

Southcliff Baptist Church
Deacon Body
Position Statement on Qualifications of Men Serving as Deacons

March 14, 2004

Background: The Bylaws of Southcliff Baptist Church (Article II, Section 5A), revised and approved March 20, 1996, provide that nominees for Deacon should meet the standards set forth in I Timothy 3:8-13:

“8) Deacons likewise [must be] men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, 9) [but] holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10) And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. 11) Women [must] likewise [be] dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. 12) Let deacons be husbands of [only] one wife, [and] good managers of [their] children and their own households. 13) For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

In addition to the scripture above, the church bylaws [*at that time*] also enumerated further criteria that nominees must meet:

- a. Shall have been a Christian for more than five years.
- b. Shall have been a member of Southcliff for at least three years prior to April 1, which is the date of inauguration for new deacons.
- c. Shall not be presently pursuing a full-time gospel ministry vocation.
- d. Shall not be a member of the Southcliff Baptist Church staff.
- e. Shall be married to his original wife, if he ever has been married, unless the marriage was ended by her death and the same shall be true of his wife.
- f. Shall believe that it is appropriate for a deacon of Southcliff Baptist Church to abstain from the use and sale of alcohol as a beverage.

Finally, the bylaws stated that men who received **at least seven nominations** from the church body shall be considered for election.

Beginning in 2002, a revision of the church bylaws was undertaken and will be submitted to the church body for approval in 2004. This revision omits all extra-biblical criteria enumerated above (e.g. *items a. through f.*, as well as the “***...at least seven nominations...***”), leaving I Timothy 3:8-13 as the sole guide for the nomination, examination, and election of candidates for the office of deacon.

In light of this change, the deacon body determined at their regularly scheduled meeting in November 2002 that it would be prudent to develop a “***Position Statement***” on the standards set forth in I Timothy 3:8-13, specifically addressing the issue of divorce and/or remarriage. An Ad Hoc committee was appointed to draft this position statement in partnership with our elder and senior pastor. This “*Position Statement*” will serve as a guide to the examination committee of the deacon body. It will not rise to the level of a binding, governing document of the church and therefore will not require formal approval by the church membership. This “*Position Statement*” can be revised by future deacon bodies as deemed appropriate with the approval of at least 75% of the active deacons and the full support of the church elder (e.g. currently the senior pastor).

Position: The biblical qualifications for the office of deacon as enumerated in I Timothy 3:8-13 are:

1. **Man of dignity:** a deacon must be serious in mind and in character; not silly or flippant about important matters; reverent (I Peter 1:13, 5:8)
2. **Not double-Tongued:** a deacon must have speech that is not hypocritical, but honest and consistent; a deacon must not say one thing to some people and something else to others (Ephesians 4:15, 25, 29). A deacon does not maliciously slander fellow church members, leaders, policies/programs, etc. He is not a grumbler or argumentative (Phil 2:14).
3. **Not addicted to much wine:** a deacon must not be preoccupied with drink; he must not have a reputation as a drinker. Rather, his lifestyle must be radically different from the world and lead others to holiness, not sin. (Prov. 23:29-35, 31:4-5, Romans 14:21, 1Peter 4:1-3)
4. **Not fond of sordid gain:** a deacon must not be controlled by a desire for material things; not a cheat; does not believe *'the end justifies the means'*; honest in business dealings; a deacon must not abuse his office to make money — he cannot be bought. (I Timothy 6:3-10).
5. **Holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience:** a deacon's profession of his faith in the gospel must be marked by his humble and willing obedience to God's precepts and the scriptures to which he outwardly holds; his life is demonstrated by brokenness, and he is quick to repent and seek forgiveness when he sins. He keeps his unconfessed sin list short (II Corinthians 1:12, I Timothy 1:5).

NOTE: The word **"mystery"** describes truth previously hidden but now revealed — the gospel message, the new testament church, and the unity of Jew and Gentile in the faith — to name a few (Ephesians 3:1-13, I Timothy 3:16). The phrase **"clear conscience"** is used frequently by Paul in his writings and it refers to the self-judging faculty that God created in man, and that produces guilt which acts as the mind's security system that produces fear, guilt, shame, and doubt as warnings of threats to the soul's well-being. When a believer does God's will, he enjoys the affirmation, assurance, peace, and joy of a good [pure] conscience (John 8:9, Romans 9:1, Hebrews 10:19-23).

6. **Beyond reproach:** there is no valid accusation of wrongdoing that can be made against him. No overt, flagrant sin can mar the life of one who must be an example for his people to follow. Blameless. This is the over-arching requirement that is controlling in all the other requirements.

7. **Women [must] likewise [be] dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things:**

a deacon's wife must also be serious in mind and character; not silly or flippant about important matters; she must be a woman of confidence and not a gossip; alert, watchful, vigilant, clear-headed; a deacon's wife should be a **devoted** believer, and like her husband, absolutely trustworthy in all aspects of her life and ministry.

8. **Husband of [only] one wife:**

a deacon must be a **"one-woman man"** or a **"one-woman type of man"**. The issue is not the deacon's marital status, but his moral and sexual purity. A **"one-woman man"** is one totally devoted to his wife (present or future), maintaining singular devotion, affection and sexual purity in both thought and deed. It therefore does not exclude from consideration:

- a. candidates who have never been married. (I Corinthians 7:8, 7:25-33)
- b. candidates who have been widowed by the death of their wife. (I Corinthians 7:8)
- c. candidates who have been widowed by the death of their wife and have remarried in the faith. (I Corinthians 7:8-9, 39-40; Romans 7:1-3; I Timothy 5:14)
- d. candidates who have been divorced, or have divorced and remarried. **(subject to the specific criteria discussed below)**

NOTE: We believe there are some conditions under which a divorced man would not be prohibited from serving as a deacon based on the teachings of the whole of scripture. They are:

1. The divorce occurred prior to his conversion to Christ

- God's mercy covers our life of unbelief/sin before and after Christ (I Timothy 1:12-16)
- **"Certainly we cannot attempt to make the qualifications of I Timothy 3 apply to a man's life before he is saved. If God has forgiven him and made him a part of His church, why do Christians hold his past against him? When one is saved:**
 - a. All his sins are forgiven (Colossians 2:13)
 - b. He becomes a member of the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:13-14, Ephesians 4:16)
 - c. His body becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:19)
 - d. He receives a new nature created after God's own holiness (Ephesians 4:24)
 - e. He becomes a new creature (II Corinthians 5:17)
 - f. He becomes a part of God's spiritual house (I Peter 2:5)
 - g. He becomes a part of God's royal priesthood (I Peter 2:9)

Before a man is saved, he:

- a. Is dead toward God and His holy standards (Ephesians 2:1-13)
- b. Has no power over sin (same as above)
- c. Has no knowledge of God's word or will (John 14:15-17)

Thus to judge one's life before his new birth is totally unjust. Paul states that even adulterers (e.g. as in divorce and remarriage) "were washed...sanctified...justified" (I Corinthians 6:9-11). If God has made a man clean, how can the church consider him unworthy to serve God even on the highest levels? Is the church guilty of Peter's prejudice - Acts 10:9-16?" ["Bibliotheca", Dallas Theological Seminary July-Sept '83]

2. Divorced Spouse for Sexual Immorality (e.g. fornication, 'porneia')
 - Matthew 5:31-32, 19:1-9 — the Greek term "porneia" (fornication) is broader in scope than the term "moichao" used for adultery. Adultery is the effect of engaging in sexual sin(s) or porneia. The term porneia includes all forms of sexual immorality — incest, bestiality, homosexuality, and lesbianism as well as adultery.

Note that no requirement for divorce is laid down in these texts. It is, however, permitted. Furthermore, Luke 17:3-4, Ephesians 4:32, and Colossians 3:13 would seem to further restrict the permissibility of divorce for sexual immorality only to those whose partners refuse to repent of their sin(s). It is the view of some conservative scholars that the biblical process of church discipline outlined in Matthew 18 should be followed through to the final step before pursuing a divorce in this case.

3. The Abandonment of an Unbelieving Spouse
 - I Corinthians 7:12-16
 - Note that the believer is commanded to live with the willing unbeliever
 - If the unbeliever pursues divorce (e.g. "departs") because they cannot tolerate the believer's faith, the believer is to let them "depart".
 - In this case, the believer is not under bondage and is free to remarry (Romans 7:1-3).

Note: Several scholars agree that where divorce is discussed in scripture, remarriage is assumed.

9. Good managers of [their] children and their own households:

the deacon's home life, like his personal life, must be exemplary. He must be one who "**rules**" (presides over, has authority over) "**his own house**" (everything connected with his home, not merely his wife and children) "**well**" (intrinsically good; excellently).

A deacon's children must be believers (see "**faithful**" in Titus 1:6), well behaved, and respectful.

Note: Issues of divorce should be related to this character quality. A divorced man gives no evidence of a well-managed home, but rather that divorce shows weakness in his spiritual leadership. If there has been a biblically

permitted divorce, it must have been so far in the past as to have been overcome by a long pattern of solid family leadership and the rearing of Godly children.

Conclusion:

- I Timothy 3:8-13, when all the qualifications are taken as a whole, is a biblical profile of a man who has the character, leadership, spirit, morality and faithfulness to serve the church body in the specific role of deacon under the authority of the elder(s). It is not intended as a list to separate believers into different classes.
- I Timothy 3:10 says: **“And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach”**. This present tense verb indicates an ongoing evaluation of a deacon’s character and service by the church. This is to continue even after his ordination and as long as he serves actively in this role. I Timothy 5:22, 24-25 speaks to the fact that in evaluating a man for deacon/elder, time and truth go hand in hand. The emphasis in this evaluation process is to be patient, fair, impartial, and pure. Those responsible for hasty ordination are culpable before God for the man’s sin of serving as an unqualified deacon and thus misleading people.

Bibliography:

1. **“The New American Commentary”** — editors include Dr. Paige Patterson. The late Dr. Thomas Lea (SWBTS) wrote the section of the pastoral epistles that included I Timothy 3.
2. **“Bibliotheca”**, July-September 1983; — Theological journal of Dallas Theological Seminary.
3. **“Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible”**, Jay E. Adams
4. Notes from **“The MacArthur Study Bible”** (NKJV)
5. Various other commentaries.
6. Various other church policies, by-laws on deacon qualifications:
 - Apex Baptist Church, Apex, North Carolina
 - Peace Presbyterian Church, Cary, North Carolina
 - Fellowship Baptist Church of Durham, North Carolina
 - Chapel Hill Bible Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina