-existence, and then manifested himself in human flesh. He was God of very God – in the beginning with God. When he was born it was God manifest in flesh. How would we have known what God is really like unless God had been made manifest in the flesh, in human terms that we can understand. And with us – true godliness is not a matter of holding the right theories: it is to be worked out in real life in our physical body.

He was vindicated by the Spirit:

At the end of that godly life, the verdict of religion and politics was that he deserved nothing but a cross. Where did his justification/vindication come from? From the Holy Spirit. Through the resurrection and through the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit demonstrated that the world was wrong and that Jesus Christ is true, Messiah and Son of God. Where does our justification come from? Listen to Paul in Corinthians: "I know nothing against myself, but I am not hereby justified. He who justifies me is the Lord – wait for the day to declare it."

Seen of angels:

God saw to it that Christ's godly life had the maximum publicity. Angels watched him. What lessons they learned. What did they think when he was incarnated? Or when he was a baby? When he associated with sinners, or when he was rejected and nailed to a cross. What were the angels to learn from it? The character and wisdom of God.

They watch us too: church is an exhibition of the wisdom and grace of God: several times Paul reminds Timothy in this letter that he is living his life not just in front of the world but before the gaze of heaven.

Preached among the nations and believed on in the world

Christ didn't travel very far: didn't invest in publicity campaigns – invested in obedience to the Father. The result was that he was preached and believed in Jerusalem and in the world. The call upon us is faithfully and consistently to obey God, and leave the consequences to him. As we demonstrate something of the attractiveness of God's life, others might also come to believe in him.

Received up in glory.

At the end of his godly life the world rejected him as an imposter, but heaven welcomed him to the highest position. From glory he will return as King. And those who have come to trust and know him will reign with him in the eternal kingdom. Do we believe it? If we do, then all of life will be based upon it. This is ultimate reality: it is the opinion of heaven that matters, not that of the world around us. A godly life is the only life that makes sense.

The mystery of godliness is the person of Christ, not just Christian principles, nor the morality we have in common with other religions. The truth is Jesus, the Son of God. He has perfectly expressed the life of God. In coming to know him we come to know the truth. In that new relationship we begin to reflect that truth in turn to the watching world.

Questions for discussion

1. What differences would it make to understand 'church' as first and foremost who we are, rather than as what we do on Sunday?
2. How does the 'pillar and support' image help us to understand what the function of church is in this world?
3. What do we mean by 'character'? Why is the development of mature Christian character so important, especially in those who serve in the church?
4. Based on the characteristics, how should a church go about 'testing' prospective deacons?
5. What is the relationship between personal spiritual growth and service in the community of the church? What are some of the biggest barriers to service? Describe in your own words, and in your own experience, some of the personal benefits/rewards of serving well. How might a focus on the rewards of service help in motivating people into service?
6. The mystery (open secret) of godliness is a person, not a technique, not a system, not a set of rules and disciplines. What does this mean in practice? Why might it be easy for us to replace personal response to the Lord Jesus with techniques, systems, rules?