



Deacons

Overview

The Bible provides two roles in the leadership and governance of the church: elders (*presbyteros* and *episkopos*) and deacons (*diakonos*). Elders lead the church by exercising spiritual authority and providing regular preaching and teaching. Deacons serve by carrying out the practical tasks and necessities that arise within the church.

Qualifications

Like the elders listed in 1 Tim. 3:17, the requirements for Deacons are primarily based on character and spiritual maturity. Unlike elders, deacons are not expected to teach or exercise ultimate spiritual authority in the church. Like others in the churches, deacons fall under the leadership, teaching, and spiritual authority of the elders.

In 1 Tim. 3:8, Paul gives the only list of qualifications for deacons in the New Testament. This list describes a Christian of maturity, not perfection. This list of attributes includes the normal expectations for every person following Christ and walking by the Spirit. Deacons, like elders, should be noted for their consistency, track record of faithful obedience, involvement in the church, and evidence of faithful service.

Character Qualifications - 1 Timothy 3:8-10

Paul's use of likewise in vs. 8 indicates that character is again the overarching concern. Deacons should be "*dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.*" Dignity refers not just to worldly praise, but respect within the church. Deacons should exhibit godly self-control by watching over their speech, consumption of alcohol (and by extension other substances), and desires.¹

In addition, they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Unlike the qualification for elders, "able to teach," Paul offers something slightly different here for deacons. Each deacon must understand their faith and live it out consistently. The backdrop for this charge is likely Paul's charge earlier in the letter in vs. 5-7, "*The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.*" Simply put, deacons need to know what they're talking about when they discuss the faith and they need to live a life of love that issues from a pure heart, ruling out unconfessed or secret sin and disagreements with the basic teachings of the faith.

¹ Notice the similarities here to the lists of fruit found in Galatians 5:19-24. Restraint, particularly of emotions, passions, and consumptions, is a sign of the kind of self-control rounding out the list of the fruits of the Spirit.



Paul adds a qualification in vs. 10 that not only distinguishes deacons from elders, but also provides the clearest description of the responsibilities of the deacons. *“And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.”* Deacons should be recognizable before they have a title. Whether they serve out of their own initiative or by the request of the elders, deacons are to be tested before they are recognized.²

Deaconesses / Wives - 1 Timothy 3:11

In the next verse, Paul begins, *“Women/Wives, likewise...”* This word for women, *“gunē”* can be used for wives (Eph. 5:22) and for women generally (Acts 5:14, 1 Tim. 2:11), and presents an ambiguity over who Paul is referring to. Some argue that this refers to women who serve as deacons, others that these are the wives of deacons. In the first case, Paul is adding specific instructions for women deacons in vs. 11 before he finishes instructing the men (or all of the deacons) in vs. 12-13. In the second case, the wives must meet certain character qualifications for their husbands to be selected as deacons.

Some scholars argue that the absence of a possessive pronoun indicates this is a separate group of women, not the wives of the deacons.³ In Greek, possessive pronouns can be implied, but typically happens when there is an article, which there is not in this case. Many commentators notice that the adverb, *hosautos* (translated “likewise” in the ESV), indicates another group with similar qualifications.⁴

Others interpret this shift as a reference to deacons’ wives. Since this list is so short, it can be read as an additional qualification applying to the wives of potential deacons, important because of the sensitive nature of their work and the importance of their leadership in the home.⁵

Against that position, some have wondered why there might be qualifications for deacons’ wives when there are no qualifications for elders’ wives. Since elder is a higher office, it would be surprising that a deacon could be removed from consideration over the conduct of his wife, but an elder could not. Those who argue this way find it more likely that this is a second group, female deacons. Additionally, even if the word refers to deacons’ wives, it may be possible that they are being appointed together, and thus, screened together with these qualifications. If that is true, then both members of the couple would serve as deacons and they would both

² There is an implicit recognition in the phrase, “let them be tested” that the elders will oversee the deacons. Otherwise, who is evaluating the testing? This does not prohibit a chairman of the deacons, but supports the point that the deacons are also ultimately under the leadership of the elders.

³ Schreiner, “Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? Yes.”

⁴ Schreiner, Köstenberger.

⁵ Waters, “Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? No.”



need to be evaluated by these criteria. Others would say the couple is vetted, but only the man is ordained or commissioned as a deacon.

Nearly every commentator notices the oddity of slipping this verse about women into the qualifications for male deacons. Those who take the second set of instructions in vs. 12-13 to indicate that deacons must be *husbands*, of one wife, argue that whatever vs. 11 refers to it cannot refer to female deacons. This group would also argue that the same qualification for elders should be read as *husbands* of one wife as opposed to husbands *of one wife*. The difference in emphasis is important in the question of women serving as deacons. In the former case, the qualification is referring to the gender and, in the latter, the monogamous nature of the relationship.

The instructions for this group of women are similar to the character qualifications expected of the men, “*dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.*”

Additional Qualifications - 1 Timothy 3:12-13

Paul moves back to add a few final qualifications for deacons. Like elders, the male deacons must be husbands of one wife and must manage their households well.⁶ Though the descriptions are not exactly the same, the principle is: those who are serving the church should demonstrate faithful service and administration in the home, the first ministry of every believer.

Gifts and Qualifications

Elders and deacons both use their gifts to serve the church, but in neither case does Paul mention specific gifts that qualify someone for church leadership. The gifts of the Spirit are open to all believers, regardless of whether they are in a church office. Women and men can both have all of the gifts, including teaching and leadership. Elders are given the responsibility of teaching and exercising authority in the church (1 Tim. 2:12-15; 1 Peter 5:1-3) but not because they are the only ones with these gifts.

Guy Prentiss Waters, who argues that the Bible only permits men to serve as deacons, makes this distinction clear; “We must be clear as to what the question is and is not. The question is not whether the Spirit gifts women to serve in the church. He manifestly does, a point the New Testament underscores by way of principle (1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:7) and example (e.g., Rom. 16:1–5, 6, 12). The question is not whether women may actively participate in the church’s service ministries. The New Testament highlights the hospitality of the women mentioned in

⁶ Depending on whether vs. 11 is interpreted as deaconesses or deacons’ wives, these verses take on slightly different implications. There are essentially two options; (1) If these are exclusively the male deacons being addressed, they are exhorted to be one-woman-men, like the elders. (2) If this is a continuation and a general qualification for both the men and women, then it describes the principle of being monogamous and faithful within marriage. Based on the way the sentence reads, the first option is more likely.



Luke 8:1–3, of John Mark’s mother (Acts 12:12), and of Lydia (Acts 16:14–15), even as it commends the charitable service of Dorcas (Acts 9:36).⁷ Ultimately, he argues, it is the role, not the gifts that is reserved. Churches ought to provide opportunities for every person to use what God has given them to build up the body.

Responsibilities

Throughout Christian history, deacons have served in numerous roles in the church, particularly in caring for the sick and the poor and through church administration. While deacons undoubtedly exercise some level of leadership in the church through leading teams and tackling problems and projects, deacons do not take part in the teaching and authority of the church exercised by the elders. In this sense, elders lead/teach and deacons serve.

Acts 6:1-7 provides the template for the office of deacon, though the men commissioned there are not called deacons. As the church grew, the number of widows became overwhelming. When a complaint arose that Greek widows were not being cared for like the Jewish widows, the apostles decided to commission a group of men to serve. The rationale for commissioning this team gives insight into the purpose of deacons; “And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’”

The church appointed seven men who met the qualifications, and they set them before the apostles, who laid hands and commissioned them by laying hands on them. Stephen and Philip, two of these proto-deacons, appear later in Acts, Stephen as the first martyr in Acts 7 and Philip as an evangelist to an Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.

The construction “serve tables” is the specific connection to deacons. The word “serve” is the verb form of *diakonos*, *diakoneo*. Deacons have been seen in this mold: serving in practical ways to ensure that elders can attend to prayer and the ministry of the word. As churches have grown, the kinds of service deacons provide have changed, but the principle is the same. Deacons see needs and meet them. They organize teams to accomplish logistical and administrative tasks under the leadership of the elders.

Can Women Serve as Deacons?

The textual question of whether women can serve as deacons largely comes down to two issues. The first is whether the instructions in 1 Tim. 3:11 refers to the wives of deacons or to deaconesses. The second is whether Romans 16:1 gives an example of a deaconess in the first-century church.

⁷ Waters, “Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? No.”



Romans 16:1

In the final chapter of Romans, Paul is giving instructions to members of the church he is familiar with and he begins by saying, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae.” Different translations take this term differently, either as “servant” or as “deacon.” It may be that Phoebe is the one carrying the letter to Rome on Paul’s behalf.

The Greek slightly lends itself toward saying Phoebe holds a church office for two reasons. First, because of the phrase, “of the church at Cenchrea,” it is likely this phrase describes a position or a role that she plays in that specific church. Second, the phrase, “being a *diakonos* of the church” uses a construction elsewhere used to describe office-holders in Scripture and in contemporary literature.

It’s important to note that this word is the term used for deacons in 1 Timothy 3 but that it is also used in the Bible for servants and ministers more times than it is used for deacon.⁸ Here it appears in the regular masculine form, which does not prove that it means deacon but also does not mean it could not be used in this instance as a title. Paul uses this word two other times in Romans. In 13:4 it refers to rulers as God’s servants. In 15:8, Paul uses it to describe his own role as a servant to the Gentiles.

Against Women Deacons

- The instructions in 1 Tim. 3:11 seem redundant after 3:8-10. If they do not refer to wives, why add this section?
- Waters argues that deacons do exercise authority in the church, and thus they must be men, by 1 Tim. 2:8-15. He points to the roles of the proto-deacons in Acts 6 as an example of the kind of authority seasons exercise, determining which widows to enroll in benevolence.
- Both elders and deacons are evaluated based on the leadership of their home. This responsibility is given to husbands as the head of the home and so the offices of the church are reserved for men.
- Calvin and many modern Presbyterians do not ordain women to the diaconate, but they do commission women to serve alongside deacons on church boards, committees, and projects.

⁸ For examples of *diakonos* meaning servant, see 1 Tim. 4:6; Rom. 13:4; 2 Cor. 11:15. Minister is not used as a title quite like its used in some churches today, but Paul refers to himself this way in Col. 1:23 and Eph. 3:7.



For Women Deacons

- Phoebe - Rom. 16:1 - can be understood as a deacon. She is described by the phrase, “*diakonos* of the church at Cenchrea.” This term can be rendered as “deacon” or as “servant.”
- The early testimony of the church is that they understood these passage to include women deacons. Pliny the Younger referred to two deaconesses in 115 AD (*Epistles* 10.96.8). In this letter, Pliny makes reference to two *ministrae* which is the feminine word for minister or servant. The masculine, *minister*, is commonly used to translate the Greek word, *diakonos*.
- Kostenberger’s argument from 1 Tim. 3:8:
 - The absence of qualifications for elders’ wives.
 - The adverb *ὡσαύτως* (“too”) indicating an office similar to that of a male deacon. Keller makes this point as well; “The key adverb “likewise” (*hosautos*) further supports this. It precedes the description of elders (v.1,) deacons (v.8,) and women (v.11). This indicates that the evaluation list functioned similarly in each case as a selection criteria for doing work in the congregation.”⁹
 - The parallel sentence structure and characteristics in vv. 8 and 11
 - The absence of a qualifier for *γυναικας* such as “their.”¹⁰
- Tim Keller argues for commissioning but not ordaining deacons. This difference in language reflects the underlying distinction between biblical ordination which is reserved for elders/pastors and commissioning which can be for elders and other church positions.¹¹ This also clarifies the distinction between ordination which is reserved for men and commissioning which can be done for men and women in the church.

The role of elder is not reserved for men simply because they are men, but because they are also covenant heads of individual churches. Their responsibilities in the office, not just the office itself, are reserved for men. 1 Tim. 2:12-15 prohibits women from teaching and exercising authority over men in the church. This prohibition describes the very teaching and authority exercised by the elders generally. Köstenberger writes, “Since serving as a deacon doesn’t involve teaching or ruling, both men and women are eligible to function in this capacity.”¹²

⁹ Keller, “The Case for Commissioning but Not Ordaining Deaconesses.”

¹⁰ Quoted from Köstenberger, *1-2 Timothy and Titus* in the Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Lexham, 2020), 133.

¹¹ Keller, “The Case for Commissioning but Not Ordaining Deaconesses.”

¹² Köstenberger 2020, 134. Schreiner agrees here, “Women therefore may serve as deacons because the diaconal office is one of serving, not leading. Deacons don’t teach and exercise authority, but rather help in the church’s ministry.”



Resources:

Articles:

- Schreiner, Thomas. "[Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? Yes.](#)" *The Gospel Coalition*, Feb. 19, 2019.
- Waters, Guy Prentiss. "[Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? No.](#)" *The Gospel Coalition*, Feb. 19, 2019.
- Keller, Tim. "[The Case for Commissioning \(Not Ordaining\) Deaconesses.](#)" *By Faith*, Aug. 25, 2008.
- Duncan, Ligon. "[The Case for Our Current Policy on Deacons.](#)" *By Faith*, Aug. 25, 2008.

Belief Statements

- The Village Church. "[The Role of Deacons at the Village Church.](#)" 2017.
- Bethlehem Baptist Church. "[Constitution and By-Laws of Bethlehem Baptist Church.](#)" See article II, section 3, Deacons.
- Bridgeway Church. "[Church Leadership.](#)"
- The Southern Baptist Convention. "[Baptist Faith and Message, 2000.](#)" See section VI, The Church.

Books:

- Smethurst, Matthew. *Deacons*. Crossway, 2021.

Commentaries:

- Belleville, Linda. "Commentary on 1 Timothy." *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews*. Vol. 17 in Cornerstone Biblical Commentary. Tyndale, 2009.
- Burk, Denny. "1 Timothy." *Ephesians–Philemon*. Vol. XI of the ESV Expository Commentary. Crossway, 2018.
- Knight, George W. *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC. Eerdmans, 1992.
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- Yarbrough, Robert W. *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*. PNTC. Eerdmans, 2018.