

Lesson One, 1 Tim. 3:15, What is the Local Church?

In this verse, Paul says, “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 in this verse is speaking about the local church. He says three things about the local church. He says the church is God’s household, the church is the church of the living God and the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth. Paul is therefore teaching us three things about the local church.

I. The Local Church God’s Household.

This is the first thing Paul says about the church in this passage, that it is God’s household. What does this mean? The New Testament explains this to us in detail.

1. The church is the family of God.

A household is a family. So Paul is saying that the local church is the family of God. Just as a father is the head of his household, so God is the head of each local church. The church does not belong to a pastor or a bishop or anyone like that, it belongs to God, it is His household, His family. Also, a household consists of children that the head of the household has brought into the world. They are his children, born in his image. In the same way, the local church consists of people that God has brought into His kingdom. We are His children, He is the one who has saved us and brought us into His kingdom, we have been born again bearing His image. Just as God is good and kind and merciful and holy, so we as His born again children bear this image. His image in us is not yet fully perfect. We are not yet as good and kind and merciful and holy as God is, but God is at work in us perfecting us so that one day we will be like His Son the Lord Jesus. “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (1 Jn. 3:2-3).

2. The church is the flock of God (Acts 20:28).

The apostle Paul said in this verse, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” There are two things that Paul says.

(i) He says that the church is the flock of God. This means that as the people of God, we are totally dependant upon God for everything. A flock of sheep does not go out to find food and water for themselves, they have to be led by the shepherd. If the shepherd does not lead the sheep to good pastures and to quiet waters then the sheep will starve to death. The sheep are totally dependent upon the shepherd for their lives. In the same way, the people of God are dependant totally upon God for their spiritual lives. We are born again because God makes us

so. But then the work of God does not end there. After He has made us born again, He sustains us in our spiritual life. When we get saved the Holy Spirit comes to live in us. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the power each day to live the Christian life. It is the Holy Spirit who teaches us the word of God as we read it each day. Without His work, we would read the Bible but we would not understand it. He gives us understanding of God’s word. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the desire to live a godly life each day: “It is God who works in you both to will and to act according to his good purposes” (Phil. 1:13). This is how God cares for His flock each day: He feeds them and He works in them to prepare them for heaven.

(ii) He says that Christ bought the church with His own blood. This means that the members of the local church are now owned by God and are His servants. When we were born in this world, we were born sinners. We were born in the kingdom of darkness and we were slaves of sin. But God redeemed us from this slavery through the blood of Jesus Christ. He removed us from slavery to sin and made us His people: “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness” (Rom. 6:17-18). We who are saved are now therefore the property of God. Therefore, we have to live our lives in such a way as to bring honour and glory to God: “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

3. The Church is the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25-27).

In this passage, Paul speaks to husbands and says to them, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” The text tells us two things very clearly.

(i) Christ is at work in each local church cleansing the people in order to make them holy and perfect. This is His major work in each church, this is His greatest interest. The one thing that He desires above anything else is that each local church should be holy and perfect: “It is the will of God that you should be sanctified” (1 Thess. 4:3).

(ii) Christ will one day present His people to Himself in a perfect condition. When He returns, each local church will be “a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” This is the goal that He has in mind for us, and He will never fail to achieve what He sets out to do.

4. The church is the body of Christ (Eph. 5:29-33).

Paul writes, “After all, no-one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body.” As the saved people of God, we are joined to Christ and are members of His body: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor. 12:27). This is what happens to us when we get saved, God

joins us to Christ and makes us members of His body. The Lord Jesus then feeds us and cares for us, just as each one of us feeds and cares for his own body.

5. The church is God's building (1 Cor. 3:9).

The church is a building that God is constructing here on earth. Each of His servants has a part to play in the construction of that building. Paul says, "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder and someone else is building on it" (1 Cor. 3:10). This is why we must not compare the work that one pastor is doing with the work that another one is doing. We are all working on different parts of the building. If you were watching a building being constructed, you would not say, "The man making the doors is better than the man putting up a stone wall." The two things are different and cannot be compared. The church in Corinth used to compare the different preachers to decide who was the best so that they could be his followers. Paul said to them, "We are fellow-workers; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Cor. 3:9). On the day that the Lord Jesus returns, He will test our work by His standards (see 1 Cor. 3:12-15).

6. The church is God's temple and the Holy Spirit lives in her (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

In the Old Testament, God commanded the people of Israel to construct a temple where the whole nation would come for worship. The temple was God's dwelling. God said, "In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever" (2 Chr. 33:7). The people of Israel, however, fell into sin again and again and eventually God removed the temple from their midst. This, however, does not mean that now there is no temple here on earth. The place where Solomon's temple was built now has a mosque there, but all over the world there are millions of temples today, because all over the world today there are local churches. And just as the temple in Jerusalem had the name of God on it, and just as it was the dwelling place of God, so each local church today bears the name of God and is the dwelling place of God: "You yourselves are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you."

These verses from the New Testament all show us that the local church is the people of God, and they teach us what this means.

II. The Local Church is the Church of the Living God.

Paul says in 1 Tim. 3:15, "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." There are two things Paul is teaching here about the church.

1. It is the church.

The word "church" means a company of people who have been called out of the world for a special reason. In New Testament times, the people of a city like Corinth or Ephesus would

appoint important people like businessmen to run the affairs of their city. The people who were chosen would not continue their businesses but would instead give themselves fully to running the affairs of the city. They were called the assembly who have been called out of the ordinary things of this world. This is what the word "church" means. It means that the members of the church were at one time completely worldly. They were in the world and they were of the world. The only things they cared about were the things of this world: money and possessions and honour and respect from the people. These were the things that occupied their attention fully. Then, the Lord saved these people and called them into His kingdom. They continued the work they were doing but they were now no longer of the world. They lived in the world and continued to run businesses and work in government offices and so on, but the things of this world, and the honour and respect of the people of this world were no longer their main priorities. They no longer ran after these things. Instead, they were now the servants of God. They served God in their places of work, they sought to bring Him glory and honour. And so they no longer told lies or took bribes or chased after possessions and pleasures in this world. They now lived for the glory of God. This is what the word "church" means. It means a group of people who have been called out from a worldly way of life into the kingdom of God to live a godly form of life.

2. It is the church of the living God.

This means the living God is the head and the owner of the church. The members of the local church do not belong to themselves, they are the property of God. They are to live lives of obedience to Him, they are to honour Him and live for His glory.

It means that the living God lives in the church when they meet. He lives in each member of the church and He lives in the body which is the local church. It is He who gives the local church its identity and its unity. This is the reason why so many churches are made up of different nationalities and different tribes. It is because the living God has brought them into His church and has united them together as one people.

It means that the living God is at work in each member perfecting them and preparing them for heaven. It is the living God who gives the members of the church gifts. The gifts are given graciously and for the benefit for the whole church: "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7). The gifts are there to perfect the people of God and to ensure that they are transformed into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It means that the living God will one day receive His people and will dwell with them for eternity. When the Lord Jesus comes, each local church will be perfect and spotless and He will take her to be with Him for eternity.

III. The Local Church is the Pillar and Foundation of the truth.

This is how Paul describes the local church in 1 Tim. 3:15. When the Bible speaks about the truth, it means the word of God. Jesus said, "Your word is truth" (Jn. 17:17). When Paul says

the local church is the pillar and foundation of the truth, he means three things.

1. He means that the local church preaches and teaches the word of God.

A pillar holds up a building and in the same way the local church holds up the truth before everyone. The local church is there to preach and teach the word of God to the unsaved so that they may hear of Christ as the only way of salvation and come to Him in faith and be saved through His death. The local church is also to preach and teach the word of God to believers because it is the means that God uses to cleanse us from our sins and to make us holy, pure and perfect (Eph. 5:25-26). Sometimes we hear of a local church where there are many problems. We hear of divisions in the church and we hear of fighting among the leaders. Matters become so serious that we see them on TV or read about them in the newspapers.

If a church has many severe problems like this continually and the problems are not ending, then it is very likely that the word of God is not being truly preached. The pastor may stand before the congregation each week and preach, but he is not preaching the word of God, he is preaching his own ideas and his own views and his own thoughts. He is not reading a passage from the Bible and then expounding that passage. If there is faithful preaching of God's word then people will grow in their knowledge and understanding of God's word and will begin to live lives of obedience to the word as they are moved by the Holy Spirit. Local churches will have many problems, but when a church has the same sort of problems continually then it is because there is no understanding and no obedience to the word of God.

2. He means that the local church will honour the word of God by living obedient lives.

It is not enough to have really good preachers in the pulpit. It is not enough to have people in the congregation each week who listen keenly and make notes of what they hear. It is not enough for people to understand what the Bible is teaching. None of these things by itself will bring honour to the word of God. It is when people live their lives in accordance with the word of God that the word of God is honoured. It is when people live godly lives in obedience to the word that people notice and bring praises to God. The apostle Paul wrote, "Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try and please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive" (Titus 2:9-10). The Lord Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

3. It means the local church defends the truth.

The word of God has been under attack for two thousand years and it will continue to be under attack. The world hates the word of God because they hate God. His word convicts them of sin so they hate it and they try to destroy it. But the local church is the pillar and foundation of the truth. Just as the pillars and the foundation of a building hold up a building

and prevent it from falling down, so the local church hold up the Bible and defends it from attacks. The attacks upon the word of God come in different forms.

(i) There are people in the world today who deny that the Bible is the word of God. Some of these are people who follow other religions, but also, there are people who claim to be Christians who say that the Bible was written by human beings only and that it is the work of human beings and not the word of God. This is why pastors and bishops in many countries allow sin like men marrying men to continue. The Bible says that this is sin, but these pastors and bishops say that the Bible is not the word of God and God does not condemn such practices. The local church has to defend the Scriptures against such people.

(ii) There are people today who deny that the Bible alone is the word of God. They claim that they have special revelation from God and they claim that what they receive is also the word of God. In many churches in our country today you will hear someone say, "God spoke to me and he told me such and such a thing." They then teach such things to others. These people are saying that the Bible alone is not the word of God and that God is still speaking to people today. But this is false teaching. The last words in the Bible are these: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book" (Rev. 22:18).

(iii) There are people today who deny that God gave His word to all His people. They claim that they alone can interpret it and tell people what it means. There are pastors today who say to their congregation, "The Bible is too difficult for you to understand. You do not need to bother to read it, I will explain it to you each Sunday." Again, this is false teaching. When God gave His word, He gave it to all His people, not just some. It means we all have a duty to read and study the Bible. It is true that there are things in the Bible which are difficult to understand, but most things we read in the Bible are not like this, we can all understand them.

(iv) There are people today who deny that the Bible is culturally relevant for us. They say, "We know what the Bible says certain things about marriage and about the married life and about death and about funerals. But our culture says something different, and we cannot leave our culture. We have to follow the ways of our culture." Again, this is wrong thinking. If the Bible gives us clear instruction on a certain matter then we have to follow that instruction, regardless of what the culture says.

These are some of the false teaching that we find in the world today, and the local church as the pillar and foundation of the truth must defend the Scriptures against such false teachings.

Lesson Two, Acts 2:37-47, The Members of the Local Church.

In this passage, we read about the events on the Day of Pentecost. We read that a large crowd of people gathered at the place where the disciples were, and that Peter preached to them. Then we read that the people who heard Peter were convicted in their hearts of their sins. They repented and were baptised and became members of the church in Jerusalem. In this passage, we are reading about how the first ever local church in the whole world came into being. The passage goes on to tell us what these people did after they became members of the local church. The Bible teaches very clearly that it is God's will that His people should belong to a local church. It is not good for a saved person to wander from one church to another. His will is that we should commit ourselves to one church and to serve Him there. This is why when people became believers in Christ on the day of Pentecost, they organised themselves into a local church. In this passage, we learn several things about the members of a local church.

1. The members of the local church must be born again.

We read in this passage that the apostle Peter preached to the crowd in Jerusalem about how they had sinned by putting to death the Son of God: “You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (Acts 2:23). When the people heard this, “They were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37). They heard preaching about sin and they were convicted of their sin by the Holy Spirit. They asked Peter what they should do, and he said they must repent. This means that they must turn away from their sins and turn to Christ alone for the forgiveness of their sins. This is what three thousand people did on that day in Jerusalem. They repented of all their sins and they turned to Christ in faith and were given salvation and the forgiveness of their sins by God.

There is a very clear lesson for us here that a person who is not saved cannot be a member of a local church. He may attend church each week but that does not mean he is a member, even if he calls himself a member. As we saw in the last lesson, the local church is the people of God, the temple of God, the body of Christ. How can a person who is not saved become a member of a local church? He does not belong to God but to the devil. He is not in the light but in the darkness. “For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor. 6:14-15).

The Bible teaches us clearly that if a person wants to become a member of a local church, he must be saved and he must show by his life that he is saved. Peter said to the people of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation,” and this is what they did, because we read that, “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). This was the evidence that they were truly saved: they devoted themselves to a godly life.

2. The members of the local church must be baptised.

When the people of Jerusalem asked Peter, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter answered them, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” In order to become members of this new church in Jerusalem, these people had to first repent and then to be baptised. That is the order that Peter laid out because that is the order that Christ laid out. Christ said, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). We see the order clearly in Christ's teaching. First people become disciples and then they are baptised.

Baptism is a matter that causes a lot of confusion in our country, and a lot of people do not understand it. It is important, therefore, for us to have a clear understanding of this matter.

What baptism is not.

Baptism is not the way a person gets saved. It is not the case that if an unsaved person gets baptised, then he has got saved purely because he has been baptised. Baptism does not save us. Also, baptism does not wash away our sins. This is a very common belief in our country that if a person wants to be cleansed from his sins then he must be baptised, and that the waters of baptism will wash away his sins. The Bible teaches us that it is not the waters of baptism that wash away our sins, but the blood of Jesus Christ: “the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). The Bible nowhere teaches that baptism cleanses us from our sins, but does teach very clearly that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from sin.

The Bible is very clear, therefore, that baptism does not cleanse away our sins and baptism does not save us.

What is baptism?

According to the Bible, baptism signifies two things.

1. In the first place, baptism signifies that a person has died with Christ and has been raised to new life with Christ. When a person gets saved, this is what happens to him. The person that he used to be dies, and God creates a new person in his place. This is what the Bible says, “Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Rom. 6:2-4). Notice carefully what Paul is saying in this passage. He says we were buried with Christ and we have been raised to new life with Christ. This is what happens when we are saved. We are born again by the Spirit of God. The person we used to be dies and a new person comes into being in his place.

This is what baptism signifies: it signifies that we have been made new through faith in Christ.

2. Baptism signifies that our sins have been washed away in the blood of Christ and we have been forgiven all our sins. Peter said to the people of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:18). He commanded the people to be baptised because when they repented and came to Christ in faith, their sins were forgiven. The Bible makes it clear that in order to get saved, a person has to repent and believe in Christ (see Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21). Baptism therefore is a public testimony that a person has turned from his sins and believed in Christ and has therefore been forgiven all his sins and has been cleansed from them.

It is important for us to notice that baptism is a public testimony of what has already happened to a person. He has already been saved, he has died with Christ and has been raised to new life with Christ, his sins have been forgiven and cleansed. All this happened to him when he got saved, it does not happen to him when he gets baptised. Baptism is a public testimony that God has saved him.

3. The members of the local church are committed to the teaching of the word of God.

The Bible says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching” (Acts 2:42). This was the first major act of those who were converted on the day of Pentecost. They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. The apostles were those men whom Christ had sent to preach and teach His word. This means, therefore, that these early Christians were committed to the word of God. This is one of the great signs that a person has been truly saved. He desires the word of God and devotes himself to it. He is not content to go to a place where the preacher just preaches his thoughts and his ideas. That does not satisfy the person who is truly saved. He does not want to hear men's ideas, he wants to be fed upon the word of God and he wants to live his life by the word.

4. The members of the local church are committed to fellowship with each other.

The Bible says, “They devoted themselves to the fellowship.” The local church is a family, it is not just a collection of people who meet on Sunday. It is a group of people who are committed to each other. They belong to one another, they care for each other, they pray for each other, and they use the gifts God has given them for the good of their fellow members. A person who is a member of a local church attends church each Sunday to meet with his fellow members to serve them and encourage them. He does not drift from one church to another, he is committed to one local church and he attends there only. He may fellowship with other believers, but he commits himself to one local church.

Church membership is a serious issue. It is not the case that if a person attends a certain church most weeks then he is a member there. There is a formal procedure by which he becomes a member. This is because the members of a certain church must be committed to that church. Before a person becomes a member, he must speak to the elders and to the members. He must show that he is committed to that church and will not just stop attending one day and go to another church.

5. The members of the local church are focussed on the cross of Christ.

We read, “They devoted themselves...to the breaking of bread.” This is a reference to the Lord's Supper and it tells us that the Lord's Supper was an important part of church life in Jerusalem. The reason why we have the Lord's Supper is primarily to remember the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me,” and, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:23-25).

Therefore, when the Bible says that the early church devoted themselves to the breaking of bread, it means that they kept their minds focussed on the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not difficult for us to see why they did this. It is very easy for a local church to lose its focus and to begin to concentrate on other things. Churches in our country today place a lot of emphasis on pastors and bishops and uniforms for the choir and buildings and weddings and funerals and money. These things and many others seem to occupy their attention. It is sadly true that we do not often hear preaching about Christ and Him crucified. A lot of preaching is about how a person can be successful in his marriage or his business or about the great works of the pastor. The early church kept their minds focussed not on these things, but on Christ. He is the foundation and the head and the heart of the local church.

6. The members of the local church pray for each other.

We read in this passage that they devoted themselves to the prayers. This is a duty that is laid upon each member of a church: he must pray for the members of the church. Prayer is important because the life of the believer and the life of the local church are in the hands of God. It is God who saves us and keeps us and enables us to grow and to serve Him. It is therefore important that we come to Him in prayer for the members of the church that they should not fall away but that they should grow in their faith and honour God in their lives.

Lesson Three, 1 Tim. 3:1-13, The Officers of the Local Church.

In this passage, the apostle Paul gives instructions about the officers of the local church. It is important for us to notice that the local church is to have two officers only, elders and deacons. The New Testament does not speak about senior pastors and assistant pastors and youth pastors or anything like that. It simply says that each church is to have elders and deacons, and in this passage, we have their qualifications.

I. Bishops, pastors and elders.

There is quite a lot of confusion in our churches today with regard to these three offices. We know that in many churches these three are separate offices. Usually a church will have a bishop who is the head of a province or the head of the whole denomination, and then it will have elders who are usually the management committee of the local church overseeing the running of the church, and then they will have the pastor, the man who does the preaching, the weddings, and so on. The question we have to ask is, "Is this arrangement biblical?" Now when we look at the Bible we find that this arrangement was not there. There are two passages in the Bible which tell us how the church in New Testament times arranged matters.

1. The first passage that is of primary importance is Acts 20:17-38. There are two verses in this passage that are of particular importance. Firstly, in v. 17 we are told that, "From Miletus he [that is Paul] sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church." In response to this request, the elders of the church at Ephesus made the journey to Miletus to see Paul (see v. 18, note it was "they", i.e. the elders as a group, who came). Then in v. 28 we read Paul's instructions to these elders. He says to them, "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

There are three words here of great importance to us. Firstly, notice that Paul is speaking to the elders of the church at Ephesus. Secondly, notice that he tells them that God has made them "overseers." This word is sometimes translated in the New Testament as "bishops" (see 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7). Then he says to these elders whom God has made bishops, that they are to "shepherd" the church of God. The word shepherd is the one that is commonly translated "pastor."

2. The second passage that is of importance is 1 Pet. 5:1-2. Here Peter writes, "The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers." Again we notice the same three words in a text: elders, pastors and bishops, and again they are applied to the same group of people. Peter says to the elders of the local churches to whom he is writing that they are to shepherd (or pastor) the flock, serving as bishops.

The conclusion we draw from this is that in a local church there is a group of men who are given the gifts required for serving as elders. These men are appointed by the local church as elders. They as elders had two tasks: to shepherd the people of God and to serve as overseers. These are the two ways in which an elder does his work. He pastors the people by feeding them from the word of God, and he serves as a bishop by leading the affairs of the local church. The local church must have good biblical leadership and this is what the elders provide when they serve as bishops. In other words, in the New Testament, the elder, the bishop and the pastor is the same person. The arrangement we have in many churches today that there are elders, a pastor and a bishop is not found anywhere in the New Testament.

II. The work of elders and deacons.

In Acts 6:1-6 we read that the church in Jerusalem had two types of officers. The apostles gave attention to prayer and the ministry of the word, and a group of seven men was chosen to look after the distribution of food to the widows. In doing this, the church in Jerusalem is a model for what local churches should do today. Although elders are not apostles, the work that the apostles did in Jerusalem should be their model. Their main task therefore must be prayer and the ministry of the word. This means that their work is to pray for the members of the church and for the on-going ministry of the church. Their work is also to preach and teach the word of God. It is not wise for elders to be involved in the administration side of church life. Things like the finances of the church and putting up a building and maintaining the building should not be the work of the elders. Their main work is prayer and preaching and teaching.

The seven men the church in Jerusalem chose are a good model for deacons today. They looked after the practical side of church life like making sure that food for the widows was fairly distributed. In the same way, deacons should look after the finances of the church, the building work and all other practical matters. This, however, does not mean that deacons can be worldly men. The seven men that the church in Jerusalem chose were "full of the Spirit and wisdom." They were godly men. Also, this does not mean that deacons can only do the practical side of church work and nothing else. It is interesting to note in the book of Acts that two of the seven men, Stephen and Philip, became mighty preachers of God's word. Each church must pray that their deacons will also be mighty preachers.

III. The qualifications of an elder.

In 1 Tim. 3:1-7, the Bible gives us several qualifications of an elder.

1. An elder must desire the work. Paul says, "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task" (v. 1). The Bible makes it clear that a man must enter into this work willingly. Peter says that an elder is to serve, "not by compulsion, but willingly" (1 Pet. 5:2). It may be that there is a man in the local church who seems to everyone to be fully equipped for the work of an elder but for certain reasons he does not desire the office. It would not be

right for the church to compel the man or to put any pressure on him. Equally, it may be that an elder has a son and he has always wanted his son to be an elder so pushes the son to seek that position even though the son does not want it. This again is not right. The man must have a genuine desire to be an elder.

2. An elder's home life must not be at fault. It is interesting that this is the first matter that Paul addresses, not the man's preaching ability or leadership qualities, but his life in the home. He says two things about this.

(i) He must be the husband of one wife (v. 2). A man with more than one wife can be baptised and become a member of a local church, but he cannot hold office in the church, he cannot be an elder or a deacon. Only those who have one wife qualify as elders. Please note that Paul is not saying an elder must be married. It is quite possible for a single man to become an elder.

(ii) He must "rule his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence" (v. 4). This means that an elder must show that he has authority over his own children and that his own children obey him. We sometimes meet a man who is quite weak at keeping order in his own home. His children do not honour and respect him but live lives of sin, and he seems to be unable to control them. Such a man, says Paul, is not qualified to be an elder. His reason for saying this is in v. 5, "For if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?" One of the tasks an elder has is to rule the church. He must make sure that there is order and godliness in the church and if there is a member who lives a life of open sin then the elder must deal with him. If he has shown himself to be weak in his own home then he will not be strong in the church to deal with such a man.

3. An elder's general character. Paul says an elder must be, "self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money" (vs. 2-3). These are all matters that speak of his general character. He is to be a serious-minded man, a calm man who is not violent or easily agitated. In matters of money he is not to be greedy or covetous. The man who constantly thinks about money, seeks to acquire money for himself and preaches about money all the time does not qualify as an elder.

4. An elder must be able to teach. This is what Paul says in v. 2, and this is the main work of an elder. There are three important things about this that we need to understand.

(i) An elder must know the Bible and the teaching of the Bible well. Since his main work is to teach the Scriptures he cannot be a man who knows the Bible only here and there and who does not know the doctrines that are taught in the Scriptures. He does not need to attend Bible school but he must make sure that he reads the Bible everyday and that he reads good Christian books that will teach him doctrine. Without this, he cannot do his work properly.

(ii) An elder must be able to teach but that does not mean that every elder must be able to preach from the pulpit. Some elders are gifted in preaching in public, other elders are better at

visiting the members in their homes and teaching the Scriptures to them. It would not be wise for a church to insist that a man must be able to preach in public if he is to be appointed an elder. If a man visits the home of the members and at each home pastors the family by teaching them the Scriptures and encouraging them to follow Christ he is doing the work of an elder.

(iii) All elders in a church are pastors, but that does not mean that all elders have to be engaged full time in pastoral work. A church may have, for example, four elders of whom three are working and one is employed full time by the church. They are all pastors and they are all equal as elders, but the one man who has been employed by the church has been set apart especially for the work of preaching and teaching. It seems that churches in the New Testament followed this pattern since Paul says, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17).

5. An elder must be an experienced Christian. Paul says in v. 6 that an elder, "Must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgement as the devil." The position of an elder in a local church is a very difficult one and the person who seeks it should be very careful. It is so easy for an elder to become proud because he has been appointed to a leadership position in the local church and this is particularly so when the man is young and has not had much experience in life. Pride is one of the most serious sins in the Bible, and here Paul indicates that it was this sin that led to the devil's fall. An elder has to watch himself above all things that he does not become proud, arrogant and conceited. He must watch himself that he does not begin to think that he is better than other people, that somehow he is more spiritual and more blessed than other men. This will be the cause of his downfall because, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18), and "A man's pride will bring him low" (Prov. 29:23).

6. An elder must have a good testimony in the world. Paul says, "He must have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap" (v. 7). It is, as we all know, a fact that people judge a church by its leaders. If the leaders of a church have a reputation for being greedy or corrupt or in any way ungodly then people will judge the whole church by these sins. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the elder has a good reputation in the world. Once people in a village begin to charge an elder with certain behaviour and have good reasons to do so, the elder is no longer qualified to hold the office and must resign.

IV. The Qualifications of a Deacon.

Having dealt with the matter of elders, Paul now goes on to give the qualifications for deacons. It is interesting to note that the passage begins with the word, "likewise," indicating that many of the qualifications for deacons are the same as those for elders. Once again we

shall look at these qualifications under various headings.

1. The deacon's personal character. Paul says, "Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain" (v. 8). A deacon must be worthy of respect, meaning he must be someone people are able to respect. Equally the deacon must guard his tongue so that he does not say one thing to one person and another to someone else. Also, as with elders he must not be given to much wine and must not be greedy for money.

2. The deacon's dealing with church members. In v. 9 Paul says the deacon must hold, "the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience." What does he mean by this? The word mystery has a very specific meaning in Paul's writings and is defined clearly in Eph. 3:6, "That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel." The mystery, in other words, is that in the New Covenant there is no more a division between the Jews and the Gentiles, all are equal in the sight of God. It is an interesting question to ask, "Why should a deacon specifically be asked to hold this truth with a pure conscience?" The answer, of course, is that he will be dealing with the needs of the whole church and may be tempted to favour one group rather than another. This, of course, was a problem in the church in Jerusalem when deacons were first appointed, the Hellenistic Jews were being overlooked in the distribution of food for widows (Acts 6:1-6). The nature of a deacon's duty is such that he has to be impartial otherwise he will cause division in the local church. Consequently when the church is examining a man to see if he qualifies as a deacon they must make sure that he is not going to favour his people or his friends when he assesses needs in the local church.

3. The deacon must be experienced. Paul says in v. 10, "They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons." He is here exhorting the church to make sure that there is a trial period before a man is appointed a deacon. This is not a difficult thing to do. A deacon deals with money, church building and general everyday duties in the church. If the church thinks that a man may be suitable to look after the building, for instance, they could over a period of a few months give him certain duties to see how he performs. If he shows competence and faithfulness in the tasks he is given then he can be formally appointed a deacon.

4. The deacon's family life. In vs. 11-12 Paul says, "In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well." Because a deacon is in a position of responsibility, his wife must be a woman who is respected and is well behaved. Also, the deacon must not be a polygamist and he must show that he can rule his house well.

5. The result of faithful service as a deacon. In v. 13 Paul says, "Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus." Faithful deacons obtain for themselves a good standing. In all probability what Paul means by this is that they

will earn a good name for themselves in the church and in society. Faithful deacons will have great boldness in the faith. This means that when they have served well they can witness to others with a good reputation to support their testimony.

V. How elders and deacons should be appointed.

It is very important for a local church to make sure that they follow the patterns laid down in the Bible when appointing elders and deacons, since both offices are so important in the life of a local church.

1. How elders should be appointed.

In Acts 14:23 we read, "So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." This event occurred towards the end of the first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas visited several towns in present day Turkey preaching the gospel and people became believers. On their way back they visited these new Christians and organised them into local churches. This verse gives us two major guiding principles on how elders should be appointed in a local church.

(i) Elders should be appointed through voting by members. In this verse where we have the word "appointed." While we cannot be completely sure what this word means, it is quite clear that the word carries the idea of participation by the membership. It seems quite clear that Paul and Barnabas did not choose the elders by themselves and then present them to the church. The members of the local church were involved in the exercise. From this we can say that no elder should be appointed in a local church except by participation of the members.

(ii) Elders should be appointed under the guidance of mature Christians. In this verse we see that Paul and Barnabas were present and clearly involved in the process through which elders were appointed in the local church. It is fairly easy to work out what happened. Paul and Barnabas most probably met with the members of each church and spoke to the men of the church. They would have then identified those from each church they felt were qualified to serve as elders and recommended these brothers to the church. The members then voted to accept or reject each one as they saw fit. This is an important principle for churches to use today.

The best way for a church to appoint an elder is for those who are already elders to talk with a man who desires to be an elder. In the course of talking with him they can assess as to whether the man does indeed have the necessary biblical qualifications for the office. If they are satisfied that he does then they can recommend him to the membership and the members can then vote on whether they do want the man to serve as an elder or not. If after talking with the man the elders come to the conclusion that the man does not in fact qualify to hold the office of an elder then they must explain to the man why they feel he does not qualify. The man then does not stand for the office.

2. How deacons should be appointed.

In Acts 6:1-6, we read about how the church in Jerusalem chose some men to do the practical work of the church like the distribution of food to widows. This passage gives us two very useful principles for how deacons should be appointed.

(i) The apostles encouraged the members to choose some men for this office. This means that the members of the church were involved in the process. They were told by the apostles what sort of men they should look for, and then the church members chose some men. In the same way, it is a good idea for the members of the church to think about who can serve as a deacon in the church.

(ii) The men that the church chose were first presented to the elders (v. 6). In other words, the church did not simply hold elections and appoint deacons. They chose men who they thought were fit for the office and presented these men to the leaders of the church. In the same way, the best way to appoint deacons would be for members to speak to the elders about men who they think are fit for the office and will serve well. The elders can then assess the men who have been proposed. If they decide that the men who have been proposed are fit for the office, they can call a members meeting and hold a formal election. In this way both the members and the leaders are involved in the process.

Lesson Four, 1 Thess. 1:4-10, A model local church.

Paul, Silas and Timothy visited the city of Thessalonica during Paul's second missionary journey (see Acts 17:1-9) and it was while they were in this city that a local church was planted. A little later, they wrote this letter to the church in Thessalonica to encourage them to persevere, even though the members of the church were under "severe suffering" for being Christians (1 Thess. 1:6). Paul says that this church was a model for all the believers in the surrounding districts. He says, "And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia" (1 Thess. 1:7). This church was a model not only to the people of their day, but to us as well. If we want to know what sort of church Christ is pleased with, then we need to study this church and to seek to follow in their example. In vs. 4-10, Paul mentions nine things that made this church a model church. We need to study these things carefully.

1. They were loved by God.

The first thing that Paul mentions about this church is that they were loved by God. He says in v. 4, "For we know, brothers loved by God." This is something that we all need to remember very carefully. The reason why they are in the local church as saved people is because God has loved them from eternity. The members of the local church are not trying to earn the love of God by their good works, they do good works because God loves them. It is the love of God that motivates them to live a holy life and to serve God. The apostle Paul says about his work, "The love of Christ compels us" (2 Cor. 5:14).

The members of a local church will go through many trials in life and are often tempted to be discouraged and to give up. But we need to remember that though we are weak and we still have sin dwelling in us that Christ loves us. It is for this reason that He came to earth and died for us: "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). The love of God is always upon us, even when we are going through the hardest of trials, God never leaves us.

The pastor of a local church also needs to remember that God loves the members of a local church. It is a sad truth that many times in our country a pastor will abuse and exploit the members of the church. Many times a pastor will force members of the church to give money and at other times he will threaten members that he will not marry them or bury them unless they do certain duties. It is important for such a pastor to remember that he is dealing with the people whom God loves, the people for whom Christ died. If a pastor abuses or exploits the people of God then the pastor himself will be judged by God.

2. They had been chosen by God for salvation.

Paul writes, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thess. 1:4). What Paul is saying here is that the members of the church in Thessalonica had been chosen by God for salvation: "But we ought always to thank God for

you, brothers, loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you for salvation” (2 Thess. 2:13). The Bible teaches us clearly that God has elected from before the foundation of the world those who are going to be saved (see Eph. 1:4). Paul says here that the members of the church in Thessalonica responded to the preaching of God’s word because they were chosen for salvation. Those who have been elected to be saved will respond to the preaching of God’s word and will be saved. This is of great encouragement to all preachers. We must always be very careful and diligent to preach the gospel clearly and simply. But we are not required to make sure that a person gets saved. Salvation is the work of God and He will make sure that those who are elected for salvation will get saved.

3. They became imitators of other Christians and of God.

Paul says, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord.” To imitate someone means to follow their example and to live like them and to behave like them. This letter was written by Paul, Silas and Timothy and it was these three men that the Christians in Thessalonica imitated. But they did not just follow the example of other men, they also became imitators of God. It is good for us to follow the example of other Christians, but only if they follow the example of Christ. There are two very important things we learn from this.

(i) Young Christians will often follow the example of older Christians. This is how God has arranged things in His kingdom. Those who are young in the faith will always look to those who have been Christians for some years and follow their example in things like how to pray, how to read and study the Bible, how to live the Christian life in the world and so on. This is particularly true of pastors. They are to set a good example for the people of God to follow, which is why Peter says that pastors are to shepherd the flock of God as examples (1 Pet. 5:3). This means that those who have been saved some years need to be very careful how they live their lives. They know that younger Christians are looking to them to set an example and they need to set a good example.

(ii) All Christians are to imitate God in their behaviour. The Lord Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be the sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:44-45). It is true that God is not like us human beings and that in many ways we cannot be like God. But we must remember that God is kind and compassionate and gracious and merciful and we are to imitate Him in this. It is also true that God hates sin with a holy hatred and will not tolerate sin, and again we need to imitate Him in this. We must love the things He loves and hate the things He hates. We must be like Him and avoid any behaviour that would displease Him.

4. They persevered despite their trials.

Paul writes, “In spite of severe sufferings, you welcomed the message with joy given by the Holy Spirit” (v. 6). We know from this passage that these Christians in Thessalonica at one time worshipped false gods, and it seems that when they got saved, others in the city persecuted them. This is something that happens fairly often. If a person has been born in a

certain religion and then he becomes a Christian, the people who still follow that religion will turn against him and persecute him. This is probably what happened in Thessalonica. The Christians there were probably persecuted by members of their family and by their friends. Imagine that a woman from an idolatrous family gets saved, but her husband and her parents are not saved. It is a matter of great shame to them that this woman does not come to the temple any more but attends the local church, and the husband may even be violent towards her.

The Christians in Thessalonica faced persecution but they did not give up. Instead they persevered. This is proof that their faith was genuine faith and that they were truly saved. The apostle Peter said that we sometimes face persecution so that our faith may be shown to be genuine (1 Pet. 1:7). The Lord Jesus spoke about some people who receive the word with joy, but then when persecution comes on account of the word, they give up (Matt. 13:20-21). Those people who give up are not truly saved, their faith is not genuine. The person who perseveres is a true Christian. The Lord Jesus said, “He who perseveres to the end shall be saved” (Matt. 24:13).

5. They became a model church.

Paul writes, “And so you became a model to all in Macedonia and Achaia” (v. 7). When this letter was written, Christianity was coming to Europe for the first time and there were many young Christians. They needed examples to follow in their Christian lives. The Thessalonians themselves were young Christians, but they became a model for others to follow. The Christians in Macedonia and Achaia needed a model that they could follow and these Christians in Thessalonica became that model. How pleasing it is to God when young Christians like these quickly become serious followers of Christ so that others can follow their example. It is not pleasing to God when we remain young children for a long time and do not mature. He is our Father, and like every father, He wants to see His children grow up and mature.

6. They made the word of God known.

Paul writes, “The Lord’s message rang out from you” (v. 8). The church in Thessalonica was very serious about the word of God. They received it when it was preached to them (1 Thess. 2:13), they obeyed it with a full heart, and they preached it to others. They did not say, “We are very young Christians and we do not know very much, we have not had any training so we cannot preach.” The task of teaching the word of God is something that every Christian needs to do. It is true that God has raised up pastors in churches whose work it is to labour in the word, but that does not mean that other Christians cannot teach.

The Bible makes it clear that God has given gifts to all His children and that it is our duty to use our gifts for the good of the local church (Matt. 25:14-30; 1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:7-13). It is not good when just a few people in a church do all the work and most of the people do very little or nothing. This is not how a church is supposed to be. In a church, each member has

the duty to find out what gifts God has given him and then to use those gifts. If a person is a member of a church but never does any work in the church then it means that there is something very badly wrong with him. The people in Thessalonica used their gifts to make the word of God known.

Of course we must make sure that we teach the Bible correctly. There are many people in our country who think that they have a ministry in teaching the word of God but actually they do not know the Bible and so do not teach it correctly. This is a very dangerous thing. Each one of us needs to study the Bible carefully to understand it and then to teach it to others. It is also our duty to bring the Scriptures to those who are not saved and exhort them to repent and believe in Christ.

7. They turned to God from idols.

Paul says, “You turned to God from idols” (1 Thess. 1:9). It is quite clear from this that before the gospel came to the city of Thessalonica, the people were idolaters. When Paul says, “You turned to God from idols,” he means two things:

(i) They broke off with their past lives and began to live a new life. Before they were converted, they attended temples where idols were worshipped and they joined in with the worship of those idols. But after they were converted, they no longer went to the temples, they met with other believers and started their own church. The way in which they lived their lives was now totally different. They were new people, they were born again.

This is something God requires of all who are saved. The saved person is born again, which means he is a new creation: “the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). God commands the person who is born again to give up his sinful old life and to start a new life, a life that is according to His will and that pleases Him: “You were taught with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22-24). This is His instruction to us, that we put off the old self which is becoming more and more corrupt and put on the new self which is created in righteousness and holiness. This means that we must let go of all beliefs about God and man and sin and salvation that we used to have and to be taught anew from the Bible. One of the biggest problems in our country today is that people are unable or unwilling to give up beliefs that our forefathers used to hold about these things. Many people have beliefs about God and man and sin and salvation that do not come from the Bible but from their culture. When they come across things in the Bible that are against their beliefs, then they ignore the Bible and continue to hold their beliefs.

We need to read the Bible and study it and believe its contents. We cannot have our beliefs from other people or from our culture. That is not honouring to God. His word must rule in our lives.

(ii) They continued to turn to God from their idols and to live a Christian life. This is why they faced “severe suffering” (v. 6). What this means is that they faced many situations when they were under pressure to join the idolaters in their religion. This is something that happens with all who are saved. The members of their community will demand that they follow the culture when it comes to things like weddings and funerals. They are expected to follow their culture when it comes to family life and the raising of children. The reason why the church in Thessalonica was a model is because they refused to do that which the culture demanded and did that which the Bible commanded. This is why they came under suffering.

The people of this world will persecute those who refuse to join them in their sins and insist on making a stand. If a saved person agrees to go along with what the culture says, even if he knows it is sin, then the world has no problem with him. The world does not mind a person being a Christian, as long as he does not insist on following God and rejecting sin. It is when we insist on following the Bible in things like funerals and marriage and family life and raising children that we come under pressure from the elders of the community. In many cases, Christians do not fight against or resist their culture. When the elders of the village tell people what they must do during the time of a wedding or a funeral then the person automatically follows even though he knows it is wrong. But the people in Thessalonica did not do this. When the question of culture came up and they saw that the matter was against what the Bible teaches, they refused to follow it, even if it meant suffering.

This is what God requires from us. He requires us to turn from all religious beliefs that are not in the Bible, and He requires us to turn from all cultural practices which are unbiblical.

8. They served the living and true God.

Paul goes on to say, “To serve the living and true God.” The members of this church used their gifts for the service and glory of God. The Bible teaches us three very important things about gifts.

(i) In the first place, the Bible teaches us that God has given gifts to all His children (see Eph. 4:7-11). It is not the case that some have gifts and others do not. All of God's people have gifts from God.

(ii) Secondly, the Bible teaches that each Christian must use his gifts. In fact it is a serious sin not to use our gifts (see Matt. 25:14-30). It is the work of the pastor to equip each member and to encourage them to use their gifts, and it is the responsibility of each member to make sure that they identify their God-given gifts and use them for the glory of God.

(iii) Thirdly, the Bible teaches us that the gifts we have are to be used for the benefit of others in the church (see 1 Cor. 12:7). The reason a person has been given a certain gift is not so that he can boast about it and show people how spiritual he is, it is so that he can do good to others with that gift.

9. They waited eagerly for the coming of Christ.

Paul goes on to say about this church, “And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” The church in Thessalonica was not obsessed with the things of this world. This is something we find so often in our country today. People who claim to be saved seem to have little or no interest at all in heaven. For them the only thing that matters is the things of this world. They live for this world and the pleasures of this world. They rarely read the Bible and seek to apply it. But the Thessalonians were not like that. They knew that this world is not their home and that they were waiting for a city whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10). They knew that this world is passing away and it is therefore futile to run after the possessions and pleasures of this world. They were therefore focussed on the return of Christ. It is this focus that helped them to live holy lives. The Bible says, “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 Jn. 3:3). The hope of heaven is a very real hope and it has an effect on the way that we live our lives here on earth.