

Biblical Qualifications for Deacons (part 2)

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Extracted from [*Ordained Servant*](#) vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 31-36

Exegesis of I Timothy 3:10—“blameless”

Translation: “But let these also first be tested, then let them serve, being *blameless*.”

Structure: Verse 10 is a complete sentence with two qualifications. The first is that deacons should be tested before they serve in the special office of deacon in the church. The second specifies what the result of that testing must be in order for a man to be qualified to serve in the office of deacon.

Comment: The Greek word means “blameless” or “above reproach.” It is a different Greek word from the word translated “blameless” in 1 Timothy 3:2, but the meaning is identical. This is confirmed in the list of qualifications for elders in Titus 1:6-7 where Paul uses the same word for elders as he uses for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:10. Paul uses this same word for both deacons and elders.

Paul says a deacon must first be tested. The result of that testing must be that the man is blameless or above reproach. If he is not above reproach, then he has failed the test and he is not qualified to serve in the office of deacon. A man may only serve in the office of deacon in the church if he is first tested and he proves himself to be above reproach.

By “blameless” the Scripture does not mean that a man must be sinless in order to be a deacon. To be blameless is to be irreproachable. No one should be able to lay a charge against a deacon and make it stick. To be blameless does not mean that one is able to evade accusation or conviction. Rather, a man is blameless or above reproach when his words and conduct conform to the holy commandments of God in Scripture so that he cannot justly be accused or convicted of any chargeable offense. In the words of John Calvin, “to be blameless means to be free from any notorious fault” (Commentary on 1 Timothy 3:10).

The Scripture says Job was “blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). The people of God should be able to say that about every deacon in the church. The deacon’s reputation should be above reproach. No one should be able to lay hold of him or assail him or reproach him because of his sins, whether in speech, conduct, or doctrine. Every Christian sins until the day he lays down this body of sin at death. Daily sins that are common to all men do not bring reproach and blame upon a person from others because they too are guilty of the same sins. A deacon, like an overseer, must have and maintain a good name. There should be no question as to his integrity or upright character.

John Calvin explains it this way: A deacon “ought not to be marked by any disgrace that would detract from his authority. There will certainly not be found a man who is free from every fault, but it is one thing to be burdened with ordinary faults that do not hurt a man’s reputation, because the most excellent men share them, but quite another to have a name that is held in infamy and besmirched by some scandalous disgrace. Thus, in order that the bishops may not lack authority, he gives charge that those who are chosen should be of good and honorable reputation, and free of any extraordinary fault. Also, he is not merely directing Timothy as to the sort of men he should choose but he is reminding all who aspire to the office that they should carefully examine their own life” (Commentary on I Timothy 3:2).

Conclusions:

1. When the church tests and evaluates a man for the office of deacon, the man must prove over a period of time that he is blameless in order to be qualified for the office of deacon. The man must show that he is a man of mature character and integrity before God and men. He must show that he is above reproach.
2. If a man is above reproach, then he may become a deacon. Otherwise, he fails the test.
3. Only a man of such maturity, character, and integrity is trustworthy and will serve God's people faithfully in the office of deacon and glorify God in his work (see Acts 6:3-5).
4. Any man who has a stain upon his character or does not live a consistent, godly life does not meet this qualification and should not be a deacon.
5. A man in the office of deacon whose character and reputation are not above reproach, or whose authority is undermined by a recurring pattern of sinful behaviour in his life ought to be removed from office.

Exegesis of 1 Timothy 3:12—"husband of one wife"

Translation: "Let deacons be the *husbands of one wife*."

Structure: Verse 12 is a complete sentence with two qualifications. The first has to do with a deacon's wife, and the second with his family and household.

Comment: This qualification does not mean that a man must be married in order to be a deacon. The apostle Peter calls himself a fellow elder in 1 Peter 5:1: "Now the presbyters among you, I, who am fellow presbyter and witness of the sufferings of Christ and a partaker of the glory that will be revealed, exhort: shepherd the flock of God among you, being overseers...." We know from 1 Cor. 7:8-9 that the apostle Paul who wrote both 1 Timothy and Titus was unmarried. Yet he was "apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, by the commandment of God our Saviour and the Lord Jesus Christ..." (1 Tim. 1:1). As an apostle Paul was also an elder, an overseer among the flock of God.

Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:15 that he is writing this letter in order that Timothy may know how he ought to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). Paul would disqualify himself from being an elder if he meant by "husband of one wife" in 1 Timothy 3:2 that an elder must be married. If an overseer such as Paul can be unmarried, then a deacon may also be unmarried.

This requirement means that if a man is married or has been married, he must not have two wives in God's sight. This is an express prohibition of polygamy for a deacon. This same requirement is given in I Timothy 3.2 for the office of overseer. In the first century many men had more than one wife (see Chrysostom and Calvin on this). The New Testament confirms God's command from the time of creation that a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife and the two shall become one flesh (Gen. 2:24; Mt. 19:5; Eph. 5:31). Those who unlawfully (according to God's law) divorce their wives and/or marry another wife so that before God they have more than one wife at the same time, may not be deacons in the church which is the bride of the Lord Jesus Christ. Deacons must be blameless before the law of God concerning marriage (and divorce). If a man can justly (keeping the precepts of Scripture) put away his wife with the approval of God and/or remarry, then he is still qualified to bear the office of deacon.

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