



THE QUALIFICATIONS OF A DEACON

The following study is designed to provide some initial help in understanding the qualifications for Deacons in the local church, for those who may recommend potential Deacon candidates, or who may be considering the office themselves. The key passage is I Timothy 3:8-13. The comments that follow are limited, and further insight may be found in commentaries or other general Bible study tools.

The term “deacon” (διακονος) means servant, a helper or minister (one who ministers to another), and is used in the New Testament of both male and female servants in the church. It seems at least at times to denote individuals recognized in the local church in positions or “offices” of service. In Philippians 1:1 Paul addressed the “overseers and deacons” specifically, and in I Timothy 3:8-13 qualifications for deacons are mentioned, in the same context as qualifications for overseers (I Timothy 3:2-7). Many assume that the appointment of the seven men in Acts 6, prompted by a need for administrating the task of serving tables, provides a prototype or pattern for a type of deacon position in a local church.

Below is a discussion of those qualifications listed in I Timothy 3:8-13. There is some question about the “women” (the Greek word γυναικας may also mean “wives”) in v. 11. Some interpret this to be a reference to the wives of male deacons (see The New Testament Deacon, by Alexander Strauch, pp. 112-131 for an excellent discussion). The other possibility is that the qualifications are for women who would be recognized as deacons (“deaconesses”) in the church.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR DEACONS (MALE)

1. “DIGNIFIED” (σεμνους), 1 Timothy 3:8

This word is related to the concept of reverence, and means a person is worthy of honor as a result of their life conduct. Thus they are “worthy of respect” (NIV). Included are the concepts of seriousness and honor, and so the Dictionary of New Testament Theology (II:95) concludes: “Seriousness both of doctrine and of life is expected of the leaders of the church”. The corresponding quality in Acts 6:3 is “men of good reputation”. They are “a person whose moral and spiritual

character evokes esteem from others. So, a deacon must be a man who is known and respected by the congregation” (Strauch, The NT Deacon, 95).

2. “NOT DOUBLE-TONGUED” (μη διλογουσ), 1 Timothy 3:8

To be “double-tongued” is to say something to one person, and something else to another. Strauch (p. 97) says “whatever its exact meaning, the term plainly prohibits any kind of manipulative, insincere, or deceitful speech.... Positively, the term emphasizes integrity of speech, sincerity, and truthfulness.” The NIV translation simply interprets the meaning as “sincere”, and a note in the NASB suggests “not given to double-talk”.

3. “NOT ADDICTED TO MUCH WINE” (μη οινω πολλω προσεξοντασ), 1 Timothy 3:8

The phrase is slightly different, but parallels the elder qualification of “not addicted to wine”. While not requiring total abstinence from wine (or by extension, from similar substances), the clear meaning is that there would be no usage which would cause reproach or negatively impact the individual’s testimony for Christ.

4. “NOT GREEDY FOR DISHONEST GAIN” (μη αισχροκερδεις), 1 Timothy 3:8

The combination of words for “disgraceful” or “shameful” and “gain” suggest the literal meaning of the prohibition, that the deacon be one who does not seek to profit by disgraceful or shameful means. In I Tim. 6:5 Paul speaks of those destructive individuals who “suppose that godliness is a means of gain”. The one who would serve as a leader (both deacon and elder qualifications include this prohibition) must have a clear testimony of financial integrity.

5. “HOLD THE MYSTERY OF THE FAITH WITH A CLEAR CONSCIENCE” (εξοντασ το μυστηριον της πιστεωσ εν καθαρα συνειδησει), 1 Timothy 3:9

The one who would serve as deacon must adhere to the truth of the Scriptures, the “mysteries” revealed in God’s Word. In saying he must do so with a “clear conscience”, the qualification implies a consistency between belief and his life practices; there must be integrity and no hypocrisy as he lives out the faith he professes.

6. “BLAMELESS” (ανεγκλητοι), 1 Timothy 3:10

“They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons” (I Tim. 3:10, NIV). The word for “above reproach” here is different than the general term used for elders. In the context of the testing it means specifically that, as they are tested for their qualification, there is no accusation leveled against them—they are actually “without reproach” or

blameless. The obvious assumption is that they are not accused because they are in fact living lives that are right and thus truly above reproach.

7. “THE HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE” (μιας γυναικος ανδρες), 1 Timothy 3:12

This is the same qualification given for elders. In Biblical Eldership, Strauch suggests “This means that an elder [also deacon] must be above reproach in his marital and sexual life.” Gene Getz in The Measure of a Man indicates it is “a character quality defining a man as a faithful husband to his wife.” Literally it means “one woman man”, and so Strauch further explains: “...the phrase ‘the husband of one wife’ is meant to be a positive statement that expresses faithful, monogamous marriage. In English we would say, ‘faithful and true to one woman’ or ‘a one-woman man.’ This latter phrasing closely follows the Greek wording” (Biblical Eldership, p. 192).

The DCC Elders adopted the following summary statement (in 2003) to clarify this qualification and its application to the offices of elder and deacon:

It is our intent to uphold Biblical standards for the offices of Elder and Deacon, holding to the ideal that God intended for leadership in His church. The two offices (Elders - male and Deacons - male and female) are to be filled by those believers who are blameless in their marriage relationship, namely, who are "men of one woman" (elders and deacons) and "women of one man" (women deacons) (I Timothy 3:2; 3:11; Titus 1:6). Where the candidate or his/her spouse has experienced divorce, that situation will have an impact on their qualification for leadership. Each will be considered on an individual basis as to their qualification to serve in the office of elder or deacon.

8. “MANAGING THEIR CHILDREN AND THEIR OWN HOUSEHOLDS WELL” (τεκνων καλωσ προισταμενοι και των ιδιων οικων), 1 Timothy 3:12

The word “managers” suggests leadership and care, and specifically here for children and the affairs of one’s own household. The one who would serve as a leader in the church must demonstrate leadership in his home that is above reproach, in accord with Christian teaching and principles and honoring to the Lord Jesus Christ.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR DEACONS (FEMALE) OR WIVES OF DEACONS

1. “DIGNIFIED” (σεμνας), 1 Timothy 3:11

This is the same word applied to male deacons in v. 8 (see discussion above).

2. “NOT SLANDERERS” (μη διαβολουσ), 1 Timothy 3:11

Beyond the idea of merely talking about others, the word used (the same word as for “devil”) speaks of slander, and thus a malicious intent behind or motivating the talk. Strauch writes (NT Deacon, pp. 128-129): “Malicious gossips create division, hatred, and suspicions. Malicious gossipers exhibit confused judgment and uncontrolled speech. They are controlled by unrestrained passions such as anger, jealousy, bitterness, wounded feelings, pride, or mental disorder....A malicious gossip spreads bad rumors, innuendos, criticisms, and lies about people.”

3. “SOBER-MINDED” (νηφελιουσ), 1 Timothy 3:11

This is a qualification given for elders in I Tim. 3:2. It describes a positive characteristic of mental alertness and spiritual awareness, a clarity of mind. The Dictionary of New Testament Theology states “The main point in these contexts is the self-control necessary for effective ministry” (I:515). Strauch says “the word describes a person who is stable, circumspect, self-restrained, and clearheaded” (NT Deacon, 129).

4. “FAITHFUL IN ALL THINGS” (πιστας εν πασιν), 1 Timothy 3:11

This very general statement means that in all areas of life, this woman is trustworthy, reliable, and dependable. Faithfulness “in all things” implies one is true to God and His ways in every area of life, and so this person can be relied upon to fulfill all responsibilities of all their given roles in a way that pleases and honors the Lord.