

# The Biblical Role of Deacons

by Derek Gentle

**New Testament Deacons serve the Lord by conducting the caring ministry of the church—doing the benevolence work, visiting the sick, being alert to the spiritual needs of the congregation—for the purposes of freeing the pastoral staff to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word, promoting unity within the church, and facilitating the spread of the gospel.**

## Biblical Guidance on the Office of Deacon

### Deacons and Elders Are the Two Distinct Offices in a New Testament Church

The two New Testament offices are mentioned together in Philippians 1:1 and in 1st Timothy 3 — bishops and deacons. In 1st Timothy 3 the qualifications are spelled out for the two offices, bishops in verses 1-7, and deacons in verse 8-13. The qualifications are similar, but not identical. For example, the bishop is required to be “able to teach” whereas the deacon does not have that expectation. The differences in title and qualifications mean that the offices are distinct.

The term “bishop” is translated overseer in some translations. It is the word from which we get our word “episcopal” which means, “to look upon, inspect, oversee, look after, care for” and refers to “the care of the church which rested upon the elders.” The term is used interchangeably with “elder” and “shepherd” (i.e. pastor) in Acts 20 and 1st Peter 5. There is no question about the authority of the office: “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine” (1st Timothy 5:17 NKJV)

Three facts stand out:

1. Deacons and Elders are the offices in the church. The offices are distinct. Elders are not deacons. Deacons are not elders.
2. The terms, Elder, Pastor (shepherd), and Overseer (bishop) are used synonymously in the New Testament.
3. In the New Testament, elders had the role of the general oversight of the church.

### In the original language, the word, *Deacon*, means *Servant*

The title itself, is as descriptive as any job description could be. In the Bible, words have meanings and the word “deacon” means servant. Here is how the word has been defined in its various forms:

**“Diakoneo** and its derivatives, as their etymology suggests, are used mainly for personal help to others.”

**“Diakonia** is found 34 times in the NT. It means service at the table in Lk. 10:40; Acts 6:1, etc.”

**“Diakanos** is found 29 times in the NT. Its primary meaning is one who serves at tables.”

(“Serve, Deacon, Worship” in The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Colin Brown, ed., volume 3, pages 544, 546)

“In Philippians 1:1 and in numerous references in early Christian literature outside the New Testament, bishops and/or elders and deacons are mentioned together, with deacons mentioned last. Because of this order, and because of the natural connotations of the word diakonos, most interpreters believe that deacons, from the beginning, served as assistants of church leaders.”

(Deacon, Deaconess, Fred A. Grissom, Holman Bible Dictionary, Holman, 1991)

## The Office of Deacon Was Created for the Purpose of Handling the Benevolence Ministry

The Biblical account is quite clear on the founding of the deaconship and nowhere does Scripture repeal the original purpose:

"NOW ABOUT this time, when the number of the disciples was greatly increasing, complaint was made by the Hellenists (the Greek-speaking Jews) against the [native] Hebrews because their widows were being overlooked and neglected in the daily ministrations (distribution of relief). So the Twelve [apostles] convened the multitude of the disciples and said, 'It is not seemly or desirable or right that we should have to give up or neglect [preaching] the Word of God in order to attend to serving at tables and superintending the distribution of food. Therefore select out from among yourselves, brethren, seven men of good and attested character and repute, full of the [Holy] Spirit and wisdom, whom we may assign to look after this business and duty.'" Acts 6:1-3 (Amplified)

### **The Office of Deacon Was Established to Free the Apostles (who functioned as the first pastors) to Pray and to Prepare to Minister the Word**

The Apostles, in dealing with the benevolence ministry problem at the Jerusalem church, told the congregation that,

"It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Acts 6:2-4 (NKJV)

Some have understood this passage to mean that it is the role of deacons to oversee the business of the church. First, the text says, "this business," not "the business" — and the business being referred to is the business of benevolence. Second, as Dr. Robert Naylor points out, that would be a misrepresentation of the meaning of the word:

"The word 'business' should be discussed a little to prevent any misunderstanding. The Greek word is *chreia* and basically means 'need.' It is so translated twenty-five times. This is the only place it is translated 'business.' Hence there is no Scriptural authority for the deacons to make financial decisions of the church. Church decisions must remain church decisions."

### **The Early Deacons Were Selected for Their Spiritual Qualifications**

1st Timothy 3 and Acts 6 expound the qualifications for the office of deacons; the later contains what could fairly be called the "core qualifications":

"Men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" -- Acts 6:3

"And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" -- Acts 6:5

Often, when someone is discussed as a possible deacon one hears a remark such as, "He attends regularly and is a good giver." But God is looking at men with an internal dynamic, which cannot be determined in a superficial way.

### **Deacons Are to Be Capable of Serving the Lord in Spiritual Ways**

The original seven deacons were people who were able to serve the Lord in ways which were more spiritual in nature than merely delivering food. Stephen was a man of spiritual power: "And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8 NKJV). Philip was not only a deacon, but also was gifted in evangelism (Acts 8:5-7).

### **The Office of Deacon Requires a Firm Grasp of Sound Doctrine**

A church is content oriented. It is a doctrinally driven community, built upon truth. Every member should have this approach in this fellowship; leaders such as deacons, not less but, more so. "They must possess the mystic secret of the faith [Christian truth as hidden from ungodly men] with a clear conscience" Acts 6:9 (Amplified)

### **The Presence of Deacons Should Advance the Unity of a Church**

When the Apostles laid out the plan for the creation of this office, "The saying pleased the whole multitude" (Acts 6:5 NKJV). The complaints about the benevolence ministry stopped. And the complaints were by the Greek speaking Jews, the Hebrew speaking Jews obviously bent over backwards to preserve the church's unity, for all the men selected had Greek names. It is still true today: Any time a church has deacons who are properly doing their jobs, the church is more likely to be at unity.

### **The Presence of Deacons Should Advance the Cause of Evangelism**

The immediate impact of the creation of the office of deacon was to eliminate the controversy in the church and to get the church back on course in fulfilling its mission. The Bible says that, "Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:8 NKJV). Again, it is still true. When a church has deacons who are in God's will, the cause of world evangelization will be aided.

## **The Biblical Pattern for Deacons Seen in Church History**

**In the second through fifth centuries**, deacons were the real agents of the charity provided through the church, providing for widows and orphans. They visited the sick and, as early as the third century, had deacon family ministry plans. They visited the martyrs in prison. Deacons helped to train new converts. They kept watch over the church members, reporting to the bishop any who seemed about to fall away. They attempted to restore the excommunicated. Deacons carried out administrative assignments given them by their bishops and met daily to receive instructions from him. Failure to carry out their assignments was cause for removal. If they had the authority from a bishop and a presbyter or bishop were present, they could baptize. They also assisted with the Lord's Supper. (Compiled from Charles W. Deweese, *The Emerging Role of Deacons*, Broadman Press, 1979, pages 12-15)

During the **Middle Ages** the Office of Deacon came to less resemble the New Testament Model

"Later, medieval deacons assumed an increasingly ecclesiastical role, and their tendency to become candidates for the priesthood became more pronounced than ever. Almost no one was ordained to the diaconate unless he intended to advance to the priesthood."

(Deweese, Page 18)

### **During the Reformation the Return to Scripture Resulted in a Return to the Biblical Role of Deacons**

Martin Luther:

"The diaconate is the ministry, not of reading the Gospel or the Epistle, as is the present practice, but of distributing the church's aid to the poor"

John Calvin:

"Scripture specifically designates as deacons those whom the church has appointed to distribute alms and take care of the poor, and serve as stewards of the common chest for the poor."

Again, Calvin:

"Here, then, is the kind of deacons the apostolic church had, and which we, after their example should have."

(Deweese, page 19)

Timothy George summarizes Calvin's view of the biblical role of deacons:

"Calvin did in fact hold the office of deacon in high esteem. Deacons were public officers in the church entrusted with the care of the poor. He urged that they be skilled in the Christian faith since, in the course of their ministry, 'they will often have to give advice and comfort.' Indeed, the deacons in Calvin's Geneva should have experts in what we call today social work as well as pastoral care."

(Theology of the Reformers, Broadman Press, 1988, page 241)

In the early 1600's **early Baptists** such as John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, saw the primary role of deacons as that of carrying out the benevolence ministry of the church.

In 1654, in what would become an often repeated description, Thomas Collier pictured the work of deacons as that of serving tables: **the table of the Lord, the table of the minister, and the table of the poor** (Deweese, page 20). Later Southern Baptist leaders would later utilize this description to describe the work of the deacon. Southwestern Seminary founding president B.H. Carroll recalled hearing a sermon delivered by S. S. Lattimore with this very outline and stated that he "thought it a very ingenious division of the table question" (Commentary on the English Bible, Volume IV, page 135). As recently as 1997, former SBC president Jim Henry used this outline as part of his materials in *Deacons: Partners in Ministry and Growth*.

## The Drift Among Baptists From the Biblical Model

"In the later half of the eighteenth century, a new concept of Baptist deacons emerged and continues to exist in many churches today. This was the view of deacons as church business managers. This view stressed to a seemingly excessive degree the administrative function of deacons and tended to distract from other areas of service previously given equally strong attention"

(Charles W. Deweese, *The Emerging Role of Deacons*, Broadman Press, 1979, page 34).

The drift started as an effort to "Relieve the minister from the secular concerns of the church" (a treatise on church discipline, Charleston Association, S.C., 1774 cited by Deweese).

But by 1846, R. B. C. Howell was using new terminology, saying that deacons are, "A board of directors, and have charge of the all the secular affairs in the kingdom of Christ" (*The Deaconship*, Judson Press, page 11). "...The deacons in their own peculiar department are, as we have said, a BOARD OF OFFICERS, or the executive board of the church, for her temporal department..." (Pages 112-113). This is when and how in Baptist life deacons came to be called a *board*. This term has no biblical rooting in word or concept.

Howell regarded the spiritual ministry of the pastor and the temporal ministry of the deacon as separate areas, or *departments*: "...The pastor has supervision of all the spiritualities of the church, and is therefore bishop or overseer in that department; so the deacons are overseers of all her temporalities, of which they have full control" page 12). He stated, however, that, "It is not, lastly, the duty of deacons to rule in the church" (page 66), explaining that, "Deacons are not ruling elders" (page 69).

There were those, at the time, who saw this trend as a cause of concern. In 1852, one New York pastor/historian warned against the concept of the deacon as being a person, "Of so much importance and ecclesiastical consequence in the Church, that all the membership, and all the affairs in the Church, and the Pastor, must be dictated, and ruled and governed by him." In 1897, Edwin C. Dargan, professor of

homiletics and ecclesiology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, warned of the tendency of deacons to act as "a sort of ruling presbytery" (both quotes cited by Deweese, pages 47-48)

## How to Know if Your Church is Off Track

Howard Foshee listed **three evidences that deacons are operating under the concept of a board:**

- (1) When all major recommendations from church operations and church committees are screened by the deacons whether they should go to the congregation.
- (2) When the pastor and staff members are directly responsible to the deacons rather than to the church.
- (3) When the use or expenditure of major church resources, such as facilities and finances, must first be approved by the deacons.

(The Ministry of the Deacon, Howard B. Foshee, Convention Press, 1968, page 33)

## How Baptists Began to Return to the Biblical Concept of Deaconship

Beginning subtly in the 1950's and intensifying in the 1970's there were repeated rejections of the concept of deaconship which began in the 1800's. Robert E. Naylor, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, warned in 1955 that:

"There are churches where deacons have appropriated to themselves authority which is contrary to New Testament teaching. It may have gone so far that bossism has developed. There is a 'board' complex and a general feeling that deacons are 'directors' of the church. Nothing could be farther from the Baptist genius or the New Testament plan. Anywhere this condition exists, there inevitably are those who say that deacons are not needed. The truth is that such deacons as this... are not needed in churches"

(Robert E. Naylor, The Baptist Deacon, Broadman Press, 1955, pages 3-4).

In the 1970's, Howard Foshee was firmly rejecting the terminology of the period; he recounted,

"The unfortunate term, 'board of deacons' arose. The phrase is foreign to the way Baptists should work together under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. A Baptist congregation makes corporate decisions as each member seeks to vote his conviction under the leadership of the Lord."

(Howard B. Foshee, Now That You're a Deacon, Broadman Press, 1975, Page 13)

Describing the role of the original seven deacons, Wayne Dehoney wrote,

"The first responsibility of these men was to assist the pastors in the spiritual ministry of shepherding and caring for the flock and to free the pastors for the ministry of prayer, preaching, and training. Actually, these seven were selected to be 'under-shepherds' of the flock."

(Church Administration Magazine, November, 1959, cited by Foshee)

In Foshee's chapter, *Understand Your Work as Deacon*, his subtitles include, *Deacon Work Originated to Meet Spiritual Needs* and *Deacons Should Organize for Ministry*.

It was during this period that various "Deacon Family Ministry" materials were made available by the Sunday School Board and became popular.

By the 1990's, it was a decided issue in denominational publications and among Baptist leaders. In 1991 Jerry Songer wrote that, "The board of deacons and business manager concept is no longer a viable model" (Deacons Leading with Pastor and Staff, Deacons as Leaders, compiled by Robert Sheffield, Convention Press, 1991, page 87). In 1997, Jim Henry was returning Baptists to Thomas Collier's portrait of the work of deacons as that of serving three tables (the table of the Lord, the table of the minister, and the table of the poor) as part of his video training materials (Deacons: Partners in Ministry and Growth (Sampson Ministries, 1997, distributed by the Sunday School Board of the SBC).

## **Why the "Board of Directors" Concept Persists**

There are several reasons why the "Board of Directors" model persists in Baptist life:

- 1) As a carry-over from rural churches and the days when they had bi-vocational, perhaps half or quarter time "preachers," who were not on the field to tend to day to day ministry and administration.
- 2) Because of the conclusion that it is common sense to hash things out behind closed doors before bringing them out to the floor for a church vote; who else is there, besides the deacons, to hash things out?
- 3) Because some Christians have the gift of administration (or skills in that area) and the deacon body is the only place in their church's organizational structure where there is opportunity to serve the Lord in that way.
- 4) In order to provide reasonable accountability. Without such a body, an individual may become tempted to abuse his trust.
- 5) From the experience of deacons with a background in the business world (which would include R.B.C. Howell) or secular charitable institutions. Sometimes, it was the only model with which they have had any real familiarity.
- 6) Because some deacons would be out of their comfort zones - perhaps they don't know enough Bible to understand the New Testament teaching on the office of deacon or they don't feel comfortable in doing ministry. So they stick to that with that with which they are comfortable.

## **Approaches in Returning to the Biblical Deaconship**

Various approaches are being taken by churches attempting to return to a more biblical model of deaconship. How far they are willing to go in the effort is determined by a number of variables including their view of and emphasis on Scripture, their understanding of the nature of the church, the age of the congregation, and the unanimity of the fellowship on whether steps need to be taken at all.

### **1. Changing the Terminology**

Some churches, in an effort to improve their church's concept of deaconship, have attempted to return to Biblical terminology and drop the language of the business world. Perhaps, they no longer refer to the deacons as a "board," but as a "body," maybe removing the term "chairman of the board".

### **2) Changing the Attitude**

These churches simply decide that a change of by-laws would be unwise or unpassable, but that for them a move toward a more servant-ministry approach and mentality would be in order.

### **3) Moving to a Form of Church Government with Elders and Deacons**

The Capitol Hill Baptist Church has this form of organization. Says their pastor, Mike Dever,

"All churches have had individuals who have performed the functions of elders even if they were called by another name. In the NT, they were called elders or overseers, and there was always more than one (a plurality) being talked about. They were needed in the NT and they are needed now"

*(Nine Marks of a Healthy Church: Biblical Church Leadership"*

See also this [the Capitol Hills Baptist church constitution.](#))

These churches select elders to oversee the administration of the church and return the office of deacon to the benevolence/assisting role of the New Testament. The eldership in these churches usually includes the pastor, perhaps other paid ministerial staff members, and lay members of the church. It would be noted that this approach should require that members of the eldership meet the qualifications in 1st Timothy 3:1-7, including being apt to teach the Word of God. Some may ask, "Why not have the deacons function as elders, just not change the name?" If Deacons were to act as elders, who would carry out the role the Bible assigns to the deacons?

The elders would fulfill the Biblical assignment for elders; not simply being church business leaders, but spiritual leaders in the truest sense. For example, the bylaws of the Park Avenue Baptist Church in Titusville, Florida specify in part:

"The elders are responsible for providing the vision and direction to the church. They are responsible for the government of the church as representatives of the people and God. They shall pastor the people by providing spiritual guidance, teaching, and by equipping the people for the work of the ministry. The elders, with the assistance of the deacons, shall make provision for each member to receive watchcare. The main function of the elders is to provide the atmosphere and structure to enable individuals to develop their relationship with God and each other by appropriating the character of Jesus Christ and functioning daily in obedience to the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit."

### **4) Changing the Organization of the Deacons**

Some churches organize their deacons to take care of administration and ministry with different deacon teams. One church went to having administrative and ministry deacons. One should note that this is really a variation of having elders and deacons, just not changing the name from deacons or requiring one to meet the qualifications for elders.

### **5) Dropping the Administration Function of Deacons and Relying on Committees.**

These churches go all out for deacon ministry and leave all administrative functions to the staff and the committees of the church. Sometimes, the church council becomes the equivalent of ruling elders.

### **6) Adding Ministry to the Responsibilities of Deacons.**

Some churches try to get their deacons moving in a more biblical direction by *adding* ministry to their concept of deaconship. They do not delete the old approach to leadership which, in their fellowship, would arouse hostility from more traditional members. Their deacons continue to operate like a board of elders, but add ministry to their expectations.

## **Observations and Cautions:**

1. No church should attempt any changes in its by-laws without a prior change of heart and of mind; or serious division may result in the church.
2. No changes made should create a vacuum. Even churches structured in an unbiblical manner have found ways to get things done. Changes should not produce chaos.

3. Accountability provides protection for everyone; there must be a way to leave it in place, in a structure which is Biblical and which fosters respect for the office of pastor and other ministerial positions.
4. Merely changing the terminology or giving lip-service to biblical roles is insufficient. The Lord's work must actually be done in the Lord's way.
5. If a church wants to choose to use its deacons as a board of ruling elders, then those deacons (now ruling elders mislabeled) must do the work of elders and meet the qualifications for elders, as enumerated in Scripture. Otherwise, they may lack the necessary Biblical mindset to guide the church. Churches which do this often drift from their God-given mission.
6. Ultimately, a congregation has to decide if they are a church under the authority of God's Word - in practice - or not. If so, they will have to structure their government in a biblical way using biblical terminology.
7. The purpose of deacons is to serve the Lord by conducting the caring ministry of the church - doing the work of benevolence, visiting the sick, being alert to the spiritual needs of the congregation - and by promoting unity within the church, thus freeing the pastor(s) to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word, and facilitating the spread of the gospel.

It may be necessary for deacons to assume additional responsibilities to meet the needs of the modern world, but it is never acceptable to delete the original, Biblical functions of the office.