

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Deacon Qualifications: Part 3

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

While Paul specifically applies the criteria of prior proof to the man considered for the office of deacon, I believe the general tenor of Scripture equally applies the requirement to both offices. Only the most foolish of churches would knowingly ordain a man whom they knew not to be qualified by Biblical pre-requisites.

Inherent in any form of evaluation must be a clear knowledge of the requirements, as well as why they are essential to the office. Thus a church considering a man for ordination as a deacon must have a clear Biblical knowledge of the office of deacon, and what the New Testament teaches regarding his duties and functions. The word translated "prove" in this verse imposes a grave responsibility onto both the church considering the man and the man himself.

...to try to learn the genuineness of something by examination and testing, often through actual use—"to test, to examine, to try to determine the genuineness of, testing."
'I bought five pairs of oxen and am on my way to test them out' (Lk 14:19)....¹

Here "test" comes from the same word that Paul used in our study verse, "proved."

This requirement emphatically rejects the notion of ordaining an untried, untested, and, therefore, unknown man to the office. It equally rejects the practice of ordaining a novice in the church with the idea of "Giving him something to do, to feel needed." If the man shows potential for the office, give him some simple duties. Observe him to see how faithfully and how consistently he performs those duties. Is he consistently faithful in completing his task? A few years ago I was talking with the pastor of a church in a different denomination. I asked him, "How do you test a man new to your church who seems interested in growing into greater responsibility in the church?" The man smiled, but very seriously responded, "We give a toilet brush and ask him to make sure the toilets are clean before each service. If he faithfully

performs that duty over time, we consider him for more." At first I thought this idea might be a bit extreme, but I honestly believe it shows a certain quality of wisdom. If a man seeks office or position in the church for self-serving motives, he'll be wholly turned off by such an assignment. Either he'll reject it with an indignant attitude, or he'll accept it grudgingly and then do it half-heartedly, inconsistently, or not at all. Your church may not need the toilets cleaned, but it may need something else done that few people in the church want to bother doing. If you have a young man in the church who seems to have potential for leadership, offer him the opportunity to serve, and then very carefully observe his attitude and his faithful consistency—or lack thereof. He will demonstrate by his conduct in the lesser assignment whether he has potential for more or not. That is the basis of prior proof.

A wise church will look for tasks that test the man's metal, his disposition. How does he deal with the mundane, the boring, the lackluster tasks that no one wants to do? If he does them faithfully, consistently, and to the best of his ability, you have a treasure. Follow the Lord's example; tell him, "Well done," and give him a greater responsibility where he will be able to serve and benefit the church in a more substantial way. "And let these first be proved" requires some form of test or examination against a known or measurable standard of conduct. A church's good intentions, or even the man's good intentions, do not satisfy the requirements of Scripture for this office. In some way the man must prove his qualifications, and the church must reach the point of satisfaction that he has proved them. I have occasionally heard naive, though well meaning, people say, "I know he doesn't meet the qualifications, but let's ordain him anyway to build his self-confidence. Hopefully this will encourage him to grow into the requirements of the office." Most often in these situations the man falls away farther and farther from the required qualities instead of growing more and more into them. And the folks who advocated a "hopeful ordination" strangely fade into silence. Or they become the man's chief critics. Once during my business career one of my area supervisors became quite unhappy with one her senior employees. She made an appointment with me to make her case, either to demote or fire this

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., 331 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

employee. When she came into my office, she had several pages of notes, an extensive litany of shortcomings in this employee that she wanted to review with me. I let her go over each item in full detail for almost an hour. Finally she started to wind down. Then I asked her one simple question, "Who hired this employee?" A bit sheepishly she responded, "I did." I simply looked at her for a moment, not saying a word. At that point she gave me a rather anemic smile and said, "Okay. I understand." Sometimes when churches foolishly approve a "hopeful ordination" of an unqualified man, followed eventually by intense criticisms of him, I would love to see the collective faces on the church's members when someone asked them, "Who ordained this man?"

"The meaning is not [either] that they should be given a trial appointment as deacon, but rather that the church should constantly be examining and testing the members of the congregation, so that whenever the need for selecting deacons arises, they will know what members are qualified for appointment."¹³⁰²

The letter itself makes the requirements public, and 5:22ff. indicates that time must be given to appraise a man's life. From this we can conclude that the testing is to be a thoughtful and careful evaluation of a man's life by a congregation aware of these needed qualifications. The hoped-for positive outcome of the testing is expressed in the present active imperative of διακονέω (PE*: here; v. 13; 2 Tim. 1:18), which means generally "serve" but in this context most likely means "serve as a διάκονος," i.e., enter into the church office for which they have been tested (so also BAGD s.v. 5).³

These commentaries affirm that the man considered for office is not merely subjected to some form of written exam, as if he had finished a

¹³⁰ D. Edmond Hiebert, "Behind the Word 'Deacon: A New Testament Study," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140:558 (April-June 1983):154. Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, 1 Ti 3:8 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).
PE Pastoral Epistles
* all occurrences of the word or phrase in Paul or in the Pastoral Epistles are cited
BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, tr. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich. 2nd ed. rev. and augmented by F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker from Bauer's 5th ed. (1958), Chicago, 1979.
George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 170 (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1992).

college course and were taking the final exam. The test should disclose the church's wise and intimate examination of the man's life over a period of time. The proof occurs as the church observes this man in real-life challenges and tasks. The qualified man will faithfully perform the duties assigned to him with wisdom and with grace. Likely his approach to his real-life issues will mirror how he will deal with the church's business, should the church call for his ordination. If he consistently and faithfully demonstrates the qualities of the church office as he deals with his life stresses and trials, the church may comfortably and confidently know that he is qualified and will shoulder the responsibilities of the office with the same grace and maturity that he exhibited as he dealt with his ongoing life challenges. He thus proves his qualifications for the church office by the manner in which he deals with his "office" as a believer in Christ in his life.

Some denominations simply elect men as deacons for a set period of time (and in some denominations, women as well. With something of a smile, I observe that Primitive Baptists do not ordain or appoint women as elders or deacons, but in a few cases you'd never know it from the behavior of the elder's or the deacon's wife). We follow the practice of deacon ordination, similar to the ordination of a man to the ministry. The man's home church announces its desire and invites ordained elders and deacons to gather, form themselves into a presbytery, and to conduct their own examination of the man for the office. If, after their examination, they agree with the church's decision, they proceed with the ordination. Although I have not personally witnessed such an event, it would be altogether appropriate for a presbytery to decline ordination, should they discover in their examination that the man failed the Biblical qualifications. I have heard of one or two such instances in the case of presbyteries examining a man for the ministry. Typically, the members of the presbytery will question the church, ordinarily one man appointed as the church's spokesman, as well as questioning the man regarding both the soundness of his faith and more practical questions dealing with how he would deal with various issues as a deacon in the church.

...then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. The church—and the examining presbytery—must find the man blameless before ordaining him, not ordain him and hope he will eventually become blameless. As noted in an earlier study, "blameless" does not refer to sinless perfection, but to wise, responsible, and gracious execution of the duties of the office he fills. He uses, fills, the office only after he has been examined and found to meet the requirements. One of the colleges I attended during my undergraduate studies graded students "on the curve." God's criteria, as set forth in Scripture will not allow for grading on the curve. The man either

lives up to the requirements or the church does not consider him for ordination.

Whether dealing with the office of elder or deacon, I have never seen a constructive way to “unordain” a man who eventually demonstrated failure to live up to the Biblical qualifications of his office. I have observed that often the Lord quietly, but so very effectively, removes an unqualified man from a position of influence or leadership. However, the Lord’s charge to His churches is that they fully respect the qualifications that He set forth in Scripture and so emphasize them that the collective culture of the church believes them and takes them seriously. The potential for damage to a church from an unqualified man in either office is frightening. It is far healthier for a church to respect and follow God’s qualifications and teachings than to ignore them, violate them, and they try to avoid the destruction of disobedience.

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Worship service each Sunday	10:30 A. M.
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