

What is a deacon?

I mentioned last week that we are taking a small pause on our journey through the Sermon on the Mount and addressing issues related to the life of the church. This morning I want to look to what the Word of God has to say about deacons in the life of the church. You might not realize this, but deacons and deaconesses are of immeasurable value in the life of the church and the work of the gospel and safeguarding the gospel from attack.

Right now, RBC has no deacons or deaconesses. On the one hand that puts us in an excellent spot to study this aspect of church life because we can address the issue without the difficulty of people in that position feeling as though they are being picked on or critiqued or even embarrassed because maybe we're praising them. On the other hand, we would welcome those that have a heart to serve to come forward as a deacon or deaconess. And our hope is that this sermon serves as a launching pad for what that would look like.

Let me sketch it this way so you understand the importance of the work of deacons: The gospel faces many threats. If we were to sit down and make a list of things that might threaten the church or threaten the gospel message we could with quite a list. The temptation to sin is a threat. We might say false teaching; either doctrinal error or moral false teaching. Persecution is a threat. Worldly pleasures are a threat. Division within the church. Cults are a threat. Luke warm love is a threat. There are a lot of threats to the gospel.

But there is one threat that is potentially more dangerous than all of those threats. And it is a threat that is so dangerous that God in his infinite, eternal wisdom designed the office of deacon to guard against it. What is this ever-looming threat to the gospel? It is pastoral distraction. It is pastors and elders getting so caught in doing good things for other people, serving and ministering to peoples' physical needs that the primacy of studying and praying and preaching get put on a back burner. The faithful proclamation of the gospel slowly gets replaced with meeting peoples' needs.

Some people call this the tyranny of the urgent. Where there is always some pressing need that comes up and has to be dealt with right away that can distract from the main thing. And often these are legitimate needs. People need help. They need food or a hand or a ride or advice or counseling or help around the house. These are legitimate needs that need to be addressed.

And - if I can go a step further - that pastors/elders should be willing and able to address these needs. There's nothing wrong with elders or pastors addressing physical needs of the congregation. The problem is when these kinds of needs become too burdensome for the elders. Because the natural tendency of any good shepherd is to stop the work of study and faithful proclamation/teaching/counseling/soul care to meet the needs of sheep in front of you. There is just a knee-jerk inclination to do that. Shepherds care for sheep. The ever-present danger is that they do so at the cost of the proclamation of the gospel.

Definition: Deacons are qualified men and women who help people in the church so the elders can focus on teaching and praying.

What I want you to think of when you think of deacons is someone who loves serving people - sometimes difficult people - so that the work of gospel proclamation can keep going.

So I want to break our time this morning into 3 simple sections. First, what do we see deacons doing? What are some ways deacons often serve that are not prescribed by the Bible? What are the qualifications of deacons?

1) What do deacons do?

This is what we have here in Acts 6. Now, most people will call the 7 men here in Acts 6 deacons. I actually don't believe these 7 men are technically deacons. They're never called deacons in the book of Acts. We see a couple of them again but they basically disappear from the life of the church. But their function is to distribute food. That distribution is called *διακονία*. So most people - myself included - believe these are something like proto-deacons. These are the beginning of what will eventually become the office of deacon. And as we saw, the crux of the issue for their need is in **Vss. 1-2. Read**

So this is the reason for needing these guys to take over. The apostles are involved in the daily distribution of food. They've been serving and that's a good thing. But the problem is the work to do that is beginning to hinder the true work of the church which is the proclamation of the gospel. It's too much and the mission is being compromised.

This is actually the pitfall of what is called the social gospel. The social gospel movement - and social gospel churches - are really big into meeting peoples' physical needs. And that's a good thing. The problem is they neglect the gospel in doing so.

Jesus says a man shall not live on what alone? Bread alone. alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. Jesus says you need bread. We like bread. But we don't live on bread **alone**. We live on every word that comes from the mouth of God. We need both. So here's what they do: **Read 3-6**

So the porto-deacon role here is to free up the apostles so they can preach and pray. The apostles and the deacons know that prayer and preaching are the primary means of the advancing the Kingdom. So there's a sense in which the deacons are doing tasks for the apostles so they can do their job.

Let me give you a little analogy. Say you were talking military veteran. And they were talking to you about the war they served in. And you asked them "what kind of fighting did you do in the war?" And they said "I was a cook; I prepared food for the troops." And your response was "Oh, so you didn't really fight in the war." You'd probably offend them. Pulling a trigger isn't the only type of fighting in the war. Preparing food so that soldiers can keep up the fight is also a type of fighting. No food, no troops. No troops, no victory. Cooks in the military do what they do so that battalion can advance and the war can be won. They are vital to winning the war.

That's essentially the deacon's role. Deacons serve in critical ways so that the gospel can advance while very crucial needs are met.

Let me make a couple of observations here. First of all, deacons have to deal well with complainers. **Vs. 1** says a complaint. A grumbling. Literally in the Gk it's a gonging going on in the background. Complaints, back-biting, criticism of the apostles. So whoever deacons are, they need to be able to listen well to complaining, redirect the complaining, and bring peace to the situation. It's very easy to get caught up in the fray and add gas to the fire. Deacons need to be peacemakers when things are tough. And this was no small matter. This wasn't "I didn't get the color of carpet I wanted." This was: "I have no food and I might starve."

Second, the deacons respect the work of the apostles in preaching and teaching and praying. It's not that the apostles are beneath serving tables. That's just not what God has designed them to do. So these are not competing positions, they are positions that work in harmony so the gospel can be proclaimed.

Third - we'll see qualifications for deacons later - but they have to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Why? The word deacon just means servant. It's a waiter or a waitress. Why do you have to be filled with the Spirit and meet a whole bunch of qualifications in order to serve tables? Because oftentimes deacons are going into very sensitive situations, personal situations, vulnerable situations, and the apostles need to be able to fully support a man or woman who enters that situation.

Many times they're doing benevolence - giving money or financial help on behalf of the church - so not only do we need to trust them with other people and their money, but trust them with at least some of the funds of the church.

Throughout the Bible - and even in our society - there is really no more vulnerable segment of the population than the orphans and widows. So you need people who you know that you know that you can trust going into a widow's home and they will treat them with the utmost respect and deference and kindness and selflessness.

Fourth, the qualifications had nothing to do with food or management or elderly administration. They weren't diesel mechanics or good with Windows 10 or plumbing. Those aren't bad. **Read 3**

This is what matters. Do they have a good reputation? Does everyone in the congregation look at this person and go, “Yeah, of course, send that guy and his wife to help the single mom.” “Send her to take that widower to his doctor appointment.” They’re full of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control. They’re wise. They’re not foolish with their life, they’re not immature. You’d want other people to imitate their life.

Fifth, they are culturally and emotionally sensitive. Now this sounds weird, but follow me here for a minute. Which widows were being neglected according to Vs. 1? The Hellenist widows. These were Greek speaking Jewish ladies. In fact, they were probably Gentiles who had come to faith in the God of Abraham, but who when heard the gospel on the day of Pentecost believed in Jesus. So they’re Greek out-of-town widows. And they’re being neglected. What ethnicity are the apostles? Jewish. So there’s a racial and cultural tension here as well. So we would probably appoint 4 Gentile deacons and 3 Jewish ones so that everything was even. Notice the names of these guys. **Read 5**

There’s no Davids, no Abrahams, no Moishes. These are all Greek dudes. The Hellenist - Greek-speaking widows - are raising the complaint, so let’s make sure they are being well cared for and well represented by Hellenist men. Appropriate people are taking care of the appropriate task.

Sixth, God blessed this effort. **Read 7**

If the 7 weren’t doing their thing, the apostles couldn’t do theirs. But because the proto-deacons were working in complete harmony with the apostles, the gospel went forward. The Word of God grew. These things are tied together. The Word would not have increased if the apostles were weighed down with serving tables.

It’s hard to fire torpedos and launch aircraft and drive tanks if you have no food. Everyone was supplied so the Word of God advanced.

One last thing before we move on. It’s important, again, that we realize these were probably proto-deacons, there were many ways these guys function very similarly to deacons without actually being deacons. And I say that because we have to realize this section isn’t a strict outline for exactly how deacons have to work. There don’t always have to be 7 deacons. They don’t have to be all men. Deacons can be Jewish. Deacons can do more than just pass out food to widows. This section just gives us a small glimpse into the attitude and function of those who served in a manner very similar to deacons.

2) What are some ways deacons often serve that are not prescribed by the Bible?

I think it’s safe to say there is a lot of confusion about deacons in the church. Who can be a deacon, what the role of deacon is, how they relate to elders and pastors is all very clouded. Part of this cloudiness is tradition, part of it is lack of teaching. Frankly, part of the confusion is that the NT is simply just not as clear as maybe we’d like on this role. Except for this passage - which never calls these guys deacons - and passing references to deacons and their qualifications, we don’t have a lot to go on.

And I don’t want you to hear that out of the tens of thousands of churches and the hundreds of different ways deacons and deaconesses serve, that somehow we are the only ones to have it right. I think we’ll see that there’s a fair amount of freedom from one church to another to define and describe the roles of deacons and how they serve.

But I think what we will see is that, while there is some flexibility, there are also errors that we can avoid.

So if you were to ask most Christians today who go to church regularly, “What are deacons?” the reply would probably be something like, “They are leaders in the church alongside the elders.”

And if you asked that same group, “What do deacons do?” they would probably respond by saying, “They take care of the church building and help people and manage the budget.”

Now, those are probably true answers in the sense that that is what most deacons functionally do. But those things are not what the Bible describes as being the primary function of deacons. So here are some common things that deacons do in churches do that are not outlined by Scripture at all.

1) Building maintenance: Some people see deacons as the ones who oversee the church building and property therefore deacons need to be handy and maybe have construction experience to know how to best keep the facility. Now, facility maintenance may be a good way in which deacons can keep pastors from being burdened, but biblically speaking we see no requirement for deacons to do this kind of work. And to be fair, non-deacons can maintain the property as well. You don't have to be a deacon to mow or clean or do a project around the building. So if you're looking around at our building and thinking "Man, it'd be nice if I could just do..." then come ask and I'll probably let you loose. You don't have to be a deacon to do those things.

2) Deacons serve as a power check on pastors. This is the typical baptist model of church government: there's one main pastor and he reports to the deacon board who sets his salary, sets the budget, has to approve his ideas. Deacons, then, are really a power check to pastors who might dominate a congregation. This is a bigger problem because now pastors/elders - who are designed to oversee the church - are subordinate to deacons who are designed to serve the church and help the elders. The role of pastor and deacon has actually been reversed. There are many pastors who are domineering, but the answer to that is not to make elders submit to deacons. It's to do a better job of installing pastors and removing them from office if they're tyrannical.

3) Deacons set the budget and manage finances. This is a little bit related to the last one but more specific to financial oversight. This is actually very common in many churches: deacons are designated as those who manage the finances of the church. They set the budget, they ensure the bills are paid, monitor for indiscretion, so on.

Now, historically, deacons have usually managed at least some money because part of their job is care of people and that often requires money. This is called benevolence or alms giving. Benevolence is more directed at church members specifically, alms giving is more directed at those outside the church who are in poverty. Those are good things. If your lights are about to go out because you can't pay the bill or you need some food money, come ask Andy or I. Your lights will not go out. Your bellies will not be hungry. Or - Lord willing when we get some deacons - ask them. Part of a church family is to take care of each other's physical needs.

James 2:15-16: If you see a brother in need of food and clothing and you say, "Go be warmed and filled" without giving him anything your faith is dead. Well, part of that equation is we have to know you have that need. Well, I don't want to be a burden. That's pride. Part of what deacons do is make sure people have food and clothes and heat and shelter.

But here's what has happened with deacons: responsibility for some money grows to oversight over all money. And being willing to shoulder the burden of budget and finance to free up the elder team becomes an untouchable right that they alone have. And for elders to give direction or input becomes a disruption.

Can you imagine sitting down to dinner at a restaurant and giving your order to the waiter and he says: "Sir, I won't let you order that. I will not allow you to spend that much on appetizers. You need to spend more on drinks and entrees." That server would be fired. That's not their place. A good waiter will give suggestions and input and feedback. But ultimately they serve in the way that frees up the elders.

Side: If a person or church can't trust their elders to manage the finances it's time for them to find a new church or remove the elders. Elders are responsible for peoples' souls, which is much more valuable than money. If you can't trust them with money, why would you trust them with your souls?

4) Deacons are referred to as "leaders." Now, this is going to sound a little weird, but deacons are not technically leaders in a church. Leading implies authority. As we'll see, deacons have no technical authority in the church. Deacons are servers. That's what the word means: a server of tables. So when you go out to eat at a nice restaurant do you think of the waiter as a leader in the restaurant? Probably not. They're not the manager, they're not the chef, they're not the patron. That doesn't mean that any schmoe should be a waiter. We've all had great wait staff and bad wait staff - so they need to be qualified for the position.

What I think most people mean is that deacons are to be exemplary. Their lives are so godly that we could point to others to them as a model of godliness. That is true. Both deacons and elders are to be examples of

how people should live their Christian lives but there is no authority or leadership, per se, in the office of deacon.

Okay, so those are some common misconceptions. We could spend a lot of time on common misconceptions. Let me show you 2 more passages. **Look at Rom. 16:1-2.**

I've mentioned that both qualified men and women can be deacons. Biblically, this is true for a couple of reasons. First of all, we have a woman in the Bible called a deaconess. **Read 16:1-2**

Pheobe is a servant of the church in Cenchreae. Usually when you see the word servant in the NT the Gk word for that is *doulos*, which means slave. Believers are commonly called slaves of Christ. But most of you have a footnote on Vs. 1 that the Gk word is actually *διάκονον* - a female deacon. The NIV and NLT translate it literally as deacon.

And it seems as though it's more than just that she's a good server in the church, because Paul is sending her hundreds of miles away to Rome to benefit the church. She's been a patron which is a technical term for someone in an official capacity as a supportive role.

Jason, I thought you said last week that women can't exercise authority or teach men in the church. She's not. She's serving in the church. Paul says to help her, he doesn't say to submit to her. Let her bless you guys. Let her use the gifts God has given her to enrich the church in Rome. Paul says: She has been a patron - a supporting role - for me and many others. That's not leadership. That's support. That's administration.

The problem with many churches is that the deacons **do** exercise authority. The deacons do lead and have power equal to the elders. When that is that case, women cannot, by definition have the role of deacon. So if the church polity - organization - is that deacons are leaders just like elders, then in those contexts women cannot serve as deacons.

3) What are the qualifications for deacons?

Look over to 1 Tim. 3. Here are the qualifications for deacons. Not just any shmoe or schmee can be a deacon. Paul lays out the requirements for deacons.

Read 8: Dignified means worthy of respect or honor. Is this a man or woman who is worthy of honor? Are the double tongued: can you trust what they say? Do they hit the bottle a little too much? We're not teetotalers here - the Bible says wine is a gift from God. But too much wine, that person probably should hold off on meeting other peoples' needs on behalf of the church. Are they greedy? Do they always want more and more or covet peoples' stuff? Probably shouldn't be around the most vulnerable in the church.

Read 9: What does that mean? It means they need to know the gospel. They are going into very tough situations and although they are not elders they need to be able to articulate that the bread they are feeding people and the way they are serving them is an outpouring of gospel love. They need to be able to minister the grace of God in Jesus Christ to those who need it most. To those whose only hope for peace and comfort is in the next life. They don't have to be a preacher or elder or know a bunch of systematic theology. But they need to know the gospel cold. And hold unwaveringly to it.

Read 10: As elders it's really incumbent on us to test people. To see if they meet these qualifications and hear how they serve. We want a track record of faithfulness and wisdom before we lay our hands on them and commission them as representatives of the church.

Read 11: This is a difficult passage because there is some question as to whether Paul is talking about the wives of deacons or is it talking about ladies who happen to be deacons. I've gone back and forth over the years, but I'm pretty convinced these are ladies who happen to be deacons. We already saw in Romans that Pheobe was a deacon. Deacons have no authority or teach.

More than that, the grammar - specifically the word "likewise" - indicates that Paul is turning to a separate group that has similarities. So now he's talking to ladies who are deacons, not the wives of deacons. It's also

odd that elders don't have requirements for their wives, but that deacons would. Well, it's not odd if this is just a list of qualifications for each role: elders, deacons, deaconesses.

Read 12: Deacons, like elders, need to be faithful in their homes. If they are married they need to be faithful to their spouse. If they have children, they need to manage them well. Good management in the home will translate into God-honoring service to the church.

Read 13: This the the reward for being a deacon. Good standing among men and God.

Far from being an unimportant role in the life of the church, deacons are often on the front lines of ministry, serving in the most difficult and sensitive ways. But they do so in order that the gospel can go forward faithfully to the glory of God.

Pray