

Roles Of A Deacon And Deaconess

Overview

Deacons and Elders are the two distinct offices in a New Testament Church. The two New Testament offices are mentioned together in Philippians 1:1 and in 1 Timothy 3 — bishops and deacons. In 1 Timothy 3 the qualifications are spelled out for the two offices, bishops in verses 1-7, and deacons in verse 8-13. The qualifications are similar, but not identical. For example, the elder is required to be “able to teach” whereas the deacon does not have that expectation. The differences in title and qualifications mean that the offices are distinct.

The term “bishop” is translated overseer in some translations. It is the word from which we get our word “episcopal” which means, “to look upon, inspect, oversee, look after, care for” and refers to “the care of the church which rested upon the elders.” The term is used interchangeably with “elder” and “shepherd” (i.e. pastor) in Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5. There is no question about the authority of the office: “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine”

The role of deacon is open to men and women. Leading the church by serving the church is not a gender-specific role. Men and women can hold this office, as evidenced by Phoebe, a deaconess in the church at Cenchreae (Romans 16:1).

Three facts stand out:

1. Deacons and Elders are the offices in the church. The offices are distinct. Elders are not deacons. Deacons are not elders.
2. The terms, Elder, Pastor (shepherd), and Overseer (bishop) are used synonymously in the New Testament.
3. In the New Testament, elders had the role of the general oversight of the church.

In the original language, the word, Deacon, means Servant

The title itself, is as descriptive as any job description could be. In the Bible, words have meanings and the word "deacon" means servant. Here is how the word has been defined in its various forms:

"Diakoneo and its derivatives, as their etymology suggests, are used mainly for personal help to others."

"Diakonia is found 34 times in the NT. It means service at the table in Lk. 10:40; Acts 6:1, etc."

"Diakanos is found 29 times in the NT. Its primary meaning is one who serves at tables."

The Early Deacons/Deaconesses Were Selected for Their Spiritual Qualifications

There are unique qualifications for deacons/deaconesses. The following list, based on 1 Timothy 3:1-13, details the qualifications of deacons/deaconesses.

1: Worthy of Imitation

Deacons/Deaconesses must be worthy of imitation, as stated in Hebrews 13:7: “Remember your leaders... Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” They must delight in God’s law and desire to keep it – but it must be more than just a desire. There must be evidence. At the heart of this quality is self-control in four key areas.

A. Self-control in matters of sexual purity.

The phrase “husband of one wife” is indicative of self-control of over the sexual passions of the body. A leader worthy of imitation (male and female alike) is someone who exercises self-control over their body. As Christians, we were bought at a very high price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). We are called to master our bodies through discipline in the Gospel.

B. Self-control in matters of Christian liberty.

The phrases “not a drunkard” and “not addicted to much wine” indicate that a leader worthy of imitation does not use his/her liberty as a license to sin. They don’t push it to the limit. They don’t allow their liberties to master them – but they are self-controlled in their use of everything worldly. They aren’t addicted to or mastered by anything. Once again, this describes someone who is daily disciplining themselves in the Gospel.

C. Self-control in matters of conflict resolution.

The phrases “not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome” and “dignified, not double-tongued” reveal that a leader worth imitating exercises control over his/her anger, frustration and tongue. Church leadership involves people, and where there are people, there is always a potential for conflict. Some conflict is inevitable and God-glorifying, and at those times, a leader must have self-control to not become violent, quarrelsome or to recklessly destroy others with their words.

D. Self-control in matters of financial stewardship.

The phrases “not a lover of money” and “not greedy for dishonest gain” show that a leader worth imitating is not driven by monetary or material gain. Money and materials are something to be mastered and utilized for the glory of God and the good of others.

2: Marked by Integrity

Deacons/Deaconesses must be marked by integrity. Their lives in the public square should be in alignment with their lives at home. The phrases “he must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive” and “managing their children and their own households well” teach that elders and deacons/deaconesses are not one kind of person at home and another kind of person in the world. They manage their households well with integrity, dignity and Gospel-centered leadership.

This is a significant quality because those who are not faithful with a little will not be faithful with much. In other words, if someone is not marked by integrity in their private life, then they will not be marked by integrity in the public sphere, either. This is the meaning of verse 5: “for if

someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?"

3: Respectable, Hospitable and Gentle

Deacons/Deaconesses must be respectable people (both inside and outside of the church body), they must be hospitable, and they must be gentle. Respectability would include matters such as work ethic and responsibility in private and public settings. Hospitality refers to generosity, and gentleness refers to genuine loving-kindness and care for others.

These three qualifications for deacons/deaconesses clearly reveal that only those who are centered on the transformative power of the Gospel can function in these roles. Perfection is not required, otherwise no one would qualify. So being "above reproach" and "blameless" does not mean sinless, but instead, it describes someone who confesses sin, repents of it and lives in light of the Gospel on a daily basis.