

Deacons: God's Special Servants

1 TIMOTHY 3:8-13

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
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Four months ago, this congregation took a giant step in faith by appointing the first elders in the more than 20-year history of this congregation. We took that step because of our goal to imitate the early First Century church to the best of our ability. I can tell you that over the past four months, the elders of this congregation have learned so much. It has been an awesome experience, and yet at the same time it has also been a humbling experience. We have now met with about half of the congregation, and from our point of view, the wisdom of God's plan for his church is becoming more and more clear every week – as we have learned some of the spiritual challenges that all of you are facing, and as we continue to pray on behalf of each member of our Christian family here in Madison.

But again, as with everything we do here at this congregation, our goal is to be (to the best of our ability) the church of the First Century. And as we know, there is more to do, because the First Century church had not just elders, but also DEACONS, and deacons are a vital part of God's plan for his kingdom. As you can see on the front of today's bulletin, at the end of our service today, the elders would like to present the names of several men to serve as deacons here at this congregation. We have specific roles in mind for these men to fill, we will introduce those roles at the end of today's service, we will then give everyone here a chance to make scriptural objections over the next week and a half, and then, if the Lord wills, we would like to see these men appointed two weeks from today, on May 15.

Well, this obviously leads to our lesson this morning. I have been preaching in some form or another for more than 25 years, and in 25 years I have never presented a lesson on the subject of deacons. We have covered it in Bible classes here and there, but in the absence of elders, having deacons was something that was way out there on the horizon. We have now come to that horizon! So, this morning, I want us to do just an overview of what the Bible teaches about deacons.

What is a deacon? Well, when we start looking into this, we find that most Bible translations didn't really translate this word; but instead (similar to what they did with the word "baptism"), they transliterated it. In other words, they looked at the word in Greek, they assigned each Greek letter its English equivalent, and they basically created a new word in English. Deacon, therefore, is basically a Greek word. So, what does it mean? When we actually translate it, we find that deacon is simply the word for SERVANT. And in the New Testament, the word is used in two ways: 1.) With reference to anyone who serves, and 2.) With reference to

what appears to be something of an “office” of deacon in the church – special servants who are chosen and appointed by the church to serve in some special capacity. I might compare it to the word “elder.” There are those who are elderly (in the generic sense of that word), and then there are “elders,” men who meet certain qualifications who are appointed by the church to serve in that capacity.

In that generic sense of deacon or servant, we have a number of passages that I have put on the wall up here – and this is just a sample. Generically, the word is used this way something like a hundred times in the New Testament. For example, in John 2:5, Jesus’ mother spoke to the **“servants”** at the wedding feast in Cana. Literally, those people carrying the water pots were deacons. In Matthew 20:26, the Lord said to his disciples, **“but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant.”** Again, that word **“servant”** is the word **“deacon.”** The word is used twice in Romans 13:4, where Paul spoke of those in government (most likely parallel to those who serve in law enforcement today, and in this passage, the NASB uses the word **“minister.”** But the word **“minister”** there is the word for **“deacon”** or **“servant.”** Twice in that passage, Paul refers to the government as a “minister” or “deacon” or “servant” of God, that **“does not bear the sword for nothing.”** In a sense, then, the men and women of the Madison Police Department are God’s deacons, ministers, or servants. We could go on and on with more than a hundred passages like this, but the point is: Usually, the term is used in a generic sense, in that all of us are to be servants – servants of God, servants to each other, and so on.

But what surprised me in this study is that the word is used with reference to the “office” of deacon only six times in the New Testament, and those references are found in only two passages. In Philippians 1:1, Paul addresses that letter, **“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.”** And there, I hope it is as obvious to you as it is to me that Paul seems to be referring not to servants in general, but to a group of men who were appointed to serve as **“deacons”** of that congregation, **“the overseers and deacons.”** And then the other passage is found in 1 Timothy 3, where we have a list of qualifications. We will get back to 1 Timothy 3 in just a moment, but I would just point out that when we have a list of qualifications, it seems rather obvious that we are talking about something special. We don’t need to be qualified to serve in a generic sense, so there must be some office or position that Paul has in mind. But again, we will get back to that in just a moment.

Here at the beginning, though, I would invite you to turn with me to a passage where we seem to have a reference to what we might refer to as the forerunners to deacons in the church – the passage is found in Acts 6:1-7 (p. 1709). To put this in context, the church had just been established in Acts 2 as people had come in from around the world to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem. On that first day, 3000 people obeyed the gospel, and in those first few weeks, the church continued to grow by leaps and bounds. In fact, many of these people from around the world decided to stay in Jerusalem to learn more. And, for the most part, the early church did very well at taking care of physical needs. They shared; but, as the church grew, the first real problem pops up in Acts 6. Notice, please, Acts 6:1-7...

¹ ***Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.*** ² ***So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.”*** ³ ***Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.*** ⁴ ***But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”*** ⁵ ***The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.*** ⁶ ***And these they***

brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. ⁷ The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

I would make several observations here: First of all, these men are never described as deacons; however, these men are appointed to do the work that deacons do! Some of you might remember the “ABC’s of Acts,” where we assign a letter to each chapter in Acts, to help us remember what is in each chapter, the “Ascension” (for Chapter 1), the “Beginning of the Church” (for Chapter 2), and so on. Chapter 6 is “F,” and the designation there is “First Deacons?” But, I always write it with a question mark. Again, these men seem to be doing the work of deacons, they are chosen and appointed as deacons might be, but they are never specifically referred to as “deacons.” I almost think of them as forerunners of deacons.

But we see the problem in Acts 6: The church was threatened with division as the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. Now, the apostles could have fed these women personally, but the problem is: The apostles really needed to keep on preaching – not that feeding widows was unimportant, not that serving food was beneath them in any way, but preaching was even more important. So, they gave the congregation a list of qualifications, the church put forward seven men with Greek names to take care of this issue, and these men were then appointed by the apostles. These men then dedicated themselves to solving this issue, and the apostles got back to preaching and prayer. The result (in verse 7) is that ***“the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem.”***

Based on this passage, some have suggested that elders take care of everything that is SPIRITUAL within the congregation and that deacons take care of everything that is PHYSICAL within the congregation. And I understand the thought behind that, but it is not completely accurate. First of all, the Bible never comes out and says this. But secondly, everything the church does is spiritual! In fact, if there is something we do as a congregation that does not have some spiritual aspect to it, then we should not be doing it! I think about our church budget: Every line item needs to have some kind of spiritual objective to it; otherwise, we should not be spending the Lord’s money on it. I would also point out: The qualifications given for deacons are, in fact, spiritual in nature. And by that I mean: Nowhere does the Bible say that a deacon must be physically strong! Nowhere does the Bible say that a deacon must be tall, so that he can change light bulbs. Nowhere does the Bible say that a deacon must have a degree in business so that he can manage the church’s finances. Instead, the qualifications for deacons are in fact spiritual qualifications. Yes, deacons will often do work that seems to be more physical than the work done by elders, but a clean split between spiritual and physical is not what we are dealing with here. Even with the situation in Acts 6, these men did not need to have a background in food service (which would have been helpful), but the qualifications for serving food to widows was that they had to be men of ***“good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”*** The apostles were not just looking for warm bodies to fill a role, but they were looking for men of faith. I would also point out that at least two of those men went on to serve as preachers – I am thinking of Stephen and his sermon in Acts 7 as well as Philip and the preaching he did in Samaria in Acts 8.

As we move forward into our primary passage on deacons, I would invite you to turn with me to 1 Timothy 3 (p. 1856). And again, as we look at these qualifications, I would make the point that we have often made concerning the qualifications for elders, and that is: Almost every qualification in some ways applies to all of us. Just as elders must be hospitable, so must all of us be hospitable. Just as elders must be free from the love of money, so must all of us be free from the love of money. The same goes for the qualifications for deacons. So before we think, “This doesn’t apply to me,” let us try to find a way that it should apply to each of us. And

just with the idea of service – all of us should be serving. I would also point out that as with our study of elders, we are not looking for PERFECT men to fill these roles. I know my wife may have a hard time believing this, and I almost hate breaking it to her this morning, but there are no perfect men at this congregation! So we will never find men who are perfect. But instead, we are looking for men who are qualified – those who meet these qualifications to a reasonable degree. With this in mind, let's look at the qualifications for deacons as found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13...

⁸ Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, ⁹ but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. ¹¹ Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. ¹² Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. ¹³ 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.

As we look at this paragraph, I would like to give just a brief overview by dividing the qualifications into two groups: The qualifications for the man himself, and then the qualifications that involve his family.

I. But first of all, let's notice THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE MAN HIMSELF.

And in this category, we find, first of all, that deacons must be ***“men of dignity.”*** Other translations might refer to deacons being men of ***“gravity,”*** men who are ***“serious.”*** Now, this does not mean that deacons must be grumpy. It doesn't mean that deacons cannot have a sense of humor. I think of the men we have in mind for deacons here at Four Lakes: They all have a good sense of humor. So, Paul is not banning a sense of humor, but he is saying that deacons must be men who are worthy of respect, level-headed, honorable, serious in their approach to God's work.

Secondly, Paul says that these men must not be ***“double-tongued.”*** And the idea here is: They are not to be speaking out of both sides of their mouth, as we might say today. In his work, a deacon might be pulled aside by various people at different times, and his message to one is to be the same as his message to another. He cannot speak different things to different people just to try to keep people happy. Deacons are to be straightforward and honest, believable, men of their word, trustworthy. As Jesus said, ***“Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no,’ be ‘no’”*** (Matthew 5:37). People need to know that what a deacon says is what he means. And I hope we are starting to see that these are qualities that all of us need to have!

Next, we find that a deacon must not be ***“addicted to much wine.”*** Deacons, then, are not to be dependent on alcohol. Of course, drunkenness is a sin for any of us, but deacons are specifically told here that they are not to depend on it, that they are not to be controlled by it.

We go on to notice that these men who serve as deacons are not to be ***“fond of sordid gain.”*** And you know, that is not a phrase I use very often in my everyday life. But the idea is: They are not to be in it for what they can get out of it, as one paraphrase of this verse has it. They are not to be greedy. One scholar describes someone who is “shamelessly greedy for money.” He is not to be ruled by always getting more. Spiritual treasure is to be more important than material possessions. We think of Judas who served as the treasurer for the apostles, a man who complained when Mary put the expensive perfume on the Lord's feet – upset that the perfume had not been sold and the funds given to the poor, when John explains that what Judas really wanted to do was to take some of those funds for himself. There are so many warnings in the Bible about the

danger of wealth, but there are some special warnings for those who would take on a position of leadership in the church.

Moving into verse 9, we find that deacons must be men who ***“hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.”*** The idea here is: They know the word of God, they respect the word of God, they are not bouncing here and there in terms of what they believe. And the key is: They hold to what they believe with a clear conscience. In other words, they understand what the Bible wants them to do, and they do it. There is no crisis of conscience. And here we find a key difference between elders and deacons. Elders must be capable of teaching the word. Deacons must simply know the word and do it. Teaching is not one of the requirements.

In verse 10, we find that before being appointed as deacons, these men must be tested. In other words, we look at what this man is currently doing, perhaps we give him some assignment, and if he does well, only then is he appointed. I think about the men we are putting forward later this morning: All of them are men who are already actively doing what they need to be doing. All of them are men who have already proven themselves in the past. All of them have already been tested. I would emphasize here: We do not make someone a deacon as a way of encouraging him to get his life straightened out! As brother Neal Pollard points out in one of his articles, “Experience shows that this just does not work any more than marrying someone to change them works.” And so deacons must first be tested, Paul says. In the Lord’s church, we know that the reward for service is more service!

And finally, we also find in verse 10 that deacons must be ***“beyond reproach.”*** We’re not talking here about sinless perfection, but instead, we are talking (literally) about someone who cannot be brought up on charges - and I would say specifically, with reference to these qualifications. The way I look at this is: If I go into this person’s neighborhood or workplace and let them know that this person is one of our deacons and say that he was chosen because he’s not addicted to much wine, that he’s not double-tongued, and so on, I don’t really want to see cringing! We don’t want people saying, “Oh, really!” In my mind, by appointing this person as a deacon, we should not be giving Satan a stick to beat us with. But rather, he is to be ***“beyond reproach.”***

II. As we move into the second half of this passage, we have some FAMILY QUALIFICATIONS.

And it starts here with some qualifications for ***“women”*** or ***“wives,”*** as some translations have it. The word can go either way, depending on the context, but sandwiched in the middle of qualifications for deacons, it seems that the qualifications here would be for deacons’ wives. It is interesting to me that Paul does not use the female form of the word “deacon” here. He does not refer to these women as “deaconesses.” But instead, these are simply women, the wives of the deacons. In the Bible, we have no reference anywhere to a special class of women known as “deaconesses.” In Romans 16:1-2, we do have a reference to Phoebe who was a servant of the church, and a few modern translations might use the word “deaconess,” but there is no indication that Phoebe had ever been appointed to that position by the church, we have no indication that she ever met a set of qualifications. I would compare it to the use of “elder” vs. “elderly” I mentioned earlier. There is a generic sense, and there is a specific sense. I would take it, then, that these qualifications are for the wives of deacons.

And we find, first of all, that these women (like their husbands) must be ***“dignified.”*** Secondly, they must not be ***“malicious gossips.”*** The word refers to slanderous and false accusations and is actually the same word that we translate as ***“devil.”*** One translation, in fact, says that the women must not be “she-devils.” I laughed at that when I read it, but then I looked it up in the Greek, and that is what it says! Literally, the devil is a “false accuser.” In Revelation, Satan is referred to as “the accuser of the brethren.” A deacon’s wife, therefore, is not

to be a woman, then, who use information gained through her husband's position to do any kind of undeserved harm to another person. Paul does on to add that she must be ***"temperate."*** Literally, she must be ***"sober-minded,"*** not drunk, in terms of wine. She must be sober in her behavior, sober in her thinking. And finally, she must also be ***"faithful in all things."*** She must be a Christian, faithful in her attendance, faithful in her service to the church, faithful to her husband.

And speaking of her husband, he must be the ***"husband of one wife."*** Literally, he must be a one-woman man. He must be scripturally married, and no woman other than his wife is to have his undivided love and attention.

And finally, deacons must be good managers of their children and their own households. I would summarize this by suggesting that his home is not to be in chaos. There is to be some level of order in the home. Unlike elders, there is nothing here about his children being faithful Christians. Instead, he is simply to be a good manager at home. Is he respected by his wife and children? Is there some sense of peace and stability in the family? Again, we are not looking for perfection, but (as Paul says) we are looking for those who are good managers at home.

III. Before we close this morning, we cannot overlook verse 13, because in verse 13 Paul promises a **REWARD**, a **BLESSING**, for those who serve well.

Notice: ***"Those who serve well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus."*** Certainly, a reward or recognition is not why we serve. I think of those men we have asked to serve as deacons, and as I remember it, every single one responded with something to the effect of, "Oh, no, I don't really need to have this title to serve," or something to that effect. Exactly! We are thankful, though that these men ultimately decided to put themselves out there, to put themselves on the line, to step up in this way, simply because this is God's plan for his church. So, deacons do not serve so that they have this recognition, but there is some encouragement here (in verse 13). By serving well, a deacon gains confidence in the faith. His faith grows stronger. There is a blessing promised to those who are willing to step forward when called upon by the church to serve.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage and as we wrap up this summary of deacons, there is something that just amazes me every time I study it, and that is: God's plan for his church, God's plan for his kingdom on this earth, is so simple! In the Bible, we don't have popes, and cardinals, and councils, and all of this structure and hierarchy and bureaucracy we see in the man-made religions in the world around us. But instead, God's plan is so simple! We have elders, godly men responsible for leading the congregation, men on the Judgment Day who will give an account to God for the souls in their care, men who are responsible for the spiritual health of the congregation. And then we have deacons, those men who are called upon to serve the church in a special way, making sure that the vision of the elders is carried out efficiently and effectively. The way I see it, deacons are given responsibility of various programs and areas of the church's work, and then, they go to work.

God's plan is for each congregation to be led by elders and served by deacons. If you want to be a part of a church that takes God's plan seriously, if you are looking for a place to get busy with the Lord's work, we would welcome you to be a part of the Four Lakes congregation. On the other hand, if you are looking for a place where you can pop in every few weeks and then just quietly disappear until next time, I would encourage you to have a change of heart and to look for some way to get involved with this family.

Jesus died on the cross, not so that we can sit around and take it easy. He died to save us from sin, to transfer us into his kingdom, a place where we work together to reach this world with the good news. We obey the good news by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can talk to me right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com

DEACON OBJECTION FORM

Four Lakes Church of Christ

I cannot support the nomination of _____ to be a deacon, because
I believe he does NOT meet one or more of the following qualifications:

⁸ Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, ⁹ but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. ¹¹ Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. ¹² Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. ¹³ 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 3:8-13 (NASB)

⁸ 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.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 (ESV)

Based on this passage of Scripture, my objection is:

I am willing to discuss my concerns with the nominee and the elders at a meeting to be arranged at some point before 6 p.m. on Friday, May 13, 2016.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

****Please use a separate form for each nominee, and return this sheet to one of the elders immediately. ****