



ORDINATION OF PROTESTANT DEACONS AND OTHER NON-CLERGY PERSONS

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY



PHOTO: Transformation Ministries First Baptist Church
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Lection - I Timothy 3:8-10, 13; 5:22 (New Revised Standard Version)

I Timothy 3:8-10, 13

(v. 8) Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; (v. 9) They must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. (v. 10) And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons.

(v. 13) For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

5:22

(v. 22) Do not ordain anyone hastily, and do not participate in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The ordination of deacons is an important moment in the African American church because setting aside persons for the work of deacon is an essential component of the ministry of the church. The office of deacon is based by inference upon Acts 6:1-8, where seven people of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, were chosen by laying on of hands to minister to widows and serve tables.

Deacons are basically chosen the same way they were in the early church. Men, and now women, are chosen based on the requisites of Acts 6:3 and the qualifications in I Timothy 3:8-9. In Baptist churches, during a trial period of six months to a year, the candidates study Bible doctrine, participate in church ministries and are given the opportunity to minister to the spiritual and physical needs of the congregation. Then, in some instances, there is an ordination council that questions those who would be deacons to determine if they are ready to be ordained. If they are, then an ordination service is performed that includes the laying on of hands by a pastor and ordained deacons upon them as a confirmation of their service to God, the congregation and the community. After this confirmation comes a cooperative effort of the pastor and deacons to care for those whom the Lord has given to them to serve.

Much is known in the Black Church about the ordination of Deacons. However, through this lectionary, we join those wise and forward thinking churches who are, more and more, ordaining persons for all vital areas of ministry such as Christian Education, Evangelism/ Discipleship Ministry, and Youth Ministry. Just because persons may rotate in and out of these ministries should not affect ordaining them. Some churches also assign deacons for terms: 5 years, 7 years, etc. The position is the issue more than who occupies it and for how long they occupy it.

We also take note today of ordination services held by African American denominations (including those that are historically black and those that are not) who have long provided ordination to non-clergy persons serving in a variety of roles. This history is long and honorable.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: I Timothy 3:8-10, 13; 5:22

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In 2010, ordination in the largest African American denominations continues to apply mainly to two offices: clergy and deacons. Perhaps people are unwilling or unable to

understand scripture in its fullest sense as a living word (all of which was not written down) so as to support ordinations of Evangelism leaders, Christian Education leaders and those in other ministries. It is now accepted by a few that seminary students with Masters of Religious Education degrees can be ordained and to serve as heads of Christian Education departments.

Just as the practice of ordaining more than deacons and preachers is slowly changing, so are more and more churches ordaining women as deacons and heads of other church ministries not historically led by women. As we read I Timothy 3:8-10, the qualifications for deacons hold true for women as well as for men. Even Paul in Romans 16 recognized Phoebe, a woman, as a deacon. (Romans 16:1) Perhaps we are moving toward a day when men (sometimes supported by women who share their beliefs) will stop feeling threatened by women leaders and accept all gifts intended for the kingdom regardless of the gender in which they come clothed.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

I Timothy 3:8-10, 13; 5:22 is found in the context of a letter written by Paul to Timothy, a young pastor in Ephesus. As pastor, Timothy was appointed to ordain deacons in the church.

In verses 8 and 9, Paul gave qualifications that are needed for choosing deacons and the qualifications are also worthy of being requested of all who would serve in non-clerical positions in ministry. With these qualifications Paul provides a look at the nature of the moral and spiritual character these persons should possess.

Deacons [All ordained Non-Clergy] must be serious

”Must be”- this quality must be seen in a person’s life before they are selected for ordination. To be *serious* means that a person is mature and is respected by others inside and outside the church. Maturity is a necessary characteristic for serious leadership work. Today, many deacons, Christian Education directors, Evangelism/Discipleship and Youth ministry leaders are faced weekly with life and death matters presented by those they serve. This is serious business.

Then, there is the important matter of being leaders who are respected. Job said that people show you respect “when they listen to you and wait for your advice, because you spoke to them with gentle words.” (Job 29:21-22) Any Christian leader chosen to lead others must respect others in order to receive respect.

...not double-tongued

An ordained non-clergy leader must not be *double-tongued*, meaning *involved* in gossip or not having a conversation of integrity. Titus 2:8 states, “If they speak the truth then they can’t be criticized.” These leaders must also be persons who are truthful and discreet. Persons are apt to share a multitude of very confidential information with today’s non-clergy leaders. Leaders must know how to handle such information at all times. Given the litigious nature of our society, churches could even find themselves

slapped with lawsuits for improper handling of confidential information, especially if persons are needlessly harmed by information that was leaked, misconstrued or improperly discussed among large audiences.

...not indulging in much wine

During Paul's day wine was a commonly used substance much more so than today. Drinking too much wine led to drunkenness. Isaiah gave strong reasons for not choosing someone who *indulged in much wine*. He stated that, "they were so blind that they didn't know anything (where they were or what they were doing); all they wanted to do was sleep; and they thought only of themselves" (Isaiah 56:10-12). It goes without saying that this type of behavior is unbefitting an ordained Christian leader or any Christian for that matter. However, for ordained leaders, the awareness that they are always on call adds a further requirement for sobriety, if one is needed. Although Paul mentions wine, because it was the toxin of the day, modernly any excessive habits that deaden one's senses and in any way harms their ability to serve must be avoided.

...not greedy for money

Being greedy is a sign of discontentment with one's self. Such discontent actually cannot be cured by money. An ordained Christian leader must never be focused on monetary gain to the harm of their being a walking advertisement for the Savior or the church. Timothy stated that, "*the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil and has caused some to wander from their faith and caused pain to themselves*" (I Timothy 6:10). Ordained non-clergy leaders must be chosen because they are content with whatever the Lord has blessed them materially and are ready to use what they have been given in the Lord's service.

...they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience

All ordained non-clergy leaders must know what they believe and why they believe it. Much harm is done by ordained leaders who are biblically illiterate and unaware of the polity of their faith community. Continuous training/education is necessary. The training provided before ordination will provide a decent foundation, but it will not be sufficient for those who will provide long-term service. In addition to Bible study and Sunday school classes offered at the local church, and two or three day classes offered at denominational gatherings, more and more ordained non-clergy persons are expected to receive Bible College and or seminary training. Such training is long overdue.

The second part of this verse concerns persons never being ashamed to share their beliefs with others whenever the opportunity presents. How much stronger would the Church be if all ordained leaders knew enough and had the courage to share and speak up about sin in the world while standing on the Word of God?

After meeting all the qualifications to be chosen to become [in this case a deacon], verse 10 states that they "*must be tested.*" In other words, their conduct in church and social settings and their willingness and ability to serve the Church and humanity are observed for a period of time. After faithfully completing this process, they are now ready to be ordained as a deacon or non-clergy leader. Paul concludes with the statement that, "*no*

one should be ordained hastily.” The process of testing is critically important. All diligence must be taken in choosing and approving the right people to aid pastors and preachers in serving the Church and the world. Only leaders who can with courage and certainty answer when asked “Whom shall [we] send, and who will go for Us?” (Isaiah 6:8) Here am I, Lord, send me.

Celebration

Ordination of deacons and other non-clergy Church leaders is a sacred and joyous occasion. It is the time where ordained clergy and congregation can acknowledge that these leaders have met all needed requirements. For the candidates, it is the time to have family and friends witness the spiritual service of giving one’s life to the service of God. With tears of joy, the ordained realize that this is their life’s work, to serve God by serving others. What a blessing to be chosen for such work.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: A double-tongue, excessive amounts of wine, a person who is to be ordained being tested, people serving others; and

Sounds: A person speaking who is double-tongued, sounds made by a person filled with much wine.

III. Recommendations

- Read Kenneth H. Hill’s book Religious Education in the African American Tradition: A Comprehensive Introduction. Saint Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2007, in which he argues for the ordination of Christian Educators. Especially see pp. 120-160
- Smith, T. DeWitt. The Deacon in the Black Baptist Church. Atlanta, GA: Hope Pub. House, 1993. pp. 75-85
- Suggestions For Ordaining A Deacon Online location: (<http://www.cobaptist.org/deacon%20ordination.htm>) accessed 28 October 2009