

# Living in God's Church Today

## Qualifications for Deacons

*1 Timothy 3:8-13*

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# Qualifications for Deacons

## Scripture

Paul wrote his First Letter to Timothy to give him directions about how Christians were “to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). In chapter 3, Paul set down the qualifications for church officers. He first set down the qualifications for overseers (3:1-7), also known as elders, which we examined last week. Then he set down the qualifications for deacons in Timothy 3:8-13, which we are going to examine today.

Let us read about the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13:

**<sup>8</sup>Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. <sup>9</sup>They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. <sup>10</sup>And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. <sup>11</sup>Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. <sup>12</sup>Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. <sup>13</sup>For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 3:8-13)**

## Introduction

Earlier this week, I was having a meal in a restaurant with a friend. Toward the end of the meal, we were trying to get the

attention of a waiter so that we could get a “to go” box and the check. It took several attempts to get the attention of a waiter. Have you ever had that experience?

In his commentary on this text, Dr. Philip Ryken writes that “some years ago, a pastoral assistant... telephoned the director of the Philadelphia Restaurant School and asked, ‘What qualities are you looking for in a waiter?’ The director explained that, above all else, a good waiter is someone who notices what people need and gives it to them even before they ask.”<sup>1</sup>

The reason I mention this is because today’s restaurant waiters are similar to first-century deacons. The first-century deacons were appointed to serve meals. Listen to Acts 6:1-4:

<sup>1</sup> Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

The word that the apostles used for “serve tables” is the Greek word for “deaconing” (*diakonein*). So the seven men who were chosen to serve tables in the first-century church were the first deacons in the church. As Phil Ryken says, “Deacons are the waiters of the church.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Daniel M. Doriani, and Philip Graham Ryken, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, 123.

In 1 Timothy 3:8, Paul wrote, “Deacons likewise...” By using the word “likewise” Paul wanted to stress that like the office of overseer, the office of deacon was important and that deacons, just like overseers, needed to be properly qualified to serve in that office. The Greek word for “deacons” (*diakonos*) originally meant “a person working in the service of another.” But in the church, it came to mean “a person in the office of deacon who cares for the needs and livelihood of an assembly of believers.”

I once had a man in the church tell me that he understood the government in a PCA church to be like that of the US government. He said that the deacons were like the House of Representatives, the elders were like the Senate, and the pastor was like the President. That is not an accurate description at all! The biblical picture is that the deacons assist the elders in their ministry. Together they serve as church officers who are making disciples, as Jesus has commanded his church to do.

## Lesson

1 Timothy 3:8-13 shows us the qualifications for deacons. Let's use the following outline:

1. A Man Must Be Qualified to Serve as a Deacon (3:8-12)
2. A Man Will Be Rewarded for Serving as a Deacon (3:13)

### **I. A Man Must Be Qualified to Serve as a Deacon (3:8-12)**

First, a man must be qualified to serve as a deacon. Just as a man must be qualified to serve as an elder, so

must a man be qualified to serve as a deacon. I am going to suggest that there are four areas of qualification.

*A. He Must Have Self-Mastery (3:8)*

First, he must have self-mastery.

Commentator John Stott suggests the term “self-mastery.” He says that the four words in verse 8 seem to form a natural grouping.<sup>3</sup> A deacon must have the following.

*First, he must be dignified.* In verse 8a, Paul wrote, “Deacons likewise **must be dignified...**” The Greek word for “**dignified**” (*semnos*) is used 4 times in the New Testament and it means “being worthy of esteem or respect; especially on account of one’s behavior.” The word combines ideas such as dignity, restraint, virtue, temperance, honor, and modesty. Since deacons serve the people of God in terms of their material and physical needs, the people of God need to see men who are serious in mind and character and not silly or flippant about important matters.

*Second, he must not be double-tongued.* In verse 8b, Paul wrote, “Deacons likewise **must be...not double-tongued....**” The Greek word for “**double-tongued**” is a compound word and it occurs only here in the New Testament. It is made up of the Greek words for “two” (*duo*) and “word” (*logos*), and therefore it means “two-worded.” It refers to a person who speaks one word to one person and a different word to another person. It could also mean saying one thing while knowing that something different is really true. So, a person who is two-worded is insincere, hypocritical, and lying. Paul said that a deacon must

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<sup>3</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 99.

not be characterized by those attributes.

*Third, he must not be addicted to much wine.* In verse 8c, Paul wrote, “Deacons likewise **must be...not addicted to much wine....**” Paul did not mean that total abstinence from alcohol was required on the part of the deacon. Rather, Paul was forbidding the excessive use of it. Wine was the common drink of the time and Paul did not want deacons to consume wine to excess.

*And fourth, he must not be greedy for dishonest gain.* In verse 8d, Paul wrote, “Deacons likewise **must be...not greedy for dishonest gain.**” The Greek text that is translated as “**not greedy for dishonest gain**” has only two words. The one word is “not” and the second word is a compound word made up of two words that mean “shameful” and “gain.” The word means “being so desirous of acquiring wealth that it brings disgrace and shame on a person.” In Paul’s day, deacons may have had responsibility for finances, administering food and money to widows. Paul forbade a person to seek the office of deacon for material profit.

In our situation today, deacons have responsibility for the church’s finances. Regarding the office of deacon, our *Book of Church Order* states, in part, “It is their duty also to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church, to devise effective methods of collecting the gifts of the people, and to distribute these gifts among the objects to which they are contributed” (BCO 9-2). Among the responsibility of deacons is that of collecting money and distributing it. People must have confidence that their deacons are handling the church finances with honesty and integrity. There must be no suspicion that there is some kind of mismanagement of the finances that are to the gain of the deacons.

So, first, a deacon must have self-mastery.

B. *He Must Have Sound Doctrine (3:9)*

Second, he must have sound doctrine.

In verse 9, Paul wrote, **“They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.”** The term **“mystery”** in the New Testament generally refers not to something that is *concealed* but rather to something that has been *revealed*. Thus, Paul wanted deacons to be men who understood and embraced biblical truth. The term **“the faith”** refers to the objective body of Christian doctrine. In other words, the deacon is a Christian who has a solid understanding of biblical truth. And it must be so if the deacons are to assist the elders in their work of caring for the flock of God.

Deacons assist the elders in serving the people of God. Unlike elders, deacons do not need to be “able to teach” (3:2). Yet, deacons need to have a good understanding of biblical truth so that they can properly support the elders. Deacons will not undermine what the elders are teaching. Deacons will approve and illustrate and apply the teaching of the elders in their service to the people of God.

So, a deacon must have self-mastery and sound doctrine.

C. *He Must Have Satisfactory Testing (3:10)*

Third, he must have satisfactory testing.

In verse 10, Paul wrote, **“And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.”** Paul stated that deacons need to be tested first *before* they were installed into office. He did not want men to be installed into office and then tested while serving in office. Prospective deacons were to be evaluated regarding their

fitness to serve in office. The character and past conduct of the prospective deacon was to be reviewed to see if he met the qualifications that Paul listed. If the prospective deacon was found to be above reproach, then he was qualified to serve as a deacon.

To meet this qualification, the implication is that the prospective deacon could not be a recent convert. There has to be time to evaluate the man's maturity to see that he does meet the qualifications listed by Paul. One way to test a prospective deacon is to get men to assist with diaconal matters. In most churches, the deacons alone have far more to do than is possible. So they can enlist men to assist in some of their responsibilities. Over time, they will be able to assess how well they do in their tasks. More importantly, they will also be able to evaluate their character. That will go a long way in assessing whether a man has the potential to serve well as a deacon.

Another way in which we test men before they take up the office of deacon is by having a one-year probationary period. Prospective deacons—and prospective elders too—go through a one-year class with me in which we cover doctrine, polity, and the character requirements for the office. Then, if a man wants to serve as an officer—deacon or elder—he must complete a written examination. After he passes that written examination, he may then be nominated to serve as an officer. He will then be what we call a “Deacon in Training” or a “Ruling Elder in Training” for one year. That gives the rest of the officers a chance to examine the character of the potential officer to see if he is blameless so that he can serve as an officer in our church.

So, a deacon must have self-mastery, sound doctrine, and satisfactory testing.

*D. He Must Have a Stable Family (3:11-12)*

And fourth, he must have a stable family.

Paul wrote in verse 11a, **“Their wives likewise....”** The Greek word for **“wives”** (*gunaikas*) can also be translated as “women.” Commentators are divided on the question about whether this refers to the wives of deacons or to deaconesses. John Stott summarizes as follows:

In favor of “deaconesses,” the “likewise” of verse 11, like that of verse 8, leads one to expect a new category; it would be strange for deacons’ wives to be mentioned when elders’ wives are not; there is no definite article or possessive before “women” which there would have to be if it meant “their wives” (*NIV* has unwarrantably added “their”); and we know from Phoebe that there were women deacons or deaconesses at that time.

In favor of “deacons’ wives,” on the other hand, these women are not called “deacons” like Phoebe; the reference to them is sandwiched between two references to deacons, which would make an allusion to their wives quite natural; and the omission of a reference to the women’s married faithfulness, corresponding to verses 2 and 12, would be explained if these women were the deacons’ wives.<sup>4</sup>

In our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, only men are ordained to the office of deacon, in keeping with the view that the women in verse 11 are deacons’ wives rather than deaconesses. Yet the elders are encouraged to “select and appoint godly men and women of the congregation to assist the deacons in caring for the sick, the widows, the orphans, the prisoners, and others who may be in any distress or

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<sup>4</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, 101.

need” (*Book of Church Order* 9-7).

Paul went on to write in verse 11b, “Their wives likewise **must be dignified....**” The Greek word for “**dignified**” (*semnas*) is the feminine of the same adjective that was used of deacons in verse 8. The wife of a deacon was also expected to be serious in mind and character and not silly or flippant about important matters.

Paul also wrote in verse 11c that deacons’ wives must be “**not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.**” It seems that since diaconal ministry involved both men and women, the wives of deacons were often actively involved with their husbands in ministering to women and children. Therefore, they had to have outstanding character qualifications themselves in order to minister effectively.

Then Paul wrote in verse 12, “**Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.**” Deacons had to have just one wife if they were married. A polygamist could not serve as a deacon. Just as elders were required to manage their own households well (3:4), so deacons were to do the same. A deacon who was unable to manage his own household well was unlikely to serve God’s people well.

So, a deacon must have self-mastery, sound doctrine, satisfactory testing, and a stable family.

## **II. A Man Will Be Rewarded for Serving as a Deacon (3:13)**

And second, a man will be rewarded for serving as a deacon.

Paul wrote in verse 13, “**For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also**

**great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”** As Paul concluded his qualifications for deacons, he stated two results for those deacons who serve well. First, they will **“gain a good standing for themselves.”** The **“good standing”** means that they will acquire a good standing in the estimation of others in the church. It could also mean that they will acquire a good standing in the estimation of God.

And second, they will have **“great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”** The deacons will grow in their confidence to speak out boldly to people because of their personal faith in Jesus.

Deacons grow and mature in their walk with the Lord. They learn more and they serve better. And as they do so, they are increasingly affirmed and encouraged to speak and serve even better. A deacon is not merely elected, ordained, and installed into the office and that then is the end for him. A deacon, like an elder, is not appointed to a *title* but to *service*. And as he serves, he will continue to grow in the Lord and be used by the Lord. And the result will be a great reward for his service to the Lord and the Lord’s people as a deacon.

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, let us ask the Lord to send us men who are qualified to serve as deacons in our church.

The supreme model for a deacon is Jesus himself. Jesus said in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus came to be a deacon. And it is by his diaconal service that we have eternal life. So, let each one of us follow the example of Jesus and serve others for his glory and their good. Amen.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

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