

Biblical Qualifications For Deacons, Part 3

Archibald Alexander Allison

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Exegesis of 1 Timothy 3:13

Translation:

13 For those who serve well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great confidence in faith in Christ Jesus.

Structure:

Paul concludes the list of qualifications for the office of deacon with two benefits that God gives those who serve well in the office of deacon in the church.

Comment:

The phrase “as deacons” in verse 13 is not stated in the Greek text. The context makes it clear that Paul is talking about serving in the office of deacon. I have indicated this by placing this phrase in italics in my translation above.

Verse 13 does not contain any qualifications for the office of deacon. It simply says that men who serve well in this office gain two benefits. Some deacons serve better than others. Those who serve well gain a good grade or a good standing. This is similar to 1 Timothy 5:17 where Paul says that presbyters who rule well are worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. A man who serves well in the office of deacon will gain the honor, esteem, respect, and praise of the congregation. That is what it means to gain good standing. The congregation will honor him and esteem him highly because he has done a good job as a deacon. The church will have a high regard for a good deacon. That is good. It is an honor when those you serve think well of you and trust you. It encourages you to continue your good work and excel still more in it, for the glory of God and the good of God’s people.

The second benefit Paul mentions in this verse is that a deacon who serves well gains “great confidence” or “great boldness” in faith in Christ. When a man serves well in the office of deacon and gains the respect and honor of the church, he also becomes more confident in faith in Christ. He gains assurance that what he believes and what he does in service to Christ and his church are pleasing to God and to the church. He becomes bolder and less inhibited in his work as a deacon in the congregation. His trust in Christ becomes stronger and he is able to serve Christ with greater boldness. He is more confident that he knows how to apply God’s Word to the needs of people whom he serves in the office of deacon. Those who do not serve well in the office of deacon become more and more timid.

In the first or second century after the apostles the practice of choosing presbyters from among the deacons was introduced in the church. People cited 1 Timothy 3:13 in support of this practice, as if the apostle Paul were saying that those have been faithful deacons should move up a step into the office of elder in the church. The text does not support this interpretation. In the words of John Calvin, it is true “that the diaconate may sometimes be the nursery from which presbyters are chosen” (Commentary on 1 Timothy 3:13), but this verse simply says that those who serve well as deacons are worthy of great honor.

In other words, the office of deacon is not a menial task, but a highly honorable office. We should not look down upon the office of deacon as though it were inferior and less honorable

than the office of elder. Deacons assist the elders, but that does not make one office more honorable than the other. God says that those who hold either office are worthy of great honor. Paul's point in this verse is that when the church carefully chooses qualified men to be deacons and they perform the duties of their office faithfully and well, not only does the church benefit, but the deacons gain esteem and reverence as well as boldness in the faith.

Conclusions:

1. This verse states two benefits for those who serve well as deacons. First, they gain a good standing, that is, the honor, esteem, respect, and praise of the congregation. Second, they gain confidence or boldness in faith in Christ.
2. This verse does not support the ancient practice of choosing presbyters from among the deacons as a promotion to a higher rank. A deacon may be chosen to be an elder, but a man who is not a deacon may be more qualified to become an elder than the deacon is.
3. The office of deacon is not a menial task, but a highly honorable office. The church should be careful to choose well-qualified men to be deacons. Deacons should strive to serve well in their office. The church should highly honor and respect deacons who serve well, just as the church gives double honor to presbyters who rule well. This encourages deacons to continue their good work and excel still more in it, for the glory of God and the good of God's people
4. The church also profits greatly from faithful deacons who serve well.

Exegesis of 1 Timothy 3:11, "wives"

Translation:

11) Wives likewise must be reverent, not slanderers, vigilant, faithful in all things.

Structure:

Verse 11 lists four qualifications for women. The structure of this sentence is similar to the structure of verse 8. Neither sentence has a main verb. Both verse 8 and verse 11 depend grammatically on verse 2.

Comment:

This verse raises many questions. What is Paul talking about in verse 11? Are these qualifications for women-deacons as some commentators argue? Should the first word of the verse be translated "women" or "wives"? Why does Paul use the word "likewise," the same word he used in verse 8 when he began a new set of qualifications?

In classical and Hellenistic Greek the word translated "wives" can mean either a woman, a female in the generic sense, or it can mean a man's wife. This seems strange to people who speak English, but other languages have this same ambiguity. For example, the German word Frau can mean either woman or wife. We have to figure out which is meant by the context in which the word occurs.

The question in verse 11 is this: Does Paul give four qualifications for the wives of deacons or four qualifications for female deacons? There are several good reasons that compel us to conclude that Paul is talking about wives, not female deacons.

First, if some women were deacons just like men are, there would be only one list of qualifications. No special qualifications for women-deacons would be necessary. For example, in the United States Congress we have both male senators and female senators, but there is only one list of qualifications for senators in the Constitution of the United States.

Both men and women must meet that one set of qualifications in order to be elected to office. There are no separate qualifications for any category of senator, whether white, black, male, female, blond, red-haired, or otherwise. All senators must meet the same qualifications.

Second, the word “likewise” does not imply a separate class of office bearers, as some commentators argue. The word “likewise” simply indicates that these qualities required of wives are similar to the qualities required for deacons. The qualifications in verse 11 are similar to the qualifications for deacons in verses 8-9. In fact, some are identical. Further examination shows that the qualifications for both deacons (verses 8-9) and their wives (verse 11) are similar to the qualifications for overseer in verses 2-7. Again, some are identical.

This brings us to a third point. The word “their” is not in the Greek text. It is not unusual in the Greek language to omit an article or demonstrative pronoun. However, in verse 11 Paul may have had a good reason to leave out the word “their.” If Paul had used the word “their,” most readers would refer the qualifications in verse 11 to the wives of the deacons only because Paul is talking about deacons in the immediate context. By leaving out the word “their” Paul refers not only to the wives of deacons, but also to the wives of overseers (ministers and elders). In other words, in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 Paul gives the qualifications for both overseers and deacons. In the midst of that, specifically, in the midst of the qualifications for deacon, the apostle says that the wives of both overseers and deacons must have certain qualities which he lists in verse 11. This interpretation also fits with the fact that both verses 8-9 and verse 11 share the main verb in verse 2 and thus are grammatically dependent upon verse 2.

Fourth, 1 Timothy 2:12 forbids women to teach or exercise authority over a man. This means that women may not hold special office in the church because ministers, elders, and deacons all exercise authority over men. None of the apostles were women. None of the original deacons chosen in Acts 6 were women. Acts 6:3 specifically states that the deacons were to be men. There is no record in the New Testament of a woman being an elder. There is no record in the New Testament of a woman being a minister. In fact, 1 Timothy 3:2 requires an overseer (minister and elder) to be “the husband of one wife.” This disqualifies all women from the office of overseer. Similarly, 1 Timothy 3:12 requires a deacon to be the husband of one wife. No woman can meet that qualification.

For Paul to speak about female deacons in verse 11 would contradict many other passages of Scripture. Female deacons also do not fit with the four points mentioned above. Some argue that in Romans 16:1 Paul calls Phoebe a deacon. It is true that the Greek word in Romans 16:1 is the same word used in the New Testament for the office of deacon in the church. However, in the New Testament that word (diakonos) does not usually refer to the office of deacon in the church. It is just the ordinary Greek word for “servant.” That is what it usually means in the New Testament. Phoebe was a servant, just as every member of the church should be. John Calvin comments on verse 11 that Paul “refers here to the wives of both bishops and deacons, for they must help their husbands in their office and they can do that only if their behaviour is better than other people’s.”

Conclusions:

1. Verse 11 gives qualifications for the wives of both overseers and deacons. If a man’s wife does not have the four qualities stated in verse 11, he may not become a minister, elder, or deacon in the church.
2. In verse 11 Paul does not give special qualifications for a female deacon, a deaconess, or some other special class of women or special office for women in the church.

Comment:

We now consider each of the four qualities that wives of both overseers and deacons must

have:

1. “Reverent”

This first quality is the same word as the first qualification for deacons in verse 8. The wives of both overseers and deacons must be “reverent,” which means that they must be worthy of respect or honor. The wives must be noble or dignified. They must not turn everything into a joke. They must be serious about things that are important. The wife of an overseer or a deacon must be a respectable person. In order to be worthy of respect and honor, she must be above reproach. If the wife of a deacon or overseer can be justly accused and convicted of sin, she is not worthy of respect and honor and the people in the congregation will not hold her in high esteem. Such a person does not meet this first qualification. Therefore, her husband may not hold a special office in the church.

The people of God should venerate the wives of overseers and deacons because they are admirable women. The congregation should have love and affection for these wives. To be reverent is to be worthy of this esteem and honor.

Conclusions on “Reverent”:

1. The wives of overseers and deacons must have upright character and integrity before God and men so that they are worthy of the respect, honor, admiration, love, and affection of God’s people. Like deacons, the wives must have a good reputation.
2. Any wife whose manner, conduct, thoughts, or attitude is not honorable, worthy of respect and admiration, and dignified does not meet this qualification. Her husband should not be an overseer or deacon.
3. The congregation should revere and honor the wives of overseers and deacons who serve in their midst.

2. “Not slanderers”

The Greek word translated “slanderer” is “diabolos” which is one of the names the Bible uses for Satan. The English word “diabolical” comes from this same Greek word. This word is translated “Devil” thirty-five times in the New Testament. It is translated “slanderer” three times in the New Testament when it refers to people (1 Timothy 3:11; 2 Timothy 3.3; Titus 2:3).

Satan is called the Devil because he slanders God’s people. He falsely accuses them of sin in the vain hope that God will condemn them and they will suffer eternal punishment with the Devil and his angels. See Matthew 4.1,8,11; 1 Timothy 3.6-7; 2 Timothy 2:26; 1 Peter 5:8; and Revelation 12:9-10.

Paul says that the wife of an overseer or a deacon must not be a slanderer like the Devil who tries to get as many people to fall into his trap of reproach and condemnation. Slander is a false tale or report that one maliciously utters in order to injure the reputation of another person by causing others to esteem him less, by exposing him to impeachment or punishment, or by impairing his means of living. The wife of an overseers or a deacon must not spread false reports which defame or injure a person’s good name. She must not falsely accuse people. She must not say things about people in order to damage their reputation. She should not make up stories about people that tend to impair their good name or make others esteem them less.

Two striking examples in the Bible of women who slandered other people are Potiphar’s wife who slandered Joseph (Genesis 39.7-33) and King Ahab’s wife Jezebel who slandered Naboth (I Kings 21).

God forbids slander in the ninth commandment (see Exodus 20:16 and what the catechisms teach about the ninth commandment). In Titus 2:3 Paul says that especially all older women should have this same quality. They should not be slanderers. John Calvin comments: “Talkativeness is a disease among women and old age usually makes it worse. In addition to this, women are never satisfied with their talking till they have become prattlers and scandalmongers attacking everybody’s reputation. The result is that old women by their slanderous garrulity, as by a lighted torch, often set many homes on fire” (Commentary on Titus 2:3). The wives of those who bear special office in the church should not imitate the Devil and set homes on fire. They should help their husbands preserve, encourage, and build up God’s people, not devour them by slandering them.

Conclusions on “Not Slanderers”: 1. The wives of officebearers in the church must not slander other people, that is, say false things which damage other people’s good name. Rather, wives should assist their husbands in building up others and equipping them for every good work.

2. Every person, including every woman, should cultivate this quality, but especially the wives of ministers, elders, and deacons.

3. A man whose wife does slander other people is not qualified for the office of overseer or deacon in the church.

3. “Temperate”

This Greek word can mean: sober, not intoxicated, clear-headed, self-controlled, moderate, frugal, continent, sober-minded, prudent, reasonable. The King James Version translates this Greek word as “sober” in 1 Timothy 3:11, and “vigilant” in 1 Timothy 3:2. The New King James Version uses the translation “temperate” in both places. We usually use the English word “temperate” to mean moderate, such as a temperate climate. In 1 Timothy 3 Paul does not use this Greek word in the sense of restraint in using intoxicating drink or moderation, but rather in the sense of how a person thinks and reacts in general. There are several reasons for this conclusion.

First, Paul uses this Greek word in 1 Timothy 3:2 in the qualifications for overseers. In the next verse (1 Tim. 3:3) Paul specifically states that an elder must not be given to wine. This same qualification regarding the use of wine is in Titus 1:7 also. Since Paul later deals specifically with the use of wine, it would seem that “temperate” here does not focus on the same point. It is logical that when Paul uses this same word again in verse 11 for the wives of officebearers, since the context of the word is the same, he means the same thing as for elders in verse 2.

Second, in verse 2 “temperate” begins a list of qualities that have to do with the general character of an elder’s behavior, thinking, and attitudes. Temperate is followed by sober-minded. The translators of the New King James Version used these two English words interchangeably in the New Testament. For example, in Titus 2:2 we read: “that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience.” The word translated as “temperate” in Titus 2:2 is the same word as “sober-minded” in 1 Timothy 3:2. The translation of these words has been interchanged in Titus from what we have in 1 Timothy 3:2. If the words “temperate” and “sober” were two totally different ideas, clearly distinguished from one another, then it would be erroneous to interchange the translation. These two (Greek) words are closely related and have almost the same meaning in the New Testament. The translators of the New King James Version understood this.

Third, in Titus 2:2 and Titus 2:6-7 Paul uses the word “temperate” and the word “sober-minded” (same word as “sober”) in the context of a man’s general character. The context of these passages makes clear that Paul is not talking about a man’s restraint in drinking wine.

In 2 Timothy 4:5 we have the verb form of the word translated “temperate” in 1 Timothy 3: 2.

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things...” (2 Tim. 4:3-5). The qualification we are discussing means to be watchful and on guard against turning aside to nice stories and fables in place of the truth of the Gospel of Christ. It means to be wise, stable, and discerning.

Paul uses this same verb in 1 Thessalonians 5:6: “Therefore let us not sleep, as others, but let us watch and be sober.” This time the verb is translated “be sober.” It is placed parallel to “watch.” Paul uses the same verb again in verse 8: “But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.” The qualification we are discussing means to be on guard, to be diligent in faith, love, and hope, to pay attention to the things of God in order that we might persevere until the Day of the Lord (cf. Hebrews 2:1; 6:11,12). It is for this reason that the King James Version uses the translation “vigilant” instead of “temperate” in 1 Timothy 3:2, and “sober” instead of “temperate” in 1 Timothy 3:11.

The apostle Peter uses this same verb several times in his first letter. In 1:13-14 he writes: “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance.” The idea in this verse is that we must pay attention, be serious, and think clearly. We must be able to give diligent heed to the truth of God’s Word and consequently obey with determination. In 4:7 we read: “But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful unto prayer.” The command to be watchful is parallel with the command to be serious. The end of all things is about to come. Be alert! Be wide awake! A drunkard or an indifferent person pays little attention to what is going on. His senses and faculties are neither sharp nor keen. This is the opposite of what it means to be vigilant or clear-headed or sober. When warning the saints of the Devil who walks about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, Peter says: “Be sober, be vigilant...” (1 Peter 5:8).

Conclusions on “Temperate”:

1. The sense of the original word is better conveyed by the translations “vigilant” and “sober” which the King James Version uses in 1 Timothy 3:2,11.
2. The wife of an overseer or deacon must be on guard and alert. Her senses must be sharp. She must watch out for wolves and anything that would devour her or any of God’s people. She should not be a babe in Christ who drinks only milk and is unskilled in the word of righteousness. Rather, she should be mature and able to eat the solid food of Scripture. Her senses should be exercised by use so that she is able to discern truth from error (Hebrews 5:12-14). She must watch carefully over her own life and heart lest there arise any root of bitterness; unbelief; sinful patterns of life, speech, or thought; neglect of the things of God; or disobedience to the commands of Scripture. She should be able to help her husband, her family, and others guard against sin and error. This is required of overseers (1 Timothy 3:2), older men (Titus 2:2), and all God’s people (1 Peter 5:8).
3. The wife of an overseer or deacon should be wise, stable, and discerning. She should have a clear mind and sound judgment. A man whose wife does not have this quality, but is gullible, a babe in Christ, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 3: 6-7) is not qualified for the office of overseer or the office of deacon.
4. “Faithful in All Things” This Greek adjective means trustworthy, faithful, dependable, reliable. The wife of an overseer or deacon must be faithful in every respect. Her husband should be able to trust her completely in everything. He should have no doubt that she will be faithful to him in marriage. He should have no doubt that he can trust her not to tell others about confidential information that he tells her. He should trust her to teach and train his

children. He should trust her to manage the household. He should trust her to be prudent and gracious to others. She should be a trustworthy advisor and helper to her husband. Her word should be reliable. Her husband should be able to depend upon her no matter what the situation.

The Bible says that every wife should be faithful in all things. Proverbs 31:10-12 provides a model which every wife should follow: “Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts in her; so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life.” Verses 13-25 give examples of her faithfulness in every aspect of daily life as she manages the household and helps her husband. She is a faithful steward in all things. Verses 26-31 conclude: “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: ‘Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all.’ Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates.”

These verses from Proverbs 31 describe a wife who is faithful in all things. A man who can not trust his wife to be faithful in all things is not qualified to be an overseer or a deacon in the church.

Conclusions on “Faithful in All Things”:

1. Every wife should be trustworthy and faithful in every area of life. Her husband should be able to trust her completely. Proverbs 31 illustrates a godly wife who is faithful in all things.
2. If a man’s wife is not faithful in all things, that man is not qualified to be an overseer or a deacon in the church.

This concludes the series on the qualifications for the offices of elder and deacon in the Christian church. We are grateful to Pastor Allison for this consistently fine exposition. Rev. Archibald Alexander Allison is currently serving as pastor of the Emmaus Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Fort Collins, Colorado.

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