

## NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON- Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 2024 am

TITLE: "DIGNIFIED SERVANTS" TEXT: 1 Timothy 3 v 8-13

SERIES: "Guarding the deposit" Pt 9 Scripture references from the ESV

*1 Timothy 3:8-13 Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. <sup>9</sup> They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. <sup>10</sup> And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. <sup>11</sup> Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. <sup>12</sup> Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. <sup>13</sup> For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

*Acts 6:1-7 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup> And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." <sup>5</sup> And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup> And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*

We want our church to grow spiritually so that we are a people who grow in our knowledge of Christ, our love for Christ and our likeness to Christ. We also want numerical growth, because Jesus, and our life in him, is so precious that we surely want others to come to know him and love and honour him too. However, we are often not prepared for what numerical growth means.

### As church grows, so church life changes

- The pastor on his own is unable to meet all the needs of the people, and starts to feel overwhelmed and perhaps that he is failing. The end result is burnout.
- Those in the congregation who have been in the church for years feel sidelined by new people coming in, or neglected because they can no longer have time with the pastor as they used to.

- People become critical and before long the church begins to fracture.

The desire for church growth is a right desire when it is driven by a desire to see Christ glorified, but it brings challenges.

How do we navigate this?

The early church faced this problem (**Acts 6:1-7** above). Church growth had led to the apostles becoming overwhelmed and unable to meet all the needs, and some members of the church were feeling neglected (**v1**). Even worse, the widows who were being missed were Grecians and not native Hebrews so there was a risk that this would become a racial conflict.

The apostles were fulfilling their God-given calling to pray for the church and minister the word. Yet there was a need for more food parcels to be distributed. It would have been easy for the apostles to choose to spend less time in prayer, study and teaching so that they could satisfy the needs of the people and meet their expectations. To do so would have been deadly for the church.

- The physical health of some people was suffering, but if the apostles gave up prayer and preaching the word of God, then the church would cease to exist.
- The church would become just a social welfare organisation and cease to be the church of Christ

The apostles did not rebuke the complainers, but neither did they give up their Christ appointed calling (**Acts 6:2-4** above). Instead, they entrusted the task of food distribution to seven godly men, with this result: **And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (v7** above).

Church growth had threatened the very existence of the church. However, through the actions of the apostles and the willingness of the church to be led by them, the church was not only preserved but it grew. What is more, it grew through new converts not through transfer.

*By prioritising scripture and prayer, the apostles are choosing to stay focussed on the whole church's spiritual welfare, even as they affirm the Hellenist's physical needs. (Matt Smethurst: Deacons)*

The seven men in Acts 6 are not called deacons, but through the centuries, the church has generally taken Acts 6 to be a pattern for diaconal office. We are to see that those who lead the church through prayer and the ministry of the word (the elders) are to be supported by godly servants (diakonos/deacons) who serve in recognised roles to help meet specific needs of the church. Two questions arise and are answered in the text.

1. **Who are the deacons?** The word Paul uses (diakonos) simply means servant, and generally it is translated in that way throughout the Bible, except when it refers to what seems to be a recognised role in the church, as here in 1 Timothy. We may see their role in connection with their gifting, but although these servants are called to meet specific needs, the Bible does not explicitly tell us what deacons are to do. Instead, the focus is on their character (**1 Tim 3:8-10** above).

The elders' greatest need is to be Christlike, since fulfilling their noble calling requires a noble character (see **pt 8**). They are to be like that because

#### **Christlike church leaders will lead the church to Christlikeness**

- Paul shows us that those called to diaconal ministry are to be no less Christlike (**v8**).

Deacons, like elders, are to be worthy of respect and that respect is based on how they are seen to behave in the church (**v8**). They are to be free from those vices that bring churches into disrepute. Unlike elders they are not required to teach, but they must still know the gospel well (**v9**).

#### **These are gospel minded, gospel motivated, dignified servants**

Who should be doing this diaconal ministry? It is those with a godly, Christlike character. A deacon's effectiveness in the church for good is not based on how gifted they are.

- Their effectiveness for good in the church is based on how godly they are.

*It is not great talents that God blesses, so much as great likeness to Jesus* (Robert Murray M'Cheyne). We will never be perfect until we are with Jesus, but scripture tells us that deacons are those who show likeness to Jesus, and whose trajectory is towards Christlikeness.

**2. Who are the women?** Generally, English translations use the word **wives (v11)** but the Greek text does not have the word **their** and it uses a word that can mean either wives or simply women.

There are different views around the question of the role of women in connection with diaconal ministry. This has been the case throughout the centuries of church history and much grace and generosity of heart are needed to avoid dogmatism around this issue. The ambiguity in the word used has led to different interpretations:

- a) The reference could be to **the wives of deacons**. Paul does continue to speak about deacons in **v12**, listing their character qualities, and speaking of their wives and their home life.
- b) **OR** The reference is to **women deacons or women who assist deacons**. Paul sets conditions for these women (**v11**) that he does not set for elders' wives, even though the elders have the primary responsibility to manage the church. The text reads as though he is introducing a new group of people who serve in a diaconal way. These character qualities mirror those required of the deacons.

It would seem that these are women who serve as deacons. Paul does not call them deaconesses because Greek does not have that word! Since AD 111, there have been references to women deacons in church history. Clement of Alexandria mentioned them. The constitution of the Holy Apostles (AD 380) referred to deaconesses, as did John Calvin in his Christian Institutes. The Victorian preacher, Charles Spurgeon, in one of his sermons, spoke of deaconesses as an office that most certainly was recognised in the apostolic churches. Through the centuries, the church has taken different views on this issue, often depending on how deacons function in their churches.

- If deacons have functioned as elders, then deacons have been male generally
- If the church has been elder led, then that has opened up the way for women deacons.

Speaking for myself, I, (Pastor Tim), stand by what I said over 20 years ago when I was interviewed for this pastorate:

*Where a church is led by male elders, I believe that the church needs godly men and women to serve in this diaconal ministry, so that the elders are free to obey Christ's calling to pray and minister the word of God.*

We need to show grace to one another as we discuss this issue, bearing in mind that the church through the ages has never fully resolved it so we are unlikely to because of one sermon!

- In thinking this through, we need to avoid focussing so much on just that one verse that we fail to take on board the dignified nature of this role in the church, and the blessing it is both to the church and to those who serve.

The emphasis in this passage is on

**the dignified role, godly character and the reward for those who serve in this way (v13)**

Those who serve well in this way gain a good reputation with people and confidence before God. This diaconal ministry both blesses the church and mirrors Christ.

- a) Diaconal ministry blesses the church.** Where a church values and uses these dignified servants to free the elders for their ministry, the church is able to grow. It cares well for its members, is spiritually healthy and is a witness to the world. However, we will never realise how glorious diaconal ministry is unless we see who diaconal ministry mirrors.
- b) Diaconal ministry mirrors Christ.** Jesus described his ministry thus: **For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."** (Mark 10:45). The word **serve** is the same word that is used in the New Testament for deacon.

Jesus fed hungry people, healed the sick, washed feet and ministered to children. He defended his disciples, women and those who were defenceless. He served all those he encountered but his ultimate act of service was to give his life as a payment for our sin so that we could be forgiven, made clean and accepted into God's holy presence.

Jesus has now returned to heaven so how does he continue his diaconal ministry on earth? It is through deacons who:

- Feed hungry people, minister to the sick, wash the feet of people by doing the unpleasant tasks that others do not want to do and doing all this for the good of others and to the glory of God, even when people are not grateful
- Defend God's people and serve the youngest
- Serve the church in a way that enables others to hear about the saving work of Christ

**This ministry in the church requires dignified servants**

**because it is a ministry that is dignified by the deacon of deacons:**

**The Lord Jesus Christ**

There are many men and women in this church who serve in recognised ways, stepping in to fill a need. They are doing diaconal ministry, though without the title of deacon, and are following their Saviour into a ministry that is made glorious because Christ is glorious. They are to be recognised, thanked and honoured because Christ honours them. Perhaps you are one of those people and you feel weary in your work, underappreciated or battered by criticism. Be encouraged by these words from Matt Smethurst's book on the role of deacons:

*Deacon, lift your eyes from the mundane to the Messiah. See him touching unclean hands, and washing filthy feet and serving ungrateful sinners and finally relinquishing his life for those he loves. The entire shape of diaconal service finds its model and its mission in the life of your Saviour.*

*Deacon, your office has an expiration date, but your status as the King's servant will never end... your current role as deacon is just an internship for an eternal future in which you will see his face, together with all his servants.*

**Diaconal ministry is dignified by the deacon of deacons:**

**The Lord Jesus Christ**

**The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor;**

he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;  
<sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;

(Isaiah 61:1-2)