

BIBLICAL QUALIFICATIONS FOR CHURCH LEADERS

OFFICIAL DOCUMENT

In a day and age where pragmatism often takes precedence over precept, and at times becomes prescription, the need for the Church to submit to the authority of the Word of God and carefully discern its application is absolutely essential. With a high view of Scripture and a reverent approach to its timeless and binding truth, the responsibility of Church leaders to "*be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth*" (2 Tim 2:15)¹ remains ever so vital for shepherding the flock of God.

Church leadership is (1) necessary and prescribed in Scripture, (2) local and locally autonomous, (3) a serious responsibility, and (4) a great privilege. The Scripture does not prescribe a multi-tiered hierarchical system of authority and government ruling over multiple congregations in various geographies. The biblical model is expressly restricted to the government of local expressions or instances of the universal Church. Christ Jesus alone is head over His Church universal (cf. Eph 1:22-23) and He alone is the true *Pastor* and *Overseer* of our souls (cf. 1 Peter 2:25). Redeemed men are appointed by God as *lead servants*, or *servant leaders*, to "shepherd the flock of God" (Acts 20:28). This appointment is acknowledged and affirmed by the active participants in a local church for leadership in that local church. (cf. Acts 6:3; 1 Tim 3:1).

The biblical image of the local church is not merely organizational, it is primarily organic. It is, by God's grace, a living organism of Spirit indwelt saints, a "*household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.*" (1 Tim 3:15). Therefore, church leadership is not as much a function of institutional organization as it is spiritual leadership, responsibility, and service. Thus, it has been suggested that church "leadership is a part of spiritual organization"² and as such requires spiritual qualifications. These qualifications are addressed for the office of *overseer* and *deacon* in the respective sections that follow.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE OFFICE OF OVERSEER

First Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9 identify several explicit qualifications for the office of overseer. Though other qualifications are necessarily implied (*such as baptism*), these place great stress on key moral and spiritual qualities that a man must characteristically demonstrate in order to serve as an overseer.

The word translated *overseer* is used synonymously in the New Testament with the word translated *elder*. *Overseer* relates to the office and responsibility while *elder* relates to the spiritual maturity and character of the individual.

Vital to an accurate understanding of the following explicit qualifications is the principle that a man is qualified or disqualified on the basis of his character. Though roles and responsibilities cannot be disconnected from an office, qualification is concerned with the person—who he is over what he can do. Pragmatism has no platform in determining the qualification of a man to service in church leadership. The last section dealt with roles and responsibilities, which appear to have developed in the course of time and according to necessity. The great emphasis placed on guarding the truth, teaching, and ministering the word of God clearly arose in providential response to the infestation of false teachers (cf. Eph 4:14; 1 Tim 1:3, 6-7; 4:6, 11; 5:7; 6:3, 20; 2 Tim 1:14; 4:15; Titus 1:9; 2 Pet 3:17). What does this have to do with the

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) unless otherwise noted.

² Wiersbe, 219.



qualifications of an overseer? For one, it directs our attention away from *structure* and *doing* and sets it on *living* and *being*. It is a false "notion that institutionalization is the way to deal with false teaching. Rather, it is the character of the leaders, not the job descriptions or the interrelationships between different sorts of ministerial roles, that is stressed."³ This elevates the essential importance of faith, spiritual discipline and maturity, stability, and integrity in the battle against false teaching, deception, and dissent within the church. The character of a man is the closest a mortal creature can come in terms of knowing the heart of a man, and the heart of this matter is the matter of the heart. Qualification according to the will of God, then, is supremely concerned with the faith and character of a man.

1 Timothy 3:2-7

"An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."

Titus 1:6-9

"...if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict."

These qualifications are qualities that every follower of Christ should demonstrate and continue to cultivate. Immediately, then, the overseer is called to be an example. "The effect of gathering the traits together in these parenetic texts is to stress that leaders are to be models of the behavior described for everyone in the church."⁴ "It is a sober fact that as goes the leadership, so goes the church."⁵

Much more attention must be given to the integrity of a man who wishes to serve as a leader in Christ's church. Observable public behavior is all that the church has access to objectively, which demands a higher degree of consistency concerning the qualities being evaluated. Finally, of all the qualities identified, **the one all-inclusive and ultimate goal is Christ-likeness**. Christ is "Chief Shepherd" (1 Pet 5:4) and true "Overseer" (1 Pet 2:25 ESV) of souls. *Maturity in Christ is the all-encompassing measure of qualification.*

Quality #1: "above reproach"

1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6, 7

The overseer must be "above reproach, blameless, above criticism, without fault." This is a strong term that describes someone who is *irreproachable*, meaning that no charge or accusation of sinful conduct can be brought against them. The Greeks defined the meaning of the word behind this phrase as "affording nothing of which an adversary can take hold."⁶ This is "the overarching qualification from which the rest flow."⁷ "Of course, this does not mean he must be perfectly sinless. But it does refer to consistent, mature Christian living which gives no occasion for public reproach."⁸

³ Witherington, 233.

⁴ Towner, 241.

⁵ Hughes, 76.

⁶ Barclay, 84.

⁷ MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church*, 212. So also, Hughes, 77; Towner, 249-250; Hiebert, 64; Fee, 80.

⁸ Kent, 212.



Quality #2: "a one-woman man"

1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6

The overseer must be "*a one-woman man, the husband of one wife,*" which essentially describes a character quality that demonstrates exclusive and devoted faithfulness to his one wife. Sexual purity in word, thought, and deed are readily attached to the thrust of this qualification.

Quality #3: "sober-minded"

1 Timothy 3:2

The overseer must be "*sober-minded, temperate.*" Literally, this refers to "*holding no wine*" or being "*without wine.*" It is best understood to describe self-control, restrained in conduct, sober in judgment, and free from all forms of excess.

Quality #4: "self-controlled"

1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8

The overseer must be "*self-controlled, prudent, sensible, moderate, sound-minded.*" This stresses the control of one's self (*self-mastery*) and the ability to curb one's own desires and impulses (strictly, "*having a sound or healthy mind*" as in *will-power* or *mind-over-matter*).

Quality #5: "respectable"

1 Timothy 3:2

The overseer must be "*respectable, honorable, orderly, of good behavior.*" This conveys the idea of *orderliness* in both the inner and outer life. It describes having characteristics or qualities that evoke admiration or delight, and is therefore an expression of someone who gives cause for others to maintain a high regard of them.

Quality #6: "hospitable"

1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8

The overseer must be "*hospitable, kind to strangers, generous to guests.*" This describes a man who is characteristically willing to receive guests into his home and care for them without complaints.

Quality #7: "apt to teach"

1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9

The overseer must be "*apt to teach, able to teach, apt and skillful in teaching.*" This includes both the willingness and the ability to teach. In Titus 1:9 this qualification includes the ability to "*exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.*" The man must demonstrate an interest and aptitude to study and explain the Scriptures.

Quality #8: "not given to wine"

1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7

The overseer must be "*not given to wine, not addicted to wine, not a drunkard.*" This most fully describes one who is characteristically free from any influence of alcohol. "There is a vast difference between the cultural use of wine in Bible days and supporting the alcohol industry of today."⁹ As this applies to the use of alcohol today, any man being considered for leadership should be fully willing to limit his liberty and abstain from all alcohol for the sake of others. Stott astutely observes that drinking alcohol "blunts and blurs our faculty of judgment. Those called to teach should take special warning. It is perhaps not an accident that not given to drunkenness should immediately follow 'an apt teacher'."¹⁰

Quality #9: "not quarrelsome"

1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7

⁹ Wiersbe, 220.

¹⁰ Stott, 96.



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The overseer must be *"not quarrelsome, not pugnacious, not violent, not a brawler."* Literally quarrelsome means to be *ready with a blow or ready to strike someone*. It describes someone who is characteristically not quick-tempered, not interested in disputes, arguments, and fights. As a character trait it may extend to one's words.

Quality #10: "forbearing"

1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7

The overseer must be *"forbearing, gentle, patient, fair, mild."* The emphasis here is on one's disposition toward others, to be considerate of the feelings of others. In general, it describes reasonableness in difficulties, courteousness toward others, and tolerance when wronged.

Quality #11: "not contentious"

1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7

The overseer must be *"not contentious, not a brawler, not quarrelsome, peaceable."* Literally this means *"without battle,"* and here describes one who is not disposed to fight, to quarrel. It describes one who characteristically does not insist on his rights but rather pursues peace.

Quality #12: "not a lover of money"

1 Timothy 3:3

The overseer must be *"not a lover of money, not covetous, not greedy."* The key here is affection and ambition, that is the character of the man must be free from a ruling desire of material gain and wealth. He must not be characterized by a motive to "have" and he must not be stingy with what he does have.

Quality #13: "leading his own house well"

1 Timothy 3:4; Titus 1:6

The overseer must be one who is *"leading, managing, ruling—his own house well."* This term in the original literally means to "put oneself (responsibly) at the head, to lead, to direct, to rule."¹¹ The most literal rendering is *'leading'*. The meaning here in 1 Tim 3:4 is strengthened by *"take care of"* in 3:5. It "is a word for 'leader', combining the concepts of 'rule' and 'care'."¹² If the man is characteristically *leading* his own house well—that is with order and tender care, (if he has children) it should be reflected in the *dignity* with which he parents and by the *subjection* of his children to his leadership.

Quality #14: "not a new convert"

1 Timothy 3:6

The overseer must be *"not a new convert, not a novice (in the faith), not a new believer."* The emphasis here is clearly upon the requirement for spiritual maturity, with a warning of great danger attached to sanctions against all potential conceit or blinding pride. Age is not always an accurate indicator of spiritual maturity, though a reasonable amount of time is necessary for spiritual growth, discipline, consistency, testing, and evaluation by others.

¹¹ Friberg, προΐστημι.

¹² Stott, 98.



Quality #15: "well reputed by those outside the church"

1 Timothy 3:7

The overseer must be *"well reputed, one who has a good testimony, one who has a good reputation, well thought of, approved, well respected—by those outside the church."* This speaks of the ongoing evidence of the man's character as seen by those outside the church. It is not as much a measure of opinion from outsiders as much as it is a matter of the man's integrity. It essentially addresses the character quality of a man as being without hypocrisy in the midst of a watching world. It complements the first qualification, namely *"above reproach,"* this time with a view to those outside the church.

Quality #16: "not self-seeking"

Titus 1:7

The overseer must be *"not self-seeking, self-willed, stubborn, arrogant."* This conveys the idea of arrogance in one who pursues their own interests, unconcerned about the interests of others, in order to please himself.

Quality #17: "a lover of what is good"

Titus 1:8

The overseer must be *"a lover of what is good, a lover of goodness, a lover of virtue."* This emphasizes zeal for good, and that which is good. It describes the characteristic affection of a man as being drawn to that which pleases God and is declared by Him as *good*.

Quality #18: "upright"

Titus 1:8

The overseer must be *"upright, just, righteous, fair, lawful."* The basic quality here is character and conduct that conforms to right standards. It most clearly describes right living in accord with God's precepts and conveys the notion of honest and upright dealings toward other people. This may also include the ability and quality of a man to judge *rightly, equitably, justly, and fairly*.

Quality #19: "holy"

Titus 1:8

The overseer must be *"holy, devout, pure, dedicated (to God), pious."* The emphasis here is on devotion and dedication to God (though it is not the common term for *"holy"*). It describes the God-ward compliment to the previous quality (which occasionally occur together). It is observable orientation and practice that reflects inward purity and a commitment to godliness.

Quality #20: "disciplined"

Titus 1:8

The overseer must be *"disciplined, self-restrained, self-controlled."* Though this term overlaps with *"self-controlled"* its emphasis is on the control of sensual impulse, fleshly appetites, and overall passions of the body. It is often used in the context of sexual restraint and physical discipline or conditioning (cf. 1 Cor 7:9; 9:25). It most fully describes a man who characteristically demonstrates a disciplined nature and strength to restrain from temptation, especially those of a sensual nature.



THE OFFICE OF DEACON

The English word deacon is a transliteration of Greek word *diakonos*, which generally means *servant*. The associated word group commonly describes actions or things pertaining to service (*diakoneo* – to serve, *diakonia* – service, *diakonos* – servant).

Every adjective used in the list of qualifying characteristics for *overseers* is masculine. *Deacon* qualifications employ both masculine and feminine adjectives. The best exegetical evidence suggests that females are included in the office of *deacons* and not in the office of *overseers*. There is no exegetical or contextual evidence that female *deacons* substantiate an entirely separate office, independent of or subordinate to, the order and authority of the office of the *deacon*. The term *servant* in Romans 16:1 is the same term translated *deacon*. It is likely that the reference here is indeed describing Phoebe as a female *deacon*; hence the translation, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae” (Rom 16:1 RSV).

First Timothy 3:11 begins, “Women must likewise be.” “As far as the Greek goes, this could refer to the wives of the deacons, or to women engaged in a similar service. It seems far more likely that it refers to women who are also engaged upon this work of charity. There must have been acts of kindness and help which only a woman could properly do for another woman.”¹³ Moreover, key to interpretation is the parallel use of the adverb translated “*likewise*.” In verse eight it introduces the office of deacon and in verse eleven it introduces the female gender to that office. This best explains the grammatical parallel of the adverb in conjunction with the masculine and feminine adjectives, all under the singular office of deacon.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE OFFICE OF DEACON

First Timothy 3:8–12 identifies several explicit qualifications for the office of deacon. The qualifications set forth here are essentially the same as those of overseers, with the principal difference being that there is no explicit qualification for teaching. Like the qualifications of overseers, these place great stress on key moral and spiritual qualities that an individual must characteristically demonstrate in order to serve as a deacon.

1 Timothy 3:8-12

Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.

The summary of all these qualifications are subsumed in the ultimate goal of every Christian, namely *Christ-likeness*. As with overseers, *maturity in Christ is the all-encompassing measure of qualification*.

Applying the continuity of the injunction “*must be*” (cf. 3:2) according to the adverb “*likewise*” (cf. 3:8, 11), we may say, ***a deacon must be:***

Quality #1: "dignified"

1 Timothy 3:8, 11

The deacon must be “*dignified, reverent, honorable, worthy of respect, serious, of good character*.” This is an important term that describes someone whose character is seriously minded and whose conduct warrants respect. Serious does not mean without joy, or without laughter, but rather reflects initiative of dignified

¹³ Barclay, 97.



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reverence whenever appropriate. In this context, it describes one who takes their faith seriously and all related responsibilities in the church seriously. Like the first qualification of an overseer, this too serves as a representative quality covering all subsequent qualities. The table that follows illustrates both this observation and the apparent parallel between male and female deacons:

Quality	Male	Female
"worthy of respect"	dignified	dignified
<i>integrity & communication character</i>	not double-tongued	not a slanderer
<i>sobriety & level-headedness</i>	not given to much wine	sober-minded
<i>faithfulness & trustworthiness</i>	holding the mystery of the faith	faithful in all things

Beyond this, an emphasis for men appears to be placed on sexual purity, while an emphasis for women on verbal purity. Perhaps these two qualifications generally reflect the greatest vulnerability of each respective gender.

This applies to both male and female deacons.

Quality #2: "not double-tongued"

1 Timothy 3:8

The deacon must be *"not double-tongued, not hypocritical, not insincere, not deceitful, not duplicitous."* The emphasis here is on integrity and consistency in character, though it undoubtedly includes the idea of controlling one's speech.

This applies to both male and female deacons.

Quality #3: "not given to much wine"

1 Timothy 3:8

The deacon must be *"not given to much wine, not addicted to alcohol, not devoted or attached to alcohol."* The stress here is on the strength of will, ability, and consistency of controlling *thoughts* and *desires* to be free from, in this context, the influence of substances (*cf. "wine"*). This is a stronger and more lengthy expression than that found in v.3 (please see comments there for more).

This applies to both male and female deacons.

Quality #4: "not eager for dishonest gain"

1 Timothy 3:8

The deacon must be *"not eager for dishonest gain, not fond of sordid gain, not greedy in a shameful way, not covetous, not pursuing material gain or profit shamefully."* This emphasizes the importance of motivation, and especially in the ministry. The person should not be characterized by material interests and financial gain.

This applies to both male and female deacons.

Quality #5: "holding the mystery of the faith in a clean conscience"

1 Timothy 3:9

The deacon must be *"holding the mystery of the faith in a clean conscience, firm in the faith with a pure conscience."* The *"mystery of the faith"* describes knowing and believing the Word of God as revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ—that is the truth now unveiled through Christ. The aspect of a *"clean conscience"* stresses the importance of living outwardly what is professed inwardly. This too describes someone of integrity, characteristically demonstrating their profession of faith in Christ.

This applies to both male and female deacons.

Quality #6: "proved—by testing"

1 Timothy 3:10



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The deacon must be *"proved—by testing, approved after testing, put to the test, examined."* This calls for a careful examination of something in order to determine its level of genuineness. A servant is to be affirmed to the office of deacon only after being observed as demonstrating the character of a servant.

This applies to both male and female deacons.

Quality #7: "free from reproach"

1 Timothy 3:10

The deacon must be *"free from reproach, beyond reproach, blameless, unaccused."* This describes a quality of character that is marked as not having been accused of anything sinful. It implies the absence of any charge or accusation against the person.

This applies to both male and female deacons.

Quality #8: "not a slanderer"

1 Timothy 3:11

The deacon must be *"not a slanderer, not a malicious gossip."* This describes a quality of character that is free from gossip, and particularly free from speaking harmful words against another. It stresses the absence of slander and misrepresentation in one's speech.

This quality was addressed specifically to female deacons.

Quality #9: "sober-minded"

1 Timothy 3:11

The deacon must be *"sober-minded, temperate."* Literally, this refers to *"holding no wine"* or being *"without wine."* It is best understood to describe self-control, restrained in conduct, sober in judgment, and free from all forms of excess.

This quality was addressed specifically to female deacons.

Quality #10: "faithful in all things"

1 Timothy 3:11

The deacon must be *"faithful in all things."* This describes an all-encompassing demonstration of faith. It conveys the idea of trustworthiness and reliability in domestic duties as well as in her service elsewhere, qualities that are characteristically the outworking of her faithfulness to Christ.

This quality was addressed specifically to female deacons.

Quality #11: "a one-woman man"

1 Timothy 3:12

The deacon must be *"a one-woman man, the husband of one wife,"* which essentially describes a character quality that demonstrates exclusive and devoted faithfulness to his one wife. Sexual purity in word, thought, and deed are readily attached to the thrust of this qualification.

This quality was addressed specifically to male deacons.

Quality #12: "leading well his children and his own house "

1 Timothy 3:12

The deacon must be *"leading, managing, ruling—well his children and his own house."* This term, as in 1 Timothy 3:4, in the original literally means to "put oneself (responsibly) at the head, to lead, to direct, to rule."¹⁴ The most literal rendering is *'leading'*. As noted above, it "is a word for 'leader', combining the concepts of 'rule' and 'care'."¹⁵ Unlike 3:4, the meaning here is directly applied to his children. The concept here is that his orderly and tender leading is to be reflected even in his children.

This quality was addressed specifically to male deacons.

¹⁴ Friberg, προΐστημι.

¹⁵ Stott, 98.

