

## **The Church (8) Church Leadership--Elders & Deacons (3)**

### **Introduction:**

In our study of the Holy Scriptures on the subject of the local church, we have shown that the local church of the New Testament was independent and self-governing. Congregational church government is reflected in the teaching regarding the local church and the practice of the local church set forth in the New Testament. Every local church should be independent of all outside authority, for the Lord Jesus Himself is the only Head of His church. But the Scriptures also reveal how the Lord Jesus would have local churches govern themselves under His Lordship. Local churches are to be governed by elders and deacons. Today, we wish to consider *the qualifications for both elders and deacons* that the Lord has set forth in His Word. Let us turn to 1 Timothy 3 and read the first 13 verses.

This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; <sup>3</sup>not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; <sup>4</sup>one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence <sup>5</sup>(for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); <sup>6</sup>not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. <sup>7</sup>Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

<sup>8</sup>Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, <sup>9</sup>holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. <sup>10</sup>But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. <sup>11</sup>Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. <sup>12</sup>Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. <sup>13</sup>For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

The Apostle Paul penned these words to Timothy, a young man who had accompanied Paul in his mission work of planting and establishing churches. In this epistle to Timothy, the apostle instructed him on how to reform the church at Ephesus, so that the blessing of the Lord would continue on this church and its ministry. We read of Paul's intention of writing this epistle in 1 Timothy 3:14f.

These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

This letter of Paul is, therefore, commonly called a pastoral epistle. It contains instruction primarily to the pastor on the nature and activity of the pastoral ministry. We have already seen that *the selection of elders, or bishops to the churches was through congregational deliberation.*<sup>1</sup> And yet, we may conclude from the passage that we have read, 1 Timothy 3:1-13, that one of the important responsibilities of the pastor is *to assure that the church of Jesus Christ has qualified elders and deacons serving in the church.* I believe both of these biblical principles are preserved in the manner that our church operates.

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<sup>1</sup> See sermon #FBC863, given on August 7, 2016, "The Church (6); Congregational Polity"

The members of the congregation may nominate a man to serve as an elder or deacon, but then the elders assess the biblical qualifications of that man to assure that he is qualified to stand before the congregation for their vote, resulting in his installation into office.

Now again, Paul wrote this epistle to Timothy in order to commission him and instruct him to minister to the church at Ephesus. There is no perfect church; the church at Ephesus was no exception. This was a church that was beset with problems. Paul, as the apostle entrusted to care for this church, intended to send Timothy to correct its faith and practice. Paul gave Timothy the task to reform the faith and practice of the church.

A major problem that existed that needed correction was the leadership of the church. Perhaps the major reason the church was troubled was due to the failure of the leadership in its responsibility to lead and teach the church rightly. Heretical teachers had corrupted the church with their error. And so, Timothy would need to reform the leadership in order to set the church back on a right course. In order for the church at Ephesus to be all that the Lord would have it be, Timothy would need to see to it that godly, qualified leaders were serving in the church. Here in chapter 3 we see the qualifications that Timothy was to use to screen potential new leaders.

We see from this passage the great need and importance for a local church to have biblically qualified leadership, if it is to be a church blessed of God. If a church's leadership is sound, a weak church may become sound in time. If a church's leadership is faulty, the church will most certainly suffer spiritual decline and difficulty and forfeit the full blessing of the Lord.

Now please understand this point: Timothy's task involved placing the right men in established, legitimate offices that were already in place. It would seem that Timothy did not need to restructure the nature of the offices of the church. When the church was first founded, Paul had established the proper church structure with its leadership positions. We see that Paul identified the leadership of the church in two groups. The office of "bishop" is mentioned in verse 1. The office of "deacon" is introduced in verse 8. The offices of bishops and deacons were ordained by God and instituted in all of the churches that were begun by the Lord's Apostles. Timothy would only need to place the right men in the positions that already existed. Timothy would need to reform this church to biblical standards, which is a task that is always before the elders of a church.

As a church we are always to be undergoing a work of reform, seeking to conform ourselves to God's ideal as He has revealed to us in His Word. None of us as individuals are what we should be or can be, nor is our church what it should be or could be. But as we strive as individuals to grow to maturity, so we as a church should seek to grow to maturity.

The work of reform is not always fun and pleasant. Reform is difficult work. Change is uncomfortable. Our nature does not readily accept the fact that our belief or behavior is in need of correction. Often we do not like those who point out where we have been in error or that we have done wrong things. We may not be ready to hear that there are faulty or deficient practices that need correction and policies that need emendation. Paul had sensed resistance in his efforts to correct the churches in Galatia. He therefore appealed to the ones he was seeking to reform, "Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?" (Gal. 4:16). But we are to be humble before the Lord. We are to be willing to receive instruction and correction. It must always be our desire to conform our thinking and practice to the will of God.

## **I. The qualifications for church leaders (1 Tim. 3:1-13)**

### **1. The qualifications for elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7)**

**Verse 1** reads, "This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop<sup>2</sup>, he desires a good work." The man who would become an elder desires the good work that it entails. This is not a

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<sup>2</sup> We have shown before that in the New Testament, a bishop is the same as an elder and pastor. A bishop means that the man is an "overseer" of the church.

statement of God's calling, to which we gave our attention last week, for even false teachers, ministers of satan, also desire to be placed in the position of a bishop in a local church. But the desire to serve in this office did reveal something of his character. In the first century for a man to stand and serve in the local church as an elder, he would encounter much opposition; he would be willing to sacrifice much to serve the lord's people.

Again and again persecution would rage, from the side of the Jews, of the Gentiles, or, as often, of both. False teachers did their utmost to undermine the true foundation. Truly in *such* a time and amid such circumstances an *incentive to overseership and word of implied praise* for the man who indicated a willingness to serve in this high office were not at all out of place. And the office itself was surely "a noble work." It still is, but it was never more so than in the early decades!<sup>3</sup>

There are many qualities of an elder listed in our passage. The first seven characteristics are positive in nature--what he should be. This is followed by those characteristics that are negative in nature--what he should not be.

(1) "A bishop then must be blameless..."

An elder must have a good reputation among the people of God. He is one who may not be blamed for any scandal or impropriety. It is not a standard by which he may be said to be sinless, for no fallen man could meet that standard. No, although he is not sinless, the elder should be blameless. An elder who has the responsibility to teach the people of God may have his teaching dismissed if he can be discredited in his life. Being "blameless, the man of God will leave the detractor of his ministry without ammunition.

There will be no one found among men that is free from every vice; but it is one thing to be blemished with ordinary vices, which do not hurt the reputation, because they are found in men of the highest excellence, and another thing to have a disgraceful name, or to be stained with any baseness. In order, therefore, that a bishop may not be without authority, he enjoins that there shall be made a selection of one who has a good and honorable reputation, and not chargeable with any remarkable vice. Besides, he does not merely lay down a rule for Timothy what sort of person he must select, but likewise reminds every one of those who aspire to that rank, to institute a careful examination of himself and of his life.<sup>4</sup>

(2) The elder must be "the husband of one wife,"

There are different opinions as to the meaning of Paul's words. Some argue that he was saying that an elder of a church could only be a man who has been married one time. In other words, a divorced and remarried man would not meet this standard. But it may also be said, if this were the case, that a man whose wife had died and he remarried afterward, would also be unqualified to serve the church as an elder, for he had been married to more than one woman. Others argue that what Paul was prohibiting was a man who was a polygamist from serving as an elder. This would seem to address a rather uncommon situation in the New Testament era for Paul to place this standard at the head of his list. The best way to understand Paul's words was that he was saying that a man was to be devoted to his wife, and only to his wife. In other words, the elder should be known to be a man devoted to his wife, as one who is chaste in

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<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews* in the New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1957), p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, p. 42.

his morality respecting the opposite sex. In other words, the elder must be a “one-woman man.”<sup>5</sup> “He must be an example to others of faithfulness to his one and only marriage-partner.”<sup>6</sup>

(3) The elder must be “temperate.”

There is a stability of character always present. He is dependable and, therefore, somewhat predictable. All know how he is and how he will react and respond when a crisis arises. The opposite of someone who is temperate, is one who is temperamental. We might say he is volatile, reacting to happenings in an extreme manner. He is a devoted and dedicated man to his calling and cause. He disciplines himself so that he may be faithful in his responsibilities. The elder is not a man of excess. He is a careful and thoughtful man with regard to his duty.

(4) The elder must be “sober-minded.”

He is a clear and reasonable thinker. He has a sound mind in matters. He is always willing and ready to learn, but he is not carried away by extremes or by tangential matters.

(5) The elder must be “of good behavior.”

We might say that this describes a virtuous man. He is honorable before others, but is equally so when not before others. This speaks of the man being well-ordered in his life. He is known for his stability and consistency. He is virtuous. He is morally stable.

(6) The elder must be “hospitable.”

This was a trait of particular importance in the ancient world. It was a common occurrence to open one’s home to others for temporary lodging. The Greet word translated as “hospitable” is *philozenon* (φιλόξενον), which is the combination of *phileo*, which means “love”, and *xenon*, which means “stranger.” An elder must care for people in general and be willing and desirous to assist them.

(7) The elder must be “able to teach.”

The elder must have the aptitude to teach. Some elders, as we pointed out last week, have a special call of God upon them to proclaim the Word of God. But every elder should have the ability to sit down and instruct another in the matters of the faith.

(8) The elder must not be “given to wine.”

The same apostle who told Timothy, “Take a little wine for thy stomach’s sake and thy frequent infirmities” (1 Tim. 5:23), here declares that a man “given to wine” is not qualified to serve as an elder in the church. This man would be regarded as a drunkard, one who is controlled by his drink rather than controlled by the standards of righteousness.

(9) The elder must “not be violent.”

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<sup>5</sup> However, one good argument that this expression means that an elder could only have been married once is the case and description of the “true widow” who was to be supported by the church. She was to be the “wife of one man” (1 Tim. 5:9). Clearly this is not a word against polygamy, for there was never a case when one woman had more than one husband at a time; rather, it means that she should only have been married once before becoming a widow.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 121.

The elder is not prone to excessive or outburst of anger. The King James Version translates this as “no striker.” He must not be quarrelsome. He must never resort to violence or the threat of violence, but rather he reasons and appeals, and that with mildness and gentleness.

Some have connected this trait of no-violence with what went before. The man “given to wine” would tend to be a violent man. Calvin wrote of this:

The true interpretation is that which is given by Chrysostom (4<sup>th</sup> c.), that men of a drunken and fierce disposition ought to be excluded from the office of a bishop. As to the opinion given by Chrysostom, that “a striker” means one who wounds with the tongue, (that is, who is guilty of slander or of outrageous reproaches,) I do not admit it. Nor am I moved by his argument, that it will be no great matter, if the bishop do not strike with the hand; for I think that here he reproveth generally that fierceness which is often found in the military profession, and which is utterly unbecoming in the servants of Christ. It is well known to what ridicule they expose themselves, who are more ready to strike a blow with the fist, and — we might even say — to draw the sword, than to settle the disputes of others by their own sedate behavior. *Strikers* is therefore the term which he applies to those who deal much in threatenings, and are of a warlike temperament.<sup>7</sup>

(10) The elder must not be “greedy for money.”

A godly elder cannot be a greedy man, someone that is always after the money of others. He is never content with what God has given him. He is always desirous of what God has given to others. A greedy man cannot be a man who cares for the good of others, for he only cares for the goods of others.

(11) Rather, the elder must be “gentle.”

Earlier we saw how the elder must “not be violent.” Here, we see that he is to be gentle rather than violent. These two are linked in 2 Timothy 2:24, “The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle towards all.”

(12) The elder must be “not quarrelsome.”

He is not to be argumentative in his interaction with others. He has a calming demeanor and manner. He does not incite others and promote dissension, but rather coalesces the people of God to see themselves as one and act as one.

(13) The elder must be “not covetous.”

The elder must be a contented man. He is contented with what God has given him and he is contented with what God has not given him. He does not desire that which belongs to another man. He is a thankful man.

(14) The elder must be “one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?).”

It is assumed the elder is married and has children. This is not a requirement that an elder be married, but if the elder is married, he should order his family in a godly manner with his wife and

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, p. 45.

children in support of him and his ministry. We see that a man who may otherwise be a good and qualified man for the office of an elder, may be disqualified by his wife or children.

Now this ability to manage or govern well his own family becomes evident when the father keeps his *offspring* in submission. The so-called “progressive” idea of permitting the child to do as he pleases finds no support in Scripture. But though authority must be exercised, this must be done with “true dignity,” that is, it must be done in such a manner that the father’s *firmness* makes it *advisable* for a child to obey, that his *wisdom* makes it *natural* for a child to obey, and that his *love* makes it a *pleasure* for a child to obey.<sup>8</sup>

(15) The elder must not “be a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil.”

An elder must not be too young in the faith. It takes time for the Lord to teach a man to be a humble man. If a man is placed in a position in which some measure of respect is rendered to him and he wields some measure of authority, he will tend to think too highly of himself, of his importance and indispensability to others.

Pride goes before destruction,  
And a haughty spirit before a fall. (Prov. 16:18)

The Lord will prepare a man to become an elder. Part of that preparation is teaching him the folly of his own self and the fact that if he stands it is because the Lord enables him to do so. Only after he is no longer a “novice”, a neophyte in the faith, may he be considered for the office of elder.

(16) The elder, “moreover, must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”

Here we see that he must have a good reputation among unbelievers as well as in the church. A good man in the church may be regarded as a bad man in the community, due to his family relationships, his business dealings, or his public interaction with non-Christians in the community.

Elder are not men who are commonly found. There are too many factors that can easily discredit someone from service. But is very important that the local church purposes to maintain these high standards that our Lord has set before His people through His apostle.

## II. The qualifications for deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13)

Now, when a significant need for ministry arises in the local church that requires organization and direction, it is then that *the ministry of deacons* is necessary. **Acts 6** is commonly viewed as the first instance when the service of deacons is seen in a New Testament church. Let us turn there and read.

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.<sup>2</sup> Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;<sup>4</sup> but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

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<sup>8</sup> Hendriksen, p. 127.

<sup>5</sup>And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, <sup>6</sup>whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

<sup>7</sup>Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

We see that the deacons assumed the entire ministry of giving assistance to the needy widows. Their efforts enabled the apostles to do what they were called to do, minister the Word of God and pray. The service that these seven godly men rendered, not only brought true and practical assistance to their widows, but it enabled the cause of Christ to advance in that region.

By way of application, we could say that there are very practical matters in local churches today that should probably be under the governance of deacons. Namely, we might say the financial and administrative concerns, building maintenance, as well as the practical ministry to those in need, are tasks suitable for the deaconate. But not just anybody should be placed in the responsible position of handling these matters. We see in 1 Timothy 3:8ff, the qualifications for deacons.

#### **a. Qualifications for the deacons themselves**

**(1) Deacons must be “reverent.”** This says that a deacon must be characterized by a sense or air of dignity. Of course he is to be one who loves God and is concerned about God’s glory. But he is one who is concerned about people and their well-being. Deacons are to be reputable. They are to be perceived as trustworthy to administer justly both goods and finances on behalf of the people of God.

**(2) Deacons must not be “double-tongued.”** He is to be a man of his word. He is to be sincere, honest, and open with all. He is not to say one thing and do another. He is not to say one thing to one person and say something else to another. This undermines his trustworthiness before others.

**(3) Deacons must not be “given to much wine.”** A man who is addicted to alcohol should not be a deacon. This again, brings a reproach to him and his trustworthiness and general character.

**(4) Deacons must not be “greedy for money.”** Often times deacons administer the funds of the people of God. Greediness of character will influence the judgment and willingness to distribute to those in need. Judas Iscariot was a greedy man, and he was a thief.

**(5) Deacons must “hold the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience.”** A deacon is to be a Christian, obviously, but is to be one who has an understanding of the faith. “The mystery of the faith” is a reference to New Testament Christianity. Much of what we know as New Testament Christianity was unknown to saints during Old Testament days. There are aspects of the faith that was a “mystery” to them, that is, unknown to them for it had not yet been revealed by God. Often times in the early days of the church age the aspects of the Christian faith are referred to as “mysteries”, but mysteries that have now been made known by God. The short of the matter is this: a deacon must be a sound Christian. His ministry should be designed not merely to administer to the practical needs of the church and of people, but to use his ministry for the furtherance of the cause of Christ.

**(6) Deacons must “first be proved; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless.”** Prospective deacons should be observed first to assure that they are of consistent character for the office. If they are determined to be “beyond reproach” (NKJV, “blameless”), then they may serve in this office.

Down in verse 12 we see several more qualities that should characterize deacons:

**(7) They must be good husbands who are devoted to their wives--** “the husband of one wife.”

**(8) They are to be good fathers toward their children.**

**b. Qualifications for the deacons' wives (3:11)**

“Likewise their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.” We see that a man may otherwise be qualified, but his wife may disqualify him from the deaconate. Men do not serve alone. God has given to men their wives to assist them in their service toward Him and His people. In a sense the deacon and his wife serve as a team. He holds the office. But he is only able to discharge his duty properly and fully with her assistance. If she detract from him rather than assist him, he may not be suited to serve as a deacon.

**1. The wives of deacons must be “reverent.”** The deacon’s wife, as her husband, must be characterized by a sense or air of dignity. She, too, is to be one who loves God and is concerned for God’s glory.

**2. The wives of deacons must not be “slanderers.”** A slanderer is one who says things about other people in order to defame their name or reputation. A woman who is characterized by discrediting others with her words, disqualifies her husband from serving in the office of deacon. Interestingly, the Greek word for “slanderers” is *diabolous*, which is the plural form of *diabolos*, which is often translated “devil.” The devil is a slanderer, or accuser, of the brethren. Wives of deacons should not be devils, seeking to find fault and defame others with her words.

**3. The wives of deacons must be “temperate.”** They are to be stable, have self-control, and be sound in judgment.

**4. The wives of deacons must be “faithful in all things.”** They are to be trustworthy and dependable. Here, “faithful” also carries the idea of being “full of faith.” She is to be a Christian, even a sound and stable Christian.

It is clear that the marriages and families of the elders and deacons are to be examples to all of how the Christian family should function. It is the man who alone holds the office, yes, but his wife is his helpmate serving alongside of him. She may help him greatly in his service; or, she can disqualify him from service as a deacon. His children should not detract from his effectiveness or discredit his reputation so as to render him a poor witness and unfruitful servant. His children, who are under his authority and living in his household, may also disqualify him from the deaconate, or they can enhance his witness and service in the church.

Now, it may be noted that there is debate about how verse 11 should be understood. The word that Paul used is commonly translated “women.” Translators have generally translated the word as “wives”, in other words, wives of deacons. But some argue that because of the Greek word, that Paul was not addressing the wives of deacons, but rather, he was addressing a third order of church officers—elders, deacons, and women specially called to assist the deacons in their service. Paul spoke about elders first, then deacons, and then some argue that in verse 11 “women” refers to “deaconesses.” I have read carefully the arguments of good men that hold this position, but their argument is weak. Others say that these “women” are not the wives of deacons, but are other women in the church who assist the deacons in their ministry in the church.

But the argument that these are the wives of deacons is most convincing. Why? First, although the Greek word that Paul uses is often translated simply as “women”, he does not always use it in this way. Here are some examples of the word being translated rightly as “women”:



**1 Timothy 2:8, 9.** “I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; in like manner also, that the *women* (γυναῖκας) adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing...”

**Acts 22:4f.** “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and *women* (γυναῖκας), <sup>5</sup>as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.”

**Acts 13:50.** “But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent *women* (γυναῖκας) and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.”

**Acts 9:1f.** “Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or *women* (γυναῖκας), he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

**Acts 8:3.** “As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and *women* (γυναῖκας), committing them to prison.”

In each of these instances, clearly the writer was speaking of women in general, not wives in particular. However, although this word Greek word, *gunikas* (γυναῖκας), is correctly translated in places as “women”, Paul commonly used this Greek word for “wives.” Here are some examples:

**Colossians 3:19.** “Husbands, love your wives (γυναῖκας) and do not be bitter toward them.”

**Ephesians 5:25.** “Husbands, love your wives (γυναῖκας), just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her.”

**Ephesians 5:28.** “So husbands ought to love their own wives (γυναῖκας) as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.”

**1 Corinthians 7:29.** “But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives (γυναῖκας) should be as though they had none.”

In these instances the same Greek word is clearly to be translated as “wives.” And so, the word itself is not determinative. The context should determine for us how the word is to be translated.

This leads us to the second reason that the proper translation of γυναῖκας should be “wives” in 1 Timothy 3:11: this word is placed in verse 11, which is sandwiched in the middle of the qualifications of the deacons themselves, which are in verses 8-10 and verses 12-13. The context is not Paul writing of women generally, or of a special class of women who served in a kind of “third office” in the church. Paul was writing of the qualifications of both the deacons and their wives.

### **c. The honor of serving as a deacon (3:13)**

We see that the apostle concludes this list of qualifications for deacons by writing of the honor and usefulness of deacons (3:13). Paul wrote, “For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.” Two personal benefits are received by serving faithfully as a deacon within a church.

**1. A deacon obtains for himself a “good standing.”** There is honor and respect conferred upon the one who serves faithfully in the church of Jesus Christ. He is not one who seeks personal honor, but he is one who nevertheless deserves it and receives it. The office and function of the office of deacon should be a revered one. The one who has been faithful in his service should be recognized and respected. The Scriptures declare that the Lord will reward those who serve in humility and faithfulness. Those who devote themselves to serving God’s people, the Lord views as serving Himself. He, the Lord, is grateful and will reward them greatly.

**2. A deacon obtains for himself “great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus good standing.”** Deacons who serve well are emboldened in their witness for Jesus Christ. When the early chapters of the Book of Acts are read, one sees that the early church expanded largely due to the work and the public witness of deacons. Not only through their service was the ministry of the word furthered through the apostles, but also the deacons themselves became very bold and useful in their witness of the gospel.

We read of **Stephen**, a deacon. He spoke boldly for the Lord in Jerusalem (see Acts 7). He was martyred for his ministry. But the point is that he had great boldness of speech. We read that as he was dying he looked into heaven and he saw the Lord Jesus was standing there, apparently honoring this man and anticipating his soon reception into glory.

We read also of **Philip**, also a deacon, He was the first one to take the gospel to non-Jews, the Samaritans. His service and concern for people was of a spiritual nature. When he travelled through Samaria, he preached Christ to them. He had great boldness in Christ toward them and for them. God used his word and opened the heart of the Samaritans enabling them to repent and believe Philip’s preaching.

Philip was also used to bring to faith in Christ an Ethiopian eunuch, and through him, Christianity was taken to Ethiopia where it took hold and spread. Ethiopian Christians boast of having churches of the most ancient heritage of all. Their Christianity was brought to them through the ministry of a deacon.

The point is this, the ministry of deacons within the church is a highly respectful, useful, and valued ministry. May the Lord help our deacons and those who will yet serve as deacons be used of our Lord to further His name.

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Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,  
And to present you faultless  
Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,  
To God our Savior, Who alone is wise,  
Be glory and majesty,  
Dominion and power,  
Both now and forever.  
Amen. (Jude 24f)

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**Excursus:  
The Claim that Phoebe was a “Deaconess”  
(Rom. 16:1, 2)**

There are those who argue that the New Testament allows for women deacons, or deaconesses. Often the case of Phoebe is brought up to argue for their position. Paul opens the concluding portion of his epistle to the church at Rome by commending Phoebe to the church. He instructed the church to welcome her and assist her in whatever she might need from them. Verses 1 and 2 read:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, <sup>2</sup>that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.

Here was a faithful woman for whom Paul had the highest regard. Paul “commended” her to the church. This was a formal recommendation of this lady to this church. Apparently such recommendations were commonly conveyed through letters. Paul alluded to them in 2 Corinthians 3:1: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?” Paul desired that this church would show Phoebe the highest regard, so he wrote this word of commendation on her behalf instructing the church to have high regard for her and extend whatever help they could to her.

Phoebe is described as “a servant of the church at Cenchreae.” Cenchreae was a coastal town on the eastern side of the narrow isthmus separating the mainland of Greece from the Peloponnesian Peninsula. It was not too far to the east from the major city of Corinth and a little distance south of Athens.

The Greek word that is translated as “servant” is δίακονον (*deaconon*), which is sometimes translated as “deacon.” Because of the use of this word to identify her and due to what appears to be the official reason for Phoebe coming to the church at Rome, many have said this shows the New Testament church had women serve in the office of deacon. And so Phoebe is frequently described as having been a deaconess. As one had written, “It is impossible to be sure, but for several reasons it is likely that she held the office of a deacon.”<sup>9</sup> Just about every church that has women deaconesses in addition to men as deacons cite this verse, referring to Phoebe as a faithful deaconess.

But I do not believe this is correct, for several reasons. First, the nature of the word does not require a translation with the English word, deacon. The Greek word is translated elsewhere as “servant.” For example, we read Romans 15:8, “For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness.” Here Jesus Christ is described with the same word, δίακονον (*deaconon*), which is translated as “servant”, but we would not say the He were a “deacon.” Second, the word does not bear the weight of being a technical term, i.e. deacon. “It is not easy to translate δίακονος (*deaconos*), for “servant” is too vague, and “deaconess” is more technical than the original.”<sup>10</sup> Third, to make allowance for the office of deaconess based on this word, would conflict with the qualifications that God’s Word provides for the office of deacon (cf. 1Tim. 3:8ff). Phoebe would not meet the qualifications for deacon that Paul would later set forth to Timothy. **John Murray** wrote of this matter:

It is common to give to Phoebe the title of “deaconess” and regard her as having performed an office in the church corresponding to that which belonged to men who exercised the office of deacon (cf. Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). Though the word for “servant” is the same as is used for deacon in the instances cited, yet the word is also used to denote the person performing any type of ministry. If Phoebe ministered to the saints, as is evident from verse 2, then she would be a servant of the church and there is neither need nor warrant to suppose that she occupied or exercised what amounted to an ecclesiastical office comparable to that of the diaconate.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 787.

<sup>10</sup> James Denney, *The Expositor’s Greek New Testament; Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1951, vol. 2, p. 717).

<sup>11</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2 (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 226.