

The Letters from Paul – Session 13

Dear Timothy: Deacons Rock! Elect Some.

1 Timothy 3:1-12

Paul continues his teaching on intra - church leadership by citing qualifications for the role of deacon. Oddly, there is no set teaching in the New Testament that defines or delineates the exact duties of the deacon, nor is there a history of when, or even why, they came into existence. It is widely accepted that the role of deacon did exist in the early church before Paul's writing to Timothy, possibly beginning with the pronounced needs of widows as described in Acts 6:1-4:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against those of the Aramaic - speaking community because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So, the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

It should be noted that those chosen for service in the Jerusalem church were not called "deacons." Paul had a tendency to use the Greek word translated *deacon* for anyone who served the kingdom, including himself (Philippians 1:1). He includes the word in Romans 12:7 as a needed spiritual gift and models it personally by taking up money for the drought and famine-stricken Jerusalem believers in 2 Corinthians 8:1-15. There is little doubt that early believers would have easily recognized the role of deacon by the long-standing meaning of the basic Greek word. *Diakonos* essentially signified servant, with a specific first century meaning of, *waiter at table*. This definition was initially used to identify the character of the servant rather than form a job description of the official

church role. The absolute specifics of what a deacon was to do continued to be sketchy throughout scripture. The qualifications, however, became more and more specific and well known as the church continued to develop. This disconnect between qualifications versus role most likely did not have any adverse consequences for the early church in Ephesus. To understand *diakonos* as *servant* was to understand the subsidiary role of one who served the needy. The beauty of this self - defined flexibility undoubtedly allowed for many variations of the role from one church to the next as the first century church progressed.

The bulk of Hebrew history also assisted the new role of deacon become more established in role and function. William Barclay best details the historical social practices of the Jews that led to blanket care for the poor and disadvantaged. The Synagogue created an organization for helping people of need in a unified, cooperative sense. An individual person providing for the poor and hungry was frowned upon in each Hebrew community, with the preferred model being a collective support approach. Each Friday two collectors would go door to door to collect money and items from businesses and homes in order provide for the disadvantaged. The collected monies and items were pooled together and were distributed by a select committee. The poor were given enough food for two meals per day for fourteen days, unless a family already had food supplies for seven days. If that were the case, they were skipped on that round of distribution. There was also a collection and distribution plan for emergency needs that was also administered by committee. This approach was shifted into the early Christian church model and allowed for deacons to be both collector and distribution committee.

The Christian church clearly delineated two categories of leaders, overseers and deacons. Overseer, Elder and Bishop were for the most part interchangeable until the early second century and were the teacher - leader of the church. Philippians 1:1 cites both leader groups: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons." Overseers led all early churches, with the establishing evangelist filling the role until the church was strong enough to be led by another person. Often the establishing overseer would select the successor,

which is a practice Paul used in most cases, and if not, the church would select from within. In the case of deacon, however, not every church selected and installed servant leaders. In church bodies that did not utilize deacons, the overseer had to deal with a great deal more responsibility. Clearly the model demonstrated in Acts 6, accompanied by the qualifications found in the Timothy letters, was the best distribution of resources for the ministry - minded early church. In contrast to the Hebrew synagogue, the Christian church balanced social ministry with evangelism, requiring much more from servant leaders. If the Hebrew practices were one - dimensional, the early New Testament church was truly multi - dimensional.

Over time the role of deacon evolved into a greatly different model than the early church practiced. By the second century the deacon role was an established one in all churches. From that point forward it has morphed into the modern version that hardly resembles the original in any form. However, that can be said for virtually all aspects of the church, so this should not be seen as an indictment of modern leadership. Possibly the best way to view progress in deacon ministry over time is to grade today's practice with the original intent of the role. If service and base ministry is foundational to today's deacon ministry, the original intent has remained true for almost two thousand years. On the other hand, if the deacon ministry has become primarily a ruling body that "runs" the business of the church, the original intent has been replaced by a modern reaction. One has to admit that modern deacons should be in the know, and at times, decision makers. If, however, that role is the sole function, a generous break with the New Testament intent has occurred.

Qualifications for Deacons

Paul lists qualifications of deacons in verses I Timothy 3:8-13, leading with, *worthy of respect*. Many versions have *Men* leading the sentence, but in the Greek language 'men' is not actually there. Translators added it as an assumption of implication. The modern view of a leader who "commands respect" is quite foreign to Paul's description in this verse. Respect should not be automatically

garnered due to position alone. Respect must be earned by life - practice and modeling of righteous behavior. "Worthy" is a key descriptive in this qualification. Worth signifies some level of attainment and as such, respect is earned after outward expression of proper living. Due to the complexities of translating multiple - meaning Greek words into English, "respect" has more meanings in Greek than in English. The classic definition would be one of reciprocity, where a person is not only one who receives respect, but one who supplies it as well. In Paul's time, respect was first given, and then received. The same Greek word was used in I Timothy 2:4, "...quiet lives in all godliness and holiness," and suggests a person of dignity and integrity based on Christ's model.

Sincere is the next qualification of the deacon and signifies a person who "is not double - tongued," (NSRV). A modern colloquial phrase would be, "not speaking out of both sides of the mouth." A deacon is to always model Christ in the way they speak and communicate. Some have viewed this as being as simple as not gossiping, but in reality it means much more. The totality of a deacon's speech habits must be above board and overtly Christian, thus not being open to the charge of hypocrisy. Ralph Earle, in "Word Meanings in the New Testament," defines this as "not having the intent to deceive". Once again, integrity is to be part of a deacon's speech practices.

The next qualifier is, *not indulging in much wine*. Just as the overseer was to not have overindulgence issues with wine and strong drink, neither must the deacon. To have problems with wine would signify a lack of self - control on the part of the deacon. This would provide indication of poor judgment as well, and possibly jeopardize how he or she might treat other people or property. It is a historically accurate statement that virtually all people drank wine in the first - century Greco - Roman world (with the exception of Hebrew and pagan priests in respective temple ceremonies). While the Christian deacon was not excluded from drinking alcohol, he or she was to exercise great judgment when doing so.

Paul also taught that deacons *should not pursue dishonest gain*. One version reads, "Greedy of filthy lucre," but since "lucre" isn't used much anymore, the

idea of dishonest gain best covers the prohibition. This is all one word in Greek and occurs only in the New Testament in this verse and in Titus 1:7 in reference to a bishop. Obviously Paul had a single focus in the Timothy and Titus letters on integrity in all areas for church leaders. It is quite possible that the deacon would be in charge of church funds, especially if they served in ways similar to those in Jerusalem. Since money has always been a delicate subject to those in the church, financial sanity and smart practice was imperative for the deacon.

In verse nine Paul cites the need for deacons to *keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience*. The NSRV reads, *they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience*. In New Testament language, *mystery* does not hold the same meaning as the common English term today. Rather than mysterious, cryptic or unfathomable, the Greek word denotes something “once hidden which has been discovered and made known by revelation from God” (Hovey, 42). This was uniquely necessary in the pagan - infested city of Ephesus, especially with the inherent problem of false teachers within the church. In I Timothy 1:19 Paul speaks of false teachers who have rejected their conscience and damaged their faith. In essence, they missed the entire point of faith in Christ. It was never a rational exercise led by a rational spiritual leader teaching a variation of existing truths. It was God delivering the message of salvation in a heretofore-unknown mode that came with but one requirement: Faith.

British pastor and writer, Tom Wright, writes: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed”; in other words, don’t let the pagan world shape your worldview, your praxis, your symbolic universe, your thinking”. In Acts 6:13 the seven people chosen were “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.” While these early servants are not referred to as deacons, they serve as vicarious models of what deacon servants should embody. First and foremost, the deacon must be a person filled with the Holy Spirit and one in touch with the foundational truths of Christianity. The Life Application Commentary defines the “*mystery or deep truths* as the plan of salvation now fully known in Christ (Romans 16:26; 1 Corinthians. 2:7, 4:1; Ephesians 3:3-9; Colossians 1:26). Originally unknown to humanity, this plan became crystal clear when Jesus rose

from the dead”.

Paul also commands deacon candidates *first be tested, then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons*. The New English Bible reads, “undergo a scrutiny,” which suggests the entire church engage in the process of evaluating the totality of the candidate’s worthiness. Stott sees this as a “period of probation in which the congregation may assess the character, beliefs and gifts of the deacon candidate”. This rigorous process would have been especially important in the first century due to the volume of immigrants into the new faith from disparate backgrounds. It would be hard to argue against such a structure and fashion in today’s church as well, especially considering the odd variety of methods in use for selecting deacons in the modern church.

The next section of qualifications is easily the most volatile for the modern church to both decipher and apply. Sadly, this has not stopped many churches from ignoring any and all levels of difficulty and opting for the very easy, literal reading of verse eleven. Easy, however, does not always mean correct or historically accurate, and literal always has a margin for error when taking scripture from Greek to English. This is especially true when the biases of translators become additions to the text, which has happened numerous times in I Timothy 3:11. The New International Version reads: *In the same way their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything*. Simple, right? Case closed. Deacons who have wives are males, so putting two and two together provides the orthodox answer for selecting deacons...Males Only, Females Need Not Apply! The biggest problem with this literal take is the tedious fact that “*their*” is not in the original Greek sentence. It gets worse, as the word Paul used (*gynaikes*) is a rather ordinary word for both *women* and *wives*. The Revised Standard Version uses, “Women in like manner...,” while the New Revised Standard Version opts for “Women likewise...,” both utilizing the majority usage of the Greek word most common for a female.

In reality, this verse could refer to the wives of deacons or deaconesses or female deacons or just women. While the odds favor simply *women*, the argument must

be augmented with other components in order to make the strongest case possible for Paul's meaning. Possibly the other strongest fact would be where he places this statement. It must not be lost on the modern reader that this segment is in the middle of his overall teaching on deacon qualifications. With the original language almost certainly favoring *women* over *wives*, and Paul citing qualifiers for both women and men for deacon ministry, the role should be one open for qualified *people* regardless of gender. Yet another indicator is the fact that Paul does not list qualifications for wives of overseers. If the wife of the lead overseer did not merit qualifications, why would the wife of a secondary leader need to meet specific criteria? Plus, why would a qualification be necessary in the first place if the wife or spouse were not elected to a role of service?

One could easily ask why did Paul not make all of this easier by simply citing *deaconesses* in verse eleven rather than the somewhat troublesome *wives* or *women*? He did not have a choice as the Greek did not have a separate word at that time for "deaconess," as *diakonos* was a one - size - fits - all term for both male and female deacons. An additional support for female deacons in this verse is Paul laying down stringent qualifiers for the women. Just as he did specifically for men, Paul charged the Ephesus church to hold women deacon candidates to high, ethical standards. His specific instruction concerning female deacons state *they must be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything*. Women servants must exhibit the same hallmarks of integrity as their male counterparts, plus specifically, they should not slander or gossip, they must show moderation and self - control in all things, and they should faithfully discharge their duties in and for the church. If one considers the references to Phoebe of Cenchreae (Romans 16:1), Euodia and Synyche (Philippians 4:2), Tabitha (Acts 9:36-41), and others mentioned, the case is made for female deacons serving during the formative years of the church.

Paul's final qualification for the deacon candidate states, *a deacon must be the husband of one wife and must manage his children and his household well*. The easiest deduction here would be the prohibition against divorce, but, just as with the case of overseer qualifications, no one really knows what Paul had in mind. It

could mean that Paul prohibits anyone who has divorced a spouse or, it could apply to remarriage after divorce or, it could prohibit the practice of polygamy. Any and all of these were issues affecting the early church and each are covered in scripture at some level, so all are active possibilities. Theologian Wayne Grudem leans heavily toward polygamy being the focus of this verse:

A better interpretation is that Paul was prohibiting a polygamist (a man who presently has more than one wife) from serving. All the other qualifications refer to a man's present status, not his entire past life. In I Timothy 3:1-7 it does not mean "one who has never been a lover of money," but "one who is not now a lover of money." It does not mean "one who has been above reproach for his whole life," but "one who is now above reproach." If we made these qualifications apply to one's past life, then we would exclude from office almost everyone who became a Christian as an adult. Paul could have said, "having been married only once" if he had wanted to, but he did not.

Obviously this view does not answer all questions relating to marital status or history of deacon candidates, but it does assist in widening the debate. It is far too easy to take yet another literal reading of these verses and stake out a dogmatic theological and doctrinal stance for deacon qualifications. This cursory approach would ignore the contextual and language issues constantly in play when breaking down Paul's letters. Since no one knows exactly what Paul had in mind for the Ephesus church, it would seem that dogmatism would not be a legitimate, even ethical option.

Deacon Candidates in a Nutshell

To cite specific duties for a deacon in the New Testament would be quite difficult. Possibly the best description of "deaconing" is found in Acts 6, despite the fact that the seven people chosen to serve were not called deacons. They were simply seven people chosen to serve the unique needs of the Jerusalem church. To make matters even more complicated, the only specific reference to a deacon in a

church setting in the New Testament was Phoebe, who incidentally, was female. It is no wonder that today's practices and processes are all over the proverbial board with little similarities existing across denominational lines. Scripture teaches us that deacons are first and foremost servants who actively serve other people and subsequently, the church itself. One must meet certain qualifications, but the specifics listed by Paul must never be read in a cursory or trivial manner. These verses require more than a literal glance and instant dogma. To properly honor this ministry role a church would need to attend to these verses through deep study and even deeper prayer.

Takeaway:

It would be safe to admit that few church roles, structures and functions present today resemble those of the early church. This reality would definitely be the case when viewing the biblical format for deacon, as we are provided much more in the way of qualifications than in direct function. What ministry description we do have, however, demonstrates that the early deacon was exclusively one who served the people. This fact makes a great deal of sense after considering that Paul charged the overseer (pastor/minister/teacher) with overall leadership, and clearly demonstrated that two distinct roles were both necessary and complimentary. In order for the overseer to adequately evangelize and teach, the deacons were to take care of the day-to-day needs of the people, specifically orphans, widows and the poor. The early church became the social safety net for those who were marginalized or who had no hope for survival otherwise. The deacons, in effect, modeled the gospel through direct ministries and assisted the overseer in "proving" the gospel message genuine. It was the almost perfect blending together of words and actions that combined to demonstrate and explain God's plans through the church.

It certainly seems correct that today's approach to deacon ministry morphed along the historical timeline and now resembles more an oversight committee than ministry outlet. It would be difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the drift, but chances are it began at about the same point that the modern church lost its

prime position of influencing society. Few would argue the fact that we live in a "post church" age, a time in which the church is closer to historical artifact than the agents of "salt and light" that Jesus commanded. It is arguable, but possible, that the demise is the result of losing the ministry of deacon to a perceived need for oversight and leadership. Possibly a return to the biblical roots of pure service is an answer to the decline of the institution. If so, Paul's incomplete instructions on the role of deacon serve as a real jumping off point for the reclamation of the deacon servant. Paul was more than thorough in the qualifications for deacon and it would undoubtedly serve the church well to take *all* items on the list seriously when selecting for the office. It is also imperative to fully and adequately contextualize Paul's words to Ephesus and Crete and not fall prey to the easy, literal read, which automatically disqualifies segments of the church from service.

In the proper context of the status of women in the Greco-Roman world and, the often-troublesome translational issues, we can readily see that Paul wrote to these specific churches at these specific times with these specific instructions. Did Paul entertain the notion that we would be dealing with questions related to deacon ministry almost two thousand years later? The chances are all but nil that he did, so to do justice to his writings we have no choice but to contextualize them before application. This should open doors to the possibility of women in deacon ministry and, at the very least, allow for discussion on the actual meaning of "husband of one wife." To be willing to contextualize these verses is to be willing to be honest with scripture as it was written. Anything short of this is simply selective reading and interpretation to suit either the status quo or personal preference. Even if little changes as a result of the contextualization process, due diligence would have taken place. The office of deacon alone is worthy of such an openness to the possibilities of scripture.

Amen & Amen

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