

The Vital Role Deacons Play

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“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 ...” – Acts 6:3 (NIV)

Acts Chapter 6 is a watershed moment in the life of the early church. After a period of sustained growth since the day of Pentecost, the church faced a serious problem. The Greek-speaking Jews complained that their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food. The Hebraic Jews, it was claimed, were giving preferential treatment to their widows. If this went unresolved, it could very well have led to a church split, hindering growth and maybe destroying much of the church in its infancy. Something had to be done, and it had to be done with wisdom and sensitivity.

The First Deacons

The apostles, who were acting as the elders of the local church in Jerusalem at the time, could have chosen to handle this themselves. Instead, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they set in place seven men to resolve the issue. These seven were the first deacons. Their appointment served not only to solve one problem but to help the church grow at an even faster rate. Up to this point, Acts tells us that God added people, but after deacons were ordained, the church multiplied!

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Deacons Today

Today, many churches have dispensed with the office of deacon altogether or made it something very different to that which we see in Scripture. If we are to have healthy churches, we need to build in a healthy way, according to the pattern of Scripture. This includes recognising and releasing deacons in a manner that is consistent with Biblical principles.

The word deacon (Greek *diakonos*) means 'servant' or 'one who executes the command of another'. For this reason, in many churches, deacons are simply those who serve well; maybe they look after the building or hand out Bibles. This fails to do justice to the vital role of deacons in the life of the church. Simply serving is the duty of all believers; after all, we are referred to in Scripture as slaves (Greek *doulos*). Just because somebody serves well does not mean they should be a deacon.

On the other hand, in some churches, deacon boards have the authority to 'hire and fire' the pastor and make governmental decisions. Whilst this practice recognises the importance of the office, it fails to recognise the proper role of elders and places the role of deacon higher than it should be.

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What Scripture Says About Deacons

- They are men and women who should be **filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom** (Acts 6:3).
- They were **delegated an area of responsibility** by the apostles (elders). The apostles did not abdicate their authority nor duplicate the work. They assigned authority to those who could then exercise such authority within the sphere they were assigned. Remember, deacons are those who 'execute the command of another'. This freed the apostles to continue leading the church forward.
- The deacons were trusted not just with a simple task of handing out food parcels but of **resolving a dispute** that could have severely damaged the church. They were **trusted by the apostles with significant tasks** "*We will turn this responsibility over to them*".
- These were **men of great faith and great capacity**. Stephen preached powerfully and was martyred, while Philip brought revival to Samaria and performed amazing signs and wonders. They were certainly not confined to simple, practical duties. Within our field of churches, we are privileged to have many deacons who can truly be described as "*full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit*". They set an example to all the believers in the way they love God and people, the way they worship, and the way they exercise their spiritual gifts.
- Once revival had come to Samaria through Philip, the apostles went on to establish healthy churches (Acts 8). There was a recognition of governmental authority not carried by a deacon. Again, even in the Four12 field, we have seen **deacons start outreach groups that have become congregations**.

"Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus" – 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (ESV)

- Later, Paul gave instructions for the qualifications of deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13). They are almost identical to those of elder, with the exception of being able to teach (setting doctrine is a governmental responsibility carried by elders in partnership with apostles). In other words, those who fulfil the role of deacon must be those who **set an example for other believers in character and conduct**.

- In this same passage, it is made clear that **women can also be deacons** (or deaconesses).
- **Deacons must be tested first** (1 Timothy 3:10). Whilst Paul doesn't clarify what a test should be, the context seems to show that there must be a track record in the life of a prospective deacon. That person should be living and acting as a deacon would for a period before being set into office.
- In Acts 6, the apostles told the people to choose seven men that the apostles would then trust with the work. This does not mean that deacons are elected by some democratic method, but rather that they can be **recognised as leaders and examples by the people**. For this reason, before any person is ordained as a deacon, there should be an opportunity for people to raise any concerns about character issues of which the leadership may not be aware.

Their Job Description

There is no real job description given for deacons in Scripture. This is most likely deliberate. Deacons serve Christ by serving the church in a wide variety of ways. Some notable examples of deacons roles could include working full time for the church in an administrative capacity, leading ministries within the life of the church, overseeing one or more Community groups, or simply exercising specific giftings within the life of a congregation. This list is illustrative of the kind of roles deacons can fulfil and is certainly not exhaustive.

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Deacons, whatever their role, should work closely with the eldership team, doing whatever is needed to help the vision of the team become a reality. Yet they are far more than dogsbodies or gofers: they are men and women called by God to help lead His people and build His church. Without deacons, the church will never become as healthy or move forward as God intends. As for the deacons themselves, as Paul writes, *"those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus"* (1 Timothy 3:13, ESV).

If you enjoyed this read, then we also recommend [Leadership That Reflects Christ](#) by Mike Davies and [Building Not Just Blessing](#) by Jonathan Stanfield.

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