

DEACONS: SERVANTS OR LEADERS?

To The Pastors, Deacons, and Brethren of ARBCA Churches:

The subject submitted to the Theological Committee and approved at last year's General Assembly for the 2009 Circular Letter is "Deacons: Servants Or Leaders?" A proper understanding of the local church manifests itself in a proper functioning of its government, particularly as seen in its officers. While only God can receive praise for blessings on a church, He still uses means to bestow those blessings. Thus, a healthy church exhibits stability and unity in large part because its officers fulfill their roles with stability and unity. The opposite is equally true. An unhealthy church can often trace its problems to the leadership of that church.

If you will, allow me to give two personal observations that illustrate the above. In Texas, there are myriad of small, rural Baptist churches. Because there is a very large seminary nearby, the easy choice for such churches is to employ seminary students as pastors. However, the combination of doctrinally inexperienced pastors plus their rapid turnover rate results in instability for the churches. Their solution has been to place governance of the church in the hands of the deacons. At least the deacons will still be there two years later. The results of this "solution" are churches that are thoroughly resistant to change of any kind from the pulpit, and members that are doctrinally naïve and uninstructed. In the end, having a church government where deacons function as elders, trustees function as deacons, and pastors function as little more than employees creates unhealthy churches.

In contrast, I have personally had the inestimable blessing of being a part of a church for over 17 years in which there has been very little rancor or debate. While all praise is God's alone, in large part the earthly means he has used to accomplish this is the fantastic unity among the church's officers. Specifically, God has bestowed upon us deacons who are beyond price, and whose leadership and support has greatly fostered an environment of peace.

A proper understanding, then, of the office of deacon and of its relationship to the office of pastor is essential for a church's steadfastness and growth. In one respect, the question posed for this year's topic is misleading. I hope to show that in the Biblical understanding of the office, a deacon is *both* a servant and a leader. He is one who has authority (though that authority is secondary to that of the eldership) and, like all who are granted authority in Christ's kingdom, uses that authority to serve – just as Christ Himself.

There are some assumptions that form the background to this letter. First, while recognizing the supreme authority of the Scriptures alone, it is assumed that, since all ARBCA churches fully subscribe to the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith [hereafter referred to as 2LBCF], the Confession's authority is binding, and will be cited *as an authority* in proving the points made below. Second, it is assumed the terms pastor, bishop, and elder are but different aspects of the same office. Third, as a result of the second, it is assumed that there are therefore only two offices in the local church – elders and deacons (see Philippians 1:1; 2LBCF, Chapter 26, para. 8). Each of these assumptions can easily become, or already has been, a point of study in itself, and it is therefore beyond the scope of this letter to attempt to prove these points here.

The Position of Deacon is a Church Office

The first element, then, in understanding the diaconate is to see that the position of deacon is a church office. In Philippians 1:1, Paul addresses his letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons....” Paul’s specific mention of both the bishops and deacons marks them off as, in some way, distinguished from the members of the church. Since it is reasonable to conclude that Paul separately mentions bishops since they are office holders in the church, we must understand that he mentions deacons for the same reason. Thus, Paul sends his greetings to the members and officers – bishops and deacons – of the local church. Similarly, when Paul writes to Timothy about the criteria of church officers in I Timothy 3, he mentions only two – bishops and deacons. The fact that he is listing criteria for offices clearly shows that both bishops and deacons are authoritative positions in the church. The Confession, chapter 26 and paragraph 8, also clearly states that a local church is composed of officers and members, and the only officers listed are bishops and deacons.

The position of deacon, then, is an office in the church of Christ. As an officer, he is clearly a leader in the church, vested with authority by Christ’s ordination and the church’s recognition. Our Confession states that a deacon is “appointed by Christ... for the execution of power and duty which He entrusts them with or calls them to...” (Chapter 26, paragraph 8). The deacon, like the pastor, is “fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit.” When the church has recognized such men, both are set aside in similar fashion – by prayer and the laying on of hands (Chapter 26, paragraph 9).

We must see deacons as those upon whom Christ bestows the gift of ministry and whom the church recognizes to bear authority. A deacon is not merely a church member who looks after the matters of the church’s buildings and money, like a volunteer janitor or treasurer. Rather, he is one who bears authority to decide how to accomplish these things (and more). When the seven were first chosen in Acts 6, the apostle’s directions were that men should be chosen whom they could appoint *over* the matter of widows’ benevolence. The deacons were not chosen to do the work necessarily, but to be “over” it – to supervise and to have decision-making authority as to how it should be handled. The Biblical position, then, is for the church (members and pastors) to recognize that deacons have authority over certain areas of the church, and to trust them and free them to exercise that authority.

Recognizing, then, that deacons are officers of the church and have authority raises a consequent issue: What is the relationship between the authority of deacons and that of the elders? Are they two separate but equal realms, neither have supervision over the other? Or do the deacons, as managers of the finances, have a *de facto* control over the entire church and its directions – including the pastors? I will show that the eldership of a church has an authority over the entire church – the diaconate as well.

The Relationship Between the Authority of the Eldership and the Diaconate

First, the terms used for each office tells us something about their relative positions of authority in the church. The Greek word for deacon is *diakonos*. It is used in both a technical sense (of the church office) and in a general sense (of servants in particular). The Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich Lexicon (BDAG) defines the word as referring to one who “serves as an intermediary in a transaction; an agent who gets something done at the behest of a superior.”

The related verb form means “to perform obligations; to render assistance; to serve.” As a result, the noun (when not referring to the office of a deacon) is consistently translated by our modern English versions as either “minister” or “servant.” The term clearly refers to one whose task is that of service to another. Thus, the task of the deacons in Acts 6 is to minister to benevolent needs, so as to free up the apostles for the greater task of ministering the Word. While deacons have authority, it is an authority that sets them aside as servants of the church.

In contrast, the terms for the eldership consistently show a position of authority over the entire church. The word for pastor (*poimenos*) refers to a shepherd, one who *leads* the sheep. The word for elder (*presbuteros*) refers not just to one who is spiritually mature, but carries with it the background of the Jewish elders who ruled the cities and tribes of Israel in the Old Testament. Finally, pastors are also called “bishops” (*episkopos*), or “overseers.” This last word especially indicates the authority that pastors have over the church as a whole. These terms, contrasted with that for “deacon” clearly mark off a difference in how the offices are viewed in the New Testament. The office of a deacon is that of a servant of the church; the pastor is one who leads, rules, and oversees the church.

This relationship can also be seen in the tasks assigned to each in the church. The deacons of Acts 6 are assigned the task of benevolence needs in the church. This task is given to them so that the pastors may be freed from the lesser duty of serving tables and may focus on the greater duty of ministering the Word. The deacons’ task is crucial, and yet subsidiary to the greater task of the pastors. The Scriptures never assign a position of ruling or overseeing the church to the diaconate.

The task of the pastors of the church, however, is described in terms of both rule and oversight. In I Timothy 5:17, the elders who are marked for distinction are those who *rule* well. The assumption is that all elders rule, but those who rule well are worthy of double honor. In I Timothy 3:5, this rule is compared to the rule of a father over his children – not a delegated or secondary rule, but the primary rule of one who has final earthly authority over his house. Again, in Hebrews 13:7, 17 church members are admonished to remember and *to obey* those who *rule* over them. These rulers are defined in verse 7 as those “who have spoken the word of God to you”; i.e. those whose task it is to authoritatively preach the Word of God – the elders. Clearly, the Bible assigns the task of ruling the church to the elders, who have final authority over the church. Subject to Christ and His Word, the elders rule the church, not the deacons.

Similarly, the Bible ascribes the role of *overseeing* the church to elders, not deacons. In I Peter 5:1, Peter challenges the elders to “shepherd the flock of God... exercising oversight....” (NASB). Here, the task of leading the church is synonymous with taking the oversight of it. Again, In Acts 20:28, Paul tells the elders at Ephesus that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers over the flock of God, to shepherd them. In Scripture, the pastor carries out his role by exercising supervision, or oversight, over the church.

Finally, Scripture consistently connects authority and the position of teaching. In Matthew’s gospel (7:29), Christ teaches as One who has authority. In chapter 21, after Jesus clears the Temple, He begins to teach there. In response, the priests demand to know by what authority He does this. Further, in the Great Commission, Christ connects His position as the One who bears all authority with the commission of the church to make disciples and to teach them all He has commanded. Teaching and bearing authority are found together in the gospels.

Similarly, in the epistles, the position of authority in the church is consistently ascribed to those who teach the Word of God in the church. In I Timothy 5:17, the elders who rule well are specified as those who “labor in word and doctrine.” Their ruling is connected to their teaching.

In Acts 20:25-32, Paul's emphasis to the Ephesian elders is on the faithful preaching of the whole counsel of God – and it is to this purpose that they are appointed overseers, that they might feed, or shepherd, the church of God. Paul's warning is that this position will be subverted to their desire for power, and so they will teach false doctrine to gain a following. In both Paul's admonition and his warning, authority is linked to the office of teacher. In I Timothy 2:12, the woman is forbidden to "teach or to have authority over the man." We are not to understand this verse as Paul forbidding two separate things (women either teaching or having authority), but rather one – women bearing authority over men through teaching them. Again, in Hebrews 13:17, the one whom the church obeys is the one who has spoken the Word of God to them. Finally, Paul instructs Titus to choose overseers who hold fast to the Word, so that they can exhort the church and convict those whose doctrine is contradictory. Those who teach are those who bear authority over those who are taught.

This point is made relevant to our discussion when we notice that Paul requires a bishop to be able to teach (I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9) – but makes no such requirement of a deacon. Clearly, Paul understands the office of a pastor as bearing oversight and authority through the ministry of teaching, but does not ascribe this function (and hence, neither the final authority) to the diaconate.

Our Confession also reflects the final authority in the church of those who teach. In Chapter 26, paragraph 10, the Confession instructs churches to give "all due respect" to pastors who "attend the service of Christ, in His churches, in the ministry of the Word and prayer." The phrase "all due respect" means more than just esteem or reverence, as in modern connotations. It shows that the local church is to give *all* deference, or final authority, to those who minister the Word of God.

Summary and Exhortations

In summary, the Scriptures and the Confession consistently ascribe oversight, leadership, and supervision of the local church to the eldership, not to the diaconate. While a deacon is an officer of the local church with authority granted to him by Christ, his authority is secondary and subsidiary to that of the eldership. The deacon's authority is granted to him so that he may relieve the pastors of undue or inappropriate burdens that would otherwise prevent them from devoting themselves to the greater good – the study and proclamation of God's Word. The task of the elder, however, is to direct the church – primarily through the function of teaching – and to this end, the eldership is given the final earthly authority over all aspects of the local church.

What, then, is the best way to place these teachings into practice? Allow me, if you will, to give some personal advice on this issue.

First, a church must be very slow and careful when appointing officers. While admittedly having only my own observations, I have noticed that when a church hastily appoints men to church offices, it usually results in discord and division among the officers and eventually in the church. Conversely, those carefully chosen usually become a blessing to the church for years – and often for decades – afterward. A church that has recently adopted reformed doctrine often may be too anxious to appoint a plurality of elders or appoint new deacons, and not be willing to wait for a season to test the men carefully before placing them into office. Pastors whom God has blessed to instruct their churches in the right understanding of church government may be too quick to see men appointed, not realizing that maturity of judgment does not come instantly

from mere comprehension. Understanding the role of a deacon or elder, and having the maturity to recognize and discern such men among the church, is not the same thing. Churches should exercise the utmost patience and care in this matter.

Second, pastors and deacons must adopt the old adage that “good fences make good neighbors.” Clearly defining the role of each office within each local church, delineating what responsibility belongs to what office and to which officer, can be of huge assistance in times of potential disagreement. While the authority belongs to the office as a whole and not to any officer in particular, our church has found it very helpful to publish a list of responsibilities within the church, and appointing one elder or deacon (as the case requires) as an immediate reference point for that ministry. This is done based on discerning the strengths of each officer, and assigning ministries that match that man’s special abilities. These clear lines of authority help organize the whole church, making sure that smaller matters are handled quickly and efficiently and that larger matters are brought to the entire respective board of officers. While recognizing that elders have final authority over any matter, we make it our goal to give as much freedom and trust to the deacons – and to each other – as possible. If a church has carefully chosen and selected its officers, this freedom will be a delight to the church and its officers. Whether a church adopts this particular method or not, the principle is the same: pastors should recognize the authority of deacons, and encourage the use of that authority by stating plainly the specific duties over which the deacons have authority. Elders should overrule deacons in these areas only when their decisions are clearly unbiblical, or when they contradict the spiritual direction and tone that the elders have set for the church.

Third, there are clear instructions in the Word of God for how Christians are to handle their differences with each other, and it is especially incumbent on pastors and deacons to obey these directions when differences arise between them. The requirements of going to our brother one-on-one and of endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is as binding on church officers as upon church members. Too many church battles resolve down to one issue: officers of the church failing to follow basic teaching about forgiveness and reconciliation. Brothers, we have the great privilege of exercising authority over the church through example. We can cultivate godly, stable churches if we will but implement foundational Christian conduct amongst ourselves. When that happens, it is a marvelous thing. “How good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” A church whose officers consistently follow the Bible in these matters will truly become “House Beautiful.”

Fourth, our churches are part of a wonderful association, which seriously seeks to practice the instructions of our Confession. Listen to Chapter 26, paragraph 15:

In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned....

It should be the goal of all church officers to seek the help that is available to them from our Association and its pastors. Help is available whenever difficulty threatens the peace of the local church and the officers do not readily resolve the problem. Pastors should teach their deacons

and church members how this process works in ARBCA, and remind them of it periodically. We regularly remind our deacons and members that, if they believe the elders have overstepped their bounds of authority or have acted unbiblically, their first step is to talk to us privately. If that does not bring resolution, they know that they have recourse to the Association. I would much rather have a problem addressed quickly through the quiet mediation of other godly pastors than later on have a rancorous and divisive church squabble.

This leads to my final bit of advice. Before any difference between the eldership and the diaconate turns into something more serious, each side must ask one simple question: Is the fight really worth it? Our job is to further the church of Jesus Christ. It is His church, not ours; He holds the stars in His hand and walks among the candlesticks. We have the awesome privilege of being the means by which He blesses and edifies His church. Christ has made us overseers of *His* church, which *He* purchased with His own blood. Remembering that we are only stewards may preserve us from a quarrel. In the end, it may be necessary for those who disagree with the direction of a church to practice the counsel of the Confession, chapter 26, paragraph 13:

No church members, upon any offence taken by them, having performed their duty required of them towards the person they are offended at, ought to disturb any church-order, or absent themselves from the assemblies of the church, or administration of any ordinances, upon the account of such offence at any of their fellow members, but to wait upon Christ, in the further proceedings of the church.

Christ will take care of His church. It is our duty to trust Him to do so. When we begin to think that the well-being of the church depends upon my viewpoint prevailing, it may be that we are defending ourselves while convinced that we are defending Christ's church.

The church is a marvelous thing. It is Christ's body (Ephesians 1:23); Christ's bride (II Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 21:9); and made up of Christ's brothers and sisters (Matthew 12:50; Hebrews 2:11). When the church and its people live in love and orderliness, it is an organization like no other, which captures the respect and provokes the jealousy of those outside. God saves His people through the preaching of the church, bringing them into the church. He sanctifies them through the means of grace administered by the church. It is to the church that He gives His authority by means of His presence. The church is promised that the gates of hell will never prevail against it. And when, in the last chapters of Scripture, the description of the New Jerusalem is given, it is in terms which are previously used of God's church, showing that the eternal abode of God and men is but the church brought to glory.

*May the Most Holy and Gracious Triune God –
the Father who chose the church,
the Son who made atonement for the church,
and the Holy Spirit who applies the redemptive work of Christ to the church -
bless and enlarge our churches in Christ Jesus' name. Amen!*

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