

Church is more important than you think

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[0 : 0 0] Well, something that's been in the news constantly for years now has been our state electricity utility, ESCOM. We often talk about ESCOM because it affects us all on a daily basis.

And more specifically, the leadership of ESCOM has been in the news. So, you know, we've been very interested over the last years who's running the place. And the outgoing CEO and his unfortunate cup of coffee, the incoming CEO and his background, the Minister of Electricity, the newly formed Ministry of Electricity in Parliament.

And we wonder, you know, are these the right people for the job? And the reason we care about the leadership of a place like ESCOM is because it matters, right?

It's important. It's important. We don't care about the leadership of anything like the second-hand bookstore on the main road in Plumstead. We don't care who runs that.

But we do care who runs ESCOM because it matters to us. It's a key institution in our country. It's important. So we want the right people running it. We've seen and experienced what happens when the wrong people are running an important institution like that.

[1 : 1 5] We are currently in the load shedding we're in because in the past the wrong people have run ESCOM. And we want the right people running it because it matters.

Well, as we come to what Paul is writing to Timothy now, we realize the same is true of the church. It matters who runs it.

That's what today's passage is about. I invite you to open your Bibles in 1 Timothy chapter 3 as we look at what it means to run God's church and who should be doing it, making sure we have the right people for the job.

Obviously, this is important given where we are in this part of the year in our church with our AVM coming up. As Alan has mentioned, we are nominating, not we, not me, you, you are nominating council members.

If you're a member of this church, you've got to decide who leads you. You've got to nominate the council and the council employs the pastors. And so it's important to make sure that you are nominating and putting forward the right people.

[2 : 2 3] If you have been put forward as a prospective council member, it's important that you know what that entails. Because who runs the church really matters.

But what I want to concentrate on, and I want to go into the details of who that should be in the criteria, but more important is actually why it matters who runs the church.

And that's where Paul, who's writing this letter to Timothy, he ends up at the end of this passage in verse 15, explaining why it's so important you choose the right people to run the church.

And the reason is because of what the church really is. And this really comes to the heart, not only of this passage that we're looking at this morning, but this whole letter that we've been studying so far, and will be for a while.

The whole letter, you could argue, this is the heart of it. This is the heart of his letter, what the church is. Especially in his description in verse 15. And why the church is actually far more important than you think.

[3 : 34] Because the church, he argues here, is actually the most important institution in the world. The church is the most important institution in the world.

Now, I know it doesn't look like it. What does the church look like to the world? What does the church look like? What does the world think of the church today, in 2023?

Well, I think to the world, the church looks like a support group for people who like singing dirgy songs and listening to long sermons about ancient history.

At least that's how it's portrayed in the movies, right? You look at how Christians and the church is portrayed in the movies. It's kind of quaint, a little out of date, really out of touch, but a nice traditional institution.

The pastors, well, you know, they couldn't get a real job. So, they ended up being pastors. And pastors are always seen as a bit silly. You remember that movie, Four Weddings and a Funeral?

[4 : 37] The pastor was Mr. Bean, okay? And that's what the world thinks of church. It's out of touch. It's a little bit silly. It doesn't really matter. The church doesn't look important to the world.

But what's become clear to me over the past few years, and what's very concerning, is that it also doesn't seem that important to many Christians themselves.

Many Christians don't take their church very seriously. I think many Christians have forgotten, if they even ever knew, why church, the church, is actually far more important than it looks.

And that's why we need this morning's teaching. Before we look at who runs the church, we need to spend some time grasping what the church truly is.

And so that's what we're going to do this morning. Look at verse 15 with me. 1 Timothy 3, verse 15. Well, I'll start from verse 14, give it some context.

[5 : 45] I write these things to you, hoping to come to you soon, but if I should be delayed. So Paul is writing to Timothy. He's writing this letter very urgently to Timothy because he is so burdened that the church in Ephesus that the young minister Timothy is running is run well.

And this is the reason why. That's what the whole letter is about, running the church well. How we should conduct ourselves as a church in the world. But Paul's burden really comes out in what he says next.

Verse 15, but if I should be delayed, I have written to you so that 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.

That's what the church is. And there's two main identities that we see in that verse that I want us to think about this morning. Firstly, the church is God's family on earth.

That's what he means by the household. That word household didn't mean the building. It meant the family in a house. And by calling the church God's household, he's saying this is the human family of God on earth.

[7 : 05] And then he goes and says it's the gathering, the church of the living God. But church in the original language just meant a gathering. It's the gathering of the living God. It's his family. So a church, you should know by now, a church in the Bible doesn't mean the building, the church building like we often refer to it as, well, you know, that's the church on Casino Road in Plumstead.

No, the church is the people. The church is always the people. And here it's the people of the living God. And those people are called God's household. Those people are called God's family.

God's family on earth. God has a family. God. God, the God we know is there and who made all of this. He is a family man.

He has a family. And this is it. God's family. Those who have come to believe and trust in Christ, his son, become part of God's family.

And we really need to, as Christians, stop every now and again and realize just what a profound thing that is. And that the purpose God saves people is not so that they can just go to heaven when they die.

[8 : 17] No, the purpose God saves people is not to save them as individuals, or save them individually, to give them individual salvation. The purpose, right from the beginning, that God has saved people, that God has chosen people is because he is constructing a family.

He is calling people into a family where God is the Father and Christians are the brothers and sisters. And that isn't a very important thing, that God is calling a family together.

In fact, the whole story of the Bible is about God's desire to have a human family. And everything he's ever done in this plan, in the salvation history, is to make that family because God is a God of relationship.

That is the very core of who he is. God has never been alone. God has always been relationship. And God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in eternity past has always been the core relationship of creation.

The core of God's character is love. God is about relationship. God invented relationship. And God has always wanted to bring human beings that he's created into relationship, family relationship with himself and with each other.

[9 : 33] That is why everything has happened. That's why God has done what he's done. That's why Jesus, his Son, went to the extent to come in human flesh and die for our sins that are keeping us from God.

Not so that we could just be saved, but that we could become adopted into the family of God. That is God's purpose. That is what God wants for you and me, to be living and active members of a family.

His household. If you're a believer in Christ, God wanted you in his family. He chose you to be in his family. And that is a huge thing.

It should totally change how we think about what we're doing here. It should totally change how we think about our identity, that God has chosen us to be part of his family.

And not because we deserved it. None of us who are in God's family, who are believers in Christ, whose eyes have been opened to the truth, who have received the Holy Spirit.

[10 : 38] None of us were saved because of something we've done, or because we deserved it. And it wasn't because of what God could get out of it. You know, when God chose to save people, he didn't ask, hmm, if I save Nolan, what could I get out of it?

You know, or what can I get out of saving Dylan? You know, God didn't sit there and calculate what he's going to benefit by saving, by calling people into his family.

In other words, as one person helpfully put it, God doesn't think economically about relationships in his family. He doesn't think economically, cost, benefit, what can I get out of it?

That's not how God thinks about relationships in his family. That's not how a family works. It's how the world works. It's how business works.

Business relationships are all about what can we get out of it. Let's make a contract with this person so we can get something out of them and have a mutually beneficial relationship. And that, sadly, is also how human, worldly relationships work.

[11 : 49] I enter into a relationship with someone because of what I can get out of it. That's typically how people think. What can I get out of it? We think economically about relationships in the world.

But that's not how family works, is it? That's not how we think about the relationships in our families. You know, parents, before having kids, don't ask, well, what can we get out of it by having kids?

If they thought economically about having children, no children would ever be born. Okay? You don't think, what can I get out of it? It's just, family relationships are about this, about this unselfish, unconditional, very often messy love.

Where it's not, we don't think economically about it. We're not thinking about what we can get out of it. When you go to a family gathering, you don't think, oh, should I go? What can I get out of it? Let's weigh up the pros and cons of going to this family gathering.

No, because it's your family. You belong there. It's not about what you can get out of it. You don't think economically about family.

[13 : 00] Well, this is God's family. This is God's family. God does not think economically about this family and what relationships He has chosen to call people into.

and so neither should we think economically about these relationships and this family because this is God's family. But sadly, many do think economically.

In our world of consumerism, that seeps into the church and without realizing it, we consume in the church. We see the church as a service provider.

We often don't realize how much we think economically about church, but we do. We see it as a service provider where we pay, you know, our tithes, we pay our monthly subscription, and then we consume the content that the church puts out.

That's how we're programmed to think about it in our culture, like Netflix or like some streaming service. But that's treating it economically, you see.

[14 : 06] That's seeing, what do I put in and what can I get out? What can my immediate family, my children, get out of this church? That's why I'm going to choose church. That's why I'm going to go to that church because of what I can get out.

But don't you realize that's thinking economically about church. That's not how God thinks about His family. That's not treating this church like God's family. when we weigh up options and we go, oh, okay, you know, should I go to church or should I do sport this Sunday because, you know, my friends are going out and there's this event on or should I go to church?

When we weigh up options or should I go to growth group or should I chill at home? I really need to relax and let's weigh it up. Let's weigh up the pros and cons of either.

The moment you start thinking like that, you're thinking economically, you're not treated this as a family. When you're focused on what you can get out of it and when you leave or change churches because you're not getting what you want from this particular church, you are treating it economically.

You're not treating it like a family. But the Bible says this is God's family. We don't treat our families like that. We shouldn't treat God's family like that. We need to realize, we need to grasp afresh the privilege of what it means to be adopted into the human family of God on earth.

[15 : 33] That we get to be part of God's family and all that means and we need to start seeing our church in that way. Because that's what it is.

First of all, it is God's household, God's family. We need to treat it like that. But that's not all it is. Because look what else Paul, inspired by God, describes the church to be.

And this is pretty epic. The second thing, he describes it to be in verse 15 at the end there. The end of verse 15 is the foundation of truth in the world.

The pillar and foundation of the truth. That's the subtitle of our whole series because this verse really gets to the heart of what this letter is trying to teach us about the church.

It's the pillar. The foundation of the truth in the world. So the picture is, and what was quite common in the ancient world was pillars.

[16:37] You know what a pillar is? In fact, on the picture over there in the background is an example of pillars. What pillars did is that they held up these buildings. And of course, the more pillars you had, the more stable it was.

And it could last. And it could stand the test of time, which it has. I mean, thousands of years later, we still have these ancient buildings standing, like the Parthenon in Athens and stuff like that, where it's the pillars that have kept them going.

Even with all the weather and the forces and the armies that have come and gone throughout the ages, these pillars have stood through all the different winds of change.

The pillars have stood for thousands of years holding up these ancient buildings. That is the picture Paul uses to describe the church. It is responsible, it is the institution on earth that exists to hold up the truth that God has revealed into this world and to keep it standing through all the winds of change and culture.

That is its job. No other institution is charged with that most important job in the world. Yes, you get other institutions in the world, UN and NATO and ESCOM and all these different institutions that have different jobs to keep things going and to do different things.

[18:10] The church, even though it doesn't look like much to the world, is the most important institution on earth because its job that no other institution is charged with but we are is to hold up the truth that God has revealed into our world.

And that is not easy because in every generation there are the winds that blow against it. The winds of this age, the winds of every generation, there are different, there are different forces that are trying to compromise the truth, trying to attack the truth because deep down we don't like the truth as sinners.

And so the winds of every age try to wear it down. Today it is gale force, am I right? With people vehemently opposing God's truth about gender and sexuality.

And if it wasn't for the church standing firm against the push of the culture, then the truth would have disappeared long ago. even though standing firm and keeping on holding up the truth means suffering, it means being persecuted, it means being prosecuted, it means being accused of hate speech, we have to do it because if we don't, no one else will.

And what I love about the picture Paul uses here of churches being pillars and in an old ancient building you would have had lots of pillars, right, holding this thing up. One pillar wouldn't have been able to do it but you need all the pillars providing the strength to hold the whole thing up.

[19:40] God's truth is heavy and God's truth is vital and God's truth is important but to hold it up you need not just one pillar, you need a whole lot of pillars. And each church, each local church like this, even though it's a small church in the middle of Plumstead Southfield and it doesn't look like much, we are one of those pillars which along with all the other small churches around the world are holding up God's truth to make it accessible to the world.

And so if you are here this morning looking for truth, if the world is confusing to you and you don't know what to make of all the different voices you hear on TikTok and YouTube and Facebook and everybody's saying different things and you're confused and you're looking for truth, you're looking for what is real, what is true, what life is really about, if that is you and you are looking for that, this is where you should be.

You are in the right place. There is no better place because it is our job, no one else's, our job to hold up what is really true even if people don't want to hear it.

And if you are looking to invest in something, maybe you've run into a lot of money and you want to invest in something important. Maybe you're rich okay, it's probably the wrong audience to talk to but maybe you're listening to this and you're rich and you've got everything sorted and you realize in your latter years you actually want to invest in important things not just things to make money and you're wondering what should it be, renewable energy, artificial intelligence, what should I invest in?

Invest in the church because this is the most important institution in the world because this is the institution whose job it is to hold up the truth of God to the world.

[21 : 32] We are God's family whose job it is to hold up God's truth to the world. That is what church is. Okay, now that we know what it is, now we can talk about who should run it.

And this, as I say, is pertinent to our annual vesture meeting, especially if you're a member of St. Mark's that we're going to have in the next few weeks. and if you're nominating, if you're thinking of nominating, putting someone forward to be a church council member or if you're being nominated to be a church council member.

I want to ask you, how deeply did you think about that before you did it? How much time did you spend thinking about who should, who should be in the church council?

Because I'll tell you one thing, if we get leadership wrong in the church, it is costly. It can put a church back decades of growth if the leadership is wrongly chosen.

And that is why Paul gives such specific instructions in this chapter on who we should choose. We must take this seriously. We must not ignore it. And so, who should run the church?

[22 : 52] Well, look in your Bibles from verse 1 to 13 is the qualifications for church leaders. And what you'll notice right away is that there's two types of ministries or ministers that the Bible mentions.

Now, you go to different churches, different denominations, and they have different structures, and they have different names for leaders, whether it's pastor, deacon, elder, presbyter, priest, whatever.

But that's really just traditional. traditional, the Bible only really talks about two. And all the different ones that you see in churches today are one of those two, in essence.

There is what the Bible calls the overseer, which is mentioned in verse 1 to 7, and what the Bible calls the deacon. Now, the overseer are the men who are responsible for teaching and leading the church forward, and the deacons are men and women who are responsible for other ministries which are necessary, but which free up the teachers and the leaders to do their job.

The first example of this is in Acts chapter 6. We won't go there, but you can read it at home, of when the apostles were being so inundated with all the different ministries that they needed to do that they actually set aside deacons so that they could focus on their ministry which is to teach and to lead the church.

[24 : 21] And yet, what we realize as we read about the qualifications for these two offices, these two ministries, is that while one is leading and one is essentially serving, they are both called to a very high standard, much higher than we would normally think.

Firstly, they had to be competent in the work that they did. Now, that makes sense. And that's not a church thing. That applies to any job in any organization.

If you employ someone to do a job, if they are commissioned to do something, they've got to know what they're doing, right? They've got to be competent. So, for example, in verse 2, talking about overseers towards the end, it says they've got to be able to teach.

They've got to have the necessary skills to lead and to teach. It's the same as any other job. Right? You don't want the guy who manages the nuclear reactor at Kubrick to only have a metric chemistry.

Right? That would be quite dangerous. And if the church is even more important than a power station, because of what we've seen, you don't want people running it who don't know what they're doing, who aren't in some way qualified to do that.

[25 : 39] Sadly, many churches do just because they like how a person talks or that, you know, he's a very convincing guy. But imagine that's the way Kubrick employed their nuclear reactor technicians just because they liked how they sounded.

No. You look at the CV. You look at making sure they've got the right qualifications. So that's obviously mentioned here. They've got to know what they're doing. They've got to be qualified.

If people have a regular ministry full time of preaching and teaching in a pulpit like I'm doing, they've got to have qualifications for that. Right? They've got to have gone to Bible college and learned Hebrew and Greek and biblical theology.

They've got to know what they're talking about because this is so important. You don't want to get it wrong. But what's interesting is that as you read these qualifications, the competency and the ability, important as it is, is really not the main thing.

Because for running a church, far more important than their competency is their godliness, their character. Because if the church is going to produce godly people, which is one of the things it does in order to do its job in the world, then it's got to be run by godly people.

[27 : 02] Right? Makes sense. You know, you've never seen a weedy personal trainer in a gym. Okay? If you go to gym and you want to bulk up and you want a personal trainer to teach you how to, you know, get muscle mass, you don't see this thin weedy guy coming and teaching you how to do that.

You want a person who is actually, who looks a bit like the person you want to be. Well, it's the same in a church. You know, if you want to grow in godliness, you should be led by people who are godly.

That's the argument Paul is making here. Now, let's not use this as a get out of jail free card and think, oh, it's only the church leaders who need to be like this.

No, all Christians are called to godliness. If you are called into God's family, you are called to take on the family likeness. You are called to live the life you're called to, live the life you've been saved for, change, and be transformed to be the kind of person God made you and saved you to be.

All Christians are called to godliness, but we need to realize and get real with the fact that we're all on different points on that road.

[28 : 17] All Christians are at different levels and have had different amounts of time developing and growing godly characters. We're not all the same.

We're not all at the same point on the road to godliness and that's, by the way, why a lot of grace is needed in a local church like this. Don't expect everyone to be at the same level as you in godliness.

Okay? It often happens and it creates ugly situations where people are going, oh, look at them, they're not godly because they don't do what I do but actually you were that ten years ago, five years ago so just be a bit gracious and realize we're all at different points on the road.

We need a lot of latitude with each other but the point that Paul's making here is that leaders in the church should actually be quite far down the road already. It can't just be anyone.

Look at what he says in verse 6. He's talking about overseers, he must not be a new convert or he might become conceited and incur the same condemnation as the devil.

[29 : 24] Even deacons are called to be tested in verse 10 that they have actually developed a certain level of godliness and so these church leaders, everybody is on a path of godliness but the church leaders need to be quite far down the road if they're going to call others to follow them and if they're going to lead forward.

Both those who lead and those who serve in ministries. Now as we go through the list I don't really have time to go into each one and it would be good for you to study especially if you're being nominated to council or nominating someone to study each of these in detail but you can kind of classify all of this list of qualifications into three basic areas.

Firstly, character. They need to have proven character. Look at verse 2 and 3 for example. An overseer therefore must be above reproach, the husband of one wife or faithful to one wife that's talking about sexual faithfulness, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not an excessive drinker, not a bully but gentle.

That's interesting because in some translations it's violent but the root word actually talks about not just physical violence, it talks about anybody who throws their weight around, uses their power to get what they want from people but that's not the kind of character that God wants running His church.

Not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy or not a lover of money. I think just this list that I mentioned in verse 2 and 3 I think that already disqualifies many people who are leading churches today.

[31 : 22] Especially, you know, being gentle or not being a lover of money. So many leaders in churches are in it because of the money they can get. I don't know why. There's not much money in it.

Although if you run a big church and you say things people want to hear you can, actually there's potential. But the moment you're focused on money you're not focused on the kingdom. Jesus says you can't focus on both.

Your energy can't be put into both. It's got to be one or the other in this life. And whether you're a church leader on a full-time basis or a part-time basis if you want money then you are not going to put your energy into God's kingdom.

And so a leader of the church cannot be someone who's obsessed with being rich, obsessed with money. That's going to distract them. Verse 8 Even deacons are also called to a high standard of character.

Deacons likewise should be worthy of respect not hypocritical or more literally double-tongued. In other words there shouldn't be one person at church and then a different person behind closed doors.

[32 : 30] You often find people who are that who act one way in public and a different way in private. Well people who run the church must be transparent.

You must you know get what you see. They mustn't be double-tongued or hypocritical or fake. Also their wives there's a interesting in verse 11 the wives of the deacons are called to a particular standard of character as well.

Now this could also be translated the woman talking about the woman deacons. There's debate and we don't know which one but either way it's the same thing because the wives of the deacons in the early church would have helped them in their ministry and therefore because they're helping their men do their ministry they've got to have godly characters as well.

Look at verse 11 wives too must be worthy of respect not slanderers. That is so common in churches. I'm still blown away by how much slander there is in churches how much people are talking about other people behind their backs in ways that isn't building them up.

It's totally not appropriate for God's church. And so godly character is to put that off to not talk about other people in a way that stamps down on them and to be self-controlled and to be faithful in everything honest true and you can rely on them.

[34 : 02] See this is character and while competency in the job is important character is so much more important if it's God's church. Secondly they're not only to have proven character they're also to have ordered households.

One of the qualifications for both overseers and deacons is that their households must be in order. Now that's interesting because we don't often come across that in the secular world.

When you go for a job interview they don't ask you how obedient your children are. You know people in the world don't care what happens at home but in the church it matters. Look at verse 4-5.

He must manage his own household competently and have his children under control with all dignity. If anyone does not know how to manage his own household how will he take care of God's church?

He makes a good point there doesn't he? Because this is God's family if you can't lead your own family how can you lead God's?

[35 : 11] This is a household this is a family you've got to prove your ability to lead a family at home. The same for deacons verse 12 deacons are to be husbands of one wife managing their children and their own households competently.

You know the real test of godliness is not what you say and do here so much as what happens at home. The real test of godliness is what happens at home.

I wonder if you put forward a council member a nomination do you know what their home situation is? Did you look into it? Did you talk to them about it?

Because that's one of the important qualifications here. And then thirdly this is one we wouldn't have expected they are also to have a good reputation with non-Christians.

Church leaders are to have a good reputation with outsiders both those who lead and those who serve in the church. Verse 7 for example furthermore he must have a good reputation among outsiders that's non-Christians so that he does not fall into disgrace and the devil's trap.

[36 : 26] You know what the devil wants to do is he wants to discredit the church in the eyes of the world. He wants to make the church look hypocritical and stupid and that is why church leaders who run the churches that are the pillars of the truth in society must actually be able to communicate and get a hearing with the outside world.

Now that doesn't mean to pander to the world because after all we're holding up the truth not what the world wants to hear but it does mean to conduct themselves in a way that is worthy of respect from outsiders even if those outsiders disagree with you and that is hard.

God's family on earth and this is the pillar that upholds God's truth in the world learn to see your church how God sees it take its leadership seriously and take your involvement in it seriously as well let's pray oh Lord we are blown away when we consider the great privilege of being called into your family of being the people that for generations for thousands of years you have planned certain humans to be called into relationship with yourself to be called into your eternal family and we are those people and Lord we are so thankful we do not deserve this high calling but Lord help us to believe who we truly are help us to believe who the church truly is as you've taught us this morning and help us to take church seriously help us

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