

The Goal is Love (Part 4)

Passages: 1 Timothy 3:1-16
Matthew 20:20-28

Let me begin with some Anglican trivia.

What is the name of the Anglican Church in the USA? (Episcopal)
Where does the name come from? (Greek *episkopos* meaning *bishop*)
What are the three offices in the Anglican Church? (Bishops, priests and deacons)
How do you obtain one of these offices? (**Deacon**-- you do three or four years in Moore College as an approved candidate for ordination. Then, upon completion of your studies, the Diocese appoints you to a church and ordains you as a *deacon* in that church. **Priest**- After one year, you may be approved for ordination as a *priest*. **Bishop**- This office is filled by special appointment from the Archbishop. However, the office of Archbishop is democratically filled through an election by the Synod. We will be voting for a new Archbishop next year.)

Now, the point of all this ‘trivia’ is to show you that the Anglican Church was basically formed around a three-fold hierarchy or orders. It is an *episcopal* church. Moreover, if you ever asked a good Sydney Anglican where this hierarchy comes from, you’d probably be pointed to today’s passage from **1 Timothy 3**, where **bishops** and **deacons** are both mentioned.

Of course, most denominations have these (or similar) offices! Whether they be called *bishops* or *apostolic overseers*; *priests* or *pastors*; *deacons* or *parish councillors*, denominations have established these positions because it is believed to be the Biblical thing to do! Most Christians, in fact, believe that some form of hierarchical structure has been established by God and endorsed by the Scriptures since the days of the Apostle Paul.

But, you know, I’m not so sure!

As I said, most churches get this idea of church hierarchy from today’s passage in 1 Timothy 3. **But**, as we’ve been discovering in our studies so far, the exhortations and commands Paul gives to Timothy in this letter can only be understood through an appreciation of the historic context of the

letter.

First, we need to remember that Paul's *First Letter to Timothy* is not a general letter to all churches but a specific letter to Timothy **concerning one particular church**-- the church that Paul started many years earlier in the city of **Ephesus**. Indeed, not only did Paul start the church in Ephesus, but he lived there for three whole years, working with Jewish and Gentile converts in an effort to build them up in unity, in the way of Christ. And that's important to keep in mind! You see, over the course of those years, Paul had succeeded in establishing one of the most healthy, thriving Christian communities in the New Testament, a community where both Jewish and Gentile converts lived together in harmony. That's why Paul would later write a letter to them (what we call *the Book of Ephesians*) extolling the many virtues of their amazing, multi-ethnic fellowship. In Paul's mind, the church in Ephesus was a beautiful example of the power of Christ; the power to reconcile and bring together two, very distinct, groups of people and make them one.

The **second** thing to remember, however, is that, now, many years later, Paul is greatly alarmed that all this good work is quickly being destroyed! Some false teachers have come in to the church in Ephesus and begun to stir up ethnic tensions, arguing that the Gentile believers need to follow the Old Testament food and circumcision laws. In return, two Greek Christians named Alexander and Hymaneus have started to stir up their Gentile community against this heavy-handed imposition of Jewish culture. It's for this reason that Paul sends Timothy to Ephesus, to get these two groups back together again!

And so, with this historic situation in mind, we can understand that **this First Letter of Paul to Timothy is no ordinary letter!** Rather, it's a letter of alarm and desperation! Paul is calling on his trusted friend, Timothy, to go to Ephesus and deal with this urgent situation. *This letter, therefore, cannot be read as if Paul is laying out a blueprint for every church in every age!* Paul is dealing with a very specific situation over which the future of this multi-ethnic unity of the church in Ephesus is at stake. His advice, therefore, needs to be read in the light of that church's peculiar situation.

With that in mind, let's look at **1 Timothy 3**. Let's start by reading just verse 1.

1Ti 3:1 *Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer (episcopos), he desires a noble task.*

At the time of this letter to Timothy, the church in Ephesus had already existed for **14 years!** For the first three years, Paul lived in that city. Then, a few years later, he wrote *‘Ephesians’*, a glowing letter of all the good things that God was doing in their midst! It is only now, **14 years later**, that Paul talks to them for the first time about the appointment of ‘overseers/bishops’. Why would that be? I mean, **if** the office of ‘bishop’ was an essential element of the church’s structure, why didn’t Paul teach about this office and establish it earlier?

The extraordinary truth is that it simply wasn’t a priority in Paul’s thinking! Instead of the establishment of church ‘offices’ and hierarchy, Paul preferred to focus 14 years of teaching on **‘spiritual gifts’** and on the responsibility that *every member* of the church has towards the Body. For 14 years, Paul argued that, because every member of the Ephesian church has a spiritual gift, everyone has a part to play in seeing that both Jewish and Gentile Christians are built up *together* in love and in the bonds of peace.

In fact, if you read thorough the entire letter to the Ephesians, you’ll soon discover that **Paul never makes mention of any official offices in the church.** But listen to what Paul writes to them about spiritual gifts!

Eph 4:11-13, ¹⁶ ***It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.***

Obviously, Paul believed that the use of spiritual gifts by every member was sufficient for the smooth operation of the church. If Jesus is the ‘head’ of His church, and everyone is using their gifts in direct coordination with the Head, then Christ’s ‘office’ is the only one that is really necessary.

In fact, this idea of ‘*body-life*’ was central to Paul’s theology of the church—this was his *ecclesiology*—developed out of the knowledge that, ever since the Day of Pentecost, the church was established by the Holy Spirit as a lay-run movement, and **not as an institution.** (This is the reason why Paul could not destroy it!) Furthermore, once Paul became a believer himself, he realised that every believer was endowed with God’s Spirit and gifted to serve the ever-expanding Body of Christ. This became the

hallmark of Paul's missionary work, as he encouraged these newly-formed Christian communities to display the life of Christ, fuelled by a God-given passion for the Lord and for each other. Paul encouraged everyone to get involved in the body life of their local congregation, knowing that, **as long as Jesus was kept in the centre of everything, there was no need to set up hierarchical structures of governance.**

Of course, this is not to say that Paul never appointed leaders in the churches he planted. The Book of Acts tells us that '**elders**' were eventually appointed in every church he planted. In Paul's mind, however, an elder's role was not so much a *hierarchical* position but one more in keeping with that of the OT elders. In the OT, Israel's **elders** were the wiser, older men who sat at the Temple gate and to whom you would go for spiritual insight and wisdom. And so, in the NT letters of Paul, Peter and James, the **elders** would be the ones who would lay hands on the sick or discern a person's calling in service to Christ. In other words, they always led from the back... in the way that Jesus told them to lead in Matthew 20:25-28!

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The point is clear: Because these *elders* stayed more in the background of the church's activities, Paul rarely referred to them in his letters. In fact, not once in Paul's letters do we find him calling on the **elders** (in a hierarchical way) to step in to resolve a dispute or 'lay down the law'. Indeed, Paul's general approach to church problems was to call on the entire church to work them through.

Obviously, however, the problem in Ephesus was so big and the crisis was so pervasive, threatening to destroy everything that God had established there, that Paul was forced to change tactics. **For the very first time in all of Paul's writings we find him speaking in terms of a hierarchy of overseers and deacons!**

Paul's action, of course, makes a lot of sense. If you think about the recent crises that we've seen in Queensland and Christchurch, you'll understand that, with every crisis, there is a need for a hierarchy. Whether it be floods or earthquakes, the magnitude of these local crises meant that, when the local government becomes overwhelmed, the state comes in with its resources. When the state finds itself out of resources, they turn to the

Federal government. Eventually, even international calls for help may be needed.

In crisis situations, a hierarchical chain can work very well. And that's exactly what Paul does here. Paul calls in hierarchical help in the form of bishops and deacons. And here's what he asks them to do:

They were to teach and preach. Of course, the main teacher/preacher would be Timothy. But, according to verse 2, one of the chief criteria for the selection of an overseer/bishop was his "***ability to teach***". No doubt, the focus of their teaching would be on issues of unity...about *loving one another* and *serving each other* through good works.

The were to be an example to the church of what unity looks like.

When you read the qualifications for the position of overseer/bishop found in verses 2-5, it should strike you that they're mostly about the person's home-life.

1Ti 3:2-5 Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)

The reason for this focus is obvious—a splintered church needs leaders who are whole and who already model wholeness and conflict resolution in their home situations.

They were called to engage in spiritual warfare on behalf of the

church. That's why Paul's criteria included being old enough, informed enough and stable enough to truly know the mind of Christ and to intercede against Satan for the church.

1Ti 3:6-7 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Now, the strange thing is that, as you move on to the next section (vv 8-13) and to the qualifications for deacons/deaconesses (Gk: *diakounos*=*servants*), you soon discover that they are almost the same as for bishops! It makes me wonder why? I mean, if Paul was writing a manual on how to set up a permanent church hierarchy, you would have thought that he would

take more time and be more precise. But he isn't precise! And that's probably because he sees bishops and deacons (servants) as *crisis managers*...called in, appointed for a season, to bring the church back to its senses...and back to unity in Christ.

Indeed, I think I'm supported in this view by what Paul says in verses 14-15, where he talks about personally coming to Ephesus. He obviously sees himself as one of those overseers or bishops...a trouble shooter...one who will come in for a short time to fix a temporary problem. Paul says, **“Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.”** Paul seems to be saying, *“Even if I can't get there soon enough, you should be able to find other bishops and deacons...those who are wise in the Lord... who can step in and help resolve the problems you're having.”*

Let's finish our study with a quick reflection on our church. **Do we have a hierarchy of leadership?** Do we need one? My answer is, “I don't think so!” In fact, I try to preach quite the opposite; that I'm simply one of the elders of this church who uses his particular gifts for the building up of Christ's Body here in Penshurst. But, of course, you have your gifts as well...everyone does! As long as everyone keeps focusing on Christ, and as long as we all use our gifts for each other, then this Body of Christ will prosper in His unity!

And if we ever come to a time when we are devouring each other and destroying this church through disunity, well...that will be the time to call in overseers and 'servants'...people who can step into our local situation and help us to resolve our disputes.

With that in mind, let me finish with a story:

A few weeks ago, Stewart and I were talking about his retirement. I mentioned the fact that he needed to retire at age 65 and when he responded by saying that that was God's decision, I told him 'No'... it was my decision! I left it at that.

Two weeks passed and I started to hear rumours circulating around the church saying that I was dismissing Stewart! That I was being a dictator!

That I thought I knew more than God! So, last week, I went to Stewart and asked him if there was something he wanted to talk about. He sheepishly told me what he had been feeling—that he was very upset that I was forcing him out of our church and that I was being a dictator.

And so we talked—I told him three things:

It is our culture-- everyone retires at 65. This is a general expectation. Even bishops retire at 65!

I'm concerned for your health. Stewart has often told me that he wanted to leave the ministry because of ill health. In fact, I've been asking him to hold on until his retirement!

Our financial situation is not adequate to keep supporting a Chinese minister at his current salary level. The Parish Council has been talking about ways to reduce our salary expenditures but increase ministry potential, perhaps by employing two part-time ministers? Stewart's retirement is a chance for us to take stock and rearrange our finances.

But the point here is this— What would have happened if the rumours persisted? What would have happened if our church became hopelessly divided? Well, according to Paul, it would be time to call in the overseers!

Thankfully, we followed Jesus' advice in Matthew 18 and corrected the problem before it got any bigger, bringing all our misunderstandings back to Jesus and under the power of His reconciliation!

Indeed, I think that it's for this very reason that Paul finishes off chapter three with the following reflection on the person of Jesus Christ, the Head and centre of the church!

1Ti 3:16 *Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory."*

Here is the focus we must all maintain—a focus on Jesus—the whole reason why there is a church in the first place!

Let's pray.

