

Deacons at Remedy Church

The bulk of this content was created by the Paradox Church in Ft. Worth, TX¹, and has been modified in places to better reflect our convictions and practices.

WHY DEACONS?

The Rare Sighting of Biblical Deacons

Across the landscape of the American church, it takes some digging to find a church that has a thriving diaconal ministry. Some churches have self-consciously or fearfully removed the office of deacon. Other churches have kept the language of deacon while divesting the office of its biblical functionality. Many churches, for instance, are governed by a deacon “board” or “body” that more closely resembles a nonprofit or corporate board than a biblically qualified diaconate.

It is a fair conclusion to say that, by and large, the biblical deacon is an uncommon find in the American church. Though Scripture clearly teaches that such an office exists and should be filled by mature, qualified Christians, it seems that modern churches have strayed from its biblical basis or deemed it unnecessary altogether.

Why Biblical Deacons Matter

As we see in Acts 6.1-7, great needs arose in the early church as it grew. For the the Apostles to give more of their time and energy to these needs would have caused them to neglect their primary responsibilities of teaching the Word of God and leading and giving oversight to the church. All agreed that this would not be right, and they appointed seven qualified and mature men to give particular care and attention to these needs, while the Apostles remained focused on their primary, God-given tasks.

When we do away with the office of deacon in the modern church, we are either asking the pastors/elders to give more of their time and attention to meeting practical and logistical needs than is healthy and right, or we are leaving these needs unaddressed in some way. When we make deacons into a governing or decision-making board of some sort, not only are we making the same mistake with regard to the elders and unmet needs, we are setting up an authority structure that is not biblical.

There are many schools of thought in how to go about church polity, and if a church wants to establish a group, or groups, who help oversee and make decisions for the church (under elder leadership and delegation), that is a fair conversation to have, but those particular roles are not one and the same with the biblical role given to a deacon. As we will see, the role given to a

¹ <http://theparadoxchurch.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/DEACONS-%E2%80%93-THROUGH-THE-DUST.pdf>

deacon in Scripture is one of a lead servant in the church who meets needs and frees the elders to teach, shepherd, and lead.

If we seek to plant and grow as churches that are faithful to the teaching of Scripture, intentional about caring for the needs within the body, and aggressive about engaging the culture around them, we must renew our biblical understanding of deacons and their place in Jesus' church.

WHAT DOES THE WORD MEAN?

The term diakonos, like many biblical words, has both a general meaning (servant) and a specific meaning and usage (deacon). Most of the instances of diakonos in the New Testament are in the broader sense, not referring to the specific office of deacon, but rather to the general role of helping or serving. The context around the word determines how it is best interpreted.

Consider the following instances:

- John 2:9: "...The master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants (diakonoι) who had drawn the water knew."
- Luke 22:25-27: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them... But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves (diakonon)... I am among you as one who serves (diakonon)."
- John 12:26: "Whoever serves (diakone) me must follow me; and where I am, my servant (diakonos) will also be. My Father will honor the one who serves (diakone) me."
- Ephesians 3:7: "I became a servant (diakonos) of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given to me through the working of his power."
- 1 Timothy 4:6: "If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister (diakonos) of Christ Jesus..."

In all of these cases, diakonos and its other forms express some nuance of the general term "servant." However, the same Greek word is used in a more technical sense in certain places in the New Testament to describe the formal office of deacon:

- Philippians 1:1: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons (diakonos)..."

- 1 Timothy 3:8-13: “Deacons (diakonos) likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons (diakoneo) if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons (diakonos) each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons (diakoneo) gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”

We see that the term diakonos has both a broader meaning (servant) and a narrower meaning (deacon). A deacon is a servant of Christ and His church. But not everyone who serves God or the church does so in the official capacity of deacon. In other words: while every deacon is a servant, not every servant is a deacon.

DEACONS AND ELDERS: WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

Both deacon and elder/pastor are biblical, formal offices in the church, so it is helpful to ask:

- How are these roles unique?
- How do deacons and elders serve together for the good of the church?

Elders are appointed first, then deacons. One primary piece of organizing a local church is to appoint qualified elders. This was Paul’s consistent practice in New Testament church planting (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). It seems that the office of elder/overseer/pastor is given primacy in the New Testament because of the importance of sound doctrine and biblical teaching in the life of a young church (1 Timothy 1:3-7). Elders must be raised up as soon as possible in order to guard the gospel and refute error (Titus 1:9). Deacons may be appointed later as practical ministry needs increase.

The main task of elders is theological oversight; the main task of deacons is practical ministry. Only one important qualification distinguishes elders from deacons: elders must be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2) and “able to... refute those who contradict [sound doctrine]” (Titus 1:9). There is no such requirement for deacons. They simply “must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Tim 3:9).

Elders, then, are charged primarily with the theological, directional, and moral leadership of the church, focusing especially on the faithful teaching and application of Scripture and the gospel. Deacons are charged with the practical leadership and ministry of the church under the oversight of the elders. Again, this reflects the division of labor in Acts 6, the Apostles devoting themselves to “prayer and the ministry of the Word” and entrusting the Seven with the daily ministry.

While the New Testament outlines in copious detail the practical duties of elders, it offers almost no teaching about the roles and responsibilities of deacons. Based on the primacy of eldership and the apostolic pattern in Acts 6, it seems that the job of a deacon is to serve as a “pastoral assistant” under the oversight and direction of the elders.

As the Apostles delegated practical ministry tasks to the Seven, so the elders delegate practical ministry to the deacons as the size and needs of the church increase. This is certainly the way the early church understood the office of deacon: “Deacons... are to be honorable and sincere in performing the duties assigned to them by the presbyters [elders],” wrote Theodore of Mopsuestia.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR DEACONS

1 Timothy 3:8-13 outlines a clear set of qualifications for deacons. All who wish to serve as deacons in the church must meet these criteria:

- Dignified: worthy of respect, honorable, noble, highly esteemed; people younger Christians want to be like
- Not double-tongued: honest and truthful; careful in speech; consistent & trustworthy
- Not addicted to much wine: self-controlled and wise with use of alcohol; no addictions; self-controlled in habits
- Not greedy for dishonest gain: not greedy; not “in it for the money” (aren’t serving in hopes of eventually getting paid by the church); generous; above reproach in financial dealings
- Must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience: humbly hold to sound theology; understand the gospel; no discrepancy between what they profess and how they live
- Tested and proven blameless: proven faithful over time; stand up under examination; not open to accusation

Additional requirements for wives or female deacons:

- Dignified: worthy of respect, noble, honorable; women younger Christians want to emulate
- Not slanderers: no malicious talk or gossip
- Sober-minded: clear-minded; humble; self-controlled

- Faithful in all things: trustworthy and reliable; doing well in life roles (wife, mother, etc)

Additional requirements for married male deacons (principles that correlate to women, as well):

- Husband of one wife: one-woman man; totally faithful to his wife; sexually pure
- Manages his children and household well: faithfully loves, diligently leads, and provides for his family; kids respect and obey their father

Acts 6:3 outlines a few additional descriptors of qualified deacons. All who wish to serve as deacons in the church must meet these criteria, as well:

- Good reputation: known for doing what is right; highly thought of, both inside and outside the church
- Full of the Spirit: an established pattern of discerning and listening to the Holy Spirit and obeying
- Full of wisdom: possessing the wisdom from the Holy Spirit to act appropriately

SHOULD WOMEN BE DEACONS?

The question of whether women should serve as deacons is a debated one. The Bible renders no conclusive judgment on the matter. Acts 6.3-5 speaks of men while Romans 16:1 uses the word diakonos to describe a woman named Phoebe: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [diakonos] of the church in Cenchrea.” Bible scholars are divided over whether we should see Phoebe as a “deaconess” (office) or simply as a “servant” (role).

Either way, good exegesis precludes us from arguing conclusively for or against female deacons from only one verse that is not explicitly clear. So to answer the question of whether women can be deacons, we must take into account the broader teaching of Scripture concerning men’s and women’s roles in the church.

It is the position of Remedy Church that women can and should serve as deacons, provided that the church is led by properly qualified, biblical elders. This position seems to best allow for the diverse gifting of godly women while still honoring the biblical principle of male headship in the family and the church. The following lines of reasoning support this conclusion:

- “The Greek word for deacon can be masculine or feminine, so the word does not settle the issue.”²
- “In the middle of the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Paul says, ‘The women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.’ This could be the wives of deacons, but could also be the women deacons. The latter is suggested by the fact that elders’ wives are not mentioned in 3:1-7.”² Since eldership is the highest office in the church, it would seem strange for God to require something of deacons’ wives that he does not require of elders’ wives.
- “The deacons were distinguished from the elders in that they were not the governing body in the church nor were they charged with the duty of authoritative teaching. So the role of deacon seems not to involve anything that Paul taught in 1 Timothy 2:12 is inappropriate for women to perform in the church.”²
- Some believe that 1 Timothy 3:11-13 are additional qualifications directed toward primarily male or female deacons. Mark Driscoll writes: “[T]he requirements of 1 Timothy 3:8-10 are for both male and female deacons... [verse 11] lists the additional requirements for female deacons, and 3:12-13 lists the additional requirements for male deacons... Paul is indicating that a male deacon is most vulnerable to sexual sins, while a female deacon is most vulnerable to emotional and verbal sins.”
- The office of deaconess arose very early in church history. Appeals to history are secondary to biblical exegesis, but it is instructive to note that the earliest churches had no problem appointing female deacons. In cultures which were strongly patriarchal, the early fathers of the church saw the appointment of deaconesses neither as a threat to male headship nor as an affront to Scripture. “It is indisputable... that an order of deaconesses did quickly arise in the church.” John Chrysostom, one of the dominant church fathers of the 4th century (c. 349-407), understood 1 Timothy 3:11 to refer to “those who hold the rank of deaconesses.”

In light of this biblical and historical evidence, it is our conviction that the church is to be led by biblically qualified male elders who then appoint both male and female deacons to assist with the many practical areas of pastoral ministry. Women can and should serve as deacons under the oversight of a plurality of male elders.

² John Piper. “What Did Deacons Do?” <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-did-deacons-do>

OUR PRACTICE FOR INSTALLING DEACONS

As the size and scope of Remedy's ministry increases, we will appoint both male and female deacons to assist the pastors/elders in the work of ministry. Deacon candidates will be suggested by the covenant members to the pastors/elders, who will discuss and affirm these suggestions and then talk with those nominated to check for aspiration to the role of deacon.

Candidates will then be presented to the church and will undergo a period of training, preparation, and examination, during which any concerns or questions may be brought to the elders about any particular candidate. Upon successful completion of the requirements and training, candidates will be appointed to the office of deacon.

It is our hope and prayer that by following the biblical directives regarding elders and deacons, we will continue to be a church that is obedient to God's word, maximizes the spiritual gifts of his people, and effectively and passionately engages the mission of God for the glory of God.

