

1 Timothy Lesson 4 Articles

There are two words used to refer to leaders in this chapter: overseers and deacons. In the New Testament the word ‘overseer’ is interchangeable with the word ‘elder’. The distinction between them is best understood as follows: ‘elder’ describes the man for who he is—a mature Christian who is in a position of leadership in a local church—and ‘overseer’ describes what he does—the Greek word means that he ‘watches over’ God’s people. Peter uses it in this way when he tells elders to ‘shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight’ (1 Peter 5:2).

‘Deacon’ literally means ‘servant’. In letters such as Philippians and Ephesians, Paul refers to ‘the elders and deacons’, which indicates that a deacon held a recognized office.

There is an overlap in most of the qualities required for people holding these two offices. The greatest difference is that, although a deacon ‘must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience’ (v. 9, NIV), only an overseer is required to have the ability to teach (v. 2). There has been a lot written about the difference between these two offices, but we shall make one simple distinction: overseers/elders watch over and lead the local church and teach the Word of God, while deacons work alongside them so that the elders can exercise their ministry effectively. This is the pattern set out in Acts 6 when seven men, ‘full of the Spirit and of wisdom’ (v. 3), were appointed to take some practical tasks over from the apostles to enable them to ‘devote [themselves] to prayer and to the ministry of the Word’ (Acts 6:4).

There are two lists, one with respect to overseers and the other with respect to deacons. But when closely examined, it is obvious that there are elements which are common to both. Some Bible commentators say that they are similar to lists of virtues that existed in the Greek-speaking world at the time the letter was written.⁴ This is likely because Paul is concerned about the witness of the local church in the community in which it is placed. He uses these lists to tell the church in Ephesus that it must not have leaders whose domestic life is in a shambles, who quarrel with one another, are the scandal of the neighborhood and who drink too much wine. The church must develop new leaders who are men of integrity.¹

Should an overseer be a teacher?

As has already been stated, the greatest difference between a deacon and an overseer is that an overseer must be ‘able to teach’ (v. 2). This does not mean that a man who meets all the other criteria but does not have the gift of teaching cannot be an elder. The ability to teach that Paul talks about here is one which will enable an elder to apply God’s Word to situations that people in the local church find themselves in, to the end that God’s people may be led into a greater understanding of his ways. Alexander Strauch describes it in this way: ‘An elder must be able to open his Bible and exhort and encourage others from it. He must be able to discern false doctrine and refute it with the Scriptures.’⁶ This was urgently needed among the Christians in Ephesus!²

⁴ See Fee, Gordon, *op cit*, page 79

^{1 2} Robinson, S. J. (2004). *Opening up 1 Timothy* (pp. 54–55, 60). Leominster: Day One Publications.

⁶ Strauch, Alexander, *Biblical Eldership*, Lewis and Roth, Littleton, Colorado, page 199