

Deacon: The Office of a Servant

I. INTRODUCTION

One Sunday morning at GCC: “I will take care of this so you can take care of preaching. I don’t want to see you doing this again.” Lee

At an early point in the life of GCC a group of men and women took on roles of service that made the church stronger, care more effective, and the affairs of the church, both mundane and large, more efficient and more able to meet the needs of the church. It was rooted for Lee and countless others in the desire to serve the bride of Christ.

“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, nor addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.” – 1 Timothy 3:8-13

Deacons serve the church with lives shaped by the Gospel.

From 1 Timothy 3 we want to see together the *need* for deacons, the *qualifications* for deacons, the *role* of deacons, why we should *recognize* deacons, and finally, what *difference* should this make for all of us who are members here at MLC.

II. THE NEED FOR DEACONS

A. Elevating the Office of Deacon in the Church

1. Our history— here at MLC the principle of deacons has been applied but without formally using the term or publically recognized the office. Why?
 - a. Various ministries in the church function like a diaconate. Perhaps more than any other ministry our home group structure fulfills some of the primary diaconate responsibilities, and we have been comfortable with that.
 - b. I think we have historically in our family of churches looked to the eldership structure to fulfill some of what the diaconate can and should do, which in turn positions the elders to focus more on the primary tasks God has assigned them. And Scripture is more clear about elders than deacons.
2. Why focus on deacons now?
 - a. Most obvious: It’s in the text! 😊
 - b. As we continue to study, learn and refine our polity on eldership and oversight, we also want to invest time in clarifying, establishing, recognizing and supporting the diaconate office here at MLC, and beyond hone group

leaders and financial overseers. We have an array of opportunities where gifted, qualified, godly people are needed. We need deacons!

- c. This passage also affords us an opportunity to look at the present discussion of women deacons within broader parts of evangelicalism.

B. 1 Timothy 3:8-13, not Acts 6:1-7, Establishes the Need and Office of Deacons

1. We approach Acts 6 through the original intention of Luke
 - a. Acts 6 is not first and primarily about church polity or widows
 - b. Acts 6 *is* about the tension emerging as the gospel is moving forward and pushing outward. It was having ramifications on care in the church.
 - c. Luke never calls the seven deacons
 - d. *Diakonos*—broadly used in NT as “servant”; narrowly used in Scripture for the office of deacon
 - e. Point: we can’t derive the office of “deacon” from Acts 6
2. We must draw more from the epistles to establish the diaconate and the parameters for the role
 - a. Acts 6 is suggestive of the office, but doesn’t have exegetical support to establish the office.
 - But 1 Timothy 3:8-13 does, and then Acts 6 becomes one possible example of what kinds of service a diaconate may provide in the church and why.
 - b. What Acts 6 does not establish by way of a formal office in the church, 1 Timothy 3 does.
 - Paul wants Timothy to establish order, structure and conduct in the church that will both *promote* the Gospel’s advance in the world and *display* the Gospel’s work in the church.
 - God has established deacons to serve these glorious gospel ends. So, deacons are needed!

III. THE QUALIFICATIONS OF DEACONS

A. Gospel Grounded

1. Verse 9—“They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience”
2. Paul’s use of mystery is referring to truth, previously concealed, but now revealed
 - a. Refers to the gospel!

- b. This means they know it clearly enough to articulate and defend it. It does not mean they need to be gifted teachers.
- 3. Holding it “with a clear conscience”
 - a. Not just people who know doctrine but know the cross and understand liberty
 - b. Deacons season the church with gospel influence

B. Qualified by Character

- 1. Context: Paul begins by listing qualifications for elders
- 2. Nine qualifications for the deacon
- 3. Broad Observations
 - a. Deacons are qualified by who they are and who they are not
 - (1) Not double-tongued (v. 8)
 - (2) Not addicted to much wine (v. 8)
 - (3) Not greedy for dishonest gain (v. 8)
 - (4) In other words, a deacon’s tongue, liberties and financial practices must be in order.
 - b. Where married, the deacons wife may serve alongside of him
 - c. Where married, the deacon’s home becomes a qualifying context (but the text is not saying a deacon must be married; rather, where married certain qualifications should be present). Singles can serve as deacons.
 - (1) To Paul, the home reveals and validates a deacon’s calling to the church
 - (2) The home is *an essential evidence of a calling to church office*
 - d. Though present, the deacons qualifications must still be tested (v.10)

III. THE ROLE OF DEACONS

A. A Role of Care and Service

- 1. 1 Timothy 3 depicts the role deacons fulfill as a role of care and service (Acts 6:1-7, as we said earlier, is not an explicit teaching on deacons. It is however a helpful text to see what this may have looked like in the early church).
- 2. This role exists to serve the church and serve the elders
 - a. Serving the church through a variety of ways that specifically meet needs.

This can find broad expression and application.

“... it seems best to view the deacons as servants who do whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church.”¹

“Deacons are those who see to it that there are no forgotten or neglected people in the church of God.”²

- b. Serving the elders through a variety of ways that frees the elders to concentrate on leading, praying for and equipping the church through preaching and teaching.

“Deacons provide much needed wisdom and energy to the ample physical needs in the church, often using such provision as opportunities to minister as well to the spiritual needs of others.”³

D. A Non-Governmental Role

1. Deacons are not a governmental role (opposite of elders)
2. How do we conclude this is a non-governmental role?
 - a. Terms for the offices are descriptive—*episkopos* means overseer; *diakonos* means service; deacons do not have ruling authority in Scripture.
 - b. Most notably: deacons do not have an official teaching roles. Elders must be able to teach.
 - (1) Deacons are permitted to teach, but it’s not a responsibility of the role
3. Deacons serve elders but are not interchangeable with elders. Elders can perform the function of deacons, but deacons are not called upon in Scripture to perform the function of elders.
 - a. This is likely where the term deacon fell out of favor in some places; deacons or deacon boards became ruling boards, thus not allowing the elders to function as God had called them too. Deacons became business mangers and money counters primarily, and servants secondarily.
 - b. But just as Scripture serves to correct any other error, the role of deacons, correctly understood, is vital to the overall health of the church.

“The NT deaconate was never intended to be a building-maintenance committee...We must not forget that the real treasures of the church are its

¹ Merkle, Benjamin L., *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 240.

² Ryken, Philip Graham quoting C. Van Dam, *The Communion of the Saints* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2001), 113.

³ Newton, Phil A., *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 41.

people, not its pews and buildings. Yet, so often the needy are left unattended and the church building receives priority attention both in time and funds.”

IV. THE GENDER OF DEACONS

A. Male, or Male and Female

1. We have been discussing this and studying it closely
 - c. We are eager to see women released and deployed as broadly as Scripture allows
 - d. Some widely-respected reformed voices affirm female deacons (Piper, Keller)

2. Reasons some affirm female deacons

- a. First, 1 Timothy 2:12—Paul does not permit women to teach or exercise authority over men

(1) Some would say it’s providential that deacons don’t teach or govern.

Elders are distinguished from deacons in these two ways: elders bear the responsibility to govern and teach the church (**1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17**). They are, among other things, the doctrinal guardians and overseers of the body (**Titus 1:9**). Deacons, on the other hand, are not charged with the teaching and governing responsibility, and this enables women to serve as deacons while being faithful to Scripture on eldership in the church.

(2) Therefore, the two specific prohibitions of the passage would not be violated.

- b. Second, 1 Timothy 3:11 is translated “their wives” in the ESV, but it can also be understood as “women”
- c. Phoebe in Romans 16:1 may be a deacon. “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae...” - Romans 16:1

(1) Paul references her as a servant of the church; may infer a more official capacity.

3. Reasons for affirming male-only deacons

- a. If we did want to reference Acts 6, we could note that the solution of the needs of women (widows) was the appointment of men (the Seven).

- b. Thoughts on 1 Timothy 3:11

(1) It would be strange for the flow of the text for Paul to give instruction for male deacons (verses 8-10), then interrupt his train of thought (verse 11) to address the new office of female deacon

- i. Much more natural and fitting to the context to see Paul addressing men and then commenting on wives
 - ii. When seen in that light the section breaks down in an understandable fashion: verses 8-10 address personal qualifications and verse 11-12 address family
 - iii. The job description for a deacon (serving) invites wives involvement whereas the job description for an elder doesn't
4. Given the difference in opinion among those we respect, and given the absence of a prohibition we want to affirm the liberty and variance respected churches and church leaders have brought to this issue.
 - a. So, here at MLC we want to more clearly and publicly recognize the contributions men and women make in the service of the church. There is variance in opinion on the question of female deacons among the pastoral team, however, we all agree that we want to affirm and honor the vital role women play in the church. What Scripture prohibits we will prohibit; what Scripture leaves room for variance on we want to leave room as well.
 - b. If we do appoint female deacons, it's important that we do so in keeping with other biblical data on women and how they serve in the church.
 - This means: non-governmental; non-"eldering". In other words, it would need to be carefully and biblically applied. To that end we would want to promote in our midst the historical application of deaconesses in ways that honor everything else Scripture teaches us about leadership in the church and biblical manhood and womanhood.
 - We would want to honor and recognize these ladies because deacons are to be recognized.

V. THE RECOGNITION OF DEACONS

1. Deacons are church offices with real influence that merit public recognition.
 - a. That God would institute an office in the church so devoted to service reveals the priority God places on this!
 - b. It also reveals God's heart for elders to devote themselves to preaching, teaching, equipping and praying.
2. I Timothy 3 affirms that the role of a deacon is publicly recognized (installed, not ordained).
 - a. It's an official office; it's a vital office.
 - (1) Contrary to the spirit of our age Paul's teaching to the church is not to say to try church without leaders. Paul's solution has to do with the affirmation and appointment of two vital roles of elder and deacon
 - (2) Both roles should be publicly affirmed, and we intend to do so in the near

future. We want to think through a service for this, where we define, honor, identify and pray for the deacons.

b. It's an influential office

- (1) In verse 13, that "good standing" specifically refers to how they are regarded
- (2) *"Let it be remembered that those deacons who have served well acquired for themselves a noble standing. The church will think highly of them because they have performed their tasks in a worthy manner."*⁴
- (3) Officially recognizing and installing associates them with the elders of the church, not independent agents in the church.

Deacons serve the church with lives shaped by the Gospel.

VI. **CONCLUSION**

1. Regardless of the office, we all share in the call to serve the church!
2. We would not want a formal diaconate to create a consumer or laid back approach to serving one another in the church.
3. "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, *taking the form of a servant*, being born in the likeness of men." – Philippians 2:4-7
4. If there is one role we all play in the church together, it's servant. As a member here at MLC, are you envisioned for that? How can you and I more passionately embrace that?
5. Let's seize this text to consider afresh; what practical, Gospel shaped acts of service am I providing to the people of MLC? The conduct of serving one another is the conduct God delights to see at work in His church!
6. Let me tell you about Sam, Lee's son! Generations of servants! What a vision; regardless of occupying an office! Bennett *Jonathan* Osborne. Servant-hood is the jewel office in the church, the way of our Savior, Lord and Master. And it is the need in the church! No office of spectator, consumer, critiquer...but servant; that is so integral to God's heart he created an office, the only other office besides elder in the church. God thinks much of servant-hood; let us make much of servant hood and respond!

⁴ Hendriksen, William, *New Testament Commentary: Thessalonians , Timothy and Titus*, 135.