

The Office

Twice in the NT, deacons are listed (alongside overseers) as an office in the church.

[Philippians 1:1](#) “1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:” [1 Timothy 3:8](#) “8 Deacons likewise must be [qualifications]...”

Proto-deacons

[Acts 6](#) does not mention deacons. I would argue that the office of deacon did not exist at this point in the church. However, this passage likely describes the **idea** that led to the **office** of deacon. The need need in [Acts 6:1](#) was the daily διακονία. The task to address the need in [Acts 6:2](#) was the διακονέω of tables.

The need

[Acts 6:1](#) “1 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.”

What was the problem in the church at Jerusalem? As the church cared for widows, some were being neglected. **Hellenist** refers to a person who spoke Greek; this would include both Jews and Gentiles. **Hebrew** refers to a person who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic (both are Semitic languages). Most Jews around the world spoke Greek, which is why the OT was translated into Greek (LXX). Those who lived near Judea (and Galilee) more often spoke Aramaic (and sometimes Hebrew). Although nearly everyone during this time-period spoke Greek, there was still a natural language barrier.

[Acts 6:2](#) “2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.”

Who are “the twelve?” This refers to the twelve apostles. Although the office of overseer (elder, pastor) developed earlier in the church, the apostles had authority from Jesus over all the churches. Just like the men appointed in [Acts 6](#) provide implications for deacons, the apostles in [Acts 6](#) provide implications for overseers (though with less authority).

What were the apostles unwilling to sacrifice to address the church’s problem? They would not sacrifice their responsibility to Scripture to take on other responsibilities.

"Serving tables" should not be viewed as a derogatory task. Scripture is full of commands to provide for widows. [James 1:27](#) calls such ministry “pure religion.”

The men

[Acts 6:3-4](#) “3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Who chose the men for this task? The apostles addressed the “brothers,” meaning the church. There are some deacons at Bethlehem who were previously deacons at another church. They are deacons here because Bethlehem recognized the same virtue in them as the previous church. Being a deacon at one church does not necessitate being a deacon at another church when he moves.

What were the qualifications of these men? They were to have a good reputation. They were to be full of the Spirit. Only believers who continue to walk faithfully with the Lord can be deacons. They were to be full of wisdom. [James 3:13-17](#) makes a major distinction between godly wisdom and worldly wisdom. I think that distinction applies here, too.

To what did the apostles devote themselves? They devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. Jesus displayed this same priority in [Mark 1:35-39](#). He chose prayer and preaching the word over healing people and casting out demons. Again, this has implications for overseers (elders, pastors) as well.

The result

[Acts 6:5-7](#) “5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”

How many men did the church choose for this task? They chose seven men to serve the widows. This does not mean that every church should have seven deacons. This was the number needed for **this task**. It is worth noting that all seven men had Greek names, which was fitting since it was the Greek-speaking widows who were not being served.

What did the apostles do after this selection? They laid their hands on them and prayed. I think this describes their approval of the church’s selections.

In verse 7, what was the outcome of appointing these seven men to serve? The word of God increased. The apostles were free to focus on Scripture. The church in Jerusalem grew.

Summary

There are a few **easily overlooked details** in this passage. Again, these men are not deacons, but they are the predecessors of deacons. First, the men were appointed for the sake of

unity. [Acts 6:1](#) begins with a complaint. A deacon's primary responsibility is to maintain unity in the church. Second, the men were appointed for a task (a need), not for an office. That is, the goal was not to fill the office of deacon. There was a need that required seven men; therefore, seven men were chosen. Deacons should be appointed based specific needs. Third, these men were appointed so that the apostles could focus on prayer and the word. This focus is also true concerning overseers (elders, pastors); deacons serve so that overseers can focus on prayer and Scripture.

Fourth, deacons are appointed to serve, but this does not remove the church's responsibility to serve. Deacons are not given oversight of the church; that is they are not expected to teach or make church-wide decisions (leading). However, I would argue that deacons are given oversight of particular needs. The apostles were responsible for determining the needs of the church. The church body was responsible for the work of ministry ([Eph 4:12](#)). The deacons were given the task of overseeing a specific task - *how will we make sure the task is accomplished?*

Fifth, the tasks of a deacon, while distinct from overseers, is a spiritual task, not a physical task. Churches should not appoint deacons because they are good business managers or have good trade skills. Those skills may determine what task a particular deacon is appointed to; however, the primary qualification is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Serving widows is a spiritual task.

Sixth, when deacons serve well, they free overseers for focusing on prayer and Scripture, and maintain unity well, churches will be blessed ([Acts 6:7](#)).

Qualifications

[1 Timothy 3:1-13](#) describes the qualifications of overseers and deacons. This is the only passage that gives deacon qualifications.

First Qualifications

[1 Timothy 3:8-10](#) "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."

It is important to note that the qualifications of deacons (e.g., dignified, not double-tongued, not greedy, etc.) are not qualities that are unique to deacons. These are qualities of all professing Christians. The point in listing these qualities is that deacons must exemplify Christian character.

In verse 10, what should precede a deacon's appointment? They should be **examined** (tested, δοκιμάζω) before appointment. This is the same word used in [1 Cor 11:28](#) which encourages

church members to **examine** themselves before partaking in the Lord's Supper. The distinction here is that the church must examine the deacons.

Wives/women

[1 Timothy 3:11](#) “11 Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.”

This is a highly debated verse. The word translated “wives” in ESV (γυνή) means “woman” **or** “wife.” The debate then is, does this verse refer to women (female deacons) or wives (of deacons). This is important for deciding whether the Bible teaches about female deacons.

*What support might there be for **female deacons**?* First, it is odd that deacons' wives should have qualifications, but overseers' (pastors') wives should not have qualifications. Second, although [1 Tim 2-3](#) indicates that overseers (pastors) should be men because overseers are responsible for leading the church (having authority in the church) and teaching the church, two responsibilities that women are not given ([1 Tim 2:12](#)). However, deacons do not have the responsibility of leading or of teaching; therefore, women would not be excluded. Third, Romans refers to Phoebe as a deacon. [Romans 16:1](#) “1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant (δίακονος) of the church at Cenchreae...”

What support might there be against female deacons? First, although deacons do not lead, it is still a church office. Therefore, while [2 Tim 2:12](#) does not directly relate to deacons, it may relate secondarily. Second, it is reasonable that deacons' wives should be mentioned, but not overseers' wives. The wife will not share in the overseer's responsibilities of leading and teaching. However, the wife of a deacon **may** share in his responsibilities of serving. Third, there does not seem to be a good reason for female deacons having additional qualifications beyond male deacons. Furthermore, we would expect verse 12 to say, “Let men...,” not “Let deacons...”

Finally, although Phoebe is a strong argument for female deacons, there is reason to question it. [Romans 13:4](#) refers to government authorities as God's servant (δίακονος), although they clearly do not serve as church deacons. This argument should be considered cautiously because Phoebe is called a “deacon” of a church.

The arguments for both sides are strong and biblically based. I would caution churches to not make this a point of fellowship. That is, if one church has female deacons and another forbids female deacons, it would be unwise for that to be a divisive point between those churches.

Family heads

[1 Timothy 3:12-13](#) “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.”

What qualifications do deacons have in relation to their spouses? They should have one wife. “Husband of one wife” is a difficult phrase. First, this could be translated either “husband of one wife” or “man of one woman,” which may influence how we interpret it. Second, there is no context to determine how we should understand it.

What are some possible meanings of this phrase? First, this could refer to polygamy; that is, deacons should not be married to multiple women. A lot of scholars argue that this was not prevalent in the Greco-Roman culture. However, D. A. Carson has given evidence that it **was** prevalent among people of authority.

Second, this could refer to divorce and remarriage. Some argue that God still considers a couple to be married even though they divorce. This is largely based on Jesus’s teaching about divorce where He says that those who divorce for an unjustified reason (besides sexual immorality) commits adultery in remarriage ([Matt 19:9](#)) and causes the spouse to commit adultery (presumably in remarriage) ([Matt 5:31-32](#)). Jesus’s teaching (and this view) is built on the Scripture’s teaching that two people become one flesh. Against this view, if remarriage disqualifies a deacon because they are “one flesh” with two women, then all sexual immorality disqualifies a deacon, including premarital sex ([1 Cor 6:16](#)). Additionally, [Deuteronomy 24](#), which is the primary biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage (although interpreted against [Gen 2:24](#) by Jesus), seems to indicate that God does **not** consider someone to be married to his wife after remarriage. If a man divorces his wife, she remarries, and the second husband divorces her, the first husband cannot remarry her. If God considered them to still be married, their “remarriage” would only be a recognition of what was already true.

Third, this phrase could refer to faithfulness; that is, a husband should be faithful to his wife. This would be the most reasonable interpretation of “man of one woman.” This view would include the first view (rejection of polygamy), but would **also** include how the husband interacted with other women (e.g., adultery, inappropriate relationships, etc.).

****Personal View:** I think the clearest interpretation is that this is a rejection of polygamy. First, the only solid argument against this referring to polygamy is that polygamy was not common in the culture. As stated above, although polygamy was not wide-spread, it was more common among leaders. The most natural interpretation is that a man can only be married to one woman. Second, [Deut 24:1-4](#) suggests that God does not regard someone who is divorced and remarried to still be married to the first spouse. This is an idea imposed into Scripture (although not without good reason). If this view were true, then it would also be reasonable for a person to divorce his second wife and return to his first wife. However, a biblical view of marriage would be that he should remain married to his **current** wife. Third, although “man of one woman” is a reasonable translation (and a reasonable requirement), the context of verse 12 suggests that this is referring to family **roles**, not just faithfulness.

What qualification do deacons have in relation to their family (beyond just their wives)? They should manage their children and households well. This is a significant qualification, but one that should not be interpreted too strictly.

First, the word “manage” is the same word used in [1 Tim 5:17](#) to describe the responsibility of overseers (elders, pastors) to lead in the church. The word means to lead, rule, or have authority. Overseers are given responsibility to lead the church, but deacons are not. It is significant that they are **still** responsible for leading their families well.

Second, does this mean that men should not be considered if they have rebellious or rambunctious children? The point of the passage is that they should **lead** their household (wife and children) well, not that they can determine how their wife and children respond. In the same way, Paul would not be disqualified for the rebellion of the Corinthian or Galatians churches. Pastors are responsible for leading, not determining the response. Likewise, fathers are responsible for leading, not determining the response.

Closing Comments

God has blessed Bethlehem with great deacons. As a church, we should remember to honor them for their commitment to serving the church. Ultimately, we should glorify God because their devotion is a work of the Holy Spirit and their service is the Holy Spirit working through them.

Why should a church have deacons? First, deacons help preserve unity in the church by meeting the needs that lead to conflict. Second, deacons free pastors to focus on prayer and proclaiming Scripture. Third, when deacons serve well, churches are blessed.

Deacons serve the church to preserve the unity we have in Christ. Deacons serve the church so that pastors can better proclaim Christ. Deacons serve the church to point people to Christ.