

THE LORD'S SERVANTS

by Ray C. Stedman

I find much confusion today, even here at PBC, about who the leaders of the church ought to be, and what these terms, elders, deacons, and pastors, mean. Anne-Marie Ritchie was telling me yesterday that when their son Roddie was about eight years old or so, at school one day he was asked to write down what his father did. Roddie wrote, "My father is a rabbi, or a priest, or a minister, or something like that." Ron is still trying to figure that out!

When you come to the New Testament, however, there is no confusion as to what the prescribed leadership of the church is to be. The Apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy gives specific directions of what the elders are to do and what kind of men they are to be. Elders are to know and to seek the mind of the Lord, to guide the burgeoning ministry of the congregation as it develops, in direct inspiration of the Spirit of God, as each one in the congregation finds what the Lord wants him or her to do. The elders are to oversee that, to guide it, to correct it, if need be, along the lines of what the Scriptures teach and what the Spirit of God has led them to understand as they seek the mind of the Lord in prayer.

In the passage from First Timothy which we will be looking at this morning, Paul now turns his attention to the deacons.

In this section, beginning with Verse 8 of Chapter 3, we are going to try to understand what makes deacons "deek."

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain; they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then if they prove themselves blameless let them serve as deacons. The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. {1 Tim 3:8-11 RSV}

It is very striking that, in the passage on elders, the apostle said nothing about women, for in the New Testament churches there were no women elders. It is obvious that the Lord himself chose no women apostles. There are reasons for that, which Paul has already dealt with that in this letter. But when he comes to deacons it is clear that Paul includes women in this ministry. We will say more about that when we come to that verse.

All the scholars agree that this function of deacon in the early church arose from the quarrel over the distribution of food, described in the sixth chapter of Acts. There were two language divisions in the church at Jerusalem -- the Jews who spoke Greek because they were born in Greek-speaking communities, and those who spoke Hebrew (Aramaic was the actual form of it). There was a murmuring among the Greek-speaking Jews who had become Christians, because they said their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. It is interesting that the early church did not depend upon any kind of community supply for needy people in their midst, but took care of this directly themselves by a daily distribution of food to widows. Food stamps had not been thought of yet, so they handed food out directly to those in need.

The Greek-speaking widows, however, felt neglected. They brought the problem to the apostles, who told them to choose out from among them seven men (for whom they gave certain qualifications) who were to handle this problem -- "but we [i.e., we apostles, we elders] are to give ourselves continually to the ministry of the Word of God and to prayer, seeking the mind of the Lord," they said {cf, Acts 6:4 KJV}. Thus arose the first evidence of the work of deacons in the church.

Here are the three qualifications the apostles laid down for those deacons: they were to be men of good reputation, well-known for their character in the congregation; they were to be filled with the Spirit (i.e., they were to have a biblical view of life; they were to understand the revelation of life that the Spirit of God had

taught, and thus be spiritual-minded men); and third, they were to possess the gift of wisdom (they were to know how to apply the truth of the Word of God to specific situations. That is what wisdom is). These men were obviously appointed to serve the church. Thus, deacons are to serve the church and their Lord by handling the practical problems of administration, of distribution, of finances, whatever may be the problem within the church. As for the deacons in Acts 6, they were chosen by the congregation and confirmed by the elders. But essentially, they were the church's helpers, not the servants of the church; they were the servants of the Lord, but they were serving the church, doing for the many what would be difficult for individuals to do for themselves.

In our church here we have many who serve as deacons. I am sorry we have never developed the habit of calling them deacons; I think we should do so. But regardless of what they have been called, there have been many deacons, both male and female, in this congregation. For instance, the ushers who seated you this morning are serving as deacons in this congregation. They assist us in the orderly carrying-on of a meeting. They help you find seats. They turn on and off lights, open doors, solve problems and watch out over the congregation to see if anyone needs any particular kind of help. They serve voluntarily, willingly, and repeatedly, Sunday after Sunday, without thanks or without recognition, and they do so, "as unto the Lord." They are deacons, and we ought to be very grateful for them.

Right now, out in the nursery, there are attendants who give themselves regularly to the ministry of taking care of your children so that you might have free time to listen to the message and not read the bulletin, etc. They too are ministering as deacons when they do that. That is not always an easy task. (By the way, there is a Scripture verse that describes the work that goes on in the nursery: "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed"! This is what is happening in the nursery right now.) I am always very grateful for those who are willing to serve as deacons of the church, freely and voluntarily, in the nursery. We have had some remarkably faithful people who have done so for years without any public recognition.

Those who take the collection and count the money are also deacons of this church. When the money is taken back here it is not dumped into a sack and handed to the staff (as some of you suspect!) but it is accounted for and deposited in a bank. Though they are never recognized publicly, those people who do that are deacons. Those who keep the books for us are deacons. For years we had a faithful couple, Ed and Lydia Mason (they have both gone to be with the Lord now), who kept the books for us and never charged a dime for it although that work took hours of their time. Thus they served faithfully in the office of deacons of this church.

All who serve on committees are deacons. If you are on the building committee, or the maintenance committee, or if you served on the committee that planned the Family Faire, that is the work of a deacon. Those who prepare the communion for us do not say anything about it, but the communion table appears regularly. They are serving as deacons. Our organists, our pianists and others who play so faithfully Sunday after Sunday are not paid; they are deacons. The woman who makes the banners which decorate the auditorium so beautifully serves as a deacon of this church. So there are large numbers of people who are serving in that capacity. We do not have a board of deacons as some churches do. I do not think there was such in the early church. Deacons were volunteers who took on specific assignments of service in order that the congregation might be able to conduct its services and its ministry in helpful and wonderful ways.

The apostle now gives us certain qualifications for deacons:

First, the men: They are to be "serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain." These are personal qualifications.

- We have looked at this word "serious" earlier in this letter. It means to be a realist, not to be a dreamer who chases after rainbows, not one who is easily influenced, but one who sees life realistically and handles it that way.
- Deacons are not to be "double-tongued." That is an interesting word, Those of us who grew up on the Lone Ranger and Tonto remember that every now and then Tonto used to say. "White man speak with forked tongue." That is exactly the idea that this word has -- a tongue that says two things, one thing to one person and another thing to someone else. Those people, male or female, are not to be deacons

in the church. Deacons are chosen because they are believable people. They are not given to pleasing people by saying things that differ from person to person. They are straightforward, honest-speaking people who tell the truth.

- Third, deacons are not to be "given to much wine." We have already commented on this with regard to elders. It is clear that the wine involved here did have the possibility of being intoxicating, so it was not to be indulged in very much. Deacons are not to be winos or alcoholics in any degree at all, or to give themselves, even occasionally, to excessive use of wine. They are to be moderate and temperate in this regard.
- Fourth, they are "not greedy for gain." The best term for that today is, they are not to be "wheeler-dealers," always looking out for a fast buck, always out to take advantage of situations to gain some more money. This applies especially to those who handle the finances of a church. Every now and then you read in the newspapers a scandal about people -- sometimes even pastors -- who misuse church funds. This is definitely to be recognized as a temptation to those who handle the congregation's money. So it is especially to be observed that deacons are not "greedy for gain." Some checkup is to be made along that line.

Like the elders, deacons are also to have a track record of certain things they have demonstrated. There are three of them here:

- First, "They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." "The mystery of the faith" is an unusual term. It means, of course, the Scriptures, the whole revelation from God. A mystery is not something mysterious in the New Testament so much as it is something that is revealed only to the initiated; it is not something everyone understands. This is surely true of the Scriptures. The world rejects the Bible, laughs at it, ridicules it, and says it is a fanatical book that does not deal realistically with life. But we who have come to know the Bible, know that is not true. It is the world that is confused and dealing unrealistically with life. The Bible sees things the way they really are. So a deacon should be one who has understood the Word of God, who holds it and believes it himself.

Notice that this does not say that a deacon has to teach, although there is nothing wrong with a deacon being a Bible teacher. In fact, among the first seven deacons mentioned in Acts 6, Philip was an outstanding evangelist, and Stephen was a mighty prophet; they were good teachers of the Word. But a deacon is not required by virtue of his office to teach. Elders are. Elders have to be teachers of the Word of God. Deacons are to "hold the mystery of the faith."

- Second, deacons are to hold it in "a clear conscience," i.e., they practice what they preach; they believe it, and they behave accordingly. That standard of practical behavior is necessary.
- Then third, deacons are to be tried out first: "Let them also be tested first; then if they prove themselves blameless let them serve as deacons." Obviously, this means in some kind of an initial assignment, when one is watched to see how he does. The reward of service is always more service. That is the problem, isn't it? Some of you who have been asked to do things, did well, so you were asked to do something else. But we are not to look on that as punishment. It is a privilege, rather, to serve the church of Jesus Christ, a privilege to live for the Lord. We are all called to be servants of Christ. To be given opportunity to do more is a great privilege. So, "let them also be tested first." If they do well, then they are to serve as deacons. This seems to imply a longer term of service, perhaps over a period of years.

The apostle now turns to women deacons. It is true that this word "women" here can mean the wives of the male deacons, but I do not take it that way, largely because there is no corresponding treatment of the wives of elders in the preceding passage. If Paul was concerned about how the wives of the deacons behaved, he would likely have been concerned about the way the wives of the elders behaved, but he does not say anything about them. I take this, therefore, as a reference to female deacons.

In the 16th chapter of Romans there is a woman, Phoebe, who was called a deacon by the Apostle Paul (not a

deaconess, although that is the word used in our English translation, for there is no word for female deacon.) Phoebe, Paul says, was a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, which was the port city for the city of Corinth. Serving as a deacon in that congregation she had been a great help to the Apostle Paul himself. So here we have women deacons.

There are four things that should characterize them:

- First, they too are to be "serious." This is the same word which was used to describe the men. Women deacons are to be realistic people, not dreamers following after rainbows, not given to visionary tasks, but people who deal realistically with what life presents before them.
- Second, they are not to be "slanderers." Literally, in the original language, the term is, "she-devils." Women are not to be she-devils. I am not going to ask you how many she-devils you know, but this is an interesting term. It refers to women who were given to the practice of gossiping and slandering the reputations of others. I know that men can do that kind of thing too, but women probably have more opportunity to do so because men are involved in work away from their homes, while women oftentimes gather together in their own neighborhoods so it is easy for them to talk about people. Care must be exercised, therefore, in choosing women deacons. They must not be known as wreckers of reputations, slanderers, she-devils.

I have known for a long time about a congregation in another state which had a continual record of unrest in the church. The pastors and the board of elders were always at odds with one another. Nothing seemed to work out, and that church's whole ministry was hindered for long years by a continual series of trouble and unrest. Recently it was discovered that the wife of one of the elders had for years been deliberately telling lies about the leaders of the church, planting innuendoes in people's minds, and constantly undermining the ministry of the church. No one realized it because she was so clever, so subtle about it. But finally it all came out that, for years, this one person had been wrecking the ministry of an evangelical church, which is in an influential situation, by her slander of individuals in that congregation. That is exactly what the apostle is talking about here. A woman is not to serve as a deacon if she is a slanderer.

- Then third, women deacons are to be "temperate." Here again is a word about their drinking habits. It also includes other habits such as eating, perhaps, or even work. Some people are workaholics. Somebody told me the other day that in the office of a workaholic you will see the sign, "Thank God it's Monday!" Some people can give themselves to work so much that they can destroy themselves. Women are to be temperate in that regard as well.
- Then the last qualification is that they are to be "faithful in all things." They are to be responsible, trustworthy individuals; having been given assignments, they will carry them through. Thank God we have a great many such women in our congregation. I could name a whole long list of them, and we are grateful for them. They serve in many capacities; they labor so willingly and so beautifully behind the scenes, doing things for which the whole congregation ought to be grateful. The apostle later points out that their service will produce that kind of gratitude.

Paul closes with a general word of instruction, both for the males, and for male and female deacons alike.

Let deacons be the husband of one wife, and let them manage their children and their households well; {1 Tim 3:12 RSV}

Clearly, that is addressed to male, married deacons. If they are married, they are to be, literally, "one-woman men." That is not really insisting that they be married, because Paul himself was not married, nor was Timothy, as far as we can tell at this point. Deacons are to be men who, if they are married, have their eye only for one woman. (We have also seen that with regard to the elders.) Deacons also are to manage their children and their households well. If they have families, you can tell a lot about deacons and their ability to function in the congregation by the way their households are run; whether they face the problems that may come, how

they handle them, etc. All this is to be taken note of when people are chosen to be deacons.

Finally, the last word here is:

... for those who serve well as deacons [male or female] gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith which is in Christ Jesus. {1 Tim 3:13 RSV}

Two things will result when the service of a deacon is done in a rightful way:

- First, it will create a great sense of appreciation on the part of the congregation -- deacons will have "good standing for themselves." Their own ministry will be widely received and appreciated. We ought to be careful to be aware of all those who are serving us as a congregation, and, every now and then, there ought to be some way of recognizing them. I am delighted that in recent days, we, as a congregation, have taken on sending those who have faithfully served us to Hawaii for a couple of weeks. We did that with one couple. We sent two other couples to Carmel as a gift of appreciation from the congregation. It is right that we should give thanks, and not take for granted those who so diligently and faithfully serve us week after week after week. They are not being paid, they are not hired to do this work; they are volunteering it in the name of Christ. That should earn for them a great sense of appreciation on the part of the congregation.
- But the second thing Paul says is most interesting. He says that deacons earn for themselves, "great confidence in the faith which is in Christ Jesus." The word is really, "boldness." When you serve the Lord with all your heart in whatever ministry he gives you, especially if it is on behalf of the whole congregation, you develop a wonderful sense of God at work with you helping you solve problems, and this creates a deep sense of boldness.

I have in my hand a remarkable paper which was given to me a few Sundays ago by a deacon of this church who works in one of the major industries of this area. Without knowing that I was going to preach on this theme at all, he shared this with me. I then took the liberty of sharing with the rest of the elders an experience he had at work that confirms what this passage is talking about.

This man said that he began to realize that if Jesus was Lord of his life, he was not only Lord at church, and in his Christian relationships, but he was Lord of his life at work and could work through him at his assigned tasks just as freely and abundantly as he did in any church-related matter. So he began to lean on the Lord at work, expecting God to help him to think of insights and aspects of his work that others, perhaps, would not see. He found it was true that the Lord did help him to see things others did not see. He found that he had, in a sense, an edge on the others because the Lord of Glory was enlightening his mind and heart to see things about his work that others would pass by.

He was given a special assignment to evaluate a certain kind of work, and noticed things about it that indicated weakness. He saw another way to do something, but the project had progressed to the point that it was difficult to expect the management to change. But when he presented his conclusions he found that the Lord was with him. To his amazement, against great opposition, the management did change. They scrapped the other program and went ahead with his. Out of this, this man says he came to a conclusion that a three-mode plan was at work. He said,

1. I would inherently have the knowledge needed for the situation at hand.
2. It would have been placed in my consciousness to look into, just prior to need, what information would be required, and my part was to listen and act no matter how irrelevant the action seemed at the time.
3. Someone would be ready in a presentation audience to volunteer additional information I might need for clarification of a conclusion.

Then he says,

What reassurance! It was coming through that I could operate with a special sense of knowing the Lord was interested and active in each circumstance. The result was a new feeling of security and boldness for the conception of and selling of rather audacious departures from the conventional. This was not foolish boldness, but based upon liberation from haunting concern over critical eventualities.

That is an outstanding testimony to what Paul is saying. When you serve the Lord, in any capacity, you gain from God; and it is promised here that those who serve as deacons in the congregation will gain great boldness in the faith. What a wonderful promise, and how adequately and fully it is confirmed by this testimony!

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for the practical quality of your Word. How it deals with such simple and yet practical matters! Teach us to be faithful ministers of the gospel of grace; to depend upon you in all things, reckoning upon your wisdom imparted to us. Thank you for that possibility. And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit go with each of you. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

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