



Church on Mill

Qualifications of Deacons
A Theological Position Paper

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Introduction

Church on Mill's purpose is to glorify God through lives changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. What a tremendous privilege we have to be part of God's supernatural work of redeeming and gathering a people from every tribe, tongue, and nation to be united under our Savior, Lord, and King!¹

But how is this purpose to be accomplished? In his wisdom God established a structure to support his people and lead them in faithful and fruitful mission. That structure is congregationalism, eldership, and a diaconate. Deacons honor God by serving the body, particularly in ways that relieve the elders so they can concentrate on their role. Jamie Dunlop's articulation of the role of a deacon is particularly helpful:

“Deacons are shock-absorbers: the seven men chosen by the church in Jerusalem to care for widows, who seem to be precursors to deacons, were chosen to preserve unity at a time when botched administration was creating fissures in the church (see Acts 6:1-7).

And deacons are servants: their very name means servant, and their precursors in Acts 6 were chosen to handle the practical needs of the church. That way, the apostles could devote themselves to leading the church through prayer and the ministry of the Word.”²

Men and women who would hold such an important role of shock-absorbing and serving must be people of mature Christian character. To that end the Scripture outlines specific biblical qualifications for people who would serve as deacons.

On the pages that follow, readers will ponder the qualifications of deacons, be encouraged to give attention to who is to serve as a deacon, and consider a conclusion.

Qualifications of Deacons

Elders are responsible to protect, feed, lead, care, and serve as humble examples of Christlikeness, so that the members of the church are built up in the faith and the testimony of the church is clear to a world desperately in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Deacons ensure that the elders are able to focus on their God-given tasks by wisely handling the service needs of the church, such as administrative, practical, and benevolence needs.³ Deacons help the church to be healthy, ministering in such a way that no legitimate need in the body goes unmet.

The Bible articulates that qualified and called men are to serve as elders and qualified and called women and men are to serve as deacons.⁴ This distinction in role is part of God's good design for humanity, reflecting gender as a godly gift rooted in both creation and in the Trinity.⁵ The Bible is the coherent, consistent, and redemptive Word of God and it is our delight to submit to God's will.

¹ Exodus 6:7, Ephesians 1:10, Titus 2:14, Revelation 21:3.

² Jamie Dunlop, “Deacons: Shock-Absorbers and Servants” in *9Marks Journal*, May-June 2010. Accessed 10 May 2015. Available <http://9marks.org/article/deacons-shock-absorbers-and-servants/>

³ See Acts 6 for a helpful probable example of the relationship between deacons and elders. Additionally, see Walter A. Elwell and Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Baker Reference Library; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996; Logos Library Systems.

⁴ 1 Timothy 2:8-3:13.

⁵ Genesis 1:26-27, Genesis 2:18-24, 1 Corinthians 11:7-9.

While a full treatment of complementarianism is beyond the scope of this position paper, the issue remains significant both because 1 Timothy 3 gives different qualifications for male and for female deacons, and our culture's neglect of God's teaching is having increasingly negative consequences.⁶ May the Lord grant us godly elders and deacons to demonstrate that God's good design is the best way to live!

One additional introductory comment related to deacon qualifications is necessary. It is sometimes assumed that because deacons are servants not teachers or overseers (i.e. they are not elders) their work is not spiritual work and does not demand rigorous qualifications. New Testament scholar Thomas Schreiner wisely warns us not to make that mistake, "Deacons have different responsibilities than elders, which focus on serving rather than leading, but churches must not take deacons for granted and should appoint those who are godly."⁷ The servant ministry of deacons requires substantial maturity in the faith.

Below is a brief explanation of each biblical qualification for male deacons:⁸

- 1) *Dignified* (1 Timothy 3:8) – The first several qualifications for deacons all have

⁶ The most thorough treatment in English of God's design for men and women is John Piper and Wayne Grudem eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006.

⁷ Thomas Schreiner, *Overseeing and Serving the Church in the Pastoral and General Epistles*, in Thomas Schreiner and Benjamin Merkle and Thomas Schreiner, eds., *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2014; 110.

⁸ The prerequisites of people who are qualified to serve as deacons are nearly unanimously the characteristics that are to describe all mature Christians. Thus, deacons are not super-Christians, but rather men and women of spiritual maturity. Churches should use caution to apply these prerequisites carefully but not moralistically. No Christian this side of heaven will always meet the qualifications 100% of the time; however, their character must be clearly consistent with the qualifications as they learn daily to live in light of and by the power of the biblical gospel.

to do with sincerity in life. A deacon must be someone worthy of respect. His behavior is obedient towards God and helpful towards people.

- 2) *Not double-tongued* (1 Timothy 3:8) – Duplicity of speech (*δίλογος*) from a deacon would be catastrophic for the ministry of service. Deacons often serve in settings where emotions are high and demands are substantial. He must not "say one thing to certain people but something else to others...or say one thing but mean another."⁹
- 3) *Not addicted to much wine* (1 Timothy 3:8) – Just as an elder must not abuse substances so deacons must not as well. Deacon servanthood necessitates any use of alcohol not degrade into misuse.
- 4) *Not greedy for dishonest gain* (1 Timothy 3:8) – Also like an elder, deacons are not to be greedy people. A deacon believes and demonstrates that Jesus is his priceless treasure. Rather than being materialistically motivated, a deacon is driven by a passion for the glory of God, the fruitfulness of the elders, and the good of all people.
- 5) *Hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience* (1 Timothy 3:9) – One qualification that serves to differentiate elders from deacons is the absence of a gift of teaching as a requirement for deacons. This is consistent with God's vision for how the two church offices are to work in tandem for the good of the body. An absence of the qualification of teaching does not mean a deacon's beliefs are unimportant; on the contrary, deacons are to hold to the biblical gospel and demonstrate the goodness of the faith in all areas of life.

Deacons are people of great influence. They have impact on countless lives in the trusted setting of a church family. Brothers and sisters in need of servant

⁹ Benjamin Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008; 234.

care are invariably in need of sound doctrine. Deacons must hold and continue to hold to the Christian faith with joy, humble confidence, and consistency between one's stated doctrine and one's doctrine revealed in daily life.¹⁰ While not required to have a gifting in the area of teaching, deacons are not precluded from office if they are gifted as teachers.

- 6) *Tested and shown blameless* (1 Timothy 3:10) – A man uninvolved in the life of the church is not yet an appropriate candidate for the diaconate. A person called by God to serve as a deacon will be engaged in substantial service in the body without the title of deacon. Before the office of deacon is appropriately considered, both the elders and the church should see the potential candidate as tried and true since, “Serving others tests the depth of our love, the length of our patience, the quality of our endurance, and even the permanence of our joy.”¹¹ Service, among other things, will demonstrate if a man's character is with or without blame.
- 7) *Husband of one wife* (1 Timothy 3:12) – Like elders, deacons who are married are to be faithful. A deacon is a leader in his home and his attentive care for his bride should remind church members of Christ's care for them.¹² If a prospective male deacon is unable to lead and care for his biological family there is no reason to think he would be faithful and fruitful in serving his spiritual family (the local church). It should be noted that this qualification does not require a man to be married to be a deacon. Fidelity if married, not marriage itself is the requirement. Unmarried men who

demonstrate sexual purity and a thoughtful care for their sisters in Christ often make excellent deacons.

- 8) *Manage children and household well* (1 Timothy 3:12) – Closely related to the preceding qualification, if a prospective deacon is a father the quality of his fathering will demonstrate the appropriateness or inappropriateness of his service as a deacon. Like a father serving as an elder, a deacon with children should manage his children and household in a way consistent with God the Father's gracious love, provision, care, and leadership.

Below is a brief explanation of each biblical qualification for female deacons. Before conveying the qualifications, the reader may wish to know both the Bible (see Phoebe in Romans 16:1) and church history reveal the appropriateness and necessity of churches having female deacons. Mark Dever states that there is a “long history of deaconesses in Baptist churches...”¹³ While the sense of the prior qualifications certainly apply to women, below are the four biblical qualifications emphasized for women who would be called and qualified to serve as deacons:

- 1) *Dignified* (1 Timothy 3:11) – Like male deacons, female deacons must be people worthy of respect. Their behavior will be obedient towards God and helpful towards people.
- 2) *Not slanderers* (1 Timothy 3:11) – Nothing is quite as destructive to the church as gossip, which leads to disunity and contradicts the gospel. Female deacons must be women who by grace have mastered their tongues and are continually submitting their hearts to God. They are known for giving grace in their speech not accusation and slander (διάβολος).
- 3) *Sober-minded* (1 Timothy 3:11) – Female deacons are to exhibit the same sober-

¹⁰ The tense of the Greek verb for “hold” (ἔχω) indicates it is to be an on-going, repeated act of holding to the mystery of the faith.

¹¹ Thabiti Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2012; 41-42.

¹² See Ephesians 5:25-33 for a brilliant articulation of this principle.

¹³ Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory: Basics of Church Structure*. Washington D.C.: 9Marks, 2001; 13.

mindedness elders are required to demonstrate. They are to be temperate, godly women. One theologian helpfully states this sober-mindedness as “that state of mind which is free from the excessive influence of passion, lust or emotion.”¹⁴

- 4) *Faithful in all things* (1 Timothy 3:11) – Deacons are people of proven faithfulness. They are trustworthy in all things. Their lives are marked by consistent reliance on Jesus Christ.

With reference to all the biblical qualifications for deacons, Gene Getz states, “Men and women who serve as assistants to elders/overseers in the church should be just as qualified as those they serve...these character traits should be goals for every Christian who desires to live in the will of God by reflecting the ‘fruit of the Spirit.’”¹⁵

Conclusion

Do you know of a brother or sister in Christ who by God’s grace is qualified to serve as a deacon? Ask him or her to prayerfully consider a potential calling to serve as a deacon and inform the elders of your perspective. You may be the recipient of ministry from a future deacon, in part so that he or she would consider the possibility of being recognized and appointed to the office. While elders oversee the examination process, your thoughtful contribution is invaluable.¹⁶

¹⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2000; Logos Library Systems.

¹⁵ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God’s Plan for Leading the Church*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003; 109.

¹⁶ Strauch notes helpfully the relationship between the congregation and the elders in seeking deacons. He states, “In vital matters as important as examining and appointing deacons, the overseer-elders should direct the entire process...if the shepherds do not take the initiative in these matters, little will take place in their church. The shepherds have the authority, position, and knowledge to move the church forward. They know its needs, and they know the people.

Society models life in which greatness comes through attaining a level of success that ensures people will long jealously for the same level of success and serve you to attain it. The biblical model is quite the opposite. Deacons have the joy of modeling a way of life patterned after their Savior, namely, a life of joyful service. Jesus himself said, “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.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” (Mark 10:43b-45).

Likening the role of deacon to table servers in a good restaurant, Thabiti Anyabwile writes, “The joy, peace, unity, and fruitfulness of the local church depends in part on having a cadre of faithful table servants who are present when needed, eager to serve without being intrusive...the loftiness of the office is seen in (a) the character of the individuals required to fill it, (b) the fact that it facilitates the ministry of Word and prayer, and (c) the unifying and strengthening effect it has on the whole church. The deaconate is important!”¹⁷ May God provide many men and women for this work to the glory of God and the good of the church family.

Furthermore, the shepherds are responsible to decide if additional deacons are needed and to initiate the process of selecting them.

Because the shepherds are to take the lead in examination procedures does not suggest that the congregation is left out of the evaluation process. Absolutely not! New Testament elders should never act like dictators, bureaucrats, or a ruling oligarchy. Rather, they actively lead as loving shepherds among God’s people. They must listen to, consult with, and seek the wisdom of their fellow believers. A good shepherding body also wants an educated, involved congregation, not a passive one. The appointed deacons will serve the congregation, so the people must have a voice in evaluating them.” Alexander Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon: The Church’s Minister of Mercy*. Littleton: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1992; 106-107.

¹⁷ Anyabwile, 19-21.



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