

Coach's Corner



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"Deacons"

This past August the question arose, "What does the Bible teach about the ministry of deaconesses?" As a result, in that month's **Coach's Corner** I answered that question. Recently I decided that it would also be good to address the ministry of deacons. I was sure it would be easy to find an article on-line which would outline this ministry. However, that was simply not the case. Since I could find nothing that gives a simple biblical overview, I want to do that in this article. It is a subject that our elders should be clear on, it is an article that should be readily available for new deacons, and it is a subject which should receive treatment on our web site.

Not everyone agrees that Acts 6:1-6 addresses the ministry of the deacon, yet, I believe it most does. Though the noun "deacon" does not appear there, the verb form of the word is found in the verse two phrase, "to serve tables". This, coupled with the manner in which these men served and were appointed suggests that these men were the first deacons. Here is what that passage says:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ²And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³Therefore, 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. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

There are two key functions the deacons served as recorded in Acts 6. First, they assisted the elders in such a way that allowed elders to focus on ministries related to the Word and prayer. Second, primarily what they did here was to help meet physical needs of people. These two purposes should remain primary for those who become deacons.

By the early sixties of the first century (thirty years after the events of Acts 6), when Paul was imprisoned in Rome, the diaconate was an established office in the Church. We see this in Philippians 1:1: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and *deacons*." (emphasis added) It is very possible that when churches were first started they often may have not had deacons. This arises from the fact that Paul doesn't mention deacons when he sends instructions to Titus about the relatively new Church in Crete, yet, he does for the more established Church in Ephesus (1 Timothy 3:8-13). Though we do not want to put too much weight on an argument from silence, it is likely that Paul held that a Church could

not function for long without elders and they needed to be in place right away. Deacons could be added later as needs arose.

The qualifications of deacons are found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13:

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. ¹²Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. ¹³For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

The word “likewise” lets us know that the qualifications are similar to those of elders. In fact, the difference between the two lists is that deacons do not have to be able to teach, there is no mention of deacons aspiring to the office, and there is no statement about the diaconate being a noble task. Of course, these last two points are most likely assumed and one of the reasons “likewise” is use. The sense may be something like this: “Likewise, those who aspire to be deacons desire a noble task. Now, deacons must be....”

It is significant, however, that though deacons should be men who are sound in the Word and may even be able to teach it (cf. Acts 6:3; 7:1-53), ability to teach the Word is not a requirement for deacons since that is not at the core of their ministry responsibilities.

It should also be noticed that the qualifications for deacons, just like with elders, focus upon character far more than skill.

So, what does all this mean for our deacons? Let me summarize some key points:

- Those men who comprise our deacons should desire to be in that ministry – sensing that the Spirit has gifted and called them to be there (See 1 Corinthians 12:7-8, 11; 1 Timothy 3:1, 8 [“Likewise”]).
- Those men who serve as deacons should meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (see above).
- Deacons should have a heart to assist elders so the latter can carry out their ministry. They should also have a passion for serving people in the congregation who have needs. The primary focus of their ministry is people within the body of Christ, yet, there may also be some service of those outside the body – in the community (Galatians 6:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:15).
- Finally, deacons should have a heart to serve. This is what the word “deacon” means: “one who serves or ministers”.