

THE QUALIFICATIONS AND ROLES OF DEACONS AND WHAT ABOUT DEACONESSES?

1 Timothy 3:8–13

By Dub McClish

Introduction

The Greek New Testament employs several words which are translated by the English word, "servant." There are three major types of servitude that may be distinguished among these terms. One of these is the concept of one who is hired and works for the pay ("hired servant," from *misthios*, Luke 15: 17, 19; "hireling," from *misthotos*, John 10:12-13, etc.). A second term, *doulos*, is the concept of a bondservant or slave. This term is used literally to denote a slave (Col. 4:1, etc.), but it is also often used metaphorically of a Christian in reference to God or Christ (Rom. 1:1; Phi. 2:7, etc.). The third type of service is that which is rendered free of charge, willingly, and it is in the word *diakonos*.¹ This word is most often rendered *minister* in the English versions,² but in two passages it is rendered *deacon* (Phi. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8,12), the subject of this study.

Our word *deacon* is simply a transliteration of the Greek term *diakonos*, one of several such cases in the English New Testament (e.g., *baptisma* = "baptism"). Please notice that a deacon is not one who merely serves for the pay (although it is not inherently wrong to pay a deacon in certain circumstances), nor is he a slave who is working because he is forced to or has no choice. A deacon is a willing servant—one who does willingly what he is assigned to do.

Every Christian is to be a "deacon" in this general sense (i.e., a willing servant of God and men [Mark 10:43; John 12:26]). However, there is a specific use of the term in the New Testament in reference to certain members of the church. This is made clear by the list of qualifications for those called "deacons" immediately after those of bishops (1 Tim. 3:1–7). "Deacons" are likewise linked with "bishops" as men specifically so recognized in the Philippian church (Phi. 1:1). Paul taught the same thing everywhere in every church (1 Cor. 4:17), indicating that every congregation, when it was sufficiently mature spiritually, appointed its own elders and deacons.

Apart from 1 Timothy 3 and Philippians 1 deacons are not specifically referenced.³ However, we correctly infer from the strictness of the qualifications (only slightly less stringent than those for bishops) that the Holy Spirit attached considerable importance to their place and work.

Qualifications

Paul lists eight qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:8–10, 12; five are in positive terms, and three are in negative terms. We will begin with and proceed through all of the positive qualifications before considering the negatives. The qualifications are introduced with the phrase, *in like manner* (v.8). This refers to the phrase which introduces the qualifications of bishops, *The bishop therefore must be...* (v. 2). The force of the phrase in verse 8 is that each deacon must meet the qualifications specified for deacons, even as each elder must possess each qualification for elders (v. 8).

On the word *seainous* (“grave”), White quotes Trench and then adds his own comment as follows: “The word we want is one in which the sense of gravity and dignity, and of these as inviting reverence, is combined (Trench)... The term is used in reference to women workers and old men.”⁴

The corresponding qualification for elders is "sober-minded" (1 Tim. 3:2). This does not mean a long-faced pessimistic grouch with no sense of humor. Nor does it mean one possessed of a stern, unmerciful personality. It does rule out one who is childish, frivolous, and flippant about the cause of Christ. It demands a degree of good judgment and common sense. To meet this qualification one must be serious about serving Christ and must consider the Lord's work to be serious business. Many a church problem has been precipitated by a "smart-alec," spiritually adolescent man, appointed as a "deacon."

Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience (v. 9)

The mystery is one of Paul's favorite descriptions of the scheme of human redemption conceived in the mind of Deity. Thayer defines this use of the term as: "...God's plan of providing salvation for men through Christ, which was once hidden but now is revealed (Rom. 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26...).”⁵ *The faith* refers to the Gospel message through which the mystery was revealed to the Lord's inspired men (Acts 6:7; 1 Cor. 16:13; Jude 3, et al.). To hold to the mystery of the faith means both to understand and be steadfast in the Truth. This requirement is parallel to *holding to the faithful word* for elders (Tit. 1:9). A man who is unsound in the faith must never be considered as a deacon, regardless of how kind, wealthy, or prominent he may be. The "pure conscience" in this passage refers to the practice of the Truth. It is not enough for a man merely to have a "book knowledge" of the Gospel and be correct doctrinally. He must couple a pure life with his pure doctrine.

Proved to be blameless (v. 10)

A man is first to be proved or tested, and only if he is found blameless is he to serve as a deacon. Often congregations are very careless about the appointment of both elders and deacons. In 1962 I moved to work with a congregation of about 250 members, and I thought it strange before moving there that it had 26 deacons besides 3 elders. In my youth and inexperience, I failed to inquire about this matter before the move. I learned shortly after my move that their procedure for deacon selection had consisted of calling every adult male in the church who was not an elder or preacher, inviting each of them to serve as a deacon. Admittedly, this was done in the hope that it would cause some to serve more faithfully. I can assure you that it didn't work! In light of the plainness of this qualification, respectful and careful Bible students will not make such an egregious blunder.

William Hendriksen made the following valuable comments on this passage:

No neophytes must be chosen. Only tested men should serve in this capacity. This does not mean that a prospective deacon must serve a trial-period, but rather that by means of a consecrated life he must furnish a testimonial of character. He must be able to sustain the test of having the eyes of the whole church (plus the outsiders!) focused upon him. If he succeeds, he is then blameless.... This method of selecting deacons is surely far removed from the one which is suggested at times, namely, "Maybe if we make him a deacon, he'll stop his criticizing. Let's place him on the nomination for deacons. If elected, we can perhaps make something of him."⁶

This qualification is also parallel to that given for bishops (1 Tim. 3:2, 7). I do not understand this to mean that a man must never have any accusation or criticism of any sort brought against him, for no man could pass such a test. Rather, he must be blameless in regard to the qualifications listed. When new deacons are being sought it is the responsibility of any member of the church to step forward with any information regarding a man's failure with respect to any of these qualifications. Sad experience teaches that it is much easier to "make a deacon" of one who is unqualified than to "unmake" one. The church is subject to grave harm when untested men are appointed as deacons.

Husband of one wife (v. 12)

This phrase is identical (in both Greek and English) to the one relating to elders (v. 2). Remember that *must be* prefaces each of these inspired requirements for both bishops and deacons. This rules out deaconesses (female deacons) because no woman can be the "husband of one wife." This qualification also means that a deacon must be married, for one cannot be a husband without being married. A few brethren and some denominational commentators take the position (regarding elders and deacons) that Paul means that if they are

married they must have only one wife. However, that is not what Paul says. By this qualification all bachelors, polygamists, and men with unscriptural marriages are excluded.

Ruling their children and their own houses well (v. 12)

The parallel trait demanded in elders is *one that ruleth his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity...* (v. 4). The children of a man who would serve as a deacon should show the effects of proper training by their father. When a man allows his children to run wild or to rule the home, he demonstrates a woeful lack of moral courage or responsibility—or both—and he fails this qualification, however much he may possess the others. *Ruling one's own house* includes wife as well as children.

Not double-tongued (v. 8)

Double-tongued is from a compound Greek word (*dilogous*), meaning to speak twice. This prohibits all of the following:

1. Changing one's speech habits in different crowds,
2. Saying one thing to one person and saying something contradictory to someone else
3. Knowing what is true in a case, but saying that which is not true about it
4. Taking both sides of an issue for the sake of advantage (cheap politics!)

James describes the double-tongued Christian well: "Out of the same mouth cometh forth blessing and cursing" (Jam. 3:10). There is no specific parallel in the qualifications for elders.

Not given to much wine (v. 8)

Two grave flaws in interpretation are frequently made on this prohibition: 1) When compared with the KJV on the qualifications of elders ("not given to wine" [1 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 1:7]), some erroneously assume that elders are forbidden to drink any wine, but deacons can drink some—as long as it is not "much." 2) Some thus abuse this passage to justify "social drinking" of alcoholic beverages.

No distinction is taught here between the amounts of alcoholic beverage elders and deacons are allowed to drink. "Not given to wine" ("no brawler"—ASV) is from *paroinos*, meaning to be alongside of wine in the sense of lingering or tarrying with it. The ASV places the secondary meaning ("brawler") in the text, because one who drinks usually becomes quarrelsome. *Not given to much wine* in reference to deacons is a totally different expression (more so in the Greek than in the English), referring to the hold (addiction) which wine has on those who freely imbibe it. The two passages represent two different ways of issuing warnings about the danger and evil of drinking wine. It is passing strange that some profess to see justification for drinking in two passages which warn men of the evils of same!⁷

The justification for "social drinking" that many brethren (even elders and preachers) seek on the basis of this qualification for deacons is non-existent. Who is going to decide how "much" it takes to equal *much wine*? The drinker himself cannot do so, for by the second or third drink his judgment is impaired by alcohol.

If *not given to much wine* means that it is all right to drink moderately, consistency would demand that *Be not over much wicked* (Ecc. 7:17) grants permission to be somewhat wicked. Likewise, when Paul ordered, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body" (Rom.6:12), one may as well argue that he was actually giving license to sin as long as one does not completely yield to it. Would it be all right to steal or commit fornication "moderately" as long as one did not become addicted to that sin? Such is the "reasoning" of those who would defend drinking in any amount from 1 Timothy 3:8.

Further, if this passage authorizes "moderate" drinking (I deny that there is such a thing), it does not merely justify moderate *consumption*, but moderate *addiction*! Notice: If "not given (addicted) to much wine" means that one can drink some, it also means that one can be addicted to some wine. This obviously proves too much and therefore proves nothing.

Any interpretation of this passage which makes it contradict many Scriptures that elsewhere condemn strong drink (Pro. 20: 1), those who drink it (1 Pet. 4:3), and those who encourage others to drink it (Hab. 2: 15-16) is obviously a false interpretation. There is no Scriptural authorization here for consumption of any amount of alcohol as a beverage for a deacon or any other Christian.

Not greedy of filthy lucre (v. 8)

A deacon cannot be one who is covetous, greedy, and materialistic. This prohibition also eliminates anyone who is involved in a dishonest or dishonorable means of profit. Greed will often cause a man to seek gain at the expense of righteousness, truth, and honesty, thereby rendering such gains "filthy." Although some may not exhibit this trait by dishonorable profiteering, they may do so by refusing to give as they have been prospered, to the Lord's church. The thrust of the qualification is to exclude any who are either materialistic or dishonest. Deacons must be men in whom spiritual principles have triumphed over material concerns to an observable degree. The Holy Spirit gives the identical qualification for elders (Tit. 1:7).

All of the qualifications for deacons (as for elders) are practical, rather than merely arbitrary. By this, I mean that each of them relates in some way to ensuring that the men appointed to serve as deacon will have the integrity, morality, spirituality, and ability to perform the tasks assigned to them by the elders.

The Role and Work of Deacons

The role of deacons in the local church is subject to considerable misunderstanding. This observation is especially true regarding the relationship of elders and deacons as respective groups. Some have the concept that elders and deacons are somehow coordinate with each other; deacons are thought of as sort of “co-elders” or “junior elders.” I have heard of congregations in which elders and deacons regularly meet together and make decisions whereby everyone present have an equal voice. Obviously, if deacons outnumber elders (as they usually do), the deacons in such meetings could control any or every decision, or one elder and a few deacons could overrule the thinking of the majority of the elders. This arrangement violates Scripture. Elders are overseers (the meaning of *bishops*) of the local church (Acts 20: 17, 28), and every member of the congregation—including deacons—must submit to their rule (Heb. 13:17). Deacons are servants (the meaning of the term), and must submit to the rule and oversight of elders like every other member. A servant has no authority except that which his overseers delegate to him.

Others have the concept that elders and deacons are independent of each other. Such people aver that elders have oversight of “spiritual” matters, while deacons have oversight of material, physical, and financial matters—and neither has any authority in the field of the other. In the first place, it is impossible to divide the business of a local church into neat, separate “packages” of “spiritual” and “material” concerns. Everything pertaining to the work of the church should be considered “spiritual” because it has a spiritual purpose behind it. In the second place, such a concept of “independence” is anti-Scriptural. The church in Antioch sent its famine contribution to the elders, not the deacons, in Judea (Acts 11:30). Further, elders are charged with **all** of the oversight of **all** of the work of **all** of the church (Acts 20:28).

Yet another false concept of the relationship between elders and deacons sees them as dependent on one another. This concept goes beyond the normal dependency all Christians should feel toward one another. This concept views the elders and deacons as somewhat like the House and the Senate in Congress, respectively. It would have the elders to pass on the ideas of the deacons, but also the deacons to pass on the proposals of the elders before any action could be taken. The aforementioned Scriptures expose the fallacy of this view, as they do the errors already discussed.

There is no specific information in the New Testament to tell us the work of deacons. The nearest thing to a statement concerning their work is at the conclusion of the qualifications: “For they that have served well as deacons gain to themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3:13). The key words here are *served well*;

it is the work of deacons to serve well in whatever responsibility they are given. Also, remember that the very meaning of *diakonos* connotes willing service. I agree with the statement of James D. Cox:

The implication toward that of being a servant would require that a deacon be always ready to carry out details unquestioningly and not disputing the job arrangement. In fact, they, like the rest of the membership, are to obey and execute their tasks in such a manner as to give joy to the elders (Heb. 13:17). The very fact that they are "servants" disposed to be in readiness for whatever they may be asked to do may give a reason for no more specific Biblical mention being made of their tasks.⁸

While the seven men appointed to serve in Jerusalem are not called "deacons" in the text, the work of service performed by them may be considered typical of tasks that would be assigned to deacons. It seems obvious in the nature of the case that elders would want to assign and delegate to deacons many of the tasks relating to physical matters and "busywork" in the local church, thus leaving them more free time for matters peculiar to the work of elders. So did the apostles with the seven men in Jerusalem (Acts 6:2–4).

The failure of elders to properly assign and delegate various tasks to deacons produces a sad state of inefficiency and waste in the local church. It leaves elders doing work which they should have assigned to deacons, preachers trying to get their own work done plus doing the work neglected by the elders, and deacons with no assignments, wondering what they are supposed to be doing. The work of a deacon may be to supervise the church property, to administer a program of benevolent work, to organize and select men to serve at the Lord's table and lead prayers, or to coordinate the Bible class program. Any work that the elders assign that is Scriptural and is within his ability to perform should be willingly and diligently performed by a deacon.

What About Deaconesses?

Were there women deacons ("deaconesses") in the New Testament church? Those who so affirm often refer to 1 Tim. 3:11 as a list of their qualifications. They also affirm that Phoebe was an "official" deaconess of the church in Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1; an ASV footnote suggests *deaconess* for *servant*, which is in the text). Likewise, some identify the "enrolled" widows in Ephesus (1 Tim. 5:9–10) as deaconesses. However, I am not convinced that Phoebe or any other woman was ever a "deaconess" in the sense that certain men were deacons or bishops.

First, there is no more ground to claim an official use of *diakonon* in Rom. 16:1 than there is of *diakonos* in Romans 13:4. In the latter passage rulers are said to be "servants of God," but obviously this does not mean they were official deacons in the church. These men were not even Christians, much less deacons. Paul calls Christ a *diakonon* (Rom. 15:8) and he

often calls himself a *diakonos* (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4, et al.). However, I know of none who would claim that either Christ or Paul was an "official" deacon (our Lord was never a member of His church). Why then **assume** an official use for the term concerning Phoebe? The 149 scholars who produced the KJV and the ASV respectively rendered *diakonon* "servant" instead of "deaconess" in the text of Romans 16:1, indicating their conviction that Phoebe was no "official" deaconess. I heartily agree with the following statement from Burton Coffman:

The New Testament word *apostle* is used in its both official and limited sense and also in a secondary and more general sense when applied to men like Barnabas and Silas, who were not, strictly speaking, "apostles"; The view here is that *deaconess* as applied to Phoebe, in the same manner, does not mean that she was officially a deacon in the church of the Lord.⁹

Second, if Paul had been intending to list the qualifications for another specific class of workers in the church besides bishops and deacons (the subjects of 1 Tim. 3:1–13), he could have as easily used *diakonon* to refer to the women he mentioned in verse 11, as he used *diakonous* to identify the men he referred to in verse 8. Instead he used a generic term which may be translated "women" or "wives." If there were deaconesses in the first century church having to meet certain qualifications similar to those of bishops and deacons, 1 Timothy 3:11 would surely have been the most appropriate place so to indicate. I concur with the following argument advanced by Hendriksen:

On the other hand, the fact that no special and separate paragraph is used in describing their necessary qualifications, but that these are simply wedged in between the stipulated requirements for deacons, with equal clarity indicates that these women are not to be regarded as constituting a third office in the church, the office of "deaconesses," on a par with and endowed with authority equal to that of deacons.¹⁰

It is my view that Paul here is refers to the wives of both elders and deacons, since both must be "the husband of one wife" to be qualified. But would merely being married to a wife of any sort meet the demands of the qualifications of these men? Hardly. Would not the women described in 1 Tim. 3:11 be peculiarly suited to complement the work of any elder or deacon? These qualifications for wives are best construed as extensions of the qualifications for elders and deacons, therefore.

Third, the "enrolled" widows (1 Tim. 5:9–10) were just that, and to assume that they were deaconesses is eisegesis rather than exegesis. The mere fact that one serves a church in some capacity does not make one an "official" in that church. We have clear orders concerning the qualifications of elders and deacons. That they were to be appointed and that they existed in the early church is a matter of record. We have none of the above for deaconesses.

Conclusion

A deacon does not merely have an office or position to fill, but a work to do. Far too often the appointment to be a deacon is looked upon as an honor to be conferred. I heard of one elder who proposed that since brother _____ was growing old, if they were ever going to honor him, they should confer the office of deacon on him! While there is true honor related to serving faithfully as a deacon, the Scriptural concept of a deacon goes far beyond a mere honorary title.

Deacons are servants in the kingdom. Those who serve well "...gain to themselves a good standing, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 3:13). They must have already gained a degree of "good standing" before they can be appointed as deacons, as the qualifications state. However, they gain even more by serving faithfully. Increased exercise brings strength, both for the inner and the outer man. Those who love the cause of Christ delight in the productive and diligent service of faithful deacons. Some profess to see in this "good standing" a reference to almost automatic "promotion" to the eldership. While it is true that those who are elders often come from among those who have served as faithful deacons, this is not likely Paul's is. One could as well argue that the deacons' gain of "great boldness in the faith" implies an "automatic" progression to become Gospel preachers!

In the course of rendering "honor to whom honor" is due (Rom. 13:7), let us not forget "deacons that serve well." Such are men to whom every member of the church owes much.

Endnotes

1. W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1966), v. 2, p. 222; v. 3, pp. 347–349.
2. To use the term *minister* as a synonym for *preacher* is similar to equating *pastor* with *preacher*—in both cases Scriptural words are being used with an unscriptural application. In the New Testament *minister* (from *diakonos* and its cognates) is applied to any who serve the God and his purposes, including Christ (Rom. 5:8), women (Mark 1:31; Rom. 16:1), and unbelieving rulers (Rom. 13:4, 6). When Paul speaks of a "minister of Christ" or a "minister of the Gospel" (Col. 1:7, 23), he is not using *minister* as a synonym for *preacher* or *evangelist*. He simply means he is a servant of Christ and of the Gospel. Every faithful Gospel preacher is a "minister" (not "The Minister"), but not every "minister" is a Gospel preacher. Every Christian is to be a "minister" (servant) of Christ and the Gospel. For further study of *minister*, see author's chapter in *Studies in 1 Corinthians*, Dub McClish, ed. (Denton, TX: Valid Publications, Inc., 1982), pp. 112–13.
3. Some refer to the seven men chosen to "serve tables" for the Grecian widows (Acts 6:1–6) as "the first deacons." I do not concur for the following reasons: 1) Luke does not so refer to them. It is argued that the word for the serving they did is *diakonein* (v. 2). However, the word in the same context describing the "ministry" the apostles continued to render is also *diakonia* (v. 4). If the word in verse 2 makes the seven men "official" deacons, then the word in verse 4 makes the apostles such. 2) The qualifications for the men in Acts 6 are vastly different from those for deacons in 1 Timothy 3. 3) If the seven were deacons, we have the strange circumstance of the existence of deacons in a congregation before it had elders. If it were thus in Jerusalem, could not an argument be made for deacons before and without elders in every congregation and generation of the church? That which proves too much proves nothing and to consider the seven as deacons "proves too much."

4. Newport J. D. White, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, W. Robertson Nicoll, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), v. 4, p. 114.
5. Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York, NY: American Book Co., 1889), p. 420.
6. William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary—Exposition of The Pastoral Epistle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1957), p. 132.
7. For fuller discussion of this point see Jim McGuiggan, *The Bible, The Saint, and the Liquor Industry* (Lubbock, TX: Montex Publishing Co., 1977) pp. 126–27.
8. James D. Cox, *With the Bishops and Deacons* (Tustin, CA: James D. Cox, 1976), p. 23.
9. James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1978), p. 183.
10. Hendriksen, pp. 132–33.

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