

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## Deacon Qualifications: Part 1

*Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre.* (1 Timothy 3:8)

Sometimes those little connective words in Scripture make all the difference. With one word, "Likewise," Paul imposes all the moral or character qualities required of a preacher onto the deacons. By listing the qualities after "Likewise," Paul emphasizes the traits that he intends to emphasize. "Likewise" also indicates that Paul will now address the qualifications of a different office than the position that he has just defined. "Deacon" therefore is not simply another name for an elder, preacher, or pastor. It identifies a different office in the church. The word "deacon" was translated from a Greek word that often appears in our King James Bible as "servant" or "minister." The function of both positions in the church is to be one of service, of ministry, not a position of privilege and coercive or overbearing rule. The man in either office who adopts the politician's attitude, "Listen to the people, pretend to care, and then do what you want to do, regardless of how they feel about it," fails the bedrock test of his office. Men in both offices are viewed as leaders in a local church community, and well they should be—leaders by service and example, not by despotic or overbearing force. Therefore, they should model the qualities that exemplify Biblical Christian ethics. In this verse, Paul includes one positive quality and three negatives.

1. *Grave*. The trait defined by this word does not mean that you think the man's face would break if he ever smiled. This word is defined by such terms as "worthy of respect," or "serious and worthy." "...pertaining to appropriate, befitting behavior and implying dignity and respect—'honorable, worthy of respect, of good character.'"<sup>1</sup> A deacon should not try to be the church's stand-up comedian. Dignity, balance, and wisdom should characterize his reputation among the members of the church. Although some Bible students believe that the seven men set apart in Acts 6 were ordained to the ministry, I tend to

believe that they were deacons. "...of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom..." are the three qualities the apostles directed the church to apply to the men they chose. These qualities demonstrate essential traits for men in both offices, but the work being neglected in that setting, and the duties assigned to those men leads me to believe that they were set aside as deacons. Simply stated, these three qualities define "grave" in practical terms.

2. *...not doubletongued*. No one in the church, especially a man in leadership, should be double-tongued, saying what he thinks people want to hear rather than what they need to hear, what is true. This trait offers no excuse for cruel or harsh words. "I call it as I see it, regardless of how people react" often serves as a very thin veil for the speaker's personal bitterness far more than gracious honesty.
3. *...not given to much wine*. As with the ministry, the man in this office must not be addicted to alcohol. Over the years I've had occasion to observe alcoholics. In most cases, these folks have an acutely addictive personality. They actively seek something to "make it right," to compensate for their perceived failures or inability. They quite often heartily embrace the "victim" mindset. They always focus on a "villain" who is responsible for all their failures, and they seldom honestly confront and confess their personal responsibility for their failures. A man who constantly blames other people for everything that is wrong in his life would be a disaster, a train wreck, as an officer in a church. The personality that seems most inclined toward these addictions may demonstrate this weakness in any variety of ways, not just in excessive drinking of alcohol, but excessive drinking should serve as a red flag to a church that is considering him for office. If a church is considering a man for either office, they should take the time to observe him in adverse situations. How does he deal with difficult situations or difficult people? If he plays the "blame game" with them, he fails

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Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*: Based on *Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 747 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

the test. If he tries to understand the situation and work with grace to resolve it, he demonstrates the wisdom required by Scripture.

4. ...*not greedy of filthy lucre*. Whether in the case of the seven men in Acts 6, or a deacon in a small twenty-first century church, a central duty of a deacon involves management of the church's finances. The man in this office may demonstrate poor judgment either by wanting to spend the church's money unwisely or by guarding church funds like the stereotypical miser. Ordinarily people in a church budget and give to support their church's needs. On occasion, we find indirect Scriptural support that either individuals or whole churches sent funds to support Paul in his ministry. However, in the one case where significant support from multiple churches was sought, it seems that the New Testament pattern was for each church to specifically ask for its members to donate to that need, not simply draw from the church's regular treasury. Paul used the collection for the suffering saints at Jerusalem to teach much of what we learn from the New Testament about the proper spirit and form of giving. In our modern world of near-instant communications across the globe or country, any local church may often hear of needs in other regions, far more needs than they could possibly supply. On occasion, the need may be so public and so pressing that a church should reasonably draw from its regular treasury to help. However, in most occasions where needs in other regions become known, I believe it is more appropriate for individual members to follow their personal convictions and donate to the needs that most press on their own conscience. One member may give to one need, and another member may give to another need.

Since our church is in process of ordaining a man to the office of deacon, these qualifications address an immediate situation for us. Although he has not been a life-long member of our church, or of our fellowship, during his time as a member of our church, our man has consistently demonstrated the traits that appear in Paul's list. During the time our church was discussing our need and how to fill it, I had a very beneficial conversation with one of our very wise, older members. We comfortably agreed on the man the church has designated for the office. As we expanded our discussion to the more long-term needs of the church, we talked about our younger men in the church. She wisely observed that they need to grow and experience a few more chapters in their life before they might be ready for this position. How a man reacts to life predicts how

he will deal with church needs and issues. Over time, if he consistently deals with life wisely and with grace, he proves his qualification for consideration to this office in the church. The man's demonstrated integrity, balance, and wisdom in dealing with his own life's challenges serves as the basis on which he proves in advance to the church's comfortable satisfaction that he has qualified for leadership in the church.

How does a church go about knowing these qualities in advance? Ah, that is indeed the question of the hour. First, the church needs to quietly observe how the man manages his personal life and business. Does he deal wisely and responsibly with his budget? Or does he consistently live above his means and struggle with unpaid debt? The church should observe the man's attitude as he deals with every aspect of his personal life. In all likelihood, he will deal with church situations in the same way he deals with his personal situations. If the man demonstrates integrity, balance, and wisdom in his personal life, the next step is to give him some responsibilities in the church. How does he deal with them? Does he quietly and effectively take those duties to heart and perform them well?

The four qualities that Paul affirms in our study verse form the basis for a man's effectiveness or failure as a deacon and leader in the church. The men that a church designates as her pastor and as her deacons will in large part shape the mold that will define and characterize the whole church. Wise choices will encourage faithfulness and blessing for the whole church. Poor choices will likewise prove a church's downfall. Early in this series, I mentioned a church that adopted the philosophy of effectively ordaining just about every man who joined the church, explaining this action as a way to encourage the man. However, when men who do not qualify for either office are put in the office, or the church ordains so many men as deacons that none of them has anything to do, or even know what they are supposed to do, the action proves to be anything but encouragement. If we reasonably assess the size of the Jerusalem Church in Acts the sixth chapter, we could easily compute as many as ten thousand or more members, and the apostles designated seven men to serve in this role. It is highly unlikely that a church of fifty to two hundred members needs seven deacons. In most small churches, probably two or three deacons will adequately meet the need and have plenty of personal responsibility.

Every member of every church should regularly pray for the church. It is difficult to criticize and find fault with a church when you are busy praying for it. They should equally pray regularly for their church's officers, both the pastor and the deacons. Praying people, who remain faithful as they pray, learn the amazing and surprising joy of God's answer to their prayers. Pray often and pray hard for your church and its leaders. God will surprise you with joy.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church  
16434 Woodruff  
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor