

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"



Volume 26, Number 33

August 15, 2010

The New Testament Church: Ministerial Qualifications

This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. (1 Timothy 3:1)

Before we delve into the specific qualifications—and qualities—of a man to be ordained as a minister, we need to anchor our study in a foundational principle, the essential integrity and, to the extent we can perceive it, motive of the man. A man whose attitude and conduct suggest that he wants to be ordained so that he can wield influence over others, in effect, be the “head man,” should never be ordained. In last week’s Gleanings, I distinguished between the attitude of “demanding” respect and “commanding” it. The man who seeks the position for personal gain or to be viewed as an influential person in the church’s culture will “demand” that people look up to him, regardless of whether he earns their respect or not. The man who fills the office because God called him to it, and he seeks to honor God’s call by serving both God and His people, will take the responsibility so gravely that it will transform his personal attitudes and behaviors. His lifestyle itself will “command” the respect of the people. He will not need to demand that people look up to him. They will do so because of his personal conduct and spirituality.

An overarching principle of ministry in any form, either in the pulpit, the work of a deacon, or in the pew where the members sit each time the church gathers, appears in our study verse. “...he desireth a good work.” He doesn’t demand that people call him “Elder” or “Pastor.” He doesn’t expect to be elevated to a pedestal and have people defer to him because he is a minister. Paul defines the most fundamental principle of this man’s motive and life. It has been said that we live in a culture where “work” is increasingly viewed as a vulgar, four-letter word, not something to be desired. People want to make a fortune, but many—likely most—of them simply are not willing to work and make wise decisions that are necessary to reach their goal. They want the million dollars, but they don’t want to invest the work and wise planning necessary. I fear that occasionally men may enter—or try to enter—the ministry with the “million dollar” motive, but they soon demonstrate that they have no interest in “work.” Work is something they tell others to do.

Still other men want to be the preacher, but they also want to continue their lifestyles and self-serving attitudes rather than make the admittedly painful transformation of self-denial, not self-promotion, that is necessary to put the sermon from the pulpit into the sermon in the shoes of life. As we examine the specific qualifications that Paul lists for a preacher, we should take conscious note of the focus on personal lifestyle and personal conduct. Of all the

qualifications that Paul lists in this chapter, only one relates to the man’s ability in the pulpit, “...apt to teach.” All the others relate to how consistently and effectively the man “preaches with his feet,” with his life.

Having seen the wrong view of ministry briefly, let’s look more in depth at the right view. *...If a man desire the office....*” The word translated “desire” in this verse is the same word translated “desire” in Hebrews 11:16, “...But now they desire a better country....” Our desire for heaven should never be a selfish ambition to parade heaven’s streets to show off how large and lustrous our merited crown is. It should be to be with our Savior and to “...see him as he is....” (1 John 3:2)

There is a vast distinction between our present state and heaven, but there should be a few similarities if we live a “heavenly” life in the here and now. Consider the perspective of the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. After peering through the cloud of glory, they saw Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Moses died about fifteen hundred years before this event. Some nine hundred years earlier, the chariots of God caught Elijah up to heaven without the experience of death. I believe—and the passages dealing with this event affirm—that Moses and Elijah truly, literally appeared with Jesus. Luke even tells us that they talked with Jesus about His eminent death, “...his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:31) Peter, rather predictably, thinks the wrong thing, and wants to erect three altars, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Don’t be too hard on Peter. If you saw these two men literally standing before you and heard them talking with Jesus, would you not consider something equally silly? The voice from the Father in heaven set the record right, “This is my beloved Son: hear him.” (Luke 9:35) Old Testament or New Testament, God commands worship only—exclusively--of Himself alone. Notice the beginning of Luke 9:36, “And when the voice was past, Jesus was found alone.” Paul echoes this same consuming truth to the most carnal, challenged church in the New Testament, “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2) He further trumpets the point, “For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake.” (2 Corinthians 4:5) Paul, no less than a chosen apostle, and the chosen writer of some thirty per cent of the New Testament, did not play the “I’m an apostle. You owe me some respect” card. And he so deferred, not to the most spiritual and holy of churches, but to the most carnal

of churches. Yes, there is such a thing as a “carnal Christian,” for Paul referred to this church as being “...yet carnal...” (1 Corinthians 3:3) Paul didn't put the Corinthian church to the litmus test to see if they deserved his service, to see if they were worth his “serving” them or not. He knew their carnal state and, knowing it, yet proclaimed the Lord Jesus Christ as the centerpiece of his ministry and message, and himself as their “servant,” not their lord, for Jesus' sake.

Preaching the gospel does not grow out of an attitude of entitlement or of personal merit. No man deserves pulpit privileges who has not “worked” and “served” in the most unselfish and sacrificial of ways for both God and for His people.

The man who “desires” this office, like those longing saints in Hebrews 11:16, is consumed with passion for his Lord and for his Lord's glory. There is no space, logically or ethically, for the man to seek credit, honor, or attention to himself. If he is seeking something for himself, he has not yet seen “Jesus alone” as the object of his ministry and life. ***It is not all about the man. It is all about the Lord!*** The man who fills the office of minister, any form of ministry, must demonstrate this God-centric attitude, or he fails the position and will either vacate it, or God shall vacate it from him.

Words such as “work” and “servant” consistently define the ministry of the New Testament. If Jesus, our Lord and Savior, literally (no other-worldly, existential, out-of-time-and-space “event”) washed His disciples' feet, if Paul required that “widows indeed,” widowed women whom the church was to take under its care and support, must have “...washed the saints' feet...” (1 Timothy 5:10), can we give any respectful consideration to any man for the office of ministry who does not, both literally and in lifestyle, do the same thing? The self-serving “preacher” will get his feelings hurt and complain because the people did not listen to his preaching or otherwise look up to him. Did they always listen to Paul, or, for that matter, to Jesus' preaching? Because people didn't listen to their preaching, did Jesus or Paul get his feelings hurt and pout at or abandon his divine assignment? No, they remained faithful. They continued their “work” and remained faithful “servants” to their God. On a few occasions in my fifty plus years of ministry—thank the Lord, only a few—I have attended meetings where I got the sense that the men who preached were trying to out-preach each other. When time in the pulpit becomes a “preaching contest,” there will be no edification of hungry sheep. Such attitudes ignore the “work” and “servant” foundation of godly New Testament ministry.

As we focus on the qualifications of ministry, some traits will be quite unique and specific to the man whom God has called to this position. However, many of the personal traits and attitudes that appear in this list are traits that every believer must embrace—and live by them—if he/she hopes in any constructive way to serve God by serving His people. As you read over the list of qualifications that Paul

catalogs in this context, ask yourself how many qualities must govern the life of every credible believer who seeks to bear believable testimony of his/her faith. And do not overlook the central-most point. How many of these traits flourish in your life? If you or I were to die tomorrow, how would people remember us? What would they say to describe our influence in their lives? Would our impact on them reflect these traits? Sadly, those few preachers who seem more inclined to participate in the preaching or influence-peddling contest than preaching “Jesus alone,” might be shocked at the people's reaction to their death. “The king is dead. Long live the king,” is not the final word of a godly “servant” whose primary life-actions were invested in the “work” of a godly ministry. His message was “The King was dead—but now He lives. Long live the King.” For them, the position of King is adequately and exclusively occupied by the Lord of lords and King of kings. My uncle, Elder J. D. Holder, was a respected preacher among the Primitive Baptists who knew him for almost fifty years. I have been both amused and frustrated since his death at the men who praise him and claim him as their model and mentor. Some of these men, I recall, did not claim nearly as much of his respect as they pretend for him. At times he would quietly observe their self-serving attitudes and actions, and threaten to turn them over his knee and give them a symbolic spanking for their unworthy use of their ministry. At times he gave a few of them just such symbolic “spankings.” They now claim him, but their doctrine he rejected, and their self-centered attitude toward ministry he despised. If they respect him so much, I'd like to see them imitate his ministry in action and soundness of faith. If we whitewash the graves of pious, godly men from our past, we must ethically imitate their godliness and their unselfish faith.

The passion for this work requires incredible sacrifice of self and of one's own desires. God encourages us that He shall stand by us and bless us as we serve Him faithfully, but He never promises health, wealth, and personal comforts. In fact, He promises that, as He suffered when He preached the truth, we shall also suffer, but that suffering must be endured with a grace-smile, and with grace-action, not with bitterness. The word translated “servant” in the New Testament apparently originated in agriculture. It was used to describe the devoted farmer who works long, hard hours in his field. He works so hard that he “stirs up the dust,” but he just keeps working in the dust. Never embrace the “I just don't get that much out of church” attitude. Rather ask yourself regularly, “How much have I invested in the service of God and of His people?”

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor