

Qualifications for Deacons

This comes from Dr. Ryken's commentary on *1 Timothy* in the Reformed Expository Commentary Series.

1 Timothy 3:8-13

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. . . . For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 3:8-9, 13).

Some years ago, a pastoral assistant conducted training for deacons at an urban church. As part of her preparation she telephoned the director of the Philadelphia Restaurant School and asked, "What qualities are you looking for in a waiter?" The director explained that, above all else, a good waiter is someone who notices what people need and gives it to them even before they ask.

It may seem strange to compare deacons to restaurant personnel, but the connection is biblical. The first deacons in Jerusalem were appointed to serve meals:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:1-4).

The word the apostles used for “serving tables” (*diakonein*) is the Greek word for “deaconing.” Deacons are the waiters of the church. So the seven men chosen by the apostolic church to serve food were the first deacons.

The election of the first deacons explains the primary difference between elders and deacons. There is a practical division of labor between the only two ordained offices in the church of Jesus Christ (see Phil. 1:1). Like the apostles, elders devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). They labor in the spiritual work of intercession and proclamation. Meanwhile, as their title indicates, deacons serve. They take care of people’s material needs in a spiritual way. “The office of deacon is not one of rule,” says one book on church government, “but rather of service both to the physical and spiritual needs of the people.”¹ According to Martin Luther, the diaconate is a ministry “for distributing the Church’s bounty to the poor, in order that the priests might be relieved of the burden of temporal concerns.”² So deacons mainly assist God’s people in tangible ways. They “wait on tables,”

¹ *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 5th edn. (Atlanta, GA: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 1997), 7-2.

² Martin Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica* (1520), WA.6.566.34-567.5.

according to one use of the biblical term, which explains why a restaurant school might have something to teach a board of deacons.

A DIGNIFIED LIFE

An even better place to turn for the qualifications of deacons is Paul's first letter to Timothy, where the Bible teaches that a deacon must have a dignified life (1 Tim. 3:8), a sound doctrine (1 Tim. 3:9-10) and a stable family (1 Tim. 3:11-12).

The apostle begins by saying a deacon's life must be worthy of respect: "Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain" (1 Tim. 3:8). This is not the way the world usually chooses its leaders. The virtues listed here have little to do with talents or abilities. They are not the kinds of credentials that show up on most résumés. Instead, the biblical qualifications have to do with a person's morals. God is more concerned with who deacons are than what they do.

The Bible's emphasis on character gives churches some flexibility in deciding what deacons do, as long as their ministry is charitable and compassionate. Calvin preached that "it is certain, that God will have this rule to be observed and kept in his Church, that is to say, that the poor be cared for: and not only that every private man for his own behalf alone by himself do help them which are poor, but that there be a public office, and men appointed to have care of them that are in necessity, that things may be ordered as they ought."³ In most churches the ministry of deacons includes feeding the poor, caring for the sick, visiting the elderly, and handling cases of benevolence. In some churches they offer transportation, collect the offering, or

manage the finances. In an urban neighborhood they may help keep the building secure. Whatever deacons do, the Bible leaves the church to decide; the Bible only dictates how they are to behave.

First, a deacon's life must be "dignified," or worthy of respect. This has to do with diaconal deportment, and is similar to the guideline that elders must be "above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2). Deacons are to carry themselves with dignity and gravity. They must be respectable both inside and outside the church.

Deacons must not be "double-tongued" (*dilogous*; 1 Tim. 3:8). John Bunyan may have had this verse in mind when he named one of the parsons in *Pilgrim's Progress* "Mr. Two Tongues." Deacons must not engage in double-talk. The word of a deacon ought to be one of the strongest guarantees in the church. People both inside and outside the church must be able to take deacons at their word. Writing in the fifth century, Theodoret thought that being two-tongued meant saying one thing to one person and another thing to someone else.⁴ Alternatively, it means saying one thing and then doing another. Jesus told a parable about people like that: "A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go" (Matt. 21:28-30). The point of the parable is that *doing* is more important than saying. But neither one of the man's sons would have made a good deacon. Deacons must do what they say they will do. They cannot be two-faced.

³ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy & Titus* (London, 1579; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 297.

⁴ A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 79.

One reason deacons must be careful what they say because they know so much about people's private affairs. In his *Historical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, Sir William Ramsay described the temptations that can arise:

Now there can be no doubt that the work of deacons was more closely connected with the indoor and family life of members of the congregation than the work of presbyters. The deacons had more intimate duties in the administration of charity and help where it was needed. They had to find out the needs of individuals, to go about among the members of the congregation, and to converse and to sympathize with them. There was great temptation to say too much to one person or in one family, and thus to be betrayed into inconsistency and self-contradiction in speaking to another. Nothing is easier than for a person to slip into the fault of double-tonguedness when he is trying to accommodate himself to various families in one congregation.⁵

Since I serve as a pastor in the city, people regularly approach me for financial assistance. Often, after we pray together, I say, "This is a matter for the deacons. May I explain your situation to one of them?" When I share the need, I love to hear a deacon say, "I will take care of this." I take the deacon's word for it; the problem will be resolved—unless, of course, it is only double-talk, which is why deacons must be sincere.

Deacons must not be "addicted to much wine" (1 Tim. 3:8). As usual, the Bible puts things in just the right way. Deacons are not forbidden to drink wine altogether, because God permits Christians to drink some wine (e.g. 1 Tim. 5:23). But he does want his people—especially his officers in his church—to be sober.

The next qualification is fiscal. Deacons are not to be “greedy for dishonest gain” (1 Tim. 3:8). Like their elders, they must not be in love with money (see 1 Tim. 3:3). The reason for this is obvious. Deacons handle some of the finances of the church, often in secret. Since the days of the early church, deacons have collected and distributed alms for the poor. To this day, many churches collect offerings for diaconal work immediately following the Lord’s Supper. This is a good way for Christians to show their gratitude to God for salvation in Christ, and also a good way to care for the poor. Deacons hold the money they receive from such offerings in sacred trust. It would be an outrageous sin to use it for personal advantage. By definition, a deacon is someone who serves, not someone who helps himself. In the use of money, as in the use of words and alcohol, a deacon must lead a dignified life.

A SOUND DOCTRINE

Qualifications for service begin with conduct, but that is not where they end. Deacons must have sound doctrine as well as dignified lives: “They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Tim. 3:9). In other words, deacons must be orthodox in their theology.

When the New Testament speaks of “mystery,” it is not referring to things the church is still trying to figure out. The gospel is not a theological “whodunit.” Rather, a mystery is something long hidden but now revealed. It refers to “the secret thoughts, plans, and dispensations of God that are hidden from the human reason, as well as from all other comprehension below the divine level, and hence must be revealed to

⁵ William M. Ramsay, *Historical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ed. by Mark Wilson (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1996), 79.

those for whom they are intended.”⁶ The mystery of all mysteries is the eternal plan of salvation that God has revealed in Jesus Christ. Perhaps the best example of this way of talking about salvation comes at the end of Romans, where Paul speaks of “my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith” (Rom. 16:25-26). The mystery Paul was writing about is not something that we don’t know; it is something we *do* know for our salvation.

What are some of the mysteries or deep truths of the faith? They are the basic doctrines of Christianity: That one God exists in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That God created everything there is out of nothing. That humanity sinned against God and has thereby come under judgment. That out of his great love, God the Father sent God the Son into the world to save sinners. That Jesus Christ is both God and man. That Jesus gave his life as an atoning sacrifice when he died on the cross for sins. That everyone who believes in the Son by the power of the Spirit receives eternal life. And that these mysteries are revealed in the Bible, which is the infallible Word of God. Deacons must believe and defend these basic principles of the Christian faith.

The reason deacons have to be sound in their doctrine is because of their influence in the church. Deacons do not have the same kind of teaching authority elders have. Notice one difference between the qualifications for these two offices: only the elders must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). In fact, the reason deacons were appointed in the first place was so that elders could devote themselves “to prayer and to the ministry of

⁶ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early*

the word” (Acts 6:4). Nevertheless, deacons are teachers. As William Ramsay explained, “That the deacon should have proved himself apt to teach is not required; but this does not mean that teaching was outside of his sphere of duty.”⁷

What are some of the ways that a deacon may teach? When deacons visit prisoners or the sick they bring spiritual encouragement. Often they teach people how to manage their personal affairs in a biblical way, especially their finances. Deacons also teach others how to serve. They do not have to accomplish all of the mercy ministry themselves, but they are responsible to make sure that it all gets done. So by word and by example, they teach the church how to serve. In the words of one manual for diaconal service, “It is their duty to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church.”⁸ Then deacons must be ready to evangelize. The first deacons, like Stephen and Philip (Acts 7–8), were great evangelists. So whenever deacons help the poor, they do it in the name of Jesus Christ, with a testimony of his saving power. Otherwise, the church becomes just another social service. To carry out their ministry of discipleship and evangelism, deacons must hold on to the deep truths of the faith.

They are to do this with a good conscience (unlike the false teachers in Ephesus who rejected “faith and a good conscience;” see 1 Tim. 1:19). Deacons must not be dubious in their doctrine. Instead, they must know the fundamentals of the faith, and if they ever begin to doubt them, they ought to seek the help and correction of their elders. This is why, when they are ordained in the Presbyterian Church in America, they answer the following question in the affirmative:

Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms* of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy

Christian Literature, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 530.

⁷ Ramsay, 78.

⁸ *Book of Church Order*, 9-2.

Scriptures; and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will, on your initiative, make known to your Session the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow?⁹

The best way to find out if deacons are sound in their doctrine is to examine them before they take office: “And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless” (1 Tim. 3:10). Similarly, when the first seven deacons were chosen by the church in Jerusalem, they were “men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3). No accusation could justly be brought against them.

The fact that deacons must be tested proves that their role in the church was official. The New Testament uses the word “deacon” (*diakonos*) loosely to describe anyone who serves. Paul even uses it to describe his own ministry as an apostle (see 2 Cor. 6:4). But at least by the end of Paul’s ministry, “deacon” had become a recognized office in the church.

The Bible gives freedom by not specifying how such officers are to be examined. Scrutiny is mandatory, according to the standards listed in this passage. How the scrutiny takes place is left to the discretion of the church. Often, deacons prove their worth by serving in other ministries. This is a universal principle of Christian ministry: the way to prepare for greater service is to be diligent in some lesser service. Faithful ministry is both rewarded by God and recognized by the church. I can remember attending an annual congregational meeting where new candidates for the office of deacon were to be presented to the church. However, when it was time for

⁹ *Book of Church Order*, 24-4.

them to be introduced, they were nowhere to be found. They were finally discovered in the kitchen, busily washing the dishes from the congregational dinner. Of course! Where else would one expect to find future deacons?

Most churches have a procedure for identifying and ordaining deacons. In Presbyterian churches deacons are nominated by members of the church, examined by their elders, and then elected by the congregation. But however it is done, a deacon's life and doctrine must be approved. Deacons may only serve in the church if their soundness and respectability are beyond question.

A STABLE FAMILY

The rest of the qualifications for deacons are domestic. If they are married, deacons must have stable families: "Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well" (1 Tim. 3:11-12).

More will be said about these wives in a moment, but the reason they are addressed at all is because of the privacy of diaconal work. Marvin Vincent wisely observes that a deacon's wife "would sustain an active relation to his office, and by her ministries would increase his efficiency, and by frivolity, slander, or intemperance, would bring him and his office into disrepute."¹⁰ Presumably some men should not be ordained as a deacons because their wives are not suitable for him to serve as an officer in the church.

¹⁰ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 2nd edn, 4 vols (1888; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), 4:236.

The deacon himself must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:12). This standard has to do with marital fidelity. It does not mean that bachelors are ineligible for the office of deacon, but it does mean that a deacon is a one-woman man. If he is unmarried, he must maintain sexual purity. If he is married, he must be monogamous. Obviously, polygamists are not allowed to serve as deacons. Nor can a man serve who has divorced on anything except biblical grounds (see Matt. 5:32; 19:9). However, this qualification is also positive. A deacon must really be a husband to his wife, physically, spiritually and emotionally. He must love her and serve her. He must give himself to her the way Christ gave himself to the church (Eph. 5:25-28). How can he serve the people of God if he is not serving his own wife?

In addition to being a good husband, a deacon must be a good father. Again, this does not mean that men without children may not serve as deacons. It does mean that deacons are to discipline their children with love. Since households included servants in those days, this verse also touches upon a man’s working relationships. How can a deacon be respectable in the church if he is not respectable in the marketplace?

The reason for these high standards is that the church is “the household of God” (1 Tim. 3:15). Therefore, one of the best ways to tell if a man is ready to be a deacon is to see how he conducts his own household. Is he devoted to his wife? Does he nurture his children? Does he care for his colleagues? Is the name of Jesus Christ exalted in his home and at his workplace? A man who cannot manage his own household well will bring disorder to God’s house.

WHAT ABOUT DEACONESSES?

More needs to be said about the “wives” of deacons (1 Tim. 3:11). The Greek word that Paul uses here is *gunaikas*, which can mean either “wives” or “women” (as it is translated several times in 1 Timothy 2:9-12). Some scholars suggest, therefore, that in verse 11 *gunaikas* does not refer to wives but to deaconesses, or female deacons. So the question arises whether women served as deaconesses in the New Testament church.

The strongest reason for thinking that these women were deaconesses is the way they are introduced. Both verse 8 and verse 11 contain the word “likewise” (*hosautos*), which sounds like it introduces a new office. Furthermore, these women are to be “dignified” (1 Tim. 3:11), which is the same phrase used to describe deacons (1 Tim. 3:8). Both of these verses are grammatically dependent on the main verb in verse 2, which strengthens the connection between them. Taken together, these parallels make it sound as if the women Paul had in mind were to fulfill a separate but equal office in the church. Furthermore, if the Bible meant “wives,” we might expect it to say “*their* wives” so as to eliminate any possibility of confusion.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons for thinking that “wives” may be the better translation. The first is that if Paul meant deaconesses he would have said so. The word “woman” is such a common term that it hardly seems sufficient to designate an office in the church.¹¹ Furthermore, the word *gunaikas* appears in the very next verse (1 Tim. 3:12; cf. 3:2), where it clearly means “wife.” It would make perfect sense, therefore, for Paul to have the same women in view in both verses. Then there is the fact that the instructions for these women (or wives) are very brief. One short verse hardly seems adequate to cover the qualifications for deaconesses, especially since it is embedded within the qualifications for deacons.

We are bound to conclude that by itself, 1 Timothy 3:11 is not sufficient prove that women should serve in the office of deaconess. Indeed, the very fact that these women are singled out from the deacons shows that the ministry of these women must not be identical to that of the deacons. Donald Guthrie gives a balanced summary: “The reference is too general to postulate with certainty a distinct order of deaconesses, but some feminine ministrations were necessary in visitation. . . . For such work certain moral qualities would be essential whether for deacons’ wives or for deaconesses in their own right.”¹² Since the meaning is not certain, perhaps it is best to translate the word *gunaikas* as “women helpers.” Indeed, it is possible to argue that these women were neither deacon’s wives, nor deaconesses, but women who assisted the deacons.

If the office of deaconess is not established in 1 Timothy 3, the diaconal ministry of women is certainly present elsewhere in the Bible. New Testament women frequently carried out diaconal ministry, in the broad sense of the word. Consider Dorcas, who was “full of good works and acts of charity” (Acts 9:36). Or Lydia, who clothed the Philippians in purple (16:11-15). Or Tryphena and Tryphosa, women described as “workers in the Lord” (Rom. 16:12). Or especially Phoebe, who was “a patron of many” and is identified as “a servant of the church at Cenchreae”—literally, “a deaconess” (Rom. 16:1-2). To summarize, many New Testament women carried out diaconal ministry and one, at least, was called a “deaconess,” even if she was not ordained as an officer of the church. The obvious conclusion is that, whatever title they are given, women must be deeply involved in the mercy ministries of the church.

¹² Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy and Titus*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 91.

It is helpful to recognize that deaconesses have been a longstanding tradition in the church. In Egypt during the second century they “provided nursing mothers who sat in the public squares, often under pagan statues, while other women went up and down the streets to collect the unwanted babies abandoned in the night. They brought them, nursed, bathed and raised them.”¹³ Such ministry was characteristic of women throughout the Christian world, at least by the third century. In his survey of the women’s ministry in the early church, J. M. Ross shows that deaconesses served as doorkeepers, visited the sick, helped when women were baptized and cared for orphans.¹⁴ In the fourth century, John Chrysostom described the order of deaconesses to be “necessary and useful and honorable in the Church.”¹⁵

Closer to our own times, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield was a strong proponent of women deacons. Warfield taught at Princeton and was among the leading conservative evangelicals at the turn of the twentieth century. He based his argument for deaconesses partly on the example of Phoebe, and partly on a letter from the Roman governor Pliny to the Emperor Trajan. The letter, which was written around A.D. 112, referred to women as holding a servant office in the church. Warfield’s conclusion was that these women “constituted a female diaconate similar to and of like standing with the board of deacons which, in the New Testament, we find in every church.”¹⁶

The church of Warfield’s day did not ordain women to serve as deaconesses, but Warfield himself recognized the need for putting the gifts of women into service. He

¹² Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1957), 85.

¹³ Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 192.

¹⁴ J. M. Ross, “A Reconsideration of the Diaconate,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 12 (1959), 153.

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, “Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon,” trans. and ed. by Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, 14 vols (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 13:441.

¹⁶ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “Presbyterian Deaconesses,” *Presbyterian Review* (1889), 286.

believed that returning women to the ministry of deaconess would restore order in the church: “If the people of a particular church would simply elect women as well as men to the office of deacon, making one board or two separate boards, at their pleasure, of course ordained with the same vows and responsible to the same authority . . . the order is restored.”¹⁷

The practice of the Presbyterian Church in America may come close to what the Bible teaches. Only men are ordained to the office of deacon, in keeping with the view that the women in 1 Timothy 3:11 are wives rather than deaconesses (or else that they are women who assist the deacons). Yet the elders are encouraged to “select and appoint godly men and women of the congregation to assist the deacons in caring for the sick, the widows, the orphans, the prisoners, and others who may be in any distress or need.”¹⁸ The church thus permits congregations to commission women to the ministry of diaconal service, whatever that ministry may be called.

If women are to serve, they must be qualified. Therefore, they should display the characteristics described in 1 Timothy 3:11. As the proverb says, “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.” In this case, what is good for the deacon is good for the deaconess. Thus the biblical instructions for the women echo what has already been said to the men. The wives of deacons (or deaconesses) are to be “dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things” (1 Tim. 3:11).

According to 1 Timothy 3:11, the women who serve in diaconal ministry must be “dignified” or respectable. They must be women who are held in high regard both inside and outside the church. They must not be “slanderers” (*diabolous*)—a word for malicious talk or false accusation that is sometimes used of the devil himself (e.g.

¹⁷ Warfield, 287.

Rev. 12:9-10). The reason for this qualification has been mentioned already. Diaconal work often involves personal matters. The private affairs of a house should remain private, except insofar as they require the spiritual care of church officers. Women who serve must not be gossips. To give a further qualification, they must be “sober-minded.” This refers not simply to alcohol, but to self-control in every area of life. The wives of deacons (or deaconesses) must not be self-indulgent in their use of food, clothing or possessions. They must be stable emotionally. And these women must be trustworthy, “faithful in all things.” They must be utterly reliable and completely dependable.

The ministry of such women is vital to the health of the church. If the problem with feminist theology has been its failure to submit to divine order, the traditional church has often failed to employ the gifts of women to their full biblical extent. Here are B. B. Warfield’s last words on the subject: “A living church cannot do without Deaconesses as its organs for doing good. Deaconesses cannot do without the church as the appointed organization for doing good in the world.”¹⁹ Whether they are called deaconesses or not, women should exercise servant ministry to the glory of God. They should “minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress.”²⁰

A DEACON’S REWARD

Diaconal work is very demanding. The standards of the office are high. The duties of the office are difficult. Sometimes deacons and deaconesses get tired of meeting the same needs over and over again. Other times they are perplexed about what mercy

¹⁸ *Book of Church Order*, 9-7.

¹⁹ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “The Deaconess as a Part of the Church,” *Our Church Work* (1903), in Ronald G. Lutjens, “B. B. Warfield on Women Deacons,” *Presbyterian Journal*, May 15, 1985, 8.

means in a particular situation. Over time, they may become discouraged in their service.

Perhaps because of the difficulty of the office, the biblical qualifications for deacons end with an encouraging promise: “Those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3:13). Although much of a deacon’s work is done in private, it is noticed and commended by God.

The word for “standing” (*bathmos*) is a word for a degree, rank, or grade. It is hard to know exactly what that means in this case. It might mean that the best deacons will be promoted to the office of elder, but that is doubtful. Deacons are not elders-in-training. The diaconate is a separate office, having its own dignity and requiring its own gifts. Some deacons may well become elders as they mature in the faith, but some of the best deacons should remain deacons for life because that is what they are called and gifted to do. Another possibility is that “good standing” refers to one’s reputation. Thus, deacons who serve well gain spiritual influence in the church. Or it may even refer to their standing before God. God gives honor to worthy deacons, both in this life and the life to come. Either way, it is an encouraging prospect.

To this is added a second promise. Deacons who serve well gain “great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3:13). This confidence (*parresian*) is boldness or assurance. It might mean that deacons become bold in their Christian testimony. More probably, it refers to boldness before God. For those who sometimes doubt their salvation, this is an important lesson to learn. Assurance of

²⁰*Book of Church Order, 9-2.*

faith does not come through introspection, but through service. Those who labor for the Lord most actively love him most confidently.

What use should be made of the biblical qualifications for deacons? First, they are a guide for the church. They help Christians know what to look for when it comes time for deacons to be nominated or elected. Second, these qualifications are the divine standard for deacons. They are a reminder of how God expects them to behave and what he expects them to believe. They would be good for a deacon (or deaconess) to post by the mirror or paste to the inside of a Bible. Finally, these qualifications are a worthy goal for anyone who might eventually become an officer in the church. Make yourself available to serve the Lord. Ask the Holy Spirit to make your life dignified, your doctrine sound, and your family stable. Even if you never become a deacon, your time will not have been wasted. The qualifications for deacons are simply the virtues of a Christian exercised to a supreme degree.

It will always be something of a disappointment to me that I never became a deacon. At the end of my senior year in college I was asked to serve as a deacon in the church, but I was shortly to leave for seminary, and thus could not stand for election. To this day, I feel a sense of loss, because to wait on tables in the name of Christ is one of life's highest callings. The diaconate is the ecclesiastical office that most closely resembles the servanthood of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus sometimes used the word "deacon" (*diakonos*) to describe his own ministry: "Whoever would be great among you must be your deacon, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to receive diaconal care, but to serve as a deacon, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (author's paraphrase of Mark 10:43-45; cf. Luke 22:27; Rom. 15:8).

Deacons serve because Jesus first served them. As T. F. Torrance has written:

It is only in this Jesus that we learn what *diakonia* really is, the loving service in mercy that looks for no reward beyond the knowledge that we do what is commanded of us and looks for not thanks from those to whom mercy is extended, but it is only because this Jesus has made our cause His very own, sharing our existence in servitude and sharing with us His own life of love, that we may and can engage in this kind of *diakonia* in Him.²¹

²¹ T. F. Torrance, "Service in Jesus Christ," in *Service in Christ*, ed. by James I. McCord and T. H. L. Parker (London: Epworth, 1966), 3.