

"Deacons In Like Manner" #1

"... must be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; holding the mystery of the faith in a good conscience. And let these first be proved, then let them serve as deacons, if they be blameless ... let deacons be husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have served well as deacons, gain to themselves a good standing, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 3:8-10, 12).

Deacons were a part of the first century church, filling a role that is permanently needed in God's church through the ages. Actually the ASV has the transliterated Greek word *diakonos* ("deacon") in two instances: here and again in Philippians 1:1 where Paul salutes the deacons of that church, along with its elders. Its inherent meaning is "servant" and the Greek word found in our text is found in other passages such as Matthew 22:13 and John 2:5, 9 where it appears in its primary meaning: "*servant*." However, the fact that *diakonos* in 1 Timothy 3 is in other places does not negate the truth that it is used here of a special class of servants in the Lord's church. What is true of *diakonos* being used in a special way is equally true of "*bishop*" used here in a special sense and also of "*elders*" in the companion text of Titus 1. "*Deacons*," "*bishops*," and "*elders*" all refer to a special class of men who functioned in the Lord's church in the apostolic age.

There are three questions which immediately come to mind and deserve attention where the specific qualifications of "*deacons*" are discussed: First, were the seven chosen in Acts 6 the deacons of the Jerusalem church? Second, what about women deaconesses? Third, can a church appoint deacons in the absence of elders?

"Were the seven servants of Acts 6 the deacons of the Jerusalem church?" Some are certain they were -- certainly, since there were deacons in Philippi and presumably in Ephesus where Timothy was, and since Jerusalem was the "model" church it would seem natural to assume they were (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:3). The word "*servant*" (in the English text) is not used of them in Acts 6 although there is implication they were, for the multitude was to choose the seven to do something the apostles said was not fit that apostles should do: "*serve tables*" (Acts 6:2). But, a restraining factor to therefore conclude these were "*deacons*" in a special sense is that qualifications for the seven of Acts 6 were not precisely the same as 1 Timothy 3: the seven were to be men of good report and full of the Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3). Yet, the two lists for elders are not precisely the same, either. We must always bear in mind that the historians did not always record all the details

in each place, and more items may have been involved than appears on the surface; details which are recorded in other passages, dealing with the same matter. Whether the seven of Acts 6 were deacons in the Jerusalem church or not, they did the work of deacons.

"What about women deaconesses?" Some denominations have women deaconesses and some voice the opinion that Paul cites qualifications for "*women deaconess*" in 1 Timothy 3:11 when he commanded "*women in like manner must be grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.*" Others see authority for women deaconesses in Romans 16:1 when Paul wrote, "*I commend unto you Phoebe, our sister, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchreae.*" In that passage "*servant*" is the same word from whence "*deacon*" comes in the text from 1 Timothy 3. Still, neither of the passages prove the early church had women who served as "*deaconesses.*" The text of Timothy has spoken of the fact that both elders and deacons were to have wives. And, this being true, setting forth the qualities for those wives which elders and deacons were required to have would not be surprising; rather one should think it should be expected. As to Romans 16 and Phoebe, she could have served the church at Cenchreae in a variety of ways without being "appointed" a deaconess. These texts do not provide proof for women deaconesses. Both are inferences, but not necessary ones.

"Can a church appoint deacons if it has no elders?" There is no precedent for such. Acts 6 is not the proof which some offer. To "prove" a church may appoint deacons without elders from Acts 6 is based upon two assumptions, neither of which can be proven: that the seven of Acts 6 were "*deacons*" and, that when the seven were chosen the Jerusalem church had no elders. We do not know when Jerusalem appointed her elders; the first mention of elders in the Jerusalem church is Acts 15:2 (although some see an earlier instance in Acts 11:30, making the Jerusalem elders sponsoring elders for distribution of aid to Judaea churches, a false assumption). Still, although "*the elders*" in Acts 15 might have been used in its ordinary meaning, we think not likely. The second appearance of elders in Jerusalem is in Acts 21:18 where Paul met them when he brought aid to Jerusalem saints from the various Gentile churches. Yet, if there were no elders in Acts 6, and IF the seven were deacons, that does not remove the fact that they functioned under the oversight of the apostles, just as today deacons function under the oversight of elders. In my judgment, appointing deacons where there are no elders is a very dangerous precedent from these vantage points: one, it is encroaching on "going beyond things written" and it invites men to assume to themselves a role they were not chosen for, to act as elders.

Jim McDonald