

The Big Picture: How God intends His church to function...

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 1. His wife is godly (11).
 2. His household is in order (12).
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Implications: What do we learn about God from this text?

1. God doesn't lower His standards.
2. Rather, God brings people up to His standard.
 - Option #1: We can reject God's standard and create our own.
 - Option #2: We can reject part of God's standard and keep what we like.
 - Option #3: We can add personal opinions to God's standard.
 - Option #4: We can follow God's standard as sufficient.
3. He does it through *Christ*.

S. I. McMillen, in his book *None of These Diseases*, tells a story of a young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application blank that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst.

To her surprise, she received this letter from the college: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."²

The old adage is true. *Too many chiefs, not enough Indians*. Leaders are important. So are followers. In fact, to be a good leader a person must first know how to follow.

God has given His church a position that models this, a position that leads by following. It's called the *deacon*.

Last week I began a two part study on "God's Design for Church Leaders." This morning we're going to explore what His Word says about the deacon position. But first, I'd like to sketch the big picture of how God intends His church to function...

The Big Picture: How God intends His church to function...

According to Ephesians 2:20, Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone of the church. Furthermore, the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Those were the men through whom God spoke to the early church, and whose message was eventually recorded in what we call the New Testament. So the foundation of a strong church is Christ and His Word.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ Adapted from material used on 11/22/98.

² Adapted from S. I. McMillen, *None of These Diseases*.

But Christ is in heaven. So are the apostles and prophets. Since they're gone, how is the church to function now? Philippians 1:1 indicates that organizationally there are three positions in the church: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons."

Here's the big picture of God's design for the church. Notice the three ingredients: saints, overseers, and deacons. First...

1. *There must be overseers who lead.* Overseer is the same term used in 1 Timothy 3:1, translated "bishop" in the KJV. *Episkopos* is the Greek term. An overseer is a man (or men) who oversee a local congregation. Sometimes the Bible refers to the overseer as an "elder" (Acts 20:17, 28; Tit. 1:5-7) or a "pastor" (Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:2). To be a strong church there must be overseers who lead and whose leadership is grounded firmly on the foundation of Christ and His Word. Philippians 1:1 mentions a second office...

2. *There must be deacons who model.* As we'll see momentarily in 1 Timothy 3, deacons work hand in hand with the overseers. The overseers proclaim the Word, whereas the deacons model the Word as servants (which is what the Greek term for "deacon" literally means). Thirdly...

3. *There must be saints who minister.* The Philippian letter was directed "to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi." Don't shy away from that term "saint." It's a good term. It applies to you if you know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Saints are Christians. Christians are saints. They're people who have been declared "holy" by God based on the atoning work of Christ.

We don't call each other *saints* very often, but we could. If you know Christ, you are a saint. May I hasten to say that the real ministry of the church happens at the *saint* level? To be a strong church, there must be overseers who will lead, and deacons who will model servanthood, but to move ahead, a church must have saints who will do the ministry. The church is a body, and each member has a God-given function to perform.

But a body needs structure if it's to move efficiently, a skeletal system. So the Body of Christ needs structure. That's what 1 Timothy 3 is all about. Yes, the saints do the ministry, but God designates some of the saints to lead the Body (overseers/elders/pastors). And some He designates to be models for the Body (deacons).

In other words, if a church is to be strong it needs leaders who will study the Book and say, "Here's what the Savior calls us to do." And it needs saints who will say, "Yes, we'll do it." But it needs something else, deacons, who will lock arms with the leaders and model how ministry is to be done.

What is a deacon anyway? Who can be a deacon? And for that matter, why would anyone want to? We find the answers to these questions in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. This text gives us three insights about the deacon.

I. It's a special position (8a).

Listen to verses 8-10, "Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons."

To be a deacon is to hold a special position. What does God expect a deacon to do, anyway? There is no job description in this text, but the word itself would suggest a twofold task for the deacon.

A. His task is to serve. The Greek term for "deacon" is *diakonos*. Sometimes the word is translated "minister." By definition a deacon is "one who serves." Don't miss that. First and foremost, a deacon is a servant who, by God's design, works hand in hand

with the overseers. That means, in biblical terms a deacon is not a "board" member who pushes paper around in meetings (though one way to serve is through administration). He is a man who rolls up his sleeves and serves in the church.

B. His task is to model service. The seven men mentioned in Acts 6 were not technically deacons, but they represent a vivid picture of the role of a deacon. Remember the story? The apostles were being overwhelmed with the ministry of the growing church, particularly in the care of widows. So what was the solution? They appointed seven, Spirit-filled men to serve the widow's tables so the apostles could devote themselves to the ministry of prayer and the Word. The seven men were given the task of "serving."

That's what a deacon is to do. He is to serve. Deacons assist the elders so they can devote themselves to teaching and prayer.

"But wait," you say. "I thought it was the job of the saints to do the ministry." It is, according to Ephesians 4:12. "But you just said that's what the deacons do." That's right. The deacons are to serve, but in so doing they are to model service for the saints.

We are all called to serve (Gal. 5:13). But God has graciously placed some role-models in His church. Deacons. They are to show the saints how to serve. I'm quite confident that in Acts 6 it wasn't just the Seven who served the widows, though indeed, they rolled up their sleeves. In addition to serving, they modeled service. They mobilized the saints for service. They showed them how and then said, "Come on."

So in God's eyes, it's a special position. Who qualifies? Insight #2...

II. It takes a special person (8b-12).

Verse 8 begins, "Deacons likewise." That is, just like a church must look for certain criteria for men who would be overseers, so must it do with aspiring deacons. Paul lists about ten qualifications for deacons in verses 8-12. Some traits are positive, some negative. It's a checklist of sorts. What kind of person can be a deacon? God's Word says to look for a man with four credentials.

A. Credential #1: He has a godly testimony (8). To be a deacon a man must be "worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain." Simply put, to be a deacon a man must have a godly testimony.

Deacons are to be *worthy of respect* ("grave" as the KJV puts it). The word means "serious, reverent." It depicts a man of dignity, a man who is respectable, a man who takes His role as a servant seriously.

Frankly, if a man has a frivolous attitude towards spiritual things, he is not qualified to be a deacon. Why not? Because he is to be a role model. That implies that a person who assumes the office of deacon merely to "fill a position" isn't qualified. A deacon must use the office, not just fill it, for the good of the church and the glory of God.³

He must be *sincere* ("not double tongued"). That's an insightful word. It means "given to repetition." It describes a person who says one thing to one person, and something else to the next person. Public figures are tempted to do that, you know. Stretch a little truth here, leave out a little truth there, just to make themselves look good. That's unacceptable for a deacon. He must be a man whose word is as good as gold.

Not indulging in much wine is next. The participle means "to turn one's mind to," or "to occupy oneself with," hence the NASB translation, "addicted to." A deacon, then, is not to be preoccupied with drink nor to allow it to influence his life.⁴ In our day when

³ Observation by W. Wiersbe

⁴ Observation by J. MacArthur

countless homes are being destroyed by alcohol and substance abuse, a deacon must pave a trail for others to follow.

In addition, deacons are those who are *not pursuing dishonest gain* ("not greedy of filthy lucre"). That makes sense when you realize that in Paul's day, as now, the deacons had access to the finances and benevolent moneys of the church. It can be tempting to handle money that is not your own. That's why a deacon must be trustworthy, not greedy.

Simply put, to be a deacon a man must have a godly testimony. That's credential #1.

B. Credential #2: He knows the Word (9). "They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience." Dwight Eisenhower once said, "You don't lead by hitting people over the head. That's assault, not leadership." A deacon candidate is a man who gives evidence that he is living his life in submission to a higher authority than himself, namely the Word of God. Before a man can be a leader, he must exhibit that he's a follower, a follower of the Book.

Verse 9 indicates that deacons "must hold the deep truths of the faith," the "mystery of the faith," as the KJV puts it. "The faith" is a reference to the content of New Testament truth. To be a deacon, a man must have a handle on what God's Word says. He must know it and live it.

It's critical that we see this. God calls deacons to do more than serve as business managers who do things like balance the budget (as important as that is). Theirs is a spiritual ministry, not merely a social ministry, and certainly not simply a business venture. They must know the Word. Whereas an overseer must be able to teach the Word (2), a deacon must know the Word so as to help protect its contamination by false doctrine or faulty living.

C. Credential #3: He is a proven servant (10). "They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons." Please notice that it takes more than desire to be a deacon. It requires accountability and evaluation. They must "first be proved," as the KJV puts it. One commentator makes this observation, "Paul's language seems to suggest that the scrutiny was stricter for deacons than for overseers; the term 'testing' is not used of choosing the latter."⁵ That's interesting.

A man might say, "I've prayed about it, and I believe God wants me to be a deacon." Should his name be put on the ballot? Not necessarily. First he must be "tested."

When I played High School basketball, I used to dread the month of November. The hardest part of the basketball season, in my opinion, was November. That was the month of preseason practice. No games, just conditioning, drills, and working on the basics over and over. What was the purpose of the preseason? A key one was this. You had to prove yourself ready to play in the game. To be honest, some guys who had tons of talent weren't willing to prove themselves, so they didn't play.

To be a deacon, a man must be proven servant. How does he prove himself? Here's a checklist of indicators to help determine if a man is ready to be a deacon:

1. *Is he faithful to the church?* Once a man becomes a deacon, it will be his responsibility to support the church, its leadership and direction. Has he given such evidence yet? Does he come regularly to the church services? Is he faithful?

2. *Does he like to serve?* Has serving in the church been a priority to him? When ministries needed help, was he available? When work days were announced, did he come?

⁵ J.N.D. Kelly

3. *Is he a man of the Book?* Has he given evidence that he has a solid grasp of biblical doctrine? When you talk with him does he talk about what he's learning from God's Word or is his only subject the latest ballgame or business deal?

4. *Has he done other jobs well in the church?* If he's been a trustee, was he reliable? If an Awana worker, did he just "do the job" or did he really serve the children?

5. *Does he have good relationships with people?* Does he give evidence that people are important to him? Does he interact with people before and after worship services? Instead of ignoring problems, does he work through them with people?

If the answer to the questions is "yes," verse 10 indicates the man has proven himself. And when men have proven themselves, God says "let them serve as deacons."

D. Credential #4: He has a God-honoring family (11-12). How can you tell if that's the case? If the candidate has a God-honoring family, you'll see two evidences.

1. *His wife is godly (11).* "In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything." "Their wives" is literally "the women." Some suggest it refers to a third church office, *deaconesses*, female deacons. That's possible, but in light of the fact that verse 12 continues the discussion of a deacon's qualifications, I take it that verse 11 is not dealing with a separate office but is elaborating on a key qualification for the deacon. His wife must be a godly woman.

How can you tell if a woman is godly? Paul mentions four indicators. In her *walk* and *talk* is she *stable* and *able*? If a deacon's wife is godly, you'll see it in her *walk*--she must be "worthy of respect" ("grave," the same word used of the deacon in verse 8). You'll hear it in her *talk*--she won't be a "malicious talker" (a "slanderer"). Literally the phrase is "not devil-like." Remember, the devil is the accuser. He loves to stir up things. A deacon's wife must not. Indeed, a woman who slanders with her tongue disqualifies her husband from service as a deacon.

In addition, she must be *stable*--"temperate" (sober-minded; not hysteric when problems hit). And *able*--"trustworthy in everything" (faithful). If a man is to be a deacon, his wife must be faithful and reliable. Why? Because it will be *their* ministry, not just his. A second evidence...

2. *His household is in order (12).* "A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well." To be a deacon, a man must have his house in order. For starters, he must be, as a literal reading states, a "one-woman man."

Some writers say Paul's intent here is to forbid polygamy. But polygamy wasn't an issue in Ephesus. It wasn't permitted by the Jews, nor was it common in Roman circles—in part because sex outside of marriage was so common and accepted, and divorce was so easy to obtain. Immorality was prevalent, but the man didn't typically marry more than one woman.

Others have said Paul is forbidding a man to be a deacon if he has remarried after the death of his spouse. But in chapter 5 he actually encourages young widows to remarry.⁶

Some say this means divorced men cannot serve as deacons. Granted, God hates divorce (Mal 2:16). But in His mercy God allows for divorce in two situations, where there's sexual immorality or desertion. When either occurs and the original marriage is beyond restoration, God in His mercy permits divorce and remarriage.

In my estimation, the issue in verse 12 isn't the man's marital status so much as his moral reputation. John MacArthur observes, "Many men married only once are not one-

⁶ He even refers to "one-man women" in 5:9, the same word structure used in 3:12.

woman men. Many with one wife are unfaithful to that wife. While remaining married to one woman is commendable, it is no indication or guarantee of moral purity.”⁷

A one-woman man is a man who, if married, is devoted to his wife. He thinks only of her. He is not flirtatious with other women. He has a reputation for being sexually pure and faithful to God and to his spouse.

Again, that was a huge issue in the Roman world where men often had concubines on the side, and even engaged in sex with prostitutes at the pagan temple in the name of religion. To which Paul said, if you want to serve as a deacon in God’s church you must have a moral reputation marked by purity and faithfulness. You must be a one-woman man.

More and more people seem to forget Henry Ford’s sage advice when asked on his 50th wedding anniversary for his rule for marital bliss and longevity. He replied, “Just the same as in the automobile business, stick to one model.”⁸

To be a deacon a man must be a devoted husband, a *one-woman* man. Does this forbid men who have been divorced from serving as deacons? Godly Bible scholars differ at this point. Again, the issue is what did Paul mean by “the husband of but one wife?” I think the requirement has to do with moral reputation.

I know of a godly man whose wife committed adultery and left him after they’d been married only a couple of years. He did all he could to restore their relationship, but she divorced him. God later brought a godly woman into his life, and they now have been married for some fifteen years, serving faithfully in their church. He is regarded by the church family as a godly man, with a God-fearing wife and children. Does he have the kind of reputation required by 1 Timothy 3?

On the other hand, I know men whose marriages have hung by a thread for forty years. Granted, they never divorced but that was because of the potential embarrassment and financial burden divorce would create, not because their motive was to be godly. Do those men meet the biblical standard of 1 Timothy 3?

Beloved, I don’t believe we can take a cookie-cutter approach to this issue. We need to apply the Scriptures on a case by case basis. As a church we need to continue to study the Scriptures to discern God’s will concerning the matter of if and when divorced men can serve as overseers and deacons.

But the reason for today’s constitutional amendment vote is not to decide whether divorced men can serve as deacons—we’ll continue to search the Scriptures concerning that matter. The reason for the proposed amendment is to address what’s very clear. To disqualify a man solely because his wife has divorce in her background lacks biblical support. More about that in a moment.

In addition, he must “rule his children well,” as the KJV puts it. There must be no question who is leading in his home. His children are not perfect, but they are disciplined. They do not “run” the home. When problems arise, he deals with them biblically.

Furthermore, the text says he manages his “household” well. A man’s household includes his wife and children, but more than that. He must have his finances in order. You won’t see his name in the newspaper for writing bad checks. If you visit his home, you’ll see Christ, not chaos.

So there they are, four credentials God expects of a deacon. It takes a special person.

You need to know that as a church we take this seriously in the deacon selection process. Let me remind you how the selection of church officers works. As a

⁷ John MacArthur, p. 104.

⁸ *Christian Clippings*, p. 27.

congregation, you are invited to nominate potential servants for deacons, trustees, and treasurer. Then the Nominating Committee reviews all potential nominations prayerfully and carefully, looking at the biblical standard. Does the man have a godly testimony? Does he know the Word? Is he a proven servant? Is he seeking to have a God-honoring family? If the answer to any of these is "no," the man is not yet ready for nomination. I say *yet* because we can grow and change. We *ought* to be growing and changing. Those men that the nominating committee deems qualified are reviewed by the entire Combined Board, again prayerfully and carefully. Based on the Combined Board's recommendation, the qualified men are placed on the ballot for a congregational vote at the annual business meeting.

Perhaps you're thinking, "Wow! God's standard is high. Why would anyone want to be a deacon?" Here's why, insight #3...

III. It yields special privileges (13).

"Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus." Camp on that word *well*. It's possible to fill a slot as a deacon and not serve *well*. I am grateful that God has given our church deacons who do serve well, and I would commend Don, Gary, and Dan publicly.

What privileges does God extend to deacons who serve well? Here are two. First, they gain an excellent standing. We might say they are put on a pedestal. That's not sin because they didn't seek it, but the truth is, God exalts those who humble themselves (James 4:10). When deacons serve well they are honored by those they serve.

Secondly, they gain great assurance (boldness) in the faith. When deacons serve well, it breeds confidence. It gives them assurance that God is pleased. And what could be more rewarding than knowing that? Yes, there are privileges for serving as a deacon.

Know this. The text we've studied today is more than a pragmatic, how-to-text. Yes, it tells us how to choose deacons, but fundamentally, it teaches us some things about God.

Implications: What do we learn about God from this text? I see three implications...

1. *God doesn't lower His standards.* God's standard for leadership is high, isn't it? In fact, it's too high for any person to attain on his own strength. The solution isn't to lower the standard. God has a better way. God doesn't lower His standards. Rather...

2. *Rather, God brings people up to His standard.* That's true in salvation, right? God is holy. We are not holy. So what did God do? Lower His holy standard? No. He provided a way to bring us up. He sent His Son. Jesus came to earth to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. He lived a perfect life. He attained the standard. And then He died to pay the penalty we deserved for falling short of the standard. Then He rose again, and today offers eternal life to all who will trust in Him. If you trust in Christ, God brings you up to His standard by giving you the merit of Christ's accomplishments.

Now what's true in salvation is also true in service. If your life doesn't match the standard we've seen today, don't attack the standard. Submit to the Savior. Ask Him to bring you up so you will be the kind of servant that pleases Him.

Last time I mentioned four options in responding to God's standard for the overseer. The same four options exist in our response to His standard for deacons. You see, we've got a choice to make. We've just seen God's standard for deacons. God's standard is like a ruler with marks on it. What are we going to do with it? Here are the options:⁹

⁹ The Power Point slides present this graphically.

Option #1: We can reject God's standard and create our own. Some churches do just that. Instead of letting God's Word determine who should be deacons, they develop their own (usually unspoken) standard. Such as, a deacon must be: a good talker, possess business savvy, be smart, come from "good stock," and in short be a "good guy" (again, based on the people's personal opinion of what a "good guy" is).

Option #2: We can reject part of God's standard and keep what we like. "God's standard is okay, but come on, this is 2002 not A.D. 65! As long as a person is a hard worker, his family life doesn't matter. We want someone who gets things done (no matter how he does it). A little greed is okay, and there's no need for a fellow to be tested first in the church. Come on, this man runs a multi-million dollar company! Surely he can be a deacon!" Option #2 waters down God's standard by subtraction. Option #3 waters it down by addition...

Option #3: We can add personal opinions to God's standard. The person choosing this option may be very sincere. He may love the church. He may respect God's Word. The problem is, he doesn't think God's standard is clear enough or high enough. So he tries to help God out. How? He adds his own requirements to God's. "To be a deacon," he say, "a man *must* have children (since verse 12 says his children are in order), *must* have a Bible College degree (since verse 9 says he keeps hold of the deeps truths), and *must* be married (since verse 12 says he's the husband of one wife)."

Frankly, I believe our church constitution resorts to option #3 at this point, which is the reason for the proposed amendments. Our constitution says a deacon must take a year off after serving two terms. It also says a man who has been married to a divorced person cannot be a deacon. Did we see that stipulation in 1 Timothy 3? No, nor would we find it anywhere in the Bible.

God's Word doesn't say that. God doesn't comment on the woman's marital status in 1 Timothy 3, but simply says she is to be worthy of respect, not a malicious talker, temperate, and trustworthy (11). To keep the present clause is to add personal opinion to God's standard. It also prevents men from serving that God says are qualified.

Option #4: We can follow God's standard as sufficient. God's standard is good. In fact, we're in real trouble when we start tampering with it. It's not enough to say, "Well, we're close to being biblical." Should we be content with being *close*? Think about it. Here's what you'd get in some other areas if 99% were good enough:

--35,000 newborn babies dropped by doctors or nurses each year

--200,000 people getting the wrong drug prescriptions each year

--Unsafe drinking water three days a year.

--2 million people would die from food poisoning each year.

Let's let the Bible be our guide, not just some of the time, not even most of the time, but in *every* decision. God's way is so much better than man's. Man tampers with the standard. But there's stability when we do things God's way.

God's standard is just right. And when we accept it God does something else. He brings people up to His standard. How?

3. *He does it through Christ.* That way He gets all the glory He so richly deserves.