

# Qualifications for Church Leadership

1 TIMOTHY 3:1-13 (12)

## 1 TIMOTHY: DUTIES AND ORDER IN THE CHURCH, [1 Timothy 2:1-3:13](#) The Deacons of the Church, [1 Timothy 3:8-13](#)

[\(1 Timothy 3:8-13\)](#) **Introduction:** this passage discusses the second officer of the church, the deacon. The office of deacon is so important that the qualifications required are just as high as those demanded of a minister or bishop. In this day and time, when worldliness, immorality, and lawlessness are running so rampant, the qualifications for deacons need to be studied, heeded, and guarded ever so diligently.

### Facing the Issues

When writing to Timothy and the problem-ridden congregation at Ephesus around the year A.D. 63, Paul found it necessary to give instructions about deacons. In [1 Timothy 3:8-13](#), he insists that deacons, like shepherds, be properly qualified and publicly examined before they serve. Since he did not want their position to be minimized by others or by themselves, Paul promises that deacons who serve well will acquire an honorable and influential standing in the local church. They will also see their faith in Christ greatly increased. He writes, **“For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus”** ([1 Timothy 3:13](#)).

But who are these deacons who gain **“a high standing and great confidence in the faith”**? What do they do? Why are they important to the life of the local church?

Intense interest surrounds these questions today. During the last three decades, a major revival of interest in deacons has taken place. In nearly every denomination and branch of Christianity, efforts are underway to discover God’s design for deacons.<sup>1</sup> One study on the diaconate concluded, “The church across the world is in ferment with new thinking about the diaconate as an office of ministry.”<sup>2</sup> **(The word *diaconate* denotes the office of deacon.)**

We must be grateful for all that is good in these efforts and be glad to learn from them. But a serious, fundamental problem regarding the diaconate still exists: far too little in-depth consideration is being given to the biblical texts and the biblical parameters set for deacons. This problem is symptomatic of a much bigger problem among Christians today, which is a shameful lack of trust in God-breathed, Holy Scripture. But, as we shall see, the Scripture is perfectly sufficient to answer our questions about deacons. Indeed, the only diaconate worth discovering is the one found on the pages of the inspired New Testament. No matter how limited that information may at first appear, God, in His perfect wisdom, has given us all the information we need.

If we don’t adequately consider the texts of Holy Scripture or limit ourselves to biblical teaching on deacons, we invariably corrupt God’s design and invent a diaconate of our own imagination. Consider the following three common distortions of the New Testament diaconate.

## Ruling Executives

Many Bible-believing churches have made the diaconate the ruling board of the church. **Richard L. Dresselhaus**, writing from an Assembly of God perspective, calls the diaconate “**the official board**” of the church.<sup>3</sup> He also states,

“One of the most awesome responsibilities of the deacon board is to provide continued pastoral ministry in the church. When a pastor resigns, it becomes their responsibility to present to the congregation a nominee or nominees to fill the office of pastor.”<sup>4</sup>

In many churches, deacons act more like corporation executives than ministering servants. In direct contradiction to the explicit teaching of the New Testament and the very meaning of the name *deacon*, which is “**servant**” (*diakonos*), deacons have been made the governing officials of the church.

Even more troublesome is the fact that deacons are often placed into a competitive role with the shepherds of the local church. This practice is a proven formula for prolonged church warfare. (For the sake of communicating to readers from various denominational backgrounds, I use the terms *shepherds*, *pastors*, *elders*, and *overseers* interchangeably to describe the same pastoral body.)

## Building and Property Managers

While some churches wrongly elevate deacons to the position of executive board members, others mistakenly reduce deacons to building managers, glorified church janitors, or sanctified grounds- keepers. This view (and a similar view that turns deacons into church financial officers) seriously demeans the office of deacon and denies the local church the necessary ministry God designed the diaconate to provide for His people.

In response to this position, we must ask ourselves why God would demand that deacons meet specific moral and spiritual qualifications and undergo public examination, like the pastors of the church (**1 Timothy 3:10**), if all deacons do is wax floors or mow lawns. Anyone in the church, or even people outside the church, can do these types of jobs.

## The Church Factotums

Southern Baptist scholar **Charles W. Deweese** makes the deacon the church factotum, that is, an official who operates in nearly every area of church life:

The potential areas of deacon service are unlimited. Deacons can engage in such diverse ministries as teaching, preaching, visiting, becoming involved in social action, counseling, leading in charitable giving, organizing, administrating, carrying out the Lord’s Supper, and meeting basic needs of the pastor.<sup>5</sup>

Such unlimited spheres of service completely blur the distinctive purpose and duties of the New Testament diaconate and can only frustrate deacons.

In their zeal for deacon renewal, many churches have gone too far, beyond the bounds of Scripture. They have placed too much authority and diverse responsibilities into the hands of deacons. In fact, some of the same mistakes that churches made in the middle of the second century are being made again: deacons are placed in various positions of authority that God has not authorized.<sup>6</sup> Hopefully this teaching will help correct the many exaggerated claims being made today about the role of deacons.

## Ministers of Mercy

My heartfelt burden is to help deacons get out of the boardroom or the building-maintenance mentality and into the people-serving mentality. Deacons, as the New Testament teaches and as some of the sixteenth-century reformers discovered,<sup>7</sup> are to be involved in a compassionate ministry of caring for the poor and needy. *The deacons' ministry, therefore, is one that no Christ-centered, New Testament church can ever afford to neglect.*

*Christians today must understand the absolute necessity for and vital importance of New Testament deacons to the local church so that the needy, poor, and suffering of our churches are cared for in a thoroughly Christian manner. This is a matter dear to the heart of God.*

Stressing the significance of our responsibility to the poor, the brilliant, eighteenth-century, **American pastor-theologian, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)** wrote: “I know of scarce any duty which is so much insisted on, so pressed and urged upon us, both in the Old Testament and New, as this duty of charity to the poor.”<sup>8</sup>

So often, however, churches neglect poor and needy people. Churches spend hundreds of thousands of dollars—even millions—on buildings, draperies, pews, and stained glass windows, but can barely squeeze a thousand dollars out of their budgets to help their own needy people.

God has given deacons a wonderful ministry of service, mercy, and love to needy people. Indeed, deacons are to emulate our Lord's example of humble, loving service to needy people. Our Lord highly esteems the deacons' work, for it is essential to the life and witness of God's church. Thus we urgently need to rediscover and put into practice a New Testament diaconate. Toward this effort I will seek to explain who the New Testament deacons are and what they do. I will do this through a careful, thorough exposition of all the biblical passages that relate to deacons.

**1.** For over a thousand years the Roman Catholic Church relegated the position of deacon to an apprenticeship to the priesthood. The diaconate was an ordained position in the clerical hierarchy, but it was only a transitional step to the higher order of priesthood. Its significance was largely ceremonial.

*(Lumen Gentium 29, trans. by Mgr. Joseph Gallagher in Walter M. Abbott, ed., The Documents of Vatican II [New York: Guild Press, 1966], p. 55).*

The Anglican Communion has also historically relegated the diaconate to an apprenticeship to the priesthood, “an apprenticeship,” as one theologian says, “to be discharged as quickly as possible” (Edmond LaB. d’Etre, “The Order of Deacons in Anglicanism: A Deacon’s ‘Raison d’Etre,’” in *The Diaconate Now*, ed. Richard T. Nolan [Washington: Corpus Books, 1968], p. 116).

Interest for renewal or recovery of the diaconate among Presbyterians, Baptists, Assemblies of God, the Reformed, and Methodists is witnessed by the following books: Joan S. Gray and Joyce C. Tucker, *Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1986), pp. 44–55. Charles W. Deweese, *The Emerging Role of Deacons* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979); Richard L. Dresselhaus, *The Deacon and His Ministry* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1977); Elsie Anne McKee, *DIAKONIA in the Classical Reformed Tradition and Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans

Publishing Company, 1989); Rosemary Skinner Keller, Gerald F. Moede, and Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Called to Serve: The United Methodist Diaconate*.

2. Rosemary Skinner Keller, Gerald F. Moede, and Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Called to Serve: The United Methodist Diaconate* (Nashville: UMC General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1987), p. 2.

3. Richard L. Dresselhaus, *The Deacon and His Ministry* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1977), p. 10.

4. Ibid, pp. 43,44.

5. Charles W. Deweese, *The Emerging Role of Deacons* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), p. 62.

6. (Geoffrey J. Cuming, *Hippolytus: A Text for Students* [Bramcote Notts: Grove Books, 1976], p. 13).

7. See John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. F.L. Battles, ed. J.T. McNeill [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960], 2:1061,1062,1097,1098.

8. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (1834; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 2:164.