

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 26, Number 40

October 3, 2010



Deacon Qualifications: Part 2

Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. (1 Timothy 3:9)

Since the preacher's position involves the preaching of the gospel, Paul requires that he be "Apt to teach," the one distinction between qualifications for the two offices. However, our study verse requires that the deacon demonstrate soundness in the faith, no less than the preacher. Men in leadership positions in a church will influence others by their beliefs, even if they do not teach others or actively promote their beliefs. In typical deacon ordinations, the man being examined for ordination is routinely questioned regarding his faith.

Holding... The man's faith must not be unstable or drift from one belief to another. His faith should be stable and steadfast. The office of deacon belongs uniquely to the church of the man's membership. Unlike the preacher who often preaches at various churches, the deacon will not function as a deacon in other churches that he may visit. While the Biblical role of pastor seems to be a stable position, it may change on occasion. When one pastor leaves a church, and a new pastor arrives, there may be theological differences. The deacons in the church need to be strong and stable in their faith, so that they can serve as a theological constant in the church's culture. In fact, when a church faces the need for a new pastor, the deacons need to demonstrate this depth and stability of faith so that the man they recommend to the church is in fact a man of soundness in life and in doctrine. The deacon must not drift in and out of various ideas or doctrines. He must be strong in the bedrock faith.

Sadly, I have encountered a few men over the years—thankfully a very few—who refused to be content with serving one church as pastor, so they employed careful subtlety in reaching out to key members of a network of churches, often the deacons, and imposing their influence on those men, effectively undermining the pastor's role, and thereby spreading their errant ideas to many churches. On one occasion many years ago, when a deacon was being ordained, I feared this kind of situation with a local "wannabe" preacher who made little secret about wanting to be the regional boss over a number of churches. During the interrogation process of the ordination, I specifically questioned the man considered for ordination, "If you were to encounter a situation in which your pastor taught one thing, and some other preacher taught something different, how would you deal with

the situation?" The man categorically stated that he would stand by his pastor, not the preacher outside his home church. However, just a few years later, this same man, now a deacon, fell under the spell of that outside preacher, wreaking havoc on his home church and her pastor, so much so that this church no longer exists. A local pastor may well fall into error, but, when this occurs, a sound and faithful deacon will work privately and personally with his pastor to correct the problem. This simple respect for the local church's autonomy, a consistent Bible doctrine, would do much to curb the wildfire spread of error, if faithfully observed. While a few New Testament passages use the term "church" to refer to the whole redeemed family of God in heaven, most often it refers to an individual local assembly. The New Testament never, even once, uses the word in singular form to refer to a collection of local churches. When The New Testament refers to more than one local assembly, it consistently uses the word in the plural form. Purveyors of error often wholly ignore this central New Testament teaching and use deacons or other key members of various local churches to spread their web of influence among many churches. A wise and sound deacon who understands New Testament teaching will reject this ungodly strategy and preserve the autonomy and theological stability of the church of his membership.

...Mystery... This word does not relate to the unknown and unknowable mysteries of Gnosticism or other "mystery religions." As the New Testament uses this word, it refers to something formerly unknown, but now revealed. Paul uses the word in Colossians 1:26-27 regarding a mystery that was unknown in past ages, but now God has made known, "...Christ in you, the hope of glory." Although Christ indwelt Old Testament children of God, they did not understand or know the depth or details of this central truth till after the Incarnation and the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. The mystery existed during ages past, but now God has made it manifested to His saints. (Colossians 1:27-28)

In our English language, "mystery" typically refers to something that is inherently unknown; people struggle and search to understand it. Many authors of "mystery" novels demonstrate exceptional skill by weaving a story that leads the reader to suspect many different characters in the story of committing the crime, but the successful novel always throws a surprise at you in the end, by

pulling all the subtle clues together and revealing that someone least expected in the plot actually committed the crime. In first century Greek language and culture, this word referred to something that, though unknown in the past, is now revealed and known.

... *The faith*.... In our King James Bibles, we see the word faith, sometimes stated as a principle, "faith," and sometimes with the addition of the definite article, "the faith." In the instances where the word is qualified by the definite article, we may reasonably conclude that the inspired writer was referring to the accepted body of orthodox beliefs commonly held by the apostles and the early churches. That seems clearly to be the case in this verse. New Testament language scholars point to a number of passages where the language style or form is quite different from the style of the inspired author, observing the likely point that the inspired writer may well have been quoting from an ancient document that stated the core beliefs held in common by the apostles and the early churches. For example, 1 Timothy 3:16 appears in almost poetic form. Linguistic scholars observe this form and suggest that this verse may well have been extracted from a first generation hymn sung by those faithful people. Jude (Jude 1:3) exhorts us to "...earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." Notice Jude's specific use of "...the faith..." referring to a body of commonly held doctrines that God, literally, "once for all time," delivered to His people. God never revises what He reveals to or teaches His people. He didn't reveal one thing to first century Christians, but quite another thing to us today. What was true doctrine in the first century is not archaic and irrelevant to twenty first century Christians. It is the same truth. And Jude exhorts us to discover that truth, and to take its preservation seriously.

Although there were various cultures within the New Testament record, all received the same true teachings and were commanded to believe it and to preserve it. The variant cultures sometimes gave rise to varying errors that had to be confronted in one church, but not in other churches. For example, the Colossian Church clearly faced a problem with early, but growing Gnosticism, something that John confronted and refuted more specifically in his writings.

At the same time, the varying cultures also gave rise to less consequential issues that each local church handled differently. The Jerusalem Church felt strongly about the need for Christians to abstain from meat that was offered to a pagan idol before it arrived in the meat market and was sold for food. (See the fifteenth chapter of Acts, specifically the church's inclusion of this petition to the Antioch Church) However, Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church allows for some flexibility in dealing with this same question, though Paul requires that the church be wise and cautious so as

never to leave a misunderstanding in the minds of weak members.

This flexibility never touches the essential truth of the finished and successful work of Christ, of how God saves sinners, of the Second Coming and a literal, bodily resurrection, or other similar core New Testament truths. Purveyors of error who corrupt and seek to compromise these truths will often appeal to tolerance and try to convince their hearers that they do not teach anything that is so important as to touch fellowship. I have observed men make this appeal who erred related to the nature and work of the gospel, the new birth, predestination and election, and in one instance, even full Gnosticism. These doctrines appear in the New Testament as core and essential truths that must never be compromised under the guise of tolerance. When Paul confronted the Galatian error related to the content and nature of the gospel, he labeled the error as being in fact both another gospel and as preaching another Jesus, not the gospel or the Jesus of the true gospel.

...*in a pure conscience*. How does the man hold truth in his conscience, a highly personal point? Does he truly hold to this truth, believing in his most inner heart and thoughts the same truth that his church believes, or does he pretend to believe what his church believes, but secretly believe something quite different? In one case, the man holds the faith in a pure conscience; in the other case, he holds it in a corrupted conscience. Transparent integrity describes the man's life and faith.

Pause and review both lists that we've been studying. What kind of man do you see in your mind's eye as you ponder these qualities? Having been ordained to the ministry at a rather young age, I have on many occasions put myself through this exercise. Can I at any given time read the whole list of qualities and assert to myself or others that I flawlessly comply with every requirement? Sadly, no, I cannot do so. Nor can any other man in either office. However, our reaction to this realization will either nudge us to grow in our faith, or it will cause us to stunt our spiritual growth, leaving us, despite filling the position, as spiritual infants. When I review the lists, I usually find myself on the ground and in the dust. But I try to pick myself up, dust off, and go to work to ensure that I will live today and tomorrow far closer to those qualities than I've lived in the past. None of us should ever become so self-satisfied that we stop working long and hard, to grow closer to the New Testament model of "The Faith." A man in either of these two offices must demonstrate exemplary commitment to the qualities set forth in Scripture, and to applying those qualities to his personal life. As a preacher, my "competition" is not some preacher in a nearby church. My true "competition" is what I did in the past. And my determination should always be to improve that behavior so that tomorrow—all my tomorrows—I'll live closer to the qualities than in the past. Let tomorrow begin today.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor