

So who is Paul talking about here? I've translated the relevant word in two different ways in the first two verses. It literally means 'overseer', one who has a bird's-eye view of the church and is able to look after it as a whole. But from very early on – certainly by the end of the first century – the word had come to denote a particular office of leadership, the leadership given to one person in each community. (The question of how wide a geographical area that might cover is a separate issue which we can't comment on from this passage or letter.) And the word we normally use for this single leader in a community is 'bishop'. This doesn't mean that the early church would have thought of 'bishops' in the way we do today. churches. But it may be that to begin with the 'bishop' was simply the main leader, or perhaps even a member of a leadership team, in a local church – the pattern which is adopted in many 'non-episcopal' churches to this day. We can't be sure. However, the idea of a single person leading the church in an area which includes many local churches is certainly well established by early in the second century. It's quite possible that our present passage refers to this kind of office, perhaps as well as the main leader, or leaders, in a single community.

So to the main point, and the main challenge, of these passages: what must these persons (bishop/deacon) be like? What are the special standards which they must uphold? The leaders must, as it were, be on the leading edge of that new humanity which the church is supposed to be. Because we're all 'on the way', rather than having 'made it' into the complete new humanity God desires, it's important that there are role models, especially that leaders should play that sort of part.

Verse 11 raises a difficult question. Some people think it refers to the womenfolk within a deacon's household, in other words specifically the wife of a deacon – assuming 'deacons' in this early period were always male. Others, pointing out the parallel between verses 8 and 11, think that the women in question are women deacons, such as we find (for instance) in the case of Phoebe in Romans 16.1. The question remains at least open. *One way or another, it's clear that the women were not regarded as silent onlookers, but as people with roles to play and responsibilities to be, in their own right, people of exemplary Christian character.*

The type of Ascetic Gnosticism in Ephesus at the time believed matter to be evil and their spirit to be good. But they believed their avoidance of the flesh and its desires brought or developed this 'knowledge.' There was an emphasis on abstaining, denying and there were other types of strict rules that would aid them in their quest. This is the problem Paul was addressing in 1 Timothy. You're eager for hidden knowledge, the secrets of the universe, the formula that'll change your life? Well, here's the 'mystery' that's now revealed to all the world! The mystery that is in Jesus Christ. You can have it in a formula, a brief, six-line poetic jingle, which might even sound a bit like the kind of 'mystery' you had known elsewhere... but this isn't just one 'mystery' among others. This is the real thing. This isn't just a secret, it's a story; not just any old story, but the true story, the story of the God who became human and who now rules the whole world as its rightful Lord. This 'mystery' won't lead you into a secret, private 'religion'. It will change your life all right – by leading you out into a new way of life, a way of service and faith and discipleship and hope. Naturally of course Jesus is not named directly.

The point of it all in the present passage is that people who base their lives on this strange but powerful 'mystery', people who allow their own personal story to be reshaped around the story of Jesus himself, discover that they are 'the assembly of the living God', as opposed to the various gatherings of the 'gods' of popular culture. As they discover that, they may be startled to learn that they are themselves, as a community, to be the stabilizing force that helps God's truth to stand up and be seen in the world. If the church is founded solidly on God's truth, what people see and know of God's truth will be based on the life and witness of God's people. That's why this letter is being written, as verses 14 and 15 make clear: so that, in the apostle's absence, the church may nevertheless learn what it means to share a common life, grounded in the mystery of Christ, through which the watching world can see who its rightful Lord really is.

1 Timothy 3- Characteristics of Church Leaders and the Mystery of our Religion.

When you consider a candidate for national leadership, what characteristics are important to you?

1. Read 1 Timothy 3:1-16. Paul says Christian leaders should be beyond reproach, so no one could lodge any accusation about their behavior (vv. 2, 10). What kind of complaints do people often make against Christian leaders?
2. In what areas does Paul say Christian leaders should strive for the highest standards (vv. 2-6, 8-12)?
3. How are typical expectations of behavior challenged by the gospel and these standards?
4. The life of a leader as described in this passage is a way of life which Paul expects outsiders to acknowledge as worthy. Many non-Christians will recognize when someone is living with the integrity proper to a faith in the living God, and respect them for it—and they will notice likewise when it isn't the case. How much attention do those outside the church pay to Christian leaders? Give some examples.
5. Is Paul saying that there is one set of standards of behavior for leaders and another for everyone else? Explain.
6. Up to this point in this study we have considered the character of bishops and deacons, the leaders of the church. In these last verses we look more closely at the church. According to verse 15, what is the church?
7. How does Paul get across the idea that members of the church should show the same character and behavior as its leaders (v. 15)?
8. How do you respond to this idea?
9. Today we think of the meaning of the word mystery to be something for which there is “no explanation.” That is, indeed, not far from the meaning the word had for people in Paul’s day (the Greek word he uses is effectively the same, *mysterion*). In Paul’s world the idea of a “mystery” was something that most people couldn’t and didn’t understand, but that some did—though they of course kept it a secret so that everyone else would stay in the dark (think Gnosticism).

The Christian “religion” was different. It was a mystery, but one revealed to everyone. It was the fulfillment of the promises made by the One True God to Israel. Ponder verse 16. What do you understand of the mystery of godliness from this verse?

10. The point of it all in the present passage is that people who base their lives on this strange but powerful “mystery,” people who allow their own personal story to be reshaped around the story of Jesus himself, discover that they are “the assembly of the living God,” as opposed to the various gatherings of the “gods” of popular culture.

As you look over the whole chapter, whether you are a leader in the church or not, what stands out to you about the way you should “behave in God’s household”?

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