

THE DEACONS & DEACONESSES OF THE CHURCH

When dealing with the issue of deacons and deaconesses in the church, we must first determine what it means to serve in a formal setting and who such people might be.

1. What is a deacon?

1.1. A deacon is one who serves.

The basic meaning of the word is servant (*διάκονος*: one who renders service to another), particularly applied to one who cares for the needs of others.¹

One other basic word is translated servant in the New Testament: *doulos* (*δοῦλος*): a hierarchical term normally referring to a slave under the authority of a master. The word signifies bondage.

The difference is primarily that one serves voluntarily and the other by command. Paul called himself, and all other believers, *douloi* (*δοῦλοι*) of Jesus Christ.

Romans 1:1 Paul, a **bondservant** of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God

1 Corinthians 7:22 For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's **slave**.

1.2. A deacon is one who ministers.

¹¹ Harold K. Moulton, editor, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon, Revised* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 91.

Ephesians 4:11-12

- 11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,
- 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of **ministry** (*διακονία*), for the edifying of the body of Christ,

1.3. A deacon is a support soldier (note passage above).

The very term implies that the task of the deacon and deaconess is to do the work of the ministry which will bring about the edification, or building up, of the body of Christ.

The word, edify, (in all of its cognates), in every New Testament passage, deals with the qualitative well being of the body of individual believers rather than of the quantitative growth of the church.

The word is illustrated for us in 1 Corinthians 10:23-24:

- 23 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.
- 24 Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.

The responsibility of the deacons and deaconesses (the diaconate) is to provide for the well being of the members of the body of believers by maintaining effective, people-centered ministries..

1.4. A deacon is one who wishes to be great in the Kingdom of God.

Matthew 20:25-26

- 25 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them.
- 26 "Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant [*διάκονος*].

2. Who is a deacon?

Before we get specific in dealing with the diaconate, we must have a general understanding of the role of the generic deacon.

2.1. Christ was a deacon.

Mark 10:45 "For even the Son of Man did not come to be **served** [*διακονηθῆναι*: aorist [effectively a past tense], passive infinitive], but **to serve** [*διακονῆσαι*: aorist, active infinitive], and to give His life a ransom for many."

2.2. The apostles were deacons.

Ephesians 3:7 of which I became a **minister** [*διάκονος*] according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

2.3. All functioning believers are deacons.

Ephesians 4:11-12

11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,

12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry [*διακονία*] for the edifying of the body of Christ,

2.4. Satan's followers are deacons.

2 Corinthians 11:15 Therefore it is no great thing if his [Satan's] **ministers** [διακονία] also transform themselves into **ministers** [διάκονοι] of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

2.5. Some have the spiritual gift of deacon.

Romans 12:7 or **ministry** [διακονίαν], let us use it in our **ministering** [διακονία]; he who teaches, in teaching;

1 Corinthians 12:5 There are differences of **ministries** [διακονιῶν], but the same Lord.

2.6. Some members of local churches have the position or office of deacon.

Since the word, deacon, is a word with broad application, we need to see how we apply this word and ministry within the formal diaconate of a local church.

As will be seen under section three below, the qualifications for a deacon are spiritual in nature and not connected with natural abilities or training. It is as if God were interested in the character, motives, and purity of the servant rather than the skills. God will bless the humble servant-leader without skills but He will not bless the office-holder who may be skilled but carnal or energized by any other motive save humbly serving God's people with a joyful spirit.

3. Where does the Board of Deacons and Deaconesses fit in with the biblical instructions?

3.1. The Seven of Acts 6.

These seven men were not mandated by God, but the church solved a temporal problem by adapting a practice that was common in the

synagogues: the Committee of Seven. The responsibility of this committee was to insure that the poor in the synagogue received sufficient food and clothing. These committees were always made up of seven men.

The seven men here all have Greek names, implying that they were Hellenistic Jews (the same group that complained that their widows were not being properly cared for).

3.1.1. The qualifications of these seven men were as follows (v. 3):

3.1.1.1. Good reputation.

The word is *martureon* (*μαρτύριον*), the Greek word for witness or testimony. These men, therefore, had lives that gave ample testimony to the power of the gospel to change men and make them Christ like.

This implies that their lives were open to inspection by the church family and the congregation, by electing them, and the elders, by receiving them, we're saying these men are involved in our church in such a way that we see the outcome of their lives

This requires that the lifestyle and values of a deacon or deaconess should clearly be seen by demonstration in the church: such a person and his family should be in Sunday School and worship every Sunday possible and that attendance at communion services is required. If the fundamental ordinance of the Church is not practiced by the deacon or deaconess, then is it of little or no importance?

Every deacon and deaconess should be able to say with Paul: "imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). To fulfill this responsibility, we must be

seen worshipping, learning, serving, and caring for our families in loving ways.

3.1.1.2. Full of the Holy Spirit.

These men were clearly under the control of the Holy Spirit. Their minds, emotions, speech, and actions showed the stamp of Christ.

To be full of the Holy Spirit assumes that the fruit of the Spirit is exercised in their lives and should be evident to all that these are men fully controlled by the Holy Spirit. It should be seen in their faces, in their demeanor, in their joyful approach to people, and in their humble manner before their Lord.

Galatians 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love,
 joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness,
 faithfulness,

This should be obvious to the church at large. The diaconate is not a proving ground: it is a place where godly people serve. True, in their service, they will continue to mature in Christ and more of Christ will be seen in them during this maturation. But these are people who are already tested and proven (see 4.6 below).

3.1.1.3. Full of wisdom.

In the many business decisions of the church, these men had to show wisdom, not merely business acumen.

3.1.2. The identity of the Seven.

They are nowhere called deacons. This is an assumption, a fully warrantable assumption, however.

Although they are not called deacons, it appears obvious that the Seven clearly filled the role of a diaconate as it developed in the early church.

The requirements for them would be appropriate to apply to any deacons or deaconesses in the church today.

3.2. The Philippian deacons.

Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and **deacons**:

Official status is conferred on a group of people called deacons² whom Paul addresses along with the saints (the church as a whole) and the bishops (the elders who rule the church).

This epistle was written late in Paul's ministry, so the need for deacons who served in an official capacity had been demonstrated and the church had evolved to meet that ongoing need.

3.3. Phoebe of Romans 16.

Romans 16:1 I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a **servant** of the church in Cenchrea,

Phoebe was a deacon (not specifically deaconess). The noun is only found in the masculine, being a second declension noun.

The word, *diakonessa*, was created as a new word by the anti-Nicene church (*i.e.*, post-apostolic) to accommodate the existence of deaconesses, the post-apostolic church clearly had deaconesses since

² Possibly men and women since the masculine plural noun in Greek can include the feminine of the noun, just as it does in English. It is, however, an argument from silence

they had to develop a word to express it that would reduce confusion about the role of women in the church

3.4. The deacons of 1st Timothy.

Since there are specific requirements for being a deacon in this passage, then the obvious implication is that these are deacons serving in an official capacity having the primary purpose of relieving the elders of the responsibility of the day-to-day management of the details of the church.

These deacons could not refer to women (as deaconesses) since one qualification refers to them as “men” [as opposed to women: *aner* (*ἄνηρ*); rather than using *anthropos* (*ἄνθρωπος*), which could refer to men or women].

3.5. The women of 1st Timothy 3:11.

Are these women deaconesses or are they the wives of deacons?

Notice that the word *likewise* is used to introduce this section of the pericope (*i.e.*, an integral teaching passage). The same word is used at the beginning of verse eight to introduce the qualifications of the deacon. This leads back to the beginning of the pericope dealing with the qualifications of all officers of the church in verse two.

The structure would be:

A bishop must be . . .

A deacon, likewise, must be . . .

A woman/wife/deaconesses, likewise, must be . . .

The overall grammatical structure, therefore, is clear and no one seems to debate it. But it still does not clarify the identity of the women referred to in verse eleven other than to say there are requirements for them just as there are for elders (an office) and deacons (an office). The women are, however, distinguished from deacons.

The section on deaconesses, however, is not after the list of requirements for deacon is completed but is inserted in the middle of the list of requirements for a deacon. This is a strong grammatical support for these women being the wives of the deacons.

Some commentators avoid making any kind of decision.³

George Knight lists four positions generally taken by commentators:⁴

1. The women are inherently deacons.
2. The women are deaconesses distinguished from, although comparable to, the deacons.
3. The women are female assistants to the deacons.
4. The women are the wives of the deacons.

Colin Brown, in his article on “woman” in the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, does not differentiate between deacons and deaconesses. He would side with Knight’s first position above. His

³ Dean Fetterhof, a gracious and humble example of a godly man in our Fellowship for many years, avoids making any determination in his book, *The Making of a Man of God: Studies in 1 & 2 Timothy* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1976), p. 56. In his defense, this small commentary was probably not designed to solve such lasting issues of church polity.

⁴ George W. Knight III, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, from *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), p. 171.

argument fails in that he ignores the grammatical structure of 1 Timothy 3:2-11.⁵

The structure of the pericope rules out number one (the women are inherently deacons). Since the structure deals with the women syntactically as the third in a list of three items described or at least as separate from the deacons, they cannot be added to the second of that list: deacons.

The second is, by far, the most common position, but there are some interesting suggestions brought by commentators.

R.C.H. Lenski, the German Lutheran commentator, was a scholar of prodigious education and linguistic insight. He suggests that the women were single women who served as deaconesses. He dismisses married women because the extent of their ministries would take them away from their homes and families (note Phoebe: she went all the way to Rome in her diaconal responsibility).⁶ He believes that the personal qualifications of these single women followed immediately upon the personal qualifications of deacons in verses eight and nine, before returning, in verse 12, to complete the familial qualifications of the deacons.

John MacArthur also believes them to be deaconesses, a separate group from deacons but serving in similar ways. He passes over too quickly some grammatical issues, but his position and the influence he bears on the evangelical community makes his interpretation practically the *de facto* standard.⁷

⁵ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, Zondervan Publishing House), p. 1065.

⁶ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 599.

⁷ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Timothy* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press: 1995), p. 130.

The third position, that the women are assistants to the deacons, is not particularly tenable in that there is no evidence other than cultural prejudices of that day that would make them so.

The fourth position, that they are the wives of the deacons, is supported by the translators of the King James Version, the New King James Version, and the New International Version. The New American Standard has “women” rather than “wives.”

Homer Kent discounts the possibility that the women of verse eleven could refer to the wives of the deacons in that the noun is anarthrous (*i.e.*, no definite article with the noun). The article, he believes, would be necessary to connect definitively the women with the deacons of verse eight. His argument, although strong, is greatly weakened by Lenski's that the article is not used because these qualifications are for those who are proposed as deacons and deaconesses, not for those who are such. The article would assume that the persons represented by these three classes already held their offices. Such an assumption would make pointless the beginning of this pericope: “A bishop then must be [. . .]” “The time aspect of “must be” is clearly future, not present.

Knight, in his excellent Greek commentary on the pastoral epistles, claims, with many good grammatical reasons, that these women are the wives of the deacons, claiming that another requirement for a deacon is that the man has a wife who fits certain requirements of godly behavior:

Furthermore, this understanding of *gunaikes* [*γυναῖκες*, from *γύνη*, woman] as “wives” also provides the solution for the reference to *gunaikes* at this place in the pericope. If it is wives that are in view, then the verse fits here as another qualification necessary for one who would be a deacon and who would conduct his ministry with his wife's assistance. Thus the wife's qualifications are part and parcel of his qualifications for the office of *διάκονος*. And after giving the qualifications for the deacon's wife, Paul then goes on to the deacon's fidelity to his

wife and his children and thereby completes the picture of his family life (v. 12).⁸

Matthew Henry holds to these women being the wives of the deacons without support.⁹

Kent asserts that these women are deaconesses.¹⁰

The reason the Greek word for woman is oftentimes translated wives is that there is no word in Greek for wife. It means wife only when it is in close proximity to the Greek word for man (*aner*), and, in that case, the word man is translated husband. The word is translated wife in Matthew 5:31 where the obvious reference is to a wife even though *aner* is not found in the passage.

If Paul had wanted to specify a woman as opposed to a wife, he could have used a word that meant female, as opposed to male, and such a word exists in the Greek: *thelys*[*θηλυς*]: female.

Matthew 19:4 And He answered and said to them,
 "Have you not read that He who made them at the
 beginning 'made them male and **female** [*θηλυς*],'

After all of this discussion, what are we to decide and how are we to present this to our deacons and deaconesses and to our church family?

⁸ George W. Knight III, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, from *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), p. 172.

⁹ Matthew Henry, et al, *Commentary on the Holy Bible: Matthew to Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979), p. 282 of the section, "The Epistles."

¹⁰ Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Pastoral Epistles: Studies in I and II Timothy and Titus* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1958), pp. 140-41.

To me, the choices come down to two: these are deaconesses, not merely deacons who happen to be women; or they are the wives of deacons.

The grammatical weight leans clearly towards these women being the wives of the deacons (hence, the translators of the three most conservative English Bibles using “wives” and not “women.” Grammar, however, cannot always prove everything conclusively. It is a powerful tool for determining the meaning of a text, but it is not a final determiner.

The general consensus of conservative churches makes these women to be deaconesses as one of three separate groups.

I support the position demonstrated by the grammatical evidence, but the traditional church polity of our evangelical traditions is not one I feel good about going against.

In my experience and discussions with other pastors, it is a decision they really do not want to deal with.

4. What are the characteristics of a deacon?

4.1. Reverent.

Σεμνός (semnos): These are honorable men worthy of respect.

They are not clowns: they approach life with a serious, although not somber, demeanor.

4.2. Not double-tongued.

Lit.: not of two words.

What a deacon would say to one person regarding a certain subject, he would say to everyone else.

4.3. Not given to much wine.

“Not being before or towards much wine”: This does not mean he can be addicted to a little wine, nor does that mean that he must be a teetotaler. No biblical case can be made for complete abstention from all alcoholic beverages.

The deacon does not “approach much wine” or “go to much wine.”

Spirit-filled men cannot be under the control of any other thing, regardless how minimal that control might seem to the person at the time.

I find three basic rules guiding the use of alcoholic beverages (other than unarguable biblical injunctions against drunkenness or taking any strong drink):

1. Partake with a clear conscience before God or do not partake.
2. Abstain from any amount that would in any way hamper your ability to discern good from evil or right from wrong.
3. Do not partake of any alcoholic beverages in the presence of a believer who has or has had any problem with alcohol.

4.4. Not greedy for money.

Aisxrokerdes, αἰσχροκερδεῖς. a combination of two words: wicked/ugly and gain.

His business dealings in the world must prove he is unwilling to make a dishonest buck. Since this is an *a priori* requirement for becoming a deacon, his business and personal affairs must be demonstrably honorable. Again, he has demonstrated to the church at large that he is honorable and ethical in his business dealings.

4.5. Holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

These are men who are not blown about by every wind of doctrine, but are stable in their beliefs. Through study of the word and long practice they are sure of the faith in which they stand, although they must remain teachable.

Ephesians 4:14 that we should no longer be children,
tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of
doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning
craftiness of deceitful plotting,

4.6. Tested.

This word is a middle-voice imperative. The use of the middle voice here implies that the candidate willingly accepted and sought after such testing. The word means to put to the test.

The deacon has proven through testing that he has a pure life, pure doctrine, and pure motives.

It should be evident to all that he is Spirit-filled since he consistently demonstrates the fruit of the Spirit in his life.

4.7. Beyond reproach.

Anengkletos, ἀνέγκλητος: Not blamable; no one can bring a legitimate charge against him.

4.8. Having godly wives (assuming 1 Timothy 3:11 refers to the wives of deacons and not to deaconesses in their own right).

If this verse refers to deaconesses, then the requirements would attach to them and not the husbands being considered for the diaconate.

4.8.1. Reverent wives.

Their wives exercise the same noble seriousness as was required of deacons.

4.8.2. Not slanderers.

Diaboloι.

The tongue can destroy not only the woman's reputation but, if she has a position of trust, she can damage other persons as well. She will not slander others, but will use her words to bless and honor those deserving it.

This slander is not always malicious in intent, it can be the result of careless gossip or simply saying too much out of turn.

4.8.3. Temperate.

Nephalios, νηφάλιος: Used only three times in New Testament, and each time in reference to someone expected to be spiritually mature. The metaphorical implication of this word is that she is circumspect (heedful of circumstances; prudent) in all that she does.

4.8.4. Faithful in all things.

Another way to say this is that this woman is “absolutely trustworthy.”

Anything entrusted to her care is well cared for.

Note Phoebe with the only copy of the letter of Paul to the Romans:

Romans 16:1 I commend to you Phoebe our sister,
who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea,

4.9. The husband of one wife.

As to marital fidelity (or, in the case of a single man, his attitude toward women), the deacon is above reproach and unquestionably loyal to his wife. He is “a man of one woman.”

Although traditionally, this phrase was used in regards to divorce, it really has no such emphasis. The phrase means that he is faithful, loving, loyal, and committed to his wife.

4.10. Good manager of his children and his household.

This man cares for the details of the people entrusted to his care in his home in a way that would demonstrate that he can care adequately for his stewardship in the church.

Does he encourage and serve his wife and children?

In the church, all are deacons and deaconesses in a general sense. Their one purpose is to serve their King by serving people.

5. A suggested nominating and electing procedure for deacons and deaconesses.

The deacons and deaconesses, as servant-leaders, have one purpose: to relieve the elders of the day-to-day running of the church while usurping none of the elders' responsibility to rule.

5.1. A list of official ministry duties should be established by the Elders with the advice of the Deacons and Deaconesses.

The deacons and deaconesses are obviously task oriented. There is no purpose in electing a deacon or deaconess without having a clear task in mind.

These purposes, however, should be focused on people, not things.

5.2. A list of potential candidates should be produced by the Elders.

This list should be presented to the Board of Deacons and Deaconesses for review. Any dissenters should come privately to the Board of Elders with their concerns. The character or private lives of people within the church should not be discussed outside the Board of Elders.

5.3. Each candidate should be written informing them of the desire of the Board of Elders to present them to the membership on a ballot at the next church business meeting.

This should be done by mail and probably followed up by an interview with the Board of Elders.

5.4. The ballot should be mailed to all members in good standing with a postage-paid return envelope.

There are many of our members who do not get out at night and most of our business meetings are evening meetings. This gives all of our members an opportunity to vote.

5.5. The ballot should be for approval of each candidate, and should not be a competitive vote.

6. Ministry areas of diaconate oversight.

6.1. Worship.

6.2. Facilities and grounds.

6.3. Christian Education.

6.4. Finances and business affairs.

6.5. Special events and fellowship.

6.6. Missions.

6.7. Men's ministry.

6.8. Women's ministry.

6.9. Ordinances.

6.10. Care and counsel.