

In a church in the USA, a minister was given the task of training deacons. As part of his preparation for the training course, he contacted the director of the local Philadelphia Restaurant School and asked, "What qualities do you look for in a waiter?" The director explained that, above all else, a good waiter is someone who notices what people need and gives it to them even before they ask. It may seem strange to compare deacons to restaurant personnel, but the connection is biblical. As we saw from Acts 6, the first deacons in the early church in Jerusalem were appointed to serve meals. The apostles used the Greek word for "deaconing" when they spoke of "serving tables". Deacons are the waiters of the church.

The election of the first deacons explains the primary difference between elders and deacons. There is a practical division of labour between the only two ordained offices in the church of Jesus Christ. Like the apostles, elders devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). They labour in the spiritual work of intercession and proclamation. On the other hand, deacons, as their title indicates, serve. They take care of people's material needs in a spiritual way. Paul sets out the qualifications for deacons in his first letter to Timothy, where he says that a deacon must have a dignified life (v.8), a sound doctrine (vv.9-10), and a stable family (vv.11-12).

1. A Dignified Life

Paul begins by saying a deacon's life must be worthy of respect: "Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain". As was the case with elders, God is more concerned with who deacons are - their character - than with what they do. Deacons must be dignified, in the sense of having a kind of personal dignity. They must be respectable both inside and outside the church. They should have no mark against their name that would attract attention especially from the outside.

Deacons must be "sincere", literally "not double-tongued". They must not engage in double-talk that is, say one thing to one person and another thing to someone else. The word of a deacon ought to be one of the strongest guarantees in the church. People both inside and outside the church must be able to take deacons at their word. One reason deacons must be careful what they say is that they know so much about people's private and personal lives.

Deacons must "not" be "indulging in much wine". As usual the Bible puts things in just the right way. Deacons are not forbidden to drink wine altogether, because God permits Christians to drink some wine (e.g. 1 Timothy 5:23). But he does want his people - especially his officers in his church - to be sober. Deacons are also not to be greedy for "dishonest gain". Like elders, they must not be in love with money. Sometimes deacons have to handle money given for diaconal work. It would be a terrible breach of trust and sin to use it for personal advantage. By definition, a deacon is someone who serves, not someone who helps himself. In the use of money, as in the use of words and alcohol, a deacon must lead a dignified life.

2. A Sound Doctrine

Qualifications for service begin with conduct, but that is not where they end. Deacons must have sound doctrine as well as dignified lives: "They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith (or "the mystery of the faith") with a clear conscience". We see here that the deacon's practical service springs out of his faith in the gospel. The expression "the deep truths of the faith" or "the mystery of the faith" is a favourite one for Paul. It's not deep faith that cannot be understood. It's not mysterious in that it cannot be fathomed or shared. It can, but it only comes by a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's an expression that refers to the essential truths of the Christian faith - the basic doctrines of Christianity - especially as they relate to the sacrificial saving character of Jesus' death. No-one can make any sense out of that unless it is revealed to them by the inward light of the Holy Spirit. It comes by being born again.

The reason deacons have to be sound in their doctrine is their influence in the church. Since deacons are being put towards the front of the church's life and ministry it is important for them to understand the core values of the faith and of our theological position in the PCV. Although they are not required to prove themselves "able to teach", there are some ways that a deacon may teach. For example, when deacons visit the sick or those in prison, they bring spiritual encouragement. Often they teach people how to manage their personal affairs in a biblical way, especially their finances. Deacons also teach others how to serve. They do not have to accomplish all of the mercy ministry themselves, but they are responsible to make sure that it all gets done. So by word and example they teach the church how to serve. Also, deacons should be ready to evangelize. Whenever they help the poor or the sick or the prisoner or the aged, they do it in the name of Jesus Christ, with a testimony to his saving power. Otherwise, the church can become just another social service. To carry out their ministry of discipleship and evangelism, deacons must hold on to the deep truths of the faith. And they are to do this with a clear conscience. If they ever find themselves beginning to doubt the fundamentals of the faith, they ought to seek the help and correction of their elders.

The best way to find out if deacons are sound in their doctrine is to examine them before they take office: "They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons". The fact that deacons must be tested proves that their role in the church was official. The New Testament uses the word "deacon" (diakonos) loosely to describe anyone who serves. But at least by the end of Paul's ministry, "deacon" had become a recognized office in the church. The Bible gives freedom by not specifying how such officers are to be examined. How they are scrutinized is left to the discretion of the church. Often, deacons prove their worth by serving in other ministries. This is a universal principle of Christian ministry: the way to prepare for greater service is to be diligent in some lesser ministry. Faithful ministry is both rewarded by God and recognized by the church. In Presbyterian churches, deacons are nominated by members of the church, examined by the elders, and then elected by the congregation. But however it is done, a deacon's life and doctrine must be approved.

3. Deacons' Wives or Deaconesses?

In verse 11 Paul says, "In the same way their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything". The Greek word Paul uses in this verse, translated "wives" in the NIV (gynaikas) can mean either "wives" or "women". Some scholars suggest, therefore, that in verse 11 the Greek word does not refer to wives but to deaconesses or female deacons. So the question arises whether women served as deaconesses in the New Testament Church. The strongest reason for thinking that these women were deaconesses is the way they are introduced. Both verse 8 and verse 11 contain the same Greek word, translated "likewise" in v.8 and "in the same way" in v.11, which sounds as if it introduces a new office. Furthermore, these women are to be "worthy of respect" or "dignified", which is the same phrase used to describe deacons back in v.8. Taken together, these parallels make it sound as if the women Paul had in mind were to fulfil a separate but equal office in the church. Furthermore, if the Bible meant "wives", we might expect it to say "their wives" or "the wives" so as to eliminate any possibility of confusion but there is no possessive adjective ("their") or definite article ("the") in the Greek - unlike the NIV translation. Also one wonders why there should be instructions or qualifications for deacons' wives but none for elders' wives. Since the meaning of the Greek word "gynaikas" is not certain, perhaps it is best to translate it as "woman helpers". Indeed, it is possible to argue that these women were neither deacons' wives, nor deaconesses or female deacons, but women who assisted the deacons. Undoubtedly the work of the deacons would involve situations where the presence of women would be an advantage.

However, if the office of deaconess is not established in 1 Timothy 3, the diaconal ministry of women is certainly present elsewhere in the Bible. New Testament women frequently carried out diaconal ministry, in the broad sense of the word. Consider Dorcas, who was

“always doing good and helping the poor” (Acts 9:36). Or Tryphena and Tryphosa, women described as “women who work hard in the Lord” (Romans 16:12). Or especially there is Phoebe who Paul describes as “a servant of the church in Cenchrea” - literally a “deaconess”. In the PCV the office of deacon is open to both men and women and we have had a number of women serve in that office over the past 15 years here at Canterbury.

If women are to serve, they must be qualified. Therefore, they should display the characteristics described in 1 Timothy 3:11. According to this verse, the women who serve in diaconal ministry must be “worthy of respect” or “dignified”. They must be women who are held in high regard both inside and outside the church. They must not be “malicious talkers” - the Greek word used by Paul here being one that is sometimes used of the devil himself (e.g. Revelation 12:9-10). The reason is clear - diaconal work often involves personal matters. The private affairs of an individual or household should remain private, except in so far as they require the spiritual care of elders or deacons. Women who serve must not be gossips. Also they must be “temperate” or “sober-minded”. This refers not simply to alcohol, but to self-control in every area of life. Deaconesses or women deacons must not be self-indulgent in their use of food, clothing or possessions. They must be stable emotionally. And these women must be “trustworthy in everything”. They must be utterly reliable and completely dependable. The ministry of such women is vital to the health of the church.

4. A Stable Family

If they are married, deacons must have stable families: “A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well” (v.12). Being the husband of but one wife has to do with marital fidelity. It does not mean that bachelors are ineligible for the office of deacon, but it does mean that a deacon is a one woman man. If he is unmarried, he must maintain sexual purity. If he is married, he must be monogamous. However, this qualification is also positive - as a husband he must love and serve his wife. And he must be a good father - meaning that he should discipline his children with love. Since households included servants in those days, this verse also touches on a man’s working relationships. How can a deacon be respectable in the church if he is not respectable in the market place? The reason for these high standards is that the church is “the household of God” (4 Timothy 3:15). Therefore, one of the best ways to tell if a man is ready to become a deacon is to see how he conducts his own household. A man who cannot manage his own household well will bring disorder to God’s house.

5. A Deacon’s Reward

Diaconal work is very demanding. The standards of the office are difficult. Sometimes deacons and deaconesses get tired of meeting the same needs over and over again. Other times they are perplexed about what mercy means in a particular situation. Over time, they may become discouraged in their service. Perhaps because of the difficulty of the office, the biblical qualifications for deacons end with an encouraging promise: “Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus” (v.13). Although much of a deacon’s work is done in private, it is noticed and commended by God. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing in the eyes of the local church because of their loyal and loving service over many years. As a direct result they may be entrusted with greater responsibilities. Some male deacons may well become elders as they mature in the faith, but some of the best deacons should remain deacons for life because that is what they are called and gifted to do. The other advantage for faithful deacons is great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus, which is an additional benefit to their own faith. This results from putting faith into practice in the service of the congregation, and finding Christ faithful in giving strength to those who humbly depend on him. Assurance of faith does not come through introspection, but through service. Those who labour for the Lord most actively love him most confidently.

What should be made of the biblical qualifications for deacons? First, they are a guide for the church. They help Christians know what to look for when it comes time for deacons to

(1 Timothy 3:8-13; Acts 6:1-7; Romans 16:1-2)

be nominated or elected. Second, these qualifications are the divine standard for deacons. They are a reminder of how God expects them to behave and what he expects them to believe. Finally, these qualifications are a worthy goal for anyone who might eventually become an officer in the church. Make yourself available to serve the Lord. Ask the Holy Spirit to make your life dignified, your doctrine sound, and your family stable. Even if you never become a deacon, your time will not have been wasted. The qualifications for deacons are simply the virtues of a Christian exercised to a high degree.

The diaconate is the office in the church that most closely resembles the servanthood of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus sometimes used the word “deacon” (diakonos) to describe his own ministry. This is the case with his crucial description of his ministry in Mark 10:43-45 - “.....whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”. The heart of our salvation is the servant heart of Jesus - his selfless, self-giving attitude - in ministering to our greatest need, the need for forgiveness and peace with God.

Amen

Prepared by Rev. Grant Lawry, Canterbury Presbyterian Church, Canterbury, Melbourne, Australia for use of the Canterbury congregation.