

## Choose the Right Deacons [Slide 1] 1 Timothy 3:8-16

The church is the household of God. Since it is God's household we ought to conduct ourselves in a manner consistent with the master of the house. In our passage today Paul provides the qualifications for the office of deacon or minister. I invite you to turn in your Bible to 1 Timothy 3:8-16. 1 Timothy is about three fourths of the way through the New Testament before you get to the big book of Hebrews.

I'm going to begin with 1 Timothy 3:8-12 where Paul provides the qualifications for deacons. Let's read those verses. Read.

The key question we must ask ourselves first is: what are deacons? The Greek term diakonos means servant or minister. In every other place in the New Testament it is used generically for a servant or a minister of Christ. In this one place in the New Testament it is used as a technical term to refer to a specific office or position in the church. Unfortunately this passage does not tell us what deacons do and nowhere else in the New Testament do we learn what deacons do.

Many people point to Acts 6:1-6 where the apostles appointed certain men to serve in the church by overseeing the feeding of the widows as an example of deacons. Although they were called to serve, the technical term of deacon or minister is not used. So, we cannot say with any certainty that those men were deacons. So, we're left with this office, but we're not exactly sure what the people in that office did. It could have been a group that oversaw the ministry to the widows. It could have been an elder-in-training group. It could have been something close to what we now know as pastoral staff.

I know that churches have deacon boards or trustee boards and generally they are people who serve the organization in various ways. However, I cannot say with any certainty that they are the equivalent of the New Testament deacons. My best guess, and I will label it as a guess, is that the closest modern equivalent we have to this office is the pastoral staff. I'm saying that because one of the qualifications for deacons is that they be good managers of their household much like the elders and I'm guessing that they had a lesser oversight role than the elders, but a ministry oversight role rather than serving through accomplishing various tasks of the organization.

[Slide 2] So, the way I'm going to apply this passage is to suggest that pastoral staff should meet these qualifications, but as I said last week with the elders, these qualifications are marks of spiritual maturity and everyone can consider them to be goals to meet in their life. Let's begin with the first qualification.

Deacons must likewise be dignified. The word, "likewise" indicates Paul is comparing the offices of elder and deacon. Deacons or Servants must be dignified. Just as elders are to keep their children under control with all dignity, so deacons are to be dignified. They are to be serious-minded, respectful of customs and traditions, not given to flippancy or irreverence.

A deacon should not be double-tongued. He should not say one thing to one person and a completely different thing to another person. People who do that are often trying to avoid conflict. A deacon must be forthright and give the same message to each person.

A deacon should not be addicted to much wine. This quality also showed up in the elder list. The Bible does not forbid him drinking some wine, but he should not be under its control or addicted to having to drink. The Holy Spirit should be the one controlling him, not alcohol or drugs or other mind altering substances.

He's not avaricious or greedy. He's not motivated by the love of money.

He holds to the mystery of the Christian faith with a clean conscience. He's convinced that Christianity is true. He is not a closet unbeliever or agnostic or doubter. Do you realize there are some churches and denominations that tolerate pastors and church leaders denying key doctrines of the Faith such as the resurrection or that the Bible is the Word of God? I believe those pastors and leaders who do such a thing demonstrate lack of integrity. If you are going to draw a paycheck from a Christian church then you should believe in what the church has always believed, and if you can't, then you should go get another job. Unless they have seared their conscience, I would think such pastors would feel guilt from taking money from the people whose faith they are undermining.

Deacons should be tested first and if they serve without reproach, then they can be asked to serve as a deacon. Every church has levels of ministry. Some ministries all people can do, they don't even have to be saved to serve. Other ministries like teaching or leading children or youth or adults require a faith in Jesus and a certain level of giftedness. You don't want to call someone to pastoral ministry unless they have proven themselves in ministry already.

A lot of churches grow most of their staff from within the church and that can be a very helpful model because you do have the opportunity to witness someone prove themselves and you also have the benefit of that person already understanding the culture and mission of the church.

Now we come to verse 11 which can have two different interpretations. The Greek word that is translated as women can also be translated as wives which means we are either referring to the wives of the deacons or we are referring to women who serve as deacons.

What are the arguments that Paul is referring to deaconesses rather than wives of deacons? First the Greek grammar that begins verse 2 which introduces the position of elder and verse 8 which introduces the position of deacon is identical to the grammar in verse 11 suggesting this is a third official position. The word "likewise" in verse 11 is identical to the word in verse 8 both of which refer back to the elder position, indicating that verses 8 and 11 also introduce official positions in the church.

Second, we have to ask the question why the deacons' wives would be mentioned and not the elders' wives. That doesn't make sense, but it does if you are actually introducing women deacons.

Third, if Paul were referring to the wives of the deacons one would expect the possessive pronoun "their" to modify wives.

The chief argument for verse 11 referring to deacon's wives is the qualification in verse 12 where it says that deacons should be a one woman man, with the emphasis on man. However, the word for deacon in verse 12 is masculine plural which could be translated as "male deacons". They should be a one-woman man and rule well over their children, both qualifications that would be unique to the male deacons.

I believe it is more likely that Paul is referring to female deacons. I give this interpretation a 60% certainty factor meaning that I think it is more likely correct than the "wives" interpretation but that there is still enough uncertainty that I'm not going to care too much if someone takes the alternate view. I think it is healthy when you choose an interpretation out of competing ones, to try to assess the strength of the evidence and make a determination of how certain you can be in your interpretation.

Assuming that we are talking about female deaconesses or female staff, what qualifications does Paul mention for them? They should be dignified like the deacons.

They should not be slanderers or malicious gossips. Dare I say it? Women usually are much more verbally skilled than men. We've all heard the statistics that she has a supply of 25,000 words a day while his supply is about 10,000. With that greater volume also comes the greater opportunity to do more damage with words. In ministry you hear a lot of things or observe a lot of things in confidence. It is critical that those confidences be kept even if there is no intention to cause harm.

The women should be temperate. This is the same quality mentioned for elders. The word temperate refers to someone who is fully rational, and in full use of their faculties. She must not be clouded in her judgment by drugs, alcohol or other mind altering substances. She is mentally healthy and sound in her thinking.

She is faithful in all things. She follows the Lord and in whatever relationship or context she finds herself in, she obeys God and serves as he has called her to serve.

Returning to the men in verse 12, deacons should be a one woman man. I shared last week in the sermon on elders that I think that means he should not be divorced and remarried. Just like an elder he should rule his own household well.

So, as I said earlier, I think the closest modern application we have to New Testament deacons is pastoral and ministry staff. I believe we should apply these qualifications to them. I rate my confidence level on interpreting deacons as ministry staff as a little above fifty percent, meaning that I think this is the best choice out of the alternatives, but I could easily be wrong.

[Slide 3] Paul mentions in verse 13 the reward for those who have served well. Read verse 13. We have again the ambiguity in this word for serve, that is also translated as serve as a deacon. The word could be referring generally to those who serve and would include both the elders and deacons or it could refer more specifically to the deacons. I'm inclined to see it as referring to both the elders and the deacons since no reward was mentioned for the elders earlier.

Those who serve well obtain for themselves a good standing in the church. They become respected and appreciated for their service. And they gain confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. One of the blessings of leadership is you often get more of a picture of what God is doing in people's lives. Often you have confidential knowledge you can't share, but which shows evidence of God's work. You gain a confidence in Christ's work in his church that the casual attendee never gets. This is one of the perks of community. The more you invest in other people, the more likely you are going to be part of God's work, and that participation builds confidence in you.

[Slide 4] In verses 14-16 Paul provides the rationale for his letter to Timothy. He tells Timothy that he is writing to instruct Christians in how to conduct themselves in the household of God because the church displays the truth of the Gospel to a watching world. Let's read those verses. Read.

Paul is writing these things, probably referring to the whole letter, so that believers will know how they should conduct themselves in the household of God. The church is not the building. The church is the household or family of God. Believers are brothers and sisters to one another with God as our father and Jesus as our elder brother. God saved you to make you part of his family. He did not save you to make you an orphan, someone isolated and without family. God's intention has always been for believers to be in community. The church is God's plan for this age. It is how he plans to advance his kingdom, so you need to get with the plan.

Paul calls the church the pillar and support of the truth. What does that figure of speech mean? Think of a pillar and the base or support on which it stands. What is the function of a

pillar? Its function is to hold something up, a roof or ceiling or an awning or an overhang. It lifts something up.

The church exists to lift up and display God's truth. The church does that through proclaiming and teaching God's word. The members of the church do that by exhibiting godly character and behavior in how they relate to each other and those outside the church. Through our words and our lifestyle we uphold God's truth to a watching world. Sometimes we do it well. Sometimes we do it poorly. At one point Jesus said the world will know we are his disciples by the love we have for one another. God calls us to display his truth to a watching world. This is a sacred call and requires the best of us.

In verse 16 Paul elaborates on the truth. Great is the mystery of godliness. As you can see in the rest of the verse, the mystery of godliness is Jesus. Mystery refers to something not fully revealed in the OT and that would be the incarnation of God, God becoming a man. This was not fully revealed in the OT. Looking back at the OT prophecies you can see how they were implying the incarnation from what they said. For example Isaiah 9:6 says, "Read." Looking back that prophecy makes perfect sense. This child who is called Mighty God, Eternal Father is called that because the child actually is God in the flesh. It is perfectly clear looking backwards in time from our present perspective, but it would have been a mystery to those in Isaiah's day. When we hear the title Messiah we think of Jesus, God's Son, but it would have been more of a mystery to the original listeners. They would have thought of Messiah as God's anointed king, but they may not have thought of him as divine.

Paul could very well be quoting an ancient hymn at the end of verse 16. If he is, he is doing it under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was revealed or manifested in the flesh. God became a man and became knowable through Jesus. By studying Jesus in the Gospels we gain our clearest picture of what God is like.

Jesus was vindicated in or by the Spirit. The preposition can mean either that Jesus was vindicated in the spiritual realm or that he was vindicated by the Holy Spirit. If he was vindicated in the spiritual realm then that is probably a reference to Jesus' baptism when the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove and the Father spoke from Heaven and said Jesus was his beloved Son with whom he was pleased. If Paul means that Jesus was vindicated by the Holy Spirit he could be referring to the miracles Jesus performed through the Holy Spirit or to Jesus' resurrection. Whichever is the correct understanding, the basic meaning is the same. Jesus was proved to be God while he was on the Earth.

Jesus was seen or watched by angels while on the Earth. We can only imagine what that was like. Perhaps the whole heavenly host was intently observing Jesus during his life on the Earth.

He was proclaimed among the peoples or the Gentiles. Paul reiterates what he has said elsewhere that Jesus came not just for Jews but for Gentiles as well and even though his earthly ministry was largely confined to the Jews, at times Jesus was proclaimed to Gentiles and even more so after his death and resurrection.

Jesus was believed in the world and he was lifted up or taken to glory, referring to his bodily ascension into Heaven.

The church exists to lift high these truths.

[Slide 5] So how can you apply this passage to yourself? I offer these suggestions:

First, the list of qualifications describe a godly person and you can go through those qualifications and measure yourself against them. In what areas might you need to grow?

Second, are you really living like your fellow Christians are your spiritual family? Are you fulfilling your calling to be a member of God's household? Are you serving in the church? Are

you building relationships with your fellow Christians? Are you sharing your life with your fellow Christians?

Third, how are you helping to uphold the truth about Jesus Christ so that those outside the church? Whether it is your personal witness in the community or your involvement with church ministries like Pinterest that communicate God's truth to those outside our church, what are you doing to play your part?

Since I believe the best modern application of the deacon position is the pastoral or ministry staff I decided I would interview them just like I did the elders last week, so I invite them to come up and join me on the stage. Michelle Deavenport is our Director of Children's Ministries and is heavily involved with the Pinterest Ministry. Jason Rogers is our Director of Youth Ministry covering Junior High through Senior High and Raymond Knox is our Worship Team Leader and Visual and Graphic Arts Leader.