

## Deacons and Deaconesses

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The office of deacon and deaconess is extremely important because those who serve God as officials in His church help determine the character of the whole congregation. To serve God as a deacon or deaconess is a real privilege, but the office carries with it great responsibilities, and it should not be entered lightly.

### ***1. THE NATURE OF THE DEACON'S OFFICE***

Information concerning the nature of the deacon's office is not plentiful in the Scriptures. The exact nature and duties of the office are nowhere set forth in any systematic way. This does not mean that the work of the deacon was considered inferior. The New Testament is very clear that there was such an office, and that it is a glorious task.

The word "deacon" comes from the Greek word meaning "servant." The Greek term ***diakonos*** signifies in general "one who serves." Thus the deacon's work is primarily that of ministering or serving. Deacons were chosen (as the need arose) to assist the elders in the temporal work of the church. Their origin is given in **Acts 6**, which tells how the Jerusalem church selected seven men to administer the finances, to serve tables, and to care for the poor of the congregation (**Acts 6: 1-6**).

A grave situation had developed in the First Century Church. The size of the church grew to the point where the apostles could no longer care for the social needs of the church, and still be responsible for the spiritual ministry. Certain widows were neglected in the daily distribution of material things. The church sensed the need for enlarging its official body of administrators, and so seven men were selected to care for the material needs of its members. Some of the deacons (Stephen and Philip) turned out to be flaming evangelists, so that they helped not only with the temporal affairs of the church, but also with the spiritual ministries.

Otho Winger describes the deacon's office by saying: "Deacons are elected by the vote of the members of the local congregation. Among the many duties that may be assigned to them, are looking after the poor and sick, paying the annual visit, making preparation for the lovefeasts, and assisting the (preaching) ministry in any way they can" (Winger, *History and Doctrines of the Church of the Brethren*, 1919). Deacons are to be servants in the local church – looking after the poor and sick, taking care of church funds, assisting in the administration of the ordinances, serving as helpers to the preaching ministers of the church – so that the elders can give themselves continually to the study of the Word of God and to prayer.

## 2. THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE DEACON

The early church chose men for the deacon's office who were of honest report and full of the Holy Spirit (**Acts 6:5**). They did not look for men who were wealthy, or good organizers, or formally educated, or persons "who knew their way around." The qualifications for the deacon (and for the deacon's wife) center around the individual's personal character, spiritual life, and home relationships (**1 Timothy 3:8-13**).

### *The deacon's personal character (1 Timothy 3:8)*

The word "grave" denotes a seriousness of mind and character. It doesn't mean that the deacon must be long-faced, but it does mean that his conduct must be decent and becoming, not silly and light-minded. Humor and laughter are gifts from God. God must have meant us to laugh or He would not have made so many parrots and mules and monkeys. But "gravity" is the attitude of the person who takes a serious view of life. The Christian life is meant to be a happy experience, but we must guard against a shallow and happy-go-lucky attitude toward life.

The phrase "not double tongued" means that we must not say different things to different people to suit the occasion. One salesman describes how he trifles with the truth by being double-tongued: "When talking for a while with my prospective customer, say to the lady, 'How about the PTA! Do you belong!' If she says 'No, ' I say 'That's the way it is with my wife; she just doesn't have time.' If she says 'Yes,' I tell her my wife does too! In that way establish a friendly climate with my customer." The deacon will need to help make responsible decisions, and he might be tempted to evade issues by doing some smooth talking. But those who spread conflicting tales among the congregation will bring misunderstanding and discord in the church.

The expression "not given to much wine" puzzles present day readers because in many of our circles, total abstinence from alcoholic beverages is a foregone conclusion for the Christian. In the First Century (and in many parts of the world today) water supplies were often contaminated. Many people used wine (highly diluted with water) as a

beverage. Such use of wine was not forbidden by Scripture, but addiction to wine is severely condemned. Yet in spite of this general permission, total abstinence from alcoholic beverages was often practiced. Timothy was a total abstainer, for he had to be told to use a little wine, “for his stomach’s sake” (1 Timothy 5:23). Remember that one who never touches alcoholic beverages never becomes a drunkard!

The deacon is not to be “greedy of filthy lucre.” He is to have a balanced view toward money. Part of his work involves the distribution of alms to the needy, and there is always a chance for embezzlement even of church funds. The deacon is not to be a money lover. Judas was not the last treasurer who betrayed the Lord for a few pieces of silver. In summary then (according to 1 Timothy 3:8), the deacon is not to be a silly joker, a double talker, a wine lover, or a money grabber.

### *The deacon’s spiritual life (1 Timothy 3:9-10)*

The deacon must not only have certain personal characteristics; he must also possess a vital spiritual life.

The deacon does not need to be “apt to teach” (like the elder does), but he does need a settled faith. The deacon should not be the kind of person who falls for every wind of doctrine that blows his way.

He is to hold “the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.” He is to have a settled faith in the evangelical teachings of the Scriptures, including the ordinances, the principles, and the restrictions of the Gospel. A “mystery” is not what is beyond knowledge, but what being once hidden, is now revealed to those with spiritual discernment. Ephesians 3:4-6 explains the “mystery” as the secret of salvation through Jesus Christ which is available to all who believe (Jew and Gentile). To hold the faith with “a pure conscience” is to believe with utter sincerity and without mental reservation.

Deacons are to be “first proved.” They are not to be appointed hastily. There should be a period of probation during which his qualities are observed carefully. Then, after a time of training and examination, if there are no loopholes to criticize, let him serve permanently.

The words “being found blameless” (verse 10) do not mean that the deacon must be “sinless.” One who is “blameless” lives his life so nobly that there won’t be any loopholes for others to latch on to and to criticize. (Of course, there will always be irresponsible people who are going to accuse. The deacon might be unjustly blamed for wrong, but there must be nothing in his life that could truthfully be used to bring shame to the

cause of Christ). If there is no ground for accusation, the church should permanently ordain the deacon.

### *The deacon's home relationships (1 Timothy 3:12-13)*

No place is more telling about one's real character, than conditions surrounding the home life.

The deacon is to be the “**husband of one wife**” and he is to rule his “**children well.**” The reference to “**one wife**” (whatever else it may mean) clearly calls for the Christian husband to be totally faithful to his wife. Most certainly it rules out divorce and polygamy. Also, the deacon is to manage his household in an excellent manner. He is not only to have the ability to command the respect and obedience of his children, but he must do a good job of it (he must do it “well”). The effectiveness of his work in the church will be spoiled if his children are rebellious and undisciplined.

The congregation when choosing a deacon should look for a man who is exemplary in personal character, devoted in spiritual life, and faithful in domestic relationships.

### **3. QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE DEACON'S WIFE**

Wives of church leaders are a big factor in their husband's success. The deacon's wife must meet special requirements too because she will often need to share with her husband in his many delicate duties. Any reproach on the part of the wife, will reflect on the work of her husband. The qualifications for the deacon's wife are given in **1 Timothy 3: 11.**

The deacon's wife is to be “**grave.**” The word used here is the same as that used for her husband in **1 Timothy 3:8.** It denotes a seriousness of mind and character. She must not be silly, light-minded, and a joker. She should hold a serious view of life.

The deacon's wife is not to be a “**slanderer.**” A slanderer is one who spreads false or twisted statements about another and thus is harmful to that person's reputation. Jeremiah tells about some of his accusers who said, “**Come, let us smite him with the tongue**” (**Jeremiah 18:18**). It would be very easy for the deacon's wife to make wrong use of the details she might learn about the private life of members of the congregation. The wife of the deacon must not be one who is loose with the tongue.

The deaconess is to be “**sober minded.**” That means that she is to be temperate and calm. A “soberminded” person is one who is collected, well composed, and not easily excited. The sober-minded person is possessed with balanced judgment. That is the way a deaconess is to be.

The wife of the deacon should be “faithful in all things.” She must be a reliable, trustworthy woman – one who can be depended upon. She must be faithful to her husband, to her family, to Jesus Christ, and to the church.

To summarize, then, the qualifications of the deacon’s wife include holding a serious view of life, avoiding the spreading of gossip, striving to maintain a balanced sense of judgment, and dependability in every area of life. A wife like that is a real asset to any man, and especially to the man who has official responsibilities in the church of God.

#### **4. THE INCENTIVES FOR THE DEACON’S WORK**

**1 Timothy 3:13** says of deacons: “For they that have used the office of a deacon well, purchase to themselves a good degree and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.” The deacon who has a real heart-interest in his work, and who uses his office unselfishly, will acquire for himself a good standing in the eyes of God and of man. There are two promises held out to the deacon:

##### *1) He obtains a good degree.*

The reference is not to a university degree, but to a “good standing,” or a good record for faithful and excellent work. He is achieving a respected reputation in the church, and he is also laying up treasures in Heaven, so that in the day of Christ the deacon who serves well will have a good standing when the rewards are given out.

There is nothing sinful about looking forward to a reward at the end of this life. The Apostle Paul said, “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness” (**2 Timothy 4:8**). He looked forward to a reward. The faithful deacon will receive a special reward in the eternal world.

##### *2) He obtains boldness in the faith.*

The Greek word translated “boldness” contains the idea of confidence and assurance. Deacons who perform well will have increasing confidence in the realm of faith, and real boldness when approaching God in prayer. They will be able to say, “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him” (**2 Timothy 1:12**).

The rewards mentioned above are for the deacons who use the office “well.” Serving as a deacon involves hard work and discouraging moments, but there are some beautiful rewards along the pathway. The instructions in **1 Timothy 3** spell out the Scriptural ideal for the deacon and deaconess. Perhaps no person measures up to the ideal at every point, but none of us must ever be satisfied as long as there is room for improvement.

The qualifications emphasized in the whole passage are moral and should characterize all good Christians. However, those in leadership positions should be in the forefront, being good examples for the flock.

Our prayer is that God will raise up consecrated men and their wives (across the Brotherhood) who will serve as deacons and deaconesses with a single eye that aims to please God and to benefit their fellow human beings.