

June 27, 2004

Deacon: Qualifications

Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus. { [1Ti 3:8-13](#) }

With one exception, "apt to teach," I'd be inclined to define the qualifications for the office of deacon almost exactly the same as for the office of a minister. If we compare the two lists, we will enlighten both with added clarity. For example, can you imagine a preacher who is apt to teach standing in the pulpit and trying to deliver a sermon when he does not have a "pure conscience"?

"And let these also first be proved." You don't ordain a man hoping that he will improve and grow into the office. He must demonstrate the qualifications prior to ordination. Strong defines the word translated as "proved" in this way, "to test, examine, prove, scrutinise (to see whether a thing is genuine or not), as metals; to recognize as genuine after examination, to approve, deem worthy."

"Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things." Although Paul doesn't specifically mention the minister's wife in the qualifications for that office, it seems a bit short-sighted to think that these qualifications should not be applied to one person as fully as to the other. Often a deacon in the church, by virtue of doing his job well, becomes aware of personal information regarding members of the church. Occasionally he will share this information with his wife. Will the deacon and his wife become the church's gossip megaphones and broadcast private information that embarrasses and discourages members, or will they manifest a consistent disposition of confidentiality and grace that enables members to talk with them freely, knowing that their confidence is highly prized and protected? A gossiping deacon or deacon's wife will quickly destroy a sense of safety and spiritual trust in a church. Increasingly members will protect their private lives, often taking problems that the church's leadership could help them solve to other resources that often will do far more poorly than spiritually minded men in the church. I do not always share member confidences with my wife. Often, based on the issues, I conclude that the matter is best kept private between the member and me alone unless the member chooses to share it with others in the church. However, my wife's sense of personal dignity and trust is such that people who know her have no anxiety that she will betray their trust or confidence.

Someone might question, "The qualification forbids the deacon's wife being a slanderer, but what if she only speaks the truth about members?" If she speaks the truth in areas of that person's life that should be kept private, slander has no less occurred than if the facts had been misrepresented. The member will feel no less betrayed. Consequently, not only does the deacon or minister's work suffer, but the church's ability to provide safe and godly assistance to its members is compromised.

"For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus." Strong defines the word translated here as "degree," "of a grade of dignity and wholesome influence in the church."

It might not be a perfect parallel, but our use of the word "degree" to refer to a certificate of higher education seems appropriate here. A person has specific learning or career goals in mind and sacrifices money and time to go to a school that will provide the appropriate training. Eventually when the person has completed the class requirements, graduation will occur. He/She "purchased" the degree with

dedication, hard work, and demonstrated growth. Many years ago I knew a man who "purchased" a doctoral degree from a private school. He was studious enough, but instead of studying for years to gain the degree legitimately, he made significant financial contributions to the school and did minimal study. He was granted a doctoral degree. I must confess that when I saw him list himself as "Dr." I did not view the title with respect. This event illustrates "purchasing" a degree in a far less honorable way than Paul intended here. The specific price for this degree is a long and consistently wise use of the office of deacon. Only time and wise activity in the office earns this degree in the faith.

How many deacons should a church have? There is one pastor, though the New Testament model indicates more than one minister in each church. If you consider the size of the Jerusalem church in ['Ac 6](#) as possibly 10,000 members who were served by seven men, you don't need a large number of deacons. More than one should be viewed as nearly essential. An excessive number is not appropriate or necessary based on this initial example in Acts.

What distinguishes the two offices? I suggest that the qualifications are essentially the same with one exception. The minister must be "apt to teach," a qualification that does not apply to the deacon. Closely related to this point is the question of "calling." We hold that God calls a man to the ministry. Paul referred to the Lord "putting" him into the ministry. {['1Ti 1:12](#)} We note that he did not here refer to his apostleship, but to his "ministry." Based on this and other passages that refer to God's appointment or calling of preachers, I believe it is appropriate to add this point to the distinctions between the two offices. There is no passage that indicates a similar calling to the office of deacon. When the apostles first established the office of deacon, {['Ac 6](#)} they did not instruct the church to seek out men who gave evidence of God putting them into the position or function. They focused on men who met the specific qualifications listed. If the men qualified, the apostles ordained them to the work. Conduct qualifies a man for the office of deacon. Conduct, teaching ability, and calling qualifies a man for the office of ministry.

How should the two officers in the church work together? How do they integrate their various functions and duties? I have known deacons who were envious of their pastors, often injecting more roadblocks than help to their pastor. I have also known pastors who were so concerned at their authority that they were fearful of a strong deacon who truly filled his role effectively in the church. Over the years that I have served as pastor, I have been blessed with deacons who were godly partners with me in my ministry; men who sought ways to assist the church and me in our work. A church that enjoys this cooperative spirit between its pastor and deacons is supremely fortunate.

Spiritual maturity and wisdom are essential traits for either office. By virtue of the office a deacon must have some sense of financial propriety, for he often must make godly decisions regarding funds that belong to the church. He should never treat church funds as his own funds. Nor should he use church funds frivolously for pet personal projects or preferences. He should consider the collective mind of the church with each financial decision that he makes. "What would the whole church likely do if asked to direct me in this decision?" The church's decision may not be the same as the deacon's. However, he is the church's servant no less than the pastor and should follow godly wisdom, Biblical examples, and his sense of the church's wishes. He should not make an "edge of the envelope" decision and then try to convince the church that he did the right thing. If the decision nudges the edge of the envelope, he should delay action till he can obtain the church's specific direction. The confidence and comfort of the church with his practice in such matters will contribute greatly to his earned "degree and great boldness in the faith." Both he and the church will grow in their faith and their effectiveness in blessing those in the church who rely on them for guidance.

Inherent in the deacon's office as fully as in the ministry is the idea of a servant. He is the church's servant, not its overlord. We serve.

Elder Joe Holder