

Biblical Qualifications for Deacons

Archibald Alexander Allison

Extracted from [*Ordained Servant*](#) vol. 6, no. 1 (January 1997)

Exegesis of 1 Timothy 3:8—“reverent”

Translation:

”Deacons likewise must be *reverent*...”

Structure:

The qualifications for the office of deacon follow immediately after the qualifications for the office of overseer. Grammatically, verses 8-9 depend upon verse 2. “Reverent” is the first of five qualifications in the first sentence which covers verses 8-9.

Comment:

Several considerations lead us to conclude that in verse 8 the apostle Paul gives the qualifications for the special office of deacon in the church. First, verse 8 follows immediately after Paul gives the qualifications for the special office of overseer in the church. Second, Paul connects verse 8 with verse 2 by using the word “likewise,” which means “in the same way” or “similarly.” Third, there is no main verb written in the Greek text of verse 8. A reader of the Greek text understands verses 8-9 to share the main verb written in verse 2 (must be). That is why the English translations italicize the words “must be” in verse 8.

The word “likewise” indicates that verses 8-13 are similar in some way to verses 2-7. In Philippians 1: 1 Paul addressed the saints in the church at Philippi with the overseers and deacons. The office of overseer and the office of deacon are two special offices in the church. Verses 2-7 are similar to verses 8-13 in that both passages give the qualifications for a special office in the church. Further, the qualifications for both of these special offices are similar, though not identical.

In Acts 6 the apostles found it necessary to choose men to help them with their work. The apostles ordained these men to special office in the church by laying their hands on them. In 1 Timothy 3:8-13 the Lord gives us the qualifications for those who serve the church in this special office of deacon.

The implied main verb in verse 8, “must be,” means that these qualifications for the office of deacon are essential. They are not merely helpful guidelines. All of these qualifications are mandatory. They are requirements which God has laid down for the office of deacon in his church. No man may be a deacon in the church of God unless he meets all of these qualifications. We confess that Christ is king of the church. That means that we must follow the rules for the church which Christ sets down in his Word. God has laid upon his church the duty to keep all unworthy men out of the office of deacon. Should a man already in office show himself unqualified for the office he holds, the church must remove him from that office. By removing unqualified men from office, the church maintains discipline, upholds the honor of Christ, and insures that the church is edified unto greater peace, purity, and unity.

The first qualification is that a deacon must be “reverent,” which means that he must be worthy of respect or honor. He must be noble or dignified. He must not turn everything into a joke. He must be serious about things that are important. A deacon must be a respectable person. In order to be worthy of respect and honor, he must be above reproach. If a deacon can

be justly accused and convicted of sin, he is not worthy of respect and honor and the people in the congregation will not hold him in high esteem. Such a person does not meet this first qualification.

The people of God should have fear mingled with respect and esteem for those who serve in the office of deacon. They should venerate the deacon because he is admirable. They should have love and affection for him. To be reverent is to be worthy of this esteem and honor.

Conclusions: 1. Every deacon must be a man of upright character and integrity before God and men so that he is worthy of the fear, respect, honor, admiration, love, and affection of God's people. This was one of the qualifications for the seven men chosen to help the apostles in Acts 6.3: "men of good reputation."

2. Any man whose manner, conduct, thoughts, or attitude is not honorable, worthy of respect and admiration, and dignified does not meet this qualification and should not be a deacon.

3. A man in the office of deacon whose character and reputation are marred by sinful or improper behavior ought to be removed from office.

4. The congregation should revere and honor the deacons who serve in their midst.

Exegesis of 1 Timothy 3.8 "not double-tongued"

Translation: Deacons likewise must be reverent, *not double-tongued*,

Structure: This is the second of five qualifications for the office of deacon in the first sentence which covers verses 8-9. This is the first of three negative requirements in verse 8.

Comment: The Greek word translated "double-tongued" occurs only once in the New Testament. Literally it means "two-worded." It is essentially the Greek equivalent to the common English expression "He talks out of both sides of his mouth." A deacon must not talk out of both sides of his mouth. He must not say one thing, but mean something else. He must not say one thing to one person, but the opposite to another person. He must not just say what different people want to hear. He must not be a liar. The deacon must not deceive with his speech. He must speak the truth clearly, faithfully, and consistently. He must be a man of his word. His speech must be sincere.

Jesus commands all Christians not to be doubletongued when he says in Matthew 5.37, "But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'" For whatever is more than these is from the evil one." Paul, led by the Holy Spirit, singles this out as a necessary quality in a deacon.

John Calvin writes in his commentary on this verse "that by deacons we are to understand those mentioned in Acts 6: 3, officers, that is, who are entrusted with the care of the poor." Calvin continues: "The four chief qualities Paul requires them to possess are well enough known, but it should be carefully noted that he admonishes them not to be double-tongued, for this is a fault that is hard to avoid in that kind of work, and yet which more than any other should be completely absent from it."

Conclusions:

1. Every deacon must consistently speak the truth and be a man who keeps his word. This is no different than God's command that all Christians speak the truth and mean what they say.

2. Duplicity, double-dealing, or deliberate deceptiveness in speech disqualifies a man from the office of deacon in the church.

3. It is especially important that a deacon's speech be trustworthy, true, and free from deception since he handles the church's money and property. A deacon who does not meet

this qualification can easily end up stealing from the church.

4. A deacon should not speak kindly to the poor and needy and then turn and speak ill of them to others.

Exegesis of 1 Timothy 3.8 “not given to much wine,”

Translation:

”Deacons likewise must be reverent, not double-tongued, *not given to much wine,*”

Structure:

This is the third of five qualifications for the office of deacon in the first sentence which covers verses 8-9. This is the second of three negative requirements in verse 8.

Comment:

A deacon must not be given to much wine. The Greek verb means “to occupy oneself with” something or “to devote oneself to” something. Paul uses this same verb in 1 Timothy 4.13 when he tells Timothy: “Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.” Paul wants Timothy to occupy himself or devote himself to reading, exhortation, and teaching.

In 1 Timothy 3.8 Paul tells Timothy that a deacon must not occupy himself with or devote himself to drinking a great amount of wine. A man who is given to much wine drinks too much wine; in the words of Proverbs 23.29, he tarries long at the wine. That includes a man who has only occasional bouts of excessive drinking, as well as the man who regularly drinks too much. Wine takes an inordinate place in his life, becoming more important to him than it ought to be. In that sense, he is enslaved to drinking. It occupies too much of his time, his thinking, his desires, and his life.

Such a person is not qualified to be a deacon in the church. The Scripture says that a man who tarries long at the wine, who goes in search of mixed wine, has woe, sorrow, contentions, complaints, wounds without cause, and redness of eyes. He who longs for wine and is captivated by it will see strange things and will utter perverse things. He will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea or on top of a ship’s mast, having lost his senses and resting only to awake for another drink (Proverbs 23.29-35).

Paul does not say in 1 Timothy 3.8 that a deacon must not drink wine. Those who require deacons to abstain from drinking any wine on the basis of this verse, have twisted this qualification to say something that it does not say. We know from the rest of Scripture that just as God causes the grass to grow for the cattle and vegetation for man to eat, so God gives wine to man. It is the Lord who gives “wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread strengthens man’s heart” (Psalm 104.14-15). Jesus used wine as one of the elements of the Lord’s Supper, and we are to continue using wine in the Lord’s Supper until Jesus returns.

A little later in 1 Timothy, Paul tells Timothy: “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities” (5.23). The Scripture expresses the covenant blessing of God in this way: “Honor the LORD with your possessions, and with the first-fruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine” (Proverbs 3.9-10). Wine is one of God’s good gifts and is to be used to the glory of God.

In this verse, the Lord of the church disqualifies from the office of deacon anyone who is given to much wine. That includes all who drink excessively, including the drunkard. Scripture condemns drunkenness, saying that no drunkard will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6.9,10).

In general, a deacon must not let wine govern him, but must be able to use wine wisely and in moderation unto the glory of God. Although wine is specifically mentioned by the text, I think the principle here applies to any food or drink which has mastery over a man, especially those things which impair a man's judgment and his ability to control his speech and actions.

Because wine can impair a man's judgment and ability to control his speech and actions, God commanded Aaron and his sons: "Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die" (Lev. 10: 8-9). Scripture states the reason in these words: in order that you (Aaron and his sons) might "distinguish between holy and unholy, and between clean and unclean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by the hand of Moses" (Lev. 10.10-11).

Similarly, civil magistrates, like elders and deacons in the church, are also not to be given to wine: "It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, nor for princes intoxicating drink; lest they drink and forget the law, and pervert the justice of all the afflicted" (Proverbs 31.4,5). Compare also Isaiah 5.20-25; 28.7; and Ezekiel 44.21.

Conclusions:

1. Wine is a good thing given by God, but must be used rightly to the glory of God.
2. A deacon must not be given to wine. He must not use wine unwisely in any way, nor be enslaved by it or any other food or drink that impairs his judgment. Addiction to wine disqualifies a man from office. A man who becomes drunk also fails to meet this qualification for the office of deacon in the church.
3. The words of John Calvin regarding pastors apply also to deacons, "Excessive drinking is not only unseemly in a pastor, but usually results in many things still worse, such as quarrels, foolish attitudes, unchastity, and others there is no need to mention" (Commentary on 1 Tim. 3.3). Compare also Paul's exhortation to all believers in Ephesians 5.18. No believer, but especially no deacon, should be drunk with wine. Rather, God's people should be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is especially true of deacons. One of the qualifications for the seven men chosen to help the apostles in Acts 6.3 was that they be "full of the Holy Spirit."
4. From this qualification we can infer that a deacon, just like civil magistrates (especially judges), should neither be "given to," or under the control of any food or drink or drug which has the same kind of effect as wine on a man's speech, conduct, and judgment.
5. A deacon must show his ability to rule himself in the way he uses God's gift of wine. He must be able to use wine wisely and in moderation unto the glory of God; he must never "give himself to much wine."

Exegesis of I Tim. 3.8: "not greedy for money"

Translation:

"Deacons likewise must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, *not fond of shameful gain,*"

Structure:

This is the fourth of five qualifications for the office of deacon in the first sentence which covers verses 8-9. This is the last of three negative requirements in verse 8.

Comment:

In Greek Paul uses a compound adjective composed of the words for "shameful" and "gain."

Its meaning is best conveyed by the translation “fond of shameful gain.” Shameful gain is anything that a man gets by dishonest means, or which is itself shameful or wicked.

Peter speaks of the same thing in 1 Peter 5.2 when he exhorts the elders to “shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain, but eagerly.” Peter is saying that a man’s motivation to serve as an overseer should not be dishonest gain. The same is true of deacons. A deacon should not be seeking dishonest gain. He should not seek to exalt himself among the flock of God by the office of deacon. He should not try to garner to himself power, control, or authority over others.

His desire should not be to puff himself up with pride because of the honor, respect, prestige, or flattery that may come to him. His motivation for being a deacon should not be some advantage that he can get by this office. Rather, a man’s motivation should be an eager desire to serve Jesus Christ and serve the people of God. A deacon should desire to use the gifts and abilities God gives him to advance the kingdom of God.

The task of a deacon is to serve God by helping the pastor and elders in their work and by helping the people in the congregation with their needs. The task of a deacon is to give, not to take. His task is to serve, not seek dishonest gain. Rather than seeking shameful gain, a deacon should have the mind of Christ who though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that we through his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8.9). A deacon should serve in order to make others gain.

God gives us the power to get wealth (Deuteronomy 8.18). It is certainly not wrong for a deacon to be wealthy, since it is a covenant blessing from the Lord (cf. Proverbs 3.9-10 and Job 42.12). This qualification does not, therefore, forbid a deacon to gain wealth. Rather it forbids a deacon to covet his neighbor’s wealth, or desire to gain wealth in a wrong way. Instead of seeking shameful gain, a deacon should remember the words of the apostle Paul to the Ephesian elders: “I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

This qualification should be broadly applied. It applies to money and material goods. A man who just wants riches should not be a deacon. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 6.9-10: “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

This qualification also applies to the shameful gain of non-material things, such as power, honor, and praise. One’s goals in defending oneself or others from criticism or accusations should not be self-serving. A deacon should not use his special office in the church to serve himself, but rather to serve God’s people.

Conclusions: 1. To have or gain money and wealth is a covenant blessing from the Lord. It is not evil. It is not something the godly man must avoid, as Roman Catholic theology and asceticism falsely maintain.

2. This qualification forbids a deacon to acquire money or material possessions with sinful motives or in any dishonest way. A man should not become a deacon in order to get money or any other material advantage.

3. It also disqualifies from office a man whose primary goal is to get power, control, authority,

honor, prestige, respect, or flattery, rather than to glorify God and serve the church for its edification.

4. A man who is unscrupulous in getting his way is also fond of shameful gain and therefore is not qualified to be a deacon.

Exegesis of 1 Timothy 3.9

Translation:

8) “Deacons likewise must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not fond of shameful gain, 9) *holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience.*”

Structure:

This is the last of the five qualifications for the office of deacon in the first sentence which covers verses 8-9. The middle three requirements are stated in the negative, but the first and last are stated positively.

Comment:

The apostle Paul uses the word “mystery” several times in his letters to refer to a truth which was previously obscure and relatively unknown, but which God has now made plain to his people through special revelation. For example in Ephesians 3.3-6 Paul writes: “how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I wrote before in a few words, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel.”

1 Corinthians 2.7,8,10 is another good example: “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.”

At the end of 1 Timothy 3 Paul refers to the mystery of godliness when he writes in verse 16: “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory.” In this verse Paul uses the term “mystery of godliness” to refer to the Christian faith.

The “mystery of the faith” in verse 9 refers to the same thing. John Calvin comments that in this verse Paul “gives to the sum of Christian teaching the dignified title of ‘the mystery of the faith,’ since through the Gospel God reveals to mortal men a wisdom that makes the angels in heaven wonder, so that it is not surprising if it is too great for human capacity.”

A deacon must believe the reformed faith which God has revealed to us in his Word, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. A deacon must hold without reservation to the doctrine taught in the Bible. He must have true faith in God. He must know and accept as true all that God has revealed in his Word. He must live in obedience to God’s revealed will as the only standard to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy God. He must not be a hypocrite who says he believes, but does not bring forth the fruits of repentance and true faith in Jesus Christ.

To have a pure conscience is to be cleansed from the guilt of our sins through the blood of Jesus Christ and to be clothed in his spotless righteousness by faith. To have a pure conscience is to be a true Christian. It is to be redeemed by Christ and renewed to live in obedience to God’s holy law. Hebrews 10.19-22 speaks of this: “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house

of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

A deacon must hold firmly to the truth, to the Christian faith. He must believe it and practice it because God the Holy Spirit has regenerated him, given him a new heart, given him repentance and faith, and the blood of Christ has cleansed his conscience from dead works to serve the living God (Hebrews 9.14). A man who lives in sin or who does not obey God in some area of his life can not have a pure conscience. A pure conscience requires a life of faith, a life of obedience, a life which submits to the Word and rule of Christ the King in all things.

In the words of John Calvin, “It is as if he had said, ‘Holding the pure doctrine of our religion from the heart with a sincere fear of God, men who are rightly instructed in the faith, ignorant of nothing that it is needful for a Christian man to know’” (Commentary on 1 Timothy 3.9).

Conclusions:

1. Deacons, like elders, should be well instructed in reformed doctrine and practice. Deacons should know the Scriptures well, live according to the Scriptures, and be able to use the Scriptures correctly in all kinds of situations that occur in daily life.
2. Deacons must be true Christians who are sound in doctrine, and obedient and faithful in life. They must be committed to the reformed faith—to all that God has revealed to us in his Word. They must hold to the faith of our fathers without reservation.
3. Even though deacons do not hold a teaching office in the church, Christ does not want anyone who is unskilled in the Christian faith to hold public office in his church.
4. It is important that a deacon be skilled in the Christian faith (see Hebrews 5.2-14) because he will often have to give advice and and seek to comfort other people. That is part of the work of a deacon as he ministers to God’s people. The advice and comfort he gives must be biblical. It must be doctrinally sound. It must be correct and wise in practice. That can only come from faithfully studying and using the Scriptures correctly.

The Rev. Archibald Alexander Allison is pastor of the Emmaus Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Part 1 | [Part 2](#) | [Part 3](#)