

WHY THE CHURCH NEEDS DEACONS

Rick Gamache

Senior Pastor, Cornerstone Community Church (Burnsville, MN)

If the elders are the servant leaders of the church, then the deacons are the lead servants. And both offices (official, biblical, recognized roles) are vital in a healthy, mature, growing, vibrant, active church. God graciously bolsters his body of believers by giving deacons to care for the temporal needs of his household as we live our lives here under the sun. So let's unpack some aspects of the diaconate office to remind ourselves why the church needs deacons.

A Supporting Office

Elders govern, elders lead, and elders teach. Elders are the ones who determine how best to position deacons as lead servants in the church. And deacons are positioned to serve the church by supporting the elders.

In Acts 6 we have a proto-type of the office of deacon. The church is growing rapidly and the apostles are ministering without the support of deacons. The office hasn't been established at this point, which is why the term "deacon" (the noun) is not used in the chapter. But a variation of the word is used three times. You know the story. The Greek-speaking, Jewish widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution (6:1). In the following verses we learn that time is being taken away from the ministry of the Word and of prayer so that the apostles can tend to situations like this. And they recognize this "is not right" (6:2). So that they can "devote [themselves] to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (6:4), seven men are appointed to serve the temporal needs of the fledgling church, that is, to serve the church by supporting the elders in their call to govern and to teach. It's not that serving practical needs like taking care of widows is somehow beneath pastors; it's simply that they have another function to fulfill. So God raises up others to fulfill a different function in the church: to lead in serving and meeting needs. Thus, the diaconate is a supporting office.

A Situational Office

The diaconate is also a situational office. Here's what I mean. A need arose in the church and saints appointed by the elders served to meet that need. Devotion to the ministry of the Word cannot be compromised, but neither can the ministry of meeting needs. It's not either/or; it's both/and. God cares about the needs of his people. He's full of compassion and mercy. So much so that when he established his church, he created an office dedicated to serving others in order to meet needs.

An elder's job description is clear: he fulfills his call mainly by leading and teaching. That never changes; that's always what the elder does. But there is no specific job description for the deacon. They simply serve. It's ambiguous because it's a situational office. There are different needs in the church at different times so that the office of deacon might look different from church to church. Or perhaps it will look different in the same church from season to season. It will always be about serving to meet needs and it will always be about serving the church by supporting the elders, but there is freedom to determine what deacons specifically do in their service to the church.

So we ask questions: What is taking time away from the pastor's ministry of the word that could be passed along to a qualified deacon who will lead out in serving and so support the elders in their call? Are there needs that are not being adequately met that would be if there was a deacon in place? We have the biblical freedom to think that way about the diaconate because the office is situational.

A Spiritual Office

The diaconate is also a spiritual office. In Acts 6, the apostles give these instructions about appointing lead servants: "Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty" (6:3). By the time the office is officially established, requirements are laid out that parallel those for an elder in that they relate to the character and maturity of the one given the spiritual charge as a deacon (1 Tim. 3:8-13). The implication is that the deacon doesn't just "do stuff," but serves by the power of the Spirit for the glory of Christ.

A Significant Office

The fact that it's a spiritual office means that it's a significant office. The diaconate is an important office in the church. It's a lofty office. We see that in the required character of those who fill it. It's lofty in that it supports the ministry of the Word. It's lofty in that it expresses the character of God by meeting needs. It's lofty in that the office comes with a stated reward: "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 Tim. 3:13). What a reward: honor in the church and confidence as they draw close to God in Christ!

A Shared Office

Lastly, the diaconate is a shared office. That is, every individual member of God's household is called to serve. The Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 5:13, "through love serve one another." It's what we do. Even the teaching ministry of the elders is all about helping us fulfill our call to serve. In Ephesians 4:11-12, the Apostle Paul writes, "And he (God) gave ... the shepherds and teachers (elders), to equip the saints (the entire church) for the work of ministry (for serving), for building up the body of Christ ..."

Elders and deacons don't do it all. Elders equip the church to serve and deacons lead out in serving. But we all serve, imaging forth our Savior, who said in Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served (not to be deaconed) but to serve (to deacon), and to give his life as a ransom for many." And when we image forth Christ, we fulfill our mission as a church.

Deacons and the Mission of the Church

The Apostle Paul, after giving the qualifications for elders and deacons, states that we are God's household, his family (1 Tim. 3:14-16). We are the church of the living God, the place where God is uniquely present. We are a pillar and buttress of the truth. We support the truth as a church and we hold it up on a pillar for the world to see. When that happens we stay on mission and Jesus is magnified. That's what verse 16 is all about: "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory."

This is likely a quote from an ancient hymn of the early church. Jesus was manifest in the flesh. He came in the flesh so that he could die for the sins of his people. And he was vindicated by the Spirit. He was raised from the dead in victory over death and sin. That was all seen in the spirit world by angels, and it is being proclaimed by the church to the nations. And some are believing and being added to the church of which the ascended Christ is the head. That hymn is our mission. Our mission is Jesus.

The church is to be an army of servants, equipped with the Word, passionate about the glory of Christ, and putting him on display in all our serving. No one sits on the sidelines. It involves sacrifice and commitment. No one said being part of the church was easy. But it's glorious because we all get to be part of making Christ known, which is worth the sacrifice.

The officers of the church—elders and deacons—are commissioned to keep the church on mission. And when we stay on mission, Acts 6:7 happens: "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." That sounds good, doesn't it? May it happen through our churches, churches that need deacons!