

THE ROLE OF A DEACON (and Qualifications) of Church Deacons?

The Deacon must be a faithful servant and blameless example to the church he is appointed to serve. His qualifications and responsibilities have roots originating from the disputes within the early church but are necessary and relevant for the growth and administration of our church today.

Today's roles and responsibilities of the church Deacon vary widely and have morphed to meet both the spiritual and managerial needs of our modern churches.

The Need for Deacons in the Church

Acts 6:1 gives us the origin of the need for Deacons:

"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 being neglected in the daily ministrations."

A need for service to the widows was growing, and the murmurings were rooted in the thought the Hebrew widows were being favored in their allotment from the church.

Deacons originated from conflicts in the early church as the number of believers was steadily growing. The qualifications of the Deacons stated below, are vital to the administration of these responsibilities.

Qualifications of Deacons in the Church

Biblical qualifications for the appointment of the deacon are specified in Acts 6:3 as "men of honest report, full of The Holy Ghost and wisdom." These qualifications lend their importance to the ministering of the needs of widows and attending to the secular affairs of the church.

Be Sober and Not Greedy

In 1 Timothy 3:8, Paul taught: "In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain."

A Deacon's tongue and heart must be in agreement. He cannot act or speak in one fashion to the church members than another to the pastor. Being sober and not greedy are qualities that prevent the Deacon from taking advantage of the church's resources for his own benefit.

Manage His Own Family Well

1 Timothy 3:4-5 states, “[h]e must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?)”

The Deacon must be sober and the ruler of his own home. If he is not capable of using a clear and sound mind or resolving household conflict, he is not suited to handle these duties within the church.

Be Full of the Spirit and Wisdom

The appointed Deacon must always act in guidance of the Holy Spirit. There are the biblical responsibilities for the office of Deacon, but the individual servant in the position should be in constant prayer for leading and guiding his duties specifically commanded for himself.

“Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word,” (Acts 6:3-4).

The Deacon must be in constant prayer in order to successfully and rightfully execute his duties. This close connection to the Heavenly Father assures that not only his overt actions are appropriate, but also that his motives are pure.

Husband of One Wife

Just as these qualifications are mostly subjective, so are the duties of the Deacon in modern churches. The only objective qualification of a Deacon is to be the husband of one wife. This criterion is met by a man who has never married or only has one living wife.

Duties of Deacons in the Church

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul further outlines the qualifications as he defines the responsibilities of the offices of Deacon and bishop. The two offices share similar duties but are distinct in that the Bishop preaches the Gospel and administers the ordinances of the church.

- The Deacon is to set up and prepare the table for the administration of the Lord's Supper. In the early church, the Deacon rationed any of the leftover elements to the poor of the church or locality.
- The Deacon is to visit the sick and needy of the church and prepare necessary matters for church meetings.
- If conflict arises within the church, the Deacon is to assist the pastor in easing any tensions or resolving conflict.

The province of the church Deacon board has steadily shifted and grown. Instead of primarily caring for the sick and the widows of the church, Deacon boards have become the pseudo-corporate officers in many churches. They are deemed the overseers of the church property and its financial stability.

Many pastors feel it is the responsibility of the Deacons to visit within the community and invite them to the church. Deacons should have a part in a church's visitation ministry, but people in the community want to see and know the pastor of the church.

THE ROLE OF A DEACON

So what exactly is a deacon? The word translated “deacon” literally means servant, which is exactly what deacons do. They serve the elders and the congregation by tending to the practical and logistical needs of the church. Put simply, a deacon is an individual who meets certain character requirements and is set apart by the church in order to handle specific physical needs or ministerial endeavors (see Acts 6:1–7; 1 Tim. 3:8–13).*

Deacons don't lead or oversee the church. This is the role God has given to the elders (see Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:1–2). Instead, they humbly serve the congregation by ensuring practical matters are met. In so doing, they free the pastors from doing these tasks so that they can devote themselves to teaching, praying, and leading.

For example, a deacon may handle benevolence requests so that a pastor can prepare a sermon. A deacon may take care of the church's leaky roof so that the elders can focus on equipping and counseling others. Of course, some overlap may occur, but by and large, deacons handle physical and logistical needs and elders tend to spiritual matters.

To see this played out in Scripture, consider Acts 6:1–7. Many people believe this account marks the beginning of the office of deacon. Seven men were set apart to ensure that all the widows within the Jerusalem church received enough food. They served in this way so the apostles were free to fulfill their primary responsibilities—prayer and the ministry of the Word.

The role of the seven in Acts is clearly spelled out. They were to be in charge of the "daily serving of food" (NASB) to the widows. The church inherited this charitable practice from the Jews. The synagogue had a regular organization to help those in need. They preferred to give their alms for the poor through the synagogue rather than doing it individually. Barclay describes this practice:

Each Friday in every community two official collectors went round the markets and called on each house, collecting donations for the poor and needy in money and goods. This material so collected was distributed to those in need by a committee . . .

The poor of the community were given enough food for fourteen meals, that is for two meals a day for the week. But no one could receive any donation from this fund if he already possessed a week's food in the house. This fund . . . was called the kuppah, or the basket. In addition, there was a daily collection of food from house to house for those who were actually in emergency need for the day. This fund was called the tamhui or the tray.

It was this practice that the first deacons inherited and performed. At first the money for the poor had been administered or at least supervised by the apostles (Acts 4:35), but when the number of the disciples grew to five thousand men (Acts 4:4), the job became too much for them, and deacons were elected to help.

Another indication of the deacon's role is inherent in the name itself: "servant." Just as the title bishop carries with it the job description of "overseer" and the title pastor means a "shepherd," one who takes care of the flock, the title deacon refers to one who serves. This does not mean that it example in his is a lowly or unimportant office. The qualifications are quite high. They indicate that the deacon must be morally pure, spiritually mature, doctrinally strong, and able to handle money responsibly. In addition, he must be a good family life and his deportment in the community. He is one to be respected in the church.

No other directions are given in Scripture concerning the work of the deacon. One thing is clear: it is not the job of the deacon to rule the church. Just as there is no such thing in Scripture as a board of elders, there is no such thing as a board of deacons. Authority in the church comes from the Lord to the congregation. Deacons may be authorized by the congregation to serve the church in various ways, but these should be under the same headings found in Scripture. They should help the pastor or pastors with their ministry and help meet the physical needs of the congregation.

THE REQUIREMENTS OF A DEACON

While every church member should be serving the church, not everyone can serve as a deacon. The office of deacon—like the office of elder—is reserved only for those who meet certain character qualifications. 1 Timothy 3:8–13 makes this clear. To summarize these four verses, deacons must be marked by godliness. In a word, they should be “blameless.” Dishonest or disruptive persons need not apply. Of course, sinlessness isn’t a requirement, but personal holiness and Christian maturity certainly are.

It’s noteworthy that Scripture spends significantly more time describing what a deacon must be rather than what a deacon must do. That’s because God cares more about our character than our abilities or job description. These character requirements are also important because they protect the reputation of the local church. Deacons are typically more visible than other members and often deal with finances. For this reason, it is essential that they are trustworthy. Little brings reproach to the name of Jesus like financial mismanagement by scandalous church officers.

THE REWARD OF A DEACON

We might be tempted to think that being a deacon isn’t that important. Being an elder or a missionary or a conference speaker or a Christian author is where it’s at. But Scripture disagrees. Competent, qualified deacons are essential to the health of a local church. When deacons serve the congregation and support the elders, they protect the unity of the church—something Jesus views as precious (see John 17). One reason those first deacons were so important is because they prevented the Jerusalem church from fracturing.

And what was the net result of these deacons fulfilling their responsibility? Acts 6:7 states, “So the word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.” Because those deacons served the physical needs of the body, the unity of the church was preserved, the apostles continued to preach the Word, and the Great Commission advanced.

Paul told Timothy, “For those who have served well as deacons acquire a good standing for themselves” (1 Tim. 3:13). Christians—more than any other people on the earth—highly esteem those who dedicate themselves to humble, Christ-like service. As John Calvin commented, “The more anxious a person is to devote himself to upbuilding [the church], the more highly Paul wishes them to be regarded.”

By the world’s standards, being a deacon may seem boring and unattractive, but according to Scripture, there are great rewards for faithfully fulfilling this office. So

if you know a deacon, let me encourage you to go out of your way to thank or encourage that "servant" either in word or deed.

Number of Deacons

The New Testament does not give any directions concerning the number of deacons a church should have.

Perhaps no fixed number is given because churches of different sizes with differing conditions have very different needs for the deacons' ministry. The Jerusalem church consisted of five thousand men and perhaps as many as twenty thousand believers (Acts 4:4) at the time they chose seven to be deacons. That was a ratio of almost three thousand people per deacon. Using these figures, one could conclude that most churches have too many deacons.

Finally, a church should have no more deacons than there are men qualified to serve. One of the most serious problems a church can have is deacons or a pastor-elder who does not meet the qualifications set forth in Scripture.

This is a form of disobedience to God in electing the unqualified or not taking seriously the dictates of Scripture in these matters. It results in at least two problems. (1) It is a bad example to the younger members. Disregarding Scripture in this way says to them that it is not really important to obey Scripture in other ways. (2) It results in weak spiritual leadership for the church. If the church has mediocre leaders, it will become a mediocre church. The requirements for a deacon are very demanding because God wants the church to be a "holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9), ones who have "purified your souls in obeying the truth" (1 Pet. 1:22).

Deacons have a very important role in the church. Although they are "servants" and their ministry is a ministry of service, the fact that they have been chosen demonstrates they are respected by the brethren. Their role is second in importance only to the pastor-elders. The pastor(s) are given by the Lord the responsibility of teaching the Word. Without this ministry the church will not prosper spiritually. Part of the duty of the deacons is to relieve the pastor-elders of responsibilities that would keep them from doing their best in studying the Word, spending time alone with God in prayer, and teaching the Word effectively. This is the reason the first deacons were chosen (Acts 6). Deacons still need to work closely with the pastor-elder(s) to make sure that this problem does not arise.

The deacon is not described as a "ruler" in the church. However, as one who assists the "overseers" of the church and is appointed by the church to fulfill specific ministries, the deacon is by virtue of his office a leader of the church.

His value to the church is in his service. He is not to be the pastor-elder's supervisor but his helper. Deacons are not to form a board to rule the church; that is not their job description. They are to lead the church in ministry.

Churches who have such deacons will be blessed indeed. Pastors who have such deacons to help them will be better pastors because of it. Deacons who serve well "obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith" (1 Tim. 3:13).

In summary

The Deacon must be a faithful servant and blameless example to the church he is appointed to serve.

His qualifications and responsibilities have roots originating from the disputes within the early church but are necessary and relevant for the growth and administration of our church today.