

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

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DEACONS

*are shock absorbers*



By Jamie Dunlop

# Deacons: Shock-Absorbers and Servants

**T**he position was designed to alleviate tension in the church, but the office of deacon sure seems to provoke remarkable controversy. Elders butt heads with deacons over decision-making authority. Deacons are accused of being “turfy.” Staff treat deacons as irrelevant. And so on.

**“According to the New Testament, a deacon is two things: a shock-absorber and a servant.”**

Is there a way to alleviate these unfortunate realities in your church? Yes. What's needed is a positive, theological definition of what it means to be a deacon.

## WHAT IS A DEACON?

According to the New Testament, a deacon is two things: a shock-absorber and a servant.

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.

## DEACONS AS SHOCK-ABSORBERS

God has always intended to display his glory to the nations, in part, through the unity of Jews and Gentiles within the church (Eph 3:10), and yet it was exactly at this juncture that disunity was erupting in the early Jerusalem church.

The Greek-speaking Jews began to complain “against” the Hebrew-speaking Jews concerning the distribution of food. The church therefore chose seven men to distribute food equitably, yes, but, more than that, to restore unity where there was division. Unity-building was their primary goal; good administration was the means.

This has several important implications for how we view deacons:

**Selection:** It’s notable that, when laying out qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3, Paul focuses on issues of character rather than administrative skills. Accordingly, our churches should select deacons primarily for their track record of peacemaking, and only secondarily for administrative expertise.

In my church, we have passed over individuals with specific skills that would be beneficial in a deaconship (building management, finances, computers, and so on) in favor of less skilled individuals who are better peacemakers. Then, we have encouraged the new deacon to disciple the skilled individual as part of a volunteer team.

**Control:** The idea of deacons as shock-absorbers stands in stark contrast to deacons running their own ministry fiefdoms in the church.

How can churches avoid raising up deacons who have territorial fiefdoms? Consider giving deacons limited terms of service (say, three years), after which another individual must rotate into the position. This discourages ministry monopolies and forces deacons to be continually training their replacements.

In addition, elders should teach deacons that they do not “own” areas of ministry; rather, deacons facilitate congregational ministry under the leadership of the elders.

**Communication:** Elders can also equip deacons to be shock absorbers by regularly communicating with them. They should communicate with them concerning their specific areas of ministry. They should communicate with them concerning the direction the elders are leading the church generally.

For instance, elders might consider reviewing a members meeting agenda with the deacons beforehand, or preparing the deacons on Saturday with the news of a significant Sunday morning announcement.

In both cases, communicating with the deacons ahead of time prepares them to work for unity as the elders lead the congregation through changes.

## **DEACONS AS SERVANTS**

The elders are called to “direct the affairs of the church” (1 Timothy 5:17), and deacons are called to support that direction. In our churches, then, elders should make directional decisions while deacons facilitate congregational involvement to make that vision a reality.

This yields an interesting dilemma: how do we encourage deacons to be entrepreneurial unity-builders without encroaching on the elders’ leadership of the church, and so cause disunity? Here are a few ideas:

**Deacon Meetings?:** If the goal of deacons is to support the directional decisions made by the elders, then deacons do not need to meet as a deliberative body—especially if your deacons each facilitate ministry in one specific area, such as childcare or hospitality (as they do in my church).

Certainly there is no biblical model of deacons “sharing power” with elders, as do the House and Senate in the U.S. legislature.

**Committees:** When standing diaconal committees begin to feel that they “own” specific ministry areas of the church, it becomes difficult for them to *avoid* making direction-setting decisions that should be left to the elders. After all, even things as “worldly” as the building or the budget have highly spiritual dimensions in their administration.

As such, churches should consider making any committees task-focused and time-limited, chartered to complete a task assigned by the elders.

**“Elders lead ministry, deacons facilitate ministry, the congregation does ministry. That, I believe, is the New Testament model, and that biblical clarity in deacons’ role and function is invaluable for promoting peace and unity in our congregations.”**

**Communication:** Most diaconal ministries will at least occasionally run up against direction-level decisions that need to go to the elders. At our church we have found it useful to assign each deacon to an elder who regularly communicates what the elders are deciding in their meetings. The elders can then take direction-level issues in the deacon’s work back to the larger body of elders as needed.

Elders lead ministry, deacons facilitate ministry, the congregation does ministry. That, I believe, is the New Testament model, and that biblical clarity in deacons’ role and function is invaluable for promoting peace and unity in our congregations.

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By Benjamin Merkle

# The Biblical Qualifications and Responsibilities of Deacons

**W**ho should be a deacon? What does the Bible say deacons should do?

## THE TWO BIBLICAL OFFICES: ELDERS AND DEACONS

Comparing the office of deacon to the office of elder will help us answer these questions. The primary spiritual leaders of a congregation are the elders, who are also called overseers or pastors in the New Testament. Elders teach or preach the Word and shepherd the souls of those under their care (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9; Heb. 13:17). Deacons, too, have a crucial role in the life and the health of the local church, but their role is different from the elders'. The biblical role of deacons is to take care of the physical and logistical needs of the church so that the elders can concentrate on their primary calling.

**“Like the apostles, the elders’ primary role is one of preaching the Word of God. Like the seven, deacons serve the congregation in whatever practical needs may arise.”**

This distinction is based on the pattern found in Acts 6:1–6. The apostles were devoted “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (v. 4). Since this was their primary calling, seven men were chosen to handle more practical matters in order to allow the apostles the freedom to continue with their work.

This division of labor is similar to what we see with the offices of elder and deacon. Like the apostles, the elders’ primary role is one of preaching the Word of God. Like the seven, deacons serve the congregation in whatever practical needs may arise.

## THE QUALIFICATIONS OF DEACONS

The only passage that mentions the qualifications for deacons is 1 Timothy 3:8–13. In this passage, Paul gives an official but not exhaustive list of the requirements for deacons.

The similarities of the qualifications for deacons and elders/overseers in 1 Timothy 3 are striking. Like the qualifications for elders, a deacon must not be an addict (v. 3), not greedy for dishonest gain (v. 3), blameless (v. 2; Titus 1:6), the husband of one wife (v. 2), and an able manager of his children and household well (vv. 4–5). Furthermore, the focus of the qualifications is the moral character of the person who is to fill the office: a deacon must be mature and above reproach. The main difference between an elder and a deacon is a difference of gifts and calling, not character.

Paul identifies nine qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-12:

- 1. Dignified (v. 8):** This term normally refers to something that is honorable, respectable, esteemed, or worthy, and is closely related to “respectable,” which is given as a qualification for elders (1 Tim. 3:2).
- 2. Not double-tongued (v. 8):** Those who are double-tongued say one thing to certain people but then say something else to others, or say one thing but mean another. They are two-faced and insincere. Their words cannot be trusted, so they lack credibility.
- 3. Not addicted to much wine (v. 8):** A man is disqualified for the office of deacon if he is addicted to wine or other strong drink. Such a person lacks self-control and is undisciplined.
- 4. Not greedy for dishonest gain (v. 8):** If a person is a lover of money, he is not qualified to be a deacon, especially since deacons often handle financial matters for the church.
- 5. Sound in faith and life (v. 9):** Paul also indicates that a deacon must “hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.” The phrase “the mystery of the faith” is simply one way Paul speaks of the gospel (cf. 1 Tim. 3:16). Consequently, this statement refers to the need for deacons to hold firm to the true gospel without wavering. Yet this qualification does not merely involve one’s beliefs, for he must also hold these beliefs “with a clear conscience.” That is, the behavior of a deacon must be consistent with his beliefs.
- 6. Blameless (v. 10):** Paul writes that deacons must “be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless” (v. 10). “Blameless” is a general term referring to a person’s overall character. Although Paul does not specify what type of testing is to take place, at a minimum, the candidate’s personal background, reputation, and theological positions should be examined. Moreover, the congregation should not only examine a potential deacon’s moral, spiritual, and doctrinal maturity, but should also consider the person’s track record of service in the church.
- 7. Godly wife (v. 11):** It is debated whether verse 11 refers to a deacon’s wife or to a deaconess. For the sake of this discussion, we will assume the verse is speaking about the qualifications of a deacon’s wife. According to Paul, deacons’ wives must “be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things” (v. 11). Like her husband, the wife must be dignified or respectable. Secondly, she must not be a slanderer or a person who goes around spreading gossip. A deacon’s wife must also be sober-minded or temperate. That is, she must be able to make good judgments and must not be involved in things that might hinder such judgment. Finally, she must be “faithful in all things” (cf. 1 Tim. 5:10). This is a general requirement which functions similarly to the requirement for elders to be “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) and for deacons to be “blameless” (1 Tim. 3:10).
- 8. Husband of one wife (v. 12):** The best interpretation of this difficult phrase is to understand it as referring to the faithfulness of a husband toward his wife. He must be a “one-woman man.” That is, there must be no other woman in his life to whom he relates in an intimate way either emotionally or physically.

**9. Manage children and household well (v. 12):** A deacon must be the spiritual leader of his wife and children.

In general, if a *moral* qualification is listed for elders but not for deacons, that qualification still applies to deacons. The same goes for those qualifications listed for deacons but not for elders. For example, a deacon should not be double-tongued (v. 8, ESV). Paul does not explicitly say this about elders, but no doubt it applies to elders since Paul has said that elders must be “above reproach,” which would include this prohibition.

Still, we should observe the differences in the qualifications, since they either signify a trait that is particularly fitting for the office-holder in order to accomplish his duties, or is something that was a problem in the location to which Paul writes (in this case, Ephesus). This should be more clear as we turn to considering a deacon’s responsibilities.

## THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF DEACONS

Whereas the office of elder is often ignored in the modern church, the office of deacon is often misunderstood. Based on the New Testament, the role of the deacon is mainly to be a servant. The church needs deacons to provide logistical and material support so that the elders can focus on the Word of God and prayer.

The New Testament does not provide much information concerning the role of deacons. The requirements given in 1 Timothy 3:8-12 focus on the deacon’s character and family life. There are, however, some clues as to the function of deacons when their requirements are compared with those of the elders. Although many of the qualifications are the same or very similar, there are some notable differences.

Perhaps the most noticeable distinction between elders and deacons is that deacons do not need to be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). Deacons are called to “hold” to the faith with a clear conscience, but they are not called to “teach” that faith (1 Tim. 3:9). This suggests that the deacons do not have an official teaching role in the church.

Like elders, deacons must manage their house and children well (1 Tim. 3:4, 12). But when referring to deacons, Paul omits the section where he compares managing one’s household to taking care of God’s church (1 Tim. 3:5). The reason for this omission is most likely due to the fact that deacons are not given a ruling or leading position in the church—that function belongs to the elders.

Although Paul indicates that a person must be tested before he can hold the office of deacon (1 Tim. 3:10), the requirement that he cannot be a new convert is not included. Paul notes that if an elder is a recent convert “he may become puffed up with conceit” (1 Tim. 3:6). One implication concerning this distinction could be that those who hold the office of elder are more susceptible to pride because they possess leadership over the church. On the contrary, it is not as likely for a deacon, who is in more of a servant role, to fall into this same sin. Finally, the title “overseer” (1 Tim. 3:2) implies general oversight over the spiritual well-being of the congregation, whereas the title “deacon” implies one who has a service-oriented ministry.

Beyond what we can glean from these differences in qualifications, the Bible does not clearly indicate the function of deacons. Yet based on the pattern established in Acts 6 with the apostles and the Seven, it seems best to view deacons as servants who do whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church. Just as the apostles delegated administrative responsibilities to the Seven, so the elders are to delegate certain responsibilities to the deacons so that the elders can focus their efforts elsewhere. As a result, each local church is free to define the tasks of deacons based on their particular needs.

What are some duties that deacons might be responsible for today? They could be responsible for anything that’s not related to teaching and shepherding the church. Such duties might include:

- **Facilities:** The deacons could be responsible for managing the church property. This would include making sure the place of worship is prepared for the worship service, cleaning up, or running the sound system.
- **Benevolence:** Similar to what took place in Acts 6:1–6 with the daily distribution to the widows, the deacons may be involved in administrating funds or other assistance to the needy.
- **Finances:** While the elders should probably oversee the financial business of the church (Acts 11:30), it may be best left to the deacons to handle the day-to-day matters. This would include collecting and counting the offering, keeping records, and so on.
- **Ushers:** The deacons could be responsible for distributing bulletins, seating the congregation, or preparing the elements for communion.
- **Logistics:** Deacons should be available to help in variety of ways so that the elders are able to concentrate on teaching and shepherding the church.

## CONCLUSION

Whereas the Bible charges elders with the tasks of teaching and leading the church, deacons' role is more service-oriented. That is, they are to care for the physical or temporal concerns of the church. By handling such matters, deacons free up the elders to focus on shepherding the spiritual needs of the congregation.

Yet even though deacons are not the congregation's spiritual leaders, their character is of utmost importance, which is why deacons should be examined and held to the biblical qualifications laid down in 1 Timothy 3.

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