

What is a Deacon?

The term deacon comes from a greek noun which means “servant” and a corresponding verb which means “to serve.” The vast majority of the times that these terms are used in the New Testament they convey nothing more specific than to be a servant or to serve, respectively; however, several times they are used to refer to a specific office within the church.

For example, in **Philippians 1:1** Paul writes, “Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and **deacons**” In this context Paul appears to be referring to a specific office of deacon. Likewise, in **1 Timothy 3:8-13** Paul refers to the character qualifications needed of a deacon.

From these two references we can clearly see that God provided the office of deacon in order to help His church function properly; therefore, what God has wisely provided, let us not foolishly neglect. For this reason we thought it best to make a statement explaining our convictions about deacons.

The Purpose of Deacons

The foundational principles behind the office of deacon can be found in **Acts 6:1-6** when the church experienced a crisis surrounding its ability to provide food to all of its widows.

Acts 6:1-6 Now in those days, while the disciples were multiplying in number, there was grumbling from the Hellenists against the Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “**It is not pleasing to God for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.**” “Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this need. “**But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the service of the word.**” And this word pleased the whole congregation, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they stood before the apostles, and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

1. **The Wisdom of their Response:** In their response the Apostles had three priorities:
 - a. Protect the ministries of the word & prayer from neglect
 - b. Establish proper ministry for the widows
 - c. Ensure that the individuals ministering to the widows were qualified and trustworthy.

2. **The Necessity of delegation:** One of the earliest triumphs of the church was in recognizing a key leadership principle: delegation. The Apostles realized very quickly that for them to successfully lead the church they could not do everything, rather they must focus upon the core ministries of the church and delegate other ministries to faithful men. It is this principle which stands behind the office of deacon. We need deacons so that pastors can pastor effectively while trustworthy servants serve faithfully.

What Deacons Do

Scripture is remarkably silent on the activity of deacons. For example, **1 Timothy 3:8-13**, which is the primary passage people look to for an understanding of the office records no responsibilities for deacons. What are we to take away from Scripture's lack of specificity on what deacons do? Scripture places no hard restrictions on what deacons can and cannot do because deacons are to assist the pastors and elders. In a word: Deacons can do anything that the local church and its pastors need them to do. Paul does not get specific because the ministry needs of the church might often vary wildly.

Here are some examples of things that deacons might do:

1. Care for widows and the sick
2. Handle the church finances
3. Pass out the communion elements
4. Run an outreach ministry
5. Provide security for the church
6. Run sound equipment
7. Fix a leaky faucet
8. Assist the elders with shepherding individuals in the church

At this point someone might ask, "What's the difference between a deacon and any other member?" This is an important question. Scripture seems to make it clear that deacons are trusted with a delegated authority to run a ministry. Deacons, by virtue of their office, are accepting responsibility to ensure that ministry happens. By having deacons a church can be confident that someone other than a pastor will be able to handle critical ministry needs so that the ministry of the word and prayer will not be neglected.

Qualifications to Serve

The qualifications for the office of deacons all come from the following passage:

1 Timothy 3:8-13 Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not fond of dishonest gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And these men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, leading their children and their own households well. For those who have served

well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

The Dignity of the Office: Paul says that deacons must be “Dignified” This means that deacons are to behave in a manner that is worthy of respect. The goal of **1 Timothy 3:8-13** is to promote pure love, an unhypocritical faith, and a good conscience (**1 Tim. 1:5**) and thereby protect the witness of the Church (**1 Tim. 3:14-16**).

- a. **Undignified Disqualifications:** To be a deacon one must first possess self-control. Paul lists three examples of areas in which one must demonstrate that they have been mastered by Christ so as to master their flesh. One must master his speech, master his appetite, and master his wallet.¹ Paul is not expecting perfection; however, the pattern of their life must be self-control.
- i. “**Not Double Tongued**” The term most likely refers to sincerity and integrity of speech. A deacon is a man who does not talk differently behind closed doors or other’s backs. Additionally, his word can be counted on. This requires one to righteously master their tongue.
 - ii. “**Not indulging in much wine**” Here deacons are prohibited from being devoted to the bottle. This would include avoiding drunkenness on any given occasion, as well as being mastered by anything other than Christ. These addictive substances include alcohol, illegal drugs, stimulants, social media, video games, pornography, or any other substance or behavior. An “addict” of any kind cannot maintain the dignity of the office for they are slaves of worldly things, rather than slaves of Christ, which undermines the witness of the church.
 - iii. “**Not fond of dishonest gain**” Here deacons are expected to have integrity in their financial dealings and not be controlled by a sinful love for money. There are two obvious reasons for this prohibition: First, to protect the church from a man who would use his office to make money,² and second, to protect the witness of the church from being damaged by a man of this character..
 - iv. Recommended Questions:
 - 1. Controlled Speech: Can I trust what this person says? Do they have a tendency to gossip or slander? Are they prone to flattery or manipulative praise? Do they ever exaggerate, stretch the truth, or make inaccurate statements? Do they speak differently around unbelievers than around pastors or fellow church members?
 - 2. Controlled appetite: Does this person control their desires? Is there anything mastering them (i.e. are they “addicted” to anything)? Do they have a tendency to overindulge in alcoholic beverages? How much do they give themselves to entertainment? Are they addicted to social media use?

¹Matt Smethurst, *Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church*, 65.

² John MacArthur, *1 Timothy: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, 127

3. Controlled Finances: Do they demonstrate financial integrity? Can they be trusted with money? Has anyone ever accused them of financial dishonesty?

- b. **Dignified Qualifications:** Just as Paul provided us with three means to disqualify candidates for ministry, he also provided us with three criteria for qualified deacons. They must be found faithful in their personal life, faithful in their church ministry life, and faithful in their home life. Paul is not expecting perfection; however, the pattern of their life must be one of faithfulness.
- i. **“Holding to the Mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.”** What Paul means here is that one’s adherence to the glorious truths of the Christian faith must never be undermined by a failure to guard their own conscience. In a word, deacons must possess not only a clear testimony of God’s work in their lives, but a faithful commitment to living with integrity. So then the first sphere in which deacons must be found faithful is in their personal life and in this sphere of their personal life, they must adorn the beautiful gospel with a beautifully blameless life. A blameless life reflects an overwhelming concern for heavenly matters. As one theologian puts it, “Although deacons exercise authority over material concerns, they must be profoundly spiritual men.”³
 - ii. **“And these men must first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.”** Paul’s policy is that deacons ought to be tested. This indicates that deacons must have been found faithful in not only their own life, but also in the sphere of the church.
 - iii. **“Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, leading their children and their own households well.”** Faithfulness in marriage and to one’s family is the third sphere that Paul requires for deacons. This does not mean one must be married and have children. As John MacArthur puts it, “the issue is moral character, not marital status.”⁴ For the married deacon, faithfulness to one’s spouse and faithfulness as a leader in the home is the test of whether a man can be a deacon in the church. Why should a man be trusted to serve the family of God if he cannot be trusted at home? For single deacons, moral purity and faithfulness in the relationships they have (family, roommates, friends, or fellow church members) becomes the test of their fitness for the office.
 - iv. Recommended Questions:
 1. Personal Life: Is there anything in this person’s life that undermines the gospel? Are they obedient to the Great Commission? Are they a person of character and integrity?
 2. Ministry: Have we found this person reliable in the past? Can we trust them with tasks and deadlines? Do they follow instructions and do things well?

³ Joel Beeke, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, Vol. 4, 342.

⁴ MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, 129.

3. Family: Are they a good husband? Do they lead their children well? Is their home in order? How is he training his children theologically?

Can Women serve as Deacons? (Deaconesses)

The generally masculine language surrounding deacons would make it easy at first glance to assume that the office was restricted to men; however several Biblical arguments lead us to believe otherwise.

1. In **1 Timothy 3:11** Paul says, “**Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.**”
 - a. Opponents of female deacons prefer to translate the Greek word “women” as “wife.” They will typically argue that the phrase “**husband of one wife**” (literally, “**one-woman man**”) in **3:2** and **12** indicates that Paul had in mind deacon’s wives. They also typically cite Paul’s prohibition on women teaching or having authority over a man in **1 Timothy 2:12**.
 - b. In response, we would argue the following for the translation of “women”
 - i. **Wording:** Paul neglects to use either the personal possessive pronoun “**their** women,” or the article, which are the standard ways of indicating the meaning of “wife.” This leads us to prefer the translation “**woman**.” A simple word study of the term can confirm that this is the more natural translation.
 - ii. **Book Context:** The phrase “**Women must likewise**” is an exact match in greek for the opening phrase of **1 Tim. 2:9** where Paul says, “**Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, with modesty and self-restraint...**” In that context it is clear that women is the better translation and the fact that Paul has already made it a point to refer first to the men of the church (**1 Tim. 2:8**) and then to the women of the church (**1 Tim. 2:9**) suggests that he is doing the same thing in this passage by referring first to male deacons (**vv. 8-10**) and then “**likewise**” to female deacons (**v. 11**).
 - iii. **Immediate Context:** Paul neglects to offer any requirements for the wives of *elders* in **vv. 1-7**. Why would Paul require the prospective *deacon* to have a dignified wife, yet require nothing of the *elder’s* wife? Again, why have a requirement of *deacons* wives if he has no requirement of *elders* wives?
 - iv. **Requirements:** The requirements for women in verse 11 are essentially synonymous with that of the deacon in verses 8-10. Both are required to be dignified, both are required to control their tongues, both are required to control their appetites, and both are required to be faithful.
 - v. In response to the appeal to **1 Tim. 2:12** which says, “**But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.**” We would simply note that being able to teach is not required of deacons,

nor are deacons given authority over the church. For this reason, we believe that female deacons would not violate Paul's restriction upon female leaders, so long as the female deacons were not allowed to teach men or given any leadership roles by the elders.

2. In **Romans 16:1** Paul refers to Phoebe as a deacon. He says, "[Now I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea](#)"
 - a. While some commentators and translations argue that this is merely a general reference to Phoebe as someone who served the church at Cenchrea, it is the same greek term meaning deacon and by all accounts the service which Phoebe rendered were most likely very similar to those that a deacon could have offered.

These two Biblical passages seem to indicate to us that the office of deacon was not solely restricted to men. For this reason, Grace Bible Church is currently willing to allow women to serve as deacons provided they are not given authority over men or used by the elders to teach men.

Becoming a Deacon

Self-Preparation:

If you've read the information above, then you realize that we are looking for dignified individuals. This dignity expresses itself in two primary ways: self-control and faithfulness. If you would like to be a deacon, then these are the areas to begin preparing in.

1. Growth in Self-Control:
 - a. Speech: "[not double tongued](#)" Can people trust what comes out of my mouth? Do I have a tendency to gossip ("spreading bad news about people") or slander ("make false statements about people")? Do I ever flatter people by saying positive things about others that I think they want to hear? Do I ever exaggerate or stretch the truth? Would I speak differently around unbelievers than around my pastors or fellow church members? These may be areas to work on.
 - b. Appetite: "[not indulging in much wine](#)" How well can I control my desires and appetites? Are there areas of my life where I am being mastered by something? Do I overindulge in alcohol? Do I do drugs? How is my social media use? Is Christ the delight of my heart or is there something else that I rely upon for comfort?
 - c. Personal finances: "[not fond of dishonest gain](#)" Do I demonstrate financial integrity? Have I ever found ways to gain money, time, or possessions through dishonest or shameful means? Has anyone ever accused me of being dishonest or taking advantage of them? How would my business partners, customers, clients, employees, employers and other people with whom I have done business described me to my pastor or others?

2. Growth in Faithfulness

- a. Personal Life: “[holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience](#)” Are you faithful? Is there anything in your life that undermines your profession of faith or your gospel witness? Are you obedient to the great commission? Do you seek to have a tender conscience? Are you a person of integrity?
- b. Ministry: “[And these men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach](#)” Are you faithful at church? Can people trust you with the tasks that they give you? Do you finish tasks when you say you will? Do you follow instructions and complete things with excellence?
- c. Family: “[Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, leading their children and their own households well.](#)” For the married church member, are you faithful at home? Are you a good spouse? Do you lead your children well? Is your home in order? Are you leading your wife and children in family worship and are you training them theologically? For the unmarried church member, are you morally pure? Are you using your singleness to serve the Lord? Do you live a circumspect and organized life? Are you intentional to evangelize and make disciples out of those God has placed in your sphere of life?

3. Self-Examination

- a. In which of these areas do you excel?? In which of these areas do you most need growth? How has the Lord grown you in these areas? Are there any of these areas that you fall short in? Have you sought help to grow in them?

Examination by the leadership:

1 Timothy 3:10 says that churches must test prospective deacons. For this reason our process of examination will typically involve giving greater and greater responsibility to faithful servants and to only give them titles after they have already been doing the work of a deacon for some time. We believe that this reflects love for the men, since it allows those who are qualified to assume the office gradually and protects them from the potential embarrassment of disqualification.

The Benefits of Deaconhood

When **1 Timothy 3:13** says, “[For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.](#)” We believe that two blessings of the office are in view.

First, the eternal rewards of faithful service to Christ. Paul says, “[deacons obtain for themselves a high standing.](#)” Faithful deacons are those whom our Lord will greet by saying, “Well done, good and faithful slave.” (**Matt. 25:21**) The office of deacon is a means to please our Master through faithful service and therefore a worthy pursuit for any believer.

Second, it allows the believer confidence in their witness. The self-control and faithfulness required of Biblical deacons is what primarily gives them this confidence, since they do not have any major undermining flaws which could damage their witness.