

Qualities of a Deacon

Matthew Wireman

Of the two offices set about in the New Testament, deacons are often misunderstood—especially in our Southern church culture. Over the last two decades, the office of elder/pastor has received many books and sermons. After all, it is the office that guards orthodox doctrine and shepherds the souls of its people. Deacons, however, have not received as much explicit teaching, as so much is absorbed from “the way we’ve always done it.”

Plainly put, deacons are servants who have been set apart by the congregation to coordinate and mobilize the church to put deeds to their words. They are distinct from elders in that they do not have to be apt to teach or have leadership gifting. Rather, they are totally content to serve without anyone noticing. They are practically-minded and service-oriented.

In our own denomination, since the 1940’s or so, deacons have been men who essentially direct all matters of the church—with the “senior pastor” fulfilling the role of elder/pastor in the New Testament. The issue with this is simply a matter of biblical fidelity.

That is, *first*, we see the church recognizing multiple elders to shepherd the church.

Second, we see a clear delineation of the character qualities of deacons. Too often deacons who are successful businessmen or have proven abilities in function have been elected rather than men of character. As a result, the infighting and division that deacon boards can often bring.

Third, there does not seem to be a precedent for boards of deacons to meet in perpetuity, nor to meet as a body at all. Rather, biblically speaking, deacons are identified based upon needs in the church (i.e., Acts 6.1-6). Therefore, as the needs of the church ebb and flow, the church must also nominate offices and remove offices that no longer serve the varying needs of the church. *Fourth*, with the wisdom of other churches, it is not wise to have a deacon serve in perpetuity. As such, our Church Manual delineates a term of three years, of which a deacon can serve consecutive terms if affirmed by the church. This safeguards territorialism and ensure that others are able to serve the church in this capacity and promotes humility.

This brief article seeks to elucidate the character qualities of a deacon so that we, as Christ the Redeemer, can survey those servants in our midst and bless them and empower them to help us be the church that God has called us to be—putting into action our five Core Values. All of these character qualities come from 1 Timothy 3.8-13.

Dignified (επειθής): This word can also be translated as revered, honorable, venerable. Here we see the pre-eminent character quality is that this person is fully integrated in what they say and what they do. This one character quality encapsulates the beauty of holiness. If you were to survey a crowd of people, you would point out this person to represent what you think the Christian life ought to look like.

Not double-tongued (μη διλόγους): Literally "two words." Think of Jesus' admonition in the Sermon on the Mount, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matt. 5.37). Another way we say it in contemporary language to "not talk out both sides of your mouth." Why would someone speak this way? Perhaps they are afraid of what others will think, so they tell people what they want to hear. This is entirely unhelpful when trying to rally people together toward a common goal. Purposes must be clear. Perhaps the person doesn't have a clear goal in mind and changes his or her mind whenever they feel like it. While humility is venerable, it does not equate with a wishy-washy attitude toward things. A deacon must be willing to challenge and exhort clearly.

Not addicted to much wine (μη οὖν πολὺ ποοῦχοντας): Two things to note in this phrase regarding alcohol. First, the adjective "much". There is a sense of excess here. Therefore, the deacon is not called to be a tea-totaller (that is, abstaining from alcohol). Rather, he or she is called to be temperate (as in all things). The second word "addicted" literally means to have before you. The image we are to have is someone who constantly has a bottle in his or her hands. Someone who is leaning on something to assuage pain or for comfort. Someone who is looking to something else for their daily bread. Of course, this relates to the first overarching quality of being dignified. If someone is addicted to much wine, they are not able to act in a dignified manner. And they are failing to follow Paul's admonition to be filled with the Spirit rather than wine (Ephesians 5.18).

Not greedy for dishonest gain (μη αἰσχροκερδείς): This is the same word translated as "greedy" earlier in the chapter (1Tim 3.3). Why would this be a requirement? Similar to the non-addictive characteristic, this quality reveals where someone's treasure is. What kind of business dealings does someone have? While ministry is not the place to go to be rich, there are countless stories of embezzlement because someone was not trusting in God for their daily bread. How do you recognize this in someone? One way is to listen to what they talk about. Is their conversation more seasoned with material things than with Christ? Are they talking about how little they have or what they would do if they had more? Is there an underlying sense of discontentment with what they have? It is imperative that deacons be able to be content in their lot in life so they aren't comparing themselves to others and so they can remain focused to the charge given to them by the church.

Hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience (ἔχοντας τὸ μυστήριον τῆς πίστεως ἐν καθαρᾷ συνειδήσει): This phrase simply means they hold to an orthodox faith. You might be surprised at how many deacons don't meet this requirement—again, because churches choose people based on competencies primarily and not character as well. Within our church, no one can join without subscribing to our Statement of Faith. This serves as one safeguard to the doctrinal fidelity. As it relates to those recognized as leaders in the church, however, these points of doctrine are scrutinized more so that the candidate can say “with a clear conscience” that he or she believes these truths unreservedly. This ensures that as the elders lead, they will have a common foundation from which to move on the outworking of that faith. That is, they don't have to worry that elementary and orthodox doctrines are questionable in someone's belief system when points of how these doctrines work themselves out. As such, both elders and deacons are able to give the benefit of the doubt to each other as they seek to faithfully mobilize God's ministers.

Be tested (δοκιμαζέσθωσαν πρώτον): While this assuredly alludes to the previous characteristic of doctrinal fidelity, it also points out the fact that deacons ought to be known. In a church our size, that is not difficult. It is imperative that these characteristics can be observed in the deacon. This could mean that there is a formal time of testing, the lion's share of this testing ought to be observable in the everyday of their lives.

Blameless (ἀνέγκλητοι): This word is a play on words. We have been seeing that deacons need to be proved, and this word literally means to “not be proved”. In other words, in a court of law, you could not bring a charge against this person. Of course, this does not mean the deacon is without sin. This confuses the matter. Instead, this simply means that the deacon's lifestyle is not marked by loose living and is marked by following God's commands.

Not slanderers (μὴ διαβόλους): Similar to the admonition to male deacons to not be double-tongued, this is a call for women deacons to not be fork-tongued.¹ If you can see in the original word, it is *diabolous*—things pertaining to the work of the devil. What did the Satan do in the Garden (as he continues to do)? He slandered God's character. He takes good things and twists them. Needless to say, a deacon's speech ought to reflect the character of God and not the devil. Imagine the opportunities a deacon has to put others down who disagree with her? As she coordinates, people are going to disagree. People are going to raise issues. It takes someone who is steady and not tipsy on wine or self-grandeur who can lovingly lead by serving. If you want to know how to quickly sterilize and divide a church, look no further than the power of the tongue.

¹For an excellent explanation of the biblical direction of recognizing both male and female deacons, see Tom Schreiner's article “Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? Yes” at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-support-female-deacons-yes/>. Accessed June 25, 2020.

Managing own household well (τεκνωσ καλως ποιοτηειναι και των ιδιω οικων): As in faithful in all things, so also with this phrase, but with a specific concept in mind. That is, does the deacon manage his or her private lives with diligence and grace. Is there love in the home? There will be love in the church. Are the finances in order in the home? There will be dollars allocated appropriately in the church. If there is contention in the home, that will always bleed into the church. God will not allow hypocrisy in private and public life. Closed doors in the home will be open in the church. After all, there are closed door conversations in the church too.

Devoted spouse (για γυναικος αβρες): In order to get to the essence of the quality being highlighted, I translated dynamically. That is, this phrase literally means "one woman man". In a culture where a man could legally have concubines or second and third wives or have relations with servant girls, it was imperative for a man to be true to only his wife. This was not that much of an issue for women because they did not have multiple men partners—seeing as they were afforded the same liberties as men in that culture. The quality, though, rings true for men and women in our day. There must be an observable commitment to one's spouse. There must be an observable love and reverence for the spouse. If a man is belittling to his other half, he will be belittling to those he has not covenanted with in marriage. If a woman is backbiting toward her husband when having coffee with a friend, she will slander and gossip about others in the church.

Faithful in all things (πιστας εν παντι): How you do one thing is how you do everything. If you are slack in small things, you will compromise and give yourself a pass on the bigger more challenging things. Lying on your taxes translates to lying on expenditures in a budget. Cussing out the employee at a restaurant translates to heavy-handedness in a ministry group. What you do in the dark when no one is watching will graciously be brought to the light in the moment of a heated argument. A deacon must be grounded in the Good News—that we are all redeemed sinners. A deacon must not divert to the right or left when things are challenging. A deacon must be content to not be thanked by others. How is this possible? By being faithfully guided by a love for the Savior and not the applause of others.

Sober-minded (νηφαλους): Paul is reiterating the same characteristics for male deacons to show with a different slant to drive his points home. Just as the male deacon is to be free from addiction and to be tested, so it is with women deacons. They are not to be swept along with every wind of doctrine or smooth argument. They cannot be wishy-washy in their commitments or unclear in their duties to serve the church. How important this is when serving! Imagine having a conversation with a deacon one day and because she is unstable in her doctrinal commitments an entirely new direction is given. The church needs steady servants at the helm.

This has been a survey of the characteristics we need to observe in a deacon. As we move forward in this exciting time as a church, it is imperative for us to nominate people with character first and competency second. Deacons are recognized servants in the church. If someone were to say they met this person, you would be excited because they represent your church—rather than having your heart sink because, well, they aren't the best representation of your church and what you value.

COVID-19 & The Church

Resources for church leaders

[View »](#)



Article
03.31.2010

The 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.

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.

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.

By Jamie Dunlop

Class V: Church Government



Article
03.01.2010

Church government. I'll bet at least half of you woke up last night thinking: "I've got to find out more about church government!"

Okay, maybe not.

Why Talk About Church Government?

Church government is not something most Christians think much about. It's like a piston in a car engine. Maybe you know it's important, but you don't give it a second thought. Yet if it wasn't there, or was broken, you'd notice pretty quickly.

There are several reasons we want to take an hour to think about church government.

- First and foremost, God wrote about it in his Word, and therefore he is glorified as we follow his instructions.
- Second, a sound biblical structure will make a church more likely to sustain its witness over many, many decades.
- Third, understanding how our church is governed will help us to be more faithful church members. The more we know about how our church works, the more deliberate we can be about promoting unity.

What exactly is church government? Put simply, it's the system by which decisions are made in a church, a description of where authority resides. How, for example, should we decide what to put in our statement of faith? Who makes that decision? The answer to that question depends on our system of government.

Obviously, that's pretty important. Church government can thus be a great tool for unity in the church—or a great detriment to it.

Over the next hour, we'll think about how a biblically-based church government promotes unity, and how we can contribute to the unity of this church. My hope is that we will gain a better understanding of how God has called us to organize our lives in the church.

I. ELDERS—THE SHEPHERDS OF THE FLOCK

The Bible describes two offices in the church—elders and deacons. We won't take the time to describe these offices fully, because most of you have been or will be introduced to them in your membership classes. If you want to know even more, Mark Dever's little book, *A Display of God's Glory*, describes these offices in depth. This morning, I want to focus particularly on how these offices foster unity in a church.

The term "elder" (or, in the Greek, *presbuteros*), is used interchangeably with "overseer" or "bishop" (*episkopos*), and "pastor" (*poimenas*).¹ In Acts 20, Paul uses all three terms when he's addressing the elders of the Ephesian church:

From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for *the elders* of the church. 18 When they arrived, he said to them: . . . "28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*. Be *shepherds* [or pastors] of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." (Acts: 20:17-28)

Peter does the same in his first letter:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be *shepherds* of God's flock that is under your care, *servng as overseers* . . . (1 Peter 5:1-2).

Elders are charged with the spiritual oversight of the church (Acts 6:1-6; 20:28). They are to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word, and they are also charged with being the principal governing body of the church (1 Timothy 5:17—"The elders who *direct the affairs of the church* well are worthy of double honor . . .").

How Elders Promote Unity in the Church

With that background in mind, let me suggest four ways that having a biblical eldership promotes and protects unity in a church:

1. First, an elder-led church puts authority in the hands of those most qualified to exercise it. It entrusts the primary preaching and teaching duties, along with significant decision-making authority, to men who meet the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1:6-9.²
2. Second, elder leadership places special responsibility for the spiritual health of the church in the hands of those who are especially accountable before God. In Hebrews 13:17, we read that elders "keep watch over you as men who must give an account." Thus the members of the church can have confidence that their elders are not unaccountable and free to act out of their own self-interest. In caring for the flock, they are accountable to God himself.
3. Third, God requires members to "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority" (Heb. 13:17). Unity in the church is fostered through submission to authority, because submission to godly authority makes us more humble and less headstrong, more deferential and less defiant. As in a home, or in our own relationship with God, humble recognition of authority brings benefits. Thus Hebrews 13:17 goes on to say, "Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you." Presumably then, obeying your elders and making their work a joy *will* be an advantage to you!

Let's pause here for a moment, because this is an enormously important point, and one that is not easily accepted. By telling a congregation to obey their elders, the Bible very intentionally introduces *authority* into the church. Many people are uncomfortable with the idea of authority *anywhere*, and perhaps especially in the church. Authority can be abused, they say. It can be misguided, misdirected, and used for evil. All true. Yet God instituted authority for our own good. Rightly used, authority helps the church to be unified. It helps us to learn how to trust other people, it keeps our pride in check, and it reminds us that we're not sufficient on our own to serve God.

Of course it is also the elders' responsibility to exercise authority properly—and as we have seen, they will be held to account for that by God himself. In 1 Peter 5:2-3, Peter tells the elders: "Be shepherds of

God's flock . . . not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock." The church does not belong to the elders. It belongs to Christ, and the elders must exercise their authority with that fact always at the front of their minds. They should be servant-hearted, marked by the same humility that marked Christ.

4. Fourth, elder leadership promotes unity because it places leadership in the hands of *several* men, instead of just one. In Acts 14:23, we read: "Paul and Barnabas appointed **elders** for them in each church . . ." The word is plural, as it is in many other places in the New Testament (See, for example, Acts 14:23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; Philippians 1:1.) How does having multiple elders foster unity in the church? Let me suggest three ways:

First, decisions made by the elders collectively, rather than by a single elder, are more likely to have the support of the entire congregation. Think of Proverbs 15:22—"Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed."

Second, a plurality of elders requires each elder to be willing to submit to his fellow elders. In order for a group of elders to operate effectively, each elder must submit himself to the others, showing patience and mutual respect for one another. This picture of unity among the elders serves as a model for the congregation.

Third, a plurality of elders helps the leadership to know the congregation better. With a plurality of elders, it's less likely that members of the congregation will feel neglected, or feel like they don't have access to the leadership.

Church Members' Responsibilities

With that understanding of how the office of elder promotes unity, how can we as church members further those ends?

First, obey your elders and submit to their leadership, just as Hebrews 13:7 commands. That doesn't mean that an elder can tell you to purchase a blue car rather than a red one. Elders' authority rests in explaining the word of God. They are to provide godly wisdom based on scriptural principals and truths, and, when they do, members should follow. In a few weeks, we'll devote an entire session to the topic of what to do when we disagree with the elders. But normally, we should follow.

Second, strategize to make the elders' work a joy and not a burden. Look for ways to encourage your elders and pray for them. Work to model the role of an intelligent church member: Concern yourself in the work and decisions of the church. Take your decision-making responsibility as a member seriously, provide relevant information that you think the elders may have missed, but at the same time gladly submit to their wisdom and decisions. In doing so you will help to create a culture of trust and unity within the church.

Third, carefully consider the qualifications of those put forward as potential elders. The elders' recommendation for a new elder should always be given great weight by the congregation, but you also should make an effort to get to know prospective elders. Talk to the nominee. Ask him questions. Hear his testimony about how the Lord is working in his life, and if you have concerns about a nominee, talk to another elder about it. Part of your responsibility as a church member is to make sure that the men who are recognized as elders are truly qualified. And not only will talking to the nominees help you to fulfill that responsibility, but it will also help you to know and trust that person if he finally becomes one of your elders.

II. DEACONS—THE SERVANTS OF THE CHURCH

The second office clearly set out in Scripture is that of deacon. In the New Testament the word *diakonos* can be translated as "deacon" or "servant." Thus deacons are the church's servants (Acts 6:1-6). They attend to the practical details of church life—administration, maintenance, the care of church members with physical needs, and preparation for the services, among other things.

The qualifications for deacons are given in 1 Timothy 3:8-12, and are similar to those of elders. There are, however, two clear differences. Unlike elders, deacons can be women as well as men. And second, unlike elders, deacons are not required to be able to teach.

How Deacons Promote Unity In the Church

In Acts 6, there is a great picture of how the service performed by deacons contributes to the church's unity. In the early days of the church, the Hellenistic (Greek) Christians began complaining against the Hebrew Christians because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So, upon the recommendation of the apostles, the church appointed seven deacons to make the food distribution more equitable (vv. 2-5). In this, we see three ways that deacons contribute to the unity of the church:

1. First, deacons care for *all* the members of the church. The neglect of the Greek widows was causing spiritual disunity within the church. One group of Christians was complaining against another group, and in a particularly dangerous way – along cultural lines. By carefully attending to all of the widows, the deacons defused the situation and preserved the church's unity.
2. Second, the deacons allowed the apostles to devote their time to the ministry of the word and prayer (Acts 6:2-4). Today, deacons play the same role in support of the ministry of the elders. Thus they are a great blessing to the church not only in the particular work that they do, but for how they free up the elders to devote their time and energy to prayer and the Word.
3. Third, deacons foster unity by distributing work through the entire congregation. When deacons recruit volunteers for particular needed ministries in the church, all the members of the church are given opportunity to participate in the joy of serving others.

Church Members' Responsibilities

What are some of the implications of this? What does this mean for us?

First, we should look for deacons who are peacemakers. If deacons are meant to foster unity, then those who serve should have a reputation for healing division within the church, not creating it. They should not be concerned about protecting their own turf, lobbying for greater visibility, or competing with the elders. Instead, deacons should be joyful servants who delight in contributing to the well-being of the whole body.

Second, we should support the deacons by volunteering to serve in their various ministries. When we do, we promote unity in the church by encouraging the deacons, serving the body, and helping to accomplish the work for the good of the church.

III. THE CONGREGATION—THE FINAL COURT OF APPEAL

Having considered the offices that Scripture describes for the church, there's another question to be answered. Who has the final say on matters in the church? The elders? The pastor? An executive committee made up of delegates from each Sunday School class together with the leaders of each ministry team?

Well, no. Throughout the New Testament, it's the congregation as a whole that seems to have final authority, particularly in three significant matters of church life—personal disputes, membership and discipline, and doctrine.

In What Matters Does the Church Have Authority?

1. Personal Disputes—In Matthew 18 (vv. 15-17), Jesus makes the congregation as a whole the final court of appeal on matters of dispute between Christians. If one member has sinned against another and refuses to listen to his fellow church members, the matter should finally be brought to the entire church for resolution.
2. Membership and Discipline—In 1 Corinthians 5, we see that it is *only* the congregation that has authority to discipline a member. Paul tells the Corinthians to expel a man from their fellowship; later he

mentions that a majority of them had indeed inflicted that punishment (2 Corinthians 2). When the man repented, Paul urged the whole church to re-admit him. What we see in this example is that the congregation has the final say in who is a member of their fellowship and who is not. In matters of membership and discipline, the congregation is the final court of appeal.

3. Doctrine—Finally, the congregation is also responsible for its own doctrine. In Galatians 1:8-9, Paul calls on the churches of Galatia to sit in judgment over any preacher (even himself!) who preaches a gospel different from the one they had accepted. Many other times in the New Testament, it is the church as a whole that is blamed for bad teaching, not the leaders. Again, in doctrinal matters it is the whole church that is given authority and that is held accountable by God.

Implications for Unity

The fact that the congregation has final authority over these significant matters has huge implications for the church's unity.

For one thing, congregational authority fosters unity by forcing the congregation to take responsibility for protecting the gospel—which is the very thing that unites us as Christians. It forces us to make sure that those we admit into our fellowship believe the same gospel we do. The result is a church that is unified at the core by a trust among those who are its members.

Also, congregational authority fosters unity by protecting the church from serious error. Again and again, history has shown that hierarchical church governments tend to spread error quickly. When the national or worldwide leadership of such a church falls into error, they can force that error on local churches, thus creating enormous disunity and strife. Of course no particular form of church polity prevents churches from error and division—congregational churches included!—but more centralized polities seem to have a (slightly) worse track record than congregational polities in maintaining a faithful, vital, evangelical witness. Moreover, consider what happens when a congregational church does fall into doctrinal error. At the very least, the error is likely to remain isolated, since that errant congregation has no authority to force their error on other churches.

Why is that important to you? Keep watch and make sure that this church is congregational in practice, not just in name only. When things are going well, it can be easy to acquiesce and cede your responsibility to other people. But the preservation of the gospel depends on the *members* of the church vigilantly safeguarding what has been entrusted to them. Take that responsibility seriously.

IV. HOLD AUTHORITY. BUT SUBMIT? WHAT GIVES?

COVID-19 & The Church

Resources for church leaders

[View »](#)

One helpful way to determine when it's appropriate to challenge a decision of the elders is to consider (i) how serious a matter is (ii) and how clear it is.

Let's say, for example, that the elders proposed an amendment to the statement of faith that would deny that Jesus Christ is divine. Now *that* is about as serious as it gets! Also, it's clear from Scripture that Jesus Christ is indeed both man and God. This is the kind of issue on which the congregation should never defer to the elders. In fact, this is where, if the elders continued to insist, the congregation ought to pull out all the stops, remove the elders from leadership, and even discipline them from the church! The church must preserve the integrity of the gospel message.

Our Responsibility

In light of all this, how can we as members foster unity by participating in the decision-making processes of the church? Let me suggest two ways:

First, take seriously your responsibility to guard against false teaching and error in the church. You are a member of this church, and therefore you are responsible for guarding the church's doctrine. If you think there is error being taught from the pulpit, you need to learn more about that, find out what the pastor or elders believe on that point, and if finally necessary bring that error before the church for resolution.

Second, take seriously your responsibility to be involved in decision-making. Attend the church's members' meetings, and vote on the various questions that come up. By voting along with the rest of the congregation on important matters, you are showing your agreement with the elders and the rest of the church. That, in itself, brings glory to God.

IV. CONCLUSION

Godly and biblical leadership is crucial to the building of a church that glorifies God. When leaders exercise proper authority in the church—and when church members submit to that authority while still taking their own responsibility seriously—the whole church working in harmony displays God's image and wisdom to the world. And that, after all, is why we are here!

¹ Although some churches since the second century A.D. have used the word "bishop" to refer to a single individual with authority over several churches, this was a later development of the term and is not found in the New Testament.

² The Bible is clear that only men are to serve as elders. In 1 Timothy 2:11-14, we read that a woman should not teach or have authority over a man. See also 1 Corinthians 14:34-36; 11:2-16. Whatever the exact authority Paul intended to speak of here as inappropriate, it clearly involves women teaching.

By Jamie Dunlop

 International Sites ▾

Copyright © 2020 9Marks [Contact](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Website Design by openbox9](#)

ARTICLE FOUR: PASTORS

1. Qualifications

- 1.1. Pastors and nominees for Pastor shall be men of demonstrable godly character, above reproach in public and private, and committed to shepherding the flock of God and to teaching and guarding sound doctrine, as expressed in the Affirmation of Our Faith. Pastors and nominees will exemplify the Biblical characteristics of the pastor/elder/overseer in I Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9 and I Peter 5:1-4 and will agree with the Affirmation of Our Faith and Baptist Faith and Message 2000.

2. Responsibilities

- 2.1. The fundamental responsibility of the Pastors is to devote themselves to prayer and the Word. The Pastors are responsible for governing the Church as godly servant leaders. They must teach the Word and tend the flock of God in this Church. The responsibilities of the Pastors shall include: examining prospective members and candidates for baptism and acquainting them with the Affirmation of Faith and Church Covenant, overseeing the process of Church discipline, examining prospective candidates for office, scheduling and providing a moderator for business meetings, providing for reporting and recording of official Church business, overseeing the work of the Deacons and appointed Church agents and committees, conducting worship services, administering the ordinances of the Gospel, equipping the membership of the Church for the work of the ministry, teaching the whole counsel of God both formally and informally, correcting error, overseeing, coordinating and promoting the ministries of the Church, and mobilizing the Church for world mission.

3. Composition

- 3.1. The Pastors' Council shall be comprised of Staff and Non-Staff Pastors. Staff Pastors are men who receive financial compensation from the Church as they fulfill God's call to the specific ministries of the Word, prayer, and shepherding the flock. In addition to the duties of their office as described in Section 'b' above, Staff Pastors shall perform the duties determined by the Pastors' Council and approved by the

congregation. The duties shall be in writing at the time of employment and substantial changes shall be approved by the Church.

- 3.2. Non-Staff Pastors are men recommended by the Pastors' Council and called by the Church who serve voluntarily without financial support from the Church as they fulfill God's call to the specific ministries of the Word, prayer, and shepherding the flock.

4. Call By the Church

- 4.1. The members shall call Staff Pastors and Non-Staff Pastors (1) by ballot upon recommendation of the Pastors' Council and (2) by at least a two-thirds majority of those members voting at the meeting with at least ten percent (10%) of the membership of the Church present. Oral notice of any such meeting, stating its object, shall be given from the pulpit on the two successive weekends preceding the meeting. Notice shall also be given by mail (electronic or otherwise) to the resident membership at least one week before the meeting. Pastors shall stand for reaffirmation not later than the third annual meeting following their call or previous reaffirmation. Reaffirmation of Pastors shall be by two-thirds vote of those members present and voting at the meeting.

5. Organization

- 5.1. The Pastors' Council shall organize itself however it determines to be best to achieve the mission of the Church. The Pastors shall be equal in authority but may be specialized in function. Meetings of the Pastors' Council may be held at any location and may be conducted by means of electronic communication through which the Pastors may simultaneously hear each other. Unless the Council provides otherwise, meetings of the Council may be held immediately upon notice. The Council shall annually select its Chairman and Vice-Chairman from among its Non-Staff Pastors. The Pastors' Council will meet at least quarterly and will consist of a quorum which is at least one-half of the Non-Staff Pastors plus at least one-half of the Staff Pastors, except for matters on which only Non-Staff Pastors are entitled to vote, in which case a majority of the Non-Staff Pastors shall constitute a quorum.

6. Pastor Candidate Interview

- 6.1.** In accordance with the Constitution, the Pastors are responsible for nominating men to the Church to serve as Pastors (Article 6.3.1.5). With God's help, the Pastors shall seek to discern if a man meets the biblical qualifications and is presently suited to serve as a Pastor. The Pastors shall use the following process when interviewing Pastor candidates:
- 6.1.1. Upon considering the Church's recommendations, the Pastors shall appoint at least two Pastors to conduct candidate interviews.
 - 6.1.2. Candidates shall complete a written questionnaire prior to an interview.
 - 6.1.3. Interviews shall be conducted with the candidates individually. If a candidate is married, his wife may be asked to participate in the interview.
 - 6.1.4. The two Pastors that conduct the interview shall submit to the Pastors in writing a summary of the interview, a copy of the candidate's questionnaire, and a recommendation regarding the candidate's nomination.
 - 6.1.5. The Pastors shall then duly consider the candidate's interview, questionnaire, and the recommendation.
 - 6.1.6. Subject to the approval of the Pastors, the candidate shall be nominated to the Church according to the Constitution's procedures (Article 6.3.2).
- 6.2.** In light of the qualifications of a Pastor found in Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; James 5:14; and 1 Peter 5:1-4, candidate questionnaires and interviews shall ask questions that seek to discern the candidate's conversion experience, doctrinal beliefs, moral lifestyle, reputation among others, church involvement, financial stewardship, and motivation for desiring the office of Pastor. When the Pastors, Staff, or Church may be subject to legal liability, answers to such questions may be shared outside of the council of Pastors.

7. Pastor Subgroups

7.1. The Senior Pastor and Chairman of the Pastors may recommend forming subgroups of the Pastors as they deem necessary. A Pastor recommended to serve as part of a subgroup shall be approved by the Pastors. Pastor subgroups shall have responsibility for making recommendations to the Pastors on particular matters and handling administrative details too unwieldy to be managed by the body of the Pastors. Such matters that may be undertaken by a Pastor subgroup may include but are not limited to missions, finances, personnel, and policy and procedure manuals. A subgroup shall exist for as long as it is needed.

ARTICLE FIVE: DEACONS AND MINISTRY LEADERS

1. Qualifications

1.1. Deacons and nominees for Deacon shall be men and women who are members in good standing and demonstrate godly character and possess particular gifts of service. Deacons will exemplify the godly characteristics set forth in I Timothy 3:8-12.

2. Responsibilities

2.1. The Deacons shall advise and be ready to assist the Pastors in any service that shall support and promote the ministry of the Word, new and existing ministries of the Church, and the care for the members of the congregation. Their responsibilities may include: administering a fund to assist the poor and needy and otherwise providing aid in times of crisis or distress; the greeting and welcoming ministries of the Church; assisting in administering the ordinances of the Gospel; assisting at fellowship gatherings of the Church; caring for and maintaining the Church properties; administering the business affairs of the Church that pertain to its material assets.

3. Composition

3.1. The Deacons may be both men and women. Deacons may or may not be employed by the Church. The number of Deacons shall be determined by the needs of the ministry, and by the call and qualification of men and women in the Church.

4. Call By the Church

4.1. The members shall call Deacons (1) by ballot upon recommendation of the Pastors' Council and (2) by at least a two-thirds majority of those members voting at the meeting with at least ten percent (10%) of the membership of the Church present. Oral notice of any such meeting, stating its object, shall be given from the pulpit on the next two successive weekends preceding the meeting. Notice shall also be given by mail (electronic or otherwise) to the resident membership at least one week before the meeting. Deacons shall stand for reaffirmation not later than the third annual meeting following their call or previous reaffirmation. Reaffirmation of Deacons shall be by two-thirds vote of those members present and voting at the meeting.

5. Organization

5.1. Under the direction of the Pastors, the Deacons shall organize themselves however they determine to be best to achieve the mission of the Church. The Pastors or the Deacons may designate any specific Deacon or group of Deacons to specialize in some particular diaconal function. Meetings of the Deacons, or subcommittees thereof, shall be held as needed to best fulfill the responsibilities of the Deacons.

6. Deacon Candidate Interviews

6.1. In accordance with the Constitution, the Pastors are responsible for nominating individuals to the Church to serve as Deacons (Article 6.3.1.5). With God's help, the Pastors shall seek to discern if the individual meets the biblical qualifications and is presently suited to serve as a Deacon. The Pastors shall use the following procedure when interviewing Deacon candidates:

6.1.1. Upon considering the Church's recommendations, the Pastors shall appoint at least two Pastors to conduct candidate interviews.

- 6.1.2. Candidates shall complete a written questionnaire prior to an interview.
- 6.1.3. Interviews shall be conducted with the candidates individually. If a candidate is married, their spouse may be asked to participate in the interview.
- 6.1.4. The two Pastors that conducted the interview shall submit to the Pastors in writing a summary of the interview, a copy of the candidate's questionnaire, and a recommendation regarding the candidate's nomination.
- 6.1.5. The Pastors shall then duly consider the candidate's interview, questionnaire, and the recommendation.
- 6.1.6. Subject to the approval of the Pastors, the candidate shall be nominated to the Church according to the Constitution's procedures (Article 6.4.5). In light of the qualifications of a Deacon found in Acts 6:1-6 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13, candidate questionnaires and interviews shall ask questions that seek to discern the candidate's conversion experience, doctrinal beliefs, moral lifestyle, reputation among others, church involvement, financial stewardship, and motivation for desiring the office of Deacon. When the Pastors, Staff, or Church may be subject to legal liability, answers to such questions may be shared outside of the council of Pastors.

7. Removal

- 7.1. By resignation. Pastors or Deacons may resign their office at any time if they find they are no longer able to discharge the duties of the office.
- 7.2. Grievance. Where a grievance exists against an Pastor or Deacon due to teaching contrary to the beliefs of the Church as set forth in Article II of its Constitution or to alleged conduct on their part unfitting an Pastor or Deacon, such grievance may be brought before the Pastors' Council by any two members in good standing. If the Council, after thorough investigation and consideration, believes the grievance to be true and substantial, then the call of the Pastor or Deacon may be terminated at any business meeting upon the recommendation of the

Pastors' Council when supported by closed ballot of a majority of those members of the Church present and voting with at least ten percent (10%) of the membership of the Church present at such meeting. Oral notice of any such meeting, stating its object, shall be given from the pulpit on the two successive weekends preceding the meeting. Notice shall also be given by mail (electronic or otherwise) to the resident membership at least one week before the meeting.

- 7.3. Lack of Reaffirmation. If a Pastor or Deacon fails to be reaffirmed to the office of Pastor or Deacon a special business meeting shall be called to consider the question of terminating the call of that Pastor or Deacon. The call shall be terminated only if supported by closed ballot of a majority of those members of the Church present and voting with at least ten percent (10%) of the membership of the Church present. Public notice of any such meeting, stating its object, shall be given on the two successive weekends preceding the meeting. Notice shall also be given by mail (electronic or otherwise) to the membership at least one week before the meeting

2. Ministry Teams

- 2.1. The Deacons and Ministry Leaders may form Ministry Teams to assist them with their ministries. A Ministry Team is a group of individuals that serves as advisors and/or assistants to a Deacon or Ministry Leader. All members of a Ministry Team shall be a member of the Church. Individuals serving on a Ministry Team shall be recommended by the ministry's Deacon or Ministry Leader and shall be approved by their Pastor liaison in consultation with the Staff Pastors.
- 2.2. The Treasurer, Assistant Treasurer, and an Associate Pastor/ Administration are by nature of office members of the Deacon of Finance's Ministry Team.

3. Creation and Elimination of Diaconate Positions

- 3.1. A Pastor may recommend to the council of Pastors at any meeting the creation of a new diaconate position or the elimination of an existing one. Recommendations for new positions shall include a job description. In accordance with the Constitution, the creation and elimination of diaconate positions shall require the approval of the Pastors and the agreement of three-fourths of the members present at any Church in Conference (Article 6.4.4).
- 3.2. A member of the Church may recommend to a Pastor the creation or elimination of diaconate position at any time.

4. Pastor and Staff Advisors

- 4.1. Each Deacon and Ministry Leader shall be assigned a Pastor and Staff advisor.
- 4.2. Pastor advisors shall be responsible for ensuring that every Deacon and Ministry Leader has an updated job description that details the diaconate position's purpose, responsibilities, and advisors. (All job descriptions shall be kept on file with an Associate Pastor/ Administration.) Pastor advisors shall also be responsible for providing pastoral oversight, guidance, and feedback for the Deacons and Ministry Leaders.
- 4.3. Staff advisors shall be responsible for providing administrative assistance to the Deacons and Ministry Leaders to whom they've been assigned.

“Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? Yes.”

Tom Schreiner

The question as to whether women should serve as deacons is unclear in the Bible, and so it makes sense that sincere interpreters of Scripture differ on the matter. Thus, we must beware of dogmatism and an uncharitable spirit when adjudicating the evidence.

The issue is addressed directly in only two verses ([Rom. 16:1](#); [1 Tim. 3:11](#)), and the meaning of both is disputed. The disagreement surfaces in English translations. [Romans 16:1](#) in the NIV reads, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *deacon* of the church in Cenchreae.” The CSB translates the same verse, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a *servant* of the church in Cenchreae.”

A similar difference shows up in [1 Timothy 3:11](#), rendered in the NIV: “In the same way, the *women* are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.” The CSB translates it as, “*Wives*, too, must be worthy of respect, not slanderers, self-controlled, faithful in everything.” The NIV in using the word “women” suggests they were deacons, while the CSB inclines to “wives” of deacons. Local churches don’t have the luxury of leaving the matter undecided. They have to decide whether women will serve as deacons, and I will argue that the best reading of the evidence supports women serving as such.

Support in 1 Timothy 3:11

First, sometimes those who dissent from women serving as deacons and who don’t know Greek point to English translations which have the term “wives” (e.g., CSB, ESV, KJV), thinking that settles the issue. The ESV and KJV actually translate as “their wives,” but the Greek lacks the word “their,” and its insertion reflects an interpretation by translators. The word used here is *gynaikas*, which could be translated as either “wives” or “women,” and thus the Greek doesn’t really help us here. However, there is actually a hint that Paul refers to deacons rather than women, for if he’d used the pronoun “their,” we’d have no doubt that wives of deacons were intended. The bare use of the word “women” suggests that women deacons rather than wives are in view.

Second, the word “too” (CSB) or “likewise” (ESV)—*hosautōs*—in [1 Timothy 3:11](#) is most naturally interpreted as continuing the list of those who serve as deacons, especially since Paul returns to male deacons in verse 12. A sudden reference to wives is of course possible, but in this chapter it seems Paul is referring to offices and conduct in church (cf. [1 Tim. 3:15](#)).

Third, another argument in support of female deacons is from silence, but it’s an important one. The argument goes like this: If the reference is to the wives of deacons, why does Paul omit a reference to the wives of elders, particularly since elders exercise pastoral oversight and overall leadership in the church? It would seem the character of the wives of elders would be even *more* important than the wives of deacons—and thus focusing on the wives of deacons, but not on the wives of elders, is strange. Yet if the reference is to female deacons, we have an elegant explanation for why the wives of elders aren’t mentioned—for the wives of deacons aren’t included either. In other words, Paul isn’t referring to wives at all, but to female deacons.

Fourth, the character qualities required for the women in [1 Timothy 3:11](#) are also mandated for elders and male deacons, which makes sense if an official capacity is intended. Just as deacons are to “be worthy of respect” ([1 Tim. 3:8](#)), so too female deacons must “be worthy of respect” ([1 Tim. 3:11](#)). Elders are to be “self-controlled” ([1 Tim. 3:2](#)), and female deacons must also be “self-controlled” ([1 Tim. 3:11](#)). Two other character qualities are required of female deacons: They are not to be “slanderers,” and they must be “faithful” ([1 Tim. 3:11](#)). Such qualifications point to official responsibility. It is imperative to recognize that Paul isn’t attempting to give a comprehensive list of character requirements for *any* of the positions listed in [1 Timothy 3](#). He sketches in quickly what is mandated, leaving it to the wisdom of readers to discern whether someone is qualified. Some object that women serving as deacons can’t be in view, since Paul refers to male deacons in 3:8–10 and then returns to that theme in 3:12–13. They think the one-verse insertion about women in 3:11 can’t, therefore, refer to female deacons. But the argument is not persuasive. On either view, Paul interrupts the discussion!

Support in Romans 16:1

We saw in translations of [Romans 16:1](#) that Phoebe was either a “deacon” or “servant” of the church in Cenchreae. With so little to go on, the decision could go either way, for the word *diakonos* in Greek may refer to a servant without having the idea of a particular office. Nevertheless, the addition of the words “the church in Cenchreae” suggests an official capacity. Verse 2 supports this understanding, since Phoebe is designated as a “patron” (ESV) or “benefactor” (CSB), which means she regularly helped, perhaps financially, those in need.

In addition, many commentators believe Phoebe actually carried the letter of Romans to the Roman church, which would fit with a diaconal position.

Early Church History

My argument from church history is not determinative, since it isn't from Scripture. Nevertheless, we see an early example of women serving as deacons in the correspondence between Pliny the younger and the emperor Trajan (AD 98–117). In a fascinating conversation, Pliny [asks Trajan for advice](#) about what he should do as the legate to the province in Bithynia with Christians.

We want to think about one small piece of the conversation. Pliny refers to two Christian women, who were called *ministrae* in Latin. In English we can translate this word as “ministers,” and that is a good translation into Latin of the Greek word *diakonos*, which means “servant” or “minister.” We thus have an early example—in the second decade of the second century—of women serving as deacons. Obviously, such an example doesn't prove women should serve as deacons, but it suggests women functioned as deacons in the early church.

Crucial Clarifications

Some worry that appointing women as deacons violates [1 Timothy 2:12](#), where women are prohibited from teaching or exercising authority over men. We must recognize, however, that deacons occupy a different position from elders/pastors/overseers. The latter is *one* office, as Ben Merkle [has convincingly argued](#), in which *two* qualities are required that are not required of deacons. First, elders must have an ability to teach biblical truth and correct deviant teaching ([1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9](#)). Second, they must have gifts of leadership ([1 Tim. 3:4–5; 5:17; Titus 1:7](#)). And remarkably, teaching and exercising authority over men is the very thing disallowed for women in [1 Timothy 2:12](#). Women therefore may serve as deacons because the diaconal office is one of serving, not leading. Deacons don't teach and exercise authority, but rather help in the church's ministry.

In many Baptist churches, deacons along with the staff pastor or pastors lead the church, but in these instances the deacons are really functioning as elders—and in such cases the deacons should be *called* elders, pastors, or overseers.

The earliest evidence we have is that deacons helped care for the poor and sick. There is some freedom in how deacons serve, since the New Testament doesn't prescribe precise responsibilities. In the church I serve as an elder, deacons carry out many responsibilities. We have role-specific diaconates—that is, deacons of finance, of hospitality, of ushering, of greeting, of building maintenance, of sound, and so on. The deacons don't meet together regularly as a group, since their tasks differ dramatically.

Christians who love God's Word differ on whether women may serve as deacons, but the evidence presented here suggests they may do so. And in such a ministry they are a great blessing to the church, and the women who serve are encouraged as they use their gifts.

Thomas Schreiner is the James Buchanan Harrison professor of New Testament interpretation and associate dean for Scripture and interpretation at [The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary](#) in Louisville, Kentucky. You can [follow him on Twitter](#).

Article accessed on June 25, 2020 at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-support-female-deacons-yes/>