

Temecula Hills Christian Fellowship

Deacons: Their Role and Qualifications

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the role of deacon (and deaconess) and to detail the qualifications for this office as revealed to us in Scripture.

Office of Deacon

Deacons form the second and complimentary segment of the leadership team of the local church. Elders are given the task under Christ of shepherding the church: providing direction and oversight while giving themselves to prayer and the study of the Word. Deacons care for the practical needs of the fellowship, freeing up the elders to do this work.

Paul in writing to the church at Philippi recognized this office, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops (elders) and deacons” (Phi 1:1). He wrote to Timothy encouraging him how he ought to conduct himself in the household of God and gave him the qualifications of elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3:1-13. We believe it is safe to say that recognizing morally and spiritually qualified elders and deacons is essential to the well-being of His church. Whereas elders are servant-leaders in the church, deacons are the leading-servants. They take the lead in mobilizing God’s people towards service, especially of practical needs.

Role of Deacons

Deacon comes from the Greek noun, *diakonos*, meaning “servant.” What a deacon does comes from the verbal form, *diakoneo*, meaning “to serve” but connotes a broader sense of meeting the very practical needs of others. We see this in several verses in the New Testament:

He touched her hand, and the fever left her [Peter’s mother-in-law], and she rose and **began to serve** Him (Mat 8:15).

And Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who **provided for** them out of their means (Luk 8:3).

Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not **take care** of you?’ (Mat 25:44).

From this verse we can conclude that any meeting of practical needs associated with hunger, thirst, alienation, lack of clothing, sickness, and even imprisonment would characterize one who serves as a deacon.

As the church expanded and the widows needing food grew in number, it became incumbent upon the apostles to put men in charge of organizing and serving food to those in need. Acts 6: 1-7 says,

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men **of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom** whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles, and after praying, they laid their hands on them. The word of God kept on spreading and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

The wise and loving care exerted by The Seven averted a major church conflict including possible division and preserved its testimony before a watching world. The apostles were free to labor in the Word and God honored it.

Servant leadership is commendable and required for elders (Phi 2:5-11, 1 Pet 5:2-4). However, when serving practical needs distracts them from their primary role of praying, studying the Word, and proclaiming its truth, it is a poor stewardship of time. Godly men and women are encouraged to provide the practical demonstration of Christ's love while using their spiritual gifts of serving and mercy (Rom 12:7,8) or helps and administration (1 Cor 12:5,28). Those who take leadership in these areas are deacons or deaconesses. We see deacons as those who oversee the practical needs of the church as well as nurturing those who work alongside them.

While elders are charged with teaching the flock (1 Pet 5:2), deacons can be gifted teachers or evangelists as well. Stephen and Phillip are good examples. They both understood God's Word, were able to teach it and the Holy Spirit prospered it (Acts 6-8). If a deaconess is gifted as a teacher, she would want to use this gift within the biblical constraints of 1 Timothy 2:12 and Titus 2:3-5.

Qualifications of Deacons

Paul wrote to Timothy, one of the shepherds of the church at Ephesus, the following in 1 Timothy 3:8-13:

Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, good managers of their children and their own households. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Since wives of elders are not included in the list of qualifications for an elder, it seems reasonable to assume that women (same word as wives in Greek) are eligible to serve as deacons [deaconesses] just like men. Note the word "likewise" in reference to woman. Phoebe (Rom 16:1) is a good example of a woman who served the church at Cenchrea as a deaconess. We assume that she along with the male contingent of deacons in Cenchrea meet the following qualifications:

They are to be tested to ensure they are above reproach, that is unaccused, in the following character traits before they serve in the office of deacon. The vetting process scrutinizes their behavior within the church, their family, their neighborhood, their business, their friendships, and other relationships.

1. Dignified: well-respected character. Their moral and spiritual character should be esteemed by others, whether inside or outside the church.
2. Not double-tongued: without deceit, not saying one thing to one person and a different thing to another. Their "yes" means yes and their "no" means no (Mat 5:37).
3. Not addicted to much wine: temperate in his/her use of wine. This would preclude anyone who abuses any substance, being under its influence instead of the Holy Spirit's.
4. Not fond of sordid gain; not a greedy person. This is critical as deacons often handle money.
5. Holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience: Their walk is consistent with Scripture, they are authentic Christians. There are no long periods of unconfessed sin that results in shame or a defiled conscience.
6. Not malicious gossips: not slanderous or false accusers, they are concerned about the reputation of others.
7. Temperate: free from every form of excess, rashness or passion. They are to be clear-headed and self-controlled.
8. Faithful in all things: reliable, trustworthy in the way they live their lives and carry out ministry.
9. Husband of one wife: The quality of marital fidelity and faithfulness, including not being divorced and remarried. Deaconesses also would not be divorced and remarried. As with elders there may be unforeseen and unique circumstances that would allow a divorced believer to function as a deacon/deaconess (1 Cor 7: 10-16). Each

case would need to be carefully considered through the lens of whether this person is of a good reputation (beyond reproach) and Spirit-filled.¹

10. Good managers of their children and their own households; as with elders they must have their children under control and manage their personal affairs in an exemplary fashion.

In addition to these found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 it would be wise to consider the qualifications the apostles gave to the congregation in Acts 6 as they chose The Seven. These were highlighted in the passage quote earlier in this paper.

11. Good reputation: attested. The lives of The Seven would have given witness to the fact they were full of the Spirit and wisdom. It would be safe to say that a life lived in harmony with the qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 would give a good witness.
12. Full of the Spirit: believers who are controlled by the Holy Spirit as evidenced by their words and deeds (Eph 5:18; Gal 5:22-23)
13. Full of wisdom: deacons not only are capable servants, but they need to be wise in the way they carry out their ministry: peaceably, gently, mercifully, faithfully and unhypocritically. They need to be fair and generous while at the same time practical and responsible.²

Elders and Deacons: A Team Approach

While explicit directives are not detailed in Scripture for the selection of deacons or the cooperative working of elders and deacons, we can learn much from Acts 6:1-7.

First, the 12 apostles asked the congregation to choose seven men (Act 6:3). A plurality given to prayer and the Word [those later referred to as elders] was asking that a plurality of servants [later referred to as deacons] be selected to serve the needy. As with elders, deacons need the mutual encouragement and accountability found in numbers. It is also wise to divide the labor so no one person is tasked with providing for the needy within the church and subsequently grows weary in well-doing.

Second, the congregation was involved in the selection of The Seven (Act 6:5). It seems clear that the church should affirm those who have been qualified as to their moral and spiritual suitability.

Third, the Seven were approved by the Twelve [elders] (Act 6:6). Because deacons will be dealing with folks who are hurting and vulnerable, it is imperative that they meet the qualifications.

Fourth, the Seven were prayed for by the elders (Act 6:6). Realizing the reputation of Jesus Christ and the unity of the body was at stake the apostles prayed over them and for them.

Fifth, the Seven were affirmed and supported in their work by the elders (Act 6:6). They laid their hands on them conferring upon them the responsibility and the authority to feed the widows. Deacons need to be publicly commended to the work they are called to do.

“The two offices of [elder] and [deacon] are meant to complement one another. One is the office of pastoral oversight; the other is the office of practical service to the needy.”³ When these two offices are filled with qualified men [elders] and either men or women [deacons], the church of God is following the instruction that God has laid out for His church. Enabled by the Holy Spirit, truth can be taught with life-transforming power and Christ’s love can be displayed to a world desperately in need of both.

¹ For more on this, see the similar qualification in the paper, “Temecula Hills Christian Fellowship Elders: Their Role and Qualifications.”

² Alexander Strauch, The Minister of Mercy: The New Testament Deacon, p. 96.

³ Ibid., p. 75.