

BIBLICAL DEACONS (2) BACKGROUND AND FUNCTION

Covenant Fellowship Church
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INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

1. We find little information about deacons in the OT; many believe deacons were similar to Levites and priests. BUT: that connection is nowhere made in Scripture.
2. Many people identify the function of deacons as focused on *benevolence* or *poverty relief*. BUT: this is not stated directly in Scripture, *especially not* in the qualifications for the deacon's office in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. Rather, we should understand the work of deacons to involve *the coordination of congregational resources and needs*. Thus, their focus *includes but is broader than poverty relief*. We might say their focus is *the needy—of any kind*.
3. In our study of Acts 6:1–7, we did not find the *term* “deacon,” but we did find the *function* later performed by deacons.

MAIN PASSAGE: 1 TIMOTHY 3:8–13

This list of qualifications for deacons resembles the list for elder qualifications. The word “likewise” in v. 8 ties back to vv. 2–7. Two distinct features are the *absence* for the deacons of the requirements of being “able to teach” and “being hospitable,” and the *added* reference to “women” in the list of deacon qualifications.

So we will not restate the qualifications that we discussed in connection with those for elders.

Elders

1. Above Reproach
2. Husband of One Wife
3. Temperate
4. Self-Controlled
5. Respectable
6. Hospitable
7. Able to Teach
8. Not Given to Drunkenness
9. Not Violent but Gentle
10. Not Quarrelsome
11. Not a Lover of Money
12. Manages His Own Family Well
13. Not a Recent Convert
14. Good Reputation with Outsiders

Deacons

1. Worthy of Respect
2. Sincere
3. Not Indulging in Much Wine
4. Not Pursuing Dishonest Gain
5. Holding the Mystery of the Faith with a Clear Conscience
6. Tested First
7. Husband of One Wife
8. Managing Children and Household Well
9. Women (or Wives) Likewise

Regarding #6 under Deacons, “tested first”: this most likely refers to a time or period of evaluating competence and ability in the practices associated with this coordinating stewardship. There must be some kind of demonstration *within the life of the congregation* of qualities and abilities.

Regarding #9 under Deacons, “women (or wives),” this requirement has been interpreted in at least two ways, which we now proceed to discuss.

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1 Tim. 3:11 (the words in italics are added in the English, without existing in the Greek text):

ESV: *Their* wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

KJV: Even so *must their* wives *be* grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things.

ASV: Women in like manner *must be* grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.

LSB: Women [textual note: Either deacons' wives or deaconesses] *must* likewise *be* dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.

Five exegetical arguments favoring the interpretation of “*women deacons*”:

1. The word “likewise” indicates a new subgroup, as in vv. 2 and 8.
2. There was no term in use until the 4th century to identify women deacons, so Paul is distinguishing female deacons from their male colleagues.
3. The wives of (male) deacons are referred to indirectly in v. 12.
4. Why would Paul have formulated requirements specifically only for the wives of deacons—and not for wives of elders?
5. One example of a woman deacon is Phoebe (Rom. 16:1–2), who was commended as a “servant [LSB note: deaconess] of the church at Cenchreae.”

Five exegetical arguments favoring the interpretation of “*wives of the deacons*”:

1. The textual unit of 1 Tim. 3:8–13 is dealing with requirements for male deacons, who are mentioned in vv. 8 and 12.
2. V. 12 also uses the Greek term *guné* with the meaning of “spouse,” and is pointing to the wives of deacons. (In v. 12, the word for “their” does not appear in the Greek.)
3. The Greek term *gunaiki* is not specific enough to refer to an ecclesiastical function. Paul could easily have referred to them—if he meant women deacons—with the feminine plural Greek noun *hai diakonoi*.
4. If women deacons were in view, the qualifications mentioned are significantly fewer than for men deacons.
5. The logical progress of the apostle’s writing is: husband, wife, family. First, the qualifications of the deacons themselves are listed, then those of their wives, and finally attention to household conditions.

Given the structural and thematic unity of the text, the interpretation of “wives of deacons” seems preferable. But from a historical point of view, it is plausible that wives of the deacons were themselves deaconally engaged, so that the work of *coordinating needs and resources* fell to qualified *husbands and wives*. This would be plausible, given the needs of women in the congregation, able to be met with the care and attention of the deacons’ wives. Though Phoebe’s husband is not mentioned, it is possible that after a deacon passed away (e.g., Phoebe’s husband), his wife may have continued exercising their deaconal care and assistance.