

EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH AS 'OIKOS THEOU' IN 1 TIMOTHY 3:15 : IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH UNITY

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Abstract:

The unity of the church as a fellowship of believers in Christ is essential, as reflected in the prayer of Lord Jesus for His disciples and those who believe through their preaching: that they may be one (John 17:21). However, it is undeniable that churches across various denominations find it challenging to unite. In the context of the entire First Epistle to Timothy, Paul looks beyond Timothy to the local churches entrusted to him. Paul is concerned and, through Timothy, seeks to organize church life. The theological perspective of First Timothy is framed by the concepts of *oikonomia theou* (God's ordering of reality) and *oikos theou* (house of God). *Oikonomia theou* envisages a way of life organized divinely, where all aspects of life are subject to the divine will. The tradition of *oikonomia* is portrayed in the sense that *oikos* (household) serves as "a chief basis, paradigm, and reference point for religious, moral, social, political, and economic organization, interaction, and theology." *Oikos* provides a concrete model for believers to live out their calling as members of God's family. According to this divine pattern, the church is referred to as *oikos theou*, "the household of God," in 3:15. This metaphor positions the microcosm of God's people or the paradigm of a world obedient to God's commands. Its mission is to extend this reality beyond the walls so that God's way of ordering life may be known and followed by an increasing number of non-believers. Within such a concept of the church, it is envisioned that the unity of the churches can become an inevitability.

Keywords: the unity of the church, oikonomia theou, oikos theou

1. Pendahuluan

In general, the use of the word "church" in the Bible refers to a community of believers who gather regularly at a specific location, known locally as a church.¹ This community, also known as the *ekklesia*, subsequently forms a congregation of believers who are called out to represent a broader community, in the sense of the universal church, as the new people of God.² The universal church encompasses all Christians,

¹ Darrell L. Bock dan Jonathan J. Armstrong, *Virtual Reality Church: Perangkap dan Peluang*, terj. Wenas Kalangit (Jakarta: PT Suluh Cendekia, 2021), 238-239.

² Armstrong, *Virtual Reality Church*, 240.

both living and deceased, irrespective of denominational prejudices, ethnicities, nations, and social statuses (Eph. 1:22; 3:10; 5:23-32).³ Therefore, the concept of the church includes two aspects: the local church and the universal church, with a relationship existing between the two. The local church is identified within the universal church, and the universal church is manifested within the local church.⁴

The Church is called to construct divine life within the world, encompassing the manifestation of holiness both within and through the lives of believers in their relationships. Logically, this testimony of the Church implies that unity is a critical aspect. Unity is one of the Church's callings that must be realized in addition to witnessing and serving. The unity referred to, as witnessed by the Bible, is the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all (Eph. 4:3-7). Another term for this task of unity is the oneness of the Church, comprising the duties of renewal, building, and unifying the Church.⁵

Renewal means scrutinizing the state of the Church by constantly placing itself under the light of God's Word to foster updates and growth, so that the state of the Church aligns more closely with God's will. Church renewal includes updates in theological thought, lifestyles, and institutional patterns creatively and continuously under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁶

The second task is building the Church. Here, building means the development of the Body of Christ, steadfastly clinging to the truth; the Church grows in all aspects towards Him, Christ who is the Head (Eph.4:13-16). The building of the Body of Christ involves leveraging all positive values, knowledge, skills, and modern experiences to ensure optimal management, while also strengthening the Church as the "Body of Christ." Essentially, it involves earnest attention to the Church's growth, which truly is the work of the Holy Spirit, prompting the Church to use all the gifts within itself for continual growth and self-building.

The subsequent task involves unifying the Church. Unification here, as in John 17:21, is to manifest the oneness already present in God visibly, thus serving as a

³ Michael Griffiths, *Gereja dan Panggilannya Dewasa Ini*, terj. Oloria Silaen - Situmorang (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1995), 10.

⁴ Amstrong, *Virtual Reality Church*, 241.

⁵ Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia, *Lima Dokumen Keesaan Gereja PGI: Keputusan Sidang Raya XII PGI Jayapura, 21-30 Oktober 1994* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1996), 9.

⁶ Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia, *Lima Dokumen Keesaan Gereja PGI*, 16-17.

testimony to the world. Unifying the Church does not eliminate the various graces and gifts received from the Lord throughout the history of the churches. Instead, it places all these within a larger framework of oneness as a witness amid the world. This means that the framework of unity ensures room for diversity. However, within the context of this diversity of the churches, how can the oneness or unity of the Church be interpreted?

This research aims to explore the concept of the Church as 'oikos Theou' (household of God) based on 1 Timothy 3:15 and how this concept can impact the interpretation of the unity of the Church.

2. Discussion

Context of 1 Timothy 3:15

1 Timothy 1:3-3:16 is a cohesive unit that discusses the management and organization of God's household.⁷ This section is framed within the concepts of *oikonomia theou*, "the divine pattern" (1:4), and *oikos theou*, "the household of God" (3:15), where Paul's focus as the author is on "how one ought to conduct oneself in the household of God" (3:15).

1 Timothy indicates that before this letter was written, Paul and Timothy had been together in Ephesus. Subsequently, Paul instructed Timothy to stay in the city to tend to the congregation while Paul went to Macedonia (1:3). Should he be delayed in returning, Timothy had a letter from Paul containing instructions on how to regulate life within the congregation regarding false teachers and how people should live as members of the family of God, namely the living Church of God (3:15). A source states that verse 3:15 is a key verse in 1 Timothy.⁸

⁷ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 70.

⁸ John Balchin et al., *Intisari Alkitab Perjanjian Baru* (Jakarta: Scripture Union Indonesia, 1994),

In the context of the entire letter of 1 Timothy, Paul looks beyond Timothy to the local churches entrusted to him. Paul is concerned and, through Timothy, seeks to regulate church life.⁹ The overarching theme of 1 Timothy is the need to teach, serve, and lead the church in such a way as to propagate the Gospel and counter false teachings.¹⁰

Exploration of the Concept of the Church as 'oikos Theou'

The theological perspective of 1 Timothy is indeed framed by the concepts of 'oikonomia theou' and 'oikos theou.' The tradition of 'oikonomia' is depicted in the sense that the 'oikos' (household) is "a chief basis, paradigm, and reference point for religious and moral as well as social, political, and economic organization, interaction, and theology."¹¹ 'Oikos' is also understood as a microcosm of a state.¹² It serves as a concrete model for believers to live out their calling as members of the family of God (household of God, Eph. 2:19).¹³

'Oikonomia theou' envisions a way of life organized divinely (God's ordering of reality), where all aspects of life are subject to divine will. As Paul applies this to Christian existence, the term encompasses all spheres of life, including social, political, and religious, in the same way that the Emperor would assume for himself the role of a father or householder and regard the empire and its citizens as his household.¹⁴

The use of such terms implies that Paul views the social structure as continuously connected with God's commands. Therefore, on one hand, Chapter 1:4

⁹ John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of the 1 Timothy and Titus* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 59.

¹⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1999), 32.

¹¹ Timothy G. Gombis, "A Radically New Humanity: The Function of The *Haustafel* in Ephesians," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005): 213.

¹² Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspect of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 51

¹³ Gombis, "A Radically New Humanity," 322.

¹⁴ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 69.

announces that opponents stand against this divine command. On the other hand, following this divine pattern, the church is called 'oikos theou', "household of God," in Chapter 3:15. This metaphor creates a microcosm of God's people or a paradigm of a world obedient to God's commands; its mission is to extend this reality beyond the walls so that the way God organizes life can be known and adhered to by an increasing number of unbelievers.

The entire world is God's world, and therefore, contemporary social obligations still hold significance within the Christian household. Consequently, men and women, husbands and wives (2:8-15; 5:1-2), widows and relatives (5:3-16), slaves and masters (6:1-2) must disregard the social rules that dictate honor in their human cultural quadrant; but they must also live in full awareness that the presence of God redeems, renovates, and reshapes impulses for behavior in these relationships. If the church wishes to express the reality of 'oikonomia theou', it can only do so by engaging in all aspects of social and political life. The Christological expression iterates the recurrence that the fully human Jesus entered the world and surrendered Himself for it.

The prominent implication for the delegation and the churches addressed by the letter of 1 Timothy is primarily missiological. Paul recalls his own example for all unbelievers (1:12-16). The event of Christ becoming human forms the basis for Paul's unique universal mission to the world (2:1-7). Moreover, this divine proclamation into the human realm has borne fruit (3:16). Timothy's task is to communicate Paul's vision of Christian existence as 'oikonomia theou' at the Ephesian church. This will involve correcting opponents, instructing in doctrine, and handling church leadership and administration, all in an effort to ensure that this church effectively becomes the household of God in society—a visible emblem and physical medium of His redeeming presence in the world.

'Oikos' as the house of God. This concept is also recognized within the Qumran community and relates to the idea of the church as the "temple of God" (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22), similar to the notion of the "*house of Yahweh*" in Hos. 8:1; 9:8, 15; Jer. 12:7; Zech. 9:8).¹⁵ Paul's visionary framework for the existence of Christians as 'oikonomia theou' (1:4, the divine pattern) within the church at Ephesus

¹⁵ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "οἶκος".

aims to ensure that the Ephesian church effectively becomes 'oikos theou' (3:15, the household of God) within society—a visible symbol and physical medium of His redeeming presence in the world.

Firstly, 1 Timothy 3:15, which discusses Paul's instructions, aims to educate the congregation on how they should live as the family of God, the living church of God. This does not imply a restriction to a home church at a specific time and place, and chapters 2 and 3 evoke the author's thoughts about the church gathering for public worship. There is no discussion of behavior in the outside world, but only within the scope of the church. Essentially, the authority of the Gospel's instructions and the formal demonstration of an error are mandated not only in public worship in Ephesus but wherever worship oversees conflicts with false teachers. Since 1 Timothy 3:14-16 is the heart of the entire letter, verse 15 is normative in determining the scope of teaching.

Implications of the concept of the church as 'oikos Theou' on church unity

In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul refers to the church as 'oikos Theou', or the household of God. As the church is called the household of God, it implies that God is the father or householder, and the church is His household. Thus, the first implication is that the church as 'ekklesia', which is the fellowship of believers across all ages and places, constitutes a single household unit with God as the head, father, or householder.

Secondly, as a household of God, the arrangement and organization of the church are framed within the concept of 'oikonomia Theou' or “the divine pattern.” 'Oikonomia Theou', understood as a concept aspiring to a pattern of life organized divinely (God's ordering of reality), where all aspects of life are subject to divine will, becomes a visionary framework that can unite local churches across all ages and places to ensure that the church effectively becomes 'oikos theou' in the world—a visible symbol and physical medium of God's redemptive presence in the world.

Thirdly, 'oikonomia Theou' or the divine pattern of life, depicted as the church as 'oikos' being “a chief basis, paradigm, and reference point for religious and moral as well as social, political, and economic organization, interaction, and theology,” further unites the church in a concrete model of unity where believers can live out their calling as members of the family of God.

Fourthly, the metaphor of the church as 'oikos Theou', framed by 'oikonomia Theou' in the understanding that the entire world belongs to God, can unite the church in a shared mission to extend the reality of 'oikos Theou' beyond the walls so that the way God organizes life can be known and adhered to by an increasing number of unbelievers.

3. Conclusion

1 Timothy 3:15 is a key verse in the entire letter of 1 Timothy and is situated within the context of 1 Timothy 1:3-3:16, which discusses the arrangement and organization of God's Household. This contextual unity is framed by the concept of 'oikonomia theou', "the divine pattern" (1:4), and the concept of 'oikos theou', "the household of God" (3:15), where Paul's focus as the author centers on "how one ought to behave in the household of God or oikos Theou" (3:15).

As in 1 Timothy 3:15, where Paul refers to the church (ekklesia) as 'oikos Theou' (household of God), the church as 'oikos Theou', framed by the framework of 'oikonomia Theou', constitutes "a chief basis, paradigm, and reference point for religious and moral as well as social, political, and economic organization, interaction, and theology" in the world, where God is the head or father of the church, the household with all its organizational arrangements subject to God's will.

How does the church as 'oikos Theou' impact the unity of the church? First, the church universally is a single household of God with God as the head, father, or householder to whom the church submits to His will. Second, 'oikonomia Theou' framing the church as 'oikos Theou' becomes a visionary framework that unites the church universally. Third, 'oikonomia Theou' that frames the church also unites the church in a concrete model of unity where believers can live out their calling as members of the family of God. Fourth, the metaphor of the church as 'oikos Theou' has missiological implications, becoming a shared mission of the church universally to extend the reality of 'oikos Theou' beyond the walls.

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