

Why Deacons? (Acts 6:1-7)

GIST: Deacons are model servants who love Jesus wholeheartedly and work diligently to meet specific needs within the local church.

Here's our overview statement: *Elders and deacons are groups of exemplary Christians called & equipped by God to serve the local church under the leadership of Jesus by providing spiritual direction and meeting tangible needs.* And then last week, when we camped out with just the office of elder: *Elders serve Jesus and His flock by modeling, teaching, leading, and praying.*

1. Deacons are not a "second house of government". Last week, we talked about the elder responsibility of oversight. This is not an expectation given to deacons in the Bible. Still, it is pretty common to see deacons either acting like elders or, more frequently in recent years, like a board of directors. Deacons and elders are not like the House and Senate. They are two separate offices with separate roles. That said→

2. Deacons are not less spiritually valuable. This is not saying deacons have no spiritual value, though. They are set up as model servants for a reason, and their service to the church is indispensable—not secondary.

"Whether the role of deacons in your church has been wrongly inflated or wrongly reduced, the solution is not to swing from one extreme to another, but to restore deacons to their intended biblical purpose and irreplaceable biblical role. Deacons are not the church's spiritual council of directors, nor the executive board to whom the pastor-CEO answers. They are the cavalry of servants, deputized to execute the elders' vision by coordinating various ministries. Deacons are like a congregation's Special Ops force, carrying out unseen assignments with fortitude and joy. If you want to find a qualified deacon, don't look at his garage to see how many tools he has. Don't look at his financial portfolio to see how many investments he has. Don't look at his company to see how many employees he has. Look first at his attitude, his character, his life. Is he eager to listen, or is he angling to be heard? Is he humble and flexible, or does he always insist on his own way? Does he covet status, or does he yearn to serve? ...The witness of history is plain: a congregation without biblically functioning deacons is impoverished, but a congregation with them is incalculably rich." -Matt Smethurst

"1 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." (Acts 6:1-7 ESV)

Why were deacons needed?

- Factor 1: There was a real need. Disunity was threatening the Gospel being shared and lives being changed.

- Factor 2: The apostles could not stop prioritizing prayer & the teaching of God's Word.
- Reality: They couldn't effectively do both.

How were they chosen?

- From the congregation.
- Men with good reputations, full of the Spirit and wisdom.
 - *They had godly characters as a result of their vibrant walks with Christ and were equipped, by God, to meet these needs.*
- Appointed by the church.
 - *The church chose these men to serve them, and then prayed over them and set them to this work.*

What were they expected to do?

- Prayerfully meet this need.
 - *For deacons to function well, they need to be Godly men who can be trusted to serve the church without creating more headaches than they alleviate.*

What were the results?

- The need was met.
- The gospel continued to spread.
- Souls were saved.
 - Again, diaconal work is not of less spiritual value than the work of an elder. It's different, but equally vital – which is why God prescribed it, and we should implement it faithfully.

So, who are the deacons and how do they serve the church?

Who they are not→

1. Pastor-in-Training Peter "Heard they're making you a deacon. How long, you think, before they make you an elder?"

"...Can Deacon Peter pursue pastoral ministry? Of course, but that should not be why he's a deacon. Every shepherd must first be a servant, yes, but not every servant is meant to become a formal shepherd. Diaconal service is too significant – too glorious – to be a mere stepping-stone toward anything else." -MS

Can, but not required to teach. (Stephen and Phillip)

Not given spiritual oversight of the flock.

2. Toolbox Terrance "You're good at fixing things. They should make you a deacon."

"...There is seemingly nothing Terrance can't find a way to fix. When it comes to tending the church's building and grounds, his know-how is unmatched. Wouldn't Terrance make an ideal deacon? Not so fast. I haven't yet told you whether he's a mature believer. A deacon is far more than someone who knows his way around Home Depot. Does he know his way around his Bible?" -MS

3. Spreadsheet Sam "Our church budget is a mess; we're looking at another financial shortfall and don't have any clear income projections for the next fiscal year. Why don't we make Sam a deacon – doesn't he fix people's money problems for a living?"

"When it comes to shrewd economic sense, Sam is unrivaled in the church. Wouldn't Sam make an ideal deacon? Again, not so fast. I haven't yet told you whether he's a mature

believer. Spreadsheet wizardry is a welcome skill, but it's not sufficient for holding an office in God's home (1 Tim. 3:15)." -MS

4. Corporate Cliff "Seminaries may teach ancient languages, bless their heart, but they can't teach executive skills. What this church really needs are some decisive deacons with business sense."

"It's no secret Cliff has done well for himself in the marketplace. He's got scores of employees and decades of business savvy. Isn't Cliff an ideal deacon? Once more, not so fast. I haven't yet told you whether he's a mature believer. Executive-leadership experience can be a serious asset, but it's no indication of spiritual fitness." -MS

5. Veto Vinnie "What's the point of being deacons if we're just 'yes men'? Of course, I tell Pastor Dave how it is—who else will? Besides, I only want to keep him humble. Last thing we need is a puffed-up pastor."

"Deacon Vinnie is nothing if not a contrarian. He's not trying to make Pastor Dave's life miserable, though he often succeeds. He has simply taken it upon himself to keep the pastor grounded. Frankly, Vinnie doesn't want much about the church to change, but he can smell the desire for innovation wafting from the pastor.... Vinnie likes to carefully bubble-wrap his complaints. "Some people are talking" is a favorite. Isn't Vinnie an ideal deacon? I think we can agree he's not." -MS

6. Pseudo-Elder Steve "Welcome to First Baptist Church, where the pastors say things and the deacons run things. (Seriously, though, if you want to get something important done around here, you've got to convince those deacons.)"

Common misconception: "Deacons can't dictate what elders do with spiritual matters, since that's their lane; and elders can't dictate what deacons do with pragmatic matters, since that's their lane." When deacons start to function either as leading shepherds over the whole congregation, or as a board of directors overseeing various staff and committees, the Bible's job description for deacons has become blurred. Further, any structure that encourages deacons to function as a counterweight to the pastor or elders—a second house of legislature to "check and balance" pastoral decisions—has overstepped its biblical bounds. Though this may not have been the intention, far too often it is the effect." -MS

Who they are→

- **Men with Godly character**
- **Gifted and equipped to meet specific needs (more on that in a second)**

Servant Seth: "He isn't gunning for an office, a title, or a spotlight. In fact, he knows that doing deeds "to be seen by others" is what marks opponents of his Savior (Matt. 23:5). Seth has internalized the upside-down nature of true greatness, described by Jesus himself: The greatest among you shall be your servant [diakonos]. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matt. 23:11–12) In short, Seth gets it: as one ministry leader observed, a deacon who is above the people is below the office. Don't misunderstand. Seth is not perfect, but he is prayerful and growing in humility. He's not the smartest guy in the room, but he is teachable. He's not the most experienced guy in the room, but he is respected because of the way he treats people. Seth is not a "yes man," but he's also not a self-appointed pastoral critic. He doesn't think it's his job—or any Christian's, for that matter—to gaze suspiciously at godly leaders. Seth loves to fade into the background, not because he's falsely modest but because he cares about what's foregrounded in the

church: the glory of Jesus Christ. And he knows that the brightness of Christ's glory will be eclipsed if the pastors are perpetually distracted by administrative problems. Seth enjoys facilitating ministry and handling logistics so the elders can concentrate their energies on leading and shepherding the congregation through the ministry of the Word and prayer. And, what's more, he is motivated by love! ... Wouldn't Seth make an ideal deacon? Yes, because he's a growing, mature believer. Is he known among the church for his character, his humility, his eagerness to creatively and quietly serve? Check, check, check."

A quick note on wives. (Another  in the room discussion ☺). "Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things." (1 Timothy 3:11)

- **Women or Wives?**
- 1. **Women should not be in the role of elder.**
- 2. **Women should be doing diaconal work in some capacity, and the wives of deacons will often serve alongside them.**
- 3. **If titles are the goal, our hearts are in the wrong place anyway.**

What do deacons do?

Benjamin Merkle, a professor of New Testament and Greek at Southeastern Seminary, summarized their role as: "*servants who do whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church.*"

Maybe a helpful framework of areas:

- **Buildings:** grounds and maintenance
- **Bodies:** physical needs
- **Safety:** security and safety while at church and church functions
- **Solidarity:** unity promoters

(Adapted from Deacon Hank, qtd. in Smethurst, the last one was added by me).

- **There should not be one deacon doing all this.**
- **There should be specific deacons mobilizing others to serve in specific areas of diaconal work.**

Why does this matter?

"They assist their pastors and enrich the life of the church in manifold ways: organizing service, tackling tangible needs, shielding the ministry of the Word, guarding the harmony of the flock, caring for the distressed, and so much more. No doubt locations and circumstances vary greatly, but the common denominator – the heartbeat – of diaconal work remains the same: self-giving service for the good of Christ's church and the glory of his name." -MS

TAKEAWAYS

How Can The Church Support Its Elders?

1. Remember, these are the expectations:

- Godly character, tested faith, & equipped lives
 - Men gifted to meet specific needs & mobilize others to join in.

2. Remember, these are their roles (broadly):

- Building, bodies, safety, and solidarity

3. Provide opportunities for them to be trained.

- The Care Team. This is the model I am proposing we implement, though I am not 100% certain what form it will ultimately take. What I know is that we need a specific structure in place to raise these individuals up. The care team will be the compassion ministry arm of our church. You do not have to be an elder or a deacon to serve on this team. However, after these initial appointments, you cannot serve as an elder or deacon unless you have first served on the Care Team, and all of the elders and deacons will be part of the Care Team.

4. Pray for your deacons.

- Appoint them prayerfully. It's easier to be intentional about appointing the right men now than to be intentional about removing the wrong men later.
- Lift them up to the Lord regularly.

5. Pray for their wives & children.

- It's not easy to be a ministry family.

6. Encourage & work alongside them.

- They are *model* servants.
- Their work is often unseen. Thank them (...without grumbling ☺).

An extra passage that brought tears to my eyes every time I read it→

“Tim Ellis was the quintessential church member and model servant; respected by all, it seemed that he could do anything for anybody. Certainly it seemed like a no-brainer to install him as a deacon. There was just one sticking point: his wife was previously divorced. Even though most would say her divorce was biblical (her previous husband had committed adultery), nonetheless a cloud hovered over them both, as several older members were unwilling to consider him for the office given their take on “husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:12). Several leaders were frustrated by this vocal minority, but Tim wasn’t. In fact, his attitude was incredible. Essentially he said to us, It’s fine; I understand. Sometimes we need to meet people where they are. I’ll just serve like a deacon anyway; you don’t have to give me the title. And this was not merely a nice sentiment; Tim served for years without any official title. When he was finally ordained as a deacon, it was a big win for the congregation, not to mention a prime teaching opportunity. Two years later, Tim died in a car accident, leaving behind his wife and two young children. Tim was my neighbor and one of my closest friends; his death and subsequent absence remains one of the hardest things I’ve ever walked through. What kind of a legacy did this deacon leave? To this day, there is a phrase that floats around our church: the Tim Ellis Principle. In other words, serve the Lord in whatever you do, regardless of whether anyone recognizes you. Or to put it another way, live like Tim, the man who “deaconed” long before his church gave him the title.” -Matt Smethurst