**Lesson 2 - 1 Timothy 3-4**

**3:1.** **The office of bishop**. When these epistles were written the titles and responsibilities of the various church offices had not yet become fixed. The “bishop” (in Greek *episcopos* = overseer) was a priest who was in charge of some particular community. As a minister of the Church, his role was one of teaching (cf. v. 2) and governance (cf. v. 5); his task was a demanding one and called for self-sacrifice, because any office in a Christian community is essentially a form of service: “The holders of office, who are invested with a sacred power, are, in fact, dedicated to promoting the interests of their brethren, so that all who belong to the people of God, and are consequently endowed with true Christian dignity, may, through their free and well-ordered efforts towards a common goal, attain to salvation” (Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 18).[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Going Deeper – Husband of One Wife**

This might surprise those of us in the Catholic Church. In light of our current practice and experience, we would be shocked that the bishop would be married at all! (But remember that we are not talking about bishops in our modern sense but most probably of “presbyters,” like today’s priests.) In the emerging Church things were different. The Greek expression means literally “husband of one wife,” an ambiguous phrase that could mean (1) being monogamous rather than polygamous, (2) being faithful to one wife without a mistress, or (3) being married only once and if widowed or divorced not remarrying. Given the promiscuity in marriage in the Roman world (Pompey had five wives, Herod had nine!), the first two meanings could be very relevant to one who, by public office, would closely represent the Church, faithful spouse of Christ. This kind of marital fidelity was, of course, an expectation of all Christians, just as were the other virtues listed here. So we cannot rule out the possibility that Paul simply means that, in the area of sexuality, the bishop should be a model of Christian marital chastity. But it seems more likely that the third, more traditional meaning is Paul’s meaning here. That is, the bishop must be married only once. The same qualification is required of deacons (1 Tim 3:12), presbyters (Titus 1:6), and widows who are officially enrolled (1 Tim 5:9).

What is the reason for this restriction? It probably reflects the Jewish tradition of special rules of holiness, including sexual and marital restrictions, placed upon those engaged in sacred public service, whether military (the holy war; 1 Sam 21:6; 2 Sam 11:11) or priestly (Lev 21). Many of the pagan cults also had sexual restrictions for those engaged in sacred functions. Saint Thomas Aquinas’s insight therefore is probably correct: “This [restriction] was made not merely for the sake of continence but because of the representation of the sacrament, because the spouse of the Church is Christ, and the Church is one.” Marriage is an image of the relationship between Christ and his one Church. Spouses who marry only once in their lifetime give a clearer reflection of this exclusive love than spouses who remarry after being widowed. While Paul allowed for remarriage (1 Cor 7:39) and even encouraged it under certain circumstances (1 Tim 5:14), he holds the bishops to a higher standard.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**3:10. And let them also be tested first.** The true character of candidates may not be evident at first. Just as today doctors and other professionals need to be certified on the basis of training and supervised experience, so it was in the Hellenistic professional world: judges, priests, even those considered worthy of citizenship were expected to undergo scrutiny before being accredited for service. The candidates in the community at Qumran were expected to undergo two years’ probation before being admitted to the community. The Church later extended the catechumenate even longer.

With all the more reason, then, someone who is destined to a sacred ministry **should be tested**. This prescription is not mentioned for the bishops probably because it is assumed that their longer experience in the community has made their upright character evident. If the deacons are appointed through the laying on of hands, this is not to be done hastily (5:22). It is not clear whether being tested refers to a consultation of the community, to a reasonably long period of the candidates’ honorable membership in the community, or to a specific kind of additional probation. (**Ibid**. Montague pp. 81-82)

**3:11. The women likewise/similarly must be serious.** *Women*here is taken by some to refer to the wives of deacons. The Greek word *gynē* can sometimes mean “wife.” But if such were the case here, we would expect the text to read “*their* wives,” and the word translated as ‘likewise/similarly’ seems to parallel them perfectly with the men deacons just mentioned, whose role is picked up again in the very next verse (3:12). Thus, we can be relatively certain that there was, in the Pauline communities at least, an order of women deacons. What functions they performed we do not know, though the parallel with the men and the use of the same masculine form of the noun in the case of Phoebe suggest that some of their functions were similar.

However, we can rightly assume that certain needs of women in the community could be more fittingly met by women deacons. Post-New Testament practice, which plausibly continues the Pauline discipline, indicates that these women were consecrated virgins or widows and that their primary duty was to prepare women for baptism by instructing them, anointing their entire bodies in preparation for immersion, and otherwise ministering to their needs. (**Ibid.**) In the final analysis, however, there is no firm evidence to definitively support any conclusion about the status of the women.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Going Deeper - Women Deacons?**

There is an interesting confirmation of the existence of female ministry in the Church from an unusual source at the beginning of the second century. Pliny the Younger, an able administrator under Emperor Trajan, was appointed commissioner of the province of Pontus-Bithynia in Asia Minor in AD 110. Among the letters he wrote to the emperor reporting his disposition of various cases and asking Trajan’s advice, one discusses his treatment of Christians. Those who, upon repeated questioning, professed to be Christians he executed, while those who recanted he excused. Among the persons he tortured in order to gain information were “two female slaves [Latin ancillae] who were styled deaconesses [ministrae].”

In the East there was an order of deaconesses, usually fulfilled by widows or consecrated virgins, until the Middle Ages. The fourth-century Apostolic Constitutions has a prayer for the ordination of deaconesses (8, 20). It seems their functions were primarily related to the baptism of women in a period when baptism not only required proper instruction but the anointing of the entire body and immersion. Although the order of men deacons appeared to be open to further ordination to the priesthood, there is no evidence that such was the case for the women. Even if the Greek word for ordination (cheirotonia) of priests and male deacons is at times used for the ordination of women, the purpose for which they were ordained was for ministry to women. There is no indication they ministered at the altar. As the practice of baptizing infants became the norm, the need for the baptismal ministry of women deacons diminished.

In 2003 the International Theological Commission, reporting to the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, concluded: The present historical overview shows that a ministry of deaconesses did indeed exist, and that this developed unevenly in the different parts of the Church. It seems clear that this ministry was not perceived as simply the feminine equivalent of the masculine diaconate. At the very least, it was an ecclesial function, exercised by women, sometimes mentioned together with that of subdeacon in the lists of Church ministries. (From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles 11)

It is likely that the rise of anchorites (women hermits) and religious orders of women fulfilled the need originally met by women deacons, though in the West the requirement of cloister was an inhibiting factor until St. Vincent de Paul (1581–1660) found a way around it for the Daughters of Charity. But it was not until the nineteenth century that women’s communities generally were allowed to pursue service outside the cloister. In any case, we should be careful not to assume that the functions fulfilled by today’s deacons were the same back then. Today, women religious and laywomen minister in the Church in ways quite beyond what the women deacons did. (**Ibid.** Montague p. 83)

**3:16. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He/Who was manifested in the flesh.** After the mention of mystery, we would expect the next clause to begin with “which,” but it begins with **he/who**. The mystery, then, is not a thing but a person, Jesus Christ.

**Going Deeper - Mystery in the Ancient World**In the Jewish tradition of which Paul was heir, the mystery (*sod* or *raz*) referred to the plan of God or the heavenly council revealed to the prophets for the sake of the people (Jer 23:18, 22; Amos 3:7). Hence, it was a secret because it originated in God; but God wanted it to be known, and he made it known through his human spokespersons. The members of the Qumran community wrote often of the *raz* (“mystery”) hidden in the writings of the prophets but now revealed in the interpretation given by their founder, the Teacher of Righteousness. Similarly, in Paul, the Christian mystery is God’s plan of salvation, the “secret” of his heart, but a secret now revealed in the gospel (Rom 16:25–26; Eph 3:3–10).

This availability of the mysteries of God to everyone also appears in the writings of Philo, an Alexandrian Jew, when he contrasts Jewish contemplatives with those who practice the pagan mysteries. The prayerful Jew, unlike the initiate into pagan mystery cults, is “initiated into the mysteries of the sanctified life”, but that means being immersed in the Laws, the Prophets, the Psalms, “and anything else that fosters and perfects knowledge and piety.” Jewish historian Josephus adds another element when he contrasts pagan initiation mysteries with Jewish theocracy, where religion (eusebeia) is “the end and aim of the entire community”—not of the select few!—and “the priests are entrusted with the special charge of it.”

This background helps us understand why for Paul the mystery is not esoteric or individualistic, as in the mystery religions of his day (and in much New Age theosophy today); it is open for all, and it is served by public ministers like Paul and the other ministers he has been discussing. (**Ibid**. p. 88)

**4:1. The Spirit expressly says.** By **the Spirit** is Paul referring to any specific prophecy or to the Gospel warnings about hard times to come and especially about the debilitating effects of false prophecy (Matt 7:15; 24:11–12; Mark 13:5–6; see also 2 Thess 2:2)? Perhaps it is both. One of the strikingly new characteristics of the first Christian communities was the outbreak of the spirit of prophecy, which had virtually disappeared in Judaism and which Jewish tradition tended more and more to assign either to the past, as sufficiently contained in the Scriptures, or to the end times yet to come. But for Paul, the end times had already begun with the resurrection of Jesus, and the gift of the Spirit was a further sign of this fact. The purpose of prophecy in the Christian community was to build up, encourage, and console the faithful (1 Cor 14:3). This would not exclude warnings about hard times to come, as in the case of Agabus predicting a famine (Acts 11:28) or Paul’s impending imprisonment (21:10–11), since even these would serve to strengthen the faithful in the face of coming adversity. (**Ibid**. p. 92)

**Going Deeper – Prophecy in the New Testament**

New Testament prophecy is not to be confused with the kind of crystal-ball predictions or astrology or palm reading or tarot-card reading that certain people today peddle for profit. Nor is it the work of psychics. In the New Testament it is a gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed to build up, strengthen, and console the faithful (1 Cor 14:3). Occasionally the prophetic word concerns the future, as when Jesus foretold the destruction of the temple (Mark 13:2) or Agabus an impending famine (Acts 11:28) and Paul’s future detention in Jerusalem (21:10–11) or the Apocalypse foretelling the fall of Rome (Rev 18). Often it is also tied to a prophetic witness in the face of persecution (Matt 5:11–12). In Acts 13:2 a prophecy designates Paul and his companions for their first mission to Asia Minor. And in the Pastorals prophecy designated or accompanied the ordination of Timothy (1 Tim 1:18; 4:14). But most often prophecy is simply a spontaneous word under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit expressing, as Paul said, encouragement to the community. Luke also attributes Zechariah’s spontaneous hymn at John the Baptist’s birth to the gift of prophecy (Luke 1:67–79). It is quite different from the gifts of teaching, healing, administration, or service. Because of the spontaneous nature of prophecy, and because there can be false prophecy (Matt 7:15–20), the gift must be discerned (1 Thess 5:19–21) according to its congruence with faith in Jesus Christ (1 Cor 12:1–3). The Church is both hierarchic [structurally ordered] and charismatic. Without the former, the Church would be chaotic; without the latter, it would be dead. (**Ibid**.)

**4:3. Who forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods.**  Paul himself had commended celibacy (1 Cor 7:25–35), though only if it was voluntary; and he supported marriage (7:1–24). He respected those who preferred to eat only vegetables (Rom 14:2), though he refused to make this a norm for all. In 2 Cor 11:27 Paul refers to his own “frequent fastings.” The error of these false teachers is in making abstinence from marriage and certain foods a universal *law*.

Although the promoters of this extreme asceticism may be those who claim that the resurrected life they are already living demands these measures, in our present text, Paul does not say that their error is based on a false timetable for the resurrection but rather on their total misconception of the goodness of creation. Everything that God created, God called good, and he blessed the union of male and female (Gen 1). Foods are God’s gift and are therefore to be taken with joy (Acts 2:46) and thanksgiving (Rom 14:6; 1 Cor 10:30; Phil 4:6). (**Ibid**. pp. 93-94)

**4:6. These Instructions** would refer to the immediately preceding teachings that were concerning the gravity of the final times in which Timothy and his church are living and the importance of being on guard against misleading influences.

**4:8. While bodily training is of some value, godliness/devotion is of value in every way.** Here Paul emphasizes the contrast between bodily and spiritual care, between temporal and eternal values**. [[4]](#footnote-4)**

**4:14. Do not neglect the gift you have.** Paul reminds Timothy that the duties he has just described are not mere functions of an assignment. There is a power available to Timothy that comes from God, and it is a special gift. The Greek word for gift is *charisma*. It is often a technical term, in Pauline literature, for a gift of the Holy Spirit enabling one to perform a function for the benefit of the whole Church. It is not the same as natural talent, though it may perfect one’s natural talents. When and how did Timothy receive this gift? Initially, through prophecy, that is, **the prophetic utterance/word**. The prophecy was accompanied by the imposition of hands, a rite found already in the Old Testament, where Moses lays his hands on Joshua to convey authority as his successor (Num 27:18–23; Deut 34:9). Jesus’ frequent way of healing the sick was by laying his hands on them. The early Church continued the practice as a way of communicating the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17; 9:17; 19:6) and establishing someone in office (6:6). (**Ibid.** Montague pp 101-102)

**Going Deeper – Preparation for Ministry**

Before advising Timothy about his specific pastoral duties, Paul points to virtues in which his disciple and delegate should excel. It is all too easy for ministers to give more attention to their work than to their own personal growth in holiness. But ministry is quite different from a task to be performed—and certainly quite different from a secular job, where the priority is performance with little regard to the worker’s life of virtue. The minister is trying to communicate a way of life, and his method must be that of Jesus, who first lived the word and *then* taught it (Matt 5:19). Although Paul is speaking of the responsibilities of ordained ministers here, the principle is equally applicable to lay Christians, who should view their vocation in the world as a ministry. Both by their example and their work they can proclaim the gospel according to their particular circumstances.

Ministers who find themselves in charge of those older than themselves may experience exactly what Timothy seems to have experienced. The “grace of state,” that is, the grace that accompanies the office to which God has called them, will enable them, like Timothy, to be firm and gentle, respectful of age but not cowed by it. (Paul will return to this thought in 1 Tim 5:1.)

Reading, exhortation, and teaching—these are the three primary ministries on which Paul insists that Timothy focus his efforts. The bishop and the priest consider it a priority to read, exhort, and teach from the Scriptures, which supposes that they nourish themselves on the word of God continually. Today this speaks to seminarians who are preparing for ministry but also to the laity about the importance of knowing their faith both for their own spiritual growth and also to “be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (1 Pet 3:15).[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. [*Saint Paul’s Letters to the Thessalonians, and Pastoral Letters*](https://ref.ly/logosres/navarrentstandard73th?ref=Bible.1Ti3.1&off=0&ctx=cations+for+bishops%0a~3%3a1.+%E2%80%9CThe+office+of+) (pp. 82–83). (2005). Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Montague, G. T. (2008). [*First and Second Timothy, Titus*](https://ref.ly/logosres/cathcomm75ti?ref=BibleNAB.1Ti3.2&off=594&ctx=is+a+public+person.%0a~Accordingly%2c+he+shou) (P. S. Williamson & M. Healy, Eds.; pp. 74–75). Baker Academic. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fiore, B. (2007). [*The Pastoral Epistles: First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus*](https://ref.ly/logosres/sp12pastepis?ref=Bible.1Ti3.11&off=805&ctx=e+Pauline+churches.+~In+the+final+analysi) (D. J. Harrington, Ed.; Vol. 12, p. 81). Liturgical Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Murphy, R. E. (1996). [*The Jerome Biblical commentary*](https://ref.ly/logosres/jbc?ref=Bible.1Ti4.8&off=271&ctx=+physical+exercise.+~He+only+emphasizes+t) (Vol. 2, p. 355). Prentice-Hall. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Montague, G. T. (2008). [*First and Second Timothy, Titus*](https://ref.ly/logosres/cathcomm75ti?ref=BibleNAB.1Ti4.11-16&off=11793&ctx=plication+(4%3a11%E2%80%9316)%0a~Before+advising+Timo) (P. S. Williamson & M. Healy, Eds.; pp. 103–104). Baker Academic. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)