

Ecclesiastical Government (17th)

(The study for today concludes our studies of the offices of the congregation and the overall subject of “ecclesiastical government.”)

In our last broadcast, we closed as we were continuing to review the passage in Acts chapter six and the men set apart by the congregation of Jerusalem which appears to be the beginning of the office of deacon. So far we found that *first*, the congregation selected those to be ordained; *second*, it was the presbytery within the congregation that set aside the men for the work; *third*, seven men were selected; *fourth*, that men were selected and not women; *fifth*, the men selected were all Grecians, or Hellenist Jews since they had Greek names; and *sixth*, those selected were for the purpose of serving tables.

The *seventh*, consideration is that the men were to be of honest report. On the surface, this would seem to be obvious. Naturally, men who would be trusted with financial issues should be honest. However, honesty includes more than financial accuracy with money and other commodities. In the case of the widows receiving proper support, as was the case in Acts chapter six, it would involve more than equally dividing the funds among all of the widows. As with widows today, each one is at a different place in life and her need would not necessarily be the same as another. Therefore, one may require more attention and support than another. Also, as established later, some widows who are cared for by their kin at home would not need the support of the congregation, and the younger widows are to marry and not be “taken into the number,” I Timothy 5:3-16. Honesty not only requires the wisdom to know who should be taken care of and how much support should be supplied, but also it requires the strength, courage, and good judgment to administer these things and the finesse to oversee the office to the edification of the congregation.

The *eighth* quality is that the men were to be full of the Holy Spirit. It should be obvious that this does not mean that deacons are to have some extra measure of the Spirit of God that other men do not have. The command for all Christians are to be filled with the Spirit, Ephesians 5:18. Yet we know that this is not the case with each child of grace, especially, those newly come to faith. Sadly, many who have professed Christ for many years still are not filled with the Holy Spirit nor do they know what it means to be filled with the Spirit of the Lord. While many things could be supplied to illustrate what it is to be filled with the Spirit, we will simply state for our purposes here that it is being filled with the understanding and sense of the Scriptures. We do not mean by this, as some denominations teach, that the Scriptures are the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, it is the Holy Spirit that gave us the Word of God through inspiring the men who wrote what God would have us to know. Obviously, men who study God’s Word and know how it is to be carried out and live accordingly are men who are filled with the Spirit.

Ninth, the men were to be filled with wisdom. Though we separated wisdom from being filled with the Spirit, it appears from the text that they are joined together. I believe it is apparent that if one is filled with the Spirit of God he will equally be filled with wisdom. In short, wisdom is the ability to apply the knowledge and understanding a person has. Therefore, if one is filled with the Spirit through his study and learning of the Scriptures, by wisdom He will be skillful to put into practice the teachings of God. It is essential that deacons have godly wisdom to know when and how to fulfill their roles in the house of God. They not only need to know how to minister to the widows, but to all the membership and to support the ministry as the need requires.

Lastly, we find that these men were appointed “over this business.” The Greek word for business is translated more often *need* or *necessity*; in fact, it is only translated business in Acts 6:3. Therefore, the work of the deacon is whatever is needed to be done. In other words, whatever need or issue the congregation requires to be done is to be attended to by the deacon. Obviously, this does not include that which is to be done by the ministry or things which are to be accomplished by the continual Christian duties of the membership. In fact, this same word is used in Romans 12:13 where the Christian is to distribute “to the necessity” of the saints. And in Acts chapter six the particular necessity there was that of seeing to it that the Grecian widows were supplied with the proper support from the general funds.

Therefore, it appears that the deacons are to be in charge of the general funds. Often a congregation will have a treasurer appointed to collect the offerings, make the deposits in the bank, and write the checks. This business is to be done by the deacons. There is no office of treasurer found in the New Testament congregation outside of the deaconship. Obviously, it is expedient that one man be the record keeper of the finances but the overall work is to be done by any and all deacons, otherwise, why put an individual into the office if he is not qualified for the work. Sometimes a congregation may be small and described as “a church essential, though not a church complete ... for lack of officers,” (as noted by *A Summary of Church Discipline*, by the Baptist Association in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1774, and reprinted in the book *Some Southern Documents of the People Called Baptist* as printed of the Society for Biblical and Southern Studies, 1995). With such a small congregation where deacons are lacking, this work may lawfully be done by the ministry since the apostles (ministers) were previously doing it in Acts chapter six. Though, it is good if a man in the assembly can perform this function to alleviate the minister and avoid possible complications or questions in a weak congregation. However, in either case, clear records should be maintained so that every cent is accounted for in its distribution.

Obviously, the office of the deacon is best described in I Timothy 3:8-13. I think it is noteworthy that verse eight begins with the word “likewise.” This seems to say that the character and qualifications of a deacon are closely aligned and shadow those of the bishop. And since much of the work of the deacon is performed among the widows, it is extremely beneficial that his wife accompany him in the work to avoid any impropriety or appearance of immodesty. Sometimes the business that is needful in ministering to a widow is that which only another woman is qualified to do. This does not mean that an office of deacon is to be established for a woman. The wife of the deacon, as mentioned in verses eleven and twelve, can supply this need. Therefore, she is to be evaluated along with the man before he is ordained to the office.

While we do not have the time in this study to fully evaluate the qualifications and office of the deacon, I would like to draw our attention to a couple of things found in verse nine of this passage. It says, “Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.” Too often a man is ordained to the office of deacon simply because he is considered to be a good businessman, but he is lacking in understanding of the Scriptures as a whole and in the beliefs of the congregation in particular. This ought not to be! While being a good businessman is not a bad thing and can be beneficial to the congregation of the Lord in particular and a blessing to the kingdom of the Lord as a whole, this is not the primary reason for ordaining a man to the office of deacon. Along with the other qualifications outlining one of good moral character and behavior, he must hold or be in possession of “the mystery of the faith.” In other words, he is to be a man that knows the Scriptures and the various doctrines taught therein. He must know the truth of the Bible and understand the relationship of the different subjects and their connection with the salvation of God. Since the deacon is an officer of the household of faith, he must be proficient in the Word of God to not only assist the minister, but to aid in directing the congregation of the Lord in the mystery of God and its relationship “to the faith of God’s elect,” cf. Titus 1:1. This, too, is part of the “business” over which the deacon is to administer. But the second part of verse nine declares that the deacon is to have a “pure conscious.” Regarding this, allow me to conclude by quoting first from Elder Walter Cash in his book *Practical Suggestions: A Treatise On The Labors of the Ministry And The Work of The Deaconship*:

Deacons are to hold “the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience” (1 Tim. iii. 9). They are not to be half-hearted in their endorsement of the truth, but are to have an experimental knowledge of it, for in no other way can it be held in a “pure conscience.” If they have but a superficial knowledge of it, they cannot console the poor and needy with their conversation and presence, nor will they be able to encourage those who have a hope in Christ who ought to come into the church. The fact that they are not in hearty accord with the principles upon which the church is founded will render the work distasteful to them and unsatisfactory to the church. He must not be in doubt about the doctrines of the church nor the duties of the office, and should follow the promptings of a “pure conscience.”

And second, a quote from John Gill regarding a “pure conscience”:

[W]ith a conscience sprinkled by the blood of Christ; with a conscience void of offence both towards God and man; with a suitable life and conversation; a conversation becoming the Gospel of Christ, and by which it is adorned: and this part of their character is necessary, that such may be able to instruct and establish those who are weak in the faith, and oppose and refute the erroneous, and also recommend the Gospel by their own example; otherwise should their principles or practices be bad, their influence on others might be very pernicious and fatal.

As previously stated, much could and needs to be written regarding the office of deacon, but our time is up for today and we will close for now. This also concludes our study concerning “ecclesiastical government” of the congregation of the Lord.