

Who Are The Deacons And What Do They Do?

"Deacon" Defined

In our King James Version, the Greek word *diakonos* is usually translated as "minister" and sometimes as "servant." Three times it is just transliterated as "deacon." It can refer to service in general, to rulers in particular, or to caring for physical needs. It sometimes refers to waiting tables.

We should always be careful to maintain a distinction between the ministry of deacons and the ministry of elders. In one sense both elders and deacons are involved in "deaconing," but that service takes on two very different forms, both of which we see in Acts 6. There the apostles say that they should not "serve tables" because they are responsible for the "ministry of the word" (vv. 2-4). The words translated as "serve" and "ministry" are different forms of the same Greek root. Can you guess what it is? *Deacon!* So you have traditional deaconing (table-waiting, physical service), and you have the kind of "deaconing" of the Word to which God called the apostles (and later, elders).

The men described in Acts 6 are very much like the church's waiters, at least in an administrative sense. They are to care for the physical needs of the church. And a church needs both types of deaconing - of the Word (elders) and of tables (deacons) - so that one is not confused with the other and neither is forgotten. Churches should neglect neither the preaching of the Word nor the practical care for the members that helps to foster unity. Both of these aspects of a church's life and ministry are important. In order to ensure that both kinds of deaconing occur in our churches, we should distinguish the ministry of the deacons from the ministry of the elders.

Qualifications of Deacons

What we see in the Scriptures with both church offices is that character is of utmost importance. In fact, much more is said about character than job description. It is vital that only qualified men occupy the positions. What are the Biblical requirements?

Drawing from Acts 6, we can say that those who serve as deacons should be known to be of "honest report" and "full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom" (v. 3). They might be concerned with physical things, but theirs is a spiritual ministry. Such spiritual-minded wisdom enables them to oversee church resources in a manner that serves the unity of the flock. They should be chosen by the congregation and possess the congregation's confidence. And they should willingly and diligently take on the responsibility for the particular needs of their ministry.

In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Paul spells out further what deacons should be like. They should be grave (honourable, respectable), not doubletongued (truthful, not deceitful), not indulging in much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre (not pursuing dishonest gain), holding the mystery (deep truths) of the faith with a pure conscience, proved servants, the husband of one wife, ruling their children and own houses well. The deacon's wife

must be grave (honourable, respectable), not slanderers (liars, backbiters), sober (vigilant) and faithful in all things.

What Do Deacons Do?

The clearest picture of a deacon's work, comes from Acts 6:

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:1-7)

The office of deacon is not named, but the word *deacon* (*diakonos*) is used as a verb (*diakoneo*) to describe what these seven individuals will do (translated as "serve" in verse 2). And even if the seven men appointed here are not official deacons, the passage helps us to see three aspects of a deacon's ministry.

Care for the Physical Needs of the Church

First, deacons care for the physical needs of the church. Some of the widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. It is already noted that the word *deacon* means minister or servant, and it was particularly used of table-waiters at the time, or other types of service, usually physical or financial.

The deacons in Acts 6 probably didn't do all the deaconing themselves. Rather these few deacons probably organised and facilitated the work of other members in the church in making sure these widows were taken care of. After all, the Jerusalem church had thousands of members.

Caring for people, especially other members of our church, is important for three reasons: 1) It serves their physical well-being; 2) it serves their spiritual well-being; 3) and it serves as a witness to the world outside. Remember Jesus' words: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). The physical care presented in Acts 6 demonstrates that Christlike love.

Work for Unity in the Body

Behind this first purpose for the people in need, though, we see in Acts 6 a larger purpose for the body as a whole: deacons work for the unity of the church body.

Consider again what these seven individuals were tasked with doing. They were to make the food distribution among the widows more equitable, yes! But why was that important? Because this physical neglect was causing spiritual disunity in the body. Notice the passage begins with the report of complaining about one group in the church against another. And this arrested the attention of the apostles. They were not merely resolving a benevolence ministry problem in the church. They wanted to stop the church's unity from fracturing, and in a particularly dangerous way: along traditional ethnic lines of division. The deacons were appointed to head off disunity in the church.

Really, this is the goal for all the gifts that God's Spirit gives to His church - to build one another up and encourage each other (e.g., Rom. 1:11-12). Paul tells the Corinthians that their gifts should be exercised "to profit withal" (1 Cor. 12:4-7, 12). He again exhorts them, "Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church." (1 Cor. 14:12). A little later he adds, "let all things be done unto edifying" (14:26). Peter commands, "as every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Pet. 4:10). Likewise, the ministry of the deacons in Acts 6 is to build up the body by working for unity.

Here's one application for our church: We don't want men serving as deacons who are unhappy with our church. The deacons should never be the ones who complain the loudest or jar the church with their actions or attitudes. Quite the opposite! The deacons should be mufflers or shock absorbers.

Here's another application: We don't want narrow and small-minded men serving as deacon. We want people who care about the whole church, and not just their area of ministry and their prerogatives in that area. Yes, they address needs in their area, but they do so on behalf of the whole, and in a way that contributes to the health of the whole. They don't advocate for their cause like lobbyists who are unconcerned with what costs might be imposed on others. In fact, they help people working with them to see that work as part of uniting and edifying the whole.

Deacons help to bind the church together with cords of kindness and loving service. They are church builders.

Support the Ministry of the Word

Thirdly, the seven individuals appointed in Acts 6 worked to support the ministry of the Word. The apostles acknowledged that caring for physical needs was a responsibility of the whole church, and therefore, in some sense, their responsibility, too. But they turned this responsibility over to another group within the church so that they could attend to the ministry of the Word and prayer.

They were servants who served the church as a whole by helping with the responsibilities that the main teachers could not perform. And in so doing they supported and encouraged the teachers of the Word in their ministry. Deacons need to recognise the importance of the ministry of preaching and teaching, and be anxious to protect it.

In summary, the New Testament brings together the three aspects of deacon ministry that we've noted in Acts 6 - care for physical needs to the end of uniting the body under the ministers of the Word. They should be encouragers, peacemakers, and servants.

Who Are The Elders And What Do They Do?

As important as the deacons are, even more fundamental to our life together as Christians in the church is the ministry of another group - the elders. In the New Testament, the words for *elder*, *overseer*, *bishop*, and *pastor* are used interchangeably (see Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Tim. 3:1, Titus 1:5-6, 1 Pet. 5:1-2; see also, Eph. 4:11).

Plurality of Elders

The first thing to note about the pastors or elders of a local church is that they are plural. The New Testament never mentions a specific number of elders for a congregation, but it regularly refers to "elders" in the plural:

- "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed." (Acts 14:23; see also 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23);
- "And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem." (Acts 16:4);
- "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church." (Acts 20:17);
- "And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present." (Acts 21:18);
- "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the Word and doctrine." (1 Tim. 5:17);
- "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:" (Titus 1:5);
- "Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him" (James 5:14);
- "The elders which are among you I exhort" (1 Pet. 5:1).

The pattern is nearly uniform and the evidence overwhelming. In fact, the only singular reference to an elder occurs in 2 and 3 John, where the writer simply refers to himself as "the elder," and in 1 Timothy 5, where Paul offers instruction for an accusation against "an elder." Essentially, the New Testament uniformly presents churches as led by a body of elders, not simply one elder.

Qualifications for Elders

Who should be an elder and what should the qualifications be? Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 2 and 3 and Titus 1.

Paul teaches in 1 Timothy 2:12, “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” Whatever the exact kind of authority Paul had in mind here, he did not want women teaching men in the church, which means reserving the office of elder for men. The early church, in other words, mirrored the creation order of the authority of the husband over the wife in the practice of the church.

What about Galatians 3:28, which wonderfully observes that there is neither male nor female in Christ? The point here is to affirm our equal worth and standing before God’s throne as those who have been saved by grace alone. This is not meant to eliminate all distinctions between the genders any more than it eliminates men’s and women’s distinct roles in childbirth.

Paul then offers a fuller list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 (see also Titus 1:5-9): *This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (1 Tim. 3:1-7)*

Reflecting on this list, one New Testament scholar has observed that what’s remarkable is how unremarkable the characteristics are. Paul does not ask for men who can preach to thousands, evangelise millions, and rescue orphans from burning buildings. Rather, he lists characteristics that are enjoined on all Christians - except for “apt to teach” and “not a novice.” Why would this be the case? Because an elder should model a life that is exemplary for other Christians. You wouldn’t want an elder’s pattern of life to be something that is unreachable, but something that can be followed.

Notice also, the characteristics are virtues that would commend an elder to outsiders, or that would have caused a man to be recognized as virtuous even by the surrounding culture of the time. There are other virtues, after all, that we would want to see in an elder, like regular Bible reading and prayer. But Paul mentioned neither of these. This tells us that we should not regard this list as exhaustive, but it also tells us that Paul is emphasizing things that even pagans would recognise as good.

How do we find such leaders in our church? We pray for God’s wisdom. We study His Word, particularly these passages in 1 Timothy and Titus. And we look to affirm such gifts of Christ as He gives them.

We should also not assume that because a man is a proven leader in the world, he is fit to lead a church. Too many churches fall into the trap of appointing men who have been successful in the business or professional community. How sad, then, to hear what Os Guinness heard from one Japanese businessman: "Whenever I meet a Buddhist leader, I meet a holy man. Whenever I meet a Christian leader, I meet a manager."

Churches should search for men of character, reputation, ability to handle the Word, and fruitfulness. These qualities should mark the leaders of our church. They live not for themselves, but others. Thus, they are not lovers of money, but lovers of strangers - that's what "hospitable" literally means.

What Do Elders Do?

We have seen who the elders are. What do they do?

Elders Pray

The elders of the church should pray for the members of the church (see James 5:14; Acts 6:4). God gives elders responsibility for a flock, and so they should pray for their flocks individually, collectively, and in the congregation.

They set a pattern of noticing God's faithfulness through prayers of thanksgiving, especially since elders are in a great position to see God's work. Elders should watch for the answers to prayer and point them out to the congregation.

They also set a pattern through corporate prayers of confession. They help the church recognize God's holiness by confessing sin. In private and in public they should examine themselves to see if they are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). Their explorations of their own hearts should cause the congregation to have a greater appreciation of God's mercy and grace, and also encourage others as they lead the congregation in confessing sins to God.

Intercessory prayer is perhaps the most basic ministry of the elder. In order to speak to men for God, elders must speak to God for men. They must be aware of the futility of all of their actions apart from the life-giving work of God's Spirit. Elders do and must pray.

Elders Preach and Teach

The other basic activity of elders is preaching and teaching the Word of God to the congregation. A qualification of elders is that they must be apt to teach because so much of what they do is teaching (see 1 Tim. 3:2). Elders teach by leading the meetings of the church. They teach by the way they give announcements or read Scripture. They teach by how they pray aloud in public. Certainly they teach when they lead a Sunday school class, whether for children or adults.

Elders teach the Word of God by preaching. Elders set aside to do this work full-time are wonderful gifts to the local church. But an elder does not need to be set aside full-time or

be the main preaching pastor in order for his basic ministry to be teaching. Elders teach in their one-on-one conversations and in what they write. They teach in small group Bible studies and in evangelistic endeavours.

This is why elders must be men who devote themselves to knowing the Word of God. Elders should also specially give themselves to figuring out and understanding important topics in the Bible and in life so that the members of the congregation will be protected, prepared, and equipped.

As elders teach, they reflect the manner in which the Good News came to their ears and hearts from the outside and they were saved. Elders, too, speak God's truth to the ears of the congregation, and then they pray that God's Spirit would carry it the rest of the way into the hearts of the men and women in their charge. Elders teach and preach God's Word.

Elders Shepherd

The most comprehensive word for what elders do is "shepherd" (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). In the New Testament's Greek, as in English, there is both a noun form and a verb form of the word *shepherd*. A shepherd (noun) is someone who shepherds (verb). And in Scripture this refers to activities like knowing, feeding, leading, and protecting. In some ways, every Christian participates in shepherding (see Rom. 15:14). Yet some men are specially recognized and set apart for the work of shepherding a congregation. These are the elders in the congregation.

To shepherd is to care for those who don't belong to you, but for whom you are charged (see Luke 12:35-48). Think about what this means when someone joins a church. If you're an elder, you know that this person has been purchased by God, but he or she is your special responsibility. Hebrews 13:17 says that you will give an account to God for such individuals.

Elders therefore lead the way in rejoicing with these members, and mourning with them. Elders set a pattern for the members of caring when someone loses a job, or when someone is frustrated in his or her relationships. Elders are discontent when a member misunderstands God or His Word, and they give themselves to tending to such individuals.

Shepherding, like parenting, requires patience. This kind of work is not done in a single sermon or in a day. Sometimes, of course, God does cause breakthroughs in a single sermon or crucial conversation. But usually the work of eldering is as repetitive and daily as walking the flock to a fresh field for grazing. It is like making the daily meals or taking the kids to school.

It seems that some of the most important work in shaping a congregation's character is the small, slow, repetitive acts of love and service that elders do. Teaching that Sunday school lesson again. Leading in prayer again. Answering that question for the tenth time. Or the one hundredth!

Shepherding also requires initiative. An elder cannot be passive, merely waiting for people to come with questions to answer or problems to solve. Elders need to ask, “How was the sermon for you?” “Do you want to have lunch?” “Do you know how so-and-so is doing?” “Do you understand what the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit’s work?” “Have you read this?” “Do you want to come hang out while I work on this Bible study?” “Do you want to go over my notes with me here to see if it makes sense, and to help me make it better?” “How is your father, your wife, your non-Christian colleague?” These and a thousand other initiatives can be used by God to shape, encourage, comfort, correct, or lead a sheep committed to one’s elder-care.

Elders Watch over Themselves and Their Families

One duty even the best elders may sometimes neglect is the care of their own souls. But Paul instructs the Ephesian elders to “take heed therefore unto yourselves” (Acts 20:28).

This means that the time you spend daily in God’s Word and in prayer is certainly for yourself, but it is also part of the role God has given you in the life of your local church. It’s like the flight attendant on an aeroplane who instructs you to put the oxygen mask over your own face first in the case of an emergency; then assist anyone travelling with you. So it is with you. Make sure you’re breathing! Then help others to breathe.

An elder must also not neglect his family. He has a unique responsibility for them. The congregation can get another pastor, other elders. Children cannot get another father or a wife another husband. An elder must practice loving leadership in the home.

Elders Exercise Oversight

As they care for themselves, elders can then care for others by exercising oversight. Paul’s words to the Ephesian elders are instructive: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood.” (Acts 20:28).

Elders exercise oversight in all sorts of ways. They do it by concerning themselves with the Gospel work that the congregation sponsors. They meet with missionaries, and maybe they even travel to where the missionaries live and work.

Elders exercise oversight by meeting with the members of the congregation in their homes, and maybe even at their places of work. They look after their members’ life and doctrine. After all, they have an authority given by God to exercise for the members’ good.

Elders exercise oversight when they lead the congregation to exclude from membership someone who has decided that he loves his sin more than he loves Christ.

They counsel each other on difficult pastoral situations in members’ lives.

They pray together.

They continually search for whom God is raising up as elders or deacons.

They invite hurting or struggling sheep to meet with them to pray for them in their trial or sickness, to hear about their struggles with sin, or to advise them in their desire to take the Gospel overseas.

In all these ways and more, elders seek to fulfill Peter's exhortation, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind" (1 Pet. 5:2).

Elders Set a Good Example

One of the best ways a man can be a good elder is to be a good example to the flock. Think of Paul's description to Titus of an elder, and consider how they are to be models for others:

For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. (Titus 1:7-9)

Why are elders or pastors to be all of those things? Because part of oversight is showing the way. They lead the way as disciples. By instructing, they show how to instruct. By being faithful, they show what it looks like to be faithful. They obey Peter's instruction to be ensamples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:3).

Elders Raise up Elders

Finally, elders continually work to make themselves redundant by raising up other elders. In a sense, this is just a part of the "making disciples" mandate. They teach and train so that others will grow toward maturity and will teach and train in turn.

Consider how Paul instructs Timothy: "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." (2 Tim. 2:2). Paul (generation 1) taught Timothy (generation 2). He wants Timothy to commit those lessons to faithful men (generation 3). And he wants those faithful men to teach others also (generation 4). A congregation where more and more men are being cultivated and grown up as elders is a healthy and powerful congregation.

In summary, elders must know their sheep and serve them. Godly elders lead their sheep and feed them. They give themselves to ruling well and guarding them carefully. They seek out the lowly and despised. They train those gifted to teach others. In all of this, they follow the example of Christ, the Good Shepherd Who loses none of His sheep.

A Display of God's Glory

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is wonderful to meditate on if you want to understand what life together as a church entails. You will find that churches should be marked especially by holiness, unity, and love.

Why should churches be like this? Because the character of the church should reflect the character of God. We should be holy, united, and loving because God is holy, One, and loving.

Holy, One, and Loving

First, we should be holy in the sense of being strange to the world, but special to God, set apart to Him, pure. Holiness should be an attribute that marks the church - a trademark, common among us, typical. When someone considers our particular church, they should think, *That is a holy community* - not meaning a bunch of self-righteous, prudish people, but a community of people whose hearts are singularly set on Christ and His glory, which results in a better, more humane, more God-honouring way of living. That's one reason why the church leader's work of shepherding and teaching is important. We are to be holy because God is holy.

Second, we should be united because God is One. After hearing of the Corinthian church's divisions and factions, Paul asks, "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:13). What a fascinating question! The powerful theological assumption behind it is that the church is the body of Christ: "Ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (1 Cor. 12:27). Where do you think Paul got that idea? He probably got it in the very hour he was converted. Remember how Jesus stopped Paul on the road to Damascus? Jesus didn't say, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Christians?" or "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting the church?" No. He said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4). This is how closely Jesus relates to His church. He views it as His body. And so we are to be one. Our disunity lies about Jesus and what He is like.

Like holiness, unity should be a hallmark of the church. Our unity should transcend the old divisions of Jew and Gentile (1 Cor. 7:19), along with every other worldly division. How tragic, then, when our churches find their identity in other things. We become *the church of this pastor, or of this style of music, or of home schoolers, or of Democrats, or of the blue carpet*. This is why Paul was so upset by the report of divisions in the church. Even at the feast of their unity - the Lord's Supper - they were divided. Church leaders, however, should lead us toward such unity. The church is to be united.

Finally, we should be loving because God is loving. Brides like to have 1 Corinthians 13 read in their weddings, but fundamentally the Bible's great love chapter is about God and about the church. God's love is patient, kind, long-suffering, does not rejoice in evil, but delights in truth. So should ours be. Spiritual maturity, says Paul, is demonstrated in love. And it is the greatest gift. For that reason Paul wrote back in chapter 8, "we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth." (8:1). Chapters 8 through 14 then provide a long excursion on letting love govern what we should do. And

all our gifts, ministries and work together must be done for the edifying of the church (14:26). Paul then summarizes in chapter 16, "let all your things be done with charity." (v. 14). Consider, after all, the love that Christ has shown by pouring out His blood and by offering up His body for us (11:23-26). The church is to be loving because God is loving - most wonderfully demonstrated in the Gospel.

The church should be a display of God's holiness, unity, and love in the midst of this messed up, sinful, selfish world. Are we that? Are we helping our church display the character of God?

One of God's Chief Pieces of Evidence

Do you see what God is doing in the church? God is choosing the "...base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence." (1 Cor. 1:28-29). God chooses weak and sinful people like you and me because He does not in any way want to obscure Himself!

As one preacher has said, "We are one of God's chief pieces of evidence. Paul's great concern for the church is that the church manifest and display the glory of God, thus vindicating God's character against all the slander of demonic realms, the slander that God is not worth living for. God has entrusted to His church the glory of His own name. The circumstances of your life are the God-given occasions for you to display and manifest the attributes of God."

If we're not careful, our individualism can be used to harbour a sub-Christian holiness that tolerates sin. Our selfishness can lead us to a sub-Christian unity that glosses over disunity about the Gospel, and unites around other, lesser things. Even our flesh can know a sub-Christian love that is mere sentiment, having a family feeling because we've all been together so long. But none of these things should characterise our church primarily because all of these things lie about God. They misrepresent His character. True holiness will include discipline. True unity will be only around Christ - and the diversity of the church will give evidence to this. And true love will go deeper than sentiment, beyond natural bounds. It will go out to the stranger for Christ's sake. This is how God's glory is displayed in the church. This is the only way a church will truly prosper.

So how do we display God's glory? By organising our church after the pattern He has shown us in His Word. By living for Him with lives of holiness, unity, and love. This is to what the church should be devoted. Are you?

Adapted from the work of Mark Dever entitled, 'Understanding Church Leadership'.