

1-2 Timothy – 1 Timothy 3:8-13

Review

Last time, we considered Paul's controversial instructions to Timothy regarding the appointment of leaders (overseers/elders) in the church. Two important questions arose from this study:

1. Should churches consider the qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 mandatory in selecting church leaders?
2. How should churches proceed if no men with these qualifications are available for appointment as elders?

Although these are important questions, answers to them are elusive for churches earnestly desiring to conform to the will of God.

1 Timothy 3:8

Let's continue now in our study of the text of 1 Timothy.

⁸Deacons [διάκονος diakonos] ***likewise*** [ὡσαύτως hōsautōs] ***must be dignified, not double-tongued,*** [δύλογος dilogos] ***not addicted*** [προσέχω prosechō] ***to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.*** ***⁹They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.*** ***¹⁰And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.*** ***¹¹Their wives*** [γυνή gynē] ***likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.*** ***¹²Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.*** ***¹³For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*** 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (ESV)

Here again in 1 Timothy 3:8, we find that pesky word “likewise.” In this case it refers back to Paul's preceding instructions regarding the appointment of overseers (elders) in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 that we looked at in detail during our [previous study](#). Many of the same issues raised when we examined Paul's lists of qualifications for the office of overseer (elder) also pertain to this listing of qualifications for the office of deacon. There is also the added problem arising from Paul's use of the word **διάκονος diakonos** – not so much from the Greek word itself as from the connotations attached today to the English word “deacon” in common usage. So, let's tackle that issue first.

In some modern Christian congregations, the title “Deacon” is applied to the leaders of the fellowship. In some congregations, these so-called “deacons” are subordinate to the pastor. In others, the pastor is answerable to the board of “deacons.” Of course, the title we apply to a given role in the church doesn't really matter as long as everyone understands exactly what particular elements of leadership and service are associated with the title. The problem is that the title “deacon” has been misapplied to cause confusion when it comes to comparing the title to the relevant Biblical texts. As we pointed out in our previous study in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, the title “pastor” which is used almost universally throughout Christendom doesn't appear in the New Testament at all, and its use in the Old Testament is limited to the realm of animal husbandry. Thus, the titles we use for officers in our churches have the potential to muddy the waters of our Biblical understanding. In my opinion even the Baptist Faith and Message upon which Mt. Freedom Baptist Church bases our [Statement of Basic Belief](#) and our bylaws gets this wrong...

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A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.

<https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>

So, let's take a closer look at exactly what the Word of God has to say about deacons.

The Greek word **διάκονος diakonos** appears 31 times in the New Testament. In the KJV it is translated 20 times as “minister,” 8 times as “servant,” and 3 times as “deacon.” It means:

one who executes the commands of another, esp. of a master, a servant, attendant, minister

the servant of a king

a deacon, one who, by virtue of the office assigned to him by the church, cares for the poor and has charge of and distributes the money collected for their use

a waiter, one who serves food and drink

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1249/esv/mgnt/0-1/>

Notice that none of the aspects of the definition of the word implies any sort of leadership role. On the contrary, a deacon is a servant – pure and simple.

BTW – The words “minister” and “ministry” have also acquired unwarranted connotations in modern common usage. But ministers – like deacons – are also servants. As “ministers of the Gospel,” Christians are truly “servants” of the LORD Jesus Christ. This applies to the chosen apostles of Jesus just as much as it does to us “rank and file” ministers. In fact, Paul uses the word **διάκονος diakonos** to refer to himself...

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants [διάκονος diakonos] through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. 1 Corinthians 3:5 (ESV)

It is also significant that the first Biblical appearance of **διάκονος diakonos** is found in one of Jesus' teachings about humility after John and James put their mother up to asking Jesus to allow them to sit at His right and left hand in the coming kingdom...

²⁵But Jesus called them [His disciples] to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, [διάκονος diakonos] ²⁷and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Matthew 20:25-28 (ESV)

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Interestingly, the noun **διάκονος diakonos** is *not* used in the book of Acts where we read the story of the appointment of the very first deacons in the Church. However, the verb **διακονέω diakoneō** is...

¹Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ²And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve [διακονέω diakoneō] tables. ³Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. Acts 6:1-6 (ESV)

διακονέω diakoneō means to be a servant, to serve, to minister, to wait upon guests at table, to supply food and necessities, to provide for, in Christian churches – to serve as deacons. Thus, these seven men were the first deacons appointed by any church fellowship – in this case, the nascent church in Jerusalem.

Of course, one of these first chosen deacons – Stephen – also became the first Christian we know of to be killed by the Jewish leadership for his profession of faith. This raises an interesting point. Serving as a deacon does not preclude a person from preaching the Gospel. Jesus’ “Great Commission” of Matthew 28:18-20 assigns the task of evangelism to all His disciples, not just certain ones of us. Stephen was doing just that, and performing signs and wonders among the non-believers even as he was also serving as a deacon within the church. In fact, it was his preaching that led some of those listening to him to seize him and bring him before the council of Jewish elders who condemned him to death.

Now that we have a good idea of the responsibilities of service as a deacon in the church, let’s examine in detail the qualifications required for deacon candidates.

⁸Deacons [διάκονος diakonos] **likewise** [ὡσαύτως hōsautōs] **must be dignified, not double-tongued,** [δίλογος dilogos] **not addicted** [προσέχω prosechō] **to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.** 1 Timothy 3:8 (ESV)

The first qualification in the ESV is that deacons **must be dignified**. Other translations render this Greek word – **σεμνός semnos** – as “reverent,” “well-respected,” “serious,” and even “grave.” This is very similar to the requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2 that candidates for the office of overseer must be “**sober-minded**.”

I absolutely love the Greek word **δίλογος dilogos** that the ESV translates literally as double-tongued. Other translations say that deacons must have integrity, be sincere, not two-faced, and not hypocritical. Of course, this is a desirable – even necessary – characteristic of anyone who professes to

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be a follower of our LORD Jesus. Sadly though, for many of us the walk doesn't match the talk; we often are indeed *δίλογος dilogos*.

Next, we see that deacons must not be *addicted* [προσέχω prosechō] *to much wine*. It is funny that the Greek word here sounds the same as the name for an Italian sparkling wine. *προσέχω prosechō* literally means to hold closely, or more appropriately to be held closely by something. Many use this verse and other similar verses as proof texts for the proposition that Christians – particularly deacons in this case – must refrain entirely from drinking wine. But that is a hard stretch of the Greek text. This scripture says nothing about beer, distilled liquor, tobacco, or other drugs, so one might easily make the case that therefore excessive ingestion of *them* is acceptable. Of course, taking such a position is a heinous misuse of God's Word. The question then becomes exactly how we should apply this scripture to the selection of deacons and to life within the church generally. Paul stated the issue quite well in his first letter to the Corinthians...

“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. 1 Corinthians 6:12 (ESV)

The excessive drinking of wine is just a singular example of the multiple ways a person can become enslaved to the trappings of this world. A person who is selected as a deacon must have nothing whatsoever in their personal lives that dominates or controls them except the lordship of Jesus Christ – not even “good” things like devotion to family, country, good works, occupation or avocation! For that matter, neither should *anyone* who desires to follow Christ.

Finally, Paul says that deacons must not be *greedy for dishonest gain*. Does this even need to be said? Should *anyone* ever be greedy for dishonest gain? I'm thinking not! I love the way the KJV renders this phrase – *not greedy of filthy lucre*. It's a classic.

9They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 1 Timothy 3:9 (ESV)

To put the idea a little more simply, I think what Paul is saying here is that deacons in the church must be true believers in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and professors of His lordship over them. Here again, this seems like a no-brainer, doesn't it? But what does Paul mean when he says they must hold to the faith *with a clear conscience*? I think what he means, that deacons must be settled in their own souls with the hopeful assurance of salvation in Christ.

I must be perfectly honest here and admit that I have been subject to occasional instances of doubting my salvation from time to time. This is a symptom of the spiritual warfare that all honest Christians face daily. It is one example of the “*fiery darts*” of the evil one which Paul warned about in Ephesians 6:16. Our defense against them is the “*shield of faith*.”

I am reminded of and encouraged by the story of the demoniac's father in Mark 9:14-24. After describing the torment of his child, the father pleaded with Jesus, “*But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*” Jesus' response was slightly perturbed – “*If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.*” I find a powerful encouragement in the father's immediate and brutally honest response since I see so much of my own character in it...

“I believe; help my unbelief!”

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The sincerity of our faith isn't proven by an utter lack of any semblance of doubt forevermore, but rather in how we recognize our doubts and fears as the symptoms of attack by our enemy, and then prayerfully seek the aid of God's Spirit within us to work our way through them.

¹⁰And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. 1 Timothy 3:10 (ESV)

This instruction goes hand-in-hand with the one in 1 Timothy 3:6 that those selected as overseers (elders) must not be new converts, and Paul's later admonition in 1 Timothy 5:22 that Timothy not be hasty in laying his hands on someone. We are called to test the spirits...

¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. 1 John 4:1-3 (ESV)

Certainly, we are well-aware that no one can ever truly know the heart of another. Yet Jesus teaches that we can know them by their fruits, and by their words which are spoken out of the fulness of the heart. All of this takes time and diligent observation. Therefore, Paul advises that deacon candidates should first be tested before they are chosen to serve as deacons.

¹¹Their wives [γυνή gynē] likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. 1 Timothy 3:11 (ESV)

CAVEAT – Those (if any) who are familiar with my writings know that I like to sometimes accuse others of “ignorance speaking with the voice of authority.” Yet during this study, I have found myself several times already proclaiming confidently that some English translations have “gotten it wrong,” knowing full well that my knowledge of Greek is sketchy at best. Here with 1 Timothy 3:11 I am about to do that again. Let the reader beware and do your own research. My mind hearkens back to the words of that great theologian and philosopher Bob Dylan...

***In a soldier's stance, I aimed my hand
At the mongrel dogs who teach
Fearing not that I'd become my enemy
In the instant that I preach***

Bob Dylan – My Back Pages - <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/my-back-pages/>
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With that said, I humbly suggest that the ESV got this verse wrong. In the Greek text of this verse, there is no possessive article for the Greek **γυνή gynē** – women. I think this is an inherited flaw from the KJV which also translated the word as “Their wives.” I believe that Paul is referring to women in the church in general here, not just to the wives of prospective deacons. It is only the juxtaposition of this verse with the rest of the passage covering the appointment of deacons that might have led the

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translators of the KJV and others to add “Their” to the rendering of this verse. Several English translations seem to agree with me including the NIV, CSB, NASB, and ASB.

But what exactly is the verse trying to tell us? There’s nothing very controversial here. The desirable characteristics of Christian women that Paul lists here are indeed applicable to all Christians and really to all people in general.

12 Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 1 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)

Concerning deacons, Paul repeats here the instructions concerning overseers found in 1 Timothy 3:2-4, and little will be gained by repeating the analysis of those instructions from our [previous study](#). It would seem that this verse implies that deacons should be men. But this seems to conflict with Paul’s commendation of Phoebe.

1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [δῆκονος diakonos] of the church at Cenchreae, 2 that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well. Romans 16:1 (ESV)

So, should the church nominate women as deacons? In the absence of clear direction otherwise, I would say we should err on the side of liberality and allow both men and women to serve where they are called (assuming they meet the other characteristics found in His Word), assuming that God’s calling is perfectly trustworthy and righteous.

13 For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. 1 Timothy 3:13 (ESV)

Deacons are the “customer facing” officers of the local church. Oftentimes unbelievers in need have their initial experience of the character of the fellowship through an encounter with one of the deacons. This brings a great responsibility upon those who serve as deacons to represent their congregations and our LORD well through loving service to those who are unacquainted with us or with Him. Thus, along with the heavy responsibility in such service comes a great opportunity for evangelism. A deacon who serves our Lord and the local community well has a wonderful hope of one day hearing Jesus say, “***Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.***”

Summary – 1 Timothy 2:8-3:13

Our last few studies have been difficult. There are several aspects of these pastoral instructions from Paul to Timothy that are controversial, disquieting, and even confusing. We find some clear instructions from Paul to Timothy, but we immediately wonder whether those instructions are applicable to the church today as well, and if so to what degree. Furthermore, despite some straightforward instructions, we find some Biblical counterexamples (e.g. Deborah the judge of Israel and Phoebe the deaconess). So that leaves us in a quandary as to what rules we should establish for

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the orderly management of our local congregations. The bad news is that if there were any clear-cut Biblical answers to these questions we wouldn't have the ongoing struggles throughout Christendom about them. But the good news is that we have a loving God who knows our struggles and stands ready to uphold us if we humble ourselves and cast these burdens before Him.

In order to come to grips with the meaning and application of these passages, we would be well served to keep in mind Paul's reasons for writing his epistles – particularly the pastoral epistles. Paul's primary concern throughout his ministry was false teaching causing confusion and misdirection in the newborn churches around the Mediterranean basin. Of course, such false doctrines have only gotten more extreme and dangerous since Paul's day. Secondly, Paul was deeply concerned about contentions in the Church. Third, Paul desired that order be maintained in church worship so that unbelievers might not be put off by unruly behaviors. If we closely examine Paul's instructions to Timothy, we will clearly see these three primary motivations led Paul to write them, and that in turn will help us to better understand them.

There is a real risk here that if we put too much energy into analysis of these passage and rigidly enforce the conclusions we draw in their interpretation, we will become legalistic in our thinking and conduct, thus missing out on the opportunity to share God's mercy and grace with each other and with our communities. We can get so bogged down in making, following, and enforcing rules that we neglect Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. In the extreme case, we risk turning people away from hearing the saving message of the Gospel due to our intransigence. Therefore, Jesus warned the Pharisees...

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” Matthew 23:23 (ESV)

Let us therefore resolve to guard our hearts and minds against our own pharisaical tendencies and commit to loving one another deeply and truly as our first priority. Let us not lose sight of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus in our zeal to conform to the minutiae of His Law.

Looking Ahead

Next time, God willing, we will continue our study of Paul's instructions to Timothy regarding his leadership of the church at Ephesus, seeking out their application to our own local fellowships.