

# The Biblical Deacon

## What is a Deacon?

*A deacon is a recognized, God-called servant-leader in Jesus' church, equipped with the head, heart and hands of a spiritual servant, who serves alongside other deacons and under the spiritual leadership of the elders in the church. Let us consider this definition more closely.*

--**A deacon is "recognized"**. In the New Testament, the existing church leadership formally recognized each new deacon through a ceremony that included the public laying on of hands. (Acts 6:1-6)

--**A deacon is God-called**. The calling of a deacon is not from man, but from God. Deacons are sovereign gifts from God to His church. God intends for the church to affirm God's calling and appoint deacons who will be full of faith and the Holy Spirit. (Acts 6:1-6) God uses human instruments to recognize and affirm His calling upon a deacon, but God is the one who calls people to this ministry.

--**A deacon is a servant-leader**. The term "deacon" literally means "servant". From the beginning of the ministry of the deacon team, deacons were set apart for service. The service of the deacon liberates the elders to do the work of the Word and prayer in the church.

--**A deacon serves in Jesus' church**. The local church is precious to Jesus. Jesus promised to build her so that the gates of hell would not prevail against her. (Matthew 16:18). The local church is Jesus' precious bride whom He loves so much that He gave Himself up for her on the cross. And He did this so that He might one day present the church to Himself in all of her glory as a spotless bride (Ephesians 5:25-27). God directs for deacons to be appointed in each local church so that they can serve Him in serving the mercy needs of the church. (Acts 6:1-11; 1 Timothy 3:13)

--**A deacon is equipped with the "head" of a spiritual servant**. The term "deacon" literally means "servant". Jesus taught us that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of our mind (Matthew 22:37). The deacon must model obedience to this command over a long period of time to be qualified to lead others. They must be mature believers who love God (1 Timothy 3:8-13). Christianity builds all of life on the foundation of God's truth as revealed in God's Word. The deacon's mind, like all mature believers, must be saturated with scripture so that sound doctrine and truth saturate his whole person.

--**A deacon is equipped with the "heart" of a spiritual servant**. He loves God with all his heart and he loves people with deep spiritual concern for their soul. The deacon's ministry is primarily one of love. The deacon is a person whose heart has

matured in Christ-like character through his walking in love over a long period of time (1 Timothy 3:8-13).

**--A deacon is equipped with the “hands” of a spiritual servant.** The primary work of deacons is that of mercy and administration. The deacon must be skilled in showing mercy to others and helping other believers to serve the church too. Modern churches have added the responsibilities of physical property and facilities to the responsibilities of the deacons. We recognize that this responsibility is not found in the New Testament as the church was young and did not own property. It seems wise to us to ask the deacons to care for the facilities as this accomplishes the same effect as caring for Hellenistic widows did in Acts 6.

**--A deacon serves alongside other deacons.** The deacon does not possess authority as an individual, but is a member of a group of other deacons who together serve the church. Every time the term “deacon” is used in the New Testament, it is plural (Cf. Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 10, 12, 13). The Bible clearly teaches that each church should have more than one deacon.

**--A deacon serves under the leadership of the elders.** The deacons’ role was created so that the church leadership could accomplish their role of spiritual leading the church through the ministries of the Word and prayer (Acts 6). The deacons serve in the areas of mercy so that the elders are able to lead or to shepherd the flock of God. This authority structure is hinted at in Philippians 1 and 1 Timothy 3 where the deacons are mentioned after the elders. The elders do not “lord it over” the deacons, but the elders are in a position of servant leadership over the whole church, of which the deacons are a significant part.

## **What is the difference between a Deacon and an Elder?**

The office of Elder is described throughout Scripture, and their qualifications are listed in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:7-9. Elders are described as shepherds, and the names “Elders,” “Bishops” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7), “Pastors” (Eph. 4:11), or “Leaders” (Heb. 13:17) are given interchangeably as a specific office.

The office of Deacon is only described in 1 Tim. 3:8-13. Since Paul uses the word “likewise” in v. 8, he is comparing the office of Elder (vv. 1-7) to the office of Deacon (vv. 8-13). The only difference in qualifications between the offices of Elder and Deacon is that Deacons are not required to have a demonstrated ability to teach the Scriptures (note v. 2 “able to teach” for Elders, and no such requirement for Deacons). Other than this, the spiritual and practical qualifications of Elders and Deacons are identical.

Outside of the qualifications listed in 1 Tim. 3:8-13 (note that Titus has no such list of qualification for deacons, and Titus is only instructed to “appoint Elders in every city” (Titus 1:5). The main difference between an elder and a deacon is a difference of gifts and calling, not character.

## Is a Deacon a “Special” Office in the Church?

We see that there are really two offices designated in the church for recognized leadership; the office of Elder (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:7-9) and Deacon (1 Tim. 3:8-13). There were other positions such as Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, and Evangelists (Eph. 4:11), but the Apostles of Jesus Christ have since died out, and the gift of prophecy to the church is no longer functioning (1 Cor. 13:9-10). Pastors are synonymous with Elders and Bishops (overseers) as a primary shepherding position. An Evangelist can be anyone who “does the work of an Evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5).

The primary emphasis in the epistles of the NT is the role of Elders and Deacons. In particular, Deacons are listed in Phil. 1:1, and Phoebe is identified in Rom. 16:1 as being a Deacon (Deaconess). When Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, he indicated that Deacons were a plurality (Phil. 1:1).

While Elders are given priority in church leadership, and it is acknowledged that this is a particular office, Paul lists the Deacons in the same way in 1 Tim. 3:8. Here, Paul says, “Deacons, *likewise* must be...” and lists qualifications almost identical to that of Elders. This says that the office of Deacon is also a critical office in the church like the office of Elder.

## Can Women be Deacons, or is this Office for Men Only?

The reason for the question is two-fold. First, 1 Tim. 3:11 instructs “Women” after speaking of the qualifications for a Deacon, and then immediately resumes further instructions and qualifications for a Deacon in vv. 12-13. Does “Women” refer to “wives of Deacons” or to “women who are recognized as Deacons?” Secondly, we see in Rom. 16:1 that a woman named Phoebe is commended as a “Deacon” and also from Church History we have a letter from a man named Pliny to the Emperor Trajan which reference some women who were regarded in the Christian church as “Deaconesses.”

So, the question remains. Can a woman be a Deacon, or is there only a mandate for men Deacons and their wives? The following lists the exegetical arguments.

### Arguments in Favor of 1 Tim. 3:11 referring to “Wives of Deacons”

1. Deacons are the main focus of 1 Tim. 3:8-10 and vv. 12-13
2. The word γυνή (gyneh—translated “women”) must be translated “wife” because of its usages in v. 12 “husband of one **wife**”
3. The wife’s qualifications are qualifications for deacons
4. The word “women” is used rather than “deacon,” which was used of Phoebe in Rom. 16:1
5. There is no reference to the “deaconess’s” husband for their qualifications (like being a “one man woman”)
6. The “women” are distinguished from “likewise,” “deacons,” and “husband of one “wife”

## Arguments in Favor of 1 Tim. 3:11 being women Deacons or “Deaconesses”

1. The word “likewise” in 1 Tim. 3:11 shows a distinct group from Elder or Deacon
2. There is no possessive pronoun or definite article (in Greek) in front of the word “Women” which demonstrates its generic nature for “any women”
3. There are no specific qualifications for “wives of Deacons”
4. There was no feminine word for “Deacon” that used until post-biblical Greek
5. “Women” was the only term Paul could use to distinguish between male and female deacons (note point 4 above)
6. The women’s qualifications parallel those of Deacons (vv. 8-10)
7. Phoebe (Rom. 16:1) is recognized as a Deacon
8. The letter from Pliny to Trajan which references “Deaconesses” in the church

On this issue, commentators are split. The real issue is that if there is no clear and compelling argument for either side, how do we move forward without violating Scripture?

The conclusion is that since there were women Deacons (Deaconesses) in the early church, and that Deacons are in an office of service and not a teaching role, then women should be free to exercise their abilities in this area. The only limiting factor is that we must honor Paul’s words in 1 Tim. 2:12 where Paul writes, “But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.”

At Christ Baptist Church, both men and women can serve in the office of Deacon. The only issue is the women Deacons cannot teach or exercise authority over men.

## What does a Deacon do?

The New Testament does not provide much information concerning the role of deacons. Because Paul lists the qualifications of a Deacon (1 Tim. 3:8-13) right after the qualifications of an Elder (1 Tim. 3:1-7), we believe that this is an actual office in the church with a specific function.

Whereas the office of Elder is often ignored in the modern church, the office of Deacon is often misunderstood. Based on the New Testament, the role of the Deacon is mainly to be a servant. The church needs deacons to provide logistical and material support so that the elders can focus on the Word of God and prayer.

The primary spiritual leaders of a congregation are the Elders, who are also called overseers or pastors in the New Testament. Elders teach or preach the Word and shepherd the souls of those under their care. Deacons, too, have a crucial role in the life and the health of the local church, but their role is different from the Elders. Perhaps the most noticeable distinction between Elders and Deacons is that Deacons do not need to be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). Deacons are called to “hold” to the faith with a clear conscience, but they are not called to “teach” that faith (1 Tim.

3:9). This suggests that the deacons do not have an official teaching role in the church.

Like Elders, Deacons must manage their house and children well (1 Tim. 3:4, 12). But when referring to Deacons, Paul omits the section where he compares managing one's household to taking care of God's church (1 Tim. 3:5). The reason for this omission is most likely due to the fact that Deacons are not given a ruling or leading position in the church—that function belongs to the elders. **The biblical role of Deacons is to take care of the physical and logistical needs of the church so that the Elders can concentrate on their primary calling.**

This distinction is based on the pattern found in Acts 6:1–6. The apostles were devoted “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (v. 4). Since this was their primary calling, seven men were chosen to handle more practical matters in order to allow the apostles the freedom to continue with their work.

This division of labor is similar to what we see with the offices of Elder and Deacon. Like the apostles, the Elders' primary role is one of preaching the Word of God. Like the seven, Deacons serve the congregation in whatever practical needs may arise.

**In essence, the task of Deacons can be “Providing practical assistance and solving practical issues among the church members which yield spiritual results.”**

What are some duties that Deacons might be responsible for today? They could be responsible for anything that's not necessarily related to teaching and shepherding the church. Such duties might include:

- *Facilities:* The Deacons could be responsible for managing the church property. This would include making sure the place of worship is prepared for the worship service, cleaning up, or running the sound system.
- *Benevolence:* Similar to what took place in Acts 6:1-6 with the daily distribution to the widows, the deacons may be involved in administrating funds or other assistance to the needy.
- *Finances:* While the elders should probably oversee the financial business of the church (Acts 11:30), it may be best left to the Deacons to handle the day-to-day matters. This would include collecting and counting the offering, keeping records, and so on.
- *Ushers:* The Deacons could be responsible for distributing bulletins, seating the congregation, or preparing the elements for communion.
- *Logistics:* Deacons should be available to help in variety of ways so that the elders are able to concentrate on teaching and shepherding the church.

## The Authority of Deacons

Although Paul indicates that a person must be tested before they can hold the office of Deacon (1 Tim. 3:10), the requirement that they cannot be a new convert is not included. Paul notes that if an Elder is a recent convert “he may become puffed up with conceit” (1 Tim. 3:6). One implication concerning this distinction could be that those who hold the office of Elder are more susceptible to pride because they possess leadership over the church. On the contrary, it is not as likely for a Deacon, who is in more of a servant role, to fall into this same sin, because they are not given the responsibility for spiritual oversight over the spiritual well-being of the congregation, because theirs is a service-oriented ministry.

The office of Deacon does not carry the responsibility or weight of spiritual oversight of the congregation. Although they may do spiritual tasks (such as evangelizing, discipleship, encouragement, and even teaching) along with practical tasks, they are not ultimately responsible for that oversight. This is the full responsibility of the Elders. A Deacon is a service-oriented ministry. The office of Elder is oversight and leadership. We see this when Barnabas and Saul were responsible to handle the donations of money for the saints in Jerusalem, and both Barnabas and Saul were accountable to the Elders of the church (Acts 11:30).

Like the seven men selected in Acts 6:1-6, the Elders are responsible to oversee the Deacon ministry. **Elders and Deacons are not separate and co-equal branches of leadership or government in the church. Deacons are people who serve in a specific area, and are fully accountable to the Elders for direction and accountability.**

## Conclusion

There are two major offices in the church today; Elder and Deacon. While the office of Elder can only consist of qualified men (1 Tim. 3:1-7), the office of Deacon can consist of both men and women (1 Tim. 3:11, 12; Rom. 16:1)

Whereas the Bible charges elders with the tasks of teaching and leading the church, Deacons’ role is more service-oriented. That is, they are to care for the physical or temporal concerns of the church. By handling such matters, deacons free up the elders to focus on shepherding the spiritual needs of the congregation.

Since practical needs are temporal (meaning they exist for a time and then either go away or are replaced by different needs), the need for specific Deacon activity can also be temporal. There is no place in the New Testament that speaks of a “Deacon Board” or authorized body of Deacons. Deacons are appointed by the plurality of Elders as they see needs arise. Deacons serve the church under the authority and spiritual direction of the Elders, and each Deacon that is appointed must be examined and meet the personal and spiritual qualifications listed in 1 Tim. 3:8-13.