

How To Choose The Deacons

We have been learning about God's design for the church in 1 Timothy. Chapter one is about false teachers in the church. Chapter two is about prayer and the role of women in the church. In chapter three we started with an overview of how God wants his leadership team to be organized in the church. We learned that He wants a group of godly men called elders, overseers, or pastors to oversee and shepherd the flock. In the last study, we learned about the qualifications of elders, or how do we discover who is an elder. We learned that God the Holy Spirit works in the lives of future elders to bring them to spiritual maturity and to give them the spiritual gifts necessary for their responsibilities. That is, the Holy Spirit has determined who He wants to serve as elders and then He prepares these men to be elders. He has also given us the qualifications to help the church identify the men He has selected and prepared. We concluded that an elder is an elder because he is an elder. The point is a church can never make a man an elder by simply appointing him to that office. It can only recognize the spiritual maturation the Holy Spirit has accomplished in the man.

We discovered in Philippians 1:1 that God's design for the church includes another type of leader called deacons. The same principle also applies to deacons. The purpose of this study is to learn what God has revealed about deacons and how they are to function in the church.

DEACONS FIRST APPEAR IN ACTS 6:1-6. We start with

Acts 6:1-6, which is about the first deacons in the early church. In this passage, we are told there was a problem. Then we are told the apostles wisely provided a solution. In the process of solving the problem, the apostles established the first deacons. So, let's read the passage. It says,

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. Acts 6:1 (NASB)

First, we are told that the number of believers was increasing. That was good news. But then we learn of some bad news. Some of the Hellenistic Jews or Greek Jews complained that their widows were being ignored in the daily serving of food.

Verse 2 is the response of the apostle. It says,

So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables." Acts 6:2 (NASB)

After hearing about the problem, the apostles told the congregation that it would not be good for them (the apostles) to neglect the word of God to serve tables. Yes, it was very important for the widows to not go hungry, but there was a much greater priority for the apostles' time. That priority was studying and teaching the Word of God.

Then in verse 3, the apostles provided the solution to the



problem.

Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. Acts 6:3 (NASB)

They told the congregation to select seven men and gave them the qualifications that these men had to possess. The men had to have a good reputation, be full of the Spirit and of wisdom. If a man was full of the Spirit, then he would possess a list of additional spiritual characteristics. Those qualities are listed in 1 Timothy 3:7-12. After their selection, the apostles would put them in charge of the task of ensuring the widows were fed.

Verse 4 adds,

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. Acts 6:4 (NASB)

Notice the priority of the apostles. These are also the priorities of the elders. Their priority was prayer and the study of the word of God. This reveals what God the Father considers to be the most important ministry of an apostle and also an elder. Then Acts 6:6 tells us the congregation selected or nominated seven men. The verse says the apostles formally appointed these seven men to their position of overseeing or organizing the feeding of the Hellenistic widows. If the apostles had not been convinced that each of the men were qualified, we can be confident they would not have appointed them.

So, who were these seven men? These seven men were the first deacons. Why do we call them deacons? Notice the word “serving” in verse 1 and “serve” in verse 2. Both Greek words are related to *diakonos*, which has been transliterated as deacon. The Greek word means “to serve.” What was their responsibility? They were to take care of those organizational affairs of the church that were given to them by the apostles. They were not an independent board controlling the church.

Another important point for us to remember is that the elders in churches today have inherited the teaching and oversight role the apostles had in the early church. That is clear in 1 Peter 5:1 when the apostle Peter referred to the elders of the churches as his fellow elders. So, today the elders have the final

responsibility of overseeing and shepherding the church. They also direct the deacons.

DEACONESSES FIRST APPEAR IN ROMANS 16:1-2. I believe the New Testament teaches us that there were female deacons too! Romans 16:1-2 refers to a female deacon, and her name is Phoebe. The passage states,

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well. Romans 16:1-2 (NASB)

You might wonder where is the word deacon? In this verse the word for deacon is translated as servants. The Greek word for servants is *diakonos*. It is the normal Greek word for servant. In verse 2, Paul urged the believers in the city of Rome to help this dear woman. The reason he made this request was that she, herself, had been a helper of many. Now some people have suggested that the term deacon should be changed to helper. But Greek word for “help” is the verb form of the noun for “helper,” which is *prostatis* in this verse. The point is that the servant and helper are distinctly different. A deacon and a deaconess are more than just helpers. They have a spiritual function of oversight, but their role of oversight is determined by the elders. They do not have the privilege of determining their own role. That is clear from Acts 6:1-4.

FUNCTION OF DEACONS. So, we have discovered that deacons can be male or female. But what is their function or duties? The answer is they are to support the elders. In the last study, we discovered there are a variety of ways elders can be nominated and finally selected. The same process should be followed for selecting the deacons.

Now what are the qualifications for selecting deacons? That is what this study is about. It is from 1 Timothy 3:8-13. I want to teach each one because if we just quickly read these different qualifications, they will blur together in our thinking. We will be left with the impression that all God is saying is that the deacon must be a very spiritual man, or something like a Buddha sitting with his arms and legs crossed, just having the appearance that he is a godly man. But it is important to real-

ize that God gave us a list of qualifications for a reason. Did He give us this list so that we could just ignore it or let the words blur together? The advantage of discussing each one is that we discover what it means to be a godly person.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR IDENTIFYING DEACONS. 1 Timothy 3:8-13 gives us thirteen qualifications for deacons. These spiritual qualifications cover two areas of a deacon's life: 1) the deacon's personal life, and 2) how the deacon will perform in his or her areas of responsibilities. There are no other qualifications recorded in Scripture for a deacon. We must remember that just as the Holy Spirit prepares a man spiritually to qualify for the office of elder, he also prepares those men and women He wants to serve as deacons.

QUALIFICATIONS RELATED TO A DEACON'S PERSONAL LIFE. So, what are the Holy Spirit's qualifications for deacons? We will start with 1 Timothy 3:8-9, which says,

Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 1 Timothy 3:8-9 (NASB)

Must Have Dignity. The first spiritual qualification, which is a measure of spiritual maturity, is that a deacon must have dignity. The Greek word for "dignity" is *semnos*. It has the idea of "serious in mind," or "honorable." That is, a deacon must not be a silly person and one who is not serious in mind, but he is not a cold and indifferent person. This word occurs in Philippians 4:8 where it is translated as "honorable." That is, we are looking for a person whose conduct is honorable.

Must Not be Double-Tongued. The next qualification for a deacon is that he must not be double-tongued. The Greek phrase is *me dilogos*. It literally means "not say twice." That is, a deacon cannot be a person who says one thing to one person about a topic, and then says something different to another person about the same topic. Some people who are political do that. People who are fearful of what others think do this too! They are people pleasers. So, they say what each person wants to hear. They are deceivers just like the devil himself. Such behavior should never occur in the life of a godly man. Deacons must not be hypocrites in their speech. Instead, he

must be trustworthy even to his own hurt. Psalm 15:2-4 says that a man of integrity "swears to his own hurt and does not change." This is another description of a godly person.

Must Not be Addicted to Much Wine. The third qualification is that a deacon must not be addicted to much wine. In the Greek grammar, the word "addicted" is a verb and it is a present participle. That means this qualification prohibits a person who is actively drinking wine from being a deacon. He is not to be habitually drinking wine.

Some believers have read Paul's encouragement to Timothy to drink a little wine for his stomach's sake in 1 Timothy 5:23, and they wonder how this qualification and this verse fit together. The verse says,

No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. 1 Timothy 5:23 (NASB)

There are two important facts for us to notice. First, Paul told Timothy to use a little wine. The word "little," comes from the Greek word "*oligos*." The word means a small amount or few. Second, the wine that was consumed in the time of Jesus and the apostles was more like flavored water. The wine was mostly water. Here is an important statement from Robert Stein about the wine in Jesus' day.

*It is evident that wine was seen in ancient times as a medicine (and as a solvent for medicines) and of course as a beverage. Yet as a beverage it was always thought of as a mixed drink. Plutarch (Symposiacs III, ix), for instance, states, "We call a mixture 'wine,' although the larger of the component part is water." The ratio of water might vary, but only barbarians drank it unmixed, and a mixture of wine and water of equal parts was seen as "strong drink" and was frowned upon. The term "wine" or *oinos* in the ancient world, then, did not mean wine as we understand it today but wine mixed with water. Usually a writer referred to the mixture of water and wine as "wine." To indicate that the beverage was not a mixture of water and wine he would say "unmixed (*akratesteron*) wine."*

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In the Talmud, which contains the oral traditions from about 200 B.C. to A.D. 200, there are several tractates in which the mixture of water and wine is discussed. One tractate (Sabbath 77a) states that wine does not carry three parts of water well is not wine. The normal mixture [was] said to consist of two parts of water to one part wine. In a most important reference (Pesachim 108b) it is stated that the four cups every Jew was to drink during the Passover ritual were to be mixed in a ratio of three parts water to one part wine. From this we can conclude with a fair degree of certainty that the fruit of the vine used at the institution of the Lord's Supper was a mixture of three parts of water to one part wine. In another Jewish reference from around 60 B.C. we read, "It is harmful to drink wine alone, or again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious and enhances one's enjoyment (II Maccabees 15:39).¹

The point is that the wine of Christ's time was not like our wine. Our wine is more like their strong-drink.

Must Not be Fond of Sordid Gain (1 Timothy 3:8). The next spiritual qualification is that a deacon must not be fond of sordid gain. That is, the deacon must not be greedy for money. He must not be dishonest. This qualification is especially important if the deacon controls money in the exercise of his ministry. If the deacons in Acts 6:1-4 had spent money in order to fulfill the responsibilities of their ministry, this character trait would have been very important or he might have spent the money on himself.

Must Hold to the Mystery of Faith. The fifth spiritual qualification is that a deacon must hold to the content of the faith. What does Paul mean by the mystery of the faith? First, he is not referring to one's personal faith in Jesus. He is referring to the content of the Scriptures — the Faith. Paul loves to use the word "mystery" in his letters. He uses it to refer to truth that was not revealed in the Old Testament, but is revealed in the New Testament. That is, a deacon must believe in the Scriptures. This eliminates men who do not completely believe in or accept all of the Scriptures. He must believe in the faith that has been handed down by the apostles (Jude 4, 17).

Second, Paul says he must hold to it with a clear conscience. We have already discovered in 1 Timothy 1:5, 19 that this means a deacon's conscience does not condemn him because he is disobeying Scripture. When a believer disobeys God, the Holy Spirit will convict them of disobedience. The result is that he does not have a clear conscience. So, a deacon must believe the Scriptures and obey them. Otherwise, he will feel guilty.

Before we leave this spiritual qualification, notice that there is no requirement for a deacon to be skillful in teaching. Only elders must have that spiritual gift. This is a major difference between an elder and a deacon.

Must First Be Tested. Verse 10 gives us the sixth spiritual qualification. It says a deacon must be tested and pass the test without blame before serving. Here is the verse.

These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. 1 Timothy 3:10 (NASB)

The Greek word for "be tested" is *dokimazo*. It has the idea of "testing to determine if it is real." Also, the tense of the Greek word is in the present tense. That is, the test is not a short event, or a one-time event. It is an ongoing test in which the church and the leaders are able to determine if the man passes the spiritual character qualifications in this list. The test could also include other traits such as faithfulness.

Must Be Above Reproach. The next qualification is that the deacon must be above reproach. It is immediately connected to the ongoing testing. The Greek word is similar to the qualification of "above reproach" in verse 2 with a slight difference. The difference being that as a result of being tested, he is not blamable. Before a person is allowed to serve as a deacon he must be observed and found to be without blame. There must be no exceptions.

Husband of One Wife. The eighth spiritual qualification of a deacon is found in verse 12. But before we go there, I want to say that I believe the qualifications we have just studied in verses 8-10 also apply to both male and female deacons. Verse 11 applies only to deaconesses and verse 12 is only about deacons.

So, verse 12 is about the eighth spiritual qualification of

1. Stein, Robert. Wine Drinking in New Testament Times. Christianity Today. June 20, 1975. pp. 9-11.

deacons. This unique qualification is that a male deacon must be a “one woman man.” This is the same qualification that is required of an elder in verse 2. We have already learned that this means a man must be completely devoted to his wife. If a man is completely devoted to his wife, he will never divorce her, have a mistress, flirt with other women, or intentionally view pornography or commit other sexual sins. This is a very important spiritual qualification since he will be working with both women and men in his ministry.

Manages His House Well. The last qualification for a male deacon is that they must be “managers of their children and their own households.” This is the same qualification that is required of an elder in verse 5. The deacon must do more than lovingly manage his wife and children. He must be the spiritual leader of the home (Ephesians 5:26-28; 6:4). He must provide for his family also (1 Timothy 5:8), and his children must be under control and in submission. These are high standards that God has established. This qualification is essential for a deacon since he will have oversight responsibilities delegated to him by the elders. The elders need a man who is faithful and is capable of providing oversight. His home demonstrates if he has these skills.

QUALIFICATIONS RELATED TO A DEACONESS’ PERSONAL LIFE. The meaning of verse 11 is in much dispute. Some think it is about the wives of deacons and others think it is about deaconesses. The reason for this difference of opinion is that the Greek word that is translated as “women” is *gyne*. It can mean “women” or “wives.” Consequently, some think this verse refers to the wives of the deacons, and others think this refers to female deacons.

The view that favors the wives of deacons says that it would be awkward to first discuss deacons and then switch back to deacons in verse 12. This view also thinks verses 11 and 12 are a unit discussing the family of the deacon. Some say that this cannot refer to deaconesses since there is no discussion about deaconesses in any other part of the New Testament.

Those who think this verse refers to female deacons point out that verse 8 introduces deacons with the word “likewise,” and when women are introduced in this verse, the word “likewise” is used again. So, chapter 3 began discussing the qualifications of elders, verse 8 began discussing deacons, and it

appears that verse 11 discusses deaconesses. That is, verse 11 introduces the unique qualifications of deaconesses. That is the first reason why some believe verse 11 is about deaconesses. The second reason is why would God give us qualifications about the wives of deacons but not give us any about the wives of elders? The third reason is that there are not any possessive pronouns indicating these women belonged to deacons. Therefore, I believe the best conclusion is that verse 11 is about female deacons or deaconesses.

Must Be Dignified. So, with that explanation, I believe verse 11 is about deaconesses. This is the first unique qualification for deaconesses. The qualification is that deaconesses must be dignified. This is the same Greek word that was used for deacons in verse 8. This means that a deaconess must not be a silly person but one who is serious in mind. She is also not a cold and indifferent person. We are looking for a woman who is honorable in conduct.

Must Not be a Malicious Gossip. The next qualification for a deaconess is that she must not be a malicious gossip. The Greek word, *diabolos*, literally means “two-devils.” In this verse it should be translated as a “slanderer” because that is the basic meaning of the Greek word. She must be in control of her tongue and in control of what she says about people.

Must Be Temperate. The third qualification for a deaconess is that she is temperate. This is the same qualification required of an elder in verse 2. The Greek word has the sense of “avoiding excesses and extremes.” This qualification would eliminate a woman who has addictions and extreme behaviors.

Must Be Faithful in All Things. The fourth and final qualification for a deaconess is that she is faithful in everything. This means she can be trusted and is dependable. She does not promise to do something and then not do it. She is faithful in all. This is important in the context of ministry in the church.

CONCLUSION. At this point, you can see the spiritual health of a church is not determined by how a church is organized, but by the spiritual character of its leaders. We have also discovered what it means for a deacon to be a godly person. The spiritual qualifications that we have studied help us understand what type of godly men and women God considers worthy of serving Him in the role of a deacon. It is more than that he or she is a nice, loving Christian. These qualifica-

tions set a very high standard.

1 Timothy 3:13 is our last verse. It is a promise of rewards. It says,

For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. 1 Timothy 3:13 (NASB)

The phrase “high standing” is a promise from God that deacons who serve well obtain two things. First, they will be highly respected by those whom they serve as godly leaders. I believe this also means that God will grant them great honor. Second, the phrase “great confidence in the faith” means that God promises they will gain a high confidence in the faith. That happened to me when I served as a deacon. My faith and trust in Christ exploded. It encouraged and motivated me to further serve the Lord Jesus Christ. It was a wonderful promise from God and was literally fulfilled in my life. The promise is given to every deacon and deaconess whom God has called to serve Him in this way.