

Biblical Qualifications of Church Officers: Overseers and Deacons

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Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus contain a wealth of guidance regarding church leadership. In two of these epistles, Paul provides concentrated instruction on the qualifications required of two kinds of church officers: overseers/elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9) and deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13). While 1 Timothy 3:1-7 refer only to the overseer (*episkopos* [3:2]), Titus 1:6-9 refer in rapid sequence to the elder (*presbuteros* [1:5]) as well as the overseer (*episkopos* [1:7]). Given that the requirements mentioned in the two passages overlap substantially, there can be little doubt that these two terms refer to the same office.

For the sake of simplicity, this document will refer to office of overseer-elder simply as overseer. Incidentally, texts such as 1 Peter 5:1-4 and Acts 20:28 suggest that an alternate label for the same office is that of pastor or shepherd (*poimēn*), but a discussion of that point is beyond the scope of this document. In keeping with the biblical text, this document will apply masculine pronouns to both overseers and deacons. Further information on this point appears in context below, but the limited discussion falls short of providing thorough insight into the role of women in ministry.

Similarity of Domains, Variation in Specificity

A systematic comparison of the qualifications of overseers and deacons appears in the associated table, Qualifications of Overseers and Deacons: A Comparison Chart. The discussion below presumes familiarity with, or at least simultaneous access to, the information presented in the chart. As the chart makes clear, the respective qualifications of overseers and deacons cover essentially the same domains. The single exception to this general statement is that Paul makes no specific mention of deacons' testimony in the community, whereas he does so in regards to overseers (1 Tim. 3:7).

Requirements for overseers and deacons are often essentially equivalent; where they diverge, requirements for overseers tend to be more specific and/or stringent. Overseers and deacons are held to very similar expectations pertaining to depth of spiritual experience; exemplary family relations; and freedom from vices involving the misuse of speech, money, and alcohol.

Paul's letters provide more detail concerning spiritual virtues expected to be evident in the life of an overseer. Specific virtues expected of deacons are almost nonexistent. By comparison, the associated chart lists nine attributes for overseers—self-control, hospitality, gentleness, and the like. Perhaps Paul intended to convey that Christian graces should be more abundantly evident in overseers than in deacons.

Another key area of distinction has to do with the two officers' capacity for communicating their faith to others. Whereas it is apparently sufficient for the deacon to exhibit the faith via his life (1 Tim. 3:9), the overseer needs to have the capacity to articulate truth verbally (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9).

The list of vices to be avoided is somewhat more complete in the case of the overseer. All of the vice domains mentioned in connection with deacons are repeated, and to these are added anger and violence as well as pride. Given the frequency with which sexual indiscretions wreck modern ministries, the layout of vices to be avoided in the comparison chart may seem to suggest a major blind spot in Paul's teaching. However, a closer examination shows that this is not at all the case. In fact, sexual chastity is very much required of overseers as well as deacons via the injunction to be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2; 3:12; Titus 1:6)—literally, a man of one woman. Theoretically, this qualification could have been framed as freedom from sexual vice, but Paul's letters present it as a positive attribute, often in proximity to discussion of household management, thus warranting its separate treatment.

The Requirement to Be "the Husband of One Wife"

The requirement for overseers and deacons to be "the husband of one wife" invokes several points of discussion. First, it affirms the incompatibility of polygamy and church leadership. Second, it implies that only men—and more specifically, men old enough to be married—can be qualified for these two church offices. Some may be inclined to view Paul's teaching as a reflection of the male-dominated society of his day, and thus to reject the masculinity of church office as normative for today. Personally, I find it difficult to consider either of these two offices as being open to women, though I freely admit that women occupied prominent roles in the New Testament community, both during and after the ministry of Jesus.

A third issue related to the "husband of one wife" requirement is the question of whether a candidate for church office *must* be married. Undoubtedly, the experience of marriage is helpful in preparing one to minister to the needs of a congregation. But the issue is whether such experience is imperative. The text seems to be less conclusive on this point, particularly since the Greek phrase could legitimately be translated "a man of one woman." Given the references to children (1 Tim. 3:4-5; 3:12; Titus 1:6), it seems that the norm is for a church officer to be married and have offspring, but it may be unreasonable to insist on this point dogmatically.

Fourth, it is fitting to ask whether the phrase in question precludes a divorced man from taking up office as an overseer or deacon. Once again, the alternate translation of "a man of one woman" allows for the theoretical possibility that someone who has been divorced, but is presently in a committed monogamous relationship, could become a church officer. This said, the other qualifications of leadership set high standards that many—perhaps most—men who have been divorced will find difficult to achieve. Among such standards are overarching blamelessness (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6; 1:7) and a positive testimony in the community (1 Tim. 3:7). Even where divorced men exhibit exceptional spiritual character, their past relationships may constitute too much baggage to permit them to minister without distraction.

A further complication in the analysis of qualifications for church office is the fact that it is feasible to violate the "man of one woman" standard through premarital promiscuity. Thus it seems wise to consider carefully the facts of each case when attempting to discern whether a man's sexual/marital past disqualifies him from serving as an overseer or deacon. In all of this it is essential

to affirm that holding a church office is a high calling (1 Tim. 3:1; 3:13), one that not every committed believer is capable of fulfilling.

Observations Regarding the ESV's Rendering of the Requirements

In my judgment, the English Standard Version (ESV) usually does an admirable job of conveying the meaning of the biblical text clearly, consistently, and elegantly. Notwithstanding this general observation, a couple of incongruities emerge from a close review of the texts under consideration in their original language. First, it is surprising to find that two injunctions against greed, both of which use the Greek *aischrokerdēs*, are translated differently. In Titus 1:7, where the overseer is in view, this phrase is translated “greedy for gain”; in 1 Timothy 3:8, which refers to the deacon, it is “greedy for *dishonest* gain.” Taken at face value, this variation in translation implies that overseers are subject to a more stringent standard than deacons in this area. However, there is no difference in the standard.

A second incongruity of the ESV has to do with its handling of the texts' references to alcohol consumption. Twice Paul uses the word *paroinos* to refer to overseers' lack of addiction to alcohol (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7), and in both cases this is rendered as “drunkard.” By comparison, the participial phrase used to describe deacons' independence from alcohol is translated “not addicted to much wine” (1 Tim. 3:8). A reader might interpret this to mean that overseers have more liberty than deacons to consume alcohol, needing only to stop short of drunkenness. However, this runs counter to the spirit of the text, where the qualifications for overseers generally equal or exceed those for deacons. Personally, I am not convinced that Paul intended to convey two different standards regarding drinking, but if he did, the more stringent standard might well apply to overseers.

Conclusion

The requirements for the offices of overseer and deacon overlap to a significant extent. Those who hold each kind of office are to exhibit mature Christian faith, healthy family relations, and freedom from crippling vices. Where the requirements for the two offices differ, overseers are typically held to higher or more detailed standards. For example, overseers are given more comprehensive lists of spiritual virtues to exhibit and vices to shun. Additionally, overseers are expected to communicate their faith verbally—not merely through their lifestyle, as is the case with deacons. Finally, there is an explicit statement that overseers should have a positive testimony in the general community.

The requirements for deacons are more explicit in one significant regard. Whereas no behavioral or character traits are given for overseers' wives, deacons' wives are enjoined to conform to a list of such requirements (1 Tim. 3:11).

The requirement for deacons and overseers to be “the husband of one wife” raises a number of questions. The Greek phrase underlying this phrase might also be translated “a man of one woman.” Clearly, there is an expectation for church officers to demonstrate undivided intimacy, precluding

polygamists from being admitted to church office. The phrase also seems to imply that a church leader will typically be a man who is married and has children, and whose marital/sexual history does not discredit him.

The work of an overseer is “a noble task” (1 Tim. 3:1). Similarly, faithful service as a deacon enhances a believer’s reputation and confidence (1 Tim. 3:13). But men are not to be appointed to these offices lightly. They are high callings, positions of great responsibility before God. Not only are church officers subject to human scrutiny; they are the target of Satanic opposition (1 Tim. 3:7). Accordingly, only those who meet the highest standards are eligible for admission to these offices.