

## The Family of God, February 1, 2004

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1 Timothy 3:1-16

Intro:

We have been studying the church as the Body of Christ: that is, as the community called together by God to carry the transforming power of the life and ministry of Jesus to the nations and cultures of the world. We are the hands and feet of Christ; we speak his words and do his work. But how are we to relate to each other? Well, we have heard the call to use our gifts for building one another up, until we attain the maturity and stability that will keep us from being blown about by every new idea, every new fad that blows through the culture and through the church. But is that the most that we can say?

*It may be helpful for us to turn to another biblical description of the church, thinking now about what it means to be the "family of God."* Let's be honest: every human family has some degree of dysfunction, because every family consists of folk like you and me, folk who don't always get it right, who

don't always love as well as we mean to love, who don't always act for the sake of the other rather than for ourselves. So, too, every church family has its dysfunctions because we are pilgrims on the way to perfect love and righteousness, but we are not yet there. Nevertheless, however imperfect they may be, families can be, and ought to be, places of great joy, where we know that we are safely surrounded by people who love us.

So, also, should the church of Jesus Christ be a safe family where people who have been broken by life will find brothers and sisters willing and eager to surround them with love and compassion. For the next few weeks, we will think about the church as God's family, and try to understand how God has arranged for his family to care for its members, to provide a safe place for nurturing, caring, and loving one another into health and maturity, so that we can be the kind of children who bring honor and praise to our Father in heaven.

From its earliest days, the church understood itself to have been entrusted with Jesus' own ministry, a ministry that included both the care of souls through teaching and

preaching, and the care of bodies through the ministries of compassion – namely healing and feeding those who came to Jesus sick and hungry. The extraordinary offices of apostle and prophet disappeared within the first generation for reasons that are not necessary for us to examine at this time. But the two offices that Paul commended to every local congregation, the offices of elder and deacon, were entrusted with the two central aspects of Jesus' ministry, his teaching and his healing ministries, with the elders assigned the care of souls and the deacons given the care of bodies in the various ministries of compassion.

You will recall that the office of elder was not anything new to the household of God, but was given to Moses during the journey of Israel on their way through the wilderness to the land of promise. When Moses' father-in-law visited him, he found Moses exhausted from giving counsel to the people night and day. He counseled Moses to appoint leaders of thousands, hundreds and tens, to care for the people and to decide their disagreements. This was the origin of the elders

of Israel, and of the leading elders who became the Sanhedrin.

The office of deacon arose in the early days of the church in much the same way: the apostles were exhausted listening to the complaints of those who thought that they were being neglected at the daily distribution of food. The time spent in counseling and mediating was taking the apostles away from their primary task, which was the oversight of the church, and the care of souls through the teaching of God's Word and of prayer. So, they set apart the first deacons, a band of men who were filled with the Holy Spirit, and assigned to them that part of Jesus' ministry that involved the compassionate care of the physical needs of the family of God.

Two things should be clear to us before we examine Paul's instructions: First, at the time of Paul's writing, the office of elder and bishop was one and the same. The two words simply described two different aspects of the same ministry: bishop describing the office as an overseer of God's family, and elder describing it in terms of spiritual maturity. But by the time the last apostle had died, the office had already

begun to be divided between those called bishops who took up the apostolic oversight of a particular region, and the elders who had leadership in particular congregations. We know this from letters and documents from the end of the first century. This was not, as is too often claimed, a bad thing that took the church away from the original apostolic vision, but was rather a process overseen by the apostles as they realized the need for pastors to have their own pastors. The problems came later, when bishops became lords and masters rather than pastors and servants.

Secondly, we can be quite certain that the first generation of churches opened the office of deacon to women as well as men. Phoebe, whom Paul greets in the postscript to his letter to the church at Rome, is called by the title "deacon," (not "deaconess," as the footnote to our translation puts it). To avoid controversy and reduce book sales to conservatives, our translation uses the word "servant," a translation of the word deacon. John Calvin wrote that, if it were a man and not a woman Paul was addressing, we would certainly translate the word "deacon." Also, the instructions to the deacons in

our text include a section that appears to be about the deacons' wives. It is often asked why Paul speaks of the deacons' wives, but not the wives of the elders. However, the primary meaning of the word is "women," and the instructions appear to be addressing, not deacons' wives, but the women deacons as well as the men.

It seems clear that the requirements for the two offices are essentially the same, except the elders have the additional requirement of being teachers. We know, of course, that at least two of the first deacons, Stephen and Phillip, were gifted teachers. But this was not a gift required by their office. So, what is required of these ministries, and how should they impact this particular part of God's family?

## **Body:**

### **1. Qualification of those entrusted with the care of God's household:**

- *Personal:* "Above reproach" meaning, nothing for the world to grab onto and hold up in order to bring contempt on the church and her Lord.

- *Family:* Again, should not be a cause of scandal. Must clearly love one's wife as Christ loved the church, and must have a good relationship with one's children.
- *Church:* Must hold unwaveringly to the great mystery of the faith, as summarized at the end of the chapter, and be able to teach the faith to others.
- *Community:* Must be respected outside the church, again so that the world will not have occasion to reject our Lord because of what they see in us.

## **2. Application to our congregation:**

- *Elders are to lead in the tending of our souls:* Are you willing to allow the elders to care for your souls? Who are your elders?
- *Deacons are to lead in the tending of our bodies:* Are you willing to allow the deacons to help care for your physical needs in times of trouble, and to entrust to them the care of the fabric of the church's campus?
- *Are you willing to let the pastors give themselves to the Word and to prayer* so that we can spend more time equipping these officers to minister in this part of God's

household, and less time intervening in the conflicts and confusions that should come under the ministries of the elders and deacons?

- *Are you willing to begin seeing yourself as one who is also entrusted with the same kinds of ministries as the officers of the church, so that you are increasingly helping them with the shepherding of the bodies and souls of the family of God?*
- *Are you, especially those of you who are young, willing to begin desiring the "noble task" of serving God's people as elders and deacons, and laboring in those ministries even now toward the day that the congregation acknowledges your gifts and God's calling on your life?*

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