

The Qualifications and Responsibilities of Elders and Deacons

by David E. Moss

The Bible teaches that there are two offices in the local church: elders and deacons. Elder is an office of oversight. Deacon is an office of service. Together they provide the leadership and ministry that is vital to the health of the local church. [For a more complete definition of these offices, please see the booklet "Setting Things in Order, An Examination of the Biblical Format for Church Administration." It also puts the role of "pastor" into perspective with the offices of elder and deacon.]

A. The Institution of the Offices of the Church

1. In the beginning, leadership in the church was provided exclusively by the Apostles (*Acts 2:42; Acts 4:35*).
2. When the numbers of Christians began multiplying, the Apostles ordered the institution of other servants (deacons) to help in fulfilling direct ministry to the people (*Acts 6:1-6*).
3. The first mention of elders in the local church is at Jerusalem where they received relief sent from believers in Antioch (*Acts 11:30*). Elders were also ordained in all the local churches started by Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (*Acts 14:23*). Their role of providing primary oversight to the local church emerged in *Acts 15* where they participated with the Apostles in making major decisions (*Acts 15:2,4,6,22,23; 16:4*).
4. The oversight of the local church was turned over completely to the elders when the Apostles were no longer going to be available -- as illustrated by Paul with the Elders in Ephesus (*Acts 20:17-38*).
5. Meanwhile, at least one of the first seven deacons became an evangelist and performed great wonders among the people -- illustrating that deacons had more to do than wait on tables (*Acts 6:8*). [Acts 8 - If this Philip is the deacon and not the apostle, he would be the second deacon who became an evangelist.]
6. Bishops and deacons are identified together in the church at Philippi -- illustrating that the two offices were to work together within each local church (*Philippians 1:1*). [The terms elder and bishop are used interchangeably by Titus in *Titus 1:5-7*.]
7. Distinct qualifications are listed for bishops and deacons indicating a distinction in office, but a similarity in spiritual emphasis of responsibilities. Both are to be blameless, the husbands of one wife, and rule their children well; but the elders are to "take care of the church of God" (I Timothy 3:5), while the deacons in using their office "purchase to themselves a good degree," [i.e. a step or grade of influence] (I Timothy 3:13). The elders are recognized as the ones who are primarily responsible for the welfare of the church. Deacons are recognized as having ministry responsibilities similar to some of those given to elders, only on a different level, as servants rather than overseers.

B. The Selection of Men as Elders and Deacons

The selection of men for the offices of elder and deacon is one of the most significant factors in maintaining stability in the local church. Leadership has much to do with the way a church functions and the direction a church goes.

Many of the problems in today's local churches can be traced to unqualified leaders. This unfortunate dilemma often results from having a constitution that requires a certain number of offices to be filled whether or not qualified men are available. As a result,

congregations elect available men to serve even though they do not qualify, and these men provide inadequate leadership resulting in stressful situations in the church.

God has outlined both the qualifications and responsibilities of elders and deacons in the New Testament Scriptures. It is absolutely essential for every local church to carefully consider these matters in selecting those who serve in leadership roles.

The procedure we use at North Hills Bible Church for selecting elders and deacons is as follows:

1. At an Elder Board meeting several months before election time, we identify men whom we think might qualify for the offices of elder and deacon. Each current elder then considers these prospects and makes personal observations about them in light of the list of biblical qualifications. Also considered is whether or not they have been members of our local church for at least one year and how faithfully they attend all the services of our church.
2. At a later meeting, having given prayerful consideration of each prospect, the Elder Board agrees upon those who are believed to meet the qualifications. These men are then approached and asked if they are willing to consider serving in the respective offices.
3. Two elders then make an appointment with each man being considered and interview him.
4. Reports of the interviews are then shared with the entire Elder Board and a final decision is made as to whom will be presented to the congregation.
5. At the Annual Congregational meeting, those presented as candidates for elder are voted upon individually so that each man is approved on the merits of his qualification for office and not on the basis of how he compares with someone else. Each man who receives a vote of approval by the congregation (our constitution requires a two-thirds approval rating) then serves as an elder of the church for three years, after which he must be re-approved by the congregation.
6. Men deemed qualified to serve as deacons are appointed by the Elder Board.

C. Qualifications for Elders and Deacons

The Bible has established a very definite set of qualifications for men who would serve in the two offices given to the church. The qualifications for elders are listed in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. It is necessary to combine these two passages for a complete list of qualifications for the office of elder. The qualifications for deacons are listed in I Timothy 3:8-13. It is necessary for men to meet all of the qualifications in order to serve in these offices.

These are not comparative qualifications. In other words, a man does not qualify to serve as an elder or deacon because he comes the closest to fulfilling the biblical requirements among the men available. These are absolute qualifications. A man either qualifies, or he does not. If none of the available men in a local church qualify, it is better to have no elders or deacons than to have unqualified men serve.

Elders

(I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9)

With Regard To Their Reputation

1. Blameless. The word blameless means to be above reproach. It does not require that a person be absolutely sinless but it does require two very important things. (1) In his daily walk with God, a man must know how to deal with sin immediately and keep current in his confession

of sins, maintaining a healthy fellowship with God the Father, and not grieving or quenching the Holy Spirit. (2) He must never be guilty of serious sins which can cause embarrassment to Christ, His Church, or His work. No one must ever be able to point their finger at this man and say, "Look what he did. And he is an elder in the local church. Shame! Shame!" Blamelessness provides no opportunity for this to happen.

2. Good report of them which are without. The man who provides leadership within the church must have a good reputation outside the church as well. This suggests that he obeys the law, gets along well with his neighbors, is polite to strangers, and conducts himself honestly in business. There must be no possibility that his behavior in the community at large might cause embarrassment to Christ and His Church.

With Regard To Their Experience

3. Not a novice. The word novice refers to someone who is just starting out, a person newly planted in his faith like a seedling tree that is still in the nursery. While this characterizes the condition of new Christians, it may also be true of some who have been saved for a very long time but have never grown. The point being made by this qualification is that spiritual maturity is absolutely essential for providing leadership in the church. This maturity should not be measured simply by how long one has been a Christian, but by how far he has progressed in his Christian growth.

With Regard To Their Marriage

4. Husbands of one wife. An elder must set an example in his own marriage relationship as to what Christ meant when He said, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church...." (Ephesians 5:25). Christ has promised never to leave nor forsake the church, no matter what. An elder should be a living illustration of this truth in his relationship with his wife, loving her and remaining committed to her in the same way that Christ maintains his unconditional relationship with the church. If a man is divorced from his wife and married to another woman while his first spouse is still alive he loses the opportunity to fulfill this illustration.

With Regard To Their Family Life

5. Ruling well his own house. The Scripture explains the importance of this qualification in I Timothy 3:5: "If a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" The home is a proving ground for men who aspire to leadership in the church. There he learns how to deal with all kinds of situations similar to those he will encounter by working with people in the church. If he has managed his home well through such circumstances, he is a good prospect to provide oversight to the church. If he has failed at home, he will likely fail in the church.

6. Having his children in subjection with all gravity. In managing his home well, a father will develop within his children the tendency to be obedient and respectful in their demeanor. By doing so he provides evidence that he is able to be a positive influence on the lives of church members.

7. Having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. A father cannot force his children to be saved. Therefore, this faithfulness refers not to salvation, but to a child's response to what he has been taught by his father. If a child constantly resists his father's instructions and is known for riotous and unruly behavior at home, at school, at church, and in the neighborhood, this is evidence that a man has not managed his home well and will do poorly in managing the lives of people in the church. On the other hand, if a man's children are known to be obedient, respectful and faithful to what they have been taught at home wherever they go, this man is a

good prospect for providing leadership in the church. [This qualification would appear not to pertain to children who are grown and no longer living at home.]

With Regard To Their Spiritual Qualities

8. Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught. This statement first of all implies that the man has been taught the Word of God. He is familiar with the Scriptures and has learned them well. By holding them fast, he demonstrates by his life that he not only knows what the Bible says, but also has been able to apply its principles to his daily life. The effect of this relationship with the Word of God enables him “by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers” (Titus 1:9). In other words, he knows the Bible and is skilled in using it.

9. Vigilant. This word describes the ability to be cautious and watchful, guarding against trouble. This kind of man is not taken by surprise nor easily shaken in his leadership. He is well prepared to face difficult situations.

10. Patient. This word describes the ability to be equitable, fair, and gentle with people. A patient man has carried the principle of Romans 12:18 to its furthest extreme, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.”

11. Just. This word describes the consistent pursuit of righteousness. This kind of man is meticulously concerned about knowing what God has said to be right and about upholding that in his personal conduct and in his relationship with others.

12. Holy. This word describes the condition of a man’s life who has cooperated with the Holy Spirit in the process of sanctification. The characteristics of the old man have been put off and the characteristics of the new man have been put on. He lives a clean, moral, ethical life that truly glorifies God.

With Regard To Their Personal Character

13. Sober. This word describes the soundness of a man’s mind. A sober man is one who takes life seriously and is conscientious in all he does.

14. Given to hospitality. Hospitality is the willingness to share one’s personal possessions with someone else who needs them. It is also the willingness to receive strangers and to be helpful to them. Being given to hospitality, a man demonstrates that he is not selfish or a respecter of persons. As he is hospitable toward the needy and strangers, he sets an example of benevolence before all the people of the church.

15. Lover of good men. This is not suggesting a man be a respecter of persons, but that he exhibit proper values. If he demonstrates a tendency to respect those who are characterized by low morals or questionable behavior, he will provide poor direction for the church. On the other hand, if he demonstrates respect only for truly respectable people, he will lead the church toward excellent values.

With Regard To Their communication skills

16. Apt to teach. Not all elders will be teaching elders. I Timothy 5:17 says, “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.” By specifying “especially they who labor in the word”, there is a clear indication that not all elders will labor in the word. But all elders should be ready and able to share with others the things they know about the Word. Some may be able to do this with a group of people, while others may only be able to do this one on one.

17. Able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. A gainsayer is one who speaks against the truth and offers objections to what the Word of God teaches. To qualify to be an Elder, a man must demonstrate that his faith is unshakeable because he is able to support what he believes from the Scriptures. He will not be carried away because he is capable of defending sound doctrine against those who would contradict it.

With Regard To Their Financial Integrity

18. Not greedy of filthy lucre. This describes a man who understands the purpose of money and uses it wisely. He is not in love with money nor in danger of doing questionable things in order to obtain it.

19. Not covetous. This describes a man who is content with what he has. He has learned both how to be abased and how to abound. In whatsoever state he is, he has learned therewith to be content (Philippians 4:11-12). He is not constantly wishing he had something new, or different, or more that he presently has.

With Regard To Their Personal Discipline

20. Temperate. This is not simply a man who has developed self control. This is the quality of control developed as a result of a dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Lust and all of its companions (such as lasciviousness, wantonness, concupiscence, etc.) are held in check by the power of God. Consequently, a temperate man is one who is not given to yielding to temptation.

21. Of good behavior. This describes the qualities of modesty and respectability. A man of good behavior is one who is willing to do good things without being recognized for them. He does them simply because they are right.

22. Not given to wine. This phrase, not given to wine, means that a man is not interested in alcoholic beverages which would effect his judgment and possibly lead to irresponsible behavior causing embarrassment to Christ or his Church. Not given to wine means a person totally abstains from the use of alcoholic beverages in any form.

23. No striker. This describes a person that is not contentious. Argumentativeness would cast a shadow on the quality of a man who leads the church, especially the kind of argumentativeness which causes a man to lose control of his emotions. While "striker" suggests a readiness to hit someone, to be no striker as a quality for leadership suggests that a man never comes close to losing control and striking another, even with his tongue.

24. Not a brawler. This describes an unwillingness to get into a fight. It is characteristic of a reasonable, thoughtful man who seeks a more rational solution to difficult situations.

25. Not self willed. This describes a man who is not arrogant and does not insist on having his own way. He is instead able to accept the rejection of his own ideas and to listen respectfully to the ideas of others as he shares responsibility with them.

26. Not soon angry. This describes a man who has a very long fuse and is not given to explosive reactions. Instead, he remains calm even in the midst of very stressful circumstances.

Deacons

(I Timothy 3:8-13)

With Regard To Their Reputation

1. **Blameless.** Same as Elders.

With Regard To His Experience

2. **Proved.** Deacons are to be proved. This is the positive reciprocal of not being a novice. One who is proved has been examined and found to be worthy of the responsibilities to be handled.

With Regard To Their Marriage

3. **Husbands of one wife.** Same as Elders.

4. **Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things.** By prescribing qualifications for deacons' wives, the Scripture clearly implies that there is a partnership between husband and wife in the work of the Lord. A man whose wife has a poor spiritual reputation will be hindered in his ability to serve effectively. To do so he needs the support and cooperation of his partner. (Though specified under qualifications for deacons, one would think that elders wives should also meet these same qualifications.)

With Regard To Their Family Life

5. **Ruling their children and their own houses well.** Same as Elders.

With Regard To Their Spiritual Qualities

6. **Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.** The mystery of the faith is the truth of the Gospel and the doctrines of the church as revealed in the New Testament. To be a deacon, a man must show consistency in his doctrinal beliefs and not harbor any private beliefs which, if discovered, would make him guilty of following false doctrine.

With Regard To Their Personal Character

7. **Grave.** This is a general term which describes a man deserving of respect.

With Regard To Their Communication Skills

8. **Not Double Tongued.** A double tongued man says one thing to one person and another thing to a another person. A deacon must not be a man who tells people what they want to hear, but always speaks the truth in love.

With Regard To Their Financial Integrity

9. **Not greedy of filthy lucre.** Same as Elders.

With Regard To Their Personal Discipline

10. **Not given to much wine.** The word wine may mean either alcoholic or non-alcoholic beverage (The New Century Dictionary, published in 1948 - Wine = "The fermented juice of the grape...unfermented grape juice; also the juice, fermented or unfermented, of various other fruits or plants, used as a beverage"). The emphasis in this statement is on the word much. The consumption of alcoholic beverages is not in view. It is instead a reference to the consumption of large quantities of food and non-alcoholic beverage. Consequently, this qualification is not a license for deacons to indulge in a little alcoholic beverage. It is a phrase which means a person is not gluttonous. One who is given to much wine causes

embarrassment by how much he eats and drinks. By such behavior, he demonstrates a lack of restraint which is probably true of other parts of his life as well. A man who serves people must know how to restrain his appetite.

D. Responsibilities of Elders and Deacons

The spiritual nature of the responsibilities of elders and deacons is the reason men are required to meet such extensive qualifications in order to hold these offices. In these roles, men become the instruments of God in managing the lives of people and the affairs of the local church. They must, therefore, be clean vessels, well fitted for the Master's use.

Elders

A list of duties for elders can be compiled from New Testament texts which refer directly to elders and the things for which they are said to be responsible. These observations can be organized in the following way.

Take the Oversight

1. Oversee the particular flock to which the Holy Spirit assigns them. (*Acts 20:28*)
2. Take the oversight of the flock willingly, and of a ready mind: not by constraint, for filthy lucre, or
as being lords. (*1 Peter 5:2-3*)
3. Take care of the church. (*1 Timothy 3:5*)
4. Rule. (*Hebrews 13:7*)
5. Rule well. (*1 Timothy 5:17*)
6. Consider matters - including doctrinal matters. (*Acts 15:6*)
7. Send chosen men to answer matters. (*Acts 15:22*)
8. Ordain decrees - establish policy. (*Acts 16:4*)

Be Available

1. Labor among the people. (*1 Thessalonians 5:12*)
2. Take heed unto all the flock. (*Acts 20:28*)

Feed

1. Feed the flock of God. (*Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2*)
2. Speak the word of God. (*Hebrews 13:7*)
3. Labor in the word and doctrine. (*1 Timothy 5:17*)

Exhort

1. Watch for the souls of the people. (*Hebrews 13:17*)
2. Admonish the people. (*1 Thessalonians 5:12*)
3. Warn the flock. (*Acts 20:31*)
4. Give account for the people either with joy or with grief. (*Hebrews 13:17*)
5. Hold fast the faithful word to exhort and to convince the gainsayers by sound doctrine. (*Titus 1:9*)

Minister

1. Support the weak. (*Acts 20:34*)
2. Pray over the sick when called. (*James 5:14*)
3. Direct the sick to proper medical treatment. (*James 5:14*)

Monitor Your Own Life

1. Take heed unto themselves. (*Acts 20:28*)
2. Watch for wolves and for perverse speakers among themselves. (*Acts 20:31*)
3. Labor, using their own hands to minister unto their own needs and the needs of those who are
with them. (*Acts 20:33,34*)
4. Remember Jesus' words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (*Acts 20:34*)
5. Be an example. (*I Peter 5:3*)
6. Maintain a faith that can be followed, demonstrating the end of their conversation. (*Hebrews 13:7*)

Deacons

Deacons in the New Testament included Epaphrus (*Colossians 1:7*), Tychichus (*Ephesians 6:21*), Timothy (*I Thessalonians 3:2*), Mark (*II Timothy 4:11*), Stephanas (*I Corinthians 16:15*), Onesiphorous (*II Timothy 1:18*), Archippus (*Colossians 4:17*), among others. It is interesting to note also, that even though Paul had the authoritative position of Apostle, he identified himself as fulfilling the role of a deacon in many ministry contexts. The implication of this is that the role of primary leadership in the church includes many deacon type responsibilities. The basic distinction between the offices of elder and deacon is that elders rule and deacons do not. Otherwise there are many similarities between the two offices. A list of duties for deacons can be compiled by observing the biblical references to the things men did in the role of deaconing.

1. Labor in the Gospel, preaching Christ.
(*I Thessalonians 3:2; Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:23; II Corinthians 4:1,5*)
2. Edify the saints.
(*II Corinthians 3:3; I Thessalonians 3:2*)
3. Distribute financial aid (benevolence).
(*Romans 15:25; II Corinthians 8 and 9*)
4. Carry messages of spiritual concern from one believer to another.
(*Colossians 1:8; Colossians 4:7; Ephesians 6:22*)
5. Labor fervently in prayer for the spiritual welfare of other believers.
(*Colossians 4:12*)
6. Be zealous toward other believers.
(*Colossians 4:13; II Timothy 1:17*)
7. Comfort the hearts of believers.
(*Ephesians 6:22; Colossians 4:7*)
8. Comfort believers concerning their faith.
(*I Thessalonians 3:2*)
9. Help and labor.
(*I Corinthians 16:15-16; Hebrews 6:10*)
10. Refresh the imprisoned.
(*II Timothy 1:16*)
11. Seek to reconcile the lost.

(II Corinthians 5:18)

12. Express spiritual gifts to one another.
(I Peter 4:10)

Conclusion

Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. It is from Him that all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increases with the increase of God.

This can only be achieved when qualified men serve as Christ's instruments in the offices of elder and deacon. When unqualified men are allowed to fill these offices, they tend to lord it over God's heritage (I Peter 5:3) or impose the traditions of men in place of the Word of God (Mark 7:13). However, when qualified men serve as elders and deacons, they will serve with a willing heart and ready mind (I Peter 5:2; I Chronicles 28:9) and emphasize ministry to people (II Corinthians 1:6) through gentleness, patience, meek instruction, and a sense of responsibility to the Chief Shepherd (II Timothy 2:24-25; Hebrews 13:17). The importance of selecting only qualified men to bear the responsibilities of the offices of elder and deacon cannot be emphasized too much.📖