

1. What are the qualifications of elders and deacons?

The Bible has a clear set of qualifications for a deacon and an elder and their positions in the body of believers. The office of deacon was developed to deal with a practical issue in the church: “So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables’” ([Acts 6:2](#)). The word translated “wait on” is the Greek word *diakonein*, which comes from a word meaning “attendant, waiter, or one who ministers to another.” To “deacon” is to serve. The first deacons were a group of seven men in the Jerusalem church who were appointed to work in the daily food distribution. A deacon, therefore, is one who serves others in an official capacity in the church.

The Greek word translated “[bishop](#)” is *episkopos* (the source of our English word *episcopal*). The bishop is the superintendent, the overseer, or the officer in general charge of the congregation. In the Bible bishops are also called “elders” ([1 Timothy 5:19](#)) and “pastors” ([Ephesians 4:11](#)).

The qualifications of the bishop/elder/pastor are found in [1 Timothy 3:1–7](#): “Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task.

- Now the overseer is to be above reproach,
- faithful to his wife,
- temperate,
- self-controlled,
- respectable,
- hospitable,
- able to teach,
- not given to drunkenness,
- not violent but gentle,
- not quarrelsome,
- not a lover of money.
- He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and
- he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?)
- He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.
- He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap.”

Paul also instructs Timothy on the things that exemplify the teaching of a good minister. Beginning in [1 Timothy 4:11](#) and continuing through 6:2, Paul gives Timothy twelve things that he should “command and teach.”

The apostle Paul repeats the qualifications of a bishop/elder/pastor in his letter to Titus.

“An elder must be blameless, [faithful to his wife](#), a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God’s household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” ([Titus 1:6–9](#)).

The qualifications of a deacon are similar to those of a bishop/elder/pastor. “In the same way,

- deacons are to be worthy of respect,
- sincere,
- not indulging in much wine,
- and not pursuing dishonest gain.
- They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.
- They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.
- In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect,
- not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.
- A deacon must be faithful to his wife and
- must manage his children and his household well.
- Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus” ([1 Timothy 3:8–13](#)).

The word translated “deacon” in this passage is a form of the same Greek word used in [Acts 6:2](#), so we know we are talking about the same office.

These qualifications are simple and straightforward. Both the deacon and the bishop/elder/pastor should be a male, the husband of one wife, of sterling character, and one who rules his own home in a biblical way. These qualifications also presuppose that one seeking such an office is a born-again believer and walks in submission to God’s Word. The only substantial difference between the two sets of qualifications is that the bishop/elder/pastor must be “able to teach,” whereas teaching is not mentioned as necessary for deacons.

The Lord Jesus Himself is called the “[Shepherd](#) and Overseer of your souls” ([1 Peter 2:25](#)). The titles are interesting. The word *Shepherd* is a translation of the Greek word *poimen*, translated “pastor” elsewhere (e.g., [Ephesians 4:11](#)). This *poimen* is someone who tends herds or flocks and is used metaphorically of Christian pastors because pastors should guide the “flock” of God and feed them the Word of God. The word translated “Overseer” is the same word, *episkopos*, used by the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy and Titus.

Clearly, the offices of elder and deacon are important in the church. Ministering to God’s

people in word and deed is a serious responsibility for a man to take on, and it should never be done lightly. A biblically unqualified individual should not occupy either the office of elder or deacon; the church deserves better.¹

2. Can women serve as deacons in the church?

The statement that deacons are to be “men worthy of respect” ([1 Timothy 3:8 NIV](#)) and the qualification “the husband of but one wife” ([1 Timothy 3:12](#)) would seem to disqualify women from serving as deacons.

Arguing against interpreting "deacon's wives" as "female deacons" is the fact that it would be unusual for Paul to give qualifications for deacons in verses 8-10 and 12-13, with qualifications for deaconesses in between.

[Romans 16:1](#) refers to Phoebe with the same word Paul uses in [1 Timothy 3:12](#). It is unclear, though, whether Paul is saying Phoebe is a deacon or whether he is just saying she is a servant. In the early church, women servants cared for sick believers, the poor, strangers, and those in prison. They instructed women and children ([Titus 2:3-5](#)). Phoebe may not have had the official designation of “deacon” but Paul thought enough of her to entrust her with the tremendous responsibility of delivering the epistle to the Romans to the church in Rome ([Romans 16:1-2](#)). Clearly, he saw her not as inferior or less capable, but as a trusted and valued member of the body of Christ.

Scripture does not give much support to the idea of women serving as deacons. Some churches have instituted the office of deaconess, but most differentiate it from the office of deacon. If a church does institute the position of deaconess, the church leadership should ensure that the deaconess is in submission to the restrictions Paul places on the ministry of women in other passages (such as [1 Timothy 2:11-12](#)), just as all leadership is to be in submission to the church authority structure and ultimately to our supreme authority, Christ Jesus.²

3. What are the responsibilities of deacons in the church?

In the New Testament, the word usually translated "serve" is the Greek word *diakoneo*, which literally means "through the dirt." It refers to an attendant, a waiter, or one who ministers to another. From this word we get the English word “deacon.” We first see the word "deacon" used this way in the book of Acts. “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” ([Acts 6:2](#)). The men who were giving themselves to feeding the flock by preaching and teaching realized that it wasn't right for them to leave those activities to wait tables, so they found some other men who were willing to serve, and put them in place

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/qualifications-elders-deacons.html>

² Excerpts from the article <https://www.gotquestions.org/women-deacons.html>

to minister to the church's physical needs while the elders or pastors ministered to their spiritual needs. It was a better use of the resources they were given, and a better use of everyone's gifts. It also got more people involved in serving and helping one another.

Today, for the biblical church, these roles are essentially the same. Elders and pastors are to "preach the word...reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" ([2 Timothy 4:2](#)), and deacons are to be appointed to take care of everything else. In a modern church, this might include taking on administrative or organizational tasks, ushering, being responsible for building maintenance, or volunteering to be the church treasurer. It depends on the need and the gifts of the available men.

The responsibilities of a deacon are not clearly listed or outlined; they are assumed to be everything that does not include the duties of an elder or pastor, which is to preach, teach, and exhort. But qualifications for a deacon's character are clearly outlined in Scripture. They are to be blameless, the husband of one wife, a good household manager, respectable, honest, not addicted to alcohol, and not greedy ([1 Timothy 3:8-12](#)). According to the Word, the office of deacon is an honor and a blessing. "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 Timothy 3:13](#)).³

³ <https://www.gotquestions.org/deacons-church.html>