

## STUDY ON THE BOOK OF FIRST TIMOTHY

### SELECTING DEACONS IN GOD'S HOUSEHOLD!

Read 1 Timothy 3:8-16

#### **Introduction.**

The primary difference between bishops and deacons is not in their character, though bishops are expected to be more mature Christians. The difference lies in the teaching function of the bishops.

The term "deacon" is *diakonia*, "an administrative function, service as attendant, aide, or assistant," from *diakoneō*, "to serve, render assistance." The deacon is kind of an official administrator caring for the business of the church. It is tempting to see the appointment of seven men charged with fairly distributing food to the widows as the first deacons:

*"Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:2-4)*

They are not called "deacons" in this passage, though their function as church administrators accords with the role of a deacon in 1 Timothy, and the focus of the apostles on prayer and the ministry of the word fits the teaching role of the bishops.

In the post-apostolic (i.e., first century apostolic), church deacons were often mentioned along with bishops and presbyters. They took a portion of the Lord's Supper to those who couldn't be present at the service, apparently did some teaching, and distributed food to the widows and orphans. Later yet they functioned as servants to the bishop, receiving the offering, administering the sacraments, reading the lectionary, visiting the poor, disbursing funds, and informing the bishop of needs in the church community.

#### **Qualifications for Deacons**

*"Likewise, deacons must be..." (v8a)*

Their qualifications are much the same as those for "bishops"; practical service (especially when recognized by an office) is leadership also. It is a mistake to see one office as more prestigious than the other, though bishops have more responsibility before God. Each is more a matter of calling than status.

#### **List of Qualifications**

*"Likewise, deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well." (vv8-12)*

- **Reverent:** Showing proper respect towards both God and man.
- **Not double-tongued:** A man who speaks the truth the first time, with no intent to deceive.
- **Holding the mystery of the faith:** Those who can adhere to proper doctrine, out of sincere conviction.

- **First be proved:** A man demonstrates his fitness for office in the church by his conduct. Deacons and bishops are more recognized than appointed.
- **Likewise, their wives:** It is difficult to know if Paul here referred here to female deacons (such as Phoebe, in Romans 16:1), or the wives of male deacons. The original wording will permit either possibility.

If he is speaking mainly of a male deacon's wife, it is appropriate because a man's leadership in the home can be evaluated, in part, by his wife's conduct. Is she reverent, not [one of the] slanderers, temperate, and faithful in all things?

### **Male and Female Deacons?**

Now we need to go back to clear up a couple of issues. 1 Timothy 3:11 reads:

NIV: *"In the same way their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything."*

KJV, NRSV: *"Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things."*

The word translated "wives" in the NIV is literally "women" (KJV, NRSV, NASB). The word is *gunē*, which can mean either "woman" or "wife," depending on the context. Is the NIV right in verse 11 that the women are the deacon's wives? Or is it possible that the women were female deacons? One verse in the New Testament gives us a clue:

*"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deacon in the church in Cenchrea."* (**Romans 16:1 NLT**)

"Deacon" (NRSV), "servant" (KJV, NIV, NASB) in this verse is the female form of *diakonos*, "attendant, assistant, aide." But is Phoebe a church official or is "servant" used in the generic sense? The context is pretty meagre. But the only reason we wouldn't take her to be a church official would be a predisposition against the existence of women deacons in the early church.

- **Not slanderers:** Literally, not devils. This may be properly enough translated slanderers, backbiters, talebearers, for all these are of their father, the devil, and his lusts they will do.

### **A Promise for Deacons**

*"For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus."* (**v13**)

God remembers their faithful service, even in tasks which some would consider menial. There is little doubt that you will see more deacons with a great reward than bishops or pastors. All the work of servant-leaders in God's family is pointed towards building among God's people the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

### **The Mystery of Godliness**

*"These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."* (**vv14-15**)

Paul desired to speak these things to Timothy personally, but knowing he might not be able to come as soon as he wished, Paul made certain that he said it in a letter.

Paul uses the august phrase, "Church of the Living God." The word "church" is *ekklēsia*, from which we get our word "ecclesiastical." The word was originally used of a regularly summoned legislative body, "an assembly," then of a people with shared belief, "community, congregation." It can be used of a local gathering of Christians, the church in a city or region, or "the global community of Christians, (universal) church.

Now, Paul goes into the imagery of the building:

**"Pillar ... of the truth"** is *stylos*, literally, "a supporting portion, ordinarily cylindrical, of a structure, pillar, column." Here it is used figuratively, "a person or community recognized for spiritual leadership, pillar, support."

**"Foundation of the truth"** (NIV), "bulwark" (NRSV), "support" (NASB), "ground" (KJV) refers to "that which provides a firm base for something," perhaps, "mainstay."

What a grand vision of the church Paul unveils: God's own family, God's own assembly called from the world, which is in itself both the foundation of the building of truth and that which holds it up. When we despise the church or act in ways to undermine it, we are tampering with the holy family of the Living God himself! When we serve the church, we serve in God's own household gathered from afar, God's own house, his temple.

In the ancient Greek language, "church" was a non-religious word for a group of people called together for a purpose. The living God has called His people together for His purpose. The pillar and ground (foundation) of the church is truth. Tragically, many churches today don't value the truth as they should and are therefore left weak pillars and shaky ground.

### **The Mystery:**

*"And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory."*  
(v16)

The wonderful summary of Christian truth in 1 Timothy 3:16 should be without controversy among believers. It is unfortunate when those who claim to be Christians, debate or deny these fundamental truths.

- **God was manifested in the flesh:** This is the essence of the incarnation; that God the Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, added to His deity humanity — and was thus manifested in the flesh.
- **Justified in the Spirit:** We can say that Jesus was justified by the Spirit not in the sense that He was once sinful but made righteous, but in the sense that He was declared to be, by the Holy Spirit, what He always was — completely justified before the Father.

This declaration was made at His baptism (Matthew 3:16), and at His resurrection (1 Peter 3:18; Acts 2:32-33).

- **Seen by angels:** The ministry of Jesus, both on earth and through the Church, is of great interest to angelic beings. There were many instances when Jesus was seen by angels (Mark 1:13; Luke 22:41-43), and especially at the resurrection (Matthew 28:2-7).

- **Preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world:** Paul himself did his best to fulfil these statements. He was busy preaching Jesus among the Gentiles and bringing the world to belief.
- **Received up in glory:** This reminds us of Jesus' ascension (Luke 24:51), His finished work on our behalf (Hebrews 1:3), and His present intercession for us (1 John 2:1).

Jesus ascended into heaven in a resurrection body; yet it was a body that still retained the marks of His great work of love for us. It still had the nail prints in His hands and feet, the wound in his side, all marks of His suffering on our behalf (John 20:24-29).

Paul's description of Jesus after the passage speaking of Christian character reminds us of the key to our own character transformation — beholding Jesus. It is just as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:18: But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. Jesus is the perfect fulfilment of these descriptions of Christian character. We trust that Jesus will transform our life according to the same character, as we put our focus on Him. We sometimes want religion to build this character in us; but truly, relationship with Jesus is what really does it.