

Deacons

In many Evangelical churches across the world there is a group of individuals who are referred to as “deacons.” These individuals have been selected by their congregations and given a specific responsibility within the church. However, the scope and understanding of this responsibility can differ largely between churches. The focus of this paper is to biblically consider 1) What is a Deacon? 2) Who is Qualified to be a Deacon? & 3) What do Deacons do?

What is a Deacon?

The Greek word *diakonos*, where we get our English word “deacon” from, is best translated as “servant.” The Lexham Bible Dictionary states that *diakonos* is, “One who serves in an official capacity in the church as a deacon.”¹ This office of deacon is unique and complementary with the office elder. Regarding this complementary role alongside elders the Lexham Bible Dictionary adds,

There are two primary classes of church leadership offices in the New Testament: that of the overseer and elder, and that of the deacon (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1–13). Deacons do not hold teaching or ruling authority in the church but exercise responsibility for the physical needs of the congregation. The complementary service of overseers and deacons is analogous to that of the apostles and the Seven in Acts 6:1–6.²

Therefore, a deacon is an individual who has been called by a local church to serve in an official capacity.

Who is Qualified to be a Deacon?

The question of qualifications for these called servants is answered in two separate passages; Acts 6:1-6 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13. In Acts 6 we read that the church was growing and some widows in the church were “being neglected in the daily distribution.”³ The solution to this problem was for seven men to be chosen by the “full number of the disciples” so that the Apostles could continue to focus their time and attention on prayer and the ministry of the word.

This passage is helpful for two specific reasons:

- 1) The Apostles recognized the need for these widows, and others, to have their physical needs cared for and they recognized their inability to do so because they had been called to preach the word of God and pray. The word the Apostles use in reference to tables being “served” is *diakonein* which is a derivative of *diakonos*, the Greek word defined above.
- 2) The Apostles told the full number of the disciples to pick out men who were of good repute (reputation), full of the Spirit and of wisdom. While all believers have been called to serve, we see in Acts 6 that seven men were chosen to serve in an official way and that there were qualifications that they had to meet.

¹ Brian J. Tabb, “Deacon,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015).

² Ibid.

³ All Scripture quotations are from the ESV. Crossway Publishers. Wheaton Ill. 2001. Used with Permission.

In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, the Apostle Paul expands upon the list of items in Acts 6 and gives us further details regarding the qualifications that those chosen to serve as Deacons must meet. Here is the list that Paul gives Timothy with definitions for each qualification.

1 Timothy 3:8-10:

Dignified—“Serious in mind and character; not silly or flippant about important matters.”⁴

Not Double Tongued—Deacons are to “let their yes be yes and their no be no.”⁵ The speech of deacons should be truthful, honest, dependable, and consistent. They should be trustworthy.

Not Addicted to Much Wine—The Bible never prohibits the use of alcohol, rather the lack of or loss of self-control as the result of alcohol, or strong drink, and by extension any substance that removes the ability to control yourself.⁶ Consistent throughout the Scriptures is the command to walk by⁷ and be filled⁸ with the Spirit as opposed to drunkenness.

It is also important to note that culturally the use of alcohol carries with it connotations and assumptions which, while unfair, can damage someone’s creditability. It is therefore very important that if a deacon does partake in alcohol, in moderation as the Bible allows that he does so in wisdom considering the environment where he is at and whom he is around. Furthermore, Romans chapters 14 and 15 tell us that our freedom in Christ should never become a stumbling block for another believer. We are to always defer on preference issues for the sake of our brothers or sisters.

Not Greedy for Dishonest Gain—Deacons should be motivated by the Gospel and compelled by Christ’s love, not money.

Hold to the Mystery of the Faith with a Clear Conscience—This word “mystery” is a word common to Paul’s writings and generally refers to the gospel which was not fully understood, but now is fully understood. Included in Paul’s understanding of, hidden but now known is: Christ’s incarnation⁹, the indwelling of Christ in believers¹⁰, the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in the church¹¹, and the gospel¹². One culturally significant application of this qualification is that deacons should have racial impartiality, believing and proclaiming (with a clear conscience) that Christ saves all kinds of men and women, not just one ethnicity or race.¹³

⁴ MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*. Thomas Nelson Publishing. Dallas TX. 2005. Pg. 1787

⁵ Matthew 5:37; James 5:12

⁶ In Ephesians 5:18 Paul contrasts being “filled with the Spirit” with being “drunk with wine”. Paul writes this command in the present tense with a passive voice, thus indicating that believers are to continually (present) surrender themselves to the Spirit’s filling, control, in their lives (passive). The exhortation to be “filled with the Spirit” is a continual command to allow the Holy Spirit to control our thoughts, actions and emotions. I believe we could apply these texts principally beyond alcohol to prescription drug abuse, marijuana, stimulants, depressants and any substance that alters someone’s mental capacity for clear thinking, self-control and Spirit filling.

⁷ Galatians 5:16

⁸ Ephesians 5:18

⁹ 1 Timothy 3:16

¹⁰ Colossians 1:27

¹¹ Ephesians 3:4-6

¹² Colossians 4:2

¹³ We may also rightly apply this principle beyond the church walls into the daily lives of deacons. There should be racial impartiality in their daily lives just as there is in their work with a local church.

Tested and Proven Blameless— Not sinless perfection, but one who free from any valid accusation. This person goes the extra step, even when completely out of the way, to make sure that all situations and relationships are free from the accusation of others.

1 Timothy 3:12-13:

Husband of One Wife—Literally translated a “one woman man.” One who is a steadfastly faithful husband and father. This man’s marriage is an example to the church.¹⁴

Managing Children and Households Well— Describes the man who is actively leading his home well. “He rules and cares.” He does not sit passively by and expect his wife or children to care for the affairs of the home. As a godly man he demonstrates initiating leadership with his wife children; leading and guiding them to love Jesus well and caring for the details of the home in a respectable and orderly way.

1 Timothy 3:11:

It is our understanding from Scripture that women can serve as deacons. The specific qualifications given in verse 11 are for women deacons in addition to the qualifications already listed.¹⁵ Please see below for a detailed explanation of why we believe women are allowed to serve as deacons.

Dignified—“Serious in mind and character; not silly or flippant about important matters.”¹⁶

Not Slanderers—Their speech must be upright and holy, not characterized by gossip or degrading others. She must be known as one who will not share sensitive information about other church members.

Sober-Minded— One who knows how to order her priorities and is disciplined. Describes someone who has sobriety of judgment.¹⁷ She is serious about spiritual matters.¹⁸

Faithful in All Things—All areas of her life should reflect a desire to honor and glorify the Lord.

Women as Deacons?

As mentioned above, we believe that Scripture allows for women to hold the office of deacon. This understanding comes from three primary reasons which will be explained further below: 1) Language. 2) Theological Conclusions & 3) Logical Implications.

¹⁴ For an expanded and extensive definition of this qualification please refer to the “Husband of One Wife” Position Paper.

¹⁵ We should not conclude that these additional requirements mean that there is a greater burden of proof or “more hoops to jump through” for women deacons. We should see these additional qualifications as giving greater clarity for women deacons, and perhaps addressing specific areas that women can find themselves tempted in. Furthermore it would be incorrect to conclude that these four qualifications are the *only* qualifications for women deacons. It seems prudent then to see the entire list of qualifications that Paul gives as applicable to deacons, with verse 11 noting particular areas for women deacons.

¹⁶ ¹⁶ MacArthur. *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*. Pg. 1787

¹⁷ Mounce, William. *Word Biblical Commentary, Pastoral Epistles*. Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville. 2000. Pg. 173

¹⁸ MacArthur. Pg. 1785

Language¹⁹

We believe that the language of the New Testament supports the conviction that women can serve as deacons. Yes, in Acts 6 the Apostles told the disciples to choose seven *men* but they did not say that women were unqualified or unable to serve as deacons. Perhaps this could be in inference drawn from Acts 6, but it would be a tenuous one.

In Romans 16:1 Paul writes, “*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae...*” The word Paul uses for “servant” is *diakonon*, a derivative of *diakonos* which some translations reference in a footnote as the word deaconess.

Lastly, in regards to language, Paul in 1 Timothy 3:11 states, “Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. “The words “their wives” could also be translated as “women” rather than just wives.²⁰ John MacArthur helpfully comments, “Paul likely here refers not to deacons' wives, but to the women who serve as deacons. The use of the word likewise as an introduction (cf. vs. 8) suggests a third group in addition to elders and deacons. Also, since Paul gave no requirements for elders' wives, there is no reason to assume these would be qualifications for deacons' wives.” Also, Homer Kent Jr. writes, “this [wives] cannot be limited to the wives of deacons.”²¹ Language matters, and is helpful in informing us what the biblical authors meant by what they wrote.

Theological Conclusions

Theological conclusions are also very important to consider and think through. As was presented in the Elder Position Paper the reason why a woman is not allowed to function in the office of elder is because of God's design for male headship in both the family and in His church. Paul clearly states in 1 Timothy 2:12, “*I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man...*” The office of deacon is one that does not hold a function of teaching with it. In Acts 6, it was this function of teaching that the Apostles were remaining devoted to. They did not choose seven men to teach so that the Apostles could serve. Furthermore, the qualification of “able to teach”, in 1 Timothy 3:2, is only a qualification for elders, not deacons and is again stated in Titus 1:9 where Paul again lists qualifications for elders.²²

Logical Conclusions

Perhaps we risk overstating points already made. However, if a woman is only prohibited from serving in the office of elder then *all* other areas of church leadership are open and available for a woman to serve in, including the office of deacon.

¹⁹ Greek scholars are divided on whether or not these linguistic arguments can solely support the argument for women deacons. However, while recognizing these arguments may not solely give support the majority of scholars found, in our research, do still conclude that women can serve as deacons. Their conclusions are supported by a broader understanding of Scripture that includes the roles and elders/overseers and male headship in the family and church.

²⁰ This translation would also be consistent with the qualification of men who are elders found in 1 Timothy 3:2 The ESV translates this qualification “husband of one wife” but inserts a footnote with “a man of one woman.” Generally speaking, Pastors and Bible commentators we would agree with describe this elder's qualification as a “one woman man.”

²¹ Kent, Homer, Jr. *The Pastoral Epistles*. Moody Press. Chicago Il.1958. pg. 141

²² It is also possible to see a similar relationship between Husband/Wife (i.e the family) as head and helper with Elder/Deacon (i.e. the church) as head and helper.

On the basis of the language the Bible uses to describe both men and women serving, the theological conclusions regarding male headship and authority, and the logical conclusions regarding the aforementioned, it is our conclusion that women can be deacons.

What do Deacons Do?

We are now left to consider what deacons do. Simply put, deacons serve.

Deacons serve the church in practical ways, caring for people's physical needs and other areas of the church, so that the elders may be freed to devote themselves to the responsibilities God has given them.

By the definition given in this paper it could be concluded that *everyone* serving in a church is a deacon. However, we need to not forget that while all believers are called to serve, both inside and outside the church, the presence of qualifications for the office of deacon functions to indicate there were individuals recognized apart from the congregation at large that served in an official capacity.

In summary, deacons are those who have been asked by the church to serve in an official capacity. At Grace we believe that both men and women can serve as deacons and that there are certain positions of leadership within the church that should be filled by someone who meets the qualifications of deacon as listed in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Essentially anyone who leads a team of other people must, at least, meet the qualifications of deacon. Those individuals serving as team leaders have a greater level of responsibility than those who are simply serving on the team, and as responsibility increases so should the qualifications that someone must meet.

God has given his church deacons, to care and serve the church in very practical ways. He intends for this office to be a complementary one to that of elder in that each have unique roles and responsibilities.