

# Instructions Concerning Bishops and Deacons

## *Studies in 1 Timothy 3*

*Based on a verse by verse study of the book of 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy*

We know from the book of Acts and from the letters to Timothy that Timothy was a relatively young man, the son of a pagan father and of a converted Jewish mother. Timothy had enjoyed a pious upbringing (2 Timothy 1:5). Timothy was left in charge of the church at Ephesus, and much of the space in Paul's letters is devoted to admonitions to remain steadfast. The early church was a little island of transformed people surrounded by a vast ocean of paganism and moral corruption. The need for leadership among the young believers was obviously very great.

In 1 Timothy 3 Paul gives directions regarding the organization and government of the church. After naming some of the requirements for effective leadership, the chapter is concluded by an emphasis upon the importance of proper conduct in the house of God.

### **1. Qualifications for Bishops (3:1-7)**

The word "bishop" means "overseer," a word that carries the thought of a shepherd watching over his flock. The New Testament word "elder" is used interchangeably with the word "bishop" (as demonstrated in Titus 1:5,7). The word "elder" refers especially to the maturity of the person; the word "bishop" refers more to the nature of the work. (Today, the words "pastor" or "minister" are sometimes substituted for elder or bishop.)

There were a plural number of elders in each of the apostolic churches (Acts 14:23). The elders worked together as a leadership team, and generally there were five basic functions for the elders:

- 1) To rule in the assembly (1 Timothy 5:17)
- 2) To guard the body of truth from error (Titus 1:9)
- 3) To be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:3)
- 4) To oversee the work of the church (Acts 20:28)
- 5) To labor in the Word (2 Timothy 4:2)

It is not wrong to aspire to the office of bishop (elder) in the local church. It is a noble task—and only when we are conceited about our talents, do we sin (3:1,6). Certainly it is not proper to desire the office of bishop for one's own prestige or honor.

The church, when choosing its leaders, needs to be guided by the qualifications in this chapter. When we deviate from God's standards, we build weakness into the church.

### **a. Qualifications in personal life (3:2-3)**

The elder must be “blameless”—means to be above reproach. It does not mean that he must be sinless, but the elder’s life must be lived so nobly that there won’t be any loopholes for others to latch on to and criticize. There may be some irresponsible people who are going to accuse; the elder might be unjustly blamed for wrong, but there must be nothing in his life that could truthfully be used to bring shame to the cause of Christ.

The elder must be “the husband of one wife.” Whatever else it may mean, this phrase clearly rules out divorce and polygamy—and it calls for the elder as a husband to be totally faithful to his wife. Note too that the elder is to be a “husband”—a man, not a woman. There is no qualification like, “Let the elder be the wife of one husband.”

The elder must be “vigilant”—that is, on guard against all forms of evil. Satan goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, and so a good church leader needs to be alert and cautious—not quick to adopt every new fad and approve every novel idea. Hebrews 13:17 describes church leaders as those who “watch for your souls.”

The elder must be “sober”—collected, composed, and balanced in judgment. The elder must not be one who goes off on a tangent and gets wrapped up in certain teachings to the point that he neglects other teachings. The elder must not “ride a hobby horse”—caught up unduly with prophecy, communism, humanism, social ills, etc.

The elder must be “of good behavior”—living a life which is disciplined and well-ordered. The elder should not live a life of confusion and disorganization. He should budget his time, have a filing system, be prompt for meeting appointments, etc.

The elder must be “given to hospitality”—a warm gracious person whose heart and home are open to others. The original Greek word means that he is to be a “stranger lover.” He must enjoy meeting new persons and having visitors in his home.

The elder must be “apt to teach.” The bishop must have a clear knowledge of the Gospel message and be able to impart that knowledge to others. He must be a good Bible teacher. Many people in our churches have deep spiritual problems. The elder must be able to turn to the Scriptures and explain the will of God in a variety of areas related to Christian living. He must also be able to use the Scriptures to refute false doctrines (Acts 20:29-31).

The elder must not be “given to wine.” This qualification puzzles present-day readers because in most of our circles, total abstinence from alcoholic beverages is a foregone conclusion for the Christian. In the days of the early church, water supplies were often contaminated and most people prepared wine which was highly diluted, mixed with water, and used as a beverage. Such wine did not have the intoxicating ingredients that present-day alcoholic products have.

The elder is not to be “a striker”—not quarrelsome, and not violent with his tongue nor with his hands. Sometimes, especially in debates over doctrinal matters, God’s people are not well-mannered. The elder must be characterized by charity and restraint, instead of being eager to strike up a quarrelsome debate.

The elder must not be “greedy of filthy lucre.” The gaining of material riches must not be his goal, because his affections are to be set on things above, not on the money of this world. Love of money is a vice not to be tolerated in Christian leaders. Pity the preacher who is looking for the church that pays the highest salary.

The elder must be “patient.” The bishop must make allowances for the slowness and awkwardness he sees in others. His patience and kindness and unselfishness should shine like a bright star in the midst of his people.

The elder must not be “a brawler”—not one who is quick tempered and passionate and impulsive. Often he must deal with frustrating travel, odd hours of work, indifferent church members, and contrary people. Titus 1:7 says the elder must “not soon be angry.”

The elder must not be “covetous”—that is, not greedy for material possessions, nor greedy for another man’s position.

These have been a series of qualifications in the preacher’s personal life. He must be a person of upright character.

#### **b. Qualifications in family life (3:4-5)**

The minister (elder/bishop) must have the ability to command the obedience and respect of his family, for if he cannot make his own little family behave, how can he help the whole church? He must “rule well his own house, having his children in subjection.” The effectiveness of the elder’s ministry is spoiled when children are rebellious and undisciplined, and when a wife’s conduct speaks more of the flesh than of the spirit.

The way a man controls his home reveals his capacity for superintending the church. The quality of a man’s family life demonstrates his ability to lead. Poorly trained children become hurtful examples, and show that the father is incompetent.

#### **c. Qualifications in public life (3:6-7)**

The elder must not be a new, inexperienced convert. The sudden elevation of a new convert may cause him to inflate with pride. He may become conceited and share in the devil’s downfall. It is unfortunate that sometimes when an outstanding athlete, a successful businessman, or a popular political leader is won to faith in Christ—he is rushed into a place of prominence as a church official. Meanwhile, more mature Christians, more seasoned in the faith, may be ignored—because their backgrounds have been less colorful. It is always dangerous to thrust a young convert into the limelight, before he is well rooted in the faith.

The minister (pastor/elder/bishop) “must have a good report” of those who are outside the faith (3:7). The minister’s character should bring a favorable report, even from those who are not Christians. A minister can have a good report from the unsaved, without embracing their worldly ways. They will admire his friendliness and his wholesome moral conduct. The world is often a pretty shrewd judge of character. They can pick out insincerity pretty quickly. They know generally what is expected of God’s people.

We are to abstain from all appearance of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22). Church leaders should seek to be examples of godly living in every area of conduct.

## **2. Qualifications for Deacons (3:8-13)**

The bishops are charged primarily with the spiritual welfare of the church, whereas the deacons are responsible especially for the temporal welfare of the local church. The word translated “deacon” means “one who serves.” The duties of the office of deacon are not set down in any one Bible passage, but the following duties can be gleaned from various passages of Scripture. Deacons are to look after the poor and sick. They generally are appointed to take care of church funds. Deacons often assist in the administration of the church ordinances (baptism, feet-washing, communion, etc.). And deacons are usually expected to serve as helpers to the preaching ministers of the church (Acts 6:1-7).

The qualifications for the deacon, and for the deacon’s wife, center around matters of personal character, spiritual life, and home relationships.

### **a. The deacon’s personal character (3:8)**

The deacon must be “grave.” The word “grave” denotes a seriousness of mind and character. Some translations use the word “serious.” It is not that the deacon must be long-faced, but it does mean that his conduct must be decent and becoming, not silly and light-minded. Being “grave” does not forbid a sense of humor or imply that one must always be somber and solemn, but the deacon must not cheapen his testimony by foolish behavior.

The deacon must not be “double tongued.” When discussing a particular issue, he must not say one thing to one person and something different to another. The deacon will need to help make responsible decisions, and he might be tempted to evade issues by doing some smooth talking, but those who spread conflicting tales among the congregation will bring misunderstanding and discord in the church.

The deacon must not be “given to much wine.” The tremendous social evils associated with drinking today start with what is termed “moderate” drinking. If a person never “touches” alcoholic beverages, he will never become a drunkard. Aside from appropriate medical use, the consumption of alcohol is not wise.

### **b. The deacon's spiritual life (3:9-10)**

The deacon is to “hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.” The deacon is to be one who has a settled faith in the evangelical teachings of the Bible—including the ordinances, the principles, and the restrictions of the Gospel. The deacon is not to follow “every wind of doctrine” that blows his way.

The word “mystery” (as used in the New Testament) is not what is beyond knowledge, but what being once hidden is now revealed to those with spiritual discernment. The “mystery of the faith” is the secret of salvation through Jesus Christ, which is now available to all who believe, Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 3:4-6). To hold one's faith “in a pure conscience” means that one's beliefs are held with utter sincerity and without mental reservation.

The deacon is to “be proved” and if found “blameless” is to serve in the office (3:10). Deacons are not to be appointed hastily. There should be a period of probation during which his qualities are observed carefully.

### **c. The deacon's wife is to be upright (3:11)**

Wives of church leaders are a big factor in their husband's success. The deacon's wife must meet special requirements too—because she will often need to share with her husband in his many delicate duties. Any reproach on the part of the wife will reflect on the work of her husband.

The deacon's wife must be “grave” and “not a slanderer.” The word “grave” is the same as that used for her husband in verse 8. It denotes a seriousness of mind and of character. The word “slanderers” refers to those who spread false (or twisted) statements about others, which are harmful to those persons' reputations. Jeremiah tells about those who “smite with the tongue” (Jeremiah 18:18). It would be very easy for the deacon's wife to make wrong use of the details she might learn about the private life of members of the congregation. The deacon's wife must not be one who is loose with the tongue.

The deacon's wife must be “sober” and “faithful in all things.” The word “sober” denotes a person who is collected, well composed, and not easily excited. A “sober” person is one who is possessed with a balanced judgment. The phrase “faithful in all things” means that the deacon's wife must be a reliable, trustworthy woman—one who can be depended upon. She must be faithful to her husband, to her family, to her Christ, and to her church.

### **d. The deacon's home relationships (3:12-13)**

Deacons are to be “the husband of one wife” and are “to rule their children and their own houses well.” No factor is more telling of a deacon's real character than the conditions surrounding his home life.

The reference to “one wife” means simply that he must be absolutely faithful to his wife. This is a prohibition against divorce and polygamy. Also, the deacon must manage his household in an excellent manner. He must not only have the ability to command the respect and obedience of his children, but he must do a good job of it.

A concluding word of encouragement for the deacon is found in verse 13. The deacon who has a real heart-interest in his work, and who uses his office unselfishly, will acquire for himself a good standing in the eyes of God and of man. The deacon will also experience increasing confidence in the promises of God's Word ("great boldness in the faith"). The office of deacon involves hard work, but there are some beautiful rewards at the end of the journey.

### **3. Conduct Among God's Household (3:14-16)**

Paul hoped to visit Timothy shortly, but was writing these instructions so that even if his visit did not materialize, Timothy would know better how to conduct himself in the household of God. One of the great functions of the church down through the years has been that of preserving the truth. The church is the "pillar" (the main support) and the "ground" (the foundation and main propagator) of the Word of God, which is truth. Satan has sought to destroy the Word; some have tried to deny it; the cults have endeavored to confuse it; the true church is delegated with the task of keeping it intact and proclaiming it to others (3:15).

The phrase "the mystery of godliness" (3:16) is explained in six concise statements describing various aspects of Christ's work. It is Christ Jesus who saves from ungodliness. Verse 16 refers to the incarnation ("God manifest in the flesh"), the resurrection ("justified [vindicated by] the Spirit"), the ascension ("received up into glory"), the preaching of the Gospel ("preached unto the Gentiles"), the response to it ("believed on in the world"), and the final victory of Christ ("seen of angels"). Angels proclaimed Christ's birth to the shepherds (Luke 2:8-14), ministered to Him after the Temptation (Matthew 4:11), strengthened Him when He prayed in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43), and explained the ascension to the apostles (Acts 1:10-11). The statements in verse 16 are great truths about the wonders of our redemption.

Our salvation centers around a Person. His name is Jesus Christ. He is God come to earth in a human body. He died on the cross, was buried, but arose from the dead and later ascended into heaven. He died in our place. He invites us to believe that His purpose for coming was to become a ransom for our sins (Matthew 20:28). Why not receive Him today?

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#### **BIBLE HELPS**

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