



Deacon Qualifications: Part 4

Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. (1 Timothy 3:11)

Throughout the New Testament discussion of the official position of deacon in the church, the reference is masculine, referring to a man. Some denominations, even among the more conservative folk, appoint women as well as men to the position, defending their practice by the fact that Paul referred to Phebe as a servant in the church who had greatly benefitted his labors. Yes, "servant" is translated from the same Greek word as "deacon," but that word often appears to identify anyone who fills the honored role of serving in God's kingdom, not exclusively to the office or role of deacon. Any church that fails to honor the women in its membership for their invaluable contribution shall suffer great loss. I am both frustrated and amused at the current women's movements that isolate the verses in which Paul distinguishes the role of women and men in the church culture, concluding quite falsely that Paul was a "woman hater." If we examine the dominant culture of first century Rome and then examine the many passages in which Paul honors the women around him for their godly and beneficial services to God and to His children, Paul stands out in unique fashion as a noble "friend" of godly women in God's kingdom and churches. To the point of our present study, Paul consistently refers to the office and to the people who serve in it in the masculine gender, just as he refers to preachers in that manner.

In more than fifty years of experience and Bible study, I have observed a few notable occasions in both offices in the church where the wife of the man ordained to the position disqualified her husband, destroying his ability to serve with edification. While the New Testament clearly teaches that women are not to be ordained to either of these positions, it equally and emphatically affirms that the wife of the man to be ordained to either office must measure up to certain qualities, or she disqualifies her husband from the position. It is right that a wife exercise tremendous influence on her husband. The requirement seems to raise the point. If her attitude and behavior are such that they compromise her husband's ability to serve, then he should not be ordained to the position. In fact, ordained to the position or not, he cannot so serve without her active support and qualifying traits. As with the qualities we see in the position of ministry, we need to study these requirements and to understand their application and meaning for churches in our time.

1. ...*grave*. We tend to impose a bad definition onto this word. It does not require that the deacon's wife constantly walk around with a long, frowning, scowling face, ready to pounce on any and all who dare to cross her path, opinions, or actions. The New Testament meaning for the word is "...pertaining to appropriate, befitting behavior and implying dignity and respect—'honorable, worthy of respect, of good character.'"¹ Not only should the deacon live so as to comfortably enjoy the respect and admiration of the people in the church community, but his wife should likewise comply with this godly, appropriate, "dignified" and "respectful" conduct.
2. ...*not slanderers*. Occasionally women are stereotyped as being gossips, of rooting out any kind of sordid details from people's private life and spreading the word. "Of course I only do it so that you know and can pray for this dear soul in need." I have always found great difficulty in rationalizing gossip with effective prayer. The façade is too transparent to deserve serious consideration. As with the preacher/pastor, the deacon and his wife should build a faithful, consistent reputation in the church that they refuse to participate in any form of gossip, exaggeration, or spreading bad news about anyone in the church. When John referred to Satan as the "accuser of the brethren," (Revelation 12:10) he used a form of the same word. No faithful believer, particular the men who lead the church, and their wives, should practice behaviors that Satan models in his blasphemous conduct toward the saints. That point alone should frighten us all away from any action or speech that might justify such an association.
3. ...*sober*. We tend to confine this word to the amount of alcohol a person drinks. If someone tends to drink excessive

¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 747 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

amounts, a sufficient amount to impair his/her judgment and/or conscience, we refer to them as “drunk,” the mirror opposite of sober. While I would apply this criterion to the list of required qualities for the deacon’s wife, I suggest that Paul likely had a far broader point in mind. Scripture refers to some who are “drunk, but not with wine.” (Isaiah 29:9; 51:21) A person may never touch a drop of alcohol, but demonstrate a proclivity for extreme attitudes, behaviors, or mood swings that renders him/her “drunk, but not with wine,” anything but “sober” in the sense of our study passage. The deacon’s wife should consistently demonstrate a reserved stability, a “sweet reasonableness” in her attitudes, words, and actions toward the people in her world. That, I suggest, is Paul’s point. Consider this behavior that would promptly disqualify a man from the position of deacon. Suppose one of the wives of the seven men whom the church chose in Acts 6 had criticized the church’s decision to ensure that Gentile (Grecian) widows were appropriately fed in the church’s daily distribution. “You know those Greeks. They lived so long in the lap of luxury that they feel entitled. They sit on their ‘stool of do-nothing’ and expect the church to take care of them. Shame on them.” What impact might this woman’s words have made on the church’s—on her husband-deacon’s—assignment to ensure that all were served according to their needs? Her lack of “sobriety” would have undermined the whole church’s ministry to a significant group of needy members. Yes, this requirement is significant and necessary.

4. ...*faithful in all things*. I love the “catch-all” phrases in Scripture. The Holy Spirit consistently poured powerful meaning into them. He made them meaningful, not mere “place-holders” for an afterthought. In this case, in addition to the specific qualities listed here, Paul requires that the deacon’s wife so live that those who know her best will think of her consistently and characteristically as “faithful.” They see her as predictable. Scripture may not address every finite issue that a twenty-first century church might face, but it does address the underlying and global principles of conduct that define a comprehensive “code of conduct” for both the man who fills the position and his wife. And this noble lady lives up to the qualities “faithfully.” We all occasionally face intense trials that “test our faith.” Scripture refers to the “...trial of your faith.” (1 Peter 1:7) Both the husband and the wife in this situation demonstrate

consistent and predictable faithfulness in the moment of that trial.

How important is it for preachers’ or deacons’ wives to take these requirements seriously and to work at living up to the qualities named in these lists? I suggest that it is essential. Let me give you a nameless example. In my youth, I knew—was quite close—to a very able preacher who powerfully and positively influenced my life and ministry. The man took his ministry seriously and worked hard at serving the Lord’s people. His wife thought he was the ablest and best preacher to be born since the Apostle Paul—barely an exaggeration of her attitude. Sadly for the man, she was never bashful about telling any and all who would listen about what a great preacher her husband was. At times she literally pondered how the Primitive Baptists would survive when he died. This woman, though admiring her husband, by her excessive praise of him, actually inflicted a crippling blow onto his effective ministry.

A deacon’s wife who fails any of the major characteristics listed in our present study verse may destroy her husband’s effectiveness in his duties. Not only does she cripple her husband, in the process she also wounds and impairs the whole church’s ministry to those who most need it.

On more than one occasion as we’ve studied these requirements for the two officers in a New Testament church, I’ve observed that a review of the requirements imposed onto anyone in either position can be both intimidating and challenging. The same applies here to the wife of a man in either of these positions. We do not ordain a woman to the office, but her active and godly participation in her husband’s life and work is essential to his fulfilling his charge so that the church is edified. To the ladies in this position, I offer encouragement and challenge. Take your husband’s position in the church seriously, and take your role conscientiously as well. Beware of over-stepping your charge and presuming to do what Scripture requires him to do. Equally avoid ignoring his duties and in any way impeding his ability to perform his duties. The godly role of “...an helper meet for him...” that God initially defined for the wife is all-encompassing. It distinctly includes your conduct as the wife of a man who holds one of these positions in a New Testament church. Help him do what the New Testament requires of him, but avoid doing it for him or instead of him. He first serves the Lord; then he serves the church. Work to facilitate the service, not supplant him in his work. The blessings you receive will far exceed the investment!

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor