

DEACONS:

SERVANTS OF THE LORD'S GOSPEL & CHRIST'S CHURCH

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The New Testament presents the local church as having two distinct offices of male leadership in the local church: shepherd-elders and deacons. This essay will speak to the office of deacon and answer pertinent questions as to *who* should be a deacon and *what* deacons must do. So much of the New Testament addresses the church and calls her to love one another, serve one another, care for one another, bear one another's burdens, and even financially and sacrificially give to one another. God has decreed that the office of deacon serves a vital place in the local church to enhance the care and to meet pressing needs in the body of Christ. *This essay will examine six headings that relate to God-ordained office of deacon.*

I. Character

In many churches, for a man to be a deacon, he must simply fill out an application and conduct a brief interview with the leadership team and after a brief conversation, the church welcomes him into the office of 'deacon.' Tragically, many overlook the clear biblical requirements that must *already be in place* for a local church to even consider a man of God to serve in the role of 'deacon.' In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, the Apostle Paul presents the character profile of a deacon. As one author put it: "It's notable that, when laying out qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3, Paul focuses on issues of character rather than administrative skills."¹ Every deacon must fit this profile to be qualified for the ministry of the Lord in the service of Christ's church. In 1 Tim 3:8, Paul says that the deacon must be a man of dignity and not double-tongued. Thus, he must shun all gossip and all false speech. He must be a trustworthy man and a man who has proven himself speak truth at all times. He must have no reputation for being addicted to wine (or, any substance) nor should his heart long for sordid (material, financial gain). Especially since deacons will handle money and the distribution of funds in the local church, this man must have a pure heart toward Christ and demonstrate that he does not yearn to be financially rich. Deacons must hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience and have no double lifestyle whatsoever (1 Tim 3:9). The home life of these candidates must be above reproach and blameless. Deacons must be one-women-men (husbands of one wife) and they must be good managers of their children leading at home and presiding as the spiritual shepherd over his home (1 Tim 3:12). The summarizing qualification of these men is that they must be beyond reproach and have nothing in their lives with which someone may accuse them (1 Tim 3:10b). A local church must first test these men (1 Tim 3:10a) to see if they *already possess* the character qualities that Paul describes in 1 Timothy 3 before installing them into the ministry. Those who lead in the local church as deacons have a high calling from God and must live exemplary Christian lives to the glory of Christ, for the purity of the church, and because of the dignity of the office.

¹ Jamie Dunlop, "Deacons, Shock-Absorbers and Servants," *9Marks Journal*. <<http://9marks.org/article/deacons-shock-absorbers-and-servants/>> [accessed March 24, 2015].

2. Ministry

The deacon first and foremost is described as a servant. He serves his Lord and he serves the body of Christ. Indeed, one of the ways in which he serves His master is by serving the local church. A man must prove himself by performing the ministry of service *already* before he is brought into the public office of serving as a deacon. He must first be tested which hints at the reality that the man of God should be functionally acting as a deacon before the church interviews and examines him as a candidate for the deaconate. All this suggests that a local church should not find any man and appoint him as a deacon. Rather, a biblical church must carefully, biblically, prayerfully, and methodically examine men who *already* serve in deacon-like ways and men who have proven themselves to be servants at heart because they love Christ and love His church rather than finding men who only serve and fulfill the role because they reside within the office of 'deacon.' In other words, a candidate for the deaconate is a man already serving in the ministry and fulfilling deacon-like services even while not yet publicly installed and recognized as a deacon.

3. Understanding

A preeminent element in the heart of every deacon is that he understands the biblical role that God has called him to as a deacon in Christ's church. That is to say, he must know what a deacon must do and he must perform the duty with joy, with confidence, with diligence, with integrity, and with a heart of worship. The early church chose seven men to serve tables and ensure that the people of God would not be overlooked in the regular day to day service (Acts 6:2-3). To fulfill the office of a deacon means that one simply serves within the context of a local church. A deacon does not fulfill the office of the elder/shepherd. A deacon nowhere is commanded to teach or preach the Word of God. Deacons must, however, administrate, lead, serve, and dispense help to meet pressing needs in the church. The acts of service must always flow from a heart of worship. The man who serves as a deacon must understand that God has gloriously placed him in the office of a grace-dispensing minister in the body of Christ. And he does this to free up the elders so they can serve the Lord unhindered in the prayer and study of the Word. It has been noted: "it seems best to view deacons as servants who do whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church."² Never, however, should a deacon feel as though he is a 'second-string Christian.' One writer has well-said that deacons must "assume a posture of support without an attitude of "playing second fiddle." According to I Corinthians 12:28 the gift of "administrating" is right up there with apostles, prophets, miracles, and healing. If you have a gift for administration and the qualities of a deacon (I Tim. 3:8-13) you are a gift to Christ's church. You have been given a particular "manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (I Cor. 12:7) Use your gift to put down division and build up Christ's body."³ Indeed, the deacon must firmly believe that God has called him to 'serve well' (I Tim 3:13a) and this faithful service will increase his confidence in his faith in Christ Jesus (I Tim 3:13b).

² Benjamin Merkle, "The Biblical Qualifications and Responsibilities of Deacons," *9Marks Journal* <<http://9marks.org/article/biblical-qualifications-and-responsibilities-deacons/>> [accessed March 24, 2015].

³ Matt Schmucker, "How to Separate Deacon Work from Elder Work," *9Marks Journal* <<http://9marks.org/article/how-separate-deacon-work-elder-work/>> [accessed March 24, 2015].

4. Submission

At the very conception of the church in Acts 6, there is a sort of proto-deacon installment as the Apostles confess that they cannot neglect prayer and the study of the Word of God. Because of the growth of the church, the Apostles pick seven good men of good reputation, men full of the Spirit and of wisdom and the Apostles specifically mention that “we will appoint [καταστήσομεν] them for this task” (Acts 6:3). The Apostles reaffirm that they must diligently devote themselves to the two-fold primary function of the overseer/shepherd: prayer and the ministry of the Word. Those who function as the overseers who give themselves to the prayer and the ministry of the Word, thus, see it as their responsibility to appoint men to serve and help. All of this points to the notion that the deacons must see it as their duty to submit to the shepherd leaders of the local church. God specifically calls the elders to preside over the church and to rule over the flock (1 Tim 5:17). God instructs all believers to submit to the elders (Heb 13:17). Thus, as the primary spiritual guides of the flock and the God-appointed decision-makers of the church, the elders must lead with much prayer and with biblical discretion. And it is the elders who appoint the deacons with various tasks, duties, and responsibilities. The deacons, then, must understand their God-given and grace-empowered role of submitting to the elders and fulfilling their directions with joy, with gladness, without question, without disputing, and without quarreling. Indeed, “The elders are called to “direct the affairs of the church” (1 Timothy 5:17), and deacons are called to support that direction. In our churches, then, elders should make directional decisions while deacons facilitate congregational involvement to make that vision a reality.”⁴ The biblical deacon is the man who receives information from the shepherd-elders and he gladly, immediately and submissively follows their guidance and directions. He does not dispute the elders’ decisions with others, he does not spread strife in the church, he does not belittle the elders to anyone in the flock (even if he disagrees with a decision that the elders made), nor does he stir up conflict in the church by fostering the people’s distrust of the shepherd-elders. All that said, the deacons serve with joy and follow the elders’ instructions gladly.

5. Availability

A deacon believes that God has specially graced him and called him to serve. One author described the role of deacon in this way: “the focus of the qualifications is the moral character of the person who is to fill the office: a deacon must be mature and above reproach. The main difference between an elder and a deacon is a difference of gifts and calling, not character.”⁵ To serve takes time. To serve sacrificially takes a lot of time. To serve the body of Christ with sacrificial love and diligent prayer and keen awareness demands that the man of God be available to serve in this capacity. Not all capable men can devote this time to service. Some, perhaps, due to travels, work demands, family life, or illness may not be capable of fulfilling the biblical office of deacon at that time. And that is fine; no curse abides upon the man who is busy. But the man who fulfills the office of a deacon must be an available man and he must have the heart to

⁴ Jamie Dunlop, “Deacons.”

⁵ Benjamin Merkle, “The Biblical Qualifications and Responsibilities of Deacons.”

serve, the integrity in serving, the hands to serve, and the time to serve. Indeed, in Acts 6, some of the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution and so the men of God were appointed by the shepherds to meet this need (Acts 6:1-2). Thus, a deacon must be qualified, godly, sacrificial, service-minded, and *able to meet pressing needs in the local church* as they arise. Benjamin Merkle has provided a helpful list of potential ways in which deacons serve. He notes: They could be responsible for anything that's not related to teaching and shepherding the church. Such duties might include:

- **Facilities:** The deacons could be responsible for managing the church property. This would include making sure the place of worship is prepared for the worship service, cleaning up, or running the sound system.
- **Benevolence:** Similar to what took place in Acts 6:1–6 with the daily distribution to the widows, the deacons may be involved in administering funds or other assistance to the needy.
- **Finances:** While the elders should probably oversee the financial business of the church (Acts 11:30), it may be best left to the deacons to handle the day-to-day matters. This would include collecting and counting the offering, keeping records, and so on.
- **Ushers:** The deacons could be responsible for distributing bulletins, seating the congregation, or preparing the elements for communion.
- **Logistics:** Deacons should be available to help in variety of ways so that the elders are able to concentrate on teaching and shepherding the church.⁶

6. Approvedness

God demands that all men who become deacons first be “tested” (1 Tim 3:10). And then, they must serve as deacons *if they are beyond reproach* (1 Tim 3:10b). Local churches must scrutinize the candidates carefully because these men will serve in the Lord's church. Indeed, it is the body of Christ in which the deacons serve; not a manmade corporation with a mortal, fallible leader. Because it is the church of the living God, churches must take great care and diligent steps to test (δοκιμαζέσθωσαν) the man first to see if he is qualified to serve in this leadership office. Instructively, Paul tells Timothy that he must test the men *first*. The careful interviews, the diligent background checks, the prayerful meetings, the purposeful observation must *first* occur before a man is fit for this office. The question is: *is he qualified?* Has he proven himself? Many of the characteristics that Paul presents in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 are character traits and *not* service-oriented, handy-man talents. Just because a man can fix things and because a man has money to give does not mean that he fits the biblical qualifications for being a deacon. Elder teams should take great care in testing men to see if they are capable, qualified, gifted, holy, pure, family men, and men full of integrity before installing them into the office of deacon.

⁶ Benjamin Merkle, “The Biblical Qualifications and Responsibilities of Deacons.”