

Shock Absorbers and Servants

Acts 6:1 ESV (Pg. 533) Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists (Greek Jews) arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. **2** And 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. **3** 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. **4** But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” **5** And 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. **6** These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. **7** And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. **8** And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

- I. We’ve talked about how God has ordered the church; that Christ is the sovereign head, and that he works through the agency of eldership. In this passage there is another set of agents vital to the proper functioning of the Church of Jesus Christ.
 - A. A deacon is a servant-hearted person who loves Christ, is full of his Spirit, and who does “whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church”¹. Most Bible scholars see the passage from Acts 6 as the inauguration of deacon ministry (though the word is not mentioned here).
 1. In fact, the words “deacon” and “deacons” are only used a handful of times in the English translations of the Bible. There is a reason for that:
 2. The word “deacon” comes from a very general Greek word, *diakonos*²; which means servant. It is translated in different ways in the NT:
 - a) It is sometimes given as deacon, servant, or attendant³; and is used not only in reference to those serving in the church⁴, but also of angels⁵, government rulers⁶, false apostles⁷ and even Jesus Christ⁸.
 - b) Since the Greek word is identical in all of the 31 times it is used in the New Testament, the context of each passage is always vitally important to understanding the intended use of the word when we find it in the text.
 - B. But in 1 Timothy 3, Paul uses “diakonos” for the official church office of **deacon**, the prototype of which we find in Acts 6. Let’s take a closer look at it now...
- II. Acts 6 begins with one of the first major church controversies, which could have blown up into a scandal. The church, committed to taking care of the less fortunate as evidence for the gospel, made sure that charity for native-born Jewish widows was distributed like clockwork, but the Jewish widows of Greek origin were often neglected and hungry. There was an understandable outcry about this!
 - A. The Apostles could have rolled up their sleeves and addressed the problem personally, but they didn’t do that, saying, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.”

1. They recognized the specifics of their calling, and the boundaries of it. They knew **what** they were called to do and were committed to doing it.
 2. Many ministries fail because they are led a key leader who tries to be a superstar. Instead of allowing everyone's gift to be utilized, they just do it all.
- B. With great wisdom, the Apostles picked 7 men to compassionately and justly handle a very real administrative and logistics, as well as PR problem.
- C. But did you notice the **kind** of people that the Apostles chose? They weren't mainly concerned with great managers. They had three distinct qualifications:
1. **"men of good repute"** First, they wanted people of the highest integrity.
 - a) Right after the list of qualifications for an elder, which Paul lists in 1 Timothy 3, he lists those for a deacon: **1 Timothy 3:8 ESV Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. 9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. 11 Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. 12 Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.**
 - b) These qualifications vary slightly from those of elders; for example, deacons are not required to be able to teach as prospective elders are.
 2. Next, they sought people who were **"full of the Spirit"**. This means a believer, genuinely in relationship with Christ and full of the Spirit, rooted in God's word. "They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience".
 - a) Otherwise qualified people could be disqualified because they had no apparent connection to Jesus Christ or to the Holy Spirit. This is why Paul emphasizes that such people should be tested first.
 - b) On the upside, people who know Christ and are able to solve real-world problems administratively and logistically in the church are placed on an equal spiritual footing with the preachers, singers, elders, etc.
 - (1) In the Old Testament there was a craftsman named Bezalel who was "filled with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship" in order to "devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft."⁹
 - (2) Bezalel teaches us that all of our work, no matter what type of work it is, is both holy and spiritual if it is done unto the Lord's glory.
 3. We see this especially evidenced in Stephen, whom the Apostles chose and is described in our passage today as, "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit", and also "full of grace and power", and who, because of this, was reported as "doing great wonders and signs among the people."
 - a) This same Stephen was the first martyr in the church, having preached a scathing, accusing message to the Jewish leaders in Acts 7.
 - b) As he died by stoning, he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Though he had been ordained to distribute food to little old ladies, he was a saint of the highest caliber. Never underestimate the importance of fulfilling your call in obedience, no matter what it is, to the glory of God.

4. Third, deacons must not only be full of the Holy Spirit, but “full of wisdom” as well. This shows us that wisdom is vital to be a deacon.
 - a) First, wisdom to fulfill the duties required is obviously important. You don’t want someone to be a fiscal deacon who is in debt up to their eyeballs and who has their power shut off every other month!
 - b) But there is also a degree of spiritual wisdom that is to be expected. How can you represent God’s kingdom if you’ve made no attempt to understand his Word? If you never meet with him in prayer?
- D. One additional point about who can be a deacon is that I don’t think that the scriptures make a clear gender requirement to serve as a deacon.
 1. Paul commends Phoebe to the church at Rome, calling her a “servant of the church at Cenchreae”¹⁰. The NIV in particular translates “servant” as deacon.
 2. There is also the ministry by widows mentioned in 1 Timothy 5, and the fact that in 1 Timothy 3, Paul lays out qualifications for the deacon’s wives, as though they would be serving together. He does not make a similar statement about the elder’s wives earlier in that same chapter.
- III. But what do deacons do? Jamie Dunlop, associate pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C. says deacons are “shock absorbers” and servants¹¹.
 - A. By “shock absorbers”, he means that deacons, by their faithful and selfless service, facilitate unity in the body of Christ. Consider Acts 6 again for a second. There was a racially charged (even if unintended) injustice that was causing division in the Body. Some people were getting served, while others of a different ethnicity, were not. The deacons, using Spirit-guided administration skills were able to right the wrong and remove the disgrace from the cause of the gospel. Deacons help to maintain unity and peace in the church in two ways:
 1. First, by faithfully serving with excellence, discovering and alleviating distracting problems as they come up in the church.
 2. Second, by being an advocate for the church and its leadership. Thom Rainer says part of a deacon’s responsibility is to “deal with critics, conflict, and bullies.”¹² thereby taking “that burden off the pastor and church staff.”¹³
 - B. But a deacon’s main calling is to live as a model of servanthood. We know that every believer is called to serve in one way or another, but the deacons play an even more significant role in this area of church life.
 1. God has called elders to make directional decisions for the church and to cast a God-exalting vision. Qualified, spirit-filled, wise deacons come along and show the church how best to facilitate that vision efficiently and effectively. The remaining members of the congregation then “do” the vision.
 2. Elders strive to hear what God would have us do, the deacons show us how best to do it.
- IV. So we have to ask ourselves, does NRLC need deacons? In every way, YES! The church cannot function if it neglects to embrace what God ordained for her best.
 - A. This can be confusing, because some of you were raised in churches where guys called deacons did the work of elders, or where guys called elders did the work of deacons! Some of you had do-it-all pastors that never made room for anyone else’s gifts and abilities (I don’t want to lead that way!), and some of you

had no church background at all for context! Remember, just because something has been done poorly elsewhere doesn't give us the right to not do it at all.

- B. Since I have been a part of it, our congregation has never had actual deacons, although we've had positions that were similar in function, if not name. I really think it's time we fix this so that we can be the kind of church that pleases the Lord, and ministers effectively. It's time to build a biblical deacons ministry.
1. What will that look like? It will look like people of great character, who love Jesus, are full of the Holy Spirit, and have all kinds of abilities and wisdom that they are willing to put to use for the glory of God and the gospel.
 2. Is that person you? What do you know about computers, hospitality, lawn maintenance, prayer, finance, encouragement, childcare, sound and lighting, evangelism, decorating, or a 1,000 other things that could shape our future?
 - a) A great deacon doesn't wait around until they are asked to serve, they honestly assess what they bring to the table, and surrender it to the church to be used for the good of everyone.
 - b) A great deacon is creative! They are innovative! They listen carefully for the vision to be stated and they realize how their unique giftings can be used to move it forward for the benefit of the gospel.
 - c) Even greater deacons make it known that they want to serve, letting the elders know what their gifts are so they can be most helpful.
- C. But don't forget that character, deep faith, and wisdom are the three legs that support a deacon's ministry. If you are deficient in any one of them, your ministry will be less than effective. That doesn't mean you can never serve, it just means you cannot lead as a deacon until you address your deficiency.
1. If your lacking in integrity and holiness, ask the Holy Spirit to work in you to make you into the person that you need to be in order to serve him well. **2 Timothy 2:21 ESV** Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.
 2. If you are lacking in deep faith, draw close to God by looking into his word and looking to him in prayer. In doing so, you will become more like him. **James 4:8 ESV** Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.
 3. If you lack wisdom to know how to serve, ask God! He promises to respond. **James 1:5 ESV** If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.
- D. I am not suggesting that all of you should be deacons. Surely not everyone is qualified! What I am saying is don't disqualify yourself before you ask the Lord. If you feel like the Lord might have spoken to you this morning about helping NRLC launch a great deacon's ministry, fill out a white card and I will call you this week so we can discover together what the Lord might be doing in you.
1. I know some of you will be great deacons, so I might just be calling on you!
 2. If you want to serve but you see the deficiencies that would make that problematic, don't quit! Talk to one of us and let us help you discover how to move forward in the call that God might have for you in this ministry.

¹ <https://www.9marks.org/article/biblical-qualifications-and-responsibilities-deacons/>

² Vine, W.A.; *A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Original Greek Words with their Precise Meanings for English Readers*, McLean Va, MacDonald Publishing Company; pp. 274-275

³ Philippians 1:1; John 2:5, 9; Matthew 22:13 (ESV)

⁴ 1 Timothy 3:8-13

⁵ Matthew 22:13

⁶ Romans 13:4

⁷ 2 Corinthians 11:15

⁸ Romans 15:8

⁹ Exodus 31:4-5

¹⁰ Romans 16:1

¹¹ <https://www.9marks.org/article/deacons-shock-absorbers-and-servants/>

¹² <https://thomrainer.com/2017/05/four-useful-ministries-deacons/>

¹³ *ibid*