

DEACONS AT THE VINE

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This document features a portion of two articles, the first by Dr. Benjamin L. Merkle and the second by Pastor Thabiti Anyabwile. In the first you will read an overview regarding the office, qualification, and responsibilities of deacons. In the second you will read a short Biblical case on why women are allowed to serve in the office of deacon. We ask that all deacon candidates review this article before completing their deacon application.

The Biblical Qualifications and Responsibilities of Deacons

By Benjamin L. Merkle, Professor of New Testament at Southeastern Seminary

THE TWO BIBLICAL OFFICES: ELDERS AND DEACONS

Comparing the office of deacon to the office of elder will help us answer these questions. The primary spiritual leaders of a congregation are the elders, who are also called overseers or pastors in the New Testament. Elders teach or preach the Word and shepherd the souls of those under their care ([Eph. 4:11](#); [1 Tim. 3:2](#); [5:17](#); [Titus 1:9](#); [Heb. 13:17](#)). Deacons, too, have a crucial role in the life and the health of the local church, but their role is different from the elders'. The biblical role of deacons is to take care of the physical and logistical needs of the church so that the elders can concentrate on their primary calling.

This distinction is based on the pattern found in [Acts 6:1–6](#). The apostles were devoted “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (v. 4). Since this was their primary calling, seven men were chosen to handle more practical matters in order to allow the apostles the freedom to continue with their work.

This division of labor is similar to what we see with the offices of elder and deacon. Like the apostles, the elders' primary role is one of preaching the Word of God. Like the seven, deacons serve the congregation in whatever practical needs may arise.

THE QUALIFICATIONS OF DEACONS

The only passage that mentions the qualifications for deacons is [1 Timothy 3:8–13](#). In this passage, Paul gives an official but not exhaustive list of the requirements for deacons.

The similarities of the qualifications for deacons and elders/overseers in 1 Timothy 3 are striking. Like the qualifications for elders, a deacon must not be an addict (v. 3), not greedy for dishonest gain (v. 3), blameless (v. 2; [Titus 1:6](#)), the husband of one wife (v. 2), and an able manager of his children and household well (vv. 4–5). Furthermore, the focus of the qualifications is the moral character of the person who is to fill the office: a deacon must be mature and above reproach. The main difference between an elder and a deacon is a difference of gifts and calling, not character.

Paul identifies nine qualifications for deacons in [1 Timothy 3:8-12](#):

1. **Dignified (v. 8):** This term normally refers to something that is honorable, respectable, esteemed, or worthy, and is closely related to “respectable,” which is given as a qualification for elders ([1 Tim. 3:2](#)).
2. **Not double-tongued (v. 8):** Those who are double-tongued say one thing to certain people but then say something else to others, or say one thing but mean another. They are two-faced and insincere. Their words cannot be trusted, so they lack credibility.
3. **Not addicted to much wine (v. 8):** A man is disqualified for the office of deacon if he is addicted to wine or other strong drink. Such a person lacks self-control and is undisciplined.
4. **Not greedy for dishonest gain (v. 8):** If a person is a lover of money, he is not qualified to be a deacon, especially since deacons often handle financial matters for the church.

5. **Sound in faith and life (v. 9):** Paul also indicates that a deacon must “hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.” The phrase “the mystery of the faith” is simply one way Paul speaks of the gospel (cf. [1 Tim. 3:16](#)). Consequently, this statement refers to the need for deacons to hold firm to the true gospel without wavering. Yet this qualification does not merely involve one’s beliefs, for he must also hold these beliefs “with a clear conscience.” That is, the behavior of a deacon must be consistent with his beliefs.
6. **Blameless (v. 10):** Paul writes that deacons must “be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless” (v. 10). “Blameless” is a general term referring to a person’s overall character. Although Paul does not specify what type of testing is to take place, at a minimum, the candidate’s personal background, reputation, and theological positions should be examined. Moreover, the congregation should not only examine a potential deacon’s moral, spiritual, and doctrinal maturity, but should also consider the person’s track record of service in the church.
7. **Godly wife (v. 11):** It is debated whether verse 11 refers to a deacon’s wife or to a deaconess. For the sake of this discussion, we will assume the verse is speaking about the qualifications of a deacon’s wife. According to Paul, deacons’ wives must “be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things” (v. 11). Like her husband, the wife must be dignified or respectable. Secondly, she must not be a slanderer or a person who goes around spreading gossip. A deacon’s wife must also be sober-minded or temperate. That is, she must be able to make good judgments and must not be involved in things that might hinder such judgment. Finally, she must be “faithful in all things” (cf. [1 Tim. 5:10](#)). This is a general requirement which functions similarly to the requirement for elders to be “above reproach” ([1 Tim. 3:2](#); [Titus 1:6](#)) and for deacons to be “blameless” ([1 Tim. 3:10](#)).
8. **Husband of one wife (v. 12):** The best interpretation of this difficult phrase is to understand it as referring to the faithfulness of a husband toward his wife. He must be a “one-woman man.” That is, there must be no other woman in his life to whom he relates in an intimate way either emotionally or physically.
9. **Manage children and household well (v. 12):** A deacon must be the spiritual leader of his wife and children.

In general, if a *moral* qualification is listed for elders but not for deacons, that qualification still applies to deacons. The same goes for those qualifications listed for deacons but not for elders. For example, a deacon should not be double-tongued (v. 8, ESV). Paul does not explicitly say this about elders, but no doubt it applies to elders since Paul has said that elders must be “above reproach,” which would include this prohibition.

Still, we should observe the differences in the qualifications, since they either signify a trait that is particularly fitting for the office-holder in order to accomplish his duties, or is something that was a problem in the location to which Paul writes (in this case, Ephesus). This should be more clear as we turn to considering a deacon’s responsibilities.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF DEACONS

Whereas the office of elder is often ignored in the modern church, the office of deacon is often misunderstood. Based on the New Testament, the role of the deacon is mainly to be a servant. The church needs deacons to provide logistical and material support so that the elders can focus on the Word of God and prayer.

The New Testament does not provide much information concerning the role of deacons. The requirements given in [1 Timothy 3:8-12](#) focus on the deacon’s character and family life. There are, however, some clues as to the function of deacons when their requirements are compared with those of the elders. Although many of the qualifications are the same or very similar, there are some notable differences.

Perhaps the most noticeable distinction between elders and deacons is that deacons do not need to be “able to teach” ([1 Tim. 3:2](#)). Deacons are called to “hold” to the faith with a clear conscience, but they are not called to “teach” that faith ([1 Tim. 3:9](#)). This suggests that the deacons do not have an official teaching role in the church.

Like elders, deacons must manage their house and children well ([1 Tim. 3:4, 12](#)). But when referring to deacons, Paul omits the section where he compares managing one's household to taking care of God's church ([1 Tim. 3:5](#)). The reason for this omission is most likely due to the fact that deacons are not given a ruling or leading position in the church—that function belongs to the elders.

Although Paul indicates that a person must be tested before he can hold the office of deacon ([1 Tim. 3:10](#)), the requirement that he cannot be a new convert is not included. Paul notes that if an elder is a recent convert “he may become puffed up with conceit” ([1 Tim. 3:6](#)). One implication concerning this distinction could be that those who hold the office of elder are more susceptible to pride because they possess leadership over the church. On the contrary, it is not as likely for a deacon, who is in more of a servant role, to fall into this same sin. Finally, the title “overseer” ([1 Tim. 3:2](#)) implies general oversight over the spiritual well-being of the congregation, whereas the title “deacon” implies one who has a service-oriented ministry.

Beyond what we can glean from these differences in qualifications, the Bible does not clearly indicate the function of deacons. Yet based on the pattern established in Acts 6 with the apostles and the Seven, it seems best to view deacons as servants who do whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church. Just as the apostles delegated administrative responsibilities to the Seven, so the elders are to delegate certain responsibilities to the deacons so that the elders can focus their efforts elsewhere. As a result, each local church is free to define the tasks of deacons based on their particular needs.

What are some duties that deacons might be responsible for today? They could be responsible for anything that's not related to teaching and shepherding the church. Such duties might include:

- **Facilities:** The deacons could be responsible for managing the church property. This would include making sure the place of worship is prepared for the worship service, cleaning up, or running the sound system.
- **Benevolence:** Similar to what took place in [Acts 6:1–6](#) with the daily distribution to the widows, the deacons may be involved in administering funds or other assistance to the needy.
- **Finances:** While the elders should probably oversee the financial business of the church ([Acts 11:30](#)), it may be best left to the deacons to handle the day-to-day matters. This would include collecting and counting the offering, keeping records, and so on.
- **Ushers:** The deacons could be responsible for distributing bulletins, seating the congregation, or preparing the elements for communion.
- **Logistics:** Deacons should be available to help in variety of ways so that the elders are able to concentrate on teaching and shepherding the church.

CONCLUSION

Whereas the Bible charges elders with the tasks of teaching and leading the church, deacons' role is more service-oriented. That is, they are to care for the physical or temporal concerns of the church. By handling such matters, deacons free up the elders to focus on shepherding the spiritual needs of the congregation.

Yet even though deacons are not the congregation's spiritual leaders, their character is of utmost importance, which is why deacons should be examined and held to the biblical qualifications laid down in 1 Timothy 3.

A BRIEF CASE FOR WOMEN DEACONS

By Pastor Thabiti Anyabwile

[First Timothy 3:8-13](#) contain some key instruction on this matter. For me, the issue turns in part on verse 11: “In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything” (NIV). Or as the ESV renders it, “Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.”

Both the NIV and ESV contain marginal notes for the word “wives,” indicating the term may be translated “women.” So, the text could either have in view the wives of deacons (if you accept the supply of “their” in the verse), women deacons, or women who assist deacons but are not themselves deacons. Because “their” is not explicit in the text, and the word “likewise” seems to indicate another category in the list, I lean with many others in understanding this verse to refer to women deacons or at the least women who assist deacons.

Moreover, there are instances elsewhere in the New Testament that seem to indicate the apostolic church had women deacons. I think of [Romans 16:1](#) where Phoebe is described as a “deacon.” True, the word “deacon” has a range of meanings wider than the office itself. Paul could refer to his own ministry as an apostle using the word “deacon” ([1 Tim. 1:12](#)). Most of the prohibitions have to do with the qualifications for male deacons—“husband of but one wife.” But if the assumptions I make in the previous paragraph are correct, then it would seem the Bible does not forbid women from playing this role.