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**THE OFFICE OF DEACON**  
The Biblical Qualifications and Their Role  
At First Baptist Church, Tallassee  
Congregation Edition

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### ***Role of Deacons***

The deacons shall function as servants in the church in accordance with the meaning of the word and the practice of the New Testament. Their purpose is to serve the Lord by conducting the caring ministry of the church – doing the work of benevolence, visiting the sick, and being alert to the spiritual needs of the congregation. They shall be the principal administrators of the benevolence ministry. They are to be zealous to guard the unity of the Spirit and peace, being responsible for overseeing steps of correction, discipline, and restoration in the church. They are to heighten the spiritual tone in the church by example and word. They shall assist in serving the Lord's Supper. The deacons shall help free the pastor (and other ministerial staff) to focus on prayer, the ministry of the Word, and the equipping ministry. Their service should facilitate the spread of the gospel and promote unity within the church. — Bylaws, First Baptist Church, Tallassee

## The Biblical Origin and Role of Deacons

Though the word, “deacon,” is not used in Acts 6, most Baptists consider this passage the historical record of the establishment of the office. The word for waiting on tables is the same root word as deacon and the duty described in the passage seems consistent with what we read in the rest of Scripture concerning the office. Here is a list of the forms of this Greek word for “servant”:

- *"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."*  
Serve, Deacon, Worship" in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, ed., volume 3, pages 544, 546

The church distributed food to the widows on a daily basis. However, controversy threatened the church when the overloaded Apostles were accused of playing favorites and neglecting the Greek-speaking widows. So the Apostles called a church conference and stated, in the first place, they should be concentrating on “Prayer and the ministry of the Word” — that is, they shouldn’t be distracted from what God had called them to do in order to administer the benevolence ministry. Second, the church should call out some people qualified to fulfill this task instead of them. The church agreed, and even selected all Greek-speaking deacons as a show of good faith. The controversy ceased and the church continued to grow.

In the early days of the church, deacons served as assistants of church leaders. They assisted in Baptism, serving the Lord’s Supper, and in helping the poor. The idea of a board of directors is found neither in Scripture nor in the history of the early church.

Here is a summary of the biblical role of deacons:

*New Testament Deacons serve the Lord by conducting the caring ministry of the church — doing the benevolence work, visiting the sick, being alert to the spiritual needs of the congregation — for the purpose of freeing the pastoral staff to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word — thus promoting unity within the church and facilitating the spread of the gospel.*

In addition to these biblical roles, at First Baptist, deacons are also responsible to:

- Guard the unity of the Spirit and peace in the church. This is why certain issues are hammered-out in deacons meeting before going to the congregation.
- Oversee steps of correction, discipline, and restoration in the church.
- Heighten the spiritual tone in the church by example and word.
- Assist in serving the Lord’s Supper.

## The Core Qualifications for Deacons

*Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men  
of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom,  
whom we can appoint to this duty.*

*Acts 6:3*

The Bible doesn't expect men to be perfect or some kind of "super-Christian" to be qualified to serve as deacons. However, Scripture does describe the type of man who should be selected for this office. The Apostles listed three core qualifications for the office of deacon: that the men have a good reputation in the community, that they be full of the Holy Spirit, and that they be full of wisdom.

**First, a man has to have a reputation in the community for character.** He has to live a consistent Christian life. Otherwise, the reputation of the church will be damaged, as will her ministry to the community. It all starts with credibility.

**Secondly, a deacon should have the experience of the Holy Spirit working in his life, enabling him to grow in grace and empowering him to serve the Lord.** Since the church is a supernatural phenomenon, powered by the Holy Spirit, her leaders should have a meaningful connection to the Holy Spirit.

**Thirdly, a deacon should be full of wisdom.** That is, he should know how to apply the principles of Scripture to the problems of life and of the church. When discussing church business, he should know how to take an appropriate biblical text and speak to the issue.

Of the original seven deacons, one of them, Stephen, is described as a man "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (verse 5). Unbelievers aren't full of faith; so deaconship is for Christians only. Critics and cynics are not suited for this ministry, either; cynics, by definition, aren't full of faith. Those who are full of faith are positive and trust the Lord.

Verse 8 adds that Stephen, was "full of grace and power." The divine enabling of God was on his life — and God touched others with His grace through him. It was this Stephen who would later become the first martyr of the church.

Another of the original seven deacons, Philip, would lead the Ethiopian eunuch to the Lord and baptize him (chapter 8).

In Acts 6 we see the qualifications listed and then exemplified. With the examples of Stephen and Philip we get a better idea of what a deacon should look like. This is to be a spiritual ministry conducted by spiritual men.

I Timothy 3 gives fuller expression to the core qualifications of Acts 6, further expounding what they look like. You will see explanations for each of these biblical descriptions on the pages that follow.

### **First Timothy 3:8-13**

8. *Deacons, likewise, should be worthy of respect, not hypocritical, not drinking a lot of wine, not greedy for money,*
9. *holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.*
10. *And they must also be tested first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons.*
11. *Wives, too, must be worthy of respect, not slanderers, self-controlled, faithful in everything.*
12. *Deacons must be husbands of one wife, managing their children and their own households competently.*
13. *For those who have served well as deacons acquire a good standing for themselves, and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

### ***Deacons likewise***

Verses 1-7 contain the qualifications for overseers (also known as bishops, elders, and the term most frequently used today, pastors). There are two offices in the New Testament church: pastors and deacons (Philippians 1:1), and the qualifications for the deacon are similar to those of the pastor.

### ***Worthy of respect***

He is a person who is taken seriously; this is why the King James Version translates this word, “grave” and the ESV translates it “dignified.” In recent years potential candidates for high office are said to have “gravitas” — it is a similar idea. This person’s life and presence command respect. He is not respected simply because he is a successful businessman. He is not merely popular. Rather, deacons are to be *worthy of respect* because they consistently live according to biblical principles.

### ***Not hypocritical***

Not given to double-talk, saying one thing to one group and another to a different group. He doesn’t tell people what they want to hear. He is not a “chameleon” who “acts spiritual” around the church folks and crude to fit in with the lost. He is a sincere Christian who deals truthfully.

### ***Not drinking a lot of wine***

*The prohibition against indulging “in much wine” forbids the love of alcohol. The requirements resemble the demand of 3:3 for the overseer. Total abstinence today from alcohol would guard the deacon from the clutches of intoxicants. It would provide a credible witness to a society that needs help in combating alcoholism.*

— *New American Commentary*

As alcohol is one drug among many, the same principle would apply to illicit drugs.

### ***Not greedy for money***

Since the church benevolence ministry would involve the handling of money, clearly someone who was greedy for it could be tempted to embezzle these funds — so there was a very practical reason for this qualification. But, of course, it goes deeper than that. Scripture tells us that greed is a form of idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Materialistic people do not have the heart for the spiritual and eternal to make good deacons.

### ***Holding the mystery of the faith***

Though deacons are not required to be “an able teacher” like the overseer (verse 2), the Lord’s church is based on doctrinal truth and is to be operated according to biblical principles. Deacons are to have a firm grip on the “mystery of the faith” — that is, they should be doctrinally sound. They should know the Bible better than the bylaws and aspire to operate the church on biblical principles more than on business principles. They should understand the Gospel well enough to explain it. Deacons should be able to share the testimony of their conversions. They should have a reasonable understanding of Christian doctrine and of those beliefs distinctive to Baptists.

### ***With a clear conscience***

We all know people who have a great deal of biblical knowledge, but little (or inconsistent) character. Instead, the deacon’s life and knowledge should be a matched set.

*Simply because a church member is popular, successful in business, or generous in his giving does not mean he is qualified to serve as a deacon.*

— Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary*

### ***And they must also be tested first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons.***

The word for testing means testing over a period of time. Regardless of promise and talent, these are not baby believers, just getting started in the Christian life. Nor are they people we are trying to help become more involved in the church. The Bible teaches that leadership goes to the faithful (I Timothy 1:12; II Timothy 2:2). These are seasoned veterans in Christian service. For this reason, some churches have a process for examining their deacons as part of the testing process. Some congregations have “Yokefellow Deacons” or “Junior Deacons” to provide a period of training and testing. Once a man is proven blameless, he can serve as deacon. “Blameless” does not mean “perfect,” but rather there isn’t a good reason the man shouldn’t serve as a deacon... having passed the test, he has demonstrated the character and knowledge and attitude to serve. No one could raise a legitimate objection to his serving.

### ***Wives, too***

Because the most literal translation of this word is “women,” rather than “wives,” some have suggested women deacons. Some have cited Phoebe as an example of a woman deacon (Romans 16:1). How do we answer this?

First, if the Bible assumed both men and women could be deacons, why did it mention women specifically as it does? Wouldn't the same qualifications apply to all? The only reason to mention qualifications specific to women would be if there were some form of auxiliary for women's ministry, or if he were referring to the wives of deacons.

Second, in regard to Phoebe, while all deacons are servants (the word deacon means “servant”), not all servants in the Bible are deacons.

Third, while the Bible does not teach that the deacons form a governing board of ruling elders, it is still regarded as a position of leadership. 1 Timothy 2:12 would forbid that type office to a woman: “I do not allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man.” And the reasons cited for this prohibition in the passage are theological and historical, not rooted in the culture of the day. Admittedly, this makes the church counter-cultural. But we base our church structure on the Bible, not on the culture of our day.

There are some places in the world where Baptist churches have women who serve as deaconesses who are involved in ministry to women. The passage allows for that understanding. In that case, Titus 2:3-5 would shed some light on the nature of that ministry. However, it seems a more natural reading of the text to take the passage as referring to the wives of deacons.

Deacon ministry is a family affair. The wife of a deacon needs to be supportive and needs to be able to come alongside to help her husband in his ministry as a partner. Thus, we read, “Wives, too.”

### ***Worthy of respect***

This is the same word as used for the deacon, explained above. How could a man be an effective deacon with a scandalous wife? She must also be respected.

### ***Not slanderers***

The word is literally, “she-devil.” That's what the devil is, an accuser and slanderer. The wives of deacons often know things others in the church do not know. If they misuse this information, it can cause great damage in the church. They should know how to keep a confidence and should speak wisely and kindly.

### ***Self-controlled***

Many translations use the word, “temperate.” The ESV translates it, “sober-minded.” In regard to alcohol, drugs, and temperament, she is a sober person.

Such a woman is calm and collected. She doesn't overreact to problems. Instead, she acts wisely under pressure. She isn't one to go chasing after one theological fad only to then chase after the next spiritual experience — she is stable.

### ***Faithful in everything***

She can be counted on. She's not good at talking the game, but then one who has an excuse for not showing up. She is where she is supposed to be and does her share of the work.

### ***Deacons must be husbands of one wife***

At First Baptist, this passage has been understood to mean, "Not divorced and remarried." Translations supporting this interpretation are:

- *Amplified: "Let deacons be the husbands of but one wife"*
- *Wuest: "Let the deacons be one-wife sort of men" Marginal note: "That is, married only once"*
- *Hendriksen: "One wife's husband"*

Naturally, this doesn't mean a widower cannot remarry and still serve as a deacon. Nor does it mean that the Apostle Paul, as an unmarried man, would have been disqualified for the office.

This is more than a mechanical question, which can be verified with a trip to the courthouse to check the records. It refers to the kind of man a deacon (and in verse 2, a pastor) presently is—he is a one-woman kind of a man, faithful to his wife. One can easily see why this should be a qualification for the office. Deacons would often be in the homes of widows to distribute food. They needed to be in a family situation that would protect them from vulnerable moments with vulnerable women.

### ***Managing their children and their own households competently***

Sometimes, our children break our hearts. How our children respond to their upbringing is one thing; how we bring them up is another — and it is the latter that is being discussed here. This person *manages* his home. His children do not run over him or show him disrespect. When problems arise, he handles them in a biblical manner.

### ***For those who have served well as deacons acquire a good standing for themselves, and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.***

This, of course, is not a qualification, but a promise to faithful deacons. On one hand, they earn the respect of others in the church. On the other, they have confidence before God — "So now, little children, remain in Him, so that when He appears we may have boldness and not be ashamed before Him at His coming" — I John 2:28

## Qualifications Found in the Church Bylaws

### **The Bylaws Require that We Use the Biblical Qualifications**

*The core qualifications for deacons are enumerated in Acts 6, emphasizing that such men be full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith, and full of wisdom. They should be men of good reputation (verses 3 & 5). These core qualifications are further elaborated in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 3:8-13.*

### **A Faithful Church Member**

*To be eligible to serve as deacon, a man must be supportive of the overall church program and staff. He shall demonstrate his faithfulness through his lifestyle, attendance and participation.*

First, for a man to accept the office of deacon at First Baptist Church, he should already be more faithful than to attend only on Sunday mornings. Such a person cannot possibly know enough about the church's program to be involved in any decision-making process in an informed manner. It doesn't set the right example and it doesn't meet the biblical standard of being tested first, before serving. The same can be said for serving the Lord in some way through the church.

What is meant by being "supportive of the overall church program and staff"? The church isn't looking for "Yes-men" to be deacons. But neither is the church looking for someone with an axe to grind, or for someone looking to get into a position to work his agenda on a staff member, or for someone who wants to sabotage the mission or vision of the church. We need people who embrace the biblical mission of the church and want to be part of the team to help us fulfill our ministry.

### **Giving Requirements**

*Deacons shall be tithers.*

It would seem inappropriate to have someone to hold the office of deacon, and be involved in the budget process that determines how the sacrificial gifts of others are to be spent, when they themselves do not tithe.

### **Age & Tenure Requirements**

*Each man shall be at least 21 years old and have been a member of the church for at least one year.*

