

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"



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The New Testament Church: Officers

And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. (1 Timothy 3:10)

For some time I have contemplated writing on the theme of the New Testament church. What is a New Testament church? What are its characteristics? Its beliefs? Its role and authority in the life of its members? Is it an optional feature of a faithful New Testament believer, or is it a necessity? In today's diverse denominational world, confusion reigns supreme on this whole theme.

Our church in Bellflower is considering ordaining a man as a deacon, so I will start this topic a bit out of sequence, dealing with the officers the New Testament defines in the church, but, upon reflection, perhaps beginning with this theme is not so far out of sequence as I at first imagined it to be.

How literally should we consider the qualifications for church offices? I have occasionally heard people say that, if we interpret the qualifications literally, no one living today qualifies, so we couldn't ordain anyone to any office on the basis of "literal" qualifications. Honestly, I wholly reject this idea. If no one qualifies, then no officers can be appointed, and no church can really exist at all. If the New Testament teaches, as it clearly does, that God shall preserve His church till the Second Coming, I believe He so convicts and guides men to take their faith seriously, and to thus live according to the qualifications set forth in Paul's "Pastoral" letters, his letters to the two young preachers, Timothy and Titus.

And let these also first be proved.... My first step in developing this theme addresses the issue before our own church at the moment. I have asked a number of men in our church a question, intending to provoke serious meditation in their minds, "Where do you see yourself in terms of your personal activity in the church five or ten years from now?" One recent personal dialogue with one of our older—and very wise—ladies in the church proved quite insightful and helpful to me. She and I were comfortably agreed regarding the man we are presently considering for ordination. As we looked forward a number of years, she and I named some men as potential candidates for deacon at some future time. She wisely observed that they need to work their way through a few more chapters of their life before they take on this role. I agreed, but I find it encouraging to look at some of our younger men and see in them a clear potential for this position in a few years.

I have observed a variety of attitudes and practices regarding ordination in my fifty some years as a pastor. One errant, and highly unproductive attitude was that any man who joined the church was shortly ordained as a deacon "To give him something

to do and to encourage him." This particular church literally gave no consideration to the qualifications of these men. Just ordain them to make them feel important in the church. Hopefully they'll figure out something to do that will benefit the church, and they'll be able to perform that benefit. This wishful hope hardly harmonizes with Paul's "And let these also first be proved..." requirement, does it? In this case, most of the male members in a church of less than fifty members are deacons. If seven deacons served eight to ten thousand members in Jerusalem Church, how many deacons does a small church need? I'd observe that they need at least two or three, but likely not more.

As I've assessed various ordinations over the years, and as we currently ponder our present consideration, the thought has congealed in my mind that no man should ever be ordained based on a hope for his future. Any man considered for either office, elder/preacher/pastor or deacon, should be presently performing the duties of the office responsibly, and Biblically, before a church ordains him to that office. That is simply and precisely what Paul teaches in this verse.

I've seen the sad results with both offices on occasion of a man whom the church set aside to the office on the hope that he would grow into his ordination, eventually qualifying for the office, though he admittedly did not do so at the time he was ordained. In almost every single case, the man never grew at all into the office. The church ordained a man who failed the prerequisites, and years later, the man still failed the prerequisites.

And let these also first be proved.... A man considered for ordination should be presently, actively engaged in the work that he will perform after ordination. If a man is considered for ordination as a preacher, he should, over time and through a variety of experiences, prove his faithfulness to New Testament teachings, including a consistent and God-blessed ability to preach, not just present an interesting lecture. He should do so by both words from the pulpit and by example in his life. A man considered for ordination as a deacon should be presently, actively engaged in the same duties that will be expected of him—and required of him from Scripture—after ordination.

As we think about men who might eventually qualify and be considered for ordination, "I think he would be a good preacher (or deacon)" is not an acceptable New Testament basis for ordination. If you think he might be good at the job, give him the

opportunity to act out those duties. Observe him in the discharge of them. How does he perform them? Does he show wisdom and spiritual insight in the way he gets things done? Does he show grace in his interactions with the people in the church in working with them? When challenges invade either his personal life or the church, does he apply consistent wisdom and New Testament grace and faithfulness in making the right decisions and in implementing “faith-at-work” in resolving those issues?

What is the New Testament description of a deacon's function? Often people will respond with the wholly non-descript “To serve the tables of the church.” Okay, what does that mean? What is he really supposed to do? The term itself comes from Acts 6:2, but what does it mean?

Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. (Acts 6:2)

In this case, Gentile widows were neglected in the church's daily distribution of food and necessities. In a typical contemporary church setting, this term is defined as if a deacon is the only person qualified to serve the bread and wine at Communion. It is appropriate for the deacons to serve the bread and wine, but is this rule so clear in the New Testament that we could not have Communion if no deacon were present? I suggest not.

What is the deacon's role in a New Testament Church? If we accept, as I do, that the men set aside in Acts 6 were ordained to the office of deacon, we find some instruction on this point.

Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. (Acts 6:3)

Notice the apostle's words, “...whom we may appoint over this business.” At this time the apostles seem to have been functioning as joint pastors of the Jerusalem Church. Eventually, according to an implication in Acts 15:13 and generally accepted history, James eventually became the Jerusalem Church's pastor. Whether we view the apostles in Acts 6 as extra-church authorities or as acting in a pastoral role, clearly we must conclude that the office of deacon is defined in Scripture, and its work appointed. I believe the New Testament consistently and clearly teaches that a church's pastor is the church's spiritual leader. As an aside, what legitimate, New Testament church activities fall outside “spiritual” activities? In a somewhat technical sense, we might then conclude that the deacons in a church are to serve in support of the pastor. I suggest that, while the pastor cannot—and should not—delegate the role of spiritual leader to anyone, he should seek counsel and support from wise men in the church. What better counsel could

he find than from a qualified New Testament deacon? I thus embrace the idea of a leadership team, including both pastor and deacons. I further embrace that both pastor and deacons should talk to each other openly and regularly so as to maintain strong agreement and harmony. Only if they agree should they take a recommended action to the church. How can a church maintain internal harmony and good spiritual health if its pastor and deacons are not agreed? I believe the New Testament theme for men in both offices emphasizes that the man shows signs of spiritual maturity and with grace commands, **but never demands**, the respect of the people in the church. His leadership should be gracious and exemplary, not harsh or arbitrary. He should lead, not drive or drag people.

We'll touch the qualifications for each office in future studies. However, I will briefly touch one point that needs to take prominence in this first study. The New Testament emphasizes a positive and important role for women in a New Testament Church. However, when we follow New Testament teaching and example, the person ordained as deacon is a man, not a woman. In both offices, a wife who decides she was ordained, so she should—and can—take over the man's official role will destroy a man in either office. A deacon's wife should support and stand by her husband, but she should never usurp his responsibilities or function as a deacon. A preacher's wife should support and stand by her husband, but she should carefully avoid even the appearance of taking over his ministry. In both cases, the man in this office and marriage will effectively lose his function, and well he should. I've seen men fail in both offices for any number of reasons, but I suspect by far the largest number of failures that I've observe has been attributable to a wife who forgot her Biblical role as a supporter, and not as a regulator, controller, or orchestrator of her husband in his office. When my wife and I were dating and planning our marriage, at one time she was ready to end our engagement. Her reason? She named two or three preacher's wives that we knew, and she observed that she was not at all like any of them. She didn't think she could possibly fill the role. We had a very long, heart-to-heart talk. I tried to emphasize to her that being married to a preacher did not mean that she was ordained, or that she should try to serve as a surrogate preacher, what the women she named had done. She has faithfully supported my ministry, but I can honestly say that she has never tried to step into my role or to become my surrogate. Thank the Lord for such wives!

Through my time as pastor, I have been richly blessed with a number of wise, godly men who served with me—I consciously use the term, “served with me,” not “served under me”—in the churches where I labored. Thus I have little sympathy for a preacher who constantly complains about problems with the deacons in his church. The relationship between pastor and deacons should be mutually supportive, not combative or competitive.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor