

A Believers' Baptist Church Distinctive

The Role of Deacons

The title *deacon* seems to have as many connotations as there are churches to bestow it. In some churches the deacons are the official board, the legally recognized managing body. Other churches appoint as deacon almost every man who is a regular attendee. Still other churches bestow the title without consideration of the qualifications or ramifications of the men chosen. The ministry of deacon can be so different from church to church that when a man says that he is a deacon, you may have to ask several questions to find out what, if anything, he actually does.

Scripture itself is vague about the specifics of what deacons are to do. We read a lot about what qualifies a man to be a deacon but little about how deacons are to minister in the local church. That fact in itself teaches us much about God's view of church leadership: the issue is character, not specific action.

The Office of Deacon

Because of the variety of meanings and related words attached to *diakonos* (servant) and the related words, with one or two possible exceptions it is difficult to pin down any clear reference in the New Testament specific to the office of deacon in the early church. Most occurrences of *diakonos* and the related words use their general meanings and clearly have nothing to do with a church office (John 2:5, 9, 12:2, 12:26, Luke 4:39, 10:40, 17:8, 22:27, Romans 15:25, 1 Corinthians 12:5, 2 Corinthians 4:1, 8:3-4). Other passages are more ambiguous, but usually the clearest, most natural interpretation calls for the general meanings, not a reference to a special title belonging to a select group in the church (Romans 12:6-7, 1 Corinthians 16:15, Ephesians 4:12).

Many view Acts 6 as the initiation of the deacon's office. However, there are a number of reasons for rejecting the notion that the seven men were chosen to fill the office of deacon. First, the New Testament never refers to the men listed in Acts 6:5 as deacons. Acts was written in the earliest years of the church and there is nothing in the book that indicates the establishment of a formal office. Elders are mentioned later in the book (and in several of the epistles to the churches) but not deacons. If Acts 6 is indeed the institution of the deacon's office, it seems strange that deacons are never referred to again in Acts. Secondly, Acts 6:1-6 suggests that the seven men were chosen to help take care of a one-time crisis, not necessarily installed into a permanent office. Ongoing ministries seem to have been distinct from the task. None of the seven were ever mentioned again in association with food distribution ministry. Finally, all seven men who were chosen had Greek names. If those men were appointed to the Jerusalem church for an ongoing ministry, it would seem strange that only Greeks would be chosen. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to conclude that seven Greeks would be chosen to take care of a short-term ministry to the Hellenistic (Greek) widows who had been neglected. For these reasons, it is best to see the circumstances of Acts 6 as an effort by the Jerusalem church to take care of a temporary crisis, and the calling the seven as a temporary ministry.

Although we cannot say definitively that Acts 6:1-6 talks about the church offices of elder or deacon, we can clearly see there is a need for two areas of ministry: one for teaching and praying (v.4), which involves spiritual care alone; the other is administration and oversight of needs (v.1-3), which involves both spiritual and physical care.

First Timothy 3:8-13

Having considered several general or questionable passages in reference to the office of deacon, it is necessary to look at the one passage in the New Testament that can definitely be said to refer to the office. In this text the personal and spiritual characteristics that qualify a man for the office of deacon are clearly given. In listing the qualifications, the text indicates that deacons occupy a recognized office in the church just as elders do. Therefore, the passage sheds light on the New Testament church in that there is to be a plurality of godly men—elders—who oversee the Lord's work in the church. They are assisted in their work by deacons. The basic offices of a church do not need to be more sophisticated than that.

The Difference Between Elders and Deacons

It is essential to recognize that deacons are equally qualified with elders in terms of character and spiritual life. The one difference between their qualifications is that the elder must be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:1-13). They both should be proven servants of Christ who have the capability to manage their own households and lead the members of the congregation. Elders should be given the primary responsibility of teaching the Word, and that can be accomplished as deacons share the work of the ministry with them.

The Function of Deacons

The primary responsibilities of a deacon are to administrate details and perform tasks in the church. This does not exclude the spiritual shepherding and care of the congregation, but these duties are seen as lesser priorities for the deacon than that of the elder. Deacons are to be no less qualified, honored, and respected in the church than are the elders. The deacon's role is a role of service, sacrifice, and commitment to others' needs, and is important to the life and health of the local church.