**Directions for worship- deacons** 21/7/24 dkm md

Read: Acts 6, 1Timothy 3

Text: 1Timothy 3:8-13

Psalms: 25:1-7, 119:129-136, 121, 72old

In relation to the upcoming presidential election in the USA, a friend in India asked if there was not an upper age limit for a president. Obviously, there is not, and indeed there are few qualifications for a presidential candidate, apart for having lots of money for self-promotion! Thankfully, electing men for an office in the church is not a party-political process- or should not be! But the qualifications for such men are set down in the Bible, and we must remember the church is the house of God, with Christ as the head (3:15). Many a church has been brought low by unqualified office-bearers. Men can change of course, but attention to qualifications before electing elders and deacons goes a long way to ensuring growth in the church. The qualifications set down in the Bible, principally in Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus, are not focused on earthly achievements, although reputation with outsiders is important. The focus is on the heart, on faith, doctrine and conduct.

The apostle Paul was not in Ephesus when he wrote this letter to Timothy. He had left Timothy there and was now telling him how to conduct himself and conduct worship in the church (3:15). The church was very important to Paul, and to God, as we see in verse 15, so it was important that worship was orderly and pleasing to God. In terms of worship, Paul has already given instructions that prayer be made for all men. He does not refer specifically to teaching or preaching but does indicate that women are not to teach or have authority (2:12), and that elders must be able to teach (3:2). He later refers to elders who labour in word and doctrine (5:17).

Oversight of the church is entrusted to elders as under-shepherds, shepherds under Christ. Along with elders, he refers to deacons as office-bearers in the church. The duties of deacons are not specified, maybe because the word itself means ‘servant’ or one who serves. On the basis of the men elected by members of the Jerusalem church and appointed by the apostles, we understand the duty of deacons to be focused on ‘serving tables’ or assisting in the material needs of members (Acts 6:1,2). Broadly speaking, elders attend to spiritual needs and deacons to material needs, although the seven deacons in the Jerusalem church included the deeply spiritual and able defender of the faith, Stephen. So it is no surprise to find considerable overlap in the qualifications of elders and deacons. We will now look at the qualifications of deacons, at the testing of deacons, at the wives of deacons, and at the rewards that come to faithful deacons in the church.

**1.Qualifications**

‘Likewise, deacons must be reverent’ or worthy of respect (3:8). This is something demanded of deacons as well as elders. For elders the same word is used with regard to the man and his children (3:4). If a man’s children do not respect him why should others? The way some children speak to their parents is shocking and shameful. Children must be taught to respect their parents, and indeed all adults. A deacon must be a serious man, not a man who is always joking, and certainly not a coarse joker. Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’, ‘no’ (Ja 5:12).

Before listing other positive qualities Paul goes over some negative characteristics. A deacon must not be double-tongued, not a man who says one thing to you and something different to your brother (3:8). Neither he nor his wife must be gossips. If the deacon is distributing food or other help to members it is easy to collect and distribute gossip at the same time. While the elder must not be greedy in demanding money, the deacon who looks after the church finances must not get greedy and start helping himself to these funds; Judas was not the last man to help himself to the money box (John 12:6). Those handling the money can be tempted to help themselves, especially if they have a need. The church should have checks in place even when deacons pass this test of not being greedy for money (3:8).

Like the elder, the deacon must not love wine such that he gets drunk and loses self-control. Not a lover of wine and not a lover of money are two simple tests for a prospective deacon. To this we could add, not a lover of women, apart from his wife (3:12). He must be a one-woman man like the elder, and a man who rules his children and his own household well (3:12). While the deacon is given to service rather than ruling in the house of God, he is still an office-bearer commanding respect from the members. But neither elder or deacon must think they can ‘lord it over’ others or be bullies in the church. The word ‘temperate’ or ‘sober’ is applied to elders, and to deacon’s wives, and we can assume to deacons also (3:2,11).

Regarding positive qualities, in addition to being respectable, Paul speaks of ‘holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience’ (3:9). We are reminded of the deacon called Stephen who was ‘full of faith and the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 6:5). Paul uses the word ‘mystery’ to refer to truth that was hidden until revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (3:9, Eph 3:9). The gospel, as preached by the apostle Paul, was believed unto the salvation of souls. Deacons must understand this gospel, must hold it without reservation and with a pure conscience. They must be able to defend the gospel even if not called upon to preach or teach in public. This is what Stephen did even as he gave a defence in the council of the Jews before he was martyred.

**2.Tested**

Prospective deacons must qualify on the grounds of being blameless, worthy of respect, committed as believers, and being faithful as husbands and rulers in their own household. They must not be lovers of money or drink or double-speak. Is this the testing that the apostle speaks of in verse10? In large part, yes. He is not talking about a written knowledge test, although the man’s knowledge of the Bible would be appropriate. But it is more than knowledge that is required, so the test is more focused on observation of words and actions over a period of time. He must be blameless or above reproach. Any negative comments about his character must be taken seriously. It is interesting that for elders there is no mention of testing, but there is the warning not to appoint a novice or new believer (3:6).

It is interesting that the call for testing is followed by reference to the deacon’s wife and children (3:11). Life within the home is largely unseen by the world or by members of the church- unless it is an open home. The public life of a man can be different to his private or home life. All of his life is seen by the Lord of course, so prayer as well as observation is required in this process of testing. It may be that Paul was thinking about testing in terms of finding out the will of God. As believers, we are to be testing and approving what God’s will is (Rom 12:2).

With regard to office-bearers in the church the man should himself be seeking God’s will, and members of the church should be doing the same. It is not wrong to desire the position of an elder (3:1) or deacon, but ministry in the church is not like getting a job, not about seeking better wages and conditions! Elders or deacons are not generally paid for their service, so salary is not an attraction. It should not be an attraction for a minister either, although the worker deserves his wages (5:18). Qualifications include matters of the heart and conduct, not just knowledge and certificates.

While the church must examine the doctrine, life, and conduct of a prospective deacon or elder, this examination is not inquisitorial, not aimed at finding some flaw in his character. We need to remember that no one is perfect, and if the Lord has forgiven past sins we must forgive also. We need to be seeking the will of God and not following our own agenda for God’s church.

**3.Wives of deacons**

While both elders and deacons must be ‘the husband of one wife’ or a one-woman man (3:2,12), the apostle makes special mention of the character of the wife with regard to deacons. I once heard of a prospective deacon being ‘tested’ because of his wife. In a secular job, wife and family are not considered, but the church is different. It is different for two reasons: firstly, the church is a family, a family of families, so ability to rule a family is important. Secondly, the ministry of an elder or deacon involves the man’s wife as a helper. A deacon going from home to home helping members of the church is greatly blessed if his wife accompanies him. And the people are greatly blessed if she is a godly woman (3:11).

In Greek there is just one word for woman and wife- ‘*gune’.* So here in verse 11 some translate this word as ‘woman’, and then start talking about a deaconess. It is true that the Greek simply reads ‘women/wives likewise’, but this reference occurs in the context of Paul giving detailed qualifications for deacons. Indeed, in the following verse he speaks of deacons being ‘husbands of one wife’- the same word (3:11). Clearly the woman in this verse is the deacon’s wife, the same as in the previous verse.

**4.Rewards**

In the kingdom of God, and in the church, a reward means greater responsibility in serving the King (Luke 19:17). Rewards in the church are spiritual not material. When a fellow lecturer in India was being thanked with a gift for being cook at our student camp, he said, ‘Thanks, but no thanks. I am satisfied with my heavenly reward’. The office of deacon, like that of elder, is one of service, service in the house of God. In serving the flock of God such men are serving God (Mat 25:40), a God who richly rewards his faithful servants.

Paul ends his listing of qualifications for deacons, and including elders, by telling us that men who have served well in these offices in the church will not miss out on their reward (3:13). Their reward comes with reference to men and to God. They firstly, obtain ‘a good standing before the people they serve. The Greek word refers to a ‘step’ or ‘stair’, or figuratively to a degree of respect or status. A man who proves himself to be a faithful deacon will be greatly appreciated and respected by the people and may be entrusted with greater responsibilities! While we have the practice of electing elders and deacons for life, some churches elect them for a term of a few years. Presumably men who have served well for a term get elected for another term.

Secondly, they obtain a great boldness or assurance ‘in the faith which is in Christ Jesus’ (3:13). Their own faith is strengthened as they step up to serve the Lord, and know His strength as they do so. I felt very inadequate, even fearful, in becoming a missionary and later a minister of the gospel, but the Lord gave me strength, as he promises to do (Phil 4:13).

The first word of Paul with regard to elders was, ‘If a man desires the position of bishop, he desires a good work’ (3:1). We should be using whatever gifts the Lord has given us to build up the body of Christ to his glory. If this gift includes being an office-bearer in the church, then let us serve the Lord cheerfully and faithfully in the strength he gives us, and to his glory.