

The Role of Deacons

*THIS PRESENTATION WAS TAUGHT ON SUNDAY EVENING, SEPTEMBER 28
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New Testament Deacons serve the Lord by conducting the caring ministry of the church—doing the benevolence work, visiting the sick, being alert to the spiritual needs of the congregation—for the purposes of freeing the pastoral staff to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word, promoting unity within the church, and facilitating the spread of the gospel.

Biblical Guidance on the Office of Deacon

Deacons and Elders Are the Two Distinct Offices in a New Testament Church

The two New Testament offices are mentioned together in Philippians 1:1 and in 1st Timothy 3 — bishops and deacons. In 1st Timothy 3 the qualifications are spelled out for the two offices, bishops in verses 1-7, and deacons in verse 8-13. The qualifications are similar, but not identical. For example, the bishop is required to be “able to teach” whereas the deacon does not have that expectation. The differences in title and qualifications mean that the offices are distinct.

The term “bishop” is translated overseer in some translations. It is the word from which we get our word “episcopal” which means, “to look upon, inspect, oversee, look after, care for” and refers to “the care of the church which rested upon the elders.” The term is used interchangeably with “elder” and “shepherd” (i.e. pastor) in Acts 20 and 1st Peter 5. There is no question about the authority of the office: **1 Timothy 5:17**The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.

Three facts stand out:

1. Deacons and Elders are the offices in the church. The offices are distinct. Elders are not deacons. Deacons are not elders.
2. The terms, Elder, Pastor (shepherd), and Overseer (bishop) are used synonymously in the New Testament.
3. In the New Testament, elders had the role of the general oversight of the church.

In the original language, the word, *Deacon*, means *Servant*

The title itself, is as descriptive as any job description could be. In the Bible, words have meanings and the word "deacon" means servant. Here is how the word has been defined in its various forms:

"Diakoneo and its derivatives, as their etymology suggests, are used mainly for personal help to others."

"Diakonia is found 34 times in the NT. It means service at the table in Lk. 10:40; Acts 6:1, etc."

"Diakanos is found 29 times in the NT. Its primary meaning is one who serves at tables."

("Serve, Deacon, Worship" in The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Colin Brown, ed., volume 3, pages 544, 546)

"In Philippians 1:1 and in numerous references in early Christian literature outside the New Testament, bishops and/or elders and deacons are mentioned together, with deacons mentioned last.

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Because of this order, and because of the natural connotations of the word diakonos, most interpreters believe that deacons, from the beginning, served as assistants of church leaders."

(Deacon, Deaconess, Fred A. Grissom, Holman Bible Dictionary, Holman, 1991)

The Office of Deacon Was Created for the Purpose of Handling the Benevolence Ministry

The Biblical account is quite clear on the founding of the deaconship and nowhere does Scripture repeal the original purpose:

Acts 6:1 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

The Office of Deacon Was Established to Free the Apostles (who functioned as the first pastors) to Pray and to Prepare to Minister the Word

The Apostles, in dealing with the benevolence ministry problem at the Jerusalem church, told the congregation that,

Acts 6:2 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. 3 Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

Some have understood this passage to mean that it is the role of deacons to oversee the business of the church. First, the text says, "this business," not "the business" — and the business being referred to is the business of benevolence. Second, as Dr. Robert Naylor points out, that would be a misrepresentation of the meaning of the word:

"The word 'business' should be discussed a little to prevent any misunderstanding. The Greek word is chreia and basically means 'need.' It is so translated twenty-five times. This is the only place it is translated 'business.' Hence there is no Scriptural authority for the deacons to make financial decisions of the church. Church decisions must remain church decisions."

The Early Deacons Were Selected for Their Spiritual Qualifications

1st Timothy 3 and Acts 6 expound the qualifications for the office of deacons; the later contains what could fairly be called the "core qualifications":

"Men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" -- Acts 6:3

"And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" -- Acts 6:5

Often, when someone is discussed as a possible deacon one hears a remark such as, "He attends regularly and is a good giver." But God is looking at men with an internal dynamic, which cannot be determined in a superficial way.

Deacons Are to Be Capable of Serving the Lord in Spiritual Ways

The original seven deacons were people who were able to serve the Lord in ways which were more spiritual in nature than merely delivering food. Stephen was a man of spiritual power: "And Stephen,

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full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8 NJKV). Philip was not only a deacon, but also was gifted in evangelism (Acts 8:5-7).

The Office of Deacon Requires a Firm Grasp of Sound Doctrine

A church is content oriented. It is a doctrinally driven community, built upon truth. Every member should have this approach in this fellowship; leaders such as deacons, not less but, more so. **Acts 6:9** Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, ¹⁰but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

The Presence of Deacons Should Advance the Unity of a Church

When the Apostles laid out the plan for the creation of this office, **Acts 6:3** Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

⁵This proposal pleased the whole group.

The complaints about the benevolence ministry stopped. And the complaints were by the Greek speaking Jews, the Hebrew speaking Jews obviously bent over backwards to preserve the church's unity, for all the men selected had Greek names. It is still true today: Any time a church has deacons who are properly doing their jobs, the church is more likely to be at unity.

The Presence of Deacons Should Advance the Cause of Evangelism

The immediate impact of the creation of the office of deacon was to eliminate the controversy in the church and to get the church back on course in fulfilling its mission. The Bible says that, **Acts 6:7** So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Again, it is still true. When a church has deacons who are in God's will, the cause of world evangelization will be aided.

Deacons and Elders are partners in ministry.

Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers [bishops] and deacons:

There are two important things to see in this simple opening. First off, we see that Paul identifies himself to the Philippians as a servant of Christ. Clearly we know that Paul was a great pastor but he most identifies himself as a servant. Our observation of Paul's life bears that out. When Paul writes to the Church of Philippi, he addresses both the elders (bishops) and the deacons. He sees them as partners in the church's ministry. The clearest distinction between the service of the Elder and the service of the Deacon is that the Elder is the servant of the spiritual (the Word) and the Deacon is the servant of physical needs. Where the elders are critical to keep their finger on the spiritual pulse of the church, the deacons are the leaders in the practical helping ministries. In a healthy church, both are essential to work together in partnership.

Deacons develop Deacons

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You ever wonder why an important figure in the early church – an apostle no less would even mention a young guy like Timothy in his greeting? Paul was discipling Timothy! Paul identified Timothy as one of the people that he was building into. I don't know this for a fact but I could easily see Paul showing Timothy the tent-making trade and as they worked together teaching him the spiritual truths that he would need to grow into the pastor that he would need to become. Paul took Timothy with him as he ministered to the churches. He was growing a servant.

Today our deacons should each have a Timothy that they are building into. We should never have to search hard for the new deacons that will be brought on. As our church grows, we should regularly be doubling the number of deacons because every deacon is building into another and encouraging their growth spiritually and as a servant. They are the first person that they call when a project comes up. They get together time to time for a cup of coffee and keep track on how things are going in their lives. They are also encouraging them to be bringing along another person for their Timothy.

Similar Qualifications – Different Gifts

It's important to note that qualifications for elders and deacons are very similar. In fact the one distinction that is made is that the qualifier of being able to teach is added to that of the elders. The more important distinction is not the qualifications or character of the person but the gifts of the person.

Currently, when you think of the term "Board of Deacons", what type of activities spring to mind? For many, the parallel that is made is to that of a "Board of Directors". In many cases deacons have served as a decision making body who are primarily engaged in an administrative role in the church.

Now when you think of the term "Helper or Servant" in the church, what comes to mind? You likely envision someone with a broom in their hands or a tool belt on. Now keep that image but expand it to include people who are actively engaged in many aspects of service in the church but also *through* the church in to the community. Think of people that demonstrate the Godly character traits that are described in Timothy that are doing construction and repair work in the community for the needy; who are doing car repair work for low income families; who are teaching English as a second language to immigrants; who are coming alongside single mothers and teaching household skills; who are training people family financial skills; etc., etc., etc. Most of you are involved in ministries in our church that reflect where your heart's passion lies. In your big dreams, how would a focused group of Godly , talented servants that would expand the impact of your ministry look like?

Now is the time to dream big and work to make it happen!

Sources:

The Biblical Role of Deacons by Derek Gentle

Now that You're a Deacon by Howard B. Foshee