



Ecclesiology: The Study of the Church

Lesson 11: Elders and Deacons in the Church

INTRODUCTION

1. What kinds of things qualify people for leadership in business? What about in local communities? In the government? _____

MAIN IDEA

Elders are called to lead the church by teaching God’s Word, shepherding the flock one by one, and serving as examples of godly character. They must be men of consistently exemplary Christian character, must lead their families well, and must be able to teach God’s Word. Deacons are to serve the church by caring for its practical needs and freeing up the elders to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer.

DIGGING IN

I. Elders

In the New Testament, the church’s spiritual leaders are interchangeably referred to as elders, overseers, or pastors (see Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7). Since “elder” is the most common title, that’s the one we’ll use. We are going to look at what elders are supposed to do and the qualifications for being an elder.

1 Peter 5:1–5.

1. On what basis does Peter appeal to the elders (v. 1)? Why do you think he mentions these things before exhorting the elders? _____

2. What is the main command Peter gives to the elders (v. 2)? _____

3. What does it mean, practically, to shepherd a church? What are some examples of what shepherding entails? _____

4. In verses 2 and 3, Peter alternates between telling the elders how they should and shouldn't shepherd the flock. Fill in the chart below in order to map out what Peter is saying:

Don't Shepherd Like This ...	Instead, Shepherd Like This ...

5. What does Peter say will happen for faithful elders when Jesus comes back (v. 4)? Why should this encourage elders? Why should it humble them? _____

6. What does Peter tell the rest of the church to do in response to the elders' ministry (v. 5)? Why does this require humility on our part? _____

1 Timothy 3:1–7.

7. What does it mean to be “above reproach” (v. 2)? _____

8. The Greek phrase translated “husband of one wife” could also be translated as “one-woman man” (v. 2). What does this qualification require of married men? _____

9. The words “temperate,” “prudent,” and “respectable” all refer to similar qualities (v. 2). Describe these words. _____

10. Why do you think hospitality is a qualification for an elder (v. 2)? What should Christian hospitality consist of? _____

New Testament scholar D. A. Carson has observed that perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the biblical qualifications for elders is that they are not all that extraordinary. In fact, almost all of them are required of all Christians elsewhere in the New Testament (see Matt. 5:27–30; Rom. 12:13; Eph. 6:4; 1 Thess. 4:12; Titus 2:1–12; 1 Pet. 1:13). Apart from not being a new convert, the one qualification that is not required of all Christians elsewhere is that elders must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2).

11. Read Titus 1:9–10. Why is it important that elders be able to teach, as verse 2 says? _____

12. Read 1 Timothy 2:11–15. Given that all elders are required to be able to teach and that teaching the church is one of their main responsibilities (Titus 1:9–10), does Scripture allow women to be elders? ____

II. Deacons

What we see in Acts 6:1–7 is likely the historical roots of the office of deacon. It begins with a tense conflict.

Acts 6:1–7.

1. What problem did the church in Jerusalem face in this passage (v. 1)? _____

2. What was the apostles’ solution to the problem (vv. 2–4)? _____

3. What kind of men did the apostles tell the congregation to pick out for this task (v. 3)? _____

4. What rationale did the apostles give for why they delegated this task to another group of people (v. 4)? ____

The Greek word from which we get the term “deacon” is *diakonos*, which means servant. It was used to describe many different kinds of work, including waiting tables (the related verb is used in 6:2). And the apostles resolved to devote themselves to the *diakonia*, the ministry, of the Word and prayer (6:4). Thus, while this passage doesn’t use the term “deacon” to describe the men who handled the distribution of food, it seems likely that Luke is recording this incident to describe the historical origins of what later became the office of deacon.

By the time the apostle Paul wrote 1 Timothy, the office of deacon was apparently well established in many churches (see Phil. 1:1). Thus, in 1 Timothy 3, after listing the qualifications for elders, Paul lays out the qualifications for deacons as well.

1 Timothy 3:8–13.

5. What does it mean to hold “to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (v. 9)? _____

6. Why do you think Paul insists that deacons be tested before they serve (v. 10)? (For a similar line of thought, see Paul’s instruction that an elder must not be a recent convert in verse 6.) _____

7. What does Paul require of deacons in terms of family life (v. 12)? _____

8. Read 1 Timothy 3:4–5. What’s present in this qualification for elders that’s absent in the qualification for deacons in 3:12? What do you think this teaches us about the difference between the two offices? ____

9. Are there any qualifications for elders that aren’t qualifications for deacons? What does that tell us about the difference between elders’ and deacons’ responsibilities? _____

10. Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” Given all that elders are responsible to do, what are some ways that you can help ensure that they shepherd you with joy and not with groaning? _____

11. What are some challenges deacons face? What are some ways you can encourage and pray for your church’s deacons in light of these challenges?¹ _____

¹ Bobby Jamieson, *Leading One Another: Church Leadership*, ed. Mark Dever, 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).