

The Office of Deacon in the Local Church

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The office of deacon commands a prominent place in New Testament revelation, being one of the two God-ordained offices which are to function in the local New Testament church. Understanding of this office by Bible believers today varies widely from church to church, often reaching extremes on either end of a broad spectrum. The primary focus of this study will be to survey the New Testament teaching concerning the office of deacon. To accomplish this, three different aspects of the office will be considered: (1) the deacon in relation to the local church and its needs, (2) the deacon in relation to the pastor, and (3) the deacon in his personal standards and conduct.

The Deacon in Relation to the Local Church

The responsibility of the deacon to the local church falls into two categories: the area of social tasks, and, secondly, the realm of spiritual duties.

Social Tasks. In social areas, the New Testament deacon was concerned with carrying out the mundane, time-consuming tasks that threatened to rob the minister of the Word of precious study and prayer time. Acts 6:1-6 records the origination of the office as a response to pressing social tasks at hand. The main issue at stake here was the daily care of the widows supported by the church. This daily distribution of food to the poor of the church was fast becoming a major concern that pulled the apostles away from the ministry of the Word. They concluded it was not logical for them to leave the Word of God and "serve tables" (Acts 6:2). This mundane responsibility was therefore delegated to seven men chosen by the congregation especially for this purpose.

The etymology of the word "deacon" supports this idea of service in menial tasks. The English word "deacon" is a loan-word

*A deacon voluntarily endeavors to
serve to benefit others.*

derived from the Latin (*diaconus*) which in turn descended from the Greek *diakonos*. The basic meaning of the term is "servant."

The Greeks held a low view of servanthood, stemming from their strong sense of personal freedom. As Hiebert observes, "They (the Greeks) did not exalt the servant's position, but they did have a keen understanding of various aspects involved in the servant concept. They developed a remarkable variety of terms to express different aspects of it."¹ Hiebert further notes that no less than ten Greek terms appear in the Greek New Testament, each conveying some different aspect of the servant theme.²

Perhaps the most common term for servant is *doulos*, referring to a slave or bond-servant. The thought here is of one who is the property of a master and thus is obligated to do his will. Unlike *doulos*, the term *diakonos* implies the thought of voluntary service.³ The service rendered is that which is performed for the benefit of another.

The derivation of the term *diakonos* is not certain, but most probably stems from the verbal root *dieko* meaning "to reach from one place to another," closely akin to *dioko*, "to hasten after, to pursue." Therefore, the root idea of the term pictures one who voluntarily reaches out with diligence and persistence in order to perform a service on behalf of others.

Other areas of social responsibility for the New Testament deacon include care for the maintenance and oversight of local church properties. Buildings and equipment represent a major investment of the Lord's money, so proper care and upkeep of them is simply a matter of good stewardship.

Dealing with matters involving money is also the responsibility of deacons. Several times in the New Testament, words from the *diakonos* word group are used to refer to the rendering of monetary assistance to other believers (see Luke 8:3; II Cor 8-9, espec. 9:1). The money entrusted to deacons is never viewed as simply cold cash, but rather as a means to minister to others for spiritual benefit. The Gentile believers who sacrificially raised money for Jewish believers in Jerusalem were performing "deacon service" for them (II Cor 8:4).

So that they can adequately perform their social duty to the local church, deacons must be well-informed about church business and projects. Certainly they should be prepared to answer intelligently questions which church members may have about local church business or policy.

Spiritual Duties. The second area of deacon-service to the local church is in the realm of spiritual activity. The New Testament examples afforded by Stephen and Philip certainly illustrate the benefit derived from the spiritual service of spirit-filled men. Acts 8:26-40 reveals the adeptness in personal soul-winning that was possessed by Philip. What a fine example of evangelistic zeal deacons like Philip are to a local body of believers! Even the most clever advocates of Judaism were no match for the Spirit-empowered preaching delivered by Stephen (Acts 6:10). His thorough knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures as recorded in Acts chapter 7 and his relentless courage in the face of death were doubtless very important factors in the conversion of the Apostle Paul.

So also today deacons should be spiritual pace-setters in the local church. Even if the witnessing of Stephen and Philip are due to personal gifts rather than carrying out of official duty, deacons can do much to enhance and widen the outreach of the local church in its community. A few suggestions for these spiritual duties could include hospital or shut-in visitation, preaching in nursing home services or missions, or heading up cottage prayer meetings. As with all believers, the deacon should possess a personal working knowledge of the Scriptures that enables him to exhort, admonish, and encourage other believers toward conformity to Christ (see Rom 15:13-14).

A helpful summary of the relationship of the deacon to local church has been offered by Richard Clearwaters: (1) A deputy who executes a commission (Rom 13:4). (2) A commissioned minister or preacher of the gospel (I Cor 3:5; II Cor 6:4). (3) A minister charged with an announcement or sentence (II Cor 3:6; Gal 2:17; Col 1:23). (4) A devoted follower (Jn 12:26). (5) A superintendent of the alms of the church and other kindred services (Rom 16:1; Phil 1:1; I Tim 3:8, 12).⁴

The Deacon in Relation to the Pastor

Some may seek to clarify their understanding of the deacon's relation to the pastor by answering the question, "Who is supposed to tell whom what to do?" A careful evaluation of New Testament teaching reveals that not only is there not a good answer to that question, but that the question itself is not a legitimate one to ask in the first place. Such a question poses a picture of competition and creates an atmosphere of working against one another rather than a feeling of cooperation as each does his part to complete a mutual task. Since both pastor and deacons are chosen by the local church through the leading of the Holy Spirit, both must labor together harmoniously to complete

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the work set before them. By comparing the New Testament description of the pastoral office to that of deacon, at least two observations concerning the relation between the two come to the fore.

Supplement. First, the deacon's work is to be supplementary. The account in Acts 6:1-6 is perhaps the clearest illustration of this fact. Since the primary objective of the church is the fulfillment of the great commission (Mt 28:19-20), the natural priority for the local church is the ministry of the Word and prayer for the blessing of God on this ministry. Since faith comes through the intelligent hearing of the Word (Rom 10:17), then the Word of God must occupy first place. This ministering of the Word of God is obviously to be the main concern of the pastor, as seen in Acts 6:2 and other references (see II Tim 2:15; 4:2 and I Tim 5:17). The conclusion in Acts 6 is that the deacons should supplement the pastor's ministry in the Word by relieving the pressure of mundane duties. The idea is that they were to search for ways to enhance and improve the pastor's opportunity to minister the Word of God.

Elsewhere in the New Testament the term *diakonos* refers to those who supplement the ministry of another. John 12:26, where the followers of Christ are referred to in relation to their Lord, and Mark 10:43, where the servants of Christ are mentioned in relation to one another, can be cited as examples.

Support. The deacon should be supportive of the pastor. As Jesus stated in Matthew 12:25, "every city or house divided against itself shall not stand." The local church as microcosm is to illustrate the absolute unity of the macrocosm, the body of Christ (see I Cor 12:12-27 and Rom 12:3-5). The deacon should exert conscious effort to support and undergird the ministry of his pastor.

A few reasons may be set forth for the rendering of such support. The first is simply by virtue of the pastor's office itself. This office is one which involves "ruling" (Heb 13:17a), and thus the pastor is to be obeyed and respected. Members are told to "submit" themselves to him (Heb 13:17b). This is much the same as the respect and support which citizens of the United States owe their president by virtue of his office, even though they may have personal differences with him over certain issues.

A second reason for respect and support is the fact that the pastor is a man of training, spiritual insight, and spiritual

maturity. Otherwise the pastor would never have been qualified to assume his position (I Tim 3:1-7).

A third reason for such support is to alleviate the burden of personal responsibility for the sheep which God has entrusted to the pastor's care (Heb 13:17c). It would be quite difficult to give account of his sheep with joy when those sheep have fought and opposed his leadership every step of the way.

Although by virtue of his office the pastor does rule and lead in the local church, by no means is he at liberty to be despotic or dictatorial. In light of this fact, deacons should feel free to share ideas and suggestions regarding church business with their pastor. As mature, spiritual men who may also have extensive qualifications in various areas of secular employment, they can provide helpful insight and important advice on decisions that are to be made. They should not fear to "disagree agreeably" with their pastor and express their opinion in love. However, once the wish of the body has been expressed by majority vote, they are no longer free to disagree and promote their opinion. They should support the decision which has been made.

Deacons should also defend the ministry of their pastor from attack both within and without. If they cannot be supportive of the direction in which he leads the church in the light of Scripture, they should not serve under him, out of respect for his position and for the well-being of the local church of which they are members.

The Deacon in His Personal Standards and Conduct

The deacon holds a conspicuous position in the local church and so it is of utmost importance that he be exemplary in both personal standards and behavior. He not only represents Christ (as does every believer), but in a very direct way becomes a representative of the local church in which he serves. As he follows in the footsteps of Christ (I Pet 2:21), he should set the pattern for other church leadership to follow.

The New Testament provides a detailed list of qualifications for one who serves as deacon in I Timothy 3:8-13. These qualifications fall into the following ten categories:

(1) Grave. Arndt and Gingrich define this word as meaning, "worthy of respect or honor, noble, dignified, serious."⁵ Moule supports the idea of "seriousness of purpose and self-respect in conduct." Certainly the command to abstain from foolish jesting and needless frivolity is in view here (Eph 5:4).

(2) Not double-tongued. The literal rendering of this word is "two-worded." The idea is that of saying one thing to one person and then giving a different view to another.

(3) Not given to much wine. The directive here is that they are not to be drunkards, but other passages such as Proverbs 31:4-5 and 23:29-35 would demand total abstinence for all believers, including church leaders.

(4) "Not greedy of filthy lucre." This indicates the acquiring of shameful or dishonest material gain.

(5) "Holding the mystery of faith in a pure conscience." They are to be sincere and conscientious in the discharge of the duties of their office.

(6) "First proved." The term *dokimos* here refers to that which is tested and found to be genuine, and thus approved, as gold which is "tried" in a furnace.

(7) "Found blameless." The term *anekletos* here literally means "not called in." The deacon can have nothing laid to his charge as a result of public investigation.

(8) Wives must be suitable in character. They should be faithful, spiritual women who are not involved in gossip or slander, serious-minded about the Lord's work.

(9) "Husband of one wife." They should not be polygamous or divorced.

(10) "Ruling their children...well." The idea of ruling here is "to stand before, to lead or attend to, indicating care and diligence."

Another important passage delineating the qualification for deacons is Acts 6:3. These three observations may be drawn from this verse: (1) They should be "men of honest report." The literal rendering "to be well testified of" suggests an individual of high moral stature, approved of, honored, and respected by all around him.

(2) They should be "full of the Spirit." This indicates they should manifest the fruit of the Holy Spirit as seen in Galatians 5:22-26. Incidentally, this also indicates that they will not manifest the works of the flesh as enumerated in Galatians 5:16-21.

(3) They should be "full of wisdom." This is probably wisdom in the sense of "maturity" as it is seen in James chapter 1. Believers who are unwavering in faith even as they experience adversity get "wisdom" from God.

The New Testament also provides a living example of a man who possessed all these qualifications in active service. Observe the example of the first martyr of the early church in Acts 6 and 7: (1) He manifested an active faith (6:8). (2) He manifested the power of God in his life (6:8). (3) He experienced God's blessing (6:1). (4) He successfully put down opposition by his maturity, wisdom, attitude, and guarded, controlled speech (6:9-10). (5) He reacted properly to false accusation (6:11-15). (6) He took an

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uncompromising stand (7:51-53). (7) He was faithful, even unto death (7:54-60).

Conclusion

The responsibilities of the deacon in the local church include both social tasks and spiritual duties. Socially, he is to remove the burden of mundane tasks from the shoulders of the pastor so that the pastor may devote himself to prayer and the study of the Word. In the spiritual realm, he should be a man with scriptural knowledge and ability to use that knowledge in ministry. He should be a spiritual pace-setter, an example for other believers to observe and follow.

As for the deacon's relation to the pastor, he is to be supplementary and supportive. His social duty to the local church in mundane areas actually supplements his pastor's ministry in the Word by freeing the pastor to devote more time to that ministry. He enhances and improves his pastor's opportunity to minister the Word. Also, the deacon should exert effort to undergird and support his pastor's ministry. This is seen to be true by virtue of the pastor's office, maturity, and personal responsibility to give an account. The pastor, however, does not lead in dictatorial fashion surrounded by mindless "yes men."

Finally, the deacon is to be exemplary in his personal standards and conduct. He should be characterized by seriousness, faithfulness, self-control, and should lead his wife and children well. He must have unquestionable integrity, having been proven to be faithful and trustworthy.

The qualified and faithful deacon in the local church may rejoice over the promise of God in Hebrews 6:10, "For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love, which ye have showed toward His Name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister."

Notes

¹ D Edmond Hiebert, "Behind the Word Deacon - A New Testament Study" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 140:558 (Apr - June 1983) pp 151-162

² An excellent discussion of these terms can be found in Hiebert.

³ The term describes the "servants" at the wedding in Cana, individuals who had voluntarily assumed their activity out of

kindness to the newlywed couple (John 2:5,7,9).

⁴ Richard V Clearwaters, *The Local Church of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Central Press, 1954)

⁵ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Translated and adopted by William F Arndt and F Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1979)