

1-2 Timothy – 1 Timothy 3:1-7

Review

Last time, we considered Paul's controversial instructions to Timothy regarding the roles of men and women in the church. We examined the worship of the Greek goddess Artemis in ancient Ephesus that formed the context for Paul's warnings. We concluded that these instructions are also applicable to the roles of men and women in the Church today. We saw that God calls women to dress modestly as a form of service to both their brothers and their sisters in Christ. We noted that although God has clearly called men as spiritual leader – in the home, in church fellowships, and in general society – men have repeatedly and increasingly abrogated that role ever since the fall of mankind in the garden, and women have therefore stepped into the gap. Finally, we proposed that Paul's intriguing statement that women would be saved through childbearing by their faith, love, holiness, and self-control, may have been motivated by the women of ancient Ephesus seeking the protection of Artemis from the significant dangers to mother and child in pregnancy and childbirth.

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Let's continue now in our study of the text of 1 Timothy.

¹The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ²Therefore an overseer [ἐπίσκοπος episkopos] must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? 1 Timothy 3:1-5 (ESV)

There's no rest for the weary. Having worked with some difficulty through Paul's instructions about the proper role of women in the Church, gaining only tentative consensus on how we should apply them, we now come to some equally contentious instructions regarding the appointment of leaders in our fellowships. To put it bluntly, these instructions are controversial simply because very few men in Christian congregations today fully meet these qualifications.

Strict conformance to the letter of Paul's instructions here to Timothy and his similar instructions to Titus would make it almost impossible for most congregations to have any leaders at all! Should congregations unable to find men who fully meet the Biblical qualifications simply do without leaders until suitable men can be found, or should they make do with the men who are available and willing to serve? Since it is so difficult to find men who perfectly meet the Biblical qualifications to be leaders, most fellowships simply "fudge" on them. This form of compromise – while admittedly disquieting – is nevertheless necessary given the present-day realities of our society. The question then is whether such compromise is acceptable within the will of God. Another consideration is whether churches should replace such leaders chosen out of necessity if better-qualified (Biblically) men are later found.

Paul begins by laying out the requirements for the office of a congregation overseer. The Greek word here is ἐπίσκοπος **episkopos**. The ESV and many other English translations render this word as "overseers." The KJV, NKJV, and ASV call them "bishops." Interestingly, of the translations I have available to me, only the NLT uses the term "elder" to translate 1 Timothy 3:1-2. This seems a little odd, given that many church denominations and independent evangelical churches call these men elders.

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ASIDE – As a man “well advanced in years” who will soon enter his eighth decade of life, I find it difficult to call the youths who arrive at my door on bicycles dressed identically in white shirts and ties wishing to share with me the teachings of an 18th century self-serving, apostate blasphemer “elders.” Nevertheless, in this discussion I will use the title “elders” for **ἐπίσκοπος episkopos**, since that is what they are called in the churches I have attended. I have been appointed an elder in my own church, but I really don’t care what title anyone uses for me provided they never call me “late for dinner.”

But I digress...

The Blue Letter Bible lexicon defines **ἐπίσκοπος episkopos** this way:

an overseer

1. a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian or superintendent
2. the superintendent, elder, or overseer of a Christian church

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1985/esv/mgnt/0-1/>

ἐπίσκοπος episkopos is found five times in the New Testament. Four of these refer to leaders within church fellowships. Peter uses **ἐπίσκοπος episkopos** in reference to the LORD Jesus.

For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. **1 Peter 2:25 (ESV)**

Before we get into Paul’s listings of the qualifications for **ἐπίσκοπος episkopos** we should notice that the title “pastor” does not appear in any English translation of the New Testament that I could find. Clearly, from the very fact that we have these instructions in 1 Timothy 3 and Paul’s similar instructions in Titus 1 we can infer that Paul intended for Timothy and Titus to select **ἐπίσκοπος episkopos** other than themselves to lead the churches in their respective locations. Paul was not specific about the number of these appointments – whether a single leader was to be appointed in each congregation, or whether churches should have a pastor and a board of elders as their **ἐπίσκοπος episkopos** such as we find in modern congregations. In some churches, the pastor alone makes all decisions. In others, the pastor and elders decide things democratically. Other congregations are led by their elder boards, with the pastor taking a subordinate role in the decision-making process. Rarely, all decisions must be ratified by the entire congregation, so the pastor and the elders are not really leaders at all, but simply ministers with non-leadership roles.

NOTE – As with our previous studies, I rely for the most part upon the ESV as my primary English language translation. Consequently, the reader may note that the wording of the listings of elder qualifications found in this passage differs significantly from the reader’s own preferred English translation. This is usually not a problem at all, but in the case of the two qualifications listings we will examine, even the Greek texts used as the basis for different translations differ somewhat, as does the interlinear reference I use to research the English meanings of the Greek words. Therefore, readers are encouraged to examine the Greek source of their own English translations rather than relying solely upon my analysis.

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Paul gives two listings of the qualifications for elders in his pastoral epistles – this one in 1 Timothy 3 and another in Titus 1. In our analysis of these qualifications, we need to consider both – noting especially where they match and where they differ.

5This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders [πρεσβύτερος presbyteros] in every town as I directed you— 6if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. 7For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, 8but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. 9He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. Titus 1:5-9 (ESV)

NOTE – In the ESV rendering of Titus 1:5, the word translated as “elders” is **πρεσβύτερος presbyteros** – not **ἐπίσκοπος episkopos**. The word **πρεσβύτερος presbyteros** is found 66 times in the New Testament. Of these, 9 refer to the leaders of Christian congregations. Peter refers to himself as “an elder” using this word (1 Peter 5:1). John calls himself “the elder” (possibly in reference to his age) in two of his epistles. Most of the instances of **πρεσβύτερος presbyteros** pertain to the leaders of the Jews. The word is also used for older people in general.

The first thing to note in Paul’s lists of **ἐπίσκοπος episkopos** qualifications is that elders are to be men. This aligns with Paul’s previous instructions in 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Whether we agree or not, Paul’s instructions are logically consistent. But this also raises an important question which is the subject of current turmoil within the Southern Baptist Convention – If no suitable men can be found, is it acceptable for churches to appoint women as elders and/or pastors?

Paul says that elders must be **above reproach**. When I truly contemplate this, it fills my heart with sorrow. Oftentimes, a man’s pristine reputation shrouds a despicable secret life. I think of Benedict Arnold and the many other traitors whose reputations remained untarnished even as they carried out their betrayals of their countries. A prime example within the church is Ravi Zacharias whose reputation as an evangelist and Christian apologist was “above reproach” until after his death when the facts of his sexual misconduct and abuse came to light. Of course, the best Biblical example of a man whose reputation belied the contents of his heart is Judas Iscariot with whom Jesus’ disciples entrusted their finances, and whom Jesus Himself sent forth as an apostle. Yet Judas became the man who betrayed Jesus into the hands of those who conspired to have Him crucified.

ASIDE – The case of Judas Iscariot contains two great mysteries of the incarnation. First, is the question of exactly how much Jesus in his human flesh knew of Judas’ activities and inner thoughts. To appropriate [Senator Howard Baker’s famous question](#) about President Nixon’s involvement in the Watergate break-in and subsequent cover-up – What did Jesus know and when did He know it? Was Jesus aware of Judas’ plans as He washed Judas’ feet, or only afterward when He said to Judas, **“What you are going to do, do quickly?”** (John 13:27) Also, it’s not entirely clear whether Judas even had any choice in his betrayal of our LORD. God’s plan of salvation conceived by Him before the creation required Jesus to be crucified as the atonement for the sins of all mankind. Someone had to

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betray Jesus to the authorities. Did God choose Judas for that role before the beginning as well locking Judas into a sequence of events beyond his choice or control?

When a church chooses elders for itself, we must indeed ensure that nominees are above reproach. Yet even so there is no guarantee of an elder's trustworthiness. Day-in and day-out we hear about church leaders whom their congregations deemed above reproach who became involved in sinful, perverse, and even illegal activities in the Holy Name of Jesus. Solomon (not a paragon of righteousness himself) put the problem bluntly.

Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips. Proverbs 25:19 (ESV)

Therefore, the psalmist wrote...

Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. Psalm 146:3 (ESV)

What can be done? Why does God allow church fellowships to install leaders who deceive them and abuse their trust? These are tough questions. First, we need to seek and trust God in choosing our elders. The second question is harder to answer. As we have seen repeatedly, the potential for painful harm to the flock at the hands of a corrupt leader is ever-present. We must trust that God holds all these things in His sovereignty, and that His plans for us are always for our good and never for evil even when the present situation might seem to indicate otherwise.

¹⁶Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, ¹⁸while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. ²

Corinthians 4:16-18 (ESV)

Just as important, if a church leader appears to be doing something in which they shouldn't be partaking, the other leaders need to act immediately to discover the facts of the matter, and if necessary remove the offender from their leadership position and possibly even from the fellowship altogether. The situation in which the Southern Baptist Convention is now embroiled arose just as much from covering up the ongoing abuses by church leaders as it did from the offenses themselves.

Next, both of Paul's listings of qualifications for elders say "**the husband of one wife.**" This could also be translated as "the man of one woman." Of course, this qualification causes the most controversy, because it immediately raises some difficult questions.

1. May men who were never married serve as elders?
2. What about widowers and divorcees who didn't remarry?
3. What about widowers and divorcees who have remarried?
4. When Paul says that an elder must be "**the husband of one wife,**" does he mean for all time, or at any given time?

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In order to come to grips with these questions, we must first look at what the Bible says about marriage and divorce.

God's Law neither defines nor commands marriage. Like the habit of prayer and the eternal existence of God, the concept of marriage is simply assumed to be understood by all. Nor is any specific ceremony or procedure ordained for the solemnization of marriage in the Bible, although many traditions have sprung up surrounding the process of marriage. There is usually a period of betrothal followed by a wedding ceremony and celebration before the married couple consummate their marriage. Jesus likened the coming of His Kingdom to a marriage ceremony and attended at least one wedding Himself. Likewise, the Bible does not forbid plural marriage – modern secular laws and societal traditions notwithstanding. In fact, Jacob had four wives who became the mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Solomon carried this tradition to the fullest degree with his 700 wives. We can infer that plural marriage was still common in Paul's day since he specified to both Timothy and Titus that a man chosen as an elder of the church was to be the husband of only one wife. For his part, Paul did not forbid marriage, but recommended against it as distracting a person from serving the LORD.

By contrast, God's Law outlines specific rules and procedures for divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). The tradition of divorce among the Hebrews continued until Jesus' day. Recall that when Joseph first learned that Mary was pregnant, he had determined to divorce her quietly – although technically he would not have been actually divorcing her, but rather simply breaking off their engagement. (Matthew 1:19). But Jesus changed the rules of the game in His Sermon on the Mount.

31“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Matthew 5:31-32 (ESV)

When questioned about divorce by the Pharisees, Jesus doubled down...

3And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” 4He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” 7They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 8He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

Matthew 19:3-9 (ESV)

This teaching seems straightforward. Jesus precludes divorce except in the case of infidelity. Before we move on though, notice what the Bible **doesn't** say about divorce. There is no mention whatsoever in the Law or in Jesus' teachings about the case of a woman who wishes to divorce her husband. Paul speaks of this case briefly, and even goes so far as to say it is a commandment from the LORD.

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10To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 (ESV)

This is a hard teaching indeed. What about the case where an abusive husband or (rarely) wife threatens the life or wellbeing of the spouse and/or the children? How could a Christian brother or sister in good conscience recommend to a victim of domestic violence that they remain in the home where their very lives are in danger? For myself, I would much rather be guilty of rebellion against God's Word than to allow my advice to put a fellow believer in danger.

So now we're "read onto" God's program for marriage and divorce. But unfortunately, we're not much closer to answering the questions above about the marital status of men selected as elders. Nor are we likely to obtain any solid answers. This is a tough Biblical nut to crack indeed.

2Therefore an overseer [ἐπίσκοπος episkopos] must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 1 Timothy 3:2 (ESV)

Next, Paul says that elders must be ***sober-minded*** (in the ESV – see note above). The Greek word here is **νηφάλιος nēphalios**. It means sober, temperate, abstaining from wine (either entirely or at least from immoderate use). This too is controversial. Must elders be tea-totalers? I don't think so. After all, Paul advises Timothy himself to drink a little wine for the sake of his stomach later on in the letter. Surely Paul wouldn't advise Timothy to tell his chosen elders, "Do as I say, not as I do." This is why I haven't drunk alcohol myself since being first called as an elder many years ago in our California church. It all ties in with the idea of being "***above reproach***." Elders must not only refrain from improper behaviors and words. We must take care avoid even the appearance of impropriety. Is it then any wonder that good elders are so hard to find?

There is no dispute about the next two characteristics – ***self-controlled and respectable***. The Greek word for self-controlled can also mean "sane" so I guess this is yet another characteristic in which I fail the test. The Greek word that is translated "***hospitable***." is notable. **φιλόξενος philoxenos** is made up of two roots meaning love or fondness and strangers or guests. So an elder should be a welcomer of guests who is generous toward strangers. This is another characteristic in which I need improvement.

Finally in verse 2 Paul says an elder must be ***able to teach***. In his instructions to Titus, Paul clarifies why this is an important characteristic for an elder.

9He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. Titus 1:9 (ESV)

Although Paul doesn't explicitly say so, this implies that the man who assumes the role of a teacher must necessarily have been properly disciplined in sound Gospel doctrine himself. Otherwise, how could he be able to instruct others in sound doctrine or recognize false doctrine when he hears it? This

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is a huge problem throughout Christendom today. There is a vast dearth of sound Bible teaching in ostensibly “christian” publications, media, and broadcasting as well as in local church fellowships. False teachers are everywhere. This is why Paul advises Timothy later on in this letter not to be overly hasty in laying hands on a man to consecrate him for service. This is especially important for those who are chosen to disciple others – particularly children. Our public schools have failed miserably in this regard – hiring teachers who barely know how to read, write, and cipher themselves, and who come to the table with perverse agenda of their own in which they concentrate their efforts to indoctrinate children behind their parents’ backs.

3not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 1 Timothy 3:3 (ESV)

Paul goes on with some undesirable characteristics of men that Timothy should watch out for and avoid in choosing elders. None of these is controversial. Some of these are readily visible like drunkenness. Others are more easily masked by an ambitious man like the love of money. Obviously, no one can ever fully know another person’s heart, but Jesus said that we can know a person by their fruits, and that out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaks, so even the most crafty man can’t hide his true nature completely for very long. By careful observation and due caution, these characteristics can be detected and avoided in choosing elders if we are patient and diligent.

4He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, 5for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? 1 Timothy 3:4-5 (ESV)

Freedom-loving people bristle at the word submissive. Other translations render this word as “under control” and “in obedience.” But the key here is the phrase “***with all dignity.***” It is not just important that our children are obedient. We must be firm with them, but also dignified, disciplining our children gently and consistently. We must never be cruel to our children, but we must certainly be the unquestioned rulers of our households. How many times have I seen parents out in public with their children with one of them (usually the mother) continually issuing threats like counting to 3 or 10 or some such thing to their unruly children, but never following through? Consequently, their children simply ignore them and go on with whatever behavior elicited the meaningless threat in the first place. Such undignified and impotent parents are the ones Paul recommends that Timothy not select as elders in the churches.

Before we move on, we should carefully note what Paul tells Titus in this regard.

6if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.

Titus 1:6 (ESV)

Here we find yet another qualification for being an elder in the church that I personally do not fulfill, since neither of my two sons are yet believers. In my mind, this verse immediately raises a difficult question. How can a parent mandate or enforce a child’s belief in the Gospel. After all, not even God Himself can do this. At least God does not choose to do it even if He might be able. This is the great

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mystery of God's gift of free will to human beings. But all that having been said, I am personally not qualified to serve as an elder under the strict letter of these instructions.

Paul goes on to say that an elder candidate's children must not be debauched or insubordinate. The Biblical example that springs to mind is the case of Eli the priest and his corrupt sons Hophni and Phinehas. (1 Samuel 2) Although Eli himself was a faithful man, he was a weak and ineffective parent to his two sons. Although they served as priests, Hophni and Phinehas did not know the LORD. The debauchery and corruption of Eli's sons was well known among the people, tarnishing Eli's own reputation. Although Eli rebuked his sons, they ignored him and continued to rebel against their father and against God. In the end, Eli and his heirs all died on the same day. In essence, God cleaned out His own house by removing Eli's house from it.

Godliness cannot be inherited. It must be chosen by each generation. God's Word is filled with examples of sons who failed to live up to their fathers' righteousness and godly obedience. Of course, this continues up to the present day both inside and outside the Church.

‘He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.’ 1 Timothy 3:6 (ESV)

Anyone who has ever been in any leadership position in a church fellowship will confirm that the spiritual warfare to which any Christian is always subject intensifies greatly when one assumes a position of leadership. In fact, a church leader who is effective in evangelism and in pastoral ministry will feel this burden from the evil one most of all. This is an encouragement for these “good shepherds” – affirmation that we are acting within the will of God and are making an impact. Our enemy doesn't bother with false teachers or with wimpy, corrupt, and ineffective church leaders. In fact, they are his favorite kind!

New believers are not yet finely attuned to the wiles of our great enemy, and thus are more easily ensnared by him. Hence Paul makes the warning to Timothy here in this verse. The primary tool in our adversary's toolbox is spiritual pride – with which Lucifer is intimately familiar since his own pride is what brought about his fall from heaven. The devil is well aware that human beings are easily ensnared by our own pride. It takes God many trips to the woodshed with His children before we learn the quality of humility that is essential in carrying out our responsibilities as church leaders. Any military leader can affirm that in order to be an effective leader, a man must first be a devoted follower. Young men must first be schooled in utter devotion to our LORD before we may become effective as His servant in leading His people.

Before we move on, it's important to take note of the phrase “***condemnation of the devil***” found at the end of 1 Timothy 3:6. We know that it is God Almighty – not our enemy – who condemns and who redeems in accordance with His will and His own good purposes. The phrase here **κρίμα *krima* ὁ *ho* διάβολος *diabolos*** isn't translated incorrectly in the ESV, just not precisely enough. The condemnation spoken of here isn't one handed out by the evil one. It is the condemnation that he himself has already incurred. This viewpoint is confirmed by the grammatical case of the definite article **ὁ *ho*** (the) in this verse. The genitive case of **ὁ *ho*** here implies ownership by the article's object (**διάβολος *diabolos***) thus, the condemnation referred to is that belonging to the devil, not that meted out by him. This is a good example of the grammatical weakness of English in comparison to other languages like Greek.

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A better rendering of this verse is found in some other English translations. For example, the CSB...

6He must not be a new convert, or he might become conceited and incur the same condemnation as the devil. ¹ Timothy 3:6 (CSB)

NOTE – In my humble opinion, the NET gets this verse completely wrong...

6He must not be a recent convert or he may become arrogant and fall into the punishment that the devil will exact. ¹ Timothy 3:6 (CSB)

But moving on...

7Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. ¹ Timothy 3:7 (ESV)

Frankly, I am very confused by this verse. After all Jesus taught...

“Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. ^{Luke 6:26} (ESV)

James was even more vehement...

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ^{James 4:4} (ESV)

BTW – James wrote these stark words in the context of his famous diatribe about the power of the tongue – particularly regarding contentions within the Church. Ouch!

In fact, the hatred of the world for Christians should be an encouragement to us...

18“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. 21But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. ^{John 15:18-21} (ESV)

Why then would Paul recommend selecting men who are well thought of by outsiders as elders in the church? Perhaps Paul was thinking of the wellbeing of non-believers. If they find a man whom they respect and admire acting effectively as a leader in a Christian fellowship, they might lend more credence the Truth of the Gospel message preached by such a man.

But given the other pertinent teachings just cited, I am far from settled in my own mind exactly how we should apply 1 Timothy 3:7. In fact, I am greatly concerned that “popular” church leaders in our world today are prime examples of the sort of teachers that Paul himself warned Timothy about in his final letter...

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For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, **2 Timothy 4:3 (ESV)**

Looking Ahead

Next time, God willing we will continue our study of Paul's instructions to Timothy regarding the appointment of deacons (servants) within church fellowships.