

I. The hungry need to be fed. The poor need to be provided for. Widows need to be visited and protected. Orphans need to be looked after and mentored. The sick need healing and care. The church property needs to be maintained and improved. Church events need to be run well. Budgets, policies, and procedures need to be created and implemented. Work needs to be done. All these common issues in the life of a church represent needs and opportunities for service. But an opportunity is not the same thing as a plan, and *noticing* a need is not the same thing as *meeting* a need. The church needs servants, which is to say, the church needs *deacons*.

We see this in Acts 6:1-2. An issue arose in the early church where the widows who depended on the church for their support were not having their practical needs met. Some got fed, some didn't. Teaching was happening, worship was taking place, but some members of the Christian community weren't being cared for.

What the apostles did was to appoint and ordain men to serve the Church by meeting those needs. They recognized leaders and conferred authority on them so that they could meet the practical needs of the congregation, while the apostles focused on the Church's need for preaching and prayer. And although they aren't given the title of "deacon" in Acts 6, this passage has long been a cornerstone in Biblical thinking about the role of deacons in the life of the Church.

By the time you get from the book of Acts to Philippians and 1 Timothy, the office of deacon has come to be recognized as a vital and distinct role in addition to the role of elder, so that biblical church leadership on the local level consists of elders and deacons. A healthy church functioning in the way God intends needs both elders and deacons.

II. So what exactly is a deacon? At the most basic level, the word deacon means *servant*, one who serves. The idea of service is at the heart of what it means to be a deacon. However, while all deacons are servants, not all servants are deacons. Preaching and leading in worship are acts of service, but preachers are not deacons. Everyone who volunteers in any capacity in the Church serves the Church, but that doesn't make them a deacon! All Christians are *servants*, but not all Christians are *deacons*.

Deacons are those who have been chosen by the congregation (Acts 6:3a), appointed by the leadership (Acts 6:3b), and ordained through the laying on of hands and prayer (Acts 6:6).

Philippians 1 and 1 Timothy 3 use the term “deacon” to refer not just to acts of service and those who do them, but to a recognized office in the Church.

Deacons are authorized to act in the name of the Church, and the Church is accountable for their actions. They are distinguished from servants who aren't officers by this official recognition, which gives them both responsibility and authority. They are distinguished from officers who serve in teaching and worship by the particular function and role that they play. They aren't regular church members, they are officers. They aren't Word and Sacrament officers, they are practical human need officers. **Deacons are publicly identified, appointed, and ordained officers of the Church who focus on meeting practical, physical, bodily needs.**

III. Because they are official representatives, that is, *officers* of the Church, the Bible gives us particular guidelines about what sort of people they must be in order to represent the Church well. The Bible spends far more time describing the *character* of deacons that it does outlining the work they do or the skills they need to have. This is because any individual deacon might do different things or serve in different ways, but all deacons need to share a notable level of Christian maturity and excellence of character, which Paul explains in 1 Timothy 3:9-12. Whatever a deacon ends up doing to serve the church, these character qualities *must* be present.

A deacon must be *dignified*. If he's the kind of guy that nobody takes seriously, then he's not the guy you want representing Christ's church. He must not be *double-tongued*, or loose with his speech. Deacons must not be *addicted to much wine*. They need sober minds, in addition to sober hearts and tongues. Deacons cannot be *greedy for dishonest gain*. A frugal front often hides a greedy heart, but a deacon needs to think about and use money like Jesus.

A deacon also needs to *hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience*. The “mystery of the faith” isn't special deacons-only Freemason-type secrets; basically, it means the New Testament - deacons need to be completely on board with Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Covenant, and with the Spirit's ministry of taking the gospel to the whole world, not just Jews. Deacons can't be waffling or uncertain about the gospel; they need to be all in for Jesus.

And before deacons can be leaders in the church, they need to be leaders at home. A deacon needs to be a one-woman man, demonstrating faithfulness, self-control, and fidelity. Their wives are held to a similar standard of dignity and sobriety, and a deacon's children and anyone

under his authority needs to respect and honor his leadership. If a deacon cannot manage his own home, he can't manage the church. It's as simple as that.

Now, all Christians should be aiming for a life like this, but a deacon actually needs to be hitting the target. This is a *high* standard for godly behavior, but it's not an *impossible* standard. By God's grace, there are men who live this way, and those are the kind of men the Church wants to represent her by leading out in good works and service.

IV. We've already made a few comments about just what it is deacons do, but I want to summarize it here. As a rough and ready distinction, elders preach and pray, while deacons feed and clothe. Deacons lead in ministry to the body, while elders lead in ministry to the soul. Both are doing kingdom work, and both are necessary for a healthy church.

As we see in Acts 6, the deacons serve the *elders* by freeing them up to devote themselves to preaching and prayer. Deacons serve the *congregation* by making sure practical needs like food and clothing are met. Deacons are *primarily* called to serve the Church and her members, and only *secondarily* to help meet the needs of the community around her, but at the same time, deacons serve the *world* by extending the church's ministry of mercy in the name of Christ.

Since deacons arose in response to specific needs, and the office was created by the apostles in a way that *pleased the congregation*, there is a great deal of freedom in the role that deacons play in a local church. Some churches use them as liturgical assistants, some use them as janitors or building managers, some as financial executives, some as technology gurus, some as admin guys, and some as ministers of mercy. There is value in all of these uses, as well as some risk in making any one use the *primary* role of deacons. The big idea is to use deacons to meet whatever practical needs you have, knowing that you might have *different* needs down the road.

In our congregation, our constitution (Article 3.B.1) explains the role of deacons this way: "Under the general oversight of the elders, the deacons will be made aware of ways to demonstrate good works and mercy that God might receive the glory and manage the financial, physical, social, and benevolent functions of the church." That is, the deacons demonstrate good works by managing four areas of church life: money, property, community, and mercy.

Currently, we have a bookkeeper to help with financial matters and a sexton to look after our facilities, in addition to a host of volunteers and contracted services. As our diaconate grows and finds its feet, those aspects of ministry will be managed by the deacons, with the elders only

involved in consultation and high-level decision making, not day-to-day concerns. But this highlights an important point: *deacons aren't the ones who **do** all the work*. Sometimes they will do tasks themselves, but their work also consists of management and oversight. Our deacons won't start mowing the church lawn, but they will make sure the lawn gets mowed and the workers get paid. This has already been and will continue to be a true blessing to this congregation, as the elders are more able to use their time and gifts to focus on the ministry of Word and sacrament, and on shepherding the congregation.

V. We've seen how the elders and the church and the world are blessed by deacons, but how are deacons themselves blessed for their service? The qualifications say that deacons can't steal from the tithe or drink all the communion wine, so what *do* they get?

Our passage in 1 Timothy lists two things: the deacon's reward is *good standing for themselves* and also *great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus*. Deacons hold a place of honor in the Church, and through their service, they get front row seats to watch Jesus at work in the world. They see widows cared for, and the hungry fed. They see the sick healed, and justice come to the powerless. This makes them confident and bold to serve Jesus - they know the gospel works, they know Jesus is powerful, because they've *seen* it.

Hear how this works in Acts 6: immediately after the deacons began their work, the Church multiplied and flourished. She was functioning like God intended, and the result was tremendous success and growth. The deacons had saved the church from falling apart, and in fact, the Church was strengthened. The very next thing we see is several deacons demonstrating great confidence in the faith: no one was able to withstand Stephen's wisdom, and Philip boldly took the gospel to Samaria, and wherever he spoke, people listened.

It is a particular honor to be the one through whom God works. God doesn't need our help, and we don't deserve for Him to use us, but when we love Him and follow Him, He honors us by making our name great along with that of His Son.

The Church ought to preview this honor by showing respect to deacons, and finding ways to make their service a joy. When deacons call for help, or enlist your support for a particular ministry project, your default should be to say *yes*. Yes, I'll help the Pregnancy Clinic. Yes, I'll show up for the Church Workday. Yes, I'll give money to the Deacon's Fund. Yes, I'll help out with

Winter Relief. Instead of second-guessing them or leaving them to shoulder the load alone, we honor deacons by supporting their ministry and by following them into service.

But as I said, the honor that the Church gives her deacons now is a *preview* of greater honor to come. As Jesus said in John 12:26, “If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.” Deacons get special honor from God. And in Matthew 20:26, Jesus says: “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant (deacon).”

By ordaining deacons, the Church places these servants first in line on Jesus’ path to greatness. (Any Christian can walk this path, but deacons go first). Because they get to follow Jesus the Servant, those who serve faithfully as deacons deserve the first place among God’s people. They are the great ones in God’s kingdom.

On the last day, God will say to all those who have faithfully carried out the high calling of deacon, those who have been set apart as the Church’s special servants: “Well done, good and faithful [deacon]. Enter into the joy of your Master.” Good servants of Jesus receive a good standing with God, and deacons are given eternal joy as a reward for their service. For a true-hearted deacon, there is no greater reward than this: they get to be like Jesus, who came not to be served, but to serve, and who, because of His service, receives honor from God. Deacons serve God like Jesus, and so they receive honor from God, just like Jesus.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*