

The Office of Deacon

1. Biblical Basis

There are numerous passages in the NT that use the Greek term diakonos and its cognates (Rom. 16:1, Eph. 6:21, Col. 1:7, Col. 4:7, Phil. 1:1, Acts 6:1-6). The word “deacon” (diakonos) simply means “servant” or “minister.” In one sense, all God’s people are called as “ministers” or “deacons.” However, there seems to be an official role for some to share that is designated with the title of “deacon.” Although many passages give us a sense that a deacon is a mature servant of the local church, the clearest passage on the qualifications and call of deacons is 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. 9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 and let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. 11 Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. 12 Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 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.”
(ESV)

2. Characteristics of a Deacon

The qualifications for a deacon parallel those for a pastor in almost every way. However, he does not need to have the ability to teach, nor is the qualification to deal gently and hospitably with others mentioned. This likely reflects that the deacon is not expected to have the same intensity of interaction with people required of a pastor. However, this office is not merely one that deals with the physical needs of the church; most of these requirements relate to character and maturity, important characteristics for a man given a spiritual charge.

Although a Biblical case can be made for female deacons, we intend to only ordain men. We wholeheartedly affirm the vital importance of the ministry of women in our church and are committed to equipping women to serve the church in diaconate-type roles. However, great care must be exercised to ensure a woman serves without exercising authority or teaching responsibility over the men of the church. God’s established order must be reflected in the church (1

Timothy 2:11-15). We aim to exercise restraint without restraining women to fulfill their calling to serve.

Deacons must hold to the gospel with integrity, they must be proven, and they must be examples in home life. While all believers are called as “deacons” in the general sense, official deacons must set a pace for maturity in Christ.

“Dignified” (1 Tim. 3:8)

“Dignified” connotes a sobriety of purpose and earnestness of conduct worthy of respect and winsome to others that brings honor to Christ and the office of deacon.

“Not double-tongued” (1 Tim. 3:8)

The deacon is to speak in a sincere and holy manner. He is not to engage in gossip, slander, or deceit.

“Not addicted to much wine” (1 Tim. 3:8)

The self-mastery of previous characteristics makes it clear that a deacon should not be mastered by wine, drugs, or any other substance, but Paul makes it explicit here. We might add other potentially 'addictive' types of activities such as gambling, pornography, computer gaming, or any activity that has overflowed its boundaries in the man's life.

“Not greedy for dishonest gain” (1 Tim. 3:8)

There are different ways to be disqualified because a man is a "lover of money." It can mean a general greed that motivates someone to exploit the church for his own financial gain (Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2), or worse, to steal from it (Eph. 4:28). It can also mean a "covetousness" in the man's life that is really a form of "idolatry" (Col. 3:5), or it could simply be a continual discontentment with what God has provided for him (Phil. 4:10-13; Heb. 13:5). All of these are temptations for everyone, but when they are characteristic of a man, he should not serve as a deacon.

“Must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Tim. 3:9)

Deacons are to hold to the Christian faith with fidelity of doctrine and life in such a way that they can operate with a clear conscience, not condemned for heresy or immoral conduct.

“Tested first...prove themselves blameless” (1 Tim. 3:10)

Deacons are to be tested before they are selected for service in the office of deacon. They must be tested for character, doctrine, and conduct in a probationary period. If they qualify according to the biblical standards in a blameless way, then they can serve.

“Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.” (1 Tim. 3:11)

The support and example of the deacon's spouse is critical to fulfilling the office of deacon. The spouse must be as committed and serious as the deacon. Their qualifications of conduct and character mirroring the deacon.

In addition, another acceptable translation of this verse would include “women” rather than “their wives.” If one reads this as “women”, then this verse becomes strong evidence for female deacons.

“Husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:12)

The requirement here does not speak to whether a man has been divorced or remarried, but, if he is married, speaks to a general faithfulness and sexual purity in his current marriage. The point is to examine his character, and a man's marriage reveals his character.

“Managing their children and their own households well” (1 Tim. 3:12)

The key word used in Timothy is "manage," a term that means "to exercise a position of leadership, rule, direct, be at the head of." A man who manages his household well is obedient to the commandments related to his role as a father and husband: He is a husband who loves his wife as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25-33), is living with her in an understanding way (1 Pet. 3:7), and he is a father who is bringing his children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord

(Eph. 6:4). In other words, there is a pattern of loving discipleship and gracious leadership in his management of the home.

3. The Role of a Deacon

Deacons are called to facilitate the ministry of the church. They exercise delegated authority and responsibility, as designated by the pastors. This ensures there are no un-served people and no unmet needs in the church. This also ensures the pastors are able to govern the church and devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:2-4).

The character requirements in 1 Timothy 3 indicate the spiritual maturity the role demands and underline its significance for the life of the church (cf. Phil. 1:1). Deacons are not required to be able to teach, nor are they given the responsibility of church governance; those roles fall to the pastors. However, deacons can greatly bolster and support the role of the pastors and the health of the congregation. They can do this by assuming responsibility for the leadership and care of the congregation in many areas in order to free pastors to better lead in the ministry of the Word and prayer. Additionally, their involvement can help provide additional communication pathways with the congregation vital to a healthy, thriving church. This role may serve similarly to that of a ruling pastor in some polities, albeit minus an official governing responsibility.

The Ordination of Deacons

1. The Process of Ordination

Appointing a man to the office of deacon involves a collaborative effort between the candidate, the pastors, and the members of the church. The purpose of a process for ordination is simply to appoint men to this office who resemble the NT criteria for the office (especially 1 Tim 3:8-13). We are not omniscient and do not know the future, but a process helps us not to miss obvious deficiencies in a man who desires this office.

A. The pastors choose a man who is qualified as much as they can determine.

The pastors bear primary responsibility for examining the life and doctrine of candidates for diaconate ministry in order to determine whether the candidate meets the biblical character qualifications and fully agrees with our Statement of

Faith. Pastors will solicit input from those who know the man and pay close attention to his current service. Such indicators are not infallible, but they do help establish the man's fitness for diaconate ministry. Appropriate counsel may be sought from the SG Regional Leader or other pastors in the region.

The man must be a member of the church in good standing.

B. The candidate is informed and consents to the process of ordination.

The pastors will prepare and counsel the candidate, helping guide him towards an informed and prayerful decision. Should he choose not to pursue ordination, the pastors will fully support him in this and commend him to all who have been involved.

C. The congregation is informed and input is invited.

Once the pastors are supportive of the man for diaconate ministry, they will notify the church and invite their further input over the next 14 days. The active involvement of the congregation is necessary in the confirmation of an deacon's call and, at a minimum, should require extensive informal interaction with the congregation regarding the suitability of the deacon candidate.

During the ordination process, members of the church are asked and given opportunity to submit in writing their observations, affirmation, or critique of the man in question. This is not to propagate gossip and slander, but to allow opportunity to stop the process if there is information the pastors lack in evaluating the man. Additionally, affirmation will help confirm the selection of the candidate. Such feedback is an important opportunity for the congregation to assist in the ordination process.

The feedback of members of the church will not be understood as a binding vote on the ordination of the candidate but may be a deciding factor in his qualification. It will be up to the pastors to handle the feedback as they deem most appropriate.

D. Successful completion of the ordination requirements.

The candidate must complete all requirements for ordination before his actual ordination. These may include written and oral ordination exams administered by

the pastors, any necessary and relevant questioning, and the written approval of the pastors in official record.

Prior to taking ordination vows, the candidate must inform his pastors of any and all reservations or disagreements he has with the Statement of Faith. (He shall put these exceptions down in writing; each deacon's exceptions shall be kept on record with the pastors). The pastors shall determine the significance of the candidate's scruples. If the exception is a trivial semantic scruple and not a substantive difference with any doctrine in the Statement of Faith, then the candidate may subscribe to the Statement of Faith. But if it is determined that the candidate substantially disagrees with any of the doctrines of the Statement of Faith, he may not subscribe. If the candidate's exceptions to the Statement of Faith prevent him from subscribing to it, the pastors shall recommend to him a course of study on the relevant doctrines, if the candidate is willing, in the hopes that his scruples might be overcome.

If the pastors approve the candidate, then the candidate shall subscribe to the Statement of Faith by signing two copies of the following statement:

"I declare sincerely before God that I believe that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Statement of Faith fully agree with the Scriptures, and I own that Statement as the statement and confession of my faith. I promise further that if in the future I come to have reservations about any of these doctrines, I will share these reservations with my pastors."

One copy will remain in the personal safekeeping of the candidate, and one copy will be recorded by the pastors.

E. A date is set for ordination.

Once the man is established as qualified for this office and the church desires to appoint him to this office, a date is set for the ordination service and is announced to the church.

F. Final written feedback is received.

Written feedback is allowable throughout the evaluation and ordination process, but should be finalized at least thirty days in advance of the ordination service.

G. The ordination service completes the process.

During the ordination service the presiding pastor(s) will include the following questions for the candidate to answer in the affirmative (“I do, God helping me.”):

Do you believe that in this call, God himself is calling you to the office of deacon?

Do you make it your ambition to live in accord with the qualifications of this office?

Do you subscribe to the doctrinal standards of this church, rejecting all that contradicts and promoting that which encourages salvation and godliness?

Do you promise to do the work of a deacon faithfully, in a way worthy of your calling and in submission to God’s word, our pastors, and this congregation?

Do you today stand ready to minister to the physical and spiritual needs of this church, to present yourself as comfort and aid to your brothers and sisters, to defend the harmony of the congregation, and to support the pastors in their ministry of word and prayer?

2. The Duration of the Ordination

It is assumed that when a man is ordained to this office he will serve as long as he is qualified and it is in the best interest of the church and his family. In other words, there is no set term on an deacon’s service. Term limits seem to be a contradiction to the way that God gifts His people and the example He gives us in the NT.

3. Resignation

A deacon is free to resign his office at anytime and for any reason. The pastors will work with him and his fellow deacons to ensure their ministry is stable and will notify the congregation in a timely manner.

4. Removal

If a disqualifying charge(s) is brought against an ordained deacon, the pastors will act immediately to establish a credible report and suitable remedy. This is to be done in the spirit of love, patience, protection, and impartiality. The hope and goal is always redemptive.

When proceeding with a charge, privacy, confidentiality, and due process must all be priorities. Where appropriate, guidelines for adjudicating the charge(s) should be taken from the Sovereign Grace Book of Church Order.

If a deacon is removed from office, the pastors will provide a written and public explanation of the charges and grounds for guilt to the congregation.