

The Pillar (Part 2 of 4)

What are Deacons to do?

1 Timothy 3:8-13

Mark Vroegop

⁸Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. ¹²Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. ¹³For 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 Tim. 3:8-13).

A lot has happened in lives of people since we were together last Sunday. It never ceases to amaze me how many different needs there are within the body of Christ. The beauty of being a part of the church is that we get to be involved in the most important moments in people's lives. Here are a few examples of what happened in our body this week:

- Vada Lyles came home this week after successful heart surgery
- Margaret Platner and her family celebrated the life of her husband, Frank, who passed away after 67 years of marriage
- Max, the preemie grandson of Greg and Miriel Candler, was approved for a new and much needed medical treatment.
- Don and Alma Walker are praying for their extended family after the unexpected death of their nephew Ted
- Shye Fox, the 20-month old grandson of Monte Fox, is recovering from cancer surgery and treatment for liver cancer
- In the last two weeks, Dwaune and Jessica Jones and Robert and Ellen Fellows were blessed with babies born into their families, and Chris and Becky Bell just received two adoptive children from Africa.
- Last week we helped 16 people who stopped by the church looking for financial assistance.

We get to take the Word of God and apply it to life's circumstances – the good, the bad, the fun, and the ugly moments of life. We get to serve them, help them, and assist them during those difficult moments. In this way, we live out the grace and truth paradox: We not only share the truth of God's word; we also get to come along-side them, care for them, and meet tangible needs.

College Park has had a long legacy of blending the Word of God and personal care. In fact, one of our core values is extravagant grace which essentially means that we value treating people with

the same level of grace with which we have been treated by God. Central to how this value is lived out is the ministry of Deacons.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 identifies the qualifications for this role, and I think it is really important for us to talk about what Deacons are supposed to be and do, especially right now. One of the things that our Elders and staff have been talking about for the last three months is how to be sure that we keep this ministry personal despite the fact that we have three large services with almost 4,000 people here every Sunday. You see, we believe that success is not just measured by the number of bodies in the building; its measured by our ability to really care for people. We refuse to be a large, numbers-oriented, well-oiled machine of a ministry. We are passionate to live out the Great Commission ("go into all the world" – Matt. 28:19) and the Great Commandment ("love your neighbor as yourself" – Matt. 22:39).

Two Roles: Elders and Deacons

Last week I showed you that the church is to be led by two important offices: Elders and Deacons. Elders are primarily responsible for governance and shepherding. We saw this most clearly expressed in 1 Peter 5:1-4 with the unique words that are used to capture the essence of Elder ministry:

*So I exhort the **elders** (presbyteros) among you, as a fellow **elder** and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² **shepherd** (poimano) the flock of God that is among you, exercising **oversight** (episkopos), not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*

Deacons, on the other hand, are primarily responsible for service and care. Now it is not that Elders never serve or care. Nor is it the case that Deacons never shepherd or lead. The distinction is one of priority, and it relates to a division of labor that keeps the church balanced. In other words, solid churches have well developed and vibrant Elders and Deacons. We need both.

Last week we looked at the qualifications for Elder which centered on the concept of "above reproach," and we learned about ten areas in which this was to be lived out. It was a sober reminder of the importance of godly, qualified leaders. However, leaders are not all that the church needs. It also needs godly, qualified servants.

Deacons: Called to Serve

In the same way that the word for "Elder" is really important to understand, so too is the word for Deacon. There are three terms that are all closely related: diakoneo ("to serve"), diakonia ("service"), and diakonos ("deacon"). We have an action, a ministry, and an office or title. These three words are used approximately 100 times in the New Testament, and only in 1 Timothy 3 and Philippians 1 do they refer to a title.

The original meaning of this collection of words involved the nuance of service or waiting on tables. Over time, the word came to be defined more broadly. It is used throughout the New Testament for any kind of ministry service, and the words are translated with the following English words: administration, minister, servant, serve, serving, relief, and support.¹ The word or concept is something that all believers are called to embrace. Consider two familiar passages:

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry (diakonia), for building up the body of Christ... (Eph. 4:11-12).

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of service (diakonia), but the same Lord (1 Corinthians 12:4-5).

Therefore the word can mean, in a very general sense, anything done in obedience. Jesus even said, “If anyone serves me (diakone), he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant (diakonos) will be” (John 12:26).

While this refers to a general calling for all believers, there are times when some sort of official capacity is in view. For example, Paul refers to those who have been given authority to enforce justice as “diakonos” in Romans 13:4. We call them “public servants” – an official title connected with service.

The role of a deacon is this kind of role. It is a specific and official title given to those who are called by the church to provide leadership to critical service-oriented ministries. While everyone in the church is called to serve at some level, there is a specific and appointed group who provide leadership to these vital areas.

What does this ministry entail? Similar to the Elders, their tasks are not exhaustively identified. Acts 6 gives us one example of a group who were chosen to lead the church in its care for those who were in need of food and who were being neglected. As I shared last week, it seems that a Deacon ministry would emerge in churches over time as the needs of the body grew. I’m sure that Deacons were involved in a variety of service opportunities. In fact, probably the best way to understand the role of Deacon is to think of it as those who model spiritual service and work alongside the Elders, implementing their oversight and teaching in the practical life of the church.²

Therefore, Deacons could be involved in a wide variety of areas of spiritual service, and this could look very different in each church setting, depending on the needs. Their main task is to ensure two things:

1. That the Elders are able to maintain focus of oversight through the Word and prayer
2. That the needs of the people in the congregation are met

At College Park we express this with three different groups of deacons:

¹ John MacArthur, The MacArthur Commentary – 1 Timothy, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 1995), 124.

² MacArthur, 125.

- **Facility deacons** – those who care for the facilities so that our needs are met every Sunday
- **Compassion deacons** – those who care for hurting people in times of crisis and our widows
- **First-Hand deacons** – those who care for our visitors, guests, and new members

These deacons provide leadership to very critical areas of our church ministry. They serve our body by taking care of very practical needs. They make our church personal; they make our church real; they help us live out our values. Deacons are very important to the spiritual vitality of a body of believers. They are called to serve.

Qualifications for Service

There is sometimes an unfortunate dichotomy made regarding the importance of Elders and Deacons. One might be tempted to think that since Deacons are involved in service that they have less importance in the body. But Paul gives a lengthy list of their qualifications, and it is remarkably similar to that of Elders. Last week I made an appeal for you to strive or aspire to be an Elder; I think that the same thing holds true for the role of a Deacon. The list that follows helps us to see that serving as a Deacon is a high calling in the church; it is one of two official roles that provide leadership to the church. Therefore, it must be pursued with great respect and seriousness.

Notice the word “**likewise**” in verse 8. Paul is linking this section with what he said previously, and the tone is the same. Elders represent the church through governance and teaching, and Deacons represent the church through leading service ministries.

Let’s look at these qualifications:

Dignified – In the same way that “above reproach” was an over-arching summary of what Elders should be, Deacons are called to be “dignified.” It is to be the singular mark of their lives. The Greek word (*semnos*) is used of older men in Titus 2:2 and in Philippians 4:8 where Paul says that we should think about things that are “honorable.” One commentator says that this word has such a richness about it that it is impossible to limit it to just one English word. Its meaning refers to lofty things, majestic things, things that lift the mind from the cheap and tawdry to that which is noble, good, and of moral worth.³

A Deacon is to be a person whom you’d want to be like, a person who models what effective and Christ-like service is all about. Deacons should be the kind of people who serve in such a way that it is clear they are doing this for Jesus and out of love for him. They are honorable and respectable servants of the Lord Jesus.

Not Double-Tongued – This statement and two others that follow provide a clear contrast to what it means to be dignified. The meaning of the phrase seems rather apparent: a deacon should be

³ William Mounce, Pastoral Epistles – The Word Biblical Commentary, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 198-199.

consistent and trustworthy with what he says. He should not be guilty of breaking confidences, saying one thing but meaning another, saying one thing to one person but a different thing to another. There should be a moral consistency in what they say. Their lives and their mouths are dignified.

Not Addicted to Much Wine – As we saw with the qualifications for Elders, a leader should not be known for his lack of self-control. The word “addicted” means to give one’s devotion to or continue to apply oneself to.

Not Greedy for Dishonest Gain – Deacons should have a right understanding of the place of money, and they should not be guilty of shameful gain. They should be known for generosity and graciousness – not ruthless, cut-throat, or morally questionable use of money.

A Gospel-driven Life – The text says “hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.” Now when Paul talks about the “mystery” he is not suggesting that something is entirely unknown. Rather, he means “knowledge that is beyond the reach of sinners but has not been revealed through the gospel” (see Rom. 16:25-26, Eph. 6:19, Col. 1:25-27).⁴ Deacons are to understand this gospel and hold to it with a “clear conscience” which means appropriate behavior. In other words, he is to show others what it means to be a gospel-centered servant.

Don’t miss the significance here of what Paul has said, because this is really important. Deacons have a powerful ability to show people how the gospel actually works. They are able to lead service opportunities that make the gospel very, very practical and which send very loud messages.

Proven – Verse ten says something we should note: “And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.” In a similar fashion as to what was said about new converts in regards to Elders (see 3:6), Paul says that Deacons should be proven or tested before they serve in an official capacity. It seems that Paul is suggesting that there be sufficient amount of time in order for the candidate to really be known and proven. The word for “test” (dokimazo) was used of the testing process for metals to determine something’s purity and genuineness. And if they proved to be “blameless” (free from reproach), then they could serve (diakoneo).

Here is something worth talking about briefly, and it relates to what I said last week about aspiring to church offices. You might wonder, “What do I do if I aspire to the office of Elder or Deacon?” The best answer I have for you is to prove yourself faithful, trustworthy, and blameless in the areas that God gives you now. Make the most of spiritual leadership opportunities however small and insignificant they might seem. When our Elders look for people who are qualified, we look for people who are serving, the kind of people who see ministry service as a life-style not a position. We look for people who demonstrate faithfulness in small and “out-of-sight” areas so that we know that they can be trusted with more. Specifically, it means that a person can be trusted to not let the official position become more about them than it is about God. You need to prove that you

⁴ Mounce, 200.

are really serving Jesus, not serving Jesus to really serve yourself. And only time will bear this out (see 1 Timothy 5:24).

Faithful, Qualified Wives – Interestingly, Paul adds a brief statement about the qualifications of wives of Deacons. He gives four qualifications: dignified, not slanderers, sober-minded, and faithful in all things. I'll unpack each of these briefly in a moment, but first let me address another important issue.

There is another way to see verse eleven. The Greek word *gyne* can refer to a woman or a wife, and some take this verse to refer to another office in the church called deaconess. There are some good reasons to take it that way.⁵ But two issues cause me to believe that this is not referring to another office. 1) The flow of thought doesn't seem to fit a discussion about an entirely new office. A plain reading of it fits better with rendering it as "wives." 2) The text immediately moves into a discussion about family. While I don't think that an office of deaconess would violate what we learned in 1 Timothy 2:12 ("to exercise authority"), I do not think a different office is in mind here.⁶

Whether is an official title or not, these women are to be characterized by some important traits:

- **Dignified** – This is same word used to describe Deacons. These men and their wives are to be known as serious, respectable people.
- **Not slanderers** – The Greek word here is *diablos*, and it is the same word used to describe Satan (Matt. 4:1). The wives of ministry leaders are not to slander people and use their tongue for malicious and satanic purposes. They must have control of their tongues.
- **Sober-minded** – She is to be clear-headed and not clouded by other things that would potentially control her.
- **Faithful in all things** – She must be worthy of the trust given to her, and she must know that her actions reflect directly on her husband's credibility and even his qualification.

She, like her husband, should be a model of godliness and someone worthy of the honor of serving.

Solid Family Leadership – Paul repeats a qualification that we heard before in the list of Elders, but this time he lists two characteristics in much closer proximity to one another "Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well" (3:12). As we saw with the Elders, these men are to be "one-woman men," which means they are to have lives of marital faithfulness.

This week a few people asked me how far back does that character requirement go? For instance, how should we think about this with someone whose sexual history is less than stellar? That is not an entirely easy question to answer. But I think what Paul had in mind here was that people being considered had a long enough track record where purity and faithfulness were clear. A failure or

⁵ See John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Commentary – 1 Timothy*, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 1995), 130

⁶ It is interesting to note translation differences here: ESV = wives; NASB = women; NIV = women

multiple failures in your past may not disqualify you; enough time, however, needs to take place to prove one's credibility.

Paul also emphasizes the importance of family management. While children and the home life of these leaders will never be perfect, there should be a clear track record of faithful family leadership. He should be a proven leader at home before he attempts to provide leadership, even service leadership, in the church.

This is another pretty sobering list, isn't it? It is remarkably similar to the qualifications for Elder with the notable exception of the statement "able to teach." This list serves to remind us of the importance and the seriousness of this role. The church not only needs qualified, godly men to provide solid teaching, discipleship, and governance. The church must also have godly, qualified men who serve as the servant-leaders in the church. It an enormously important role for the health and the balance of the body.

Paul concludes this section with a description of the reward for faithful service.

Rewards for Service

Serving as a Deacon is not only good for the church; it is good for one's soul. This is the beauty of being involved in the ministry at any level, but is especially meaningful as it relates to service-oriented ministries. Here's how Paul concludes:

¹³For 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 Tim. 3:13).

Paul identifies two rewards:

- 1) **Good standing** – The word for "standing" can mean a step, advancement, grade or rank.⁷ This doesn't mean that he's taken a step toward Eldership, rather it means that "faithful deacons will be respected and honored by those they serve."⁸ In a sense, this person is given appropriate honor since they are both worthy of it and serving well. These Deacons are honorable people, and, as a result, they are honored as such.
- 2) **Great confidence** – Paul often uses the term of confidence for openness, clarity of speech, or boldness. In other words, there is something about his service that makes him bold in regards to his own faith. Don't miss this! His service strengthens his confidence and gives him greater authority to speak.

I think I know what Paul is talking about here, and it is why it is still personally important for me to handle a few counseling cases, to visit people in the hospital, and to be present at funerals. There is something really powerful when you see the impact and the result of one-on-one ministry.

⁷ Mounce, 206.

⁸ MacArthur, 131.

There is something really powerful about seeing a person comforted, about watching someone change, about being involved in the dark moments of people's lives and seeing how relevant Christianity really is. It makes you confident that what you believe is real. And it convinces you that Jesus really works.

Your Calling?

Paul took a fair amount of time in his letter to talk about the qualifications of Elders and Deacons, and now that we've looked at them, let me draw some conclusions about your role in all of this.

Be godly! I one time had a man ask me what he could do for me. I immediately said, "Be godly!" He seemed disappointed, but what he didn't know was all the heartache I had seen that week with marriages blowing up, selfishness, and immorality. If you want to do something for our leaders at College Park – be godly for your entire life.

Be involved. As I worked through this list I was struck again with why I love the ministry of the gospel so much. And I was reminded about how much you are really missing out if you never serve, simply come to get, and never pour into people's lives. You have no idea what sacrificial service to others will do for them and for you!

Be open. It may be that God wants you to pursue something more or he wants something more from the children in your home. It may look like getting involved for the first time, in a deeper way, in a riskier ministry, or in something outside of your comfort zone. It may look like Small Group leadership or it may look like a Vision Trip. Be open.

Be faithful. God will likely not entrust to your care a larger ministry or a larger platform until you have proven yourself to be faithful in the smaller, less significant areas. Allow God to use you where you are – even if it is disappointing. Be faithful to what God has given you today.

Be watchful. Finally, I'm asking you to join in prayer on a regular basis for our church and specifically for our leadership. We have a great group of Elders and a wonderful group of faithful Deacons. But we need you to pray. You need us to lead, but we need you to pray.

The church of Jesus Christ is a very special place, and Paul spent a lot of time helping Timothy know what to look for in regards to church leadership. No wonder! The church, after all, is a pillar and buttress of the truth. And it needs godly leaders to lead and serve its people well. The gospel and people in need are that important.

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