

DEACONS

A Neglected Ministry

by Carl Kinbar
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Preface

Traditionally, the ministry of the deacon is somewhat of a puzzle. In some churches, it has attained the stature of eldership steering the church and functioning, for all intents and purposes, as final authority on the human level. In other churches, the deacon is seen simply as one who serves faithfully in some “non-spiritual” or practical task. There are also churches where this ministry has almost no place at all. The deacon’s ministry has been overlooked, ignored, and misunderstood. The relationship of deacons to the ministry of elders, and to body life in general, is not recognized. It is a ministry rarely practiced with power and as a result, the church suffers. In today’s large Christian bookstores, one would be hard-pressed to find a book, or even a chapter, about deacons (apart from those that reflect a purely traditional perspective). Examining the catalogs of restoration-minded publishers will produce the same results. One would be more likely to find a book on Christian camping (and it is good we have such books) than on this vital, biblical ministry. In these days, when Jesus is bringing about the restoration of all things, the ministry of the deacon will also be restored, both in our understanding and in practice.

The Need for Deacons

For understanding of the ministry of deacons, we must search God’s word relying on Him for light and grace. We are not looking primarily for a structure or a method, but for the way in which Jesus would manifest Himself through this precious and dynamic ministry. The Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth as we search the scriptures. If we rely instead on past understanding, church tradition, or bare reason, we will certainly go astray. Let’s begin in Acts, chapter six:

In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against those of the Aramaic-speaking community because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the “Twelve” gathered all the

disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables." (Acts 6:1-2)

The apostles were servants. It is not difficult to imagine them taking great care for their widows. It was at the apostles' feet that the contributions were laid (Acts 4:35). It was the apostles who distributed to the needy. It was they who had a heart of compassion for the poor, the widows and the fatherless. Doubtless, they could be seen hurrying through the streets of Jerusalem to purchase and bring food to those who were destitute. The most needy were the widows, neglected by government and society, without any means of support. Although others were certainly involved with the apostles in this ministry, final responsibility fell on the shoulders of the "Twelve."

However, despite their best efforts, the apostles' ministry was under accusation. We do not know whether or not the complaint of the Grecian Jews was justified. It may have resulted from wrong perception, from gossip being spread, or from the accusation that Satan continually brings against the saints. On the other hand, it is not unusual for iniquities to develop in such a situation. The church was very large. There were over five-thousand believing men (Acts 4:4), with thousands of women and children. The widows were scattered across the city. Since the apostles' contacts were mainly among the Aramaic-speaking Jews, it is understandable that some of the Greek widows may have been overlooked. It is also possible that some of those serving under the apostles may have been careless or imprudent in the distribution of food. Besides, the "Twelve" were called by God to devote themselves primarily to the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom and could not devote themselves fully to the benevolent task. Their words in verse 2 indicate that they had already overextended themselves. They were hard pressed to find a solution, not because they had no compassion or heart to serve, but because they were accountable to God for His call on their lives. Yet, as shepherds and lovers of God's flock, they could not ignore the needs of the widows.

Also, the situation was crucial because until this time all the believers had been of one heart and mind (Acts 4:32-35). Their unity was deep and spiritual, as they laid down their own interests for the sake of the gospel and for one another. This unity was a dramatic testimony to the power of the gospel. But the complaint of the Grecian Jews threatened to develop into the church's first full-blown division. So the apostles gathered the entire church.

Brothers, 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 apostles needed, first of all, to know which of the men were in touch with the people and respected by them (this is why they were chosen by the people). They must also be spiritual men, able to fulfill the great responsibility about to be given to them. So they put this need before the people, indicating at the same time their desire to devote themselves to the ministry God had given them.

The Ministry of the Deacons

The word translated “responsibility” (chreia) in the NIV is key to understanding the ministry of the deacon. The New American Standard bible says “whom we may put in charge (kathistemi = to appoint or put in charge) of this task.” Together, these convey a fuller sense of what the Holy Spirit was saying to the church. *The task was also a responsibility (which always implies accountability) and involved oversight, including the exercise of authority.*

Notice that the responsibility of the seven men was neither small nor simple. First, the responsibility of those identified as being in need (see 1 Timothy 5:3-15), making sure that family members first fulfilled their responsibilities to their widows. This alone would have been a huge task for the apostles, and their failure to discharge it properly may well have given cause for the Greeks’ complaint. If a woman was found unworthy, she must be challenged to obey God, perhaps explanations given to interested parties. This is an aspect of shepherding or pastoral ministry. After determining the needs of each widow, money must be set aside, and the food purchased and delivered. So the tasks were diverse and the responsibility was great. The well-being of the widows and, in part, the unity of the body would depend on how well these men served. No wonder that deacons must be “full of the Spirit and wisdom!” This aspect of the deacon’s ministry has often been overlooked.

Some have said that anyone who serves faithfully, and meets the character qualifications listed in 1 Timothy chapter 3, could be a deacon since “deacon” is imply a transliteration of “diakonos,” the Greek word for servant. Ultimately, it is said, every believer might become a deacon. However, though services such as cleaning and the church building, duplicating tapes, etc., are important, to perform them does not require a fullness of the Spirit and wisdom. These qualities are required because of the deacon’s ministry is essentially a ministry of oversight. It is part of church government. And no one can govern effectively who is not wise and full of the

Spirit. Everyone should seek to be established in the character that an elder must have, yet only a few are called into eldership. All should aspire to servanthood and godly character, yet only a certain number will be called to be deacons.

It must be pointed out that “full of the Spirit” does not mean “having once been baptized in the Holy Spirit.” It is that ongoing fullness mentioned in Ephesians 5:18. In examining that chapter, you will find that such a man is constantly empowered by the Spirit and imitating Jesus (verses 1-2). He is fervent in love, sacrificing himself for God and others (verse 2). He does not participate in impure things, but instead exposes them (verses 3-14). He is careful to use his time wisely for Jesus (verse 15). His life is an expression of thanksgiving and submission (verses 16-21). This lifestyle is meant for all Christians, but is essential for a deacon.

Fulness of wisdom does not refer primarily to the word of wisdom, the spiritual gift mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:8. That gift, a special insight from God into a specific person or situation, is certainly essential for leadership. However, the wisdom referred to in Acts 6 is something resident within the deacon. It is the result of an ongoing process, learning from the Holy Spirit in the Word and in life. It comes from understanding the ways of God and the ways of man. Without it, a man simply will not grasp the dynamics of the lives he must serve and the relationships he must deal with. He will be naive, often making false assumptions about people, severely diminishing his effectiveness.

The character qualifications for the diaconate are elaborated in 1 Timothy 3:8-12. These are practical, down-to-earth virtues that anchor and demonstrate the Acts 6 qualifications of “full of the Spirit and wisdom.” Thus, it is possible for a younger or undisciplined brother to seem to have these two characteristics when ministering publicly or in other special circumstances. However, only if his character and family are in order will he be able to serve successfully. For example, is he “trustworthy (or faithful) in all things.” That is, can he be counted on when help is needed? Is he committed and on time to the meetings? Does he handle his finances well? If not, you can be sure that he will not be faithful as a deacon in serving, overseeing, handling church finances, and keeping records in God’s household.

In 1 Timothy 3, the qualifications of elders and deacons are very similar. The only significant difference is that an elder must be able to teach (the Greek word for teach, *didasko*, is used for the public ministry of God’s word). The reason that the qualifications are so alike is that, as we have seen, the deacons as well as the elders must have ability to shepherd God’s people. They must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit, discerning of

people, wise to bring healing to strained or shattered relationships, and able to challenge the saints to excellence in life and serving.

Above all, a deacon must be a servant. He is not “serving” in order to attain status or position or to “graduate” to another ministry. Rather, he has a heart to serve the flock of God. He wants to see the elders released to fulfill their ministry. He takes it personally when a need is not being met. However, he will act under God’s direction in meeting needs because he is primarily a servant. Sometimes “positions” in the church are used in an attempt to motivate a person to serve or as a reward for some other service. But the diaconate is a ministry, not an office or position. It cannot be given or created by man, only recognized or confirmed. A man who is not yet spiritually qualified for this ministry, whether or not he is called and no matter how gifted he is, will have great mixture in his ministry. A man without the proper character (and I am not speaking of perfection but of stature) will cause harm.

It is important to note that in Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3, the Holy Spirit does not give us a description of “how to be a deacon” or “how to minister to the needy.” God’s method is to equip and set apart members of the body of Christ for service. If men are not properly qualified or given authority, the diaconate will then be deficient in both the life and the order of God. It is then almost inevitable that men will invent a program or construct a detailed method to “get the job done.” We must resist the temptation to substitute methods for men.

A Corporate Ministry

Another aspect that must be emphasized is the corporate nature of this ministry. The apostles did not ask for one man to be chosen by the people nor did they put one man in charge. They gave the task, ultimately, to seven men who served together, who shared responsibility and oversight. There is no evidence that these seven men served full time in their ministry. Coupled with the great size of the Jerusalem church, this would suggest that they were overseeing many saints who served with them. They needed to exercise authority with humility and yet without compromise.

Most likely, they met together periodically to pray, talk, and to plan. It was in serving together in this way they would work out their own relationships. This is excellent training for those who would ultimately be called into eldership, where oversight is also shared. There must be a heartfelt seeking of God, a coming into deep unity, without politicking, manipulation, or authoritarianism, but based on hearing and obeying the voice of God. Only then could Jesus truly be honored as Head of the church.

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procurus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread, The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:5-7)

The people quickly saw the wisdom of this plan and responded. The apostles then appointed these men, putting them in charge of the task, by the “laying on of hands.” Wisdom is vindicated by her children (Luke 7:35), determined in this case by the great fruitfulness that followed the release of the apostles to preach the gospel devotedly. Another consequence of appointing these men was that at least two of them, Stephen and Philip, quickly moved into an effective ministry of the gospel (Acts 6:8, 8:5).

How Does This Apply Today?

In order to see more explicitly how Acts 6 applies today, let’s consider a series of questions.

In Acts 6, the word “deacon” is not mentioned. How can we be sure that the ministry is the same as the one mentioned in 1 Timothy 3?

- The key can be found by doing a study of the word “diakonia” (service or ministry) and its cognates “diakonein” (to serve or minister) and “diakonos” (servant). These words can signify any type of serving, including homemaking responsibilities such as serving meals (Luke 8:15 and 17:8), relief for the destitute (Acts 11:29), the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18), and apostolic ministry (Acts 20:24 and Romans 11:13). The one who serves is called a diakonos (servant), regardless of the type or magnitude of his or her service. Diakonos is the word used for the servants at the wedding at Cana (John 2:5), governing authorities (Romans 13:4), deacons (1 Timothy 3:8), and apostles (2 Corinthians 11:23). [The word *presbuteros* (elder) has a similar flexibility of meaning, referring to an older brother (Luke 15:25), old men (Acts 2:17), the elders of Israel (Acts 4:8), older men in the church (1 Peter 5:5), and elders who oversee the church (Acts 14:23)] In Acts 6, we see two distinct types of diakonia: *verse 1* “the daily distribution” (diakopnia); *verse 2* “to wait (diakonein) on tables”; *verse 4* “the ministry (diakonia) of the word.” This is the first time that the early church saw these two types of service as distinct functions. God cares for His people, body, soul, and spirit. Jesus perfectly reflected the Father in that His ministry was likewise to the

whole person. But, as the apostles walked in Jesus' steps they began to discover a many-membered body, each member uniquely expressing the grace of God to the others. They themselves could not do it all. They were devoted to the "diakonia of the word." Others had to be appointed for the diakonia of food, of tables, and of the widows.

- We have seen that the one involved in diakonia is called a diakonos. It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that, by the time we find the word diakonos used in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3, it had attained a fixed meaning. Although it could still be used for one who served in any way, it was now the ordinary way of referring to men who served in the way we are discussing in this pamphlet.
- Also, if the seven were not deacons, what were they? Did their type of service pass out of existence and a new, different ministry arise, which does not require fullness of the Spirit and wisdom? In that case, we are also left without any scriptural way of understanding the deacon's ministry or why there should be any qualifications to serve. But we believe that such a highly-qualified ministry of oversight is still vital today.

The situation in the Jerusalem church was unusual in that apostles, not elders, were in oversight. Their sphere and responsibilities were much greater than that of an elder today. Also, an apostle's ministry would be extra-local and thus they would need local men to serve. How, then, does this apply to us?

- The parallel is very close because the underlying issue is: will we serve wherever there is a need, or will we find our place in the body, according to God's call on our lives? Notice, there must be a willingness to serve any where, any time, in any way. However, will we devote ourselves to the ministry God has given us, whether deacon, elder, secretary, homemaker, or an apostle? Paul could have devoted his entire life to serving widows in Tarsus. What would the result have been for the church? Furthermore, many elders today find themselves in exactly the same position as the apostles. Though they have a different ministry and a different sphere, they have definite responsibilities given by God. Yet, instead of devoting themselves to the ministry of the word, prayer, and shepherding the flock, they also find themselves attempting to meet the needs of the widows, acting as janitor and repairman, or closely overseeing these functions. The lesson of Acts 6 is that there are men in the church who cannot only serve effectively in practical matters, but who are

filled with the Spirit and wisdom, able to oversee these things in such a way that the elders do not have to be involved either directly or in close oversight. This will free elders to devote themselves to the work God has given them.

- According to James, the religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: “to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). In both the care for needy believers and purity of life, the church of Jesus is in dire need of restoration. The deacon’s ministry should constitute a significant portion of the church’s response in the first area. Because deacons have not been encouraged and released to care for the needy, many remain uncomforted and unhelped in their distress.

Wouldn’t it be better for the needy to be helped by those to whom God has related them, especially in the house churches?

- Certainly it is God’s will to build us together in a small house church environment to serve each other in every area of life. However, it is also clear that there are needs that cannot be met in that context. This happens when the resources, material or spiritual, are not available in the house church. For example, a widow needs plumbing repairs and no one in the group knows how to do that work, or there is a financial need the house church cannot handle; or a troubled child of a single parent needs the specialized help of a man in another house church. In each of these cases, the diakonate is responsible to make sure that the need is being properly handled. They should have a heart for such people, be aware of their needs, and be involved, when necessary, in meeting those needs.

Should deacons be chosen, as they were in Jerusalem, by the people?

- Yes, if the situation is similar. The church was very large and the apostles were out of touch with at least a significant segment of it. Hopefully, such a situation would exist today as the result of a tremendous harvest of new disciples, and not as the result of elders being out of touch with the rest of the flock. In most churches, however, the elders should know who is full of the Spirit and wisdom and sensitive to the flock, and who may be tested to see if they are faithful to God’s call to the diakonate. These men will already have shown themselves faithful in serving in their house churches.

What is the relationship between the deacons and elders?

- The deacons are a body of men who oversee and labor in various areas of church life (see below). As a body, they are responsible both to Jesus the Head of the church and to the elders. They serve under the direction of the elders. After testing (1 Timothy 3:10), a deacon will be confirmed or appointed by the elders with the laying on of hands. They seek God and work together with the elders to achieve and maintain unity of heart and mind. They can give vital input to the eldership, perhaps being aware of things the eldership is overlooking or perhaps simply seeing things from a different perspective.

A similar relationship can be found in Numbers 18:1-7, where God gives Moses the charge for the tribe of Levi. The overall responsibility for ministry and for sin against the sanctuary was Aaron's. Nevertheless, Aaron and his sons could not fulfill their ministry without the ongoing help of their fellow Levites. This relationship is a type or shadow of the relationship between elders and deacons in the New Testament church. The eldership must minister the word and oversee the church. The deacons support them by overseeing and carrying out a multitude of tasks and responsibilities. Without such support an eldership is greatly hindered in its work, and the house of God cannot effectively be built.

If the deacons are a body of men, how do their individual ministries relate to their corporate ministry?

- Just as elders have distinct ministries (pastor, teacher, prophet, etc.), so do the deacons. There will be practically-minded men who function in the areas of finances, building maintenance, audio equipment. Others may be involved in the church's music ministry, publications, evangelism, or follow-up ministry. Although all deacons should have an ability to shepherd, only some will lead house churches. Ministry to widows and the poor are certainly deacon ministries. The deacons should all be full of the Spirit and wisdom, not only able to do these types of ministry but also to oversee. Because it is a corporate ministry, the diaconate also requires a building together of men in relationship, a give-and-take, that is an excellent preparation for those among them who are called to eldership.

Can women have this ministry?

- In answering this question, it is important to keep in mind that the ministry of deacon involves the exercise of authority. The deacons are in submission to one another as well as to the elders. Likewise they have a measure of authority in each other's ministry and they direct those who serve "under" them. It is specifically not permitted for a woman to have authority over a man (1 Timothy 2:12-14), and

thus she could not function with men in this context. It is noteworthy that Paul's argument in 1 Timothy 2 is based not on the culture of his times but on theological considerations with roots in Genesis chapters 2 and 3. However, it is not difficult to imagine women serving as deaconesses (see Acts 9:36; Romans 16:1; Proverbs 31:20), submitting to one another and to the eldership, directing certain activities of other sisters as they serve in various ministries in the church. Certainly there are areas of hospitality, ministering to the needs of mothers with newborns, clothing the needy, etc., that would fall within the responsibilities of the deaconess.

Conclusion

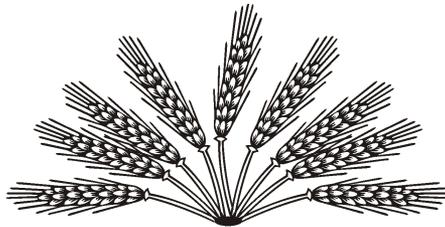
The servant lifestyle is not for the few. All who are saved from God's wrath should be motivated by His mercy to make their lives a complete sacrifice to Jesus (Romans 12:1). This will result in a visible growth of serving and faithfulness. Those who begin to demonstrate this commitment can then be trusted with specific, simple tasks that do not require them to oversee others. As time goes on, some of these will demonstrate the character, the fulness of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, and the calling required for the ministry of the deacon. They can then fulfill the specific ministry of oversight to which God has called them and serve corporately with the other deacons. Men without the call may still have godly character, but will lack the grace necessary to exercise oversight in the church. An example of this process would be the following:

A married man in his late twenties (let's call him Andy) is born-again and soon shows an eagerness to follow Jesus and serve others. When a family is moving, he is there to help. He and his wife care enough to baby-sit, at no charge, for a young couple with two infants and little money. He is available when someone needs a ride to the Sunday meeting. His commitment soon becomes obvious to the elders, who ask him to pray about regularly visiting a shut-in who lives downtown or helping with the tape ministry. After a period of serving in these and similar responsibilities, Andy is demonstrating that he is growing in character, zeal, and wisdom. When he is asked to make decisions, they are usually good ones. If they aren't, he is able to receive correction without blowing up or pouting. Others are coming to value his judgment. Importantly, Andy is also doing a good job with his family. He leads his wife and trains his children faithfully. He is not neglecting them in order to serve others. He is faithful to attend and participate in his house church. He is showing an increased sensitivity to the Holy Spirit and an increased ability to minister to others spiritually.

Now, the deacon who is overseeing the media ministries of the church is about to move to another state. This service includes overseeing audio and video taping, printing, filling orders, and record-keeping. It involves much interaction with others, face-to-face as well as by telephone and by mail.

Andy expresses the belief that God would have him fulfill that task. The elders pray and sense the confirmation of the Holy Spirit. Before he moves, the deacon trains Andy. Andy is now being tested as a deacon (1 Timothy 3:10). He is overseeing four brothers and sisters in the media ministry. Under the eldership, he begins to impart direction to that ministry as a whole. He is meeting with the other deacons to oversee together the diakonia of media. If he continues faithfully, the elders will lay hands on him and he will be recognized as a deacon.

As we examine the ministry of a deacon, it becomes increasingly apparent that it is a distinct ministry requiring a definite call of God. It is not something anyone can decide on their own to do. It will require great commitment and sacrifice. As a part of church government, it entails an increased responsibility to hear clearly from God. It will also bring increased involvement in, and exposure to, spiritual warfare, as the enemy seeks to disrupt church government and sever the church from Christ's rulership. Yet, with the ministry comes great reward. There is the satisfaction that comes from devoted service. There is the gratification that will come from seeing the elders released and the ministry of the whole church increase in fruitfulness. A deep inner joy will result from seeing the needy flourish. There is also the reward mentioned in 1 Timothy 3, where Paul says of deacons that "those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus" (verse 13). Whether or not men notice a deacon who serves well, this "excellent standing" is in the sight of



God Himself, and what greater reward could anyone ask?

FOR FURTHER READING

Roland Allen. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1962. pages 111-125. *Allen was an Anglican missionary to China around the turn of the 19th century. although some of his views can be attributed to this background, he was far ahead of his times. His chapter on authority is foundational.*

Watchman Nee. *The Church and the Work.* New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers 1982. Volume III, pages 83-101. *Nee made some very useful observations about the deacon ministry, although he had not seen its corporate nature. He emphasizes our need to seek God for the exact method of implementing this ministry.*

J. David Pawson. *Leadership is Male.* Suffolk: Highland Books 1988. This is an excellent, scholarly overview of the Biblical evidence on authority and gender.

Dale Rumble. *The Diaconate.* Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1990. This book explores the nature of servant leadership. *Dale uses the word "diaconate" to refer to the entire government of the church, both elders and deacons. The principles of character, the nature of authority, and the centrality of Jesus are all very relevant to the ministry of the deacon. See especially pages 73-81 and 163-167.*

