

FOREWORD

A busy mom was in the kitchen trying to get dinner on the table. Out back her kids were hosting a half dozen neighborhood friends and her husband would be home any minute. With a deadline looming, she was hoping for just a minute or two of peace and quiet when suddenly the backyard exploded with noise. It seemed there was a lot of yelling, accusations, insults and threats. Stepping out on the back porch she demanded an answer. One of the kids replied “It’s okay mom. We’re just playing church”!

Pushing the humor aside, nobody wants a chaotic scene like that in their own congregation. If there is one place in all the world where conversations and meetings should be done right, it should be the church. There was a reason Jesus said “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

Deacons are a real key to keep their church focused on ministry and the purposes of God. A wise and godly pastor, coupled with spiritually mature deacons will almost always successfully navigate a church through even the roughest of waters. A pastor with supportive deacons typically enjoys a freedom to preach, lead and minister with great effectiveness. A church with solid deacons will invariably experience a stable and blessed ministry.

Greg Burdine is a good friend and an exceptional writer. More importantly, he is a pastor and man of God that understands local church issues. After serving 25 years with the same congregation, he is uniquely qualified to share his insight and tutelage. His writings have always proven to be beneficial and typically they spur me toward a moment or two of analysis and meditation. I’m proud to admit I was one of those that urged him to write this

book.

Greg has done a wonderful job with *Leading By Serving*. I had high expectations for this work and I'm not disappointed. It is instructive, helpful, encouraging, and practical. The deacon testimonials at the end of each chapter lend credibility to Greg's wise and structured thoughts about church leadership. You will find this book to be both scholarly and easy to read and it is my blessing to recommend it to you.

Tim Adrian

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INTRODUCTION

The ministry of deacon has undergone tremendous abuse and misunderstanding. Some have allowed the position of deacon to become a 'church boss.' Others have felt a deacon is simply the 'errand boy' of the pastor or members of the congregation. Though often confusing, the Bible is very clear that the role of a deacon in the local church is vital. If you think about it, everything done in the congregation revolves around the performance of a deacon because the role of a deacon is principally one of service. As deacons perform in their official capacity of service, the rest of the congregation can extend that level and quality of service. A reluctance, unwillingness, or ignorance of deacons to be true to the Biblical instructions of service will hamper the effectiveness of the entire church.

The office of deacon is essential as part of the New Testament pattern of church performance. This is why I wrote this book. I want to help the church to understand the vital role of deacons. A church cannot be successful in God's eyes without a successful ministry of deacons. I also want deacons to understand the crucial role they play in their congregation.

In the early church, the congregation in Jerusalem was expanding exponentially. Every week, thousands were added to the church. With this explosive growth, problems inevitably resulted. To deal with the problems, the church chose and the apostles appointed men who would serve in an official capacity. As these seven men served, the tension eased, and the church continued to expand (Acts 6:1-6). The deacon ministry was born.

Problems in any church have the potential to hurt people and harm witness. Effective deacons are God's way to limit the de-

structive impact of the many situations that can divide a congregation. A strong deacon ministry will lead a church to meaningful ministry within the congregation and successful outreach into the community.

The immediate result of the selection of these first deacons in the Jerusalem church was “the word of God increased, and the number of the disciples multiplied” (Acts 6:7). So great was the harvest that many of the priests responded positively to the gospel. The word of God increased because the number of witnesses increased and the pastors’ ministry was more effective. The New Testament teaches, by example, that an effective method to multiply the effectiveness of the ministry of God’s Word is a group of deacons who serve faithfully in the duty assigned them by the local church. What took place in Jerusalem can take place any place. When responsibility is shared and duties accepted, God’s kingdom expands.

This book was written to help deacons serve their church to the best of their ability and beyond.

First, you will uncover what a deacon is. Not only the ministry of deacons during the New Testament, but you will learn the role of a deacon throughout church history. I also explain the difference between a pastor and a deacon. Both are servants. Pastors are servant leaders and deacons are leading servants.

Second, I have listed the biblical qualifications of a deacon from Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3. Though these characteristics are to be part of every Christian’s life, they are what every deacon must exhibit. If you have been asked to be a deacon, you have been identified as a person whose spiritual maturity has been noticed.

Third, I share many responsibilities a deacon may have in his local church. Though the New Testament does not list the duties of a deacon, each church usually has some expectations of what a deacon should do. Not all my examples may be in your church. But you will discover many opportunities to serve.

Fourth, serving a local church as a deacon has threats. Many become a deacon assuming that it’s all going to be wonderful. However, any position of leadership has potential pitfalls. It is

possible that serving as a deacon can be hazardous to your personal and spiritual life. I have a few warnings that will hopefully help you serve as a deacon with integrity and respect.

Fifth, and finally, I want everyone who is a deacon to realize the many blessings God has for you. For sure, being a deacon can appear as a thankless job. But there are many benefits to being a faithful deacon.

May personal spiritual maturity and church growth be the result of your deacon ministry. May you grow in your relationship with Jesus, solve some problems in your church and expand the Gospel into your community.

PREFACE

Recently, a pastor commented that he wished there was good material to help deacons serve in his church. He wanted to give his deacons a book or something to help them understand their role in the church. It would be great to give to first time deacons or men who were being considered as deacon. But there wasn't much out there. As we continued to talk he suggested that since I had written a couple of books in the past, maybe I should write a book for deacons. As I thought and prayed, I agreed. So, this is the result of that conversation.

I've been a pastor for over 25 years and I will admit that good, understandable training for deacons is pretty sparce. If you are a pastor there are some really good books written on pastoral ministry. But very few are available for deacons. In Bible college I had an entire course on "Pastoral Theology". Yet, during the semester we spent only a partial class session on deacons. One of the problems of deacon ministry is the lack of instruction and training.

I believe that spiritually strong deacons who humbly serve their congregation within the Biblical model under the leadership of their pastor is one of the key and neglected ingredients of an effective church ministry. Many churches become stagnant and even falter because deacons are not utilized as they were in the New Testament. This book attempts to uncover the ministry of deacons as described in the New Testament church and finds contemporary expressions in today's congregation.

My prayer is that some idea or a teaching from this book will help churches become a better representative of Jesus Christ in their community through the ministry of deacons.

Greg Burdine

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WHAT IS A DEACON?

The office of a deacon is unique in church life. The terminology of deacon is found nowhere in secular business, politics, or social life. It is strictly a religious position. Because many are unsure what a deacon is, we need to begin with a definition. We will look at what the Bible tells us about the first deacons, the office of deacon in history, the unique difference between a deacon and a pastor, and a deacon as a lead servant.

Deacons In The Bible - What Does The Bible Say?

The structure of the local church should not be determined by culture, business practices, or even denominational traditions. The authority of the Bible should regulate and guide the structure and policies of the church, including the role of deacons. Too often more emphasis is given to what a particular pastor or deacon may think or believe than what God has stated in His Word. The office of deacon is a biblical office. It is not used in any other organization except the church. As such, it is vital to understand what the Bible says about a deacon.

The term “deacon” is used in only two places in the New Testament (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8-13). However, the English word “deacon” is a transliteration of the Greek word, diakonos, and is used in approximately 100 places in the New Testament. It has also been translated into English words such as: administration, cared for, minister, servant, serve, service, preparations, relief, support, etc. According to Strong’s concordance, the defin-

ition of diakonos is a servant or minister. In other Greek literature it is used for a waiter, servant, or of anyone who performs any service. A deacon is above anything else a “servant.” The original meaning had to do with performing menial tasks, such as waiting on tables. But it also included any act of service in the church.

No one in the Bible is specifically identified as a deacon. However, seven men in Acts 6 were selected to serve (diakonein). In Acts 6 the noun form of the Greek word (diakonous) does not appear at all. However, the verb form of the Greek Word (diakonia and diakonein) appears twice (Acts 6:1-2). The emphasis is on service rather than a position of authority; an action taken rather than a position to be held. Even when the term refers to a position, it is a position of service to others not supervision or leadership over others.

The “seven” in Acts 6 are regarded as the forerunners of the office of deacon. Stephen is considered to be the first deacon. The other men include Philip, Prochurus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmesan, and Nicolas of Antioch. These men were selected to meet a definite need which arose in the first church at Jerusalem. Evidently, in the early church the apostles made distribution to the needs of the widows. They were aware and served to meet the needs of the growing congregation. However, the apostles were being distracted with these details of ministry and realized that their primary calling of the ministry of the Word and prayer (public declaration of God’s Word and their private devotion) was in jeopardy. The Greeks were complaining that their widows were not receiving the same help that the Hebrew widows received. These “original” deacons were selected to serve and meet a specific need in the church, rather than to create a position of authority.

Acts 6 reminds us that the early “deacons” were assigned the task of “waiting on tables” by the apostles. The apostles did not give their position or authority to the seven. The deacons were assigned a humble service to render, not an authority to exercise.

It is interesting that all seven men who were selected to serve the neglected Gentile widows of the early church had Greek

names. It appears that choosing men who identified culturally and racially with these ignored members of the church was a wise decision to prevent further neglect. In addition, it is good to consider diversity in leadership that arises from diversity in the church membership. This practice began with Jesus who chose men from a diversity of political, geographical, and vocational upbringing.

The Bible’s use of the word “deacon” and the example of the first deacons communicates that a deacon is an official servant of the church. No greater task can be performed for Jesus than humble service for Him and His church.

Deacons In History - What Has Been The Role Of Deacons In Church History?

The ministry of deacon goes all the way back to New Testament times. Pastor and deacon are the only two offices of the local church recognized in the Bible and have served as brothers in ministry throughout church history. They share the responsibility to reach unbelievers with the Gospel and nurture the believers of the local church. This is a team that has not only been effective in history but is expressly encouraged in God’s Word.

According to Charles Deweese in his book, "The Emerging Role of Deacons", the role of deacons in church history has had a few highlights.

During the early church, deacons were simply servants to the needy in the congregation.

During the Dark Ages their service focused on assisting in the worship service and became a step toward being a member of the clergy. It became a position to advance your spiritual career. This loss of practical help to the needy led to the formation of monastic orders that cared for practical care in the church.

The Reformation brought back the servant emphasis of the deacon ministry by helping give assistance to the poor and needy. In Reformation churches, deacons were no longer members of the clergy.

In the 1700s deacons became more involved in the administrative needs of the church and this concept has continued in many churches. This led to the idea of the deacon ministry as part of a board of directors. The Board of Deacons controlled the finances, the buildings and properties, and many of the ministries. This led to a false concept that the pastor is responsible to the deacons. In fact, some divided the duties so that deacons were assigned the secular responsibilities and pastors were given the spiritual responsibilities. This concept diverted the deacons away from their servant duties and encouraged an attitude that deacons were the directors of the church. This is not the strategy of the New Testament.

In a New Testament church, a man is not selected to be a deacon so he can sit on an official board. The office of deacon is not a position of authority but one of service. A deacon in a New Testament church is an example of service for the rest of the congregation. He is to be an example in spirit, devotion, love, faithfulness and humility. The New Testament never lists a job description for a deacon. However, the very name of deacon (servant) is a pretty good one-word job description. Deacons are to serve. It is less a position and more an action.

Deacons In Church - What Is The Difference Between A Deacon And A Pastor?

The Bible only recognizes two offices in the local church: pastor and deacon. Elder, bishop, and pastor all refer to the same God-called leader in the church. The pastor is the authorized leader of the ministry of a local church. His responsibilities include leading, teaching, and shepherding. While a pastor is the recognized leader of the church, the deacon is the recognized servant of the church. The pastor is the servant leader and the deacon is the leading servant.

Responsibilities. The pastor has the responsibility to lead and feed the church congregation. His is an overseeing work. The dea-

con has the responsibility to serve the church family through many opportunities of care and service. Actually, the deacon is able to free the pastor from some of the responsibilities of the church so he can perform his duty of spiritual leadership.

In reality, deacons do the work of a pastor by faithfully serving in certain areas as the pastor leads the church. There is too much work to be done in a church by one man. One of the primary responsibilities of a pastor is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12). The first men chosen to do the work of a deacon (Acts 6) relieved the pastors from tasks they were attempting to carry out. Freed from certain responsibilities, the pastors were able to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word. Pastors and deacons formed a team that allowed the church to experience explosive growth.

The godly pastor has a God-given desire to minister to every member of the congregation. This is called a “pastor’s heart.” But because this is usually not possible to do, deacons are called on to assist. Pastors are truly blessed when they are surrounded by deacons who are serious about serving with their pastor.

Qualifications. The qualifications of pastors and deacons are similar and emphasize the awesome responsibility deacons have for spiritual service (see 2 Timothy 3). The qualifications of deacon are not inferior to those of pastor. The only notable difference is that a pastor must be “apt to teach” (2 Timothy 3:2). The main difference between a pastor and a deacon is a difference of gifts and calling, not character.

Selection. A man becomes a pastor through the call of God, an inner Spirit-led burden to minister God’s Word to a congregation. It often begins with a “desire” to be a pastor (1 Timothy 3:1). Once he accepts the call of God on his life, he communicates that to a congregation, and they affirm the call through ordination. A man becomes a deacon by the selection of the church. He does not decide for himself that he is a deacon. The congregation makes the selection of a deacon when the need arises. Becoming a dea-

con is not something that should be sought by a man, nor is it an ambition that should be pursued. It involves an invitation to be accepted and a service to be rendered.

In the Absence of a Pastor. In many churches, deacons assume administrative and supervisory duties in the absence of a pastor. Churches who have had a number of pastors stay for short durations may feel the need to allow their deacons to play a more authoritative role in the church, especially if a pastor has made major changes and then left. Their feeling may be, “Pastors come and go but our deacons will still be here.” One can understand a church’s willingness to permit a deacon to become the ‘church boss’ to keep the pastor under control. In addition, some churches “share” a pastor with another congregation or have a part-time or bi-vocational pastor. These churches are dependent on deacons being responsible for the day-to-day decisions. Though these are unique situations, and deacons may need to step into a leadership role in a temporary situation, this is not the Biblical norm. The Bible clearly teaches by statement and example that the role of a deacon in the local church is one of a servant.

Deacons As Leaders. What Does It Look Like For A Deacon To Be A Lead Servant?

All Christians are commanded to serve God and one another. In fact, the same root word for deacon is used many other times for Christian servants in general. So, in a general sense all Christians are deacons. There is, however, a distinction between the service a deacon does and the office of a deacon. Some are chosen to the office of deacon as an official servant and model of service for everyone else. Those who are deacons aren’t the only ones who serve, but they are the lead servants and model what humble, faithful, sacrificial service looks like for the congregation.

There are numerous ways a person can serve, but in his book, “On Being a Deacon”, Mark Devers notes four ways a deacon can

model service: (1) Be available to those we serve; (2) Be gentle with those we serve; (3) Be patient with those we lead; (4) Be willing to do the things no one else wants to do.

The pastor is the leader. The deacons are the servants. What about the rest of the church members? In reality, the people are the church. The church is not to be ‘run’ by the pastor, deacons, or both. The pastor is to equip the church members to do the ministry. The deacons are to assist the pastor so that he can maintain a life of prayer and ministry of the Word to equip those church members. A Bible-oriented church is one that is led by the pastor, served by the deacons, and participated in by all the members.

Everyone has a unique role in the local church. The church works best when all members know and perform their unique duties. When deacons recognize their role as a servant the church is blessed. However, problems, divisions, and fruitless ministry may result when roles and responsibilities get confused. If the ministry of deacons was vital in the early church when the ministry was not as complex and complicated as today, it is even more essential in contemporary church life.

Today’s pastor of a local congregation has an endless list of tasks that need to be accomplished. However, time for prayer, meditation, personal Bible study, and sermon preparation can be squeezed out for other duties such as visitation, conferences, oversee staff and volunteers and a host of other responsibilities. While these duties need to be performed, the duties of prayer and ministry of the Word should never be neglected. As deacons look for opportunities to relieve a pastor from some of the burdens of the church, more time, energy and passion can be put into “prayer and to the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:4). The Word of God will have greater impact and the number of believers will multiply (Acts 6:7).

A Deacon's Perspective - Don Bannister

After being a deacon for several years, serving with different groups of men, I have found serving my local church in a leadership position to be rewarding.

One of the key things for me is not to become high minded, but to focus on being a servant leader by being faithful in the places that God has led me to serve. For me that is in children's ministries. The highlight of my week is teaching children in Sunday School and AWANA. While it is important to oversee the finances of the church and support the planning and direction of the church, it is most important to stay humble in service and keep in mind that I am a sinner saved by grace and that I have many flaws. Many who serve as deacons are successful in careers and in the things of this world, but the reality is that we are here for a short time and all we have belongs to God and our purpose is to serve God and bring Him glory. This is best accomplished as deacons by praying and supporting our pastors and church by using our time, treasures and talents and being faithful servant leaders.

The best way to lead is by serving using Jesus as our example. Jesus humbled Himself in becoming a man and sacrificed himself for all people in the greatest act of love ever witnessed. God is love and our goal should be to let the love of God shine through us to provide Him glory in serving our family, church and community. I often fall short and pray for God to help me to do better and trust God to sustain me and carry me forward. All I can do is push forward with God's strength day by day and strive to do the best I can one day at a time.

In looking back, one thing that sticks in my mind is when the deacons agreed to provide some financial support to a young couple who needed help in paying a utility bill. They hadn't been attending church for too long and weren't saved, but they had a need and the church helped them to meet their financial need. I think this act of support from the church showed them that God loved them and that the church cared for them even though they

weren't church members or saved yet. The couple ended up getting married, both professing faith in Jesus as their Savior, were baptized and became church members. I'm thankful the deacons agreed to help them as God used that act of charity to show His love. The Holy Spirit worked in their hearts and they committed their lives to Jesus. God used us to show His love to them and He changed their lives for eternity.

I'm thankful for being able to serve and hopeful that God can use me in some small way to make a difference for Him.

- Don Bannister

A Deacon's Perspective - Jamie Beach

Being in any leadership position within the church can be difficult and full of challenges. Serving in the role as deacon is no different. The Bible does not give much direction to what the responsibilities of a deacon are. Stephen is often looked at as an example of a biblical definition of what a deacon's role in a church should be.

Before accepting a nomination to becoming a deacon, it is important to understand what that actually means. Stephen's example shows us that first and foremost a deacon is a servant. Being nominated by a group of people to even becoming a deacon is a humbling experience. Being recognized by other leaders in the church as someone who has a servant's heart is something that should be an encouragement by itself.

Before accepting a nomination as a deacon, you must consider what comes along with the role. A deacon is someone who is held in high esteem from those inside the church and is often someone who is viewed as a reflection of the church, and even more so a reflection of Jesus, by those outside of the church. A deacon is someone who is well respected in the church. He should be a good steward of money, morally pure, and spiritually strong. Accepting the role is not something you can take lightly.

As important as it is to figure out what a deacon does or who a deacon is, it is also important to understand what a deacon is not. A Deacon does not hold any kind of authority in the church and should not try to assume any. It is God who has the authority over the church, and God rules through the congregation.

These are all things that I have learned through the 3+ years I have been a deacon. I did not understand this great responsibility when accepting the role but its humbling to follow the example that Stephen and others in the Bible have set and the many deacons that have served this role at my church. I have also learned that God is able to use my past life and career experiences to help me serve in this role.

I can narrow down the areas in the ministry I have focused on during my time as a deacon to 3 areas, which I believe to be true for all deacons. One area is simply assisting the pastor in the ministry. This can look like many different things. Another area is helping to oversee and meet the physical needs of the congregation. We have done this through the management of our deacon benevolence fund. Finally, financial oversight and leading the church toward being good stewards of money and resources has been an area that I have served as a deacon.

At times it has been discouraging to see and deal with the 'business' of the church but I stay encouraged knowing that God is using me in His church to grow His kingdom. Here are some Bible verses that I have found encouraging:

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. (Proverbs 3: 5-6)

I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye. (Psalm 32:8)

- Jamie Beach