

# The Good Deacons



THE WORD *deacon* (Greek, *diakonos*) in the New Testament means “servant” or “attendant,” one who ministers to and cares for others. This word is generally translated “servant,” except in the few places where it specifically refers to the office of deacon as in 1 Timothy 3:8, 12, Philippians 1:1, and possibly Romans 16:1. It primarily refers to menial service such as waiting tables, as when Martha served Jesus (cf. John 12:2; also Luke 17:8; 22:26, 27).

Jesus used the word to convey his radical ideal of human relationships as mutual service involving self-sacrifice. The famous text in Mark’s Gospel that provides both a prominent theme of that Gospel and the purpose of Jesus’ life reads: “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant [deacon], and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served [deaconed] but to serve [to deacon], and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:43–45). Later, in the upper room in Jerusalem, on the night when he washed the feet of his disciples, Jesus said, “For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves [deacons]? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves [deacons]” (Luke 22:27).

It was natural, therefore, that the word came to represent all kinds of service in the cause of the gospel. An examination of the Greek New Testament indicates that an apostle was designated a “deacon of Christ” (literal translation) (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23; 4:1; Romans 11:13). Paul calls himself a “deacon” (literal translation) of the church (Colossians 1:25), and here in 1 Timothy, Timothy is described as a “good servant [literally, “deacon”] of Christ Jesus” (4:6).<sup>1</sup> There is certainly nothing officious, self-conscious, or self-promoting in the word *deacon*. The Lord’s followers are to be humble servants.

How ironic then that the very act that Jesus used to dramatize the call to deacon-service—foot-washing—was made a ceremonial act. According to Canon 3 of the 17th Synod of Toledo (A.D. 694), foot-washing was made obligatory throughout the churches of Spain and Gaul. Over the years the postured humility of washing the feet of the poor became a public performance by leaders of church and state. For example, in 1530 Cardinal Wolsey “washed, wiped and kissed the feet of 59 poor men at Peterborough.”<sup>2</sup> The English Royals did this with typical panache. In 1213 King John washed the feet of the poor, giving thirteen pence to each of the thirteen fortunate washees, an event that became known as the Royal Maundy. An entry some 400 years later in the Chapels Royal Register records that “on Maundy Thursday, April 1685, our gracious King James ye 2nd was’d, wip’d and kiss’d the feet of 52 poor men with wonderful humility.” Right!

To the present Royals’ credit, Royal Maundy continues today but without the foot-washing and affected hypocrisy of earlier centuries, as elderly people who have served others are honored with financial gifts for their years of service. The officials still wear towels as aprons, and the queen and her attendants still carry bouquets of fragrant herbs and flowers, as the sovereigns did in the days of the plague to guard against the risk of infection.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the range of ecclesiastical history demonstrates how prone the church has been to miss the point. Not only has the example of the foot-washing Lord been treated as a parody, but also, in some instances, the office of deacon has become a seat of power and even abuse. In some traditions it is even pursued as a political office.

How far this is from the spirit of Christ! How far from the heart of his followers, and how far from the profile of servants/deacons in 1 Timothy! The following list of credentials has everything to do with the gospel.

## Deacons' Qualifications (vv. 8–12)

*Elder-like.* Although the deacon does not hold a teaching office, his position does require an elder-like bearing. “Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain” (v. 8). Respectability is the operative idea here, and in the original language it is defined by terms all beginning with “not.” First, they are to be “not double-tongued.” He is not the kind of man who says one thing to one man and a different thing to the next.<sup>4</sup> He is the kind of man whom Will Rogers described as “not afraid to sell the family parrot to the town gossip!” One could trust this man. He was respectable because he was credible, and he was credible because he was truthful. Second and third, he was also “not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.” To reference Os Guinness again, he was not drunk on wine or money. A man drunk on either does not deserve respect. To be a deacon is to embrace a position of character from first to last.

*Informed belief.* Though the deacons are not required to be “able to teach” as are elders, “they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (v. 9). *Mystery* is a term commonly used by Paul to describe something that was once hidden but is now revealed to those who have spiritual discernment. Here it means the good news of the gospel. It is called “the mystery of the gospel” in Ephesians 6:19.

The Old Testament mystery was, how can God forgive sins? It was answered by Jesus’ death as the Father’s incarnate and sinless Son suffered the wrath we deserved, thus making forgiveness possible (cf. 1 John 2:1, 2; Romans 3:9–26). The mystery was made clear by Christ, and thus it is often called “the mystery of Christ” (cf. Ephesians 3:4; Colossians 4:3). This is what deacons must understand and hold on to: Christ Jesus died on the cross for their sins (indeed he became sin for them), and if they believe, trusting in his atoning work alone, they will be saved. In a word, they must understand the mystery of the cross.

*Living belief.* But there is more—a deacon must hold on to the mystery of the faith “with a clear conscience.” That is, what he understands must not only inform his life, but he must also live by it “with a clear conscience.” A man’s faith is in great shape when his conscience does not reproach the way he lives.

As we saw earlier, this matter of conscience is dominant in 1 Timothy. At the beginning of the letter Paul emphasized the necessity of a good conscience when he told Timothy to command the false teachers to stop spreading their errors, explaining that “the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a *good conscience* and a sincere faith” (1:5). Next he told Timothy that essential to waging the good warfare is “holding faith and a *good conscience*” (1:19). Thus when a deacon holds on to the mysteries of the faith (the cross-centered gospel) “with a clear conscience,” he is in great shape! His belief has penetrated his soul and is informing his life.

But we must also remember that conscience alone is not enough, because our conscience can deceive us. Jiminy Cricket’s advice to Pinocchio, “let your conscience be your guide,” is generally good advice. But if your conscience is seared by sin, it is of little help. Jonathan Edwards likened conscience to a sundial and God’s Word to the sun. Only the light of the sun will give the correct reading. Moonlight cannot work. Candlelight is folly. Both will mislead you. The sunlight of Scripture will always tell the truth. And when we live by the truth “with a clear conscience,” we are in great shape.

*Tested.* Next there is the matter of testing—“And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless” (v. 10). The reason testing is required of deacons, and not in the preceding qualifications for elders, is that everyone was already aware of the testing required for eldership. Testing for such leaders is alluded to in 5:22, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands,” and also in verse 24 of that chapter, “The sins of some people are conspicuous . . . the sins of others appear later.” The testing here in 1 Timothy 3 does not refer to an official deacons’ test or even a probationary period, but a testing as to reputation—the positive and negative evidences in a candidate’s life.

The reality is that these men may in time become elders. So early in the process the church is charged to be very careful. Pressures will inevitably come as these deacons exercise their ministries, and their inner lives will become evident. We are like saturated sponges. If we apply pressure to a sponge, we immediately see what fills it. The pressures of their ministry would reveal what they were made of.

*Help-mated.* Some argue that the next sentence describes the qualifications of deaconesses, translating “wives” as “women,” so that verse 11 would read, “Women [deaconesses] likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.” This is unlikely, though there is evidence that an order of deaconesses developed in the early church. Romans 16:1 reads, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [*diakonon*] of the church at Cenchrea.” And Pliny’s famous letter to the Roman emperor Trajan, written in A.D. 112, mentions “two slave-women whom they call deaconesses.”<sup>5</sup> Early on, there was an emerging order of deaconesses, the prototypes of deaconesses down through church history.

But despite some good arguments, it is a stretch to read in deaconesses here because deacons are the focus mentioned on both sides of verse 11. Also, the Greek word that can be translated “wife” or “woman” has to be translated “wife” in verse 12 (“the husband of one wife”).

Paul is simply telling Timothy that a deacon must have a wife who has a respectability that matches his own, that his wife’s qualifications are part and parcel of his qualifications for the office of deacon.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, she will be expected to help him fulfill his duties. There is immense common sense here not only as to the nature of marriage in which two become one, but in the strength that a godly couple will bring to a deacon’s ministry. The character qualifications of deacons in verse 8 and of the parallel qualifications for their wives in verse 11 insure that they will not only be mutually respectable but will have the same heart for ministry.<sup>7</sup>

*Domesticated.* Next, qualifications similar to the domestic qualifications for elders are demanded of deacons: “Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well” (v. 12). He must be a one-wife man. No other woman can have his affections maritally, mentally, or emotionally. His wife ought to occupy his full horizon. He must love her as he loves himself. “He must pursue his own joy in the holy joy of his wife” (John Piper).<sup>8</sup> He rejects as treachery anything that would alter his loving focus. A one-wife man places his wife at the center of his heart.

For she is wise, if I can judge of her,  
And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true,  
And true she is, as she hath prov’d herself;  
And therefore, like herself, wise, fair, and true,  
Shall she be placed in my constant soul.

*The Merchant of Venice*, II. vI, 52–57

Alongside this, the domestic qualification of a well-run household—“managing their children and their own households well,” a necessity if one is to minister to “the household of God” (v. 15)—is understood and embraced. The logic is impeccable, and the outcome is predictable, whether the church heeds this advice or rejects it.

## Deacons' Reward (v. 13)

The deacons “who serve well” will get a twofold reward—before men and before God. As to the first, “those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves” before the people they serve. They will have the respect of and influence with the congregation. Though the office of deacon is not primarily a teaching position, it has its own eloquence.<sup>9</sup> Bishop Quail asks a rhetorical question: “Preaching is the art of making a sermon and delivering it? . . . Why no . . . preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the deacon’s life speaks. Because of his *elder-like* respectability, his *informed belief* as he holds to the mystery of faith, his *living belief* that issues in “a clear conscience,” his *tested* life oozes with character. His *help-mate* is his best qualification, and he is graciously *domesticated* in relation to his wife and children. All of this provides him an excellent standing with his people. His authority goes far beyond words.

As to the second aspect of the deacons’ reward, they have “great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (v. 13). They have confidence, even boldness, in their own faith in Christ.<sup>11</sup> There is an ever-deepening confidence in drawing close to God in Christ.

If it is true that what the leadership is in microcosm, the congregation will become in macrocosm (and it is true!), then the character of those who fill the office of deacon as well as that of elder is of utmost importance. We must pray for such leadership. We must seek such leadership. As is the leadership, so is the church.

The trajectories of our lives are of paramount importance. If we are off a bit, it may not show much at first. But it will be perceptible in a decade. And many years down the road our wrong example will lead many far astray and leave our churches in ruins.

Let us follow the advice of Scripture to God’s glory. There is no better way!