

The Ministry of Deacons

by Mark Mitchell

The Biblical Basis for Deacons

The Scriptures teach there are two offices in the local church, the office of elder and the office of deacon.

In Acts 6:1-7 the apostles made a distinction between their ministry, which was to be focused on prayer and the word, and the ministry of another group who was to be in charge of the work of serving food for widows. This latter group was to consist of seven men, chosen by the congregation, and confirmed by the apostles. These men were to be “full of the Spirit and wisdom.” It is not known how long this group functioned in this capacity. Though this passage never mentions the office of deacon, it does lay a general foundation for distinguishing between the role of elders and deacons.

The fact that there was an identifiable group called deacons in the New Testament church is confirmed by two passages. In Philippians 1:1 Paul greets the church, specifically mentioning, “the overseers and deacons.” It would seem that by mentioning these two groups, Paul had specific groups of people in mind who the church could readily identify.

The other passage which confirms an identifiable group called deacons in the church is 1 Timothy 3:8-13. After setting forth character qualifications for elders, Paul does the same for deacons. Two observations are of interest in this passage.

First, Paul expects deacons to be people of as high character as elders. There is no distinction of spiritual maturity in the two lists of qualifications. The primary difference is that elders must be “able to teach,” while no such qualification exists for deacons. This is because elders are responsible for the shepherding of God’s church, part of which means feeding the flock through the teaching of God’s word. Though deacons must “hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience,” they don’t need to be able to teach.

The second observation from 1 Timothy 3 is that women are free to serve as deacons as well. While some take Paul’s instruction to women in verse 11 as referring to the wives of deacons, it would seem strange for Paul to place qualifications upon wives of deacons and not of elders. Paul’s reference to women as deacons is also consistent with Romans 16:1, where he commends Phoebe to the church at Rome, calling her “a servant (*diaconos*) of the church which is at Cenchrea.”

The Role of Deacons

The very words Paul uses to designate elders and deacons are instructive as to their respective roles. The New Testament uses two words to speak of elders: “overseer” and “elder.” “Overseer” is the translation for the Greek word *episcopos* (“bishop” in some translations), indicating a function of oversight and care. “Elder” is the translation for the Greek word *presbyteros*, which denotes the seniority and experience of those who occupy this office. The New Testament is clear that those who serve as elders are the primary leaders and shepherds of God’s flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-2).

The word for “deacon” is the Greek word *diaconos*, which can be translated as “servant,” “minister,” or “deacon.” The use of this word in the New Testament can describe a variety of forms of service, but it does not encompass the aspects of oversight and governance that the office of Elder does.

The role of deacons is to be one of administration over the serving ministries of the church. In 1 Peter 4:11 Peter refers to two categories of spiritual gifts: speaking gifts and serving gifts. Deacons are those men and women in the church, appointed by the elders, who lead, facilitate, organize, and equip others with serving gifts to minister effectively within the Body of Christ. Though the specific areas of service will differ from church to church, some examples are:

- Administration of the meals ministry of the local church
- Coordination of ushers for Sunday morning
- Organization of a capital gifts campaign
- Oversight of the maintenance of the church building
- Leadership of a hospital visitation ministry

Note, in each case, a deacon’s ministry is both people-centered and task-centered. Deacons are not to DO all the work themselves, but rather to lead others in the accomplishment of the work.

The Organization of Deacons

Deacons should operate as identifiable leaders within the church. Deacons will be selected and appointed by the elders for specific tasks, with input from the congregation, based the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. After selection,

deacons will be brought before the congregation for the laying on of hands by the elders. The number of deacons will depend on the particular needs in the body, and may fluctuate accordingly. The longevity of a deacon's service will depend on the specific ministry he or she is involved in. Some ministries will require ongoing leadership while others will be temporary, such as serving on a building committee. There will be no formalized board of deacons.

Deacons will be accountable to the elders, who are given responsibility for the oversight of the church. At any time, the elders may chose to remove a deacon from his or her ministry. The elders will appoint one elder to be involved with the deacons and serve as liaison between the deacons and elders. The deacons will also work with the Director of Church Administration.

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Fall 2002