

1 Timothy 3:8-16 – Wednesday Service – The Mystery of Godliness – July 8, 2026

+In Nomine Iesu+

I listened to Pastor Batchelor’s excellent sermon from last week. I really like his style. I appreciate him covering for me while we were at Higher Things. If you missed last Wednesday, go check it out on our website or YouTube page. It’s good to have another faithful Lutheran voice to hear from time to time.

At the beginning of 1 Timothy 3, St. Paul gives us the noble purpose and the quality of life that the Church expects of her pastors. And this is one of several passages in Scripture where the Holy Spirit limits the office of the ministry to well-qualified men—just like we saw in 1 Timothy 2.

“An overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well...He must not be a recent convert...He must be well thought of by outsiders.”

Now, last week, we heard that most of these qualities belong in all of our lives. Some are specific to the Pastor. He must be able to teach. But wouldn’t it be nice if all of us were not so quarrelsome? I like how Solomon says it in Proverbs 26, “As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.”

And in case you missed his point, we have another list in tonight’s reading that Paul offers for deacons. Now, Pastor Batchelor defined a few Greek and Latin terms. So, I can get away with a little of this too. The term translated as *deacon* is *διάκονος*. Indeed, *Deacon* is just a transliteration of the Greek word. And very simply, the word just means *servant*.

Now, some suggest that this is a necessary office in the Church. That a Church must have deacons. Remember that we usually consider Stephen and Philip and the rest of the seven in Jerusalem in Acts 6 as deacons. Although these men were also clearly connected with the preaching office. And here in 1 Timothy, the characteristic ability to teach is not continued on our list. So this might be something ever so slightly different.

I think it is best to understand *deacon* in 1 Timothy in reference to lay leadership in the Church. We have a great deal of freedom to form Church government as best befits the Gospel and our own context. Some hierarchy, organization, and accountability are necessary. God still expects church leaders to live as “children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life.” As Paul says in Philippians 2.

So, as we talked about my life last week, we get to talk about yours tonight. “Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.”

And then we hear about deacons’ wives—this could also refer to *deaconesses*—the female counterpart to deacons. In fact, the New American Standard Bible just translates this word as *women*. These are the female lay leaders in the church. “Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.”

I hope such tasks give us pause to think about the shape of our lives. How we live matters. It matters to our human relationships. And it matters to the operation of the Church. How we live is to be a witness to the world. The Church is often known as a congregation of sinners. True enough. But let's be a congregation that is growing toward a maturity of faith, life, and confession.

Notice that both deacons and deaconesses are expected to live with dignity. The word suggests that they take their tasks seriously. They live honorably and respectfully. This means that they are pious and reverent.

And this expresses itself first in the Christian household. Leaders in the Church, if married, must have a healthy marriage. And the household must be well-managed. And this isn't just about paying your bills and cleaning your room. It is about the faith and kindness—and God-given authority.

And it is about leading spiritually in the home. It is as Paul says in Ephesians 6, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

Even Luther's instructions in the Small Catechism suggest such a connection. The whole thing begins with these words—which are then reprinted at the beginning of each chief part, "As the head of the family should them in a simple way to his household."

This is a rightly ordered household—one in which the Catechism is taught—where the Scriptures are heard—where theological conversations take place—where hymns are sung—where grace is practiced.

You can hear these details mixed into these lists. Theology is for life—it is for living. Paul says, "They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." And then he says that those who serve as deacons must have "great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus."

Now, we can roll our eyes at such characteristics. We can say such things are just for the pastor. We can make excuses for why we don't conduct our lives in such a way. But, let me encourage you to embrace such virtues.

One of the preachers at Higher Things used a very simple line over and over again. He said, "Stop sinning." It is excellent advice. Seriously, stop sinning. Drop the excuses. Don't be addicted to much wine. Don't be a malicious gossip. Train your household with devotion to Christ according to the faith. Be faithful in all things. The Church today needs leadership like that—in the pulpit—and in the pew. Not flashy, not arrogant, just faithful.

He then defines the Church as the household of God. The Church is more like a family than a business. This is reminiscent of Paul's insistence that the public servant of the congregation must first prove himself at home. He must be faithful in the smaller but crucial realm of his own private household. These are connected realities. Private life and public life must match—all to the glory of God.

And then he calls the Church a pillar and a buttress of the truth. We are built on the truth. But we have the purpose of making the truth known in our families and societies. Pastors, deacons, deaconesses, servants of the Church all have this purpose. Society—then and now—has wandered far from the truth. The Church exists as a light for the truth in our world. And the light is Jesus Christ. We uphold all He said and all He did.

Now, as heavy as this passage is with *parenesis*—this is a Greek rhetorical term for moral exhortation—I hope you heard in the details how such lives are connected to the Gospel. This is the true mystery of godliness—as Paul says. He says that deacons must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

When Paul considers this mystery, He does not call attention to what remains hidden about God. He is not peering into the unknowable essence of God’s omnipotence or omniscience. Instead, the mystery of faith and godliness is about God revealed in Jesus Christ.

And these hints lead to the second part of our text as Paul defines this mystery. The whole life of the Church—the lives that we lead—the servants who serve—these are all because of this mystery.

And here, Paul breaks into an ancient hymn. He does this in Ephesians 5, Philippians 2, Colossians 1, as well. Clearly the Church is already singing the New Testament faith—just as it retained the singing of Psalms.

The conclusion of our reading is why I chose the sermon hymn that I did today, *Of the Father’s Love Begotten*. It is one of my favorites. And I realize it is actually a Christmas hymn. And I know I am breaking the rules. Stores sometimes have Christmas in July sales. But that is not what I am doing today. I don’t have anything to sell.

But this *particular* hymn is based on the second half of our reading. In fact, if you look in the hymnal at the bottom of the page 384, you will see 1 Timothy 3:16 listed as the very first text. These verses we find here in 1 Timothy are incarnational. The mystery begins with Christ taking on our human flesh. And so, this hymn contains practical truth. It promotes right worship and encourages the exercise of true religion.

It always amazes me how closely Paul ties right practices—and even right definitions for the Church and its officers—with good doctrine. It is as if we compromise on the nature of Christ—and His work of salvation—we will also stray from the leadership structure that He recommends.

We will spend some time with this idea next week. But we can see this all around us in the church world today. When leadership falters and fails, it is because of poor doctrine. And poor doctrine leads to the current rebellions and moral failings of the Church’s leadership.

The hymn in our text has some interesting detail. Take a look at the structure. There are three pairs of statements. Each contains one line referring to a heavenly reality—and one referring to an earthly reality. The lesson is that the gap between God and humanity has been closed in the incarnation. In Christ, heaven and earth are linked. Eternal life begins on earth. And the Church exists to inhabit that reality.

Paul’s hymn grounds us as the Church in the truth of Jesus Christ. It is creedal and confessional. The truth celebrated in this Christ-centered doxology is that the eternal and uncreated Son of God took on an additional nature and became a human being—all for our salvation.

This is the mystery Paul reveals. Whatever incomprehensibility may yet shroud God’s majesty and essence in mystery, His gracious purpose in Christ—that the Church must proclaim—has now been made manifest.

The mysterious miracle is that God has and does make Himself known in Jesus Christ. It is as Jesus says to Philip—the Philip who is one of the Twelve—rather than one of the Seven—in John 14, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

Then, in 1 Corinthians 4, Paul talks about the office of the ministry—the pastoral office—in this way. He says, “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

The truth that the church holds out to the world—that we steward for the sake of the truth—is the incarnation—He was manifested in the flesh. It is the resurrection—He was vindicated by the Spirit. The presentation—He was seen by angels. The mission—He was proclaimed among the nations. The reception—He was believed on in the world. The ascension—He was taken up into glory. This is the Gospel—what God has done for us in Christ.

As I said, our reading today has two parts. The first addresses the servants of the church—deacons and deaconesses. The second addresses the mystery the church proclaims—the incarnate Christ. And perhaps the question that unites these two sections is simply this: What does it mean for the Church to hold the mystery of faith?

Since Jesus was manifest in the flesh, we certainly see a call for incarnational ministry. We need to gather with fellow believers in the Church—among its called and lay servants. We need the tangible means of grace—the hearing of the Word, the reception of the Sacrament. We need a vibrant life of prayer. And then, as servants of the Church, we use our hands to help, our lips to offer grace, our disciplined minds to know and confess the truth.

We proclaim this great mystery among the nations. That is what the world needs from us—not another soup kitchen—as important as that is—but a prophetic voice in the world. We call the world—our family and friends and neighbors—and even those halfway around the world—to believe on Jesus Christ—crucified and risen for us—even as we believe on Him with our whole hearts for salvation and provision.

We are His servants—pastors, deacons, people. And Paul writes this letter so “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 truth.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+