

The Deacon and His Wife

⁸ Likewise deacons *must be* reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, ⁹ holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. ¹⁰ But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being *found* blameless. ¹¹ Likewise, *their wives must be* reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling *their* children and their own houses well. ¹³ For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 3:8–13)

In our day, we are often used to large churches being factories of religious entertainment and false doctrine, but in the 19th century, the largest church in the world was a faithful, sound, and healthy Baptist church. The Metropolitan Tabernacle in London had over 5000 attending during the ministry of Charles Spurgeon. Such a large ministry needs a lot of help, and Spurgeon was assisted by his brother James as an associate pastor. He had around 23 elders, who were rotated and chosen every year. But closest to his heart were the Tabernacle's 10 deacons, who were chosen for life, and served as long as they were there.

Spurgeon said this of his deacons: "Deprive the church of her deacons, and she would be bereaved of her most valiant sons; their loss would be the shaking of the pillars of our spiritual house, and would cause a desolation on every side. Thanks be to God such a calamity is not likely to befall us, for the great Head of the church in mercy to her, will always raise up a succession of faithful men, who will use the office well, and earn unto themselves a good degree and much boldness in the faith."

For some sad reason, deacons are often joked about with negative, disparaging comments, but I find myself in a similar position to Spurgeon, thanking God for the deacons he has blessed this church with.

Perhaps the negative association some people have with deacons is because of a confusion over their roles, their qualifications, and their relationship to pastors. But there should be little confusion if we simply pay attention to 1 Timothy, Paul's manual of church order. Here in 1 Timothy 3 we learn most of what the New Testament has to tell us about deacons.

As we've been seeing, this is important for you to know. You need to know what this office is. You need to know what kind of man belongs in it. You need to know what to expect from your deacons, and what not to expect. You will need to choose deacons at some point, you will need to encourage them, submit to them, and support them. Having biblical deacons is a crucial way to have a healthy, thriving, flourishing church. The church with poor or no deacons is in a sorry state indeed.

This passage, vv8-13, is both deliberately similar and different to the list of qualities that the pastor-overseer-elder should have. It is similar in that it is structured exactly like that of vv1-7: a list of qualities. It is different in that the overseer is described with sixteen qualities, the deacon with eight. It is also different in that the deacon's wife is described. But the Bible wouldn't specify two offices if one would do. Obviously, the office of deacon is similar enough to that of pastor to have many overlaps, but also different enough to warrant its own office.

So we are obviously meant to both compare and contrast the deacon with the pastor-overseer-elder. We should see the overlaps and the differences. We'll see his character, his companion, and his commitment: who he is, who he's married to, and what he does.

I. The Character of the Deacon

We can use the same categories we used in studying the qualities of the pastor: reputational, moral, mental, domestic, and maturity. Because we've already studied many of these, we won't take the

time to explain each one in the same detail, but rather move over them swiftly, when we have already seen them in our study of the overseer.

1) Reputational Qualifications

being *found* blameless

Like the pastor, the deacon is to be someone beyond reasonable question. There are no black marks against his name, nor could a sensible person point a finger at some outstanding hypocrisy, or blatant, ongoing sinful lifestyle. Whether you look at his family, his finances, his physical life, his work life, you are not going to find something glaringly unChristian or ungodly. Not sinless, not faultless, but blameless.

Particularly because the deacon is going to be employed in full-time secular work, his reputation among the unsaved should also be beyond reasonable doubt. He might be the target of unfair practices at work, or persecution for his faith, but in terms of doing his job, being on time, being honest, being loyal, he is blameless.

2) Moral Qualifications

We saw the pastor was to be pure in the area of women, wine, wealth, and wrath.
We see exactly the same qualifications given here.

a) Women

¹² Let deacons be the husbands of one wife

The man serving as deacon must also be a one-woman man. He doesn't have to be married, but if he is, he has eyes for one woman, his wife. He is devoted to her, in body, affections, and attention. He guards his heart against unwise entanglements with the opposite sex. He guards his heart against visual lust and pornography.

b) Wine

⁸ not given to much wine

This is a similar phrase to the one used of the overseer. It means to be attentive or given to something. The deacon is not addicted to, or dependent on intoxicating, or hallucinatory or any other kind of substance that impairs judgement. He is not drunk with wine, because he is filled with the Spirit.

c) Wealth

not greedy for money,

The same word used for the elder. Since the deacon will be handling finances, and be responsible for administering money, he must be a man who can be trusted to be around large sums of money. A man lusting for money is not only a danger in terms of possible embezzlement, he becomes a liability in terms of planning. Like Judas, his view of ministry gets skewed by money, his priorities are out of order, he thinks without faith, and without a ministry heart.

The fourth 'w' we saw under the qualifications of a pastor was *wrath*, since Paul said the pastor must not [be] violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome. He doesn't repeat that for deacons, possibly because it is summed up in the word *reverent*. Possibly Paul knows that the pastor is going to be exposed to more situations that tempt one to anger, perhaps he will be the target of angry people, and he needs to not be a volatile person. Not that the deacons can be, but you can see where the standard for overseers is more exacting.

3) Mental Qualifications

⁸ Likewise deacons *must be* reverent,

This is a similar word to the three qualities used of the pastor-overseer-elder: temperate, sober-minded, of good behaviour. Reverent is the same idea. He is dignified, worthy of respect. He is a man of enough spiritual weight and dignity to invite respect from others. His attitude toward life commands respect. He is not silly or frivolous. He may have a sense of humour, but he doesn't think life is a joke. He doesn't treat life and people and the things of God lightly. He thinks deeply about important things and lives his life that way.

Now Paul adds this qualification: ⁸ not double-tongued,

This word means one who, as we would say, speaks out of both sides of his mouth. He says one thing to one person, and then changes his tune for another. That makes him insincere, a man-pleaser, a flatterer, even a gossip. He cannot really be trusted with information about people, because he is more concerned to please and impress than to be truthful. A deacon is to be a man who means what he says and says what he means.

Now under the qualifications of the pastor, one of the mental qualifications was *able to teach*. This is conspicuously missing from the deacon's qualifications. In fact, some would say that this is the only real difference. Now that does not mean a deacon cannot teach, or that many deacons won't be gifted teachers. It is simply that he is not required to be able to teach to serve faithfully as a deacon.

But that doesn't mean he is ignorant toward truth or indifferent towards it. Instead, Paul says in verse 9: ⁹ holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience.

The mystery of the faith simply means the doctrines of the Word, that were once unrevealed, but have now been revealed. He knows and believes these doctrines. A deacon has more than a passing familiarity with doctrine. He is a competent lay theologian. He knows his Bible. Beyond that, he obeys the Bible, because it says he holds these doctrines with a pure conscience. He lives out what he knows.

4) Domestic Qualification

ruling *their* children and their own houses well.

Identical to the elder, the deacon must be an effective manager and leader of his home. He parents with dignity, he leads his wife and children spiritually, he oversees the home's physical, mental, social, educational, recreational, spiritual aspects. Like the pastor, the deacon's home is a mini testing ground for the way he manages. If it doesn't work at home, it will not work at church.

Paul doesn't include for the deacon the qualification of being hospitable, but that may be because the deacon is going to be given to meeting material needs, that it is taken for granted, whereas for pastors, there is the danger of being all about teaching, and not meeting needs.

5) Maturity Qualification

¹⁰ But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being *found* blameless.

This seems to be a similar idea to the qualification of a pastor, that he must not be a novice, a new convert. In the same way, the deacons are first to be tested. The word means to be scrutinised, examined minutely. The church is to watch them, their lives, their families. This can be a formal

time of examination, as in our church, when four months after a nomination is given, the church is given to intentionally examine the proposed deacon. But it also means in a more informal way, men should be tested in service in the church, seen and known by others. They shouldn't be brand new converts.

Only after their maturity and reliability has been confirmed, then let them serve as deacons. By the way, this refutes the idea that deacons are just any servant in the church. Why would you need a period of testing before serving, if this refers to any servant of the church?

These five areas are the character of the deacon.

But now in verse 11, we come to a curiosity.

II. The Companion of a Deacon

¹¹ Likewise, *their wives must be* reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.

Now the difficulty here is that the Greek word translated *wives* is *gunaikos*, which means both wives and women, depending on the context. A little bit like in Afrikaans, where *vrou* can mean wife or woman.

So some translate this as “the women must be reverent, not slander, etc.”, and conclude that Paul is specifying a female deacon, that is a deaconess. Churches that have deaconesses argue that we should take this word to mean women, and create the office of deaconess.

Now to be fair, there are some plausible reasons to take it that way. 1) The opening word of verse 11 is likewise, which might suggest he is introducing another office. 2) They ask, “if this is about wives, why didn't Paul say something about the pastor's wife? 3) And why didn't he add the word “their” to wives, so we would know?” 4) Finally, they point out that in Romans 16:1, Phoebe is called a servant, a diakonos of the church. Doesn't that mean she was a deaconess? These are reasonable arguments, but not persuasive in my view.

I believe this is referring to deacon's wives. First, that better fits the flow of the passage: the deacon's life, his wife, then his family. Why interrupt the attributes of a deacon with a deaconess and then go back to what a deacon is in verse 12. Second, the reason Paul mentions the deacon's wife and not the pastor's is likely because, while a pastor's work is mainly teaching and preaching, which his wife cannot do with him, a deacon's work of mercy and material care is something that his wife will often join him in doing. Of course, a pastor's wife supports him in what he does, but a deacon's wife is often doing the ministry with him and so must be a woman of character. And it is possible that by not attaching the word “their” to the word for wives, he is actually pointing back not only to the wives of deacons, but indirectly to the wives of elders to. Let all the wives of leaders be this way. Third, as far as Phoebe goes, the word diakonos is used in an everyday form as a common noun, not as an office, just like the word apostle is also used in an everyday form for anyone who is sent, an emissary, a messenger, but it is also used to designate the Twelve. Phoebe is a servant of the church, but that does not mean there was an office of deaconess that she filled. That is arguing way too much from a single passage. Fourth, if Paul wanted to introduce us to deaconesses, why not simply use the word deacon, diakonos, with feminine pronoun, or write, the women who are deacons, or the deacons who are women? Instead he uses the word *gunaikos*, which taken by itself, seems to mean wives.

The deacons' wives are supposed to have four qualities.

“Reverent” - this is identical to the word used in verse 8 of the deacon and means the same thing.

She must be worthy of respect, dignified, serious in outlook. If a deacon's wife becomes loud, clamorous, rebellious, or frivolous, foolish and silly, it undermines her husband's role.

“Not slanderers” This is the word at the root of our word diabolical. The devil is a slanderer, and an accuser. A deacon's wife is not someone who destroys others with her tongue. She is not a gossip who accuses people behind their backs, and causes division, resentment, suspicion. She does not spread rumours, criticism, lies or anything false about others. She is a source of edification with her mouth.

“Temperate”. She is not given to extremes, sober, self-controlled. She has self-control and balance. She is not out of control with food, drink, money or even her emotions, use of the Internet, hobbies. She has self-restraint.

“Faithful in all things” She is faithful. She is a woman who is loyal and trustworthy. She is committed to her husband, to her children, to the church, to the Word, to her brothers and sisters in Christ, and above all, to her Lord. You know that if there is a responsible Christian thing to be doing regarding her home, she'll be doing it.

The deacon's wife must believe in her husband's work. It is hard enough to work a job, raise a family, pay your bills, but the deacon is going to devote some of that family time, some of those after hour times, some of the weekend time to the church. The only way he can do that is with a faithful wife who is disciplined with the homemaking and meals and children. If he is doing her work, then he will soon drown in responsibility and have nothing left over for the church. If she does not share his love of ministry, she will resent the time he gives to the church, and do nothing to free him up. If she is not part of his ministry, he will find himself unable to truly serve the church. But if she glories in the fact that her husband is giving his life to things of eternal significance, that she is part of a high calling of serving God's church, then she will want him to succeed in his ministry.

What then is the concern of the deacon? What is his responsibility and charge?

III. The Concern of the Deacon

The primary role of elders is the oversight of the church and the preaching of the Word, and deacons assist them by taking up what could consume all their time.

As we saw, the main difference between an elder and a deacon is that the elder is able to teach. That means the pastor's leadership and oversight comes through teaching of the Word. And according to 5:17, it is that teaching which is to be remunerated, so he can give himself to it full time. So if this is missing from the deacon, then we expect the deacon to be, as it is sometimes termed “lay”, or secular. He is supported by another vocation besides full-time teaching of the Word.

When it comes to the church, he serves tables, as we saw in Acts 6. One of the early Baptists, Benjamin Keach said that a deacon serves three tables: the Lord's Table, The Minister's Table and the Poor's Table. The Lord's Table has to do with the Lord's Supper, and the church ordinances. The deacons make sure these are organised and supplied. The Minister's Table is the task of looking after the pastor so he is not personally involved with finances. The Poor's Table is taking care of mercy and visitation for the poor, the widows.

He is, if we could put it this way, concerned with the more secular, material matters. Bank accounts must be opened, checked, money counted and deposited, monthly and yearly statements prepared, tax returns filled in, payrolls administrated, church assets obtained, secured and stored, repaired, replaced, missionaries to be paid, people in need to be assisted, the elderly and

sick to be cared for, rent to be paid, contracts to be negotiated, church events to be organised, meals to be catered, supplies to be purchased. The deacons thus oversee the practical aspects of the church administration under the oversight of the pastors.

Elders can get caught up with this and find entire weeks being used up organising, phoning, queuing, buying, shopping, meeting, processing instead of praying and studying, counselling, training, preaching and teaching.

That is not to say that deacons do every administrative task themselves. They themselves delegate. It is also not to say that they have no other ministries. Stephen was a great preacher, as we later find out. Philip was a great evangelist.

Deacons do not become a governing board, but they work out practical and material details so as to free the pastors up to focus on prayer and the Word of God, and visitation and discipleship.

In my opinion, many churches take the secular, material nature of a deacon's role, and they create the position of "lay" elder, supposedly an elder whose vocation is not shepherding, but who is one of the elders. In my opinion, many of those men are really deacons. Someone who remains committed to another vocation, who does not desire the office of overseer and does not give himself to teaching.

And if you do that, what do you do with your deacons? The answer is, you demote them to being almost nothing out of the ordinary, just regular servants, serving in the background. I think that's untrue to this passage, just as I think the concept of lay elders is a dubious one without much Scriptural support.

On the contrary, this passage teaches that deacons who serve well as deacons are making progress in leadership and effectiveness for Christ.

¹³ For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

The word for good standing is the idea of a stepping stone, a movement forward and upward. Serving faithfully in this office is progress in usefulness. Some deacons will continue to serve ever more effectively as deacons. Some will go on to become church-planters or missionaries. Some will go on to become pastors either in the same church, or in another.

Here is a good reason for any man to aspire to serve as a deacon. Not for the position, but for the spiritual growth and advancement that Scripture here promises.

But it is their service as deacons that gives them this forward progress and adds to their spiritual confidence and boldness. They are not bold in themselves, but bold through the spiritual battles they have now fought, the trials they have gone through, the problems they have tackled. They are not intimidated by difficulty and trouble, by people's sin or perversity, by false teaching and false teachers, by hardship.