

# Pillar and foundation of the truth

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Preacher: Dave Bott

[ 0 : 00 ] We're reading from two passages today. So the first one is Acts chapter 6, verses 1 to 7. Now in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip of Prochorus and Nicanor, and Timon of Parmenas, and Nicolaus of the proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

And then we're moving to 1 Timothy, chapter 3, verses 8 to 16. Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

[ 1 : 29 ] They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, and let them also be tested first, then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain good standing for themselves, and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness. He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

I see a few strangers in the second row.

[ 2 : 46 ] Welcome, Corderwoods. Great to have you with us. Will you pray with me? My name's Dave. I'm one of the pastors here. If you're new this morning, it's great that you're here, and I'd love to meet you after the service.

Why don't we pray as we come to God's word? Let's pray. Father, as we come to a topic about authority, since the fall, each of us have a reaction against any authority above us.

And so I pray that your word would breathe more life into us so that we might see the beauty of your authority and reflect that beauty in how we operate as a church.

So I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, blessed are the cheesemakers. Some people, if Andrew Jones is here, it's good news for you.

He's a cheesemaker. Now, those who know that's a Monty Python quote, and I was watching a Monty Python interview, and many of the cast were saying that they were influenced by the goons, which that's before my time, but a radio show.

[ 4 : 14 ] And I found it interesting that what each of the members of Monty Python were attracted to in the goons, one thing especially was that they poked fun at authority, which was very new for the time.

Now, poking fun at authority is pretty common now, isn't it? And Monty Python, like that quote, they're willing to poke fun at Christ.

They pushed it to another level. Watching that, it just bursts any notion that troubles with submitting to authority, it's not new in our age, is it?

It's always been around. But there seems to be widespread suspicion, right, don't you find, of any authority unless you're the one in it?

There's suspicion of any authority above us. So we're going to be spending time this morning looking at the topic of deacons and who are those whom God calls us to identify and gladly submit to.

[ 5 : 21 ] This is an area where we're called to be different from the world, to be a light to the world, a winsome light in who is in authority and in submitting to authority.

Now, I briefly want to clarify why are we pausing Acts to look at 1 Timothy 3? Why are we stopping our series in Acts? Well, we're not quite stopping.

We're pausing and going deeper into the passage from last week. There's three main reasons. First is that the elders believe it is a priority to expand the diaconate soon.

Paul and Alex have been deacons for 10 years, faithfully now, and we just think it would be wise to expand that team to be able to achieve more.

Paul and Alex can't carry it all on their own, so we think it would be a wise thing to do. The second reason we want to pause and look at this is we're about to distribute the Constitution, and that's all about how the church is going to be structured.

[ 6 : 31 ] And a significant section of that is on leaders, so it seems worthwhile pausing to prepare for that as well. And the third reason is to demonstrate how we can, in the book of Acts, we can glean implications that we are to follow today.

I said last week that talking about deacons isn't Luke's primary purpose. That wasn't his purpose, primary purpose, but it seems probable that he gave us these details, some of which we should be following the example of the early church.

So that's why we do it. We want to expand the diaconate. We're about to look at the Constitution of the church family, and we need principles to govern us to understand Acts properly.

So for those reasons, we're looking at 1 Timothy 3. So in Acts 6, they appoint something that looked like deacons, even though they aren't given the title of deacons.

And the reason we saw was to address disunity in the church, that there was a difference in how people were relating to one another that wasn't reflecting who we really are in Jesus.

[ 7 : 45 ] But they did it in such a way that it didn't distract them from the teaching and proclamation of the word. Now, what out of that story should we be following today?

How do we decide that? Is the number seven important? Is the fact we've got only two deacons a problem? Is seven necessary? Should they be men?

Is their function to provide food to those in need, or as a general principle, to look after the needy, the vulnerable, widows and orphans?

Who decides who to appoint deacons? Is it the leaders, the successors of the apostles, or is it the whole church deciding equally? You start asking questions, and there's way more questions than that, and you get into how do you even decide what we should learn?

So here's an important principle for interpreting scripture. So use the clear to interpret the less clear.

[ 8 : 54 ] Use the explicit commands in the New Testament to interpret the narrative, which is only implied. So use the explicit to interpret the narrative.

So that's why we're going to 1 Timothy 3, because the purpose of it is to talk directly about deacons. Now, as we come into 1 Timothy 3, where we're headed is we're going to look at what is the church, we're going to look at who should lead the church, and then we're going to look at what is the truth that the church is called to reflect and defend and proclaim.

What was happening in the church at the time, in Timothy's time, is in chapter 1 verse 3, there's very capable people, very religious people in the church who are spreading false teaching.

It was there from day one, and unbelief and false teaching is around today. It's constant. It's a constant threat on the church. So that's the context here.

So if you've got these really capable religious people saying things that are wrong, how on earth do you discern who's godly or not? Who do you appoint as leaders if they seem so religious?

[ 10 : 19 ] It's a hard question. That's the point of 1 Timothy 3, to answer that. But I want to start with Paul's purpose statement in verse 15 of chapter 3.

If you've got it open in front of you. He gives us why he's writing this letter. He's saying, Timothy, I may be delayed in coming to you, so I'm writing so that you know how you should conduct yourself in the household of God.

Now what is the church? It's the household of God. It's the assembly of the living God. It's the pillar and foundation of the truth.

What you and I think church is will have the biggest impact on how we engage with church, whether that's pleasing to God or not, is who we think we are and what we're doing.

That's the biggest thing. This isn't just necessary context. This is essential. We understand this.

That we are the household of God, the assembly of the living God, and we're the pillar and foundation of the truth.

[11:28] So I want to spend a bit of time on this. So Grace Evangelical Church, we're not a religious service provider. For people to shop around for the best product, that's not what we are.

We're not a volunteer organisation uniting for a common purpose. There's elements of similarity, but it's not who we are.

We're a local gathering of God's household, his family, a local gathering of it. We're not the totality of it, but we are a real local gathering of God's family.

We speak in church land of pastor so-and-so's church. I get why we talk like that, but it's wrong.

It's not pastor so-and-so's church. It's God's church. It's not even our church. Yes, it is. We can talk possessively. We can use that language.

[12:37] But ultimately, it's not the leader's church together. It's not one pastor's church. It's not even just the member's church. It's God's church. It's his family. It's his house.

He is our father by virtue of the new birth of coming into this family, believing in Jesus. He's the spiritual father.

We are brothers and sisters, men and women, boys and girls, equal dignity before the father. What higher privilege than belonging to the family of God?

So leaders are first and foremost. We're siblings. We're siblings calling on the one father. But what enormous responsibility to care for God's family.

It is a weighty responsibility. I want to make just a quick word about our discussion of the Constitution coming up.

[13:47] It's going to be an open discussion for all about every detail. You can comment on any detail. If you don't care about the Constitution, can I say you should?

If this is the household of God for the sake of future generations, you should care. It's not the be all and end all, but you should care. So it's going to be open to discussion, but it's not a free for all.

It's not like you've got your opinion, I've got mine, and we've got 200 opinions in this room. It's not a free for all. What we're trying to do is be faithful to what God says we should be structured as.

That's how we're going to pursue unity if we dive deeper into what God says we should be structured as. Now we're going to have to do that in grace because there's no way we're going to agree on every sentence.

But the main point I want to drive at today is it's God's household. It's his rules. We should trust him to know how to structure it best. That needs to guide us as we come to the Constitution.

[14:57] Okay. Let's move on. So we're the household of God, and second, we are the assembly of the living God. In the Old Testament, the Lord is described in contrast to the deadness of idols.

Idols can't hear you. They can't see you. They can't save you. They cannot bless you. They're dead. But the Lord is living. He's present.

God said through Moses, I will dwell among you and be your God and you will be my people. That's the point of the tabernacle and temple. Dwelling with us. He is present with his people.

Israel were to be conscious that God is present in everything. How much more we? We don't have a physical temple. We're called the temple now, the church.

We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, the church. How conscious we should be that the Lord is present among us. He is active among us.

[16:04] An isolated Christian, it's a contradiction to all Jesus' blood was given to accomplish. To be a Christian is to be assembled to Jesus and to one another.

To be conscious that the living God is among us through his words of the apostles by his spirit. I think we experience this especially and why scripture puts an emphasis on the gathering, what we're doing right now.

Martin Luther admitted, at home, in my own house, there is no warmth or vigour in me. But in the church, when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through.

It's when we're assembled that God is active in ministering to us. So are we conscious of the spirit's presence and empowering as we speak to one another over morning tea to speak into each other's lives to serve?

Are you conscious of it when the Bible's read? Are you listening to that as God is here speaking? When the corporate prayer and singing, that God is inviting us into his throne room at the Lord's table which we'll share today, that the Lord is saying, come, have fellowship with me.

[ 17 : 42 ] Are we conscious of that? If we are, God, I think, will be working powerfully among us when we're conscious of that.

And I think leaders, including deacons, are to lead this assembly of this consciousness that the living God is present. So we've got the family of God, we've got the assembly of the living God. And this next phrase, I remember when I was in small group like years and years ago, this phrase shocked me. I thought it must be worded wrong.

The church is a pillar and buttress of the truth. Isn't it the other way around? That the truth is the pillar and buttress or foundation of the church.

So buttress can be the construction people in this room are going to probably laugh at me as I try and explain this. Buttress is an external, I can't even explain, external pillar thing that holds up the walls of the building.

[ 18 : 54 ] So either it's this external support for the wall or it's talking about foundation. It's saying the church is the foundation or holding up the truth. Wow.

Wow. to keep the truth steady. So yes, we're created by the truth, we're sustained by the truth, but Paul's point here is we're to keep it steady in the midst of unbelief and false teaching.

We've got to hold the truth firm. Like imagine if the foundation under this auditorium started to crack and soften that there'd be nothing left to hold.

Like don't you find it sad to drive past, I know buildings are whatever about church buildings, like it doesn't matter, the people of the church, but you drive past churches that used to be faithful to the gospel in Newcastle and they may as well be demolished now.

They may as well be turned into cafes because the people weren't solid to the truth and so there's nothing left in it now.

[ 20 : 17 ] We're called to be steady to the truth, the foundation. Now apparently when it comes to being pillars, apparently in the temples of Artemis in Ephesus, it was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, you've got these like a hundred huge 18 metre tall pillars and on top was this beautiful marble ceiling lifted high into the air.

So I think pillar here isn't just about supporting, it's about lifting up. It's putting the beauty and wonder of the truth of the gospel and lifting it up.

The church is to be a pillar for all to see. So we're the household of God, the assembly of the living God, we're a foundation and we're a pillar of the truth.

I think we see these truths of who the church is in Acts 6, coming back to Acts 6 for a moment. We see that the apostles treat the church as family.

They are conscious that the spirit is among all God's people. I think we see that demonstrated the apostles had more authority than elders, they could have said alright, let's sort this out you lot, let us office bearers who are closer to God decide this.

[ 21 : 56 ] here's seven men submit to them. But they don't do that, they entrust the church to be spiritual, to appoint spiritual men.

I think it's something of a picture of being family and it's something of a picture of they're conscious that the spirit was among them through their word, through the apostles' word.

and they're united. They're united in purpose, they love the proposal given in Acts 6 because it demonstrates the truth of the gospel in their relationships among the widows but it also frees up the apostle to be pillars of the truth, to keep preaching, to keep teaching.

Whoever is involved in word ministry, gossiping the gospel even. So I think we see all these truths of the church in Acts 6. Okay, now we've got in our minds what the church is, let's turn to deacons. Who should lead God's household? Does being family and being spirit-filled mean that we shouldn't have leadership? Some churches try and go down that line.

[ 23 : 21 ] No, because God cares for us. He cares for the details. He's given us elders and deacons for our good because he loves us.

What are their qualifications? I want to contrast this with a job advertisement in Newcastle area for a CEO.

I'm not really saying that this job is wrong in its criteria. I just want to show how it's very different criteria to what God cares about for his church. So here's a job if you're looking for a CEO job. We're looking for an inspiring and passionate leader who has extensive leadership experience, significant experience in financial management, experience in growing community partnerships, tertiary qualifications and so on.

There you go. There's one set of qualifications. Deacons must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

[ 24 : 35 ] They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Let deacons be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.

It becomes really clear, doesn't it? Character is all-important. Maybe I've overstated that. Their conviction to the truth is essential in there too. The character is the emphasis. How do you identify godly leaders when you've got religious people saying things that contradict? How do you know? Because they're so word-based. In Timothy's day, they knew their Old Testament. Well, it's what our Lord said.

You'll know them by their fruit. Not perfection, but evidence that the gospel is ruling their lives. They're self-controlled in their behaviour.

[ 25 : 38 ] People can respect them. They're self-controlled in their speech, and that is very difficult. Read James. They're self-controlled in their use of alcohol.

And there's one that they're self-controlled in their attitude to money. I think that's a big one in our day and age that we need to take seriously.

They're faithful to their wife. They take seriously their calling as spiritual leaders in the home, and they seek to be faithful. And not perfection, but they seek to be faithful.

And they hold to the revealed truths of salvation in Jesus. That's what mystery is about. What once was hidden, the mystery of God's salvation, it has been revealed.

The gospel reveals it. They hold to that with a clear conscience. Now, how ordinary are these qualifications? They're pretty ordinary, aren't they?

[ 26 : 48 ] They're qualities all of us should be aspiring to, every believer. I suppose you just need to change the spouse, which spouse you're faithful to.

But the title of the office is ordinary. Like, it's not assistant regional manager, or assistant to the regional manager, if people know what I'm quoted, lieutenant.

It's not lieutenant. It's not chief financial officer. It's servant. There's your title. I think that's ordinary. Here is the servant who will lead the church of God.

A servant worthy of imitating. And yet, their criteria, I think, are extraordinary. ordinary. It's possible for your natural temperament and your upbringing to display some of these things, I think.

But to be across the board of life, controlling yourself and in your family life, something's going on here. Who Jesus is and his spirit is invading this person's whole life.

[ 28 : 09 ] And the title is extraordinary because a deacon shares it with the Lord. He's described as a servant.

Even the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve. That's why Jesus came, to serve, to be a deacon, if I can use that language.

So it is extraordinary. So by their fruit, you will know them. What's their role? Now, this might be dissatisfying to some, but there is very, very little information in the New Testament about what their function is meant to be.

Their official position suggests that they've got authority over the whole church and that they're representing the church.

They have the authority to represent the church. We're told nothing of their function here except that you don't have, like you do with elders, the requirement to be able to teach.

[ 29 : 19 ] But this, I don't think we should push that too far as if deacons aren't allowed to teach. They are convicted by the gospel as much as elders.

Of course they're going to be teaching by their conduct and as they have opportunity. So maybe it's best to see deacons as supporting elders in whatever the church needs at the time.

That's going to be really undefined for some, but I think that's where the logic pushes us.

Supporting the elders in whatever the church needs at the time.

So I don't think we should let Acts 6 constrain us deacons as just mercy ministries to the vulnerable. It may very well include that. But we see in Acts 6 even, Stephen and Philip they're evangelists. They're the ones who push the gospel into the next frontier. So we can't restrain their function. The function of deacons in the local church, it might change over time as the needs of the church change.

[ 30 : 31 ] But what is important is that their character is stable. If you can entrust them with money, you can entrust them with whatever, kids' ministry, anything.

I can't think of all the examples of the people's on the spot, but the character is what's important. You can entrust them with anything, really. And we see the principle of freeing up the elders to teach seems to be confirmed by 1 Timothy, that elders have the responsibility for teaching and governing, and deacons support them in that, perhaps even by teaching themselves.

I think we shouldn't be dualistic here, as if elders do the spiritual stuff and deacons do practical stuff.

I think it would be a grave mistake to get lured in to appoint deacons according to their competence and just overlook some character problems.

Talk to Don and others who have been around longer than me, that there are churches who believe the gospel but who have people in positions of authority who, at best, they're a hindrance, at worst, it's political, it's undermining the teaching.

[ 31 : 59 ] I think of Charles Simeon, for seven years, the people in charge of, we don't have pews with doors on the end, but they locked the doors so that people couldn't come to church to listen to him.

Let's not put doors on there. Other churches, a rich person has donated a lot and they use that as leverage to control the direction of church.

It could be just devoting resources and people energy to things that aren't primary spiritual goals. It could be distraction like we saw in Acts 6.

So I don't think we should limit deacons to just practical nuts and bolts. But I think we should also see the nuts and bolts as spiritual.

There's so many practical things that need to happen and when you've got gospel goals at the end, that is a spiritual task. It enables the church to go about its business.

[ 33 : 19 ] How you relate to people as you do practical things requires gospel mentality in how you treat people. So I don't think we should limit to practical things, but I think we should also see the practical things as spiritual.

Okay, that's function. What about women deacons? It's only men in Acts. 1 Timothy 3 verse 11, they're wives, but the word there is just women.

We can't determine this whether it's women deacons or wives of deacons just based off the wording. We've got to work it out by context and other reasons.

So the women, likewise, must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Their character must be just as proven and trustworthy as the deacons.

So there's two camps of interpretation here and I'm going to dissatisfy everyone and not tell you what I think. I'm just going to give you the two camps and encourage us to reflect more on it and discuss it more.

[ 34 : 38 ] As we do that, we need to trust that God has given this to thrive as a family. He hasn't spoken to restrict, nor has he just want us to get along with the world.

He wants us to be a light. He wants us to thrive. Now I'm conscious that I have to be brief right now and so if even asking this question is troubling you, I'd love to talk more.

So come talk to me or one of the elders or someone more about this. I've got to be brief right now. Okay, here's the two camps. So is it the deacons' wives or is it women deacons?

Now, please keep in mind, both of these interpretations come under people who take what God says throughout the whole Bible, that men are called to be spiritual leaders in the church and in the home seriously.

So these two camps come under both, have that same conviction. So the camp's saying it's deacon wives.

[ 35 : 55 ] Reason is that verse 11, it's sandwiched between talking to the men. So it's men and then it goes back in verse 12, deacons each be the husband of one wife.

So it's sandwiched in there. It seems to be fitting because it moves on to talk about the household of the deacon.

So addressing the deacon's wife seems fitting. And there's no mention of the wives needing to be faithful to their husbands, which you would expect if it was just women's generally, women deacons generally.

On that one, faithful in all things, does that include faithful? It's all things. Okay, that's obviously I'm even summarising the argument here.

But the other side that no, this is talking about women deaconesses, we might say, is that the connection in the passage from elders to deacons in verse 8 is deacons likewise.

[ 36 : 58 ] And then you've got verse 11, women likewise. So could that connection be suggesting this is an official office of deaconess?

There's no mention of elders' wives. That seems a bit odd. Like, surely an elders' wife has to be trustworthy as well. So you've got to explain that.

While deacons have authority, it's only in assisting the elders and so it is obeying 1 Timothy 2.12. And then you've got in Romans 16 verse 1, Phoebe is called a deacon, a deaconess.

There you go. How unsatisfying is that? I'm not going to tell you what I think after that. The implication of the two camps, can I just point out the implications of it, they're pretty close.

Because those who say this is deacons' wives, they say the rationale is, well, if deacons are involved in ministering to people, the wives will be, to some extent, involved in that service.

[ 38 : 16 ] And so the implication is, either wives were expected to be part of the deacons' serving, or women generally. So they're not too far apart when you think about the implications.

Can I encourage us, as we get into a hot topic, let 1 Timothy guide your interpretation of Acts 6. The goodness of God's design for men and women is under attack today.

Timothy was under attack with probably different problems. This is one the church is really under pressure.

How we discuss this as a church family, what convictions we come to, and some of us are going to have to submit our convictions for the sake of the unity of the church.

How we go about this, I think, will depend on how we see the church. Do we see one another as the family of God?

[ 39 : 25 ] As the assembly of the living God? As the foundation of the truth? As the pillar of the truth? Is that what's motivating us as we consider this?

That's when we'll move together as a church family. All this is given for our good, so that we might reflect and defend and declare the truth.

These instructions are given in the context of mission. Chapter 2, at the beginning of chapter 2, where all these instructions start, it speaks of God, our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

And then at the end of chapter 3, we come across this hymn. And the hymn is about mission. This is caught up in mission, which is what we're seeing in Acts.

So how we appoint deacons is important for mission. And what we see in this hymn in verse 16, and I'm not going to go through it in detail. I just want to point out one thing as it relates to deacons.

[ 40 : 41 ] Is that it's for the sake, Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He did it for his mission, and it was very fleshly.

He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit. Here's how one preacher puts it. Christ came down to us, incarnate as a man, toiling, suffering, teaching, weeping, dying.

It's fleshly. That is what the Spirit points to as holiness. That is who the Spirit vindicated by his mighty works and his resurrection.

It's very fleshly. That's the Christ we believe in. He did it to save us. That the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.

Here is, we're going to sing the servant king in a moment. Here is the servant king who we see in Acts is still serving his church. Why wouldn't it be a joy for our church family to appoint and submit to deacons who reflect this servant king who became flesh?

[ 42 : 16 ] It was very ordinary, but he did it to save sinners. It should be our joy to submit to deacons who consider their spiritual worship in following this ordinary king, in toiling and suffering

and weeping and teaching, even dying.

So here is the gospel of the household of God, this Christ who is very ordinary, but his service to save sinners is what God welcomes and says, yes, that is holiness.

Not separating from the world, but entering it. This is the gospel that has brought us into the family. This is the gospel that, this is the one who's still alive in this church family and he's among us by his word and spirit.

This is the one we are called to reflect as we appoint deacons and so that we can keep proclaiming him to the ends of the world. Well, why don't you pray with me?

Let's pray. Well, Father, I want to pray again that you would help us to be a light as a church family into a society that really despises even authority and is very suspicious.

[ 43 : 58 ] Lord, thank you that you use your authority to serve, that you lay down your life to give us life. Father, I pray that you would move us as a church family to appoint leaders that are gripped by this Jesus so that they will defend this gospel and lead this church in serving like the Lord Jesus so that we might be a witness to the nations.

Father, yeah, please use us as a light. In Jesus' name, amen.