

DEACONS: Understanding What They Do

Deacons: Significant, Strategic, Servants

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INTRO ...Why a Brief Series on Deacons?

Acts 6:1-7 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

- **Their Situation ...a Growing Church ...v. 1**

- ... From Upper Room Gathering to Thousands!

- ... A Complaint Arose ...

- **A Strategy Revealed for the Church (v. 2-4)** —Complementary Priorities — LEADERSHIP via The Ministry of the Word & Prayer ...&... CARE via Touching the Various People & Needs of Disciples

"A vital principle is illustrated in this incident, which is of urgent importance to the church today. It is that God calls all his people to ministry, that he calls different people to different ministries, and that those called to 'prayer and the ministry of the word' must on no account allow themselves to be distracted from their priorities." **John Stott**, "Acts", BST Comm.

"Of the many lessons for deacons from Acts 6, perhaps most overlooked is their strategic role in preserving congregational unity. The seven weren't merely deployed to solve a food problem. Food was the occasion, sure, but it wasn't the deepest problem. The deepest problem was a sudden threat to church unity. ...The best deacons, therefore, are far more than business managers or handymen. They are persons with fine-tuned 'conflict radars.' They love solutions more than drama and rise to respond, in creatively constructive ways, to promote harmony of the whole. ...Tracing the implications of Acts 6, Mark Dever and Paul Alexander offer an apt summary: '*Deacons, then, serve to care for the physical and financial needs of the church, and they do so in a way that heals divisions, brings unity under the Word, and supports the leadership of the elders. Without this practical service of the deacons, the elders will not be freed to devote themselves to praying and serving the Word to people. Elders need deacons to serve practically, and deacons need elders to lead spiritually.*'" **Matt Smethurst**, "Deacons", p.52-55

- This Spirit Given Strategy is Permanent

Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons...

1 Timothy 3:1-8 The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ...⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

FOCUS for This Mini-Series is on Deacons

NOTE: There are 2 Offices that are Identified in the N.T. Church. When they are presented, the Scriptures are going to draw our attention to 2 aspects of those who will serve in those offices— (1) Their Capabilities & (2) Their Character

- (1) Their Capabilities** — focuses on the grace God has placed in that person's life to serve the church in particular ways. This aspect will be highlighting one's spiritual gifts, talents, or skills. **(2 Corinthians 3:4-6** *"Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶ who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant"*) There are certain responsibilities that are asked of elders and deacons, that should inform the pursuit of potential candidates, and there are numerous lists of spiritual gifts that describe the type of grace God chooses to impart to different members of the Body of Christ. We are called on to seek these capabilities in those we seek to have serve in a church office.
- (2) Their Character** — this focuses on the quality and manner of a person's life, as they are being transformed, molded, and shaped by the Spirit of God and the Word of God. The Scriptures provide lists of qualifications that are to be used in examining a person's walk. We are to seek to find candidates where these qualities characterize their lives and relationships and inform their motivation in occupying an office that serves the church.

...Both must be present in those who would serve as elders or deacons. —a Gifted person who lacks character is not what the Bible is prescribing, and a person of quality character who lacks gifting/capabilities is not what the Bible is prescribing.

Elders & Deacons ...a Distinct, Complimentary Partnership

- **Who are Elders and What Do They Do?**

- 3 Word Description that speaks to their "ABILITIES" and their "RESPONSIBILITIES"
 - 'Presbyteros' — "elder" ...of age, advanced in life; a sense of venerability (TDNT)
 - 'Episkopos' — "overseer, supervisor"
 - 'Poimen' — "shepherd" ("pastor") ...feeding, leading, guiding, protecting

"it is a real 'ministry of the word' to which pastors are called to dedicate their life. The apostles were not too busy for ministry, but preoccupied with the wrong ministry. So are many pastors. Instead of concentrating on the ministry of the word (which will include preaching to the congregation, counselling individuals and training groups), they become overwhelmed with administration. Sometimes it is the pastor's fault (he wants to keep all the reins in his own hands), and sometimes the people's (they want him to be a general factotum). In either case the consequences are disastrous. The standards of preaching and teaching decline, since the pastor has little time to study or pray." **John Stott**, "Acts", BST

"So from the very earliest time in the church it was understood that the ministry of the Word required so much time and effort that those called to this ministry should be freed from other demands." **John Piper**, "The Ministry of the Word"

- 2 Elements that Delineate Elders & Deacons— "Authority" and "Apt to Teach"
 - Elders are given authority to lead the church. That authority is bound to and informed by the Word of God—thus elders are given to be the ministers and keepers of the Word that provides the truth that influences the church.
 - Elders must be able to teach at a significant level and provide leadership to the church through their teaching.
 - Deacons do not possess authority, but they may be called upon to extend the authority of the elders into various aspects of the life of the church.
 - Deacons do not need to be able to teach, but they are called to be sound in their doctrine and able to accurately represent sound teaching to the members of the church in their life and conversation.

- **Who are Deacons and What Do They Do?**

“Deacon” = servant

“If you put your trust in Christ, you are already a deacon in a broad sense. The Greek noun diakonos appears twenty-nine times in the New Testament and is almost always translated ‘servant(s)’ or ‘minister(s)’. ...diakonos is usually just a generic term for ‘servant’... A small handful of times, though, the word is employed in a narrower, more technical sense... To ‘deacon’ in this narrower sense is not an informal role. ...It is one of two offices the New Testament establishes for the local church.” **Matt Smethurst**, “Deacons”, p. 17

“At the heart of the term “deacon” and the office — the “diaconate” — is service. Deacons are Christians who serve the Lord Jesus by leading ministries in the local church. ...These appointed deacons are not elders, but they are also not simply volunteers. They are faithful and qualified leaders of ministries that range across many areas of service.” **Gregg Allison & Ryan Welsh**, “Raising the Dust”, p. 13, 15

"Thus, the deacons are not a separate, autonomous body of officials disconnected from the body of overseers. As the context and the terms themselves indicate, the diakonoi operate under the leadership of the episkopoi. The diakonoi assist the episkopoi by officially representing the overseers and standing ready to carry out tasks delegated by the overseers. ...as Clarence Agan succinctly explains, the term: *'better captures the intermediary function Paul had in mind. He was thinking of a role that involved being simultaneously in-and-under authority—under the authority of the elders, but having authority over the congregation to carry out tasks as needed. Diakonos provided a clear way to say this while still leaving room for flexibility as to the nature of the specific tasks deacons might undertake.'*¹⁸ **Strauch, Alexander**. *Paul's Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God's Church* (p. 45). Lewis & Roth Publishers. Kindle Edition.

"...it appears that Scripture has left the specific functions of the diaconate to be defined by the elders." **Dave Harvey**, Sovereign Grace Perspectives, April 2005

- What types of Deacon Ministries are typically found in churches?
 - ...Directing & Coordinating Various Ministries (Children’s, Youth, Sr’s, Men’s, Women’s)
 - ...Benevolence/Mercy Ministries ...Visitation (hospital, shut-ins) ...Facilities Management ...Small Group Ministry ...Hospitality/Greeters/Ushers ...Audio Visual ...Social Media & Communications ...Missions & Outreach ...Security ...Care Team ...Addiction Recovery Ministry ...etc
- Not Every Church will have an identical list of deacons and deacon ministries. Much of this will be defined by situations, seasons, and needs in the church at various times. Much of this will be defined by priorities of the elders. Much of this will be defined by the resources of a particular local church.

“By 64 A.D., when this epistle was written, the church had developed to the point where the spiritual qualifications for church leaders are specific, yet the instructions for organization are still quite limited. That is by divine design. There is great flexibility in the church organization because God knew that situations and needs would be diverse culturally and historically.” **John MacArthur**, “Answering the Key Questions about Deacons”, GTY

“Calling” Provides “Capability” ...and Humility

Acts 6:3 “Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.”

...Character + Capabilities

“Calling” is a way of explaining the “Empowering Work of the Spirit” in the Body of Christ. Its language and influence should preoccupy us as we engage those who serve in the church—because it preoccupied the N.T. Church

Acts 1:8 *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord;⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ...¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.*

Rom 12:4-8 *For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function,⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching;⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.*

1 Pet 4:10-11 *As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies*

Men & Women—Called/Gifted and Serving as Deacons

Guiding Principle that Allows Both Men & Women to serve as Deacons:

1 Timothy 2:12-13 *I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve...*

The Goal of the N.T. Church is 3-fold—

- (1) Seek to Discover Where God has Placed “Influential Grace” in members of the Body ...
- (2) Qualify These Gifted People ...
- (3) Deploy Their Influence into the Structure of the Church

“Often, unfortunately, the qualification requirements for church offices are replaced by urgent pragmatism: enticed by time limitations and human gifting, pastors can harmfully install leaders who are gifted but not qualified.” **Gregg Allison & Ryan Welsh**, “Raising the Dust”, p. 17

“Perhaps it goes without saying, but placing a woman into ministry in order to ‘make a statement’ about one’s church, to meet some type of master plan or quota, or to equalize some supposed ‘power structure’ in the church is a terrible mistake—as it is any time a male is given a position of leadership for any reason short of the spiritual qualifications outlined in Scripture.” **Wayne House**, “Principles to Use in Establishing Women in Ministry” (from “Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood” p. 358)

“What do deacons do? In short, they assist the elders by meeting needs in the life of the church. They unleash the word of God by allowing the elders to focus on praying, teaching, and governing. And in doing so, the deacons guard and encourage the church’s love for one another. For the church of Acts 6, that meant making sure everyone was fed. In our day, it might still be feeding the hungry in our congregation, or it might be maintaining the church budget, or overseeing ministry to children, or taking care of the building, or leading a small group.

The tasks may seem tedious to the untrained eye, but imagine how much our churches would be crippled if no one stepped up to do them well. Imagine how horribly distracted and worn out our pastors would be, trying to cover all those bases themselves. Imagine how the preaching and teaching would inevitably suffer, leaving the church starving in far worse ways.

“The apostles recognize a fundamental truth,” Smethurst writes.

A church whose ministers are chained to the tyranny of the urgent — which so often shows up in “tangible problems” — is a church removing its heart to strengthen its arm. It’s a kind of slow-motion suicide. A church without deacons may lack health, but a church without biblical preaching cannot exist. There is, in fact, no such thing.⁽⁴⁷⁾ **Marshall Segal**, “The Quiet and Crucial Work of Deacons”