

SERVANTS IN GOD'S HOUSEHOLD The Qualifications and Responsibilities of Deacons

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There are two main Greek words translated “servant” in our English New Testaments. The first is *doulos*, which means servant, bondservant, or slave. For example, in 1 Timothy 6:1 (ESV throughout) Paul writes, “Let all who are under a yoke as *bondservants* regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled.” This term emphasizes the servant in his relationship to his master. The second word is *diakonos*, which means servant or minister. For example, in 1 Timothy 4:6, Paul writes to Timothy, “If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good *servant* of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.” This term emphasizes the servant in relationship to his work, his service. Both these words (including the verb form, *diakoneo*) show up in our Lord Jesus’ classic description of Christian service, including his own, in Mark 10:43b-45: “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant [*diakonos*] and whoever would be first among you must be the slave [*doulos*] of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served [*diakoneo*] but to serve [*diakoneo*], and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

In a few places *diakonos* is used in a special, more official sense and transliterated into English as our word “deacon.” For example, in his greeting to the church in Philippi, the apostle Paul gives a simple organizational chart for the local church: “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons [plural in each case]” (Phil. 1:1). Notice that the church consists of all the saints (believers), the overseers (sometimes called elders), the deacons (*diakonos*), and Christ Jesus – who is both the chief Overseer and the chief Servant (or Deacon) of his household, the church. In 1 Timothy 3 Paul gives us a detailed list of qualifications for overseers or elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7), who are the primary human leaders of the local church, and for deacons (1 Tim. 3:1-7), whom we might call the “official servants” in the church.

All Christians are called to serve the Lord and his church, using their spiritual gifts. As we saw in a previous message, the elders are stewards of God’s household (Tit. 1:7). They serve by overseeing or managing the church on God’s behalf. The deacons assist the elders by ministering as “official servants” in the church. But what exactly are the responsibilities of deacons, and what are their qualifications for service? We will seek to answer these two questions by looking at two passages of Scripture.

The Qualifications of Deacons 1 Timothy 3:8-13

Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy between his two Roman imprisonments. Having left his coworker behind in Ephesus to further establish and strengthen “the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), Paul informs Timothy of the qualifications of both overseers (3:1-7) and deacons (3:8-13). The deacon qualifications are, in many ways, similar to the elder qualifications (notice the word “likewise” in v. 8). This is true with respect to both general categories and specifics.

Personal character (v. 8). The list of character traits for deacons is shorter than the one for elders (3:2-3) but, in a similar way, includes both positives and negatives. The deacons must be “dignified” or respectable. They are disqualified from being a deacon if they are “double-tongued” (speaking out of both sides of their mouth), “addicted to much wine,” or “greedy for dishonest gain.” These last two disqualifiers are included on the two lists of qualifications for elders also (1 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 1:7). While these qualities are goals for all Christians (we should all be growing in Christian character), they are requirements for deacons.

Doctrine (v. 9). Deacons “must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.” In other words, deacons must be orthodox in their beliefs, holding fast to “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The “mystery” of the faith (1 Tim. 3:9) is “the faith . . . in Christ Jesus” (v. 13) that was once hidden and known only to God himself but has now been revealed by him to the apostles and, through them, to his church. Essentially, we are talking here about the gospel. Deacons must hold to this faith with a clear conscience, that is, without reservation. It is important to notice that elders also “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught” (Tit. 1:9), but, in addition, they must be “be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Tit. 1:9) – that is, elders must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). This ability to teach is a qualification that distinguishes the elders from the deacons. (Of course, a deacon may be a gifted teacher also, but this is not a requirement for his service as a deacon.)

Blameless, above reproach (v. 10). “And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.” Like the elders, the character, the doctrine, and the marriage and family life of deacons must be examined first. Then, if they are blameless or above reproach (an overarching qualification, as in the case of elders [1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6-7]) – that is, if there is nothing in their lives that would make them unfit to serve in an official position in the church – they are qualified to serve as deacons (*diakoneo*).

Wives [or, women] (v. 11). Before he continues with the marriage and family qualifications of deacons in verse 12, Paul inserts an instruction about the character traits of women. Commentators are divided as to whether he is referring here to the wives of deacons or to female deacons (such as Phoebe in Rom. 16:1) or to both! The Greek word for “woman” and for “wife” is the same, so the proper translation must be determined by context. The word “likewise” in verse 11 indicates that Paul is continuing with a list of qualifications. Certainly, there is nothing in Scripture to prohibit a woman from serving in a deacon-type role. Deacons are not required to give authoritative teaching in the church. Official teaching, as we have seen, is part of the function of elders, who clearly are to be men (see 1 Tim. 2:11–3:7). And some of the duties of deacons, especially in relation to the female members of the congregation, may be best carried out by women. On the other hand, all seven of the prototype deacons appointed by the apostles in Acts 6:1-7 (as we will see later) were men. Perhaps Paul envisioned the wives of the deacons assisting their husbands in their duties; and, if so, they also have character qualifications to meet. Like the men (1 Tim. 3:8), they must be “dignified” or respectable, “not slanderers” (like the devil himself!), “but sober-minded” or sensible, and “faithful” or trustworthy “in all things” (3:11).

Marriage and family (v. 12). Like the elders (1 Tim. 3:2, 4; Tit. 1:6), the deacons must exhibit an exemplary marriage and family life. Each must “be the husband of one wife” (or, “a one-woman man”), that is, devoted exclusively to his wife. And they must manage their children and their own households well. Paul is not ruling out a single man from the diaconate. (Jesus, the ultimate Servant, was single!) However, Paul is assuming that most deacons will be married men with children, and, if so, their marriages and family life must be a good example to the rest of God’s household.

Paul rounds out this section on deacon qualifications with a promise of reward: “For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves [in relation to both God and man] and also great confidence [or assurance] in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3:13). Paul is seeking to encourage the deacons in Ephesus to serve their church well. They must be blameless in character, sound in doctrine, and exemplary in their marriage and family life – goals for every Christian but requirements for those who serve as deacons.

Responsibilities of Deacons **Acts 6:1-7**

When we come to the topic of deacon responsibilities, perhaps surprisingly, the New Testament is largely silent! This observation is made in contrast to the New Testament teaching on elders. As we saw in an earlier

message, both Peter (1 Pet. 5:1-5) and Paul (Acts 20:28-32) give explicit instructions on the responsibilities of elders. There are no comparable passages for deacons – which may be why churches over the centuries have given varied responsibilities to deacons. In two passages we have already referred to (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-13), deacons are mentioned secondarily to the elders, which would seem to indicate that they serve alongside the elders and in subordination to them. Perhaps the silence as to their duties is deliberate. The exact function of deacons may vary according to different circumstances, needs, and cultures.

One passage, often pointed to, does seem to offer some guidance in this regard: Acts 6:1-7. This is an historical incident in the book of Acts and is, therefore, descriptive rather than prescriptive. There is no explicit mention here of either elders or deacons but rather of the twelve apostles and seven other men whom they appoint to assist in the ministry in Jerusalem. This passage does, however, seem to give us a clue as to the role of deacons.

The Twelve were chosen by Jesus Christ to serve as his official witnesses to the world (Acts 1:8) and to lay the foundation of his church. Early in the book of Acts they appear to be the only official leaders of the church in Jerusalem: devoting themselves to prayer (1:12-14), installing Matthias as a replacement for the defector Judas (1:15-26), preaching the gospel (2:14-41; 3:11-26; 5:20-21, 42), teaching the new converts (2:42), performing signs and wonders (2:43; 3:1-10; 5:12-16), as well as overseeing the distribution of relief to the poor (5:32-37). Meanwhile, the church was experiencing explosive growth from the original 120 (1:15), with the addition of 3000 converts on the day of Pentecost (2:41), to 5000 men in Acts 4:4, and still further multiplication (5:14; 6:1). The First Church of Jerusalem was a megachurch!

In Acts 6 the twelve apostles appear to be overwhelmed by the enormous responsibility. There were no elders to assist them. They were functioning as the elders. (Later on, we see that the church in Jerusalem appointed its own elders distinct from the apostles: Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 21:18.) There were no deacons to assist them. A serious problem had arisen that threatened the unity of the church. The Helenists (Jewish Christians who were culturally and linguistically Greek) were complaining against the Hebrews (Jewish Christians who were culturally and linguistically Hebrew) because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of relief (lit., “the daily service” [*diakonia*]).

The apostles take the initiative in proposing a solution to this problem: the appointment of additional leaders. “The twelve summoned the full number of the disciples [in the temple precincts?] and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, 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. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry [*diakonia*] of the word’” (6:2-4). The Twelve understood that their primary calling was the ministry of the word, along with prayer. They were unable to also handle the ministry of relief to the needy widows. So, they proposed a division of labor. The Twelve would concentrate on the ministry of the word, the Seven on the social ministry of relief to the poor.

This proposal was favorably received by the congregation, who then chosen seven qualified men. Given the enormous size of the church in Jerusalem and the potential for ethnic division in the congregation, it was indeed necessary that these men be “of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (v. 3). The people brought the Seven (who appear to have been all chosen from the Helenist group) to the apostles. The apostles prayed and officially appointed them to the task. As a result, the church in Jerusalem continued to multiply greatly (6:7). Unity was preserved, and the apostles were able to devote themselves to the ministry of the word.

So, what is the responsibility of deacons? If we consider the Seven (see Acts 21:8) to be prototype deacons (which seems likely), then we can draw several conclusions, each one building on the one before. (1) Deacons serve the church by overseeing the care and relief of needy members of the congregation, such as widows. (2) In

contrast to the elders, who, like the apostles, devote themselves to prayer and the ministry (*diakonia*) of the word, the deacons devote themselves to the ministry (*diakonia*) of practical service, seeing to the temporal, material, social, and physical needs of the church. Theirs is more a ministry of deeds rather than words. See the similar distinction between the gift of speaking and the gift of serving in 1 Peter 4:10-11: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve [*diakoneo*] one another as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever *speaks*, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever *serves* [*diakoneo*], as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." Both speaking and serving, the ministry of elders and the ministry of deacons, are spiritual ministries, requiring qualified spiritual people. (3) Deacons serve in whatever way necessary in the church, as determined by the elders, to keep the elders from being distracted from their primary work of prayer and the ministry of the word.

In addition to these biblical responsibilities, our Exeter Chapel Constitution lists the specific duties of both elders and deacons, unique to our church, as follows:

Elders:

The Elders will serve the church as overseers, spiritual shepherds, and leaders. Specifically, they shall:

1. Exercise ministries of prayer and the Word; practice hospitality and engage in visitation; and lead the congregation by an exemplary Christian life.
2. See to the preparation of believers for baptism and church membership.
3. See to the equipping of the members for service and appoint them to ministries under their supervision. The appointments shall be reviewed annually.
4. Oversee all the ministries of worship, edification, and evangelism.
5. Supervise the work of the Deacons.
6. Preside over the worship and business meetings of the church.
7. See to the exercise of church discipline, if required.
8. Determine the specific ministry of each Elder, taking into account the differing gifts, experience and time available of each. They shall review these ministry assignments annually.

Deacons:

The Deacons will assist the Elders by caring for the practical needs of the church. Specifically, they shall:

1. Serve as trustees of any properties acquired by the church.
2. Appoint from among their number one to serve as church treasurer and one to serve as church clerk
3. Care for all matters relating to facilities and equipment.
4. Give attention to assisting members who are in material need.
5. Assist the Elders through prayer and counsel, as needed.
6. After consultation with the Elders, the Deacons shall prepare an annual budget to be submitted to the Elders and then to the congregation for their approval. Copies of the proposed budget shall be made available to the congregation at least two weeks in advance of the annual meeting. The Deacons together are authorized to alter the annual budget (to expend funds not provided in the budget) to carry out the work of the church. Such expenditure of funds in any calendar year shall not exceed 2% of the annual budget approved by the church for that year.
7. Determine, in consultation with the Elders, the specific ministry of each Deacon. They shall review these ministry assignments annually.
8. Care for other responsibilities that the Elders may from time to time delegate to them.
9. The Deacons will be assisted in their work by individuals and by various committees, as needed. The Deacons, in consultation with the Elders, will make appointments to the ministries under their supervision. These appointments shall be reviewed annually.

This list of responsibilities (along with the biblical qualifications) can help us to recognize those whom God has appointed to serve as either elders or deacons of Exeter Chapel. The congregational day of prayer on Sunday, August 12, will also be very important in our discerning of his will.