

LET THE DEACONS BE LIKE THE ELDERS

1 Timothy 3:8-9, *“Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.”*

The word “deacon” was “probably from an obsolete diako (to run on errands; compare 1377); an attendant, i.e. (genitive case) a waiter (at table or in other menial duties).” [**Strong’s Greek Dictionary**] When used in the context of Christianity and especially, a Christian teacher and pastor (technically, a deacon or deaconess), it refers to a minister, servant.

A deacon’s role and duties include assisting the elders in the care, nurture and feeding of the flock. The standard is not as stringent when compared to the standard for the elders. For one thing, the word “blameless” in 3:10 is not the same as in 3:2. The latter demands a stricter scrutiny where his entire life and character is to be irreproachable; whereas the former points to a law abiding citizen with no criminal record. Perhaps it may be explained thus: an elder’s life is to be scrutinized by his enemy and the deacon’s life is to be scrutinized by his best friend.

With a lower standard than that of the elder’s, it does not mean that the deacon’s qualifications can be slighted or looked down upon. The standard is still all spiritual and far higher than that found in the world. Some of these qualifications will be the same as that of the elders but some qualifications for elders will not be required for the deacons.

Be Grave -- The word “grave” comes from the Greek word “*semnos*” which means “honourable” or “honest”. The verb form means “to revere” or “to adore”. A deacon must be a man of serious judgement and who inspires respect from others. He is not flippant and does not behave like a comic. It does not mean that he cannot be jovial or laugh at something humorous. He knows when to be serious and when to be light-hearted. He is a sober-minded person who can be trusted to carry out his duties well and will give his best to God and God’s people. He is dependable. He is responsible and fully aware of the full extent of the duties and responsibilities laid upon him as a deacon.

But the word “grave” has more than just the idea of a sober and serious-minded individual. It has to do with honesty and integrity. In Philippians 4:8 it is translated as “honest.” *“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, **whatsoever things are honest**, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”* [Emphasis added] To be grave is to be honest. He does not deceive and does not tell lies either for personal gain or to protect his reputation or even the reputation of his friend. He must not even lie in the process of defending God and His holy and perfect Word. In short, he always tells the truth, objective truth which is God’s Word as well, and subjective truth which is the general truth, that stems from a transformed heart by the power of Christ’s redeeming blood. This is such a simple and obvious spiritual qualification that must be found in every believer whereby honesty in speech is required. “Let your yea be yea, and nay, nay” was how the Lord

Jesus Christ puts it. Anything more than this comes of evil, meaning it reveals an evil heart [cf. Matthew 5:37].

Be Not Double Tongued -- The contrast of a grave deacon would be one who is double-tongued. In the Greek it would literally mean that “he speaks the same thing twice.” This word is a *hapax legomena* (only occurrence in the whole NT). He says one thing and means another. He is deceitful. He spins tales to win arguments. He deceives to gain favours. He inflates the truth instead of speaking only the exact truth without any embellishments. For example, when he visits a mission field he would exaggerate the size of the congregation and depict a false picture of the ministry to move people’s hearts into giving or supporting the ministry that he has special interest in. Another example is when two quarrelling members go to him for counsel, he would agree with both parties knowing full well that both cannot be right! He will say the same thing twice and say it differently depending on “which way the wind is blowing”. Are there such people in the world? Yes, they are a dime a dozen! The saddest part is that some of these are found in the church. Worse still they are even found in the leadership!

When a church has such leaders who cannot say what they mean and mean what they say, they will inevitably sow seeds of discord and create unrest in the church. They will be the source of many problems and heartaches and break-ups in relationships and churches. Such men are basically men who will lie and sell their souls to the Devil to benefit self. Their loyalty is themselves. They care for no one but themselves. Even a fundamental and basic attribute of a genuine Christian is devoid in their lives. Perhaps an illustration might help explain the reality of this problem in our age and time. Some time back, Pandan church Session issued a statement on the King James Bible, that “it has no mistakes.” One double-tongued mischievous person twisted it and said: “Yes, I believe and can agree with such a statement, but what I really mean is that I believe the KJV translators translated all the mistakes in the original languages without mistakes!” This is a roundabout way to say that the KJV has real mistakes!

If such are made deacons, it would be the beginning of the end of the church. The Bible has warned us to beware of such characters, as in **Proverbs 6:16-19**, “*These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.*” When churches choose deacons who are not honest and sober but double-tongued, the price paid will be seeds of discord and destroyed lives. A deacon must have this first basic quality of honesty and sobriety as he too will be serving the King of kings like the elders, hence the word “likewise.”

Be Not Given to Much Wine -- The Greek phrase is the same as the phrase in 1 Timothy 3:8 that refers to the requirement for an elder. The only difference between the two is the addition of the word “much”. It appears to point to a lesser requirement in the case of a deacon. Could this be the right interpretation?

Albert Barnes says, “The word *much* is added here to what is said in 1Ti 3:8 of the qualification of a bishop. It is not affirmed that it would be proper for the deacon, any more than the bishop, to indulge in the use of wine in small quantities, but it is affirmed that a man who is much given to the use of wine, ought not, on any consideration, to be a deacon. It may be remarked here, that this qualification was everywhere regarded as necessary for a minister of religion. Even the heathen priests, on entering a temple, did not drink wine.--Bloomfield. The use of wine, and of strong drinks of all kinds, was absolutely prohibited to the Jewish ministers of every rank, when they were about to engage in the service of God, Le 10:9. Why should it, then, be any more proper for a Christian minister to drink wine, than for a Jewish or a heathen priest! Shall a minister of the gospel be less holy than they? Shall he have a feebler sense of the purity of his vocation? Shall he be less careful lest he expose himself to the possibility of conducting the services of religion in an irreverent and silly manner? Shall he venture to approach the altar of God under the influence of intoxicating drinks, when a sense of propriety restrained the heathen priest, and a solemn statute of Jehovah restrained the Jewish priest from doing it?”

To follow-up on Barnes’ notes above, it does not make any sense to demand that the deacon be “grave” which is to possess a serious mind and an exemplary conduct and then say that it is all right for a deacon to drink but not an elder. This may seem problematic if one understands the meaning of the word “wine” according to today’s context and usage. Wine is taken today for pleasure. The wine today has been carefully distilled and manufactured for this same pleasure. The wine of biblical times was used for pleasure by some **but** it was also used to purify the water for drinking. It must also be noted that the wine in those days was not manufactured; it was merely fermented grape juice with very low alcohol content.

The Bible’s teaching to those who wish to drink for pleasure is found in **Proverbs 31:6-7**, “*Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more.*” Those who are living a life without hope and are about to perish will drink and forget their sorrows. Such temporal relief numbs the mind and the soul for a moment until they come out of their drunken stupor; then their life of hopeless reality hits them in the face again and they turn to their alcohol again. But for priests and kings which Christians are, they must refrain from drinking. The fact that we may “stumble” others when we indulge in this vice should be sufficient grounds for total abstinence. Sunday School teachers, leaders of fellowship groups, Bible Study leaders, and all who lead in one way or another must practise total abstinence. This would definitely include parents and all who drink privately at home or away from the eyes of other believers. They may think that if no one sees them, then they are fine and will not cause anyone to stumble. This is not what the doctrine of stumbling means in the Bible. If he is asked whether he drinks privately, his answer will be a resounding “yes”. How can that be kept private when he has to confess to others that he does drink. To gratify the flesh in this manner is to play with fire. It stumbles others. Numerous sons and daughters have met with serious consequences like drink driving or rape or fornication or theft because of drinking problems caused by parents or Christian leaders who drink!

The teaching in 1 Timothy was that the ordinary believer in the congregation who drank the water purified with the wine must not use this legitimate practice as a cloak for something sinister like his love for wine! There is no justification in the believer's life today for drinking, and to all deacons and elders, total abstinence is the only witness and testimony that can stand under the search light of God's Holy and perfect Word.

Be Not Guilty of Filthy Lucre -- Since the phrase "not greedy of filthy lucre" is also found in the qualifications of an elder and it has already been explained, we will skip to the next qualification. This next qualification is rather unusual.

Holding the Mystery of the Faith in a Pure Conscience -- Many of us would think that holding on to one's faith is so obvious that it need not be stated at all. Yet the apostle Paul felt it was prudent to include this as one of the requirements of a deacon.

The word for "holding" is in the present active participle, which means that the emphasis is on the continuous action of holding and not letting go for one moment. The deacon must keep holding on. He must not allow anything in this world or in this life to "pry his hand open." It is like a death grip that even if it means losing the accolades of the world, money, family, freedom and life, he will keep on holding.

The object of his "holding on" is none other than the blessed Faith. The Bible calls it the "mystery of the faith." The word "mystery" does not mean an unknown thing like in a mystery novel. When this word is used in the Bible, it simply means the hidden things of God which will be revealed in due time, God's time. This is the basis for the doctrine of progressive revelation of God's perfect and Holy Word. Barnes explained it well when he commented, "It [mystery] means that which had been concealed, or hidden, but which was now revealed."

The word does not stand alone. It is qualified by the word "faith". "Faith" in the Bible is used in two ways: objective faith, i.e. the Word of God, and subjective faith, i.e. the Christian's personal faith that he receives from God at the time of salvation. This faith is supposed to grow when the Christian grows through prayer, the study of God's Word and living a holy life. The word "faith" in "mystery of the faith" refers to objective faith. Barnes commented rightly that, "The word *faith*, here, is synonymous with the gospel; and the sense is, that he should hold firmly the great doctrines of the Christian religion, which had been so long concealed from man, but which were now revealed. The reason is obvious. Though not a preacher, yet his influence and example would be great, and a man who held material error, ought not to be in the office." The deacon is therefore to keep on holding very tightly the revealed Word of God. He must defend it, he must love it. And he must also be able to teach it. He cannot hold on to it without knowing it.

There are some professing Christians who may have graduated from seminaries or Bible Colleges but do not hold on to the faith. These have loved the world and have exchanged their

God-given duty for filthy lucre. Others might hold on to the “faith” with their minds but not their hearts. These are talkers of the Word of God but not the practitioners of the Word of God. They pay lip service to the Word of God and live empty Christian lives in which they deny the power of the Word of God by their carnal lives. They do not know God in any way. They say they know God but in reality they do not and God definitely does not know them. These professing Christians possess an unclean heart that is corrupt, filled with greed and malignity.

The deacon must hold on to the objective Faith with a pure conscience. The purity of his conscience implies that he has a heart that is transparent, righteous, honest, full of faith and integrity. He defends the Faith with all his heart, soul, mind and strength; not by words alone but by his life as well. Burkitt said it well: “That is, they must be sound believers, and of an upright life, maintaining truth of doctrine and soundness of faith, by sincerity of heart and integrity of life.”

“Holding the mystery of faith in a pure conscience” is expected of every genuine believer. God wants us to know that this simple and fundamental truth is important enough for it not to be taken for granted but to be included as part of the qualifications of a deacon.

Conclusion – The deacons will potentially become future elders. However, some deacons may not become elders as they may not possess eldership qualities or they may not be called. There must not be an automatic “promotion” just because there is a need or that the “senior” deacon is “up for promotion”. Such kinds of eldership based upon seniority will destroy God’s church. It is our Asian culture to promote individuals because of seniority but this cultural practice must be avoided. Those who do not have all the eldership qualities must not be made elders. To disregard or lower God’s high standard for an elder is to sin against God and his church, and will inevitably ruin the person who has been made an elder when he lacks eldership qualifications. The greater sadness is that he will be judged by God severely together with those who knowingly made him an elder because of “seniority.”

If there is a younger deacon who has maturity and eldership qualities, he should be considered for eldership. The “senior” deacon who does not meet the requirements ought to remain a deacon and should not be made an elder. The argument that he will be slighted must not be taken into consideration at all, as eldership is not to be likened to a promotion like in the secular world. This is an office created and given by God Himself. No man has the right to correct or ignore God’s prescribed qualifications. If this same “senior” deacon threatens resignation because he has not been made an elder, then without hesitation, his resignation will be accepted. This kind of “threat” reveals the unspiritual heart condition of the individual. Such behaviour is even clearer evidence that he should not be an elder. Deaconship should also be removed from him. He is serving himself and not God.

The requirements might be a little less stringent than those for an elder but this does not mean that the office of deaconship is to be taken lightly or is not as crucial. In Calvary Pandan, the person has to be a faithful deacon for at least two full terms of office, i.e. six years before he

can even be considered for eldership. There is no automatic “promotion.” A faithful deacon will make a faithful elder, for he that is faithful in little will also be faithful in much. Deaconship is a noble office, for they who serve in this capacity also serve the King of kings and Lord of lords. Amen.