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INTRODUCTION

JERRY WINDSOR

*Secretary-Treasurer
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Welcome to the Fifteenth Issue of The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage

Baptist deacons are a strong force in the Florida Baptist Convention. There are 3,000 Florida Southern Baptist congregations and nearly all of them have deacons. Florida Baptists love deacons.

This issue looks at the ministry of deacon as an opportunity, task, duty and calling. The deacon is seen through the eyes of history, research, opinion and testing. He is viewed as loyal leader and friend.

My college roommate and I got separated after a few years and I lost track of him. He earned his engineering degree from the University of Florida, served in the army and got married along the way. He eventually worked for AT&T but when we reconnected I had already heard of many of his honors, accomplishments and successes in life. Upon our getting together again after a brief time of updating our friendship he said, "Oh yes, I have something I want to show you." I thought it might be an army decoration he received. I thought it might be a PE engineering award. Then he showed me his prized possession. It was his deacon ordination certificate from his local Southern Baptist church. He beamed with pride.

Honoring those who honor Christ,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jerry Windsor".

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE DEACON

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The origin of deacons is commonly (and rightly) tied to the choice of the “seven” in Acts 6, along with its story of an ethnic divide that threatened to mar the fellowship of the early church—but can that narrow understanding of the historical context actually impede our ongoing understanding of the role of deacons? Part of the problem is that modern believers may often miss the larger significance related to the origin of deacons by focusing too narrowly on that early dispute. The origin of deacons, I suggest, is part of a much larger process than just the dynamics of congregational interaction.

Another part of the problem is that modern believers may not even give that Acts 6 scenario its due significance. The fact that Hellenistic widows were being slighted in favor of Hebrew widows might seem to be a small issue to people who have felt the heat of their own church crises. Personal and recent experiences are almost always “closer to home” than those related to a church squabble in the long distant past.

Consequently, what was nothing less than the intentional, providential, and protective work of God in a wider historical context could be written off in modern times as simply the long-ago decision to get some extra help around the church. If deacons are sometimes less respected than they should be, this oversight in terms of historical context is certainly an issue to be considered.¹

What if the historical context related to the origin of deacons was wider, larger, and of much more significance? What if the

proper understanding of the historical context for the origin of deacons was that the ministry of deacons was a part of God’s larger providential and protective care for His young church, or even His intentional plan for His growing church? I want to suggest that this is exactly the case.

The wider context begins in Acts 5. This chapter contains the rather embarrassing story of Ananias and Sapphira, two believers who allowed Satan (see Acts 5:3) and their own desire for recognition to dupe them into introducing corruption into the nascent church. Apparently, they were so jealous of the attention being lauded on Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37) for having sold his land and giving the proceeds to the church that they set out to do the same. Along the way, however, they discovered that such an act would be costly, so they attempted to re-create the Barnabas effect without fully committing to the Barnabas sacrifice. They kept back part of the money, but claimed to be giving it all. In other words, they lied. The significance of the lie, though, was that they did not simply lie to their friends; they lied to the church, and thus lied to God. The result, if unchecked and un-judged, would have been the introduction of a pattern of corruption into the early church.

To prevent that corruption, God intervened in a miraculous and disturbing way. God revealed their duplicity to Peter; God gave Peter the boldness needed to confront them and warn the church in an effective way; and then God judged Ananias and Sapphira on the spot. The understated description of the resulting public fallout was given in Acts 5:5 with these simple words, “great fear came over all who heard of it.” I do not doubt it.

What Luke is telling us is that the potential corruption of the early church from within did not last very long. God did not allow corruption to enter the church during this early period. Of course, corruption eventually came, but the early church was kept pure by God’s intervention.

Corruption from within, however, was not the only potential harm that threatened the Jerusalem congregation. Hurt could also come from external persecution. That theme is present in the second half of Acts 5 and is the next part of the wider historical context for the origin of deacons. The Jewish leaders responded to the successes of the early church by arresting and imprisoning the apostles, apparently with the thought of disposing of them as they had Jesus. During the night, though, an angel released them. To their chagrin, the Jewish leaders discovered that the apostles were right back at their work the next morning, teaching and preaching in the temple.

The leaders have them arrested again. Once the apostles are before them, the high priest launches into his reprimand and threat mode, but he only gets one verse of recorded verbiage (Acts 5:28) before Peter and the others interrupt him. Peter's statement is essentially, "Look, you killed Jesus, but God raised Him, and we think we should obey Him instead of you." That statement did not play well with the Council, and the lives of the apostles were now hanging by a thread.

Again, God intervened to protect His young church. He used Gamaliel, a respected teacher, to calm the irate council. Gamaliel reminded them that if God was not with these men, their work would come to nothing anyway. The result was that instead of killing the leaders of the early church, the council simply threatened and then released the leaders of the early church. Instead of depriving the young church of its leadership, the council ultimately and ironically encouraged the leaders of the young church. Those early church leaders left the council believing even more that God was with them.

These preparatory scenes in Acts 5 form the wider historical context for Acts 6. After experiencing the threat of internal corruption and external persecution, a third crisis for the church arrived in Acts 6 in the form of internal distraction. This crisis had the potential to create serious trouble. Anytime a church gets

its collective sight off the mission to reach the world, the church is essentially doing to itself what internal corruption and external persecution could not accomplish. A church without a focused vision is just a group of people, a gaggle, and certainly not an effective force. That group can be a benevolent group, but without vision it will be an irrelevant and powerless and distracted group. In the case of Acts 6, the distraction is a worthy one (ministry to widows is as biblical as it gets), but even worthy distractions can cause a group to descend from normal and non-threatening substantive conflict to destructive inter-personal conflict.

At this point, we should remember the pattern that was established in the wider historical context under consideration (Acts 5). When internal corruption loomed, God intervened and removed the offending parties. When external persecution threatened, God intervened and used exactly the right person to mitigate the fury of the Jewish leaders. What happens next in Acts 6, I believe, is a part of that same pattern. When distraction became an issue in the early church, God intervened by leading the apostles to appoint the seven. At every turn, God intervened to protect His young church. In essence, the origin of the servant-leaders we call deacons is the result of the providence of God, and their work is a gift from God to the church.

If that is the case, then we cannot go on viewing deacons as simply a group of men who have traditionally served the church in miscellaneous ways. That definition will no longer suffice. Instead, we have to look at deacons in a better way. Allow me to make some beginning suggestions for our improved understanding of the role of deacons.

1. First, we have to remind ourselves of the divine origin of deacons. Deacons did not simply evolve from a logical decision made by early church leaders about congregational logistics. God ordained the office of the deacon as a part of His plan to protect and energize the

young church. Deacons are a result of God's providential care. He sent Peter to confront the corrupters. He sent Gamaliel to calm the council. He sent deacons to correct the distraction. Recognizing the divine origin of deacons will help us avoid viewing their role and work minimally.

2. Second, we have to understand the resulting significance of deacon service. While the first job of the proto-deacons in Acts 6 was seemingly logistical, that level of service cannot be our ultimate understanding of the work of deacons. If their presence and service is a part of God's plan, then their work cannot be described as simply logistical or miscellaneous. Instead, their role is to care for and help lead the church, primarily by keeping the church on track, on target, and on mission by guiding the church from distraction to effectiveness. In each of the three narratives in this wider context, God was at work protecting the young church from going where it should not go—into corruption from weakness, into fear from persecution, and into irrelevance from distraction.

That elevated sense of mission seems to be the point of Luke's summary statement (Acts 6:7) that follows the narrative of the first deacons. Thinking about their work in the early church, Luke said:

The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Not to press the point too firmly, the significant role of deacons reflected in that summary statement seems even more reinforced by the transition to the next narrative (Stephen) in Acts 6:8. Luke might as well have said, "Now let me illustrate my point by telling you the special story of a particular deacon."

3. Third, this means we should revise our colloquial and demeaning language about deacons. The old joke for pastors is that if you see one deacon coming to the church office, he has a problem; if you see two deacons coming to the church office, someone else has a problem; and if you see three deacons coming to the church office, you have a problem! There may be some truth to that old joke, but notice how the truth is stated in terminology that sees the deacon as generally associated with bearing bad news in one way or another. Yes, this is familiar and well-meaning jesting, but it can set a pattern of thought that sees deacons as disruptors of the church instead of providers for the church. The church should renew its Acts 6 vision of deacons as integral and important leaders, and the church should soundly communicate that vision through consistent language.

4. Fourth, the divine origin and serious nature of deacon work should also cause us to re-think the nature of deacon selection. If God calls deacons to be leaders and providers for the church, men who keep it from distraction and irrelevance, then the question of deacon selection can hardly be allowed to degenerate into, "who's available?" Those responsible for shaping deacon selection in the church would be well served by studying the significant literature on the subject of Deacon Ministry in order to form a higher view of the role of deacons.²

5. Fifth, we should also raise our expectations about deacon service. If we are going to, as I have suggested, see the divine origin of deacon work, see deacons as church guides, discard our habit of demeaning language about deacons, and raise our standards in selecting

deacons, then we also have to expect more from them as well. Deacons should be clearly visible in service and worship throughout the range of church ministry in any congregation. Sheffield called this kind of visible service, “participatory leadership.”³ Sheffield suggested that deacons who have the spiritual gift of teaching should teach Sunday School classes, and deacons who have the spiritual gift of administration should serve on committees. The point was that every deacon should be actively serving as he has been gifted. Such visible service encourages the church by helping the congregation know that God has provided leaders. Such visible service also challenges the church to follow their leadership by responding in kind and serving as they are gifted. This is why Henry Webb called deacons the “servant models” of the church.⁴ They model what we need to be.

I trust that my brief suggestions here are helpful. Instead of seeing deacons as some sort of second-order administrative necessity, we should instead see deacons as an intentional part of God’s plan to protect the church and place spiritual gifts in the church. Deacons should be now what they were then: leaders who not only stabilize the church (sometimes by doing logistical ministries), but also leaders who invigorate the church. I believe that such is the message of the wider historical context given in Acts 5 and 6.

Endnotes

¹ In my views here, I am deeply indebted to the teaching ministry of Robert Sheffield. As a young Associational Pastoral Ministries Director in the late 1980’s, I had the privilege of attending Deacon Ministry workshops with him. His passion for effective Deacon Ministry shaped my pastoral and teaching ministry, and his spirit of service encouraged me and strengthened me as a minister.

²These helpful sources will give any reader a good foundation in understanding the nature and work of deacons. See Robert Sheffield, *The Ministry of Baptist Deacons* (Convention Press, 1990), and *Deacons as Leaders* (Convention Press, 1991); Henry Webb, *Deacons: Servant Models in the Church* (updated edition, Broadman & Holman, 2001); Johnny Hunt, *The Deacon I Want to Be* (Sampson Resources, 2008).

³Robert Sheffield, *The Ministry of Baptist Deacons* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1990), 62.

⁴Henry Webb, *Deacons: Servant Models in the Church* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1980), 12.

THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST DEACON

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The call of the Deacon was to ministry in the early New Testament church, according to Acts 6:1-7. The role was to meet needs and to witness to the church and community as servants. These called servants were to give clarity to the various ministries of the church. Today, as then, Deacons are called by God out of the very family of the church of which they are members. Deacons keep a close watch on church members and report needs to the pastoral staff of the church, and work alongside them to maintain unity and peace.

Deacons played a significant role in the early Baptist church. They edified the church with any spiritual gifts they had. They were described from the beginning as the adhesive power of the Holy Spirit that kept the members together by performing their ministry.

Historical guidelines of the history of early Baptist deacons in England and America was recorded by Charles W. Deweese in his book "The Emerging Role of Deacons." First, deacons received their authority from God, the New Testament, and the local church. Baptist regularly appealed to the New Testament in defending the existence and defining the qualifications and role of deacons. A church ordained deacons, using prayer, the laying on of hands, and fasting as means of giving authority to deacons.

Second, the authority given to deacons was for positive and practical purposes...namely, to serve as church officers, to assist in limited administrative functions, to care for a church's

treasury, to make adequate provisions for the Lord's table, to ensure that the minister's needs were cared for, to minister to the sick, to stimulate responsible stewardship by encouraging voluntary contributions, and to be general servants of God, the church, and the needy.

Third, because deacons were given authority by the church, they were responsible to the church. This responsibility often manifested itself in a probationary period following a deacon's election and in the examination of the candidate and the laying on of hands employed in ordination. To ensure that deacons lived upright lives and did not misuse their authority churches required deacons at regular intervals to give accounts of their ministry activities.

Fourth, in America in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the role of deacons as caretakers of the temporal or secular affairs of the church began to assume a priority that it had never had before. The involvement of deacons in administrative, managerial, and business functions became more pronounced. As churches became more numerous, pastors served more than one church and could spend only a limited time doing administrative work in each. Thus, deacons did this work. Because church committee structures were not as developed as they are today, deacons were the logical persons to perform administrative tasks.

Because of past history and assumed assignments, Deacon Ministry is one of the most complex and misunderstood roles in the Southern Baptist Church today. There are some who think deacons run the church, but on the contrary the New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. Deacons are qualified by scripture. The original call of the New Testament Deacon was to enhance the churches Caring Ministry. Deacons are to serve God's people in the church and community. Deacons

serve the Lord by meeting needs through Pastoral Ministry. They conduct the caring ministry of the church in bereavement, ministry administration, hospital ministry, family ministry, spiritual development, disciple making, evangelism, new member orientation, and helping maintain the unity through peace making.

Let's look at the original call of the deacon servant. The office of the Deacon began right after Peter delivered his message of salvation which is called Pentecost. Acts 2 states 3,000 people believed and were baptized in the New Testament Church. Such rapid growth caught the Apostles off guard. Some of these new people were Hellenistic Jews and they wanted the same rights of membership as the Hebraic Jews. They observed that they were not receiving the same benefits of food distribution as older members. They simply asked why not? Suddenly the disciples realized they were right. Acts 6 states the disciples needed help in ministering to the church membership, therefore a group of men were called to the Caring Ministry of the church. The disciples continued to preach and establish other churches, and this new ministry to the local church was well accepted by all.

This new ministry group was called in the Greek "diakonos," which means "servant." It is from the word diakonos that down through time has become the modern day English title deacon. Deacons must have a biblical understanding of their role. Deacons who take their leadership role seriously can help their church accomplish God's purpose. Jesus felt that the issue of servant leadership was so important he had to share it with His disciples. Jesus' own life serves as the model for the deacon; for he claimed that he "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45). He defined his own ministry as a disciplining servant. "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43).

These deacons were the new church leaders. Leadership is strictly a matter of function, and that function is to serve. But, in order for this example Jesus has set to be carried out in the lives of

these seven men there were immediate requirements. These requirements should be met by all church leaders, but especially deacons.

Some of the following exposition was suggested by Robert Sheffield in "The Ministry of Baptist Deacons." In Acts 6:3 we come to understand the personal individual qualification of each deacon's life. The first biblical qualification is that of a "good reputation." You do not call a person to be a deacon in the church thinking they will become who they are supposed to be. There must be something unique about them that causes a person to say that person has the qualities of being a deacon. Therefore, first and foremost is their character, the very person God has made them to be, which we know by their reputation. The deacon's influence in the church requires the deacon to be a person respected by others and the church members they are going to serve.

Secondly, deacons should be "full of the spirit." This means they have experienced a spiritual transformation by being filled with the very spirit of God. It must be seen and felt that this person is seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in what they say and do. This must be seen in ministry of their Spiritual gift and the character qualities of the gifts of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22-23. The nine character qualities will be evidenced in the life of a deacon who is "full of the Holy Spirit."

Thirdly, "full of wisdom," not the wisdom gained by anyone's life in this world, but the wisdom here is God's wisdom. Applying God's wisdom is the ability to discern right from wrong, to make wise spiritual decisions, and to know what to say in difficult situations. Even when they do not know what to do or say they know the source of their wisdom and they seek God's wise counsel through prayer.

The basic role of the deacon candidate must begin with the Biblical Qualifications. The basic resource for this section on Deacon Qualifications is Henry Webb's book "Deacons Servant

Models in the Church.” The first question of the average church member should not be who do we elect, but who meets the qualifications of God’s Word and the expectations of the Church? The Bible in 1 Timothy 3 gives us the answer:

Christian dedication (3:8)

- Deacons likewise must be men worthy of respect
- Self-Worth and Respect...one who possesses Christian purpose, who has great reverence for spiritual matters. One whose word carries weight.

Truthfulness in speech (3:8)

- Not hypocritical
- Dependable and responsible

Disciplined Christian living (3:8)

- Not addicted to much wine or greedy for money.
- Temperance in living, steward of good influence, doing all to the glory of God.
- Not greedy for money...a right attitude toward material possessions, not eager to exploit others for his own gain or profit.

Integrity in Christian conduct (3:9)

- Holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.
- One who gives strength to the church fellowship and one who possesses spiritual integrity beyond question

Proven spiritual maturity (3:10)

- And they must be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond question.
- Tested and proved...one who demonstrates these spiritual qualifications before being elected to serve as a deacon.

Christian family life (3:12)

- Let deacons be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.
- One whose family is well-cared for, whose family

relationships are healthy and growing. Model of faithful devotion to one spouse, committed to the sanctity of the marriage bond. Manages his own home well, loved and respected by his spouse and children, firm but with compassion and tenderness of Christ

In these qualifications of Deacons in 1 Timothy 3, Paul concluded with these words, “Those who have served well as deacons acquire a good standing for themselves” 3:13.

Deacons are not incidental to the church but are an integral part of it. The role of the discipling servant deacon is the basis of all ministries in the church. A deacon’s ministry is essential to the church as long as Christian service is at its heart. Acts 6:7 is proof of their importance “So the preaching about God flourished, the number of the disciples in Jerusalem multiplied greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.”

If there was ever a time good solid leadership is needed in our churches it is today. The church needs Pastors and Deacons who focus on God’s will and not the limited ability of man. Their relationship must be to fulfill the ministry of the church and community. Pastor and Deacons do not exercise their authority; it is determined by the church they serve. There is a reason that the qualification of both church offices is found in the same chapter 1 Timothy 3. Each office requirements are distinctive, but there is a common bond. God calls and the church confirms their role.

But their relationship is important to the church’s ability to minister. The pastor and deacons play a significant role in empowering church members to serve. When the pastor and deacons model the work of ministry, other church members will follow their lead. We need to return to the New Testament concept that all believers are to serve in ministry. Can you imagine any greater witness, than observing pastors and deacons serving together for the Glory of God and His church? This will create a dramatic change in the energy level when church members discover their place of service.

Deacons must lead out in disciple making within the church and community. For the average deacon to become a disciple maker he needs a clear sense of the presence of God's Holy Spirit and his discipling passion must grow from that experience. Deacons need the strength and power of God's reconciling presence to transform them into persons capable of working with God in discipling others. Through his indwelling Spirit, God helps deacons grow as persons and grow in their ability to minister to their church and community.

Not only must deacons be disciple makers they must be disciplined themselves. Becoming a deacon is not just a matter of getting a call from the nominating committee, or achieving a certain level of spiritual maturity, or even having a desire to serve. Deacons do not just happen, they develop. Like any Christian, they need to continue to grow in their faith. They need to be nurtured and encouraged. The church must have a plan for discipling deacons. Missional disciple making is a lifelong journey of obedience to Christ that spiritually transforms a person's values and behavior and results in ministry in one's home, church, and the world.

Leadership is strictly a matter of function, and that function is to serve. Deacons came into being as servant leaders who serve the people. Servant leadership focuses not on superiority over others but on partnership and sharing to accomplish what needs to be done. Every deacon in every church should live up to the name servant.

Deacons model what Christian leadership is all about. Deacons exercise their enabling leadership by helping members discover opportunities to develop and use the spiritual gifts, talents, skills, and abilities God has given. The Deacon process helps to clarify and interpret the churches ministries to church families to enable understanding, and they can challenge and exercise them to encourage support.

Deacons also must understand their role as the church peacemakers. Deacons can help preserve peace and unity of fellowship. Where there are people there is going to be conflict. Deacons must help manage conflict by being the first line of defense. The deacon receives information and understanding that enables them to answer questions from members in the congregation and to encourage a spirit of fellowship. Sometimes when the deacon takes the time to answer someone's question it might very well curtail a major misunderstanding that leads to a conflict.

Deacons must live their faith in Christ Jesus by nurturing the ways which challenge them to act in the world as instruments of God's peace. While our natural human reaction to conflict is to escape or attack, only peacemaking actually helps us manage conflict. Deacons and all church members need to keep in perspective that God is bigger and His kingdom's mission is bigger than any single conflict.

The congregation looks to its deacons to serve as living examples of the quality of Christian living that God expects of all Christians. These qualities are manifested in the individual deacon's life through growth toward mature faith, Christian family life, personal and public morality, and a life accepted by God and the church. The result of deacons being accepted by God and the church is not a matter of personal pride but confidence. Such confidence enables deacons to accomplish their biblical role.

As servant leaders, deacons have the opportunity to demonstrate a quality of life and servant ministry that God would have for every Christian. Deacons who take their leadership role seriously can help their church accomplish God's purpose.

"Those who have served well as deacons acquire a good standing for themselves, and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus," 1 Timothy 3:13. Deacons must understand that their biblical role is an example to the church and community.

GIVE ME A D-E-A-C-O-N! WHAT'S THAT SPELL? IT DEPENDS ON WHOM YOU ASK!

JOEL BREIDENBAUGH

Pator, First Baptist Church, Sweetwater



Deacon—the very word sends shudders up some people's spines, not the least of which includes many pastors. Ask a group of Baptists to list whatever comes to mind when they hear the word *deacon*, and you will find responses like "godly," "controlling," "mean-spirited," "helpful," "compassionate," "negative," and more! Most likely, the words *servant* and/or *leader* will also surface. While the same kind of responses could describe many people's views of *pastor*, this article examines various matters surrounding the role of Convention Press in the deacon ministry, particularly the nature and duties of deacons, in order to answer definitively what a deacon should be.

Out with the Old, In with the New— Transitioning Eras for Deacons in Baptist Life

Researching the influential books from Convention Press (and the Sunday School Board) on the role of the deacon brings an unmistakable shift to light. Popular Baptist works from the 18th and 19th centuries that at least touched on deacon ministry include the *Charleston Confession of Faith* (1774), R. B. C. Howell's *The Deaconship* (1846), and J. M. Pendleton's *Church Manual* (1847). These treatises assign the material and financial aspects of the church to the deacons.¹ P. E. Burroughs' *Honoring the Deaconship* (1929) continued this trend. This volume was designed as a study course book, resulting in a widespread readership in Baptist churches. Furthermore, Burroughs' work became the standard for Baptist deacons for four decades.²

Give Me a D-E-A-C-O-N! What's That Spell! It Depends on Whom You Ask!

Howard Foshee's *The Ministry of the Deacon* (1968) ushered in significant change within deacon ministry. Foshee placed less emphasis on the material matters and gave more attention to spiritual matters in deacon service. Additional changes came with Robert Sheffield's *The Ministry of Baptist Deacons* (1990), calling for an even "deeper commitment and resolve for ministry."³ Thus, the late-1700s until the mid-1900s provided a common consensus of deacon ministry. The last forty years or so have challenged that consensus. Realizing these differences toward views of deacon ministry should aid the reader in what follows.

A Long Time Ago, in a Galaxy Far, Far Away. . . The Origin of the Diaconate

If you were to ask the average deacon when the deacon ministry originated, he will refer to Acts 6.⁴ Much of the early 20th century literature supports this view. P. E. Burroughs' *Honoring the Deaconship*, traces the origin of the diaconate to Acts 6. Moreover, E. C. Dargan, an influential voice in Baptist ecclesiology, comments on the term *deacon* in Phil 1:1 and 1 Tim 3:8-13: "while the word in its general signification means a servant, it is clear that it came to be used of the officer, and this very likely originated out of the circumstance mentioned in the 6th chapter of Acts." Furthermore, Robert Naylor writes about "the seven" in Acts 6:⁵ "It is a matter of general agreement, however, that the election of these seven qualified men is the real beginning of the deacon as a church officer."⁶

Others, however, prefer to challenge this assumption, noting that "the seven" of Acts 6 were not called deacons. Moreover, it is not uncommon for contemporary writers to challenge previous writers who focused their attention on deacons from Acts 6.⁷ Regardless of one's final views on Acts 6, all recognize the mandate for deacons "to serve" as well as their model in witnessing (see soul-winning in "odds and ends" below).⁸ Different views of Acts 6 and deacon origin often affect their understanding of how deacons function.

Board or Body (Management or Ministry)

Quite possibly the most contentious aspect of deacon ministry among Baptist churches is its function. Is a group of deacons a board or a body? Is their primary role that of management or ministry?

A few authors have sought to trace the role of the deacon throughout church history. The first few centuries reveal deacons expressing practical service, especially benevolence. The Middle Ages, however, shows the diaconate evolving into initial training for the priesthood. The Reformation Period recovered the emphasis on benevolent ministry to the poor. By the late 18th century, however, deacons began concerning themselves with the secular business, primarily by managing the material and financial issues (see endnote 1). It appears as though this management mindset arose out of secular problems, where business decisions were made during a meal around a wooden (board) table. "Boards" became known as any group that made decisions. Such a view eventually passed into the church among deacons, and by the 19th century, deacon boards were quite standard.⁹

Most of the 20th century saw this trend continue. Burroughs promotes deacon boards when he says that the deacon is entrusted with the care of the material interests of the church. He is to care for the properties of the church, its building, its pastor's home, and its other material holdings. He is to direct and safeguard the financial side of its ministry. As contrasted with the pastor he is to serve in what may be properly called the materialities of the church.¹⁰

While championing the deacon's authority, he offers a word of caution: "deacons, by virtue of their office, must share with the pastor this responsibility of leadership which really amounts to authority and rule. At the same time it should go without saying that deacons are not to be ruling elders or managing directors. The church is to be a pure democracy."¹¹ Though caution is noted, Burroughs believes that the deaconship is not honored when church finances are managed by any other group besides deacons or when

church properties are managed by others. He adds, "Deacons were to be businessmen. Business service was to be required at their hands. They must possess business qualifications. These things were assumed. They were passed without mention."¹² On a similar note, "deacons are to serve the church especially in the material phases of its life," after claiming that, "no catalogue of duties is laid down in the New Testament. In the nature of the case no such specific guidance could be given. Such guidance was not needed then and is not needed now."¹³ Furthermore, "the business of the church and its finances constitute the special and distinct assignment of the deacons."¹⁴ Therefore, while Burroughs shies away from the *terminology* of deacons as managing directors, he clearly favors deacon-rule in business management *practices*.

Issues that signal when deacons function like church business managers include

- (1) When the deacons' responsibilities are composed solely of business management matters.
- (2) When deacons administer the affairs of the church primarily as a business operation.
- (3) When deacons are viewed as the decision makers in most business affairs.
- (4) When business efficiency seems to predominate the activities of deacons.¹⁵

Foshee and Sheffield, on the other hand, aim to return deacons to an earlier era—one which highlights the *ministry* role of deacons rather than *management*. Foshee asserts, "The Scriptures do not list specific duties that deacons are to perform. The Bible focuses on deacon qualifications rather than the exact nature of the work."¹⁶ He then adds, "Deacons who measure up to the biblical qualifications are equipped to minister to the spiritual needs of persons."¹⁷ Thus, because they are spiritually qualified, deacons should help carry out the pastoral ministry areas of the church. Pastoral ministries is a large umbrella that includes caring for church members and people in the community through a Deacon Family Ministry Plan, counseling, preaching/witnessing, providing benevolence, maintaining fellowship in the church, and helping the church achieve its mission.¹⁸

Pastoral ministry is not the only area where deacons can benefit the church. The ministry options are virtually endless, including serving as greeters and ushers, helping in worship, administering the Lord's Supper, and serving on committees (finance, personnel, property, and more).¹⁹ Where Foshee and Sheffield break with Burroughs and his predecessors is that these more recent writers believe that deacons may serve in finances and material aspects, but they are not mandated to be the only, or even primary, financial/material decision-makers in the church.

Historically, Foshee asserts, many Baptist churches in the 19th century were small and rural with part-time preachers. Deacons stepped up to the plate to take care of the church property and eventually made decisions on other church matters.²⁰ The 20th century, however, has witnessed Baptist growth in other settings, especially in cities and metro-areas. These settings tend to keep pastors longer and do not expect deacons to make most of the church's decisions. Thus, the last forty years have argued against the deacon management (decision-making board) philosophy of the previous two centuries while underscoring a deacon ministry (service-oriented body) philosophy. Many older churches, typically rural or small town, still function with deacon boards in place. Newer churches, especially in larger cities, emphasize a body of deacons that serves.

War of the Worlds—

Deacons Relating to Pastors

All-to-often a pastorate has come to an end because at least one deacon butted heads with the pastor. There are times, to be sure, that the pastor bears some, or most, of the responsibility in poor relationships to deacons. Because this article's focus is deacons, however, a few suggestions follow to enhance the ways deacons relate to pastors.

Deacons who recognize and appreciate that the pastor's business is the highest of all can maximize the pastor's time by meeting with him, when necessary, so that valuable time is not spent in his travel to and from a deacon's home or place of

business. Moreover, deacons serve the pastor well when they ensure that he receives a fair and reasonable compensation from the church. Helping bear the pulpit ministry, especially on Sunday or Wednesday evenings, when the pastor needs to be away, also ministers to both the church and the pastor, who does not have to go to great lengths to secure a replacement.²¹ Finally, regular prayer for the pastor and clear communication indicate support and cooperation in serving together to accomplish the church's mission.²² Deacons who pursue good relations with their pastors, especially in these areas, usually find enjoyment and fulfillment in serving the church together.

A High Pedigree—

Qualifications for Deacons

Nearly every volume on deacons covers the important qualifications outlined in Scripture. Those who believe Acts 6 describes deacons, attribute matters like being full of the Spirit, wisdom, and faith to their qualifications.²³ Everyone agrees on the moral, doctrinal, and familial prerequisites in 1 Timothy 3, except when it comes to one issue: "the husband of one wife."

Burroughs argues for the interpretation that Paul is speaking against polygamy. He ultimately favors a "one wife at a time" kind of deacon, if the deacon is married at all.²⁴ Naylor, a generation later, promotes only one living wife at a time, if married, and even cautions against deacons' wives from non-Baptist denominations.²⁵ Foshee believes Paul gives his stamp of approval to Jesus' absolute rejection of divorce.²⁶ Sheffield remains more neutral on the issue, citing that "the sanctity of the marriage vow. . . forbids adultery, does not allow plural marriages, and encourages sexual faithfulness in marriage." The final decision of single, divorced, and/or remarried deacons, Sheffield says, is left in the hands of the local church, preferably decided without personalities involved and with much prayer.²⁷

Duck. . . Duck. . . Deacon— Electing Deacons

When it comes time to elect deacons, churches employ a variety of ways. A few practice open nomination from the floor, some accept nomination by a committee, too many allow the deacons to name their newcomers, a small number allow the pastor to nominate them, and still others call for a precise number of names to be written on a ballot.

No one system is fool-proof, but the written method seems to be the most practical. The church determines how many deacons are needed and the moderator instructs members during business how many names of qualified men should be written down (or checked off on a provided list). This practice saves those men with little or no votes from the embarrassment that could come from an open nomination. With every voting member of the church stating their preference, deacons, nominating committees, and pastors have less control over this facet of the church's life. No matter what method churches use, they are wise to state deacon qualifications clearly and screen/interview potential candidates in advance to determine if any questionable areas might exclude the man from deacon-service.²⁸

Serving 'Til the Cows Come Home?— Tenure

Just as differences of opinion exist over electing deacons, so it goes with their tenure. Some Baptists believe, "Once a deacon, always a deacon." This view finds little support among the influential writers and thinkers of the 20th century.²⁹ Burroughs cites five reasons to jettison lifetime service. First, a deacon may leave the church and go elsewhere. His new church is under no obligation to allow him to serve as a deacon. Second, a deacon may request to step down from service due to a number of circumstances. Third, a deacon's old age and limited activity may prevent him from serving, at least in an active role. Fourth, the church may ask the deacon to step down due to immorality, doctrinal heresy, or a hindering attitude. Finally, the church may have

a rotation system in place where every deacon ceases to serve for one or more years after a period of active service (usually three to five years).³⁰

Many churches now follow the rotation system. There are certain merits to this method of service, for it

1. Provides a broader base of leadership, enabling more qualified persons to serve their church as deacons.
2. Provides a way for deacons who no longer want to serve to retire with grace.
3. Provides a way for deacons to renew themselves spiritually for greater ministry effectiveness.
4. Provides for a continually effective Deacon Family Ministry Plan.
5. Provides the church the opportunity to replace those deacons who, because of age, infirmity, or loss of interest, have become inactive and ineffective.
6. Provides the church with safeguards against the "board of directors" mentality among deacons.³¹

Though a few disadvantages exist with rotation, the most obvious being that an extremely good deacon has to sit out for a period, the advantages clearly outweigh the disadvantages.

Odds and Ends—

Ordaining, Organizing, Training, and Soul-Winning

While chapters could be written on each of these areas, a common consensus exists about what each area is. Deacon ordination is a planned service, usually accompanied by the laying on of hands by either those already ordained or the whole church, whereby the church officially sets the new deacon apart for service. The preaching, singing, and praying should aim to honor the Lord while recognizing His involvement in the deacon's life. Even though ordination does not impart any special power, the service should be meaningful to the deacon, his family, and the church.³²

On a different note, the deacon body which functions best is the one where organization is in place. A chairman and a

secretary are necessities, for planning and recording deacon meetings and service. Depending on the size of the deacon body, a vice chair may be necessary. A few more organizational levels may be needed for larger churches to be more effective. Clearly written expectations of each officer and deacon bring a sense of purpose and mission to each deacon as he relates to his fellow deacons and to the church. Where a Deacon Family Ministry Plan is in place, eight to fifteen families fall under each deacon's care for one year. Each year the families are disbursed anew so that deacons get to know more people and so that families that may have been neglected receive the care they need.³³

Providing training for deacons, at least annually, enhances their effectiveness for ministry. Training may come from individual study books recommended by the pastor or deacon body, or seminars may be offered by the church, association, state, or a national conference/retreat. The purpose of such training is to help each deacon grow in the faith and his walk with the Lord, as well as his role among fellow deacons and within the church.³⁴

Ultimately, the best deacon is a soul-winning deacon. Burroughs claims, "The best service of the deacon, his highest function, is winning men to Christ."³⁵ The most obvious expectation of deacons is in the proclamation of the gospel through preaching or witnessing, for every volume on the diaconate covers this subject.³⁶ Thus, the best way a deacon can serve the church is through serving the lost by sharing the good news.

Conclusion—

Is a Deacon a Servant or a Leader?

Having traced the role of Convention Press on deacon ministry, the original issue resurfaces: is a deacon a servant or a leader. Every book on deacons underscores that deaconship "is distinctly a call to serve. . . . Men are to be elected to the office of deacon with a view to service."³⁷ In addition to service, however, each volume highlights the leadership office of deacons. Discouraged in recent decades from being the leaders of the church through a board of directors, deacons should be a part of the larger

leadership team. They "are leaders in their churches. Church members look to their deacons for leadership. The Bible pictures deacons as significant leadership figures in the New Testament church."³⁸ In the end, deacons are servant-leaders, carrying out ministry to the congregation while helping lead the church to fulfill its mission.

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, the Charleston Association's belief that "the office of a deacon is to relieve the minister from the secular concerns of the church; hence they are called Helps, *1 Cor.: 12:28*. Their business is to serve tables" (Charleston Association, *A Summary of Church Discipline* [Charleston: David Bruce, 1774] in Mark E. Dever, ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* [nc: Center for Church Reform, 2001], 121).

² For a brief history of this trend, see Howard B. Foshee, *The Ministry of the Deacon* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1968), 35-36, and Robert Sheffield, *The Ministry of Baptist Deacons* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1990), 22-23.

³ Sheffield, 11.

⁴ P. E. Burroughs, *Honoring the Deaconship* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1929), 8-9. See also Sheffield, 17-18.

⁵ E. C. Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches* (Louisville: Chas. T. Dearing, 1897), 60. A few lines later, Dargan adds this clarifier: "Perhaps it would be going too far to say that these seven were actually deacons, in the later sense, at Jerusalem."

⁶ Robert E. Naylor, *The Baptist Deacon* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), 7. Though outside the scope of Convention Press, Naylor's work is included in this study because of its vast influence in Baptist life.

⁷ 19th-20th century works simply misunderstood Acts 6 (Sheffield, 24).

⁸ See Foshee, 17-18. More recently, John Polhill notes, "Often the present passage is seen to be the initiation of the diaconate. The word 'deacon' (diakonos) never occurs in the passage. The word 'ministry' (diakonia) does occur several times, but it is

applied to both the ministry of the daily distribution (v. 2) and the ministry of the word, the apostolic witness (v. 4). In fact, the word “deacon” never occurs in Acts. . . . If one is inclined nevertheless to see the diaconate in this passage, that person should take a cue from Steven and Philip. In the rest of Acts, nothing is made of their administrative duties. What one finds them doing is bearing their witness, even to martyrdom” (Acts, vol. 26 in *The New American Commentary* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992], 182-183).

⁹ See Foshee, 32-36; Sheffield, 20-25; and Henry Webb, *Deacons: Servant Models in the Church* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1980), 75-76. Burroughs references John A. Broadus’ stance against deacon boards in Baptist life because of the tendency to leave Baptist democracy in favor of governing boards (Burroughs, 16-17). While not particularly favoring deacon boards, Dargan believed temporal, administrative duties were assigned to deacons from the New Testament: “primarily the care of the finances, looking after the business affairs of the church, attending to the poor, and probably the care of any other matters of administration which should be devolved upon them by the church” (Dargan, 61).

¹⁰ Burroughs, 13-14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 42. This writer cannot help but wonder where these kinds of assumptions might take Christianity.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62. Naylor says that deacons are businessmen in the sense of secular matters, but then adds that “there is no scriptural authority for the deacons to make the financial decisions of the church” (Naylor, 20-21).

¹⁵ Foshee, 35-36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32. Naylor voiced this same issue a few years earlier, but he does not connect it to pastoral ministries in the same way that Foshee and Sheffield do (see Naylor, 61-62).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39. Sheffield, who admits to writing something of a follow-up volume to Foshee, states, “*Deacons relate to the church as Christian ministers*” (14, emphasis original).

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, 39-40, 46-89; Naylor, 11-13, 69; Sheffield, 83-97; and Barbara Sheffield, *Help! I’m a Deacon’s Wife* (Nashville:

Convention Press, 1992), 13-14. For numerous suggestions for the care-giving role, see Homer D. Carter, *Equipping Deacons in Caring Skills* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1980).

¹⁹ See Foshee, 41-42; and Robert Sheffield, 71-82.

²⁰ Foshee, 35.

²¹ Burroughs, 42-46.

²² Robert Sheffield, 33. Other relations that deacons can have with pastors fall under the deacon ministry section above.

²³ Burroughs, 22-25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30; see also Webb, 42-43.

²⁵ Naylor, 121-124.

²⁶ Foshee, 24.

²⁷ Robert Sheffield, 40-41. A related issue concerning deaconesses (i.e., female deacons) has generally been frowned upon in Baptist life, cf. Burroughs, 31-32.

²⁸ See Burroughs, 35-36; Foshee, 102-104; Webb, 15-16; and Robert Sheffield, 46-51.

²⁹ See Naylor, 50-51, for the lone voice surveyed that sees considerable merit in lifetime deacon service, though he offers more advantages for a deacon-rotation system.

³⁰ Burroughs, 37-40. See also Webb, 14; Foshee, 105-110; and Robert Sheffield, 112-116.

³¹ Robert Sheffield, 113-114; see also Foshee, 106.

³² Robert Sheffield, 51-55; Foshee, 104-105.

³³ Robert Sheffield, 98-112; Webb, 78-81; and Foshee, 92-99.

³⁴ See Foshee, 28-30; Robert Sheffield, 111; and Burroughs, 54-55.

³⁵ Burroughs, 66. It is hard to see how Burroughs genuinely means such a statement when most of his volume covers the financial and material duties of deacons, saying these “constitute the special and distinct assignment of the deacons” (62, emphasis added).

³⁶ See Burroughs, 66-78; Naylor, 43, 95-97; Foshee, 46-55; Webb, 98-108; Robert Sheffield, 77-82; and Barbara Sheffield, 13-14.

³⁷ Burroughs, 11-12. See also Robert Sheffield, 12-13.

³⁸ Foshee, 58. See also, Naylor, 90; Webb, 116; and Barbara Sheffield, 13.

THE VIEW OF THE DEACON FROM ACTS 6

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¹ Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. ² Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. ³ Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; ⁴ but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."⁵ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, ⁶ whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

⁷ Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

⁸ And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. ¹⁰ And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. ¹¹ Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. ¹³

They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵ And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel. (NKJV)

As a teenager, I felt God calling me to preach and to serve vocationally as a pastor. In 1980, I became pastor of a small county church in central Alabama. My deacons did a wonderful job teaching this young kid, fresh out of seminary, how to apply all that I had learned in school to real life. I was at the church for two and a half years before leaving to answer the call to serve in the United States Navy as a chaplain. After retiring, I took a position at The Baptist College of Florida and additionally began a pastoral calling that was new to me: the call of being an interim pastor. It is a richly rewarding ministry, preparing each church to call its next permanent pastor. In each church where I have served, I have been blessed with godly, spirit-filled men who served as deacons. I have not encountered a church in my ministry where I found myself at odds with the deacons. Aside from my teaching ministry, I have served in three roles: pastor, military chaplain, and interim pastor. I have had a positive relationship with the deacons in all of the churches, but I experienced twenty years of ministry in the military context where I had no deacons with whom I shared ministry. Basically, I have had ministry with deacons and without, and I can tell you with no uncertainty that I believe they are crucial to the life of a healthy church.

The scripture passage above is brief in length, but has been magnificently long lasting in impact. These few verses describe the need for and establishment of a new position in the body of believers that is the church. This new role, the office of the deaconate, continues to exist in the Roman Catholic Church and in many protestant and evangelical churches today. The purpose of this article is to bring into focus the context in which the view of the deacon developed as well as its immediate impact on the church as seen in Acts chapter 6.

In the early days of the church, as the gospel message was proclaimed among both Aramaic speaking and Greek-speaking Jews, many of them responded positively to the message, joining the growing number of believers. However, with the mix of languages, there was also a distinction of cultures within the church. Even though they all likely came from the Jewish community within Jerusalem, the Greek-speaking Jews had probably returned from the dispersion, bringing many of the Greek influences with them. The natural result is for people to affiliate with their own affinity groups. Apparently, the appearance of partiality developed in the charity distributions for the widows.¹ In order to ensure the fair treatment of everyone, the apostles directed that they select from among themselves “seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit, whom we may appoint over this business.” (Acts 6:3) In doing so, they selected people from within the affinity group, recognizing that they would most readily be able to identify the needs of their own people and best understand how to meet those needs. When a problem arose, this new office was instituted to solve the problem. This brings us to the first view of the deacon: Deacons were problem-solvers within the church.

The problem that they solved was two-fold: 1) the distribution of the food to the widows was inequitable, and 2) administration of these tasks was hindering the apostles from performing their primary duty, the preaching and teaching of the word of God. By these newly appointed men performing one task, they also solved the other issue. Until this point, the administration of charity seemed to be in the hands of the apostles. As the church grew, the performance of this function became so unwieldy that it required so much time and effort on the part of the apostles that they were taken away from their primary functions: prayer and proclamation of the word. The question becomes, is this task to be interpreted narrowly or broadly? If we take a narrow interpretation, then deacons become nothing more than waiters in the family of God. It is difficult to see why it would have been necessary for these men who were to serve tables would need to be “of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3, NKJV).

However, if we interpret the passage more broadly, they are to remove the burden from the apostles (later, pastors) of *anything* that hinders them from ministering to the flock. I see this as the administration of the church. This becomes the second view of the deacon in Acts 6, the deacon as administrators of the church.

When many people think “administration,” most people think of all of the non-ministry functions of the church. However, administration itself is a specialized form of ministry. Many large churches are blessed in having a fulltime executive pastor or church administrator. Their function is to ensure that all of the business of the church is conducted in a manner that honors the Lord. If the administration of the charity in the early church is seen in this light, it is easy to see why the apostles directed that these new officers of the church should be of “good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.” The work of the church, even that of administration, should be Spirit led and with godly wisdom. Since the church must, of necessity, conduct business affairs, it is important for it to do so in a manner that honors the Lord.

When I was a Navy chaplain, I worked at one military installation as the second most senior chaplain. My role was primarily administrative. I saw the position as a form of ministry to the other chaplains at the base, freeing them from the administrative burdens of the assignment. There are no deacons in the military context, so that responsibility fell to a specific chaplain. I came to understand more clearly how important the role is of the ministry of administration. Deacons seemed to fill that role in the early church. By partnering with the apostles, the deacons enabled them to focus their ministry on that of the word, not serving tables.

There is a bit of irony in this. Jesus modeled servant ministry to the apostles, yet the apostles were now stating that it was not proper for them to serve (*diakonein*) tables. If the date of Stephen’s martyrdom is dated to have taken place within two years of Jesus death, this seems to be a short period during which the disciples apparently forgot his teaching at the last supper. However, the context of this passage points out that the disciples had a unique role in the early church. They alone were witnesses to the

life, death, and resurrection of the Lord. Because of their uniqueness in history, it would have been seen appropriate for them to limit their activities to bearing witness to Him while other worthy persons could fill the other roles that previously had been assumed by the apostles.²

As the seven were chosen, they were really set up as role models for the church. They were ordinary men who were selected by the church. True, they were appointed by the apostles, but it was after they had first been selected by the church. The church at this point was made up of what we would classify as converts rather than the apostles, who were called to their ministry by Jesus during his earthly ministry. The apostles would likely have been perceived as being special since they had been with Jesus during his time among them. The newly converted would have received salvation in response to the preaching of the apostles. It was also the apostles upon whom the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, adding to the special quality the others would have attached to the apostles. However, these new converts, including the newly selected seven, were ordinary people who had been changed as a result of their salvation experience as they had been taught by the apostles. As such, they would have been good examples of how all members of the church were expected to live their lives.

After the general qualifications were laid out by the apostles, and the new candidates were selected, the apostles prayed and appointed them, or set them apart for this service, presumably before the gathering of believers. John Polhill contends that this should not be seen as the forerunner to our current practice of ordination of the diaconate.³ John Hammett, on the other hand, argues that while the apostles neither ordained nor appointed anyone as their successors but this only applies to their role and authority as apostles.⁴ Interestingly enough, there is no biblical evidence that the apostles were ever ordained in a formal manner. However, he argues, Acts 6 does seem to parallel the commissioning of Joshua as Moses' successor. In both instances, Acts 6 and Numbers 27:18-23, there is an appointing, a reference to the Holy Spirit, a public presentation, and a laying on of hands. However, the seven who

were appointed in the book of Acts were not the successors of the apostles. Rather, they were co-workers with them, in the same way that the Levites assisted Aaron and his sons.

It must be kept in mind that at this early time, no organized concept of laity and clergy had yet emerged. However, this was the beginning of the differentiating of the new offices. By the time of Paul's ministry, there had emerged a concept of pastors, sometimes called elders, and also some who were not pastors, but seemed to be recognized as leaders in the churches. Other than the laying on of hands in Acts 6, and the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13, the only other instance of laying on of hands in the New Testament is in connection with Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). However, that act seems to be associated with a gift, but it is not clear whether Timothy was ordained as a pastor.

The next aspect of deacons that we see in Acts 6 is that deacons, full of faith and power, were performing great wonders and signs among the people. While it does not say it explicitly, I believe this included the proclamation of the gospel. All of these taken together indicated that the deacons were powerful witnesses to Jesus as Savior and to the power of the Holy Spirit. The proclamation aspect is seen fully in the subsequent chapter, which is outside the scope of this article, it is an aspect that cannot be ignored. These new officers of the church, partners in ministry with the apostles, were actively proclaiming the gospel message. Is it possible that the deacons eventually became the elders/pastors as the apostles passed off of the scene? Since the word *deacon* is never used as a title in the New Testament, the scripture seems to be, if not silent, at least vague on their role after Acts 6. After that point, only two of the deacons are mentioned; Stephen in his defense before the Sanhedrin, and Philip as he is transported to the place of the Ethiopian eunuch. In this latter passage, he is serving as an evangelist, leading the eunuch to faith in Jesus, and then immediately baptizing him. In this light, it is difficult to see any difference between their roles and the role filled by Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and others. The apostles seemed to serve as a council to whom elders appealed when disputes concerning doctrine or

practice emerged in the churches. It is easy to imagine that the deacons, elders, and pastors were all interchangeable terms, varying by location. Since the scripture is silent on this issue, however, all of this is nothing more than conjecture. Regardless, it is clear that the deacons were bold and effective witnesses and evangelists.

The last view of the deacon in Acts 6 that will be discussed here is the fact that the deacons were faithful, even to the point of death. Stephen being articulate and outspoken for the gospel, soon had charges lodged against him. He, being filled with the Spirit and with wisdom, confounded those who questioned him. Those who conspired against him soon coerced people to make false accusations against him. This gave Stephen a greater opportunity to proclaim the truth of the gospel, even though the message fell on ears that were at best deaf, and at worst, hostile. In spite of all of the opposition, he never wavered in his faith or in his message. Ultimately, he was received into the arms of Jesus, whom he saw seated at the right hand of the Father.

In summary, it appears that the deacon as seen in Acts 6 was established, not simply to wait on tables, but to be an active participant, a minister, in the administration of the early church. In doing so, they were able to enable the apostles, the forerunners of the clergy, to devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

Several years ago, a student asked me what to do, as he had deacons who wanted to run the church where he served as pastor. I asked him if they were good, godly men. He replied that they were, other than the fact that they insisted on running the church. I asked him about his call to the ministry and he told me he had felt called to preach several years ago and for the past few years had been serving as a bivocational pastor of this small church. I simply told him to thank the Lord that he had been given deacons who were trying to free their pastor to focus on visiting the sick and homebound, working as an evangelist in the community, and devoting himself more fully to those things that he initially had felt called to do. Maybe we should all be so blessed.

Endnotes

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts, New American Commentary, Vol 26*. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992) 179.

² Ibid., 180.

³ Ibid., 182

⁴ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2005) 204.

A THEOLOGICAL VIEW OF THE MINISTRY OF DEACONS

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Introduction

One of my greatest joys in ministry has been the privilege to serve alongside deacon servants as well as minister to deacon servants. For several years my wife and I served as Certified Deacon and Deacon-Wives Trainers for local churches, associational conferences and conferences for Baptist state conventions. We frequently attended the sessions on Deacons and Deacon Wives at Bible-Preaching Week Conference at Ridgecrest Conference Center. In the context of local church ministry, deacons provided the context for my richest friendships and ministry colleagues.

Most churches and deacons struggle with a singular question. What is the role of deacons? Within Southern Baptist life, two varied proposals vie for the correct answer to the question. On one hand, some understand the role of deacons as a board that governs the physical structures of the church including campus, finances, and personnel matters. Key nineteenth century leaders within early Southern Baptist life affirmed this understanding. For example, R. B. C. Howell, legendary pastor of the First Baptist Church of Nashville, wrote the influential book *The Deaconship*. Howell divided the role of pastors and deacons into two separate spheres.

By the acts there set forth [Acts 6], as well as by all that appears in every other part of the word of God, it will be fully seen that as the pastor has supervision of *all the* spiritualities of the church, and is, therefore, overseer or bishop in that department; so the deacons are overseers of *all her temporalities*, of which they of right have the full control.¹

Howell based his understanding of the role of deacons on two pre-suppositions. First, he adopted the common assumption that Acts 6 narrates the origin of the office of deacon.² Second, Howell emphasized the description of the role of deacons as expressed in the King James translation of Acts 6 – “whom we may appoint over this business.”³ On the other hand, toward the end of the twentieth century, Baptist leaders postulated that the role of deacons was one of ministry rather than a group over the temporal affairs of the church.⁴

What role does theology play in understanding the proper ministry of deacons? Jarhead, leatherneck Marines understand the importance of doctrine more than many Baptists. “In short, it [doctrine] establishes the way we practice our profession. In this manner, doctrine provides the basis for harmonious actions and mutual understanding.”⁵ A biblical theology of deacons provides the basis for harmonious actions and mutual understanding. A Theological View of the Ministry of Deacons encompasses the following theological doctrines: the nature of the church, the priesthood of all believers, spiritual gifts, personal theology of the deacon, and the biblical concept of ordination.

The Nature of the Church

A unique understanding of the nature of the church is one of the distinctives of the people of God who identify themselves as Baptist.⁶ The ordinance of baptism is not the defining characteristic of what it means to be a Baptist. Numerous other groups practice believer’s baptism by immersion. In terms of the nature of the church, Baptists affirm with other Christians the three major biblical images of the church as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit.⁷ A baptistic understanding of the nature of the church arises because of a combination of unique emphases held by Baptist. The following outline presents baptistic distinctives regarding the nature of the church. First, the nature of the church is a Christ-centered organism. The Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M) contains four expressions of this Christocentric principle of congregationalism. The BF&M

describes the church as “church of [belonging to] the Lord Jesus Christ.” Furthermore, the church is “governed by His laws.” The Lordship of Christ serves as the operational principle - “each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ.” Moreover, “each member is responsible and accountable to Jesus as Lord.” Second, the BF&M characterizes the church as a believers’ church—“a local congregation of baptized believers.” The church is not a believer’s church; the church is a believers’ church. The nature of the church as a believers’ church necessitates a regenerate church membership. Third, the BF&M affirms the nature of the church as a covenanted community —“associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel.” Historically, the church covenant functioned as the foundational document for the church rather than the constitution. Fourth, the BF&M identifies the church as a spiritual organism. The word “church” translates the New Testament word “ekklesia,” meaning “called out ones.” The church exists by the initiative of God, called out from the world, and commissioned to serve God. The BF&M describes the church as people rather than a building, a denomination, or an institution.

The practical consequence of the biblical description of the church expresses radical ramifications for the role of a deacon. Rather than serving the “secular affairs” — a description of the role of deacons according to J. L. Dagg the first Baptist theologian in the South — a deacon functions as a leader in a spiritual organism.

Priesthood of All Believers

The New Testament proclaims the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6, 5:10; 20:6). In addition to explicit biblical texts, the New Testament describes the activities of God’s people in terms of priestly activity (1 Pet. 2:5; Heb. 13:15-16; Rom. 12:1; 15:16). The New Testament teaching focuses upon the priesthood of all believers not the priesthood of individual believers. “Those five priesthood passages in 1 Peter and Revelation address the issue of community more than the idea of unrestrained individualism.”⁸ The Preamble to the BF&M affirms this communal understanding of the priesthood of all

believers. “We honor the principles of soul competency and the priesthood of believers, affirming together both our liberty in Christ and our accountability to each other under the Word of God.”⁹ Baptists historically have understood the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to mean that we are priests to each other. The teaching of God’s Word functioned as one of the primary duties of priest in the Bible; therefore, the proclamation of God’s Word serves as the primary spiritual sacrifice of the community of priests.¹⁰

While recognizing some individuals receive “a call” into vocational Christian ministry, the priesthood of all believers undercuts an unhealthy dichotomy between “clergy” and “laity.” The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther correctly understood the radical implications of the priesthood of all believers for the overturning of the Roman Catholic sacramental/sacerdotal system. English expatriate John Smyth established the first Baptist church in Holland in 1609. In 1610, he authored the first Baptist confession of faith in which he included bishops and deacons as ministers of the church.¹¹

The biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers recognizes varied roles for individuals within the people of God while at the same time highlighting the important role all believers have in the context of the ministry of the church and society. A rediscovery of the priesthood of all believers underscores the full ministry of the whole people of God.¹²

Spiritual Gifts

One of the primary descriptions of the church in the New Testament is the Body of Christ. Interestingly, the primary biblical passages expressing this image (1 Cor. 12-14) also sets forth the role of gifted members within the Body of Christ. Paul summarized the spirituals as he called them in the following manner. First, spiritual gifts are graces from God. The Greek term for spiritual gifts “charisma” means “a gift of grace.” Second, the Spirit gives a grace gift to every believer (1 Cor. 12:7, 11). Third, the spiritual gifts function within the Body of Christ to build up the

church (1 Cor. 12:7). A spiritual gift is a Spirit endowed grace enablement to serve the Triune God for the edification of the Body of Christ. Lewis Drummond, a former seminary evangelism professor and seminary president, noted the connection between spiritual gifts and ministry. "This list of gifts of the Spirit [the gift list in Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:8-10; and Eph. 4:11] makes it quite evident that they cover much of the work of the ministry. Therefore, they cannot be taken lightly."¹³ Even the serving gifts, then, focus on ministry.

The biblical teaching regarding spiritual gifts contains sweeping implications for a theological view of deacon ministry. Churches tend to organize deacon ministry around task orientation, either a task structure involving a "board of deacons" or committee structure within the deacon organization or a "ministry task" structure, for example, a deacon family plan. Spiritual giftedness suggests that deacon ministry should involve a ministry task orientation. Since deacons possess spiritual gifts perhaps a "ministry gift" organization of deacon ministry functions as a biblical based model for deacon organization. Phillip the Evangelist and deacon utilized his spiritual gift of evangelism as well as meeting the needs of the Hellenistic widows.

A Deacon's Personal Theology

Paul in 1 Timothy set forth theology as one of the qualifications for service as a deacon – "holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience" (1 Tim. 3:9 HCSB). Paul used the term "mystery" twenty-one times to describe the content of the gospel. Specifically, Paul utilized the term to describe a truth that God reveals rather than knowledge discovered by humans. The prepositional phrase "of the faith" does not describe "subjective faith". The phrase "the faith" occurs in the New Testament as a descriptor of the doctrinal content of the Christian religion. A theological view of the ministry of deacons has as a foundation the personal theology of the deacon servant. While Scripture requires bishops possess the ability to teach as a qualification for the office, qualified deacons are not required to teach doctrine. Deacons, however,

must understand the basics of the faith. In addition to the core essential doctrines of "the faith," I suggest that deacons understand distinctives of the Baptist faith as a prerequisite for service. The qualification regarding doctrine for deacons necessitates that deacons hold to the divine revelation of the faith with a "clear conscience. Paul's correlation between "the faith" and "pure conscience" unites correct theological content with correct behavior.

Ordination of Deacons

Throughout Baptist history, the issue of ordination has created an uneasy feeling. E. C. Dargan, former professor at Southern Seminary, admitted that biblical teachings regarding ordination are meager.¹⁴ The major biblical defense among Baptists regarding ordination has been the biblical language of "laying on of hands" and "appoint." In the New Testament, the phrase "laying on of hands" occurs eight times, only in 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:26 is there a possible reference to ordination. In the passages from Paul's letters to Timothy, "laying on of hands" has no reference to deacons. The primary biblical passage by which Baptists defend the ordination of deacons is Acts 6: 3 – "men whom we may appoint to this duty." The Greek term translated as "appoint" by English translations is the verb "kathistemi" which derives from a root meaning "to stand or set." Three times the term occurs in the Epistle to the Hebrews in association with the installation of priests into office (Heb. 5:1; 7:28; 8:1). The term depicts standing the men in front of the congregation to install them into office.

Baptist tradition contains two divergent strands concerning the biblical language of "laying on of hands." On the one hand, a significant tradition viewed "laying on of hands" as an external rite performed for all believers based on Hebrews 6:2 coupled with an understanding that Acts 8:17-18 taught that the "laying on of hands" was conjoined with the ministry of the Spirit. The 1742 Philadelphia Baptist Confession contained a separate article "Of Laying on of Hands" in which the association equated "laying on

of hands” as an ordinance to be performed as a prerequisite to admission to the Lord’s Supper for the purpose of “farther reception of the Spirit.”¹⁵ On the other hand, perhaps the larger Baptist tradition limited the act of “laying on of hands” to the practice of ordination following the Old Testament pattern of “laying on of hands” symbolizing blessings and prayer.

Alan Culpepper provided a helpful summary of the biblical meaning of ordination in a Baptist context.

An adequate theology of ordination derived from the biblical accounts will include at least a Christology, a pneumatology, and an ecclesiology of ordination. Ordination is the recognition and celebration of Christ’s care for his church expressed through the calling and endowment of a minister or deacon with the Spirit. The laying on of hands invokes God’s blessings upon the minister or deacon and is the church’s recognition of God’s call to the person to minister in their midst.¹⁶

On the other hand, M. W. Egerton provided a rationale for the practice of ordination for deacons upon the nature of the office rather than specific biblical teachings. Egerton connected ordination to the office of deacon in terms of the character of service performed, the responsibility of the office holder, and the qualifications for the office.¹⁷

Conclusion

The New Testament does not contain a “job description” for deacons. Acts contains two descriptions of deacons “deaconing” – caring for poor widows and personal evangelism. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul focused on deacons “being” rather than “doing.” Through an examination of a theological view of the ministry of deacons, the following summation attempts to answer the question, “What is the role of deacons?” First, deacons are influential spiritual leaders in a spiritual organism rather than an organization. The emphasis the New Testament devotes to deacons “being” a certain kind of individual means the role of the

deacon is one of spiritual example and influence. Second, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers suggests that the role of deacon is one of ministry with and to the full congregation. Deacons serve as fellow-priests to other priests. Deacon service partakes of the nature of a spiritual sacrifice offered to God in the context of worship. Third, every deacon has a spiritual gift – a Spirit endowed grace enablement to serve and build up the Body of Christ. Spiritual gifts may be divided into two broad categories – speaking and serving (1 Pet. 4:11-12). Deacons should serve in the area of their giftedness to maximize their effectiveness to serve the church. Third, a deacons’ personal theology is important because the New Testament unites theology and ethics. Fourth, the practice of ordination does not impart something special to deacons. Through ordination, a church publically recognizes an individual’s call to deacon service, qualifications to serve, as well as providing a prayerful beseeching of God’s blessings upon the servant.

Endnotes

¹ R. B. C. Howell, *The Deaconship: Its Nature, Qualifications, Relations, and Duties* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1946), 12. The italics are original. Judson Press released this edition of Howell’s work in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the original 1846 publication date. Other nineteenth century Baptist leaders affirming the same understanding include J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston, S.C.: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1859), 266; E. C. Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches* (Louisville, KY: Charles T. Dearing, 1905), 96. The first edition of Dargan’s book appeared in 1897.

² Contemporary Baptist theologians disagree regarding the relationship between Acts 6 and the origin of the office of deacon. Southeastern Baptist Seminary professor John S. Hammett affirms the traditional view that Acts 6 describes the origin of the office of deacon for three reasons: the noun and verb form related to “deacon” occur in Act 6:1-2, the qualifications

outlined in Acts 6 correlate with the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3, and if Acts 6 does not describe the origin of deacons, then the New Testament affirms an office with no precedent. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2005), 192. Southern Seminary professor Gregg Allison disagrees. Allison argues that the noun form of deacon describes the preaching ministry of the apostles (v. 4), Stephen and Phillip engaged in non-typical deacon work by preaching the gospel, and the common understanding Acts 6 as descriptive of the origin of deacons creates a schism between the spiritual ministry of deacons and the physical ministry of deacons. Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church. Foundations of Evangelical Theology*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012), 241-42.

³ The Greek term translated "business" in the KJV has the primary usage "need" and secondary usage as "office." Modern translations divide over whether "duty" (ESV, NASB, RSV) or "responsibility" (NIV, NLT) functions as the best English translation.

⁴ Robert Sheffield, *The Ministry of Baptist Deacons* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1993), 16-18.

⁵ *Warfighting*. U. S. Marine Corps (New York: Cosimo Classics, 1989), Kindle Edition.

⁶ R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 83.

⁷ Hammett, 31.

⁸ Walter B. Shurden, *The Doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1987), 60.

⁹ Baptist Faith and Message 2000. <http://www.sbc.org/bfm/bfm-preamble.asp>. Accessed 2 June 2013.

¹⁰ Malcolm B. Yarnell, III, "The Priesthood of Believers: Rediscovering the Biblical Doctrine of Royal Priesthood." *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, eds. Thomas White, Jason Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell, III (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2008), 243.

¹¹ "That the ministers of the church are, not only bishops... but also deacons..." John Smyth, "Short Confession of Faith," in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. William L. Lumpkin (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 101.

¹² Richard Broholm, "The Call to Holy Worldliness: The Unfinished Reformation Agenda," *Laos: All the People of God*, eds. Fisher Humphreys and Thomas A. Kinchen (New Orleans, LA: Convocation on the Laity, 1984), 60.

¹³ Lewis A. Drummond, "A Theology of the Laity: Spiritual Gifts," *Laos: All the People of God*, 49.

¹⁴ Dargan, 90-91.

¹⁵ Lumpkin, 351.

¹⁶ R. Allan Culpepper, "Biblical Basis for Ordination," *Review and Expositor*, 78, no. 4 (Fall 1981): 482.

¹⁷ M. W. Egerton, *A Functioning Deacon in a New Testament Church* (Nashville, TN: Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, 1953), 42.

THE DEACON AND EVANGELISM

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Deacons and evangelism are two significant and thoroughly biblical themes, yet they are seldom considered together. The New Testament places emphasis on both and connects the two in important ways. The purpose of this article is to examine their connection in the New Testament and the responsibility of the deacon for evangelism in the local church.

The writer will attempt to show the connection and responsibility of deacons and evangelism in two ways. First, deacons are servants for the church to accomplish pastoral care ministry and problem-solving so as to free and allow the pastor and pastoral staff to concentrate on evangelism; secondly, deacons are to be actively involved personally in the evangelistic work of their local church. After examining some biblical evidence, the practical application of the connection and responsibility of the deacon in the local church will be considered.

Biblical Evidence

Acts 6, 7, 8, and 21 are the most prominent passages to support this two-fold responsibility of deacons for evangelism in the local church. In Acts 6-8, Luke wrote about a problem that arose in the early church, how the early church solved the problem, the chosen servants for the task, and the resulting ministry of the church and the men involved. Without addressing all of the details of the passage, the Hellenistic believers complained that their widows were being overlooked or being treated unfairly in the food distribution ministry of the early church. The Twelve

(Acts 6:2) proposed a solution of calling out seven men to handle this ministry. Though the noun deacon (*diakonos*) was not used in the text, the infinitive (*diakoneiv*; to wait on tables) and a general word for ministry (*diakonia*) were present.¹ Though it is disputed by some, many scholars understand this passage as the calling or setting aside of the first deacons.²

The Twelve determined that it “would not be right to neglect the ministry of the Word of God” (Acts 6:2) in order to meet the needs of the widows. Both were important ministries, but the ministry of the Word was their calling. The seven men were called out for the tasks of caring for the widows, meeting the needs of the believers, and solving the problem so that the Twelve could give focus to the ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:4). Marshall emphasized the resulting growth of the church with this approach. Polhill stated, “By selecting the seven, the apostles were free to carry out their primary responsibilities of preaching and bearing witness to Christ.”³ Thus, the role of deacons of the early church involved and the role of deacons of today involves meeting the needs of people and solving problems so that the pastors/clergy can focus on prayer, study, proclamation of the gospel, and evangelization.

What did the Twelve mean by “the ministry of the Word of God” (Acts 6:2, 4)? This writer found it interesting that all of the recorded sermons in Acts to this point (Acts 2 and 3) were evangelistic in content. The first deacons were set aside so that the preaching leaders could invest more time and work in the task of evangelism.

However, the writer of Acts was emphatic that these ministering and problem-solving servants had other work as well. Two of the seven named in Acts 6:5, Stephen and Philip, had a prominent role in proclamation, evangelization, and the expansion of the mission in Acts 6-8. Marshall described their work as “the same kind of evangelistic activity as the Twelve” and called them “spiritual leaders and evangelists.”⁴ A brief study of their evangelism ministries follows.

Though not as clear as in the case of Philip, Stephen's speech included evangelism. Marshall and Polhill emphasized that Stephen's speech before his accusers prior to his martyrdom included elements of defense against his accusers, accusation of the failures, sins, and rejection of God's work by the Jews but was also an apologetic proclamation of the Messiah and the need of the hearers to repent and believe in Jesus as the Messiah.⁵

In Acts 8 and 21, Luke described Philip, the deacon, engaging in the evangelism work of the early church. In Acts 8, Philip engaged in both public proclamation of the gospel to the Samaritans (Acts 8:4-13) and in personal evangelism to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). As for his public proclamation to the Samaritans, Luke wrote that Philip "preached the good news of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12) to the Samaritans.⁶ Obviously, the deacon participated in the evangelism task of the early church by public evangelistic preaching. As for Philip's personal evangelism with the Ethiopian eunuch, Luke wrote that Philip began with the passage from Isaiah 53 that the Ethiopian was reading and "told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). The Greek word translated "told him the good news" was *euangelisato*, a form of the primary word for "to evangelize" (*euangelizo*) in the New Testament.⁷ Again, obviously, the deacon was participating in a highly significant way in the evangelism work of the early church.

A study of Acts 21 revealed that Philip's evangelizing ways probably continued. In Acts 21:8, Philip was called "Philip the evangelist," a noun form of the primary evangelism word that means "one who announces good news."⁸ Why was Philip called "the evangelist"? Some conjecture that he carried this title to distinguish him from Philip the Apostle, but Marshall proposed that Philip merited this title twenty plus years after Acts 8 because he continued his evangelistic activity of Acts 8. Marshall stated, "The title of 'evangelist' aptly described him, since although he was one of the Seven, appointed to deal with the poor aid of the church, he

was an effective evangelist, and probably founded the church in Caesarea."⁹ Again, the deacon not only ministered to the poor, provided problem-solving, and allowed the apostles to do the work of evangelism, he was involved himself in very significant ways. Though it could be argued that the persecution that scattered Philip and other early church members after the death of Stephen caused a major shift in the role of the seven called out in Acts 6, one could also argue that a pattern of work for the deacon emerged – ministering to the needy, problem-solving, allowing the leaders to evangelize, and participating in evangelism. Polhill declared, "If one is inclined . . . to see the diaconate in this passage, that person should take a cue from Stephen and Philip. In the rest of Acts, nothing is made of their administrative duties. What one finds them doing is bearing their witness, even to martyrdom."¹⁰ Regarding the deacon's biblical role in evangelism, he is to guard and provide time and opportunity for his pastoral leaders to evangelize and to engage in evangelism himself.

Practical Application

According to the study above, the biblical role of the contemporary deacon should be to meet the needs of the congregation, to be a problem-solver, to promote and allow the pastoral leaders to engage in the work of evangelism, and to participate in the evangelism work of the church. Specifically, as related to evangelism, the deacon has a two-fold responsibility: 1) handle the practical ministry of the church so that the pastoral leaders can focus on, provide leadership to, equip the saints, and engage in the evangelistic work of the church; 2) participate in the evangelism work of the church himself. In this section, the writer will address how the biblical role of the deacon can be applied in the typical church setting.

For the deacons of a local congregation to work in a biblical pattern, they must give attention to addressing the basic needs of people and serving as problem-solvers so that the pastoral

leaders can focus on “prayer and the ministry of the Word” as described in Acts 6. Though the pastor still needs to be involved in basic “pastoral” ministry or meeting the practical needs of believers such as hospital visits, bereavement visits, benevolent work, etc., as a church grows the pastor cannot and should not handle all of this ministry. If he tries to do so, he will not have time for the important work of evangelism leadership and practice, and the church will grow stagnant in reaching new persons for Jesus. Deacons should “carry the load” of pastoral care ministry so that the pastor and staff are freed to focus on and lead the evangelistic task.

This writer has found that a very helpful and organized way of practicing the above is for a church and deacon body to participate in the Deacon Family Ministry Plan. Each member of the congregation is assigned to a deacon who seeks to provide basic pastoral care, encouragement, and/or comfort to these individuals and families as needed in general and in their times of crisis.¹¹ Again, the pastor and staff are involved, but the deacons and congregation are taught to follow the biblical pattern for the sake of the evangelistic work of the church.

This writer, who regularly serves as an interim pastor, has learned to lead, equip, and encourage the deacons of an interim pastorate to begin, renew, or continue work with the Deacon Family Ministry Plan. With limited time to invest as an interim pastor, he cannot provide the practical or pastoral ministry in a timely manner. Others must be involved, and the deacons, along with Sunday School classes, are the appropriate persons to do so. This allows the interim pastor to focus on proclamation, leadership, and evangelizing/discipling. Also, this writer and interim pastor challenges the deacons to continue this work when a new pastor is called to the congregation so that he and they will be following a biblical pattern and the work of the church can prosper.

Through multiple settings and groups of deacons in interim pastorates, this writer has found that a strategic spacing or assigning of the individuals and families to the deacons is helpful

to the busy deacons. Each deacon should have an approximately equal number of active individuals/families, inactive members, and shut-ins rather than all of any one of these groups. Each group demands and needs differing amounts and types of attention. This spacing or allocation of persons to whom to minister seems to assist deacons in managing their time and demands.

When the deacons are active with the ministry as described above, the pastor and staff have more time, energy, and focus for leading, equipping, and directly participating in the evangelistic work of the congregation. This is a biblical pattern as studied previously and as described in Ephesians 4:11-16.

While meeting the ministry demands of the congregation so that the pastoral staff can concentrate on the evangelistic task, the deacons, if following a biblical pattern, have the responsibility to participate in the evangelistic work of the congregation as well. Certainly, this would have to be balanced with the other duties in terms of time and level of commitment, but some participation is required for a biblical pattern to be followed. All believers are called to witness (Acts 1:8) and disciple-making (Matthew 28:18-20). The ministry responsibility of the deacon does not exempt him from this responsibility, but it would certainly demand a balancing of the two responsibilities. In the remainder of this article, this writer will explore briefly how the deacon should be involved in evangelism in the local church.

First, a deacon should be involved in the overall evangelistic ministry of the church in the church’s worship services, Sunday School (or whatever small groups are called), ministry evangelism, etc. In the worship services, deacons should lead in being invitation or decision counselors. Every church should have a team of trained counselors or encouragers who provide careful attention and assistance for those who have responded during the invitation after a sermon. With a trained team of counselors, a counseling room, and a plan in place to take all the time needed after a worship service, a church can assist persons with spiritual

needs and genuine spiritual decisions.¹² Deacons should certainly participate in, if not lead, this ministry.

As for Sunday School or small groups, the purpose should be to reach, teach, and care/minister. If designed and coordinated properly, Sunday School is for reaching lost persons or getting them started in the group, then providing Bible study and caring ministry to encourage them toward faith in Jesus and discipleship.¹³ Deacons should certainly be involved in this ongoing process of reaching, teaching, and caring for persons through a Sunday School class or small group.

After addressing some ways to be involved in mass evangelism and small group evangelism, the writer will now emphasize personal evangelism. How should the deacon engage in personal evangelism through his congregation?

Personal evangelism can be divided between first-encounter evangelism and relational evangelism. First-encounter evangelism is this writer's term for what most call confrontational evangelism and is any evangelism in which the witness seeks to share Jesus in his/her first encounter or conversation with a non-believer. Relational evangelism is the work of sharing Jesus through the relationships of life. This writer emphasizes intentional-relational evangelism, a term he has adapted from Darrel Robinson, former leader of evangelism for Southern Baptists, from his book, *People Sharing Jesus*. Intentional-relational evangelism is being intentional about initiating, building, cultivating, and using meaningful and caring relationships with persons so that the gospel can be intentionally communicated through these trusting relationships.¹⁴

As for first-encounter personal evangelism, the deacon can or should be involved in this type by participating in his church's visitation ministry, survey projects, block parties, and other forms of ministry that put Christians in contact with non-believers and unchurched persons not previously known. Also, first-encounter personal evangelism can be applied in all types of

life situations in which a deacon would have opportunity for conversation with non-believers at work, recreation, travel, shopping, etc.

Then, every deacon should be involved in intentional-relational personal evangelism by involving himself in intentional relationships with non-believers (relatives, friends, neighbors, work associates, etc.) so as to communicate the gospel of Jesus to them through the relationship. In his personal evangelism classes, this writer teaches students to have at least two of these intense relationships going at all times. A believer, in this case a deacon, engaged in intentional-relational evangelism will do the following: 1) select or adopt a person; ask the Lord to direct to a person and then select/adopt that person as the IR person; 2) pray daily and intensely for the person; no short-cuts here; this is the heart of the work; 3) spend time with the person; work, social, and/or leisure time, whatever can be worked out; 4) minister to his needs; do whatever needs done to show genuine love and care; 5) invite the person to spiritual activities; this could be a worship service, Bible study, concert, or whatever; 6) tell the person your story or testimony about what Jesus has done in your life; 7) communicate the gospel message in some or multiple forms; 8) lead the person into discipleship. Most of these are for building trust and gaining a hearing for intentionally communicating the gospel of Jesus. Note that numbers 3 to 7 may take on any order in the relationship depending on the person's background, receptivity, and other factors.¹⁵ This is time-intensive and a labor of love, but a deacon should engage in this type of evangelism with persons throughout life.

If a pastor expects a deacon to be involved in evangelism as described above, the pastor must equip the deacon to do so as instructed by the Lord in Matthew 28:20 and Ephesians 4:11-16. In this setting, this writer suggests three ways to do so: methodologies, mentoring, and the Master's plan, or, even better, a combination of the three.

As for methodologies, Southern Baptists and other evangelicals offer many training curriculums to help a person, in this case a deacon, learn to be a personal witness. For the purposes of this article, only a few will be named: *FAITH Sunday School Evangelism Strategy*; *Evangelism Explosion*; *Share Jesus Without Fear*; *GROW*; *The Net*; *One Day/One Hour Witness Training*; *EvangeCube Complete Church Training Kit*.¹⁶ These usually involve a seminar, workshop, or classroom experience and then some on-the-field practical experience. A pastor should involve his deacons and other church members in evangelism training methodologies regularly.

Mentoring, or personal mentoring/coaching, is another way for a pastor to help his deacons with being a personal witness as well as how to fulfill other deacon responsibilities. Based on Proverbs 27:17 and 2 Timothy 2:2, a person who knows how to do something teaches another person to do the same by example, instruction, and personal coaching. The mentor should take the mentee or student with him and help the mentee or student learn by observing and then doing, in this case, personal evangelism.¹⁷ Another great way for a pastor to equip deacons in personal evangelism and all deacon responsibilities is to follow the Master's Plan as described by Robert Coleman in his *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Coleman described Jesus' strategy with the twelve disciples, which was a strategy for multiplication of disciples and world evangelization. According to Coleman, Jesus worked with the following principles with his disciples: selection, association, consecration, impartation, demonstration, delegation, supervision, and reproduction.¹⁸ This writer strongly recommends every pastor to read Coleman's classic and apply the principles to his training of deacons.

In conclusion, a brief study of some Bible passages revealed that deacons should be involved in their church's evangelism by engaging in pastoral care ministry for the needs of persons in the congregation so that the pastor and staff can

concentrate more time and work into the evangelistic commission of the church and by engaging in evangelism personally in strategic ways. Doing church has always required a team effort. Pastors and deacons should model this for others by following the biblical pattern.

Endnotes

¹ Acts 6:1-7 (Greek New Testament); J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 1. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), s.vv. "53.67," "57.230," "35.21"; J.B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 26: Acts (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 182.

² Polhill, 177, 182; Stanley E. Porter, *The Apologetics Study Bible*, gen. ed. Ted Cabel (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), s.v. "Acts 6:1-3"; Robert Jamison, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Logos 4 Software (Acts 6:1-7); K.O. Gangel, *Holman New Testament Commentary*, vol. 5: Acts (Nashville: B & H Publishers, 1998), 92.

³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980; reprint, 1982), 127; Polhill, 181.

⁴ Marshall, 132-133; Polhill, 177-228.

⁵ Marshall, 132-133; Polhill, 177-178, 187-206.

⁶ Polhill, 212-215.

⁷ Acts 8:35 (Greek New Testament); Louw and Nida, s.vv. "33.215"; Alvin Reid, *Evangelism Handbook: Biblical, Spiritual, Intentional, Missional*, with a foreword by Thom S. Rainer, with an afterword by Roy Fish (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2009), 22-23, 78-79.

⁸ Louw and Nida, s.vv. "53.76"; Reid, 23.

⁹ Marshall, 339.

¹⁰ Polhill, 182-183.

¹¹ Earnest E. Mosley, *The Deacon Family Ministry Plan* (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist

Convention, 1972), 5-8; *The Deacon Family Ministry Plan Resource Book* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1974, 13th printing).

¹² See Arthur H. Criscoe and Leonard Sanderson, *Decision-Time Commitment Counseling* (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1987), 13.

¹³ Allan Taylor, *Sunday School in HD*, with a foreword by Thom S. Rainer (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2009), 33.

¹⁴ See Robin Jumper's EV 201. Personal Evangelism course for The Baptist College of Florida; See also Darrel Robinson, *People Sharing Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995, 71-73; Reid, 283-284; Will McRaney, *The Art of Personal Evangelism: Sharing Jesus in a Changing Culture* (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 51-54.

¹⁵ See Jumper's EV 201. Personal Evangelism Course notes.

¹⁶ Reid, 262, 362-363; Southern Baptist Convention, *FAITH Sunday School Evangelism Strategy* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1997); D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion*, 4th ed. (revised) (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996); William Fay and Linda Evans Shepherd, *Share Jesus Without Fear* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999); Jerry N. Tidwell, *Outreach Teams That Win: GROW* (Nashville: Convention Press); North American Mission Board, *The NET* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 2000); North American Mission Board, *One-Day/One-Hour Witness Workshop* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 2003); *EvangeCube Complete Church Training Kit*, (Dallas: EvangeCube Global Ministries, 2004).

¹⁷ See Howard Hendricks and William Hendricks, *As Iron Sharpens Iron: Building Character in a Mentoring Relationship* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995).

¹⁸ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, with a foreword by Billy Graham, with an introduction by Paul S. Rees (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, A Division of Baker Book House, 1963; reprint, 1993), 7, 13-108.



THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF ELDER

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Southern Baptist churches and church polity have been facing fundamental changes in the last couple of decades. Two that have become obvious stand out. One relates to the impact of the rise of Calvinism. Giving an analysis to that development would involve far more than can be given here. The second development, the rising popularity of ruling elders, has caught us by surprise. Since conservative Presbyterians espouse Calvinistic doctrine and hold to a church order built around ruling elders, Baptists leaning in that direction could lose a defining Baptist belief in local church democracy. If ruling elders are giving control of church finances and programs, the local congregation de facto ceases to be a Baptist democracy. Our focus here is the way Baptists established their unique system in which each congregation is an autonomous, self-governing group apart from ruling elders as generally understood.

Old Testament Antecedents

Southern Baptists look to the Bible in setting up their church organization. The principal leader historically has been the pastor. That role developed, not from the priestly sector, the Levites, but from the position of the elders in Israel. There are instances in the Bible when elders merely means older. The elder brother, or sister, was simply older than the other siblings. You can see that aspect in Genesis 10:21; 25:23; 27:16; 29:16 (referring to Leah), and a host of others. But older takes on the more specific meaning as it refers to older, mature men who assume roles of leadership among their people. The Bible never explains how they attained their prestigious position. After God gained Moses'

attention through a burning bush (Ex. 3:2), He later instructed Moses to gather the elders of Israel together and instruct them about who God is (3:16). This first mention of elders in a technical sense is never explained. They were just there.

However, their importance was soon to be tested. As the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn of the Egyptians became inevitable, the Lord spoke to Moses to begin a Jewish new year, the beginning of months (12:2), known originally by the Canaanite name of Abib, but later by the Babylonian name Nisan, corresponding to March-April for us. The Killing of the paschal lamb was delegated to the elders (12:21). They were to kill the lamb "according to your families" and, taking a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood and "strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood" from the basin (v. 22). The elders therefore played a crucial role in instituting the Passover.

Elders were a part of four other historical events that helped solidify their part of Israel's heritage. In the first, they were present at God's command when Moses stood before the rock in Horeb when Moses smote the rock to supply water for Israel (17:5, 6). Second, the elders accompanied Moses in his encounter with Jethro, his father-in-law (Ex. 18:12), who wisely advised Moses to divide his governing responsibilities among "able men" to be rulers of various sub-groups (v. 20) while reserving for himself to handle weightier, "Godward" matters (v. 19). The Bible does not say the elders were a part of this sub-dividing of duties. Third, following Israel's rebellion at the lack of meat, God commanded Moses to gather "seventy of the elders of Israel" (Num. 11:16) who were to help Moses "bear the burden of the people" (v. 17). Moses subsequently gathered "the seventy men of the elders of the people" upon whom the "Spirit" rested as the cloud came upon the tabernacle. The seventy "prophesied and did not cease" (v. 25). Fourth, when the Covenant was ratified at Mt. Sinai, I can only quote the Bible to communicate the solemnity of the occasion. Exodus 24:9-11 says: "Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire

stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink." Amen!

We can complete the survey of the role of elders rather briefly. Not having a formal statement of their function in Israel, they apparently were invested with responsibilities and duties as needs arose. In Joshua 24:30, they were honored for their being witnesses of all that transpired during the ministries of Moses and Joshua.

The prophet Ezekiel is the last to refer to the elders. In Ezekiel 8:1, he writes that the elders of Judah sat with him in his house when he received a revelation from God. They were also present as Ezekiel saw the vision of "the stumbling block" of Israel's iniquity (Ez. 14:1). In the two final references, the elders of Israel, not of Judah, as formerly, inquired of Ezekiel (20:1, 3) to inquire of the Lord about the severe judgment that fell on Israel. God deferred to give them an answer. There are no post-exilic references to elders.

New Testament Developments

Nevertheless, Jewish acceptance of the role of elders survived what we call the inter-biblical period, with some alterations. For example, some Pharisees inquired of Jesus why His disciples transgressed "the tradition of the elders" in not washing their hands before eating bread (Matt. 15:2). On another occasion, "the elders of the people" joined with "the chief priests" to demand by what authority Jesus performed miracles (Matt. 21:23). Later, the "elders of the people" are named as joining with the scribes and priests in making an appeal to Caiaphas in trying to find a way to kill Jesus (Matt. 26:3, 47). Clearly, the respected standing of the leaders among the Jews had been transformed into a quasi-religious power.

By this time we can speculate about why the early Christians gravitated to the term elders to refer to the prominent church leader. In the first place, Christianity in the post-resurrection development was deemed an off-shoot of Judaism which lasted

roughly to the fall of Jerusalem under Titus in 70 A.D. Christians, forewarned by Jesus, left the city before the destruction. Second, the background of the role of elders suited the theology of the Christians. They could not call the leaders by priestly titles, nor did legal language suffice. So, elders it was.

By the time Paul and his missionary team had preached in Derbe, Lystra, and Antioch, "they ordained elders in every church" (Acts 14:23). At the ecumenical gathering to resolve issues arising between Gentile converts and the Jewish requirement for circumcision, as well as other issues, apostles and elders gathered to resolve the conflicting opinions (Act 15:2, 4, 6, 23-24). Hebrews 11:2, harking back to the Old Testament setting, averred that by faith "the elders obtained a good report."

Left unresolved at this point is an explanation of the role and duties of an elder. For this we must turn to Acts 20. There, Paul from Miletus called for a meeting with the elders of the church (v. 17). At the gathering he instructed them to take heed to the flock to feed the church of God, a pastoral role, over which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers, the function of what we call a bishop. The one man, the elder, was charged with two responsibilities, feeding and overseeing. The same identification is made in Titus 1:5, 6. Paul had directed Titus to ordain elders in every city (v. 5) but then calls them bishops (v. 7). The words are interchangeable.

But what are the duties of the elder? Does not the Bible refer to "ruling elders"? As a matter of fact, it does not. That phrase never occurs in the Bible. First Timothy 5:17 says, "the elders that rule." The Greek word is found also in 3:5, in which deacons are to rule "their children and their own houses well." The word carries the meaning of one who stands before as in ranks. A study of the variety of spiritual gifts would be too involved at this point, but the Holy Spirit endowed some believers with gifts of administration and operations (1 Cor. 12:4, 5) and governments (1 Cor. 12:28).

We are not left without de facto biblical evidence for the role, or more accurately, non-role, of "ruling elders." Begin with

the internal problems dealt with in the church at Corinth. Paul wrote two letters in that regard. At no time does he ever refer to elders of any kind. He charged the church with the responsibility of handling the matter of a man who co-habited with his father's wife. Also, look at Paul's salutations to the various general epistles. Not one singles out ruling elders as recipients. Even the letters written to individuals, i.e., Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, never refer to the recipients as elders. James addresses his letter to the twelve tribes. To be sure, he calls on the elders to pray for the sick (5:12), but he assigns no special designations to them. Peter addresses his first epistle to "strangers" and the second one "to them that have obtained the precious faith." John has no salutation in his first letter. In his second letter, he writes as "the elder" but addresses it to "the elect lady and her children." His third letter identifies himself as "the elder" writing to Gaius. Jude salutes "them that are sanctified by God the father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called." John addresses his audience as "his [God's] servant. Each of the seven letters is addressed to "the angel of the [given] church." Any supposed role of ruling elders is conspicuously absent.

As to how and how quickly the believers accepted the role of the elder can be discerned in the writing of Peter. In 1 Peter 5:1 he calls himself an elder and then admonishes the elders to feed (pastor) the flock over which God had made them overseers (bishop).

The way God brought about the calling may be discerned in a fresh reading of John 21:15-17 in what has unfortunately been dubbed by preachers as "Peter's Restoration." Such an interpretation misses what I believe to be the main thrust. Preachers have expounded learnedly and lengthily on the different aspects of love (agape and phileo) as though Jesus was (1) interrogating Peter three times to atone for his three denials, or (2) trying to instill in him a higher view of God's love. I think both are wrong. For Jesus to require three confessions for Peter's three denials contradicts what we know about Jesus. He did not need to humiliate Peter. Second, what higher view is implied? In regard to the sickness of

Lazarus, his sisters sent word that he whom Jesus loved (phileo) was sick. The Bible then says Jesus loved (agape) Martha, her sister and Lazarus. Note that the two words for love refer to the same event.

Then what was the thrust of our Lord's conversation with Peter? Look closely at His words. He told Peter to feed his lambs (v. 15) and twice to feed His sheep (vv. 16, 17). Then who feeds and cares for lambs and sheep? A shepherd, of course, one of the images used to describe a *pastor*. Jesus thrice asked Peter if he was willing to serve as a pastor. Jesus had already broached the subject of His church (Matt. 16:18; 18:17). So, Jesus was rehabilitating a broken sinner. On Pentecost, the meaning became clear. The age of the church was inaugurated. Acts 1-8 authenticates the ministry of Peter. When he identifies himself as an elder, the title was secure.

It is now time for us to address the issue of whether we should have ruling elders in Baptist churches. As a background to this study I cite research I began when a doctoral student at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. One of the professors remarked that we did not have a history of Southern Baptist theology. I vowed to correct that oversight and, buying my own microfilm reader, began my research. Beginning with the various Baptist Confessions of Faith in seventeenth century England, I read everything I could find, making copious notes on 5X8 index cards. I now have hundreds of those notes, organized by subject and years. I wrote a book entitled *Wind's of Doctrines: The Origin and Development of Southern Baptist Theology*, published initially in 1991. The book is not out of print. My son, Roger C. Richards, is in the process of revising the book.

Let me make a generalized summary of my findings. Baptists in England early made a distinction between the Living Word of God, Jesus, and the Written Word of God, the Bible. We Southern Baptists are inheritors of the belief in the inerrant Written Word, a battle for which rocked the SBC in the latter 1900s. The battle ended at the 2000 Convention when the SBC voted to amend and strengthen Article I, the Bible.

Through the years Baptists have discussed and remained rock solid on such doctrines as the mode and purpose of baptism, the Lord's Supper as a memorial meal, the Deity of Jesus, His substitutionary death for sin, His burial and subsequent bodily resurrection from the grave, and His certain visible return as the end of the age.

On the doctrine of the church, we Baptists have shown little interest in the so-called universal church. Nurtured in the Landmarkism of J. R. Graves, Baptist writers have assiduously protected the local church from any encroachment from without or within against its local authority as a self-governing body, under Christ. As a result they carefully crafted a denominational structure based entirely on a cooperation which never compromises local church autonomy. From the Baptist standpoint, any group that sets up ruling elders who make financial and church polity decisions has ceased to function as a Baptist church, trending toward the hierarchical structure of, say, Presbyterianism.

In reading the minutes of churches from 1800-1900, I learned some interesting facts about their times and methods of worship, but especially about the title they used to name the pastor. For the first 70 years or so, all the minutes referred to him as Elder, hence Elder Edmund Botsford, to name one of these faithful men. Somewhat surprisingly to me, men who were widely respected were sometimes addressed as Father. Not uncommonly, Elder Jesse Mercer was addressed affectionately as Father Mercer.

After the Civil War, obvious changes were reflected in the minutes. The word elder was gradually dropped in favor of the word Reverend, a title still used today. In the little country church in which I was saved at age 11 and reared, we always called the minister as Preacher. We would address him as Preacher Gore, for example. Only gradually did we change the designation to Pastor. Had he suggested he wanted to set up a new group to run the church called the Ruling Pastor, the church would have called a business meeting and declared the pulpit vacant.

Go back to calling your pastor an elder, but do us all a favor and drop the concept of "Ruling Elder." For those of us no longer serving as a pastor, you could call us elders, but that sounds too much like a Mormon title. How about just "Brother"?

WHO GAVE DEACONS THE AUTHORITY TO MAKE MAJOR DECISIONS FOR THE CHURCH?



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You don't have to attend a typical Southern Baptist church very long before you realize who the decision-makers are. In some churches they are known for the way they dress, with suit or sports blazer and tie each Sunday. A few churches list them in the bulletin for all to see. They often serve as ushers, Sunday School teachers, song leaders, trustees and more. Who are these influencers and how did they get to the place where others look to them to lead the church? This group is none other than the deacons and they have been leading the average Southern Baptist church for at least a century and a half—leading in the sense that they make and guide all the significant decisions in the church. The question that rarely gets asked is "Who gave deacons the authority to make major decisions for the church?"

Before going much further, let me say upfront: I love deacons. I grew up as a deacon's kid and my Dad is the best deacon I have ever known. I serve as pastor of a church which has many God-honoring servant-deacons. That being said, I want to challenge a traditional view of the diaconate. In order to understand the role of deacons in Southern Baptist life better, I want to look at deacons biblically, historically and practically. I also want to offer an alternate view of the role of deacons. As every good Southern Baptist should do, let us begin with the Bible.

The Role of Deacons Biblically

On multiple occasions I have witnessed raised eyebrows when I say "There are at most only two passages in the New

Testament that explain the requirements and responsibilities of a deacon." Many Christians assume the subject of deacons receives more treatment. One time an elderly deacon argued with me, claiming there was a third passage, but he didn't know where it was. He told me it said that deacons have the responsibility to lead the church. I responded that no such passage existed. With a look of bewilderment, he said, "I know it's there, and you'll just have to trust me!" That deacon and I got along very well, but I never could convince him that he was confusing tradition with what the Bible teaches.

When looking to the Bible about deacons, there is but one clear text about what to look for in a deacon. That text is 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Virtually everything that the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy, the pastor at Ephesus, has to do with a deacon's character. Practically nothing is said about a deacon's responsibilities in the church.

A passage that may speak about deacons and their function is Acts 6:1-6. It is far from certain that those called to assist the apostles were deacons. For the sake of argument, permit me to provide a few reasons why Acts 6 probably does not address deacons. At the same time, I want to allow those seven men as possible deacons.

So what are the arguments for the seven men as something other than deacons? First, the word for deacon (*diakonos* in Greek, translated as "servant" or "helper") is never used in Acts 6 (or the rest of Acts for that matter). While the related word for "service," "helps," or "ministry" (*diakonia*) occurs twice in 6:2, 4, the reader should not overlook that "ministry" is used for *both* the service (ministry) of tables *and* service (ministry) of the Word.¹

Second, if the origin of the diaconate happens in Acts 6, why don't we find any mention of deacons for another 20-25+ years? I realize arguments from silence are not the strongest, but hear me out. Acts 6 occurs around AD 35.² We find references to deacons as church officers in Philippians 1:1 (AD 61) and 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (AD 63). It is possible that Phoebe is a deacon

because of the connection with the local church of Cenchreae, as found in Romans 16:1 (AD 55). If Romans 16 is talking about the office of deacons, then the silence on deacons is approximately 20 years (or longer). At the same time, however, numerous references to elders (pastors) occur from Acts 11:30 (ca. AD 46); 14:23 (AD 48); 15:4f (AD 48/49); James 5:14 (AD 48-62);³ Ephesians 4:11 (AD 61); 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17; Titus 1:5-9 (AD 63); 1 Peter 5:1-4 (AD mid-60s) and more.

Other passages on leaders (Hebrews 13:7, 17, ca. AD pre-70) and teachers (James 3:1) may refer to the office of pastor, too, but the point is that we find a dozen or more references to the office of pastor from the mid-40s—late 60s. At the same time, there are at most four references to deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13; Philippians 1:1; Acts 6:1-6; Romans 16:1), and possibly only two (excluding Acts and Romans). So, if Acts 6 pertains to deacons, then why are deacons left out for 20-25 years with so many occurrences of pastors over much of that same time period? Is it not plausible that Acts 6 is not really the origin of the diaconate and more likely something like pastors or pastoral associates? If that is the case, when did deacons begin? I argue we do not know, but they probably originated with the growth of the church and the need for ministry assistants to aid the pastors.

If, however, deacons are in view in Acts 6 and they help make decisions (like a board), why are they not mentioned in Acts 15? The apostles, elders and the church are listed, but there is silence on the presence of deacons. Could it be the office had not yet begun? And if it had already begun, should the lack of evidence for deacons helping to make major decisions be paradigmatic for today? I will deal with this issue below, but not it is time to look at the functions of deacons throughout church history.

The Role of Deacons Historically

Baptists rightly argue the Bible as the authority for our beliefs and practices. Not wanting to take anything away from the adherents to the 16th century Reformers' claim of *sola Scriptura*

(Scripture alone), we would do well to recognize *prima Scriptura* (Scripture as primary). If the Scriptures do not teach something, we should not believe it. Baptists have rejected infant baptism, for example, because no examples occur in Scripture. Theologians find history valuable, however, to support whatever Scripture teaches, thus, the view of *prima Scriptura*. While the Bible is foundational for beliefs and practices, how Baptists have understood biblical issues throughout history is helpful.

Because this study's focus is the role of deacons in (Southern) Baptist life, I should lay my cards out on the table and admit I favor 17th century English Separatism as the origin of Baptists. That being said, suffice it to say that deacons performed a variety of duties in the Early Church, Middle Ages and through the Reformation, including acts of charity; caring for widows, orphans and the sick; assisting with baptism, the Lord's Supper and Christian burials; teaching on occasion (especially when the office of deacon was a beginner's role for those pursuing the priesthood); distributing funds and more.⁴ Many of these responsibilities became expected in Baptist life, too, with an added focus. I now turn to deacons in Baptist life from the 17th century onward.

The Start of a Good Thing—Baptist Beginnings through the Late-18th Century

Much like the New Testament itself, no single Baptist confession or early Baptist writing has much devoted to the subject of deacons, at least not until the mid-19th century. What we find, however, is deacons as servants in the church (presumably, not major decision-makers). By the mid-19th century until today, a much greater focus has been given to deacons, including their responsibilities, often elevating their status in the church.

About the time Baptists were being born, John Smyth's *Principles and Inferences* (1607) defines deacons as "officers occupied about the works of mercy respecting the body or outward man. Acts. 6, 2."⁵ Also, Thomas Helwys' *A Declaration of Faith of English People* (1611) notes deacons "who by their office

relieve the necessities off the poore and impotent brethren concerning their bodies, Acts. 6.1-4."⁶ Similarly, some Baptists, who remained after Smyth's death, wrote *Propositions and Conclusions concerning True Christian Religion* (1612), which says deacons are "to serve tables and wash the saints' feet."⁷ Initially, Baptist deacons were known for serving others in need, or, as Thomas Collier described, they served tables—the table of the Lord, the table of the ministry and the table of the poor.⁸

By the mid-17th century, seven Reformed Baptist churches composed what became known as the *First London Confession of Faith* (1644). This confession is quite generic on the subject of deacons, lumping the church offices and responsibilities together, noting "the office of Pastors, Teachers, Elders, Deacons... appointed... for the feeding, governing, serving, and building up of [Christ's] church."⁹ Even by the mid-18th century, Baptists articulated very little more on the diaconate in their major writings, other than the function of deacons as servants of the three tables and noted for their "Helps."¹⁰ Other than a few comments in some local church minutes about the deacons' help in church discipline and overseeing some of the temporal affairs of the church, little additional development of their office existed.¹¹

I have a few observations about the near silence of so many 17th and 18th century Baptist writings on the subject of deacons, let alone their duties. First, Baptists were just beginning in the 17th century and were not very numerous, especially in America. Second, Baptist tracts and pamphlets from this time period may have more to do with the fact that Baptists were trying to define and defend their distinctive beliefs, namely believer's baptism via immersion and the Lord's Supper as a memorial, while also underscoring both their orthodox views (on the Trinity and Christology) and evangelical views (on Scripture, salvation and the like). These emphases overshadowed less important subjects, including the role of deacons. The few references we have on deacons usually mention the office or their ordination, but little about their service, other than the occasional references to caring for the

poor or sick, as noted above. Finally, the best references on the duties of deacons come from church minutes, but minutes were not always kept well and those which were kept have not all survived. The few surviving church minutes acknowledge deacons' roles in serving the Lord's Supper and assisting with church discipline. Since little else exists as to deacons' duties, it seems safe to say they were not (leading) in a major role like we often find today.

A New Wind on the Horizon—Changes from the Late-18th Century—Mid-20th Century

By the late-18th century, a shift began to take place with the functions of a deacon in Baptist life, focusing on them as church business managers. In 1773 the Welsh Tract Church in Delaware labeled deacons "the chief managers in the church"¹² and the next year, Morgan Edwards of the Philadelphia Association listed the leading responsibility of deacons as "business."¹³ In some cases, deacons began to take on some administrative responsibilities, whenever pastors began serving multiple churches and could not give their full attention to a single congregation.

By the mid-19th century, controversies within Baptist life (especially Campbellism and Landmarkism within the newly-formed Southern Baptist Convention) caused them to define themselves more clearly, resulting in a more thorough ecclesiology, including much more delineation on the functions of Baptists. Thus, R.B.C. Howell, pastor of First Baptist Church, Nashville, said deacons are to attend to the temporal affairs of the church, only to expand later by labeling them "the financial officers of the church," church business managers and "a BOARD OF OFFICERS, or the executive board of the church, for her temporal department."¹⁴ W.B. Johnson, the first president of the SBC, also opened the door to permit deacons to do more when he stated "To restrict the deacons to the service of tables only, is to confine their useful labors to bounds which are too narrow."¹⁵ In a similar vein, J.M. Pendleton, a major leader in the Landmark movement,

defined the deacons' business as church management, even arguing for the necessity of deacons to serve as church treasurers and trustees. Churches "make it a point to select their best business men for trustees. These are the very men for deacons."¹⁶ Brad Creed observes that Landmark leaders were far more likely to give attention and energy to the church than any other Baptist prior to 1900. Creed then wonders "if their success in leading thousands of Baptists in the South to adopt Landmarkism was due in some measure to their ability to capitalize upon this glaring theological gap."¹⁷ Add to this influence the negative effects of the Civil War on the South during the second half of the 19th century, when everyone struggled financially, including the churches. Pastors became much more likely to serve multiple congregations and the only officers left to oversee the regular operations of the church were the deacons.

Even with these changes in the diaconate, a few Baptist leaders fought against giving deacons so much authority. In 1853 Thomas Armitage ridiculed the notion of a deacon being "of so much importance and ecclesiastical consequence in the Church, that all the membership, and all the affairs in the Church, and the Pastor, must be dictated, and ruled, and governed by him."¹⁸ If that critique is not clear enough, E.C. Dargan noted the same danger in 1897 when deacons acted like "a sort of ruling presbytery" with the increasing tendency "to speak of the deacons as a 'board,' or sometimes even as an 'official board,' and to consider them in some sort the representatives and governors of the churches."¹⁹ While the deacons could grab this power for themselves, the greater cause lies with the fact that "church members neglect too much the business meetings of the church. They turn over the business of the church too readily and easily to the deacons to perform for them."²⁰

In the 20th century, the view of deacons-as-managers continued in Southern Baptist life. J.T. Henderson labeled deacons as the "pastor's cabinet [in which] all matters of large import should come to the church by recommendation of the deacons."²¹ E.Y. Mullins, possibly the single greatest theological influence in SBC

life for most of the 20th century, and his emphasis on the priesthood of the believer and soul competency underscored democratic church polity and stripped authority from the pastor, in effect placing all believers on equal footing in the church.²² Both church offices—pastor and deacon—were on a level playing field, and with pastors occasionally switching churches, it is easy to see how deacons continued in leadership and managerial positions.

Back to the Future—Role Reversals Since 1950

During the middle and late-20th century, Baptist writers returned to an emphasis on deacons-as-servants, using phrases like “deacon ministry” and “deacon body” rather than “deacon managers” or “deacon boards.” In 1951 Gaines S. Dobbins clearly observed: deacons are “servants of the church, never managers or dictators.”²³ Likewise, Robert Naylor commented on deacons functioning “contrary to the New Testament teaching. It may have gone so far that ‘bossism’ has developed. There is a ‘board’ complex and a general feeling that deacons are ‘dictators’ of the church. Nothing could be farther from the Baptist genius or the New Testament plan.”²⁴ Writing during the last few decades of the 20th century, Howard Foshee and Robert Sheffield emphasized the ministry role of deacons rather than management.²⁵

In summary, deacons in Baptist life began by focusing on ministry (serving the table of the Lord, the poor and the ministry) and transitioned to positions of management (leading the church as a board of officers or directors). Though most of the writings since 1950 return deacons to a ministry body, the question must be asked: “Do the majority of Southern Baptist churches have deacons who are a managing board (directors) or a ministry body (servants)?” That’s the question I want to tackle next.

The Role of Deacons Practically

In many Southern Baptist churches today, deacons lead the church in its decisions. One Southern Baptist scholar observed in 1958: “Although Baptist polity permits a wide latitude of form and practice, the deacon usually renders an administrative and

officiating ministry.”²⁶ My experience teaches me that Baptist practices have not changed much since then. I have personally been involved in five churches that functioned this way and I know of countless other examples of friends and students who have shared stories of deacon-led churches. I don’t mean to imply that all deacons are bad, though some are, but even good deacons do not have a calling to lead their churches. And unfortunately, the vast majority of these churches are not growing but declining. Could one factor for the decline be churches not operating the way the Lord intends from the New Testament? If the Lord has not called and equipped deacons to lead the church, why should anyone expect the church to thrive under God’s blessings?²⁷

Some argue deacons cannot stop managing the church, because the average tenure of pastors in SBC churches is around 3.6 years.²⁸ Why is the tenure so low and how can a church expect to grow through that kind of transition, unless deacons are there to hold things together?

Undoubtedly, many of the smaller SBC churches in the vicinity of SBC seminaries and colleges benefit from young preachers needing experience. Most of these college and seminary students stay at these churches less than three years, contributing to the overall low tenure. Other pastors do not remain very long at churches because of problems. Sometimes the pastor is the problem (moral failure, lack of courage, failure to handle stress) and sometimes the church is the problem (mistreating pastors, unfriendly toward the community, divisive). When the church is the problem, it usually reflects its leaders. I think it is fair to say the average SBC church points to the deacons as its leaders.

Still, many deacons argue, “Since so many pastors don’t stick around long, isn’t our leadership in the church not only practical but necessary?” Maybe; in some cases. But could it be that many pastors do not stick around very long because they cannot lead the way God called them to lead, because the deacons refuse to let them? I’m not suggesting pastors-as-dictators where they get to call all the shots, but I am suggesting a major mindset shift for most churches and the deacons who serve them, which leads me to my final section.

Alternative View: A Group of Pastors to Lead, A Body of Deacons to Serve

After covering the biblical, historical and practical issues, it should be clear I am arguing against deacons leading or having authority in the church. I want to offer an alternate view, a view that has support biblically, historically and, in a few cases, practically: a group of pastors to lead and a body of deacons to serve. Though pastors have not been the subject of this article, permit me to interject them here in offering a workable solution. Smaller churches having trouble affording even a bi-vocational pastor may immediately object to this view, but please hear me out.

If the New Testament model for leadership in the church is pastors with deacons as servants, *and* if much of Baptist history has implemented this model, *and* if it is possible to practice such a model, why not do it? I believe deacons lead in most SBC churches because of tradition (or it became the most practical thing for them to do at the time). But can it be changed? I think so, but it will not be easy and it will not come quickly. So how can it happen? How can a current group of deacons as a board-of-directors (decision-making managers) become a body-of-servants (ministers) who assist a team of pastors in ministry?

First, pastors must have the commitment to stay longer at the churches they serve. They should not go into a new pastorate with a two or three-year plan but a five or seven or ten-year plan. They must work through the problems they encounter and stick it out before looking for a new place to serve. Will it be tough? You bet, but then again, whoever said ministry was easy? Will some pastors quit the ministry? Sure, but some will do it anyway. Will pastors miss out on bigger and better opportunities by staying at a church? In some cases, yes, but their resolve can strengthen their church, if not by making it bigger, at least by making it better.

Second, pastors must preach and teach church polity. Rather than preach topically and either avoid the hard texts or get criticized for hobby-horse preaching, I suggest expository preaching through books of the Bible. Such preaching forces pastors to deal with hard texts and when they come to the passages people

don't like to hear, they cannot be criticized for preaching selectively on their favorite texts. Pastors who continually remind their congregations that the Bible should be the foundation for faith and practice can challenge their churches on changing practices that fail to model the New Testament.

Third, deacons must take a long, hard look at this issue. They have to ask themselves if they are willing to give up their authority and place of leadership in order to follow the New Testament. They may read Acts 6 differently, seeing a God-given mandate to be a director, but the lack of deacon involvement in Acts 15 (a business meeting!) should cause them pause. They have to trust the Lord to use their pastor(s) to lead the church. The deacons should realize that pastors won't be perfect in leading the church, but they as deacons won't be perfect either. Though Harold Rawlings warns, "Deacons are not to usurp the authority of the pastor, who is the rightful 'overseer' of the church,"²⁹ such usurpation has occurred in far too many SBC churches. Deacons have to help bring the change in the church or it will never happen.

Fourth, churches must pray about having more than one pastor, if not in a paid position, at least in a lay leadership position. A church should look at the key passages pertaining to the office of pastor (Acts 14:23; 15:4f; 20:17-28; James 5:14; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17-18; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4; etc.) and discern whether some church leaders/teachers fulfill the role of pastor (without the actual title). Some of these leaders may actually be serving as deacons in some churches, but it is highly doubtful that all of the deacons meet the prerequisites of a pastor.

There are several advantages to having a few lay pastors (say two or three for each paid pastor) serving the church. For one thing, it keeps a single pastor from becoming a dictator as a leader. Moreover, a small group of pastors can help the senior pastor (preaching pastor) from making poor or foolish decisions that negatively impact the church. Furthermore, if a church has but one paid pastor and he leaves the church, the church still has a few pastors to help guide it until another preaching pastor is called.

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Finally, this model, as seen in the texts above, reflects the New Testament description of the local church better than most current models in SBC life where deacons are leading.

A fifth way to make the change from a current board of deacons (decision-makers) to a body of deacons (servants) who assist a team of pastors pertains to the church members. They will have to be open to change both in their own practice and in the practice of the church. Whenever they have a problem with the pastor, instead of running to tell the deacons, they should practice Matthew 18:15 and go to the pastor himself. Moreover, when they hear of problems others have with the pastor or church, church members ought to encourage them to get the pastor's input before approaching the deacons. These changes will be difficult, because it is not in most people's nature to confront issues. Moreover, church members often trust deacons more, because they have known them for several years, while they may have only known the pastor for a few months. Nevertheless, if church members want to help their pastors lead, then these steps will go a long way toward entrusting them with what God has called them to do.

You may be thinking, "There is no way my church could ever make this transition!" Well, my church has made the change. Some of my predecessors made sacrifices and the transition took several years, but is in place now. It works well and the Lord has blessed our efforts to model a New Testament church as best we can. I believe the same could be true for you.

Conclusion

Someone has said, "Any time you mess with deacons in a Southern Baptist church, you stir up a hornet's nest." You may be thinking that now that you have read this article. Would you be willing to take a fresh look at the Scriptures and consider some of these historical and practical examples to see if change is needed in your church? To the pastor, the deacon, the church member reading this article, will you look to the authority of the Lord and His Word and see where He has placed His authority in the local church? Some will have to take it up (pastors) and others will have

to give it up (deacons)? What will you do? How can you help deacons focus better on their calling while following your pastor(s) and benefitting the whole church? May the Lord, who has all authority, aid you in your change for His glory and the good of His people.

Endnotes

¹ John Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 182-183.

² All dates that follow are approximate (within a year or two) and generally accepted by most conservative evangelical New Testament scholars.

³ Some New Testament books, like James and Hebrews, are especially difficult to date. I simply provide more general timeframes.

⁴ See Charles W. Deweese, *The Emerging Role of Deacons* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 12-22.

⁵ H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 55.

⁶ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, revised (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 121-122.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁸ Thomas Collier, *The Right Constitution and True Subjects of the Visible Church of Christ* (London: Henry Hills, 1654), 30-31.

⁹ Lumpkin, 166. The influence of John Calvin's four-office view of the church undoubtedly influenced this confession. The *Second London Confession* (1677, 1689) corrected this false distinction by defining the church officers as "Bishops or Elders and Deacons," though nothing is said about a deacon's responsibilities (*ibid.*, 287). Even though the revision of 1689 draws more from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), Baptists have been right to limit the church offices to two.

¹⁰ Benjamin Griffith, *A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1743) in Mark E. Dever, ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (nc: Center for Church

Reform, 2001), 98-99; Charleston Association, *A Summary of Church Discipline* (Charleston: David Bruce, 1774) in Dever, 121.

¹¹ See Deweese, 31-34.

¹² *Records of the Welsh Tract Baptist Meeting*, Vol. 2 (Wilmington, DE: Historical Society of Delaware, 1904), 8.

¹³ Morgan Edwards, *The Customs of Primitive Churches* (nc: np, 1774), 36-37.

¹⁴ R.B.C. Howell, *The Deaconship: Its Nature, Qualifications, Relations, and Duties* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publications Society, 1846), 18, 121-123.

¹⁵ W.B. Johnson, *The Gospel Developed through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ* (Richmond: H.K. Ellyson, 1846) in Dever, 197.

¹⁶ See J.M. Pendleton, *Church Manual* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1867), 35-40.

¹⁷ Brad Creed, "Church Leaders," in Paul A. Basden, ed., *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought Since 1845* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 185.

¹⁸ Thomas Armitage, *The Office and Qualifications of a Deacon in the Church* (New York: E.H. Tripp, 1853), 10.

¹⁹ Edwin C. Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches* (Louisville: Charles T. Dearing, 1897), 184.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

²¹ J.T. Henderson, *The Office of Deacon*, 4th ed. (Knoxville: Kingsport Press, 1928), 77.

²² See E.Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, Timothy and Denise George, eds. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997). Written in 1908, Mullins main intent included arguing against a hierarchy of priests, but the effects of his views led to an unhealthy, self-centered hermeneutic in the church, where everyone was right in their own eyes.

²³ Gaines S. Dobbins, *The Churchbook* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951), 198.

²⁴ Robert Naylor, *The Baptist Deacon* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), 3.

²⁵ Howard B. Foshee, *The Ministry of the Deacon* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1968); Robert Sheffield, *The Ministry of*

Baptist Deacons (Nashville: Convention Press, 1990). For more on the late-20th century changes in the diaconate in SBC life, see the opening sections in my other article in this issue, "Give Me a D-E-A-C-O-N! What's That Spell? It Depends on Whom You Ask!"

²⁶ J.B. . McMinn, "Deacon" in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists: Presenting Their History, Doctrine, Polity, Life, Leadership, Organization, and Work*, Volume 1 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958), 352.

²⁷ I do not mean to imply that having a good pastor automatically guarantees God's blessings and church growth. Several issues factor into church growth, including the Spirit's leading, the evangelistic ministry of the church, genuine fellowship, relevant ministry in the community, worship style and more. Something I have observed in growing churches, however, is a greater degree of pastor-led and pastoral staff-led churches.

²⁸ http://thomrainer.com/2009/06/11/8_traits_of_effective_church_leaders/ (accessed 29 June 2013). While Rainer includes a variety of denominations, SBC churches are the greatest focus in his research. Churches known for effective leaders have pastors with 11.2-21.6 years of tenure. Trevin Wax cites pastoral tenure in SBC churches at 5-7 years and notes that greedy, lazy pastors are partly to blame, but so are churches with a few prominent members and deacons who do not want a real pastor but someone to fill the pulpit (<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevinwax/2007/04/12/the-myth-of-the-church-hopping-pastor/> [accessed 29 June 2013]).

²⁹ Harold Rawlings, *Basic Baptist Beliefs: An Exposition of Key Biblical Doctrines* (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2005), 218.

WHAT THE DEACON SHOULD EXPECT FROM HIS PASTOR.

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"Pastor and deacon share a divine responsibility to proclaim the gospel to believers and unbelievers, provide care for church members and other persons of the community, build and maintain church fellowship, and provide Christian leadership in order to help their church attain its spiritual mission," writes church administration specialist Howard Foshee.¹

In summarizing his perspective, Foshee reminds the deacon that "you are a co-laborer – a partner with your pastor in God's work."² And with that partnership naturally engenders certain expectations. This article seeks to delineate some of the expectations deacons have for their pastor/ministry-partner.

Although Foshee's book has been a standard guide for Southern Baptist deacons for decades, it joins a host of literature that has sought to provide guidance to laymen who have responded to their church's invitation to serve as a deacon. Typically this role of co-laborer includes several ideal aspects highlighted by Foshee including: understanding the pastor and his work; praying with and for the pastor; affirming and supporting the pastor; as well as enjoying fellowship with the pastor.³

Unfortunately limited are the resources that focus on the expectations that a deacon should have of his pastor. Even the books designed to orient and train deacons, do not provide guidance to the deacon on what expectations he should have of his pastor. Neither do most books on pastoral leadership focus on how pastors should support the deacon. Of course, it could be concluded that many of the instructions given to deacons in support of their pastors' ministry, as previously noted in Foshee's

comments, could equally be applied to pastors in supporting their church's deacon ministry.

"A healthy relationship between a pastor and his deacons contributes to a vital, healthy church body," observes Steve Campbell, who for 18 years served as a deacon and shared his viewpoint in an article for the *Deacon*, a magazine published by LifeWay Christian Resources, provided some insight on the deacon expectation issue as it relates to functional relationships. Campbell's article was subsequently posted on-line and served as a background resource for this *Journal* article.⁴

Campbell, who at the time of his writing, served as chairman of deacons at First Baptist Church Tillman's Corner in Mobile, Alabama, said that the relationship between the pastor and deacon involves three elements: spiritual; personal; and ministry partnership. In the spiritual context the deacon and pastor must pray for each other. Noting that his pastor "also prays for me in my role," Campbell went on to explain that, "we pray with each other regularly."⁵

A second dynamic he cited was, "Friendship between a pastor and a deacon is very important. We have a friendship rooted in our love for our Lord Jesus. Because of that love, we trust each other and know we can share confidences without fear," Campbell observed.⁶

Former longtime Florida pastor Jim Henry has publicly addressed the issue of a pastor's supporting role to deacons. In 2007 Henry led a Pastor/Deacon/Spouse Retreat in Bowling Green, Kentucky, that focused on ways "you can be a pastor your deacons will love to work with and follow." As reported by Baptist Press, the news agency of the Southern Baptist Convention and later posted on-line, the former pastor of First Baptist Church, Orlando, encouraged his fellow pastors to "be the leader God intends you to be."⁷

Henry laid out seven simple steps that pastors should follow to encourage their deacons, including the importance of understanding "the heart of your people." He exhorted them to "serve with a shepherd/servant heart." Another key for success is

the value of listening “to wise counsel. All of us preachers make mistakes. We have clay feet. We don’t know everything,” he acknowledged. “Get close to the wise men of the church.” Another trait he cited was to “wear humility as a badge of honor.” He explained that, “If you’re going to pastor in a noble way, you must do it with humility.” Henry encouraged the pastors “to make prayer and study a priority,” which he said requires “work, discipline and a plan.” He also cautioned the pastors not to chase “the latest church fad.” And finally he stressed, “Make much of Jesus.” Henry concluded, “It’s all about Jesus; it’s not about us. We’re just His messenger boys for a season.”⁸

Much of what Campbell and Henry suggested on how pastors should relate to their deacons was echoed by a sampling of Florida deacons who cited similar needs that they most expect or have received from their pastor.

“The scripture makes it clear that there are two specific ministry roles in the church, pastor and deacon,” observed deacon Marvin Pittman of Bartow. “There are, of course, multiplicities of ministries, but these are two specific roles that are ordained,” said the layman who has served as a Southern Baptist deacon for 46 years.⁹

“I understand that Jesus is the Shepherd, the pastor is the under-shepherd and the deacon is the sheepdog,” Pittman, a volunteer sheriff’s chaplain, recently wrote in response to questions by this writer. “The deacon labors with the pastor, ministering to the church’s needs, working to keep peace among the fellowship, caring for those with needs, leading by example in spiritual growth, praying for and encouraging the pastor,” Pittman explained reflecting upon his 47 years’ as a practicing Southern Baptist.¹⁰

Pittman was one of nearly two dozen laymen who were surveyed about their service as a deacon in a Florida Baptist church. The respondents ranged in age from 49 to 82 and had individually served as a deacon between six months and 46 years. By virtue of their age and service longevity, these randomly selected men represented the seasoned laity ministry veterans of Florida Baptist church life.

Service on the diaconate takes many forms and roles which are outlined in the other articles within this issue of *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*. However, the random, yet unscientific, sample of deacons contacted for this article, generally characterized their service to be that of a ministry partner with their pastor. They shared their thoughts and perspectives by completing a dozen questions and returning the one page survey developed and sent to them by the writer of this article.

In this partnership role, most identified their ministry tasks to include: visitation of the spiritually lost; lead or participate in worship and/or prayer meeting services; make hospital visits or visit the homebound; and assist in family crisis/conflict resolution.

While identifying their role as a ministry partner serving alongside the pastor, none viewed their responsibility to include serving as the “business managers” for the church – as discussed elsewhere in this *Journal* series. Mike Strickland of Tallahassee made it clear that he had “never believed in deacon management.” The retired state trooper went on to explain that “deacons are servant models to the church assisting the pastor in ministry needs and supporting his ministry.”¹¹

That sentiment was echoed by another who volunteered his opinion on church business affairs. Winter Haven deacon Jim Durham said he did not believe that deacons should act as a “board of deacons or board of directors.” Rather he did declare his preference that deacons “as spiritual leaders, the pastor should be looking to them for guidance.”¹²

Coming to the purpose of this article, each deacon was asked to identify three things they had come to expect or have received from their pastor to support their deacon service.

The responses were as varied and diverse as the geographical spread – from Miami to Tallahassee – of the congregations in which these men serve. Included in this deacon sample were members of small rural congregations, as well as those serving churches located in mid-sized cities and metropolitan areas within Florida. Although their stated expectations were

not identical, the responses of those who returned the questionnaire can be grouped into broad categories.

Complementing this narrative, this writer has drawn from a column written by Jim White, executive editor of the Virginia Baptist news journal, *The Religious Herald*. White touched on several expectations of deacons in a 2012 column, initially published in print and later added to the news journal's on-line outlet. Some of those desired expectations – based upon random comments made by deacons over the years to Editor White – parallel the Florida laymen's suggestions. Yet White identified some other expectation-related issues that have been included in this article.

Equipping for Service: Foremost, Editor White wrote, deacons want “to be clear about my role as a deacon.” He clarified that deacons, “need to know what do, to know how to do it and to know that it is an essential part of building the Kingdom of Christ.”¹³

Not surprisingly, several of the Florida deacons cited their need to be equipped for service as well. Several laymen suggested that they want their pastor to help them understand, not only their Biblical/spiritual responsibility, but their functional responsibility as well. “The best ministry partnerships I've experienced as a deacon have come with pastors who make sure we deacons understand his approach to pastoral ministry and have taken the time to demonstrate how our callings and gifts are complementary so ministry is effective and long-term,” explained Tyrus Wood of Jacksonville.¹⁴

“Challenge to grow” was a need cited by Colvin Pinkerton of Sheridan Hills Baptist Church, Hollywood.¹⁵ A similar concern was expressed by Wil Mowdy of Orlando's First Baptist Church, who has found it beneficial when the pastor provided “ongoing opportunities for Bible study classes for spiritual growth.”¹⁶ Seventy-year-old Jay Zeller, of Okeechobee, summed up his expectation for being equipped for service with four words: “Leadership training; prayer; encouragement.”¹⁷

“Deacons need a lot more instruction and direction than I thought,” observed Robert Shear of Winter Park, who during his 38 years on the First Baptist diaconate, had served occasionally as chairman of his church's deacon body.¹⁸

Affirmation: Inasmuch as most churches corporately select and elect their deacons, pastors typically are not in the enlistment loop. Rather, they must “live” with the deacons the church has designated from year to year. As a result of this dichotomy, many deacons want affirmation from the pastor, which demonstrates “their support of the deacon's role,” suggested Ocala's Jack Roland.¹⁹ A similar sentiment was shared by Shear, a retired back surgeon, who said he expects the pastor to give “recognition of a deacon's place in serving in the church, giving opportunity for this service wherever he can.”²⁰

Spiritual Guidance: A pastor should provide spiritual guidance to his deacons which, according to Mike Strickland of the Seminole Baptist Church, Tallahassee, have a two-fold value. The first comes from being able to observe the pastor in “his daily walk with the Lord.” Such a visible testimony will provide a role model for deacons on “how he reacts to those around him;”²¹ Jim Killingsworth of Wayside Baptist Church, Miami, said, “I expect my pastor to provide Godly counseling and guidance when needed in serious family matters,” as another means of helping deacons in their role.²²

Ocala funeral director Roland, whose career has involved trying to comfort and assist distraught and grieving family members, said he has benefited from the “wise counsel” provided to him by his pastors over the years. “As I have traveled my journey as a layman serving in God's church,” Roland said he had received valuable counsel “in helping to address various situations. The wisdom that comes with their years of experience has been invaluable.”²³

Prayer commitment: Reflecting the sentiments written by Steve Campbell in which the value and need for prayer commitment by and for the pastor, also was a repeated expectation by several Floridians. Luther Beauchamp of Chiefland observed that “prayer for the deacon and prayer for the pastor is vital.”²⁴ Okeechobee layman Tom Levins, during his 20 years’ service as a deacon, concluded that the pastor’s “prayer life is [of] utmost importance.”²⁵ A similar sentiment was noted by Bartow’s Pittman who called for the “prayer commitment” of his pastor.²⁶

Friendship: Friendship between the pastor and his deacons is a vital and desired expectation cited specifically by responding deacons Robert Carlton of Green Cove Springs²⁷ and Hollywood’s Colvin Pinkerton.²⁸ North central Florida deacon Roland characterized the friendship between pastor and deacon is best realized by the pastor being “available to me for whatever my needs at any time.”²⁹ A similar testimony was shared by Tyrus Wood of Southside Baptist Church, Jacksonville, who stated, “The best pastors to work with are those who get to know their deacons on a personal level – their cares and concerns, their struggles and triumphs – and encourage excellence in all things.”³⁰

Communications: Virginia Editor White suggests that deacons want to “be a sounding board” for the pastor. In such a role deacons can aid pastors in getting “a sense of how the church as a whole may react to your ideas.”³¹

Several of the Florida group also stressed the importance of communication between pastor and deacons. Orlando’s Wil Mowdy called for “briefing [and] updates of how he [the pastor] believes the Lord is guiding him to lead and serve the church body.”³² Clay County’s Robert Carlton specifically stated this communication should be all inclusive, including “direct communication of all ministry actions, issues, opportunities.”³³

Miamian Killingsworth was more forthright by noting, “I expect open and candid communications on how he feels the deacons are functioning on a regular basis.” Tied to that desired

communication, Killingsworth also noted, “I expect my pastor to keep the deacons informed so we can be effective communicators” to the church members.³⁴

Jay Zeller and Tyrus Wood both cited the need for pastors to exhibit “transparency” in their communications with deacons. For Zeller transparency requires both pastor and deacons to be “very open with each other.”³⁵ Wood also stressed the importance and value for the needed transparency. “Whether it’s good news, bad news, or no news church members will most often go to their deacon with questions or comments. If we have the facts and the thinking behind decisions, we can more accurately answer questions, provide clarification, and defuse potentially explosive situations. Even though there is a need for confidentiality in some matters, if we have the background we can respond more appropriately.”³⁶

Realtor Jim Durham suggested the need for “communication regarding the spiritual climate of the church – so that I can pray and assist [to] help preserve the harmony of the church.”³⁷

Decision-Making: Joint participation in the casting of a vision and decision making for the church was another often repeated need cited by several Florida deacons. Advocating that deacons should be “involved in the vision of the pastor for the ministry of the church” was made by Chiefland attorney Luther Beauchamp who has served 40-plus years as a deacon.³⁸ Jay Zeller also expressed the desire for the pastor to be “very open to our thoughts and concerns,” which he clarified would ensure the pastor and deacon are “always on the same page.”³⁹

Durham agreed with his counterparts by noting that he wants the pastor to “solicit my input as to what the needs of the church are.” But he went on to stress that he wants to know “what God has placed on my pastor’s heart.”⁴⁰ Yet the bottom line for many deacons being involved in the decision-making process is the expectation that the pastor “respect and value my opinion,” as was concisely stated by Colvin Pinkerton.⁴¹

Church Conflicts: One of the realities of church life is that conflicts are inevitable, reported several deacons. "Internal church politics are real" observed Mike Branch of Fernandina Beach, "and we must love, learn to forgive, and follow God in all we do."⁴² Yet, Jay Zeller of Okeechobee, observed that one of the unexpected aspects of his deacon service was having to "be involved in so many conflicts."⁴³

Despite the best of efforts to keep the lines of communications open to reduce conflicts, Editor White noted that disagreements between a deacon and pastor may still occur. But, he said, that doesn't mean that the deacons "don't support" the pastor. Nor does it imply that a deacon, who disagrees with his pastor, won't change his mind "later on." White stated that most deacons want their pastor to understand that a deacon oftentimes views his "responsibility to speak to you with respect and in love."⁴⁴

Pastor Humility: Along a similar perspective the *Religious Herald* editor reported that deacons would prefer a pastor who admits that he is "sometimes wrong." Such admission will not cause a deacon "to lose respect" for his pastor "because you are wrong. No human being is right all the time," White summarized. On the other hand, "if you obstinately refuse to admit a mistake and are too proud to apologize," a deacon's respect for the pastor "will inevitably lessen," he explained.⁴⁵

Supporting/Defending the Pastor: In conclusion, Jim White made a thoughtful statement summarizing the sentiments of many deacons: "If I seem slow to support you in opposition to another church member at times it may be because I have known that person for years and know I'll continue to live with him or her long after you are called to another field of service. If I perceive that you are having conflict with someone in the church because of personality differences, I am not likely to rush to your defense and jeopardize a longstanding relationship with my fellow church member. This is not because of cowardice on my part but because

I believe you can handle yourself in conflict situations."⁴⁶

And finally White claimed most deacons "will defend you as my pastor as I believe the Scriptures teach us to do."⁴⁷

Endnotes

¹ Howard B. Foshee, "Now that You're a Deacon," (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1975), 22].

² *Ibid.*, 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 28-38.

⁴ Steve Campbell, "Healthy Deacon-Pastor Relationships," *Deacon*, posted online May 16, 2013, <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/church-ministry-healthy-deacon-pastor-relationships>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Trennis Henderson, "Jim Henry urges pastors, deacons to pursue unity in Christ," *Western Recorder*, posted by Baptist Press, February 15, 2007, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=24977>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Marvin Pittman, (deacon, First Baptist Church, Bartow), comment as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ James "Mike" Strickland, (deacon, Seminole Baptist Church, Tallahassee), comments as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

¹² Jim Durham, (deacon, First Baptist Church, Winter Haven), comments as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

¹³ Jim White, "10 things deacons would like to say to their pastors," *The Religious Herald*, November 5, 2012, http://www.religiousherald.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6452&Itemid=9

¹⁴ Tyrus Wood, (deacon, Southside Baptist Church, Jacksonville), comments as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

¹⁵ Colvin Pinkerton, (deacon, Sheridan Hills Baptist Church, Hollywood), comments as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

¹⁶ Wil Mowdy, (deacon, First Baptist Church, Orlando), comments as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

¹⁷ Jay Zeller, (deacon, First Baptist Church, Okeechobee), comments as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

¹⁸ Robert Shear, (deacon, First Baptist Church, Winter Park), comments as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

¹⁹ Jackson Roland, (deacon, First Baptist Church, Ocala), comments as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

²⁰ Shear.

²¹ Strickland.

²² Jim Killingsworth, (deacon, Wayside Baptist Church, Miami), as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

²³ Roland.

²⁴ Luther Beauchamp, (deacon, First Baptist Church, Chiefland), comments as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

²⁵ Tom Levins, (deacon, First Baptist Church, Okeechobee), as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

²⁶ Pittman.

²⁷ Robert Carlton, (deacon, Lake Asbury Baptist Church, Green Cove Springs), as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

²⁸ Pinkerton.

²⁹ Roland.

³⁰ Wood.

³¹ White.

³² Mowdy.

³³ Carlton.

³⁴ Killingsworth.

³⁵ Zeller.

³⁶ Wood.

³⁷ Durham.

³⁸ Beauchamp.

³⁹ Zeller.

⁴⁰ Durham.

⁴¹ Pinkerton.

⁴² Mike Branch, (deacon, First Baptist Church, Fernandina Beach), comments as noted on writer-provided questionnaire returned to Donald S. Hepburn, June, 2013.

⁴³ Zeller.

⁴⁴ White.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

WHAT THE PASTOR SHOULD EXPECT FROM HIS DEACONS

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An easy reply to the assigned topic could evoke simple answers, such as respect, love, loyalty, and support. However, I wish to come at the answer in a different way. When I was active as a college professor, I would often caution prospective pastors with the following bit of advice. Namely, the vote of the church can make you the preacher, but you must earn the right to be accepted as the pastor. Earning the privilege of being called the pastor will involve developing a respect and rapport with the deacons. In some churches they will be referred to as the "Board of Deacons." This description is not quite as widespread today as in former times, but their function remains the same. The preacher/pastor is placed in the position of guiding the church in developing it both spiritually and administratively.

Let me say here that my remarks relate to churches with fewer than 300 in attendance. In those smaller churches the successful pastor must be able to identify the power structure, usually one person, whose opinion in a given issue carries great weight. To break consistently the 300 barrier will require major re-structuring in various programs, especially music. The next hurdle is the 500 mark.

By this time the role of deacons becomes redefined. The previous power structure becomes a distant memory. The deacons meeting, instead of attended by the pastor only, involves staff members. How the deacons are assimilated into the total church program will vary from church to church. The use and impact of the electronic media will continue to change the way churches function.

In working in churches through the deacons, I have tried to follow five guiding ideas. First, I have my own application of the mandate given by Paul to Timothy to "commit to faithful men" the principles of the gospel (1Tim. 2:2). I understand it as the maxim to win people to Christ and then develop them into faithful followers of Jesus. As applied to my relationships with deacons, I have sought, even as an interim pastor, to develop them in two areas. One is preaching. Taking Deacon Philip as an example, I have attempted, as the Lord leads, to teach them how to build up a sermon. My goal is to equip each deacon to have at least one sermon for "Baptist Men's Day," often promoted in January.

Second, working on the assumption that evangelism is caught, not taught, I will use most of this paper to illustrate that truth. Third, I Minister by the motto, "Move with the movers. Don't sit with the sitters." If only one deacon becomes able to give a sermon, I rejoice over the one rather than fussing at the others. Forth, I try to keep the great Commission as a binding command. It has two dimensions for Southern Baptists. As for the "regions beyond," God has led us to promote world evangelism through the Cooperative Program. No other Christian group has such an effective and efficient program for involving churches, not just individuals, in putting missionaries on the field while assuring them of financial and spiritual support. On the local level, I promote the goal of getting each church to fulfill the Great Commission in its own location. Each Sunday School class can adopt the strategy and adopting a street or road from point A to point B and making sure that every person in that locality knows God's plan of salvation. The Great Commission is fulfilled without regard to how many are added to the church roll.

To illustrate, a deacon and I visited a man, a retired U.S. Navy chief. He and his wife spent most of their time in a boat, fishing in rivers. As a former sailor myself, we got along. In the course of the conversation, I went through the plan of salvation, and he asked the Lord to save him. I tried to visit him to develop him in the faith, but he never even went to church. About fifteen years later, the deacon called me and asked, "Do you remember

that Navy chief we talked to years ago?" I did. He said, "Well, he died and the family wants you to conduct the funeral," which I did. I was the deacon's interim pastor "away back when." But he and his family have been dear friends. He died not long ago, but trying to fulfill the Great Commission brought us together.

A short time ago, I was preaching at a country church near Live Oak, Florida. The pastor had placed my picture in a local paper advertising the revival. One night a couple showed up. Since they were strangers, the pastor spoke to them. The man stood, pointed to me and said, "You baptized me." He named how many decades ago that had been. Then it all came back to me. On a Sunday afternoon, a deacon and I visited a home where a woman lived who attended our church. As I rang the door bell, I could hear the TV playing. A football game was in progress. When the man answered the door, I began to apologize and offered to come back later. His response was, "Come on in. The game is 73-0," or something like that. It was not long before I went through the plan of salvation, and he was saved. Before I resigned as pastor, he was singing in the choir.

One baptismal service stands out. Some members of the church had been instrumental in bringing a man to the Lord. He wanted to be baptized, but he was so crippled by arthritis that he could not stand. The deacons solved the problem. They arranged to get him to the church and then into a wheelchair. When they got him to the foot of the baptismal stairs, they strapped him into a wooden, straight-backed chair and partly carried and partly skidded him up the stairs to the top. I walked down into the water while the deacons took him in the chair into the water. They held him secure while I pushed him and the chair into the water. It was not dignified, but I doubt that there was a dry eye in the service. If Philip could baptize the Ethiopian, the deacons were true to biblical form.

The Lord uses unexpected events to impress spiritual truths on us. One such occasion was when a businessman, a deacon, was concerned about the spiritual condition of one of his employees. He set up an appointment for us. After we had settled

down, I brought up the subject of God's plan for us. I went through the verses about being saved as given in what we call the Roman Road. When I got to Romans 10:9-10, I got up, walked across the room and knelt beside the arm of the stuffed chair in which he was sitting and held my Bible in front of him. I wanted him to read from the Bible God's promise. I read where it says we must believe that God raised Christ from the dead. I asked him, "Do you believe that? Then you are half saved because many people do not believe that?"

Then I asked, "Are you willing confess to Christ you are a sinner and ask him to save you?" He was hesitant, so I offered to lead him through the sinner's prayer. Then I asked, "Are you saved?" He answered, "I don't know." I then explained that the Bible is God's Word. I asked, "Would God mislead you? If this is God's Word, the Bible says you are saved. Does God say you are saved?" He answered, "Yes." Then I said, "Tell me." As soon as he said, "I'm saved," his face lit up. He then read where the Bible said God raised Jesus from the dead. He exclaimed, "I never saw that before. I need to tell my wife about that verse. I don't think she knows about it." That salvation experience was a turning point for all of us. The deacon businessman is still a valued friend after all these years even though we are all, um, getting along in years.

Pastors need someone who can help keep down confusion in the church. Misunderstandings will inevitably arise over something a pastor has said or done, most of which he is totally unaware. In a church led by an alumnus from our school, a family moved into the community and joined the church. It was not long until the man in the family began finding fault with the pastor. The fellowship was being broken. When the pastor was out of town for a few days, some of the deacons visited the man to hear his complaints. They listened and then spoke. He was disrupting the fellowship. He had two options. Either decide to get along or find some other church to attend. He stopped sowing discord.

The pastor has to develop an enriching relationship with the deacons. For instance, at Christmas time we would invite the deacons and wives for a soup supper. My wife would have chili,

shrimp Creole, and another such dish. Deacon wives furnished desserts and soft drinks. The deacons were special.

Mutual love and respect are contagious. The deacons usually respond by performing as I would expect them to do. As Jesus said, "By this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you love one another."



THE PERFECT DEACON'S WIFE

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While researching for this article there was one recurring common thread among most sources. This is 'that no two deacon wives are alike.' If this is true how is someone able to write on the topic of the perfect deacon's wife? Please indulge me as I attempt to share with you the qualities of this woman, the perfect deacon's wife.

The Call

Let's start at the beginning. When a husband is approached with the request from the church asking him to prayerfully consider serving as a deacon, the wife may be experiencing many emotions. Many wives may feel pride and joy that the church would request such a service of honor from the man she has married. Others may have questioned if the church was in their right mind.

Many questions would be racing through her mind, such as; 'How will this affect our time together as a couple and a family? What will my husband's duties be as a deacon? What part will the church expect me to play in my role as a deacon's wife?' 'How do I know this is what God wants for my family?'

Perhaps to her surprise God impressed upon her and her husband that this was part of His ministry plan for their marriage and family. Some may not have been surprised at all. Certainly it was no surprise to God. In Jeremiah 29:11 we read, 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' (NIV)

Diana Davis in her book, *Deacon Wives*, says it well: "You're terrified. Or maybe you're stupefied. Your husband has been asked to serve your church as a deacon. You feel a mixture of excitement and trepidation, and you have a zillion questions.....for now just relax! *This is no surprise to God.*

Before eternity began, the God of our universe was already aware...He knew that your church would see the qualities in your husband and in you and that he would be selected as a deacon to serve your church.¹

Whatever the feelings were, prayer would be the important starting place in this decision. Praying separately and as a couple for God's guidance and wisdom is a most essential step in this process. As important as it is for the husband to learn God's plan for him, so must the wife feel assurance that this is the will of the Lord for her and their family. That assurance will play a major role in the part that a wife and family will have in a man's deacon ministry.

The importance of a couple agreeing on this decision is the corner stone for a successful deacon marriage. Martha Nelson says this about the deacon marriage in her article 'What's So Special About Deacons' Wives,' "One plus one, I'm convinced, equals far more than two when those two are husband and wife, united in love and committed to our Lord and his church. Each Christian brings his or her unique contribution to life. Paired in marriage, another influence develops. And because marriages are like a set of fingerprints, no two are alike, each couple will touch the world with a unique imprint. Never underestimate the influence of the informed, inspired, committed couple giving themselves in service through a ministering church."²

Qualifications of a deacon's wife

In the Catholic faith a deacon candidate needs his wife's consent and she is required to send a letter of support to the bishop.³ It is also expected of the deacon's wife to fully

participate in the formation process—a three- to four-year education and training process, which includes reading required material, making presentations, and writing papers. At the end of this training, the deacon is ordained; the wife is not.⁴

On the other hand, the Baptist faith expects or requires no official training. First Timothy 3:8-12 gives us the biblical qualifications for a deacon and his wife, "Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain."

They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well." (NIV)

A Baptist candidate for deacon must appear before an ordination council usually composed of deacons from the church in which he will be serving. This council meets prior to an ordination service to examine the candidate and determine if he meets the qualifications for service. If the council is satisfied with the examination, a motion to recommend ordination to the church is made and approved. The wife does not go thru this examination process and is not part of the questioning. Martha Nelson tells us, "True, the man is elected, but the wife is expected to come along. She is one side of that valuable coin known as the couple who can be counted on. That's one reason deacons' wives are so special: They help lend stability to the church."⁵

In considering the biblical charge of the deacon and his wife Louise Durkee in her article 'You Are His Wife,' tells us, "This charge (1 Timothy 3:8-12) given the deacon reflects directly on you, his wife. This church, in considering your husband for the office of deacon, has already examined you in light of this scripture. So, in a very real sense, you, too, have been chosen. You have been chosen because you have been found faithful."⁶

The biblical qualifications for a deacon's wife are found in a single verse, First Timothy 3:11. The King James Bible uses the words grave, not slanderers, sober, and faithful. The New English Bible, a more modern translation, says, 'Their wives, equally, must be women of high principle, who will not talk scandal, sober and trustworthy in every way.' There are many translations of the Bible using many different words for this verse. One might try to find a translation that uses words that sound more appealing than the King James Version, but the meaning of the qualifications remain the same.

Grave appears to be such a heavy, stern word. Many would consider this a negative charge, picturing a woman who smiles little and is very serious concerning most matters. The dictionary definition even says, 'dignified and somber in conduct or character.' However, Robert Naylor in his book *The Baptist Deacon* points out that grave is a positive qualification. "It means to be 'venerated for character.' There is enough stability in her character, worthwhileness in her personal bearing, and genuineness in her faith to attract the respect of people in the church."⁷

Scripture gives us many examples of attitudes of joy, thanksgiving and praising Him in all things. How then should a deacon's wife be the opposite by living out the dictionary definition of grave? The 'genuineness in her faith' will show in her joy and outpouring love for the Lord.

Naylor also gives us a lengthy but informative discourse on the qualification *not slanders*. He writes:

"In discussing the qualifications of the deacon, it was said that there are three negative qualifications, namely, not to be greedy of filthy lucre, not to be given to much wine, and not to be double-tongued. There is only one negative consideration mentioned as a qualification for a deacon's wife: she is not to be a slanderer. This is not to be found concerning the deacon or the preacher but is reserved for the deacon's wife. Consider carefully this word "slanderer." The Greek word is *diabolos*, and this is the only place in the New Testament where it is translated

"devil." Twice it is translated "false accuser." The Holy Spirit says that the deacon's wife is not to be the things this word describes.

The word "devil" means a false accuser...

The deacon's wife is one of those women in the church that has the privilege of communication. There are few deacons and no preachers that can avoid going home and talking to their wives about church troubles. That is natural, but it is a good springboard from which a man or woman can go out to make false accusations about other people. It is said of a deacon that he is not to be double-tongued and of the deacon's wife that she is to have a careful tongue. Surely there is nothing that can destroy a deacon's usefulness more quickly than a wife who has a careless tongue or a malicious tongue. One expositor suggested, "While men are more prone than women to be double-tongued, women are more prone than men to be slanderers."

The fact that no other negatives are included in the account suggests the seriousness of this one warning. Most pastors would agree that the most serious sin, as nearly as the Bible makes a comparative record of sin, is the sin of the tongue. It is significant to me that James, the pastor, is the one that wrote the chapter about the tongue. The sin that damns is unbelief, but the sin that destroys the usefulness of a Christian is the sin of a careless and malicious tongue. It reaches deeper into the place where people live and into the place where men ought to meet God than any other sin."⁸

The deacon's wife should not be one to share with others things that have been told to her in confidence. For that matter she does not repeat anything that is unnecessary or hurtful. The admonition 'think before you speak' should be a watch phrase for the deacon's wife, possibly changing it to 'pray before you speak.' People should be able to come to her with the confidence that

whatever burdens or troubles are shared with her will never be disclosed to anyone but God through a prayer requesting help and guidance for the one in need.

Adding to this line of thought Mary Alice Grafton writes in her article 'What God Expects of Me in Working with My Husband,' "Most of us would not deliberately say something to hurt another person. However, I have been in conversations where perhaps because of lack of information, someone misjudged another person or situation and I did not speak up. I have been a false accuser by remaining silent."⁹ Silence is not always golden when we neglect to speak up for someone who is the subject of gossip. You perhaps are their only defender.

The third qualification mentioned is *sober*. Many take this to mean that one should not partake of alcoholic beverages. Sober here goes beyond the mere inference to abstaining from intoxicating drink. Grafton states, "To be sober is not just to refrain from strong drink, although this is included...God expects me to be sober by not taking lightly situations involving my church, my Christian friends, and especially not taking lightly the eternal destiny of the soul who does not know Christ."¹⁰

Sober also means serious. A deacon's wife is charged to be serious in her concern for her family, serious in her concern for others, and serious in her concern for the lost. Just as Christ was serious in His commitment when providing salvation for all, she needs to be serious in her commitment to helping her husband fulfill his calling as deacon.

The last qualification mentioned in First Timothy 3:11 is; *being found faithful*. Some may say this is the easiest qualification to meet, all one has to do to be faithful is to show up and fill a pew. Occasionally teach a class or host a ladies Bible study. But being found faithful encompasses so much more. This quality involves personal prayer time and Bible study, reaching out to those in need and providing friendship and support to the pastor's wife and the wives of other church staff. This list barely scratches the surface of faithfulness. Every woman should be able to add to this list according to how the Lord leads her.

Much more could be added and much more has been written on the qualifications of the deacon's wife. I would like to add this wise reminder from Louise Durkee, from her article mentioned above, she shares, "You have not been elevated to a high place of honor, or admitted to any special group with privilege, but you remain today what you were yesterday, the wife of your own particular deacon."¹¹ The words that speak to me personally here are 'you remain today what you were yesterday.' A wife must consider who she was and is and what talents and gifts God has blessed her with. Was she a Sunday School teacher before her husband's ordination, then she should remain a Sunday School teacher until God calls her to a different role. Did she visit or call the sick before her husband was called as a deacon, then she should continue to visit and call the sick.

The difference may be that now more time is required of her husband to serve the members of their church. The good news here is that the deacon's wife can play an important part in her husband's ministry. Arranging to join him on his visitation is one way that allows a woman to feel as if she is a part of that ministry. It may be that the wife may notice something that the husband does not and this will allow both of them to meet a need whether it is prayer related or physical in nature. She will also need to be understanding when a circumstance arises where she should not to be present.

In his article 'Don't Forget the Wives,' S. Ray Crews says, "A deacon needs the encouragement and support from his wife. She adds that feminine touch of grace and gentleness needed in all ministries of the church. A deacon cannot be fully effective as a spiritual leader if his mate does not share his ministry concepts. A man who must lead without his wife's support is handicapped."¹²

How important is a deacon's wife to his ministry? Martha Nelson shares in her article 'A Special Word for Deacons' Wives,' "It takes all kinds of good women to make up the Lord's church, but none are needed more than faithful and gracious deacon's wives."¹³ Marie L. C. Hughes writes in her article 'From a

Deacon's Wife,' "I firmly believe a dedicated deacon can become a more efficient laborer for the Lord if he can count on a reliable helpmate."¹⁴

Conclusion

No woman is born knowing how to be a deacon's wife. God molds and shapes her using good and bad experiences to help her grow in areas that can become her ministry. What are the wife's strengths and weaknesses? She should find a place in her church to serve that plays to her strengths or perhaps where God can shape her weakness. She might possibly find the occasion to do something out of her comfort zone, allowing God to guide her in a new area of service. The very least she can do is to be faithful to attend Sunday School and church services regularly.

Is there such a thing as the perfect deacon's wife? Not if you consider that to be perfect one must be without blemish, stain or sin. However, if we consider the fact that with the salvation offered by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the confession of our sinful nature and the belief that Christ forgives us when we accept Him as our Savior, a woman can seek God's perfect will in her role as a deacon's wife.

In her article 'A Special Word for Deacons' Wives,' Martha Nelson shares these encouraging words:

"The problem that has plagued ministers' wives through the years may nag at the sincere wife of a deacon: "How can I ever live up to all the expectations of all the members of the congregation?"

The solution lies in the personal assurance that she is a creation of God, unique, a combination of mentality, abilities, interests, skills, experiences, education, spiritual maturity, emotional stability, health, and physical stamina that would never be found in another woman anywhere. Neither are her family relationships and responsibilities exactly like that of any other woman on the face of the earth.

Therefore, the Christian woman can rest in the knowledge that she is responsible primarily to the one who created her and who understands best of all the circumstances of her life. She can then ignore any criticism she might encounter. She can be herself; and with God's help her best self.

The wife of a deacon should be a maturing believer, growing in knowledge of the Master and in his favor. Ideally, the deacon's wife has begun, in some measure, to experience the fruit of the Spirit which any woman of ideals would desire: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control.

She is a woman who worships, who studies the Bible, who seeks to serve her Christ in daily relationships in her home, at work, and in the community, as well as in her church. Such a personal devotion will naturally result in the qualities that Paul urged the churches to look for in their servants' wives.

The maturing Christian woman possesses a dignity that is hers because of who she is—a child of God by reason of the new birth. She is a woman of high principles because of what she believes the Bible teaches."¹⁵

Therefore it is my opinion that the imperfect woman when she allows God to use her to encourage and strengthen her deacon husband spiritually, physically and emotionally, can be the perfect deacon's wife.

Endnotes

¹ Diana Davis, *Deacon Wives*. B & H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN, 2009, p.4.

² Martha Nelson, "What's So Special About Deacon's Wives." *The Deacon*, Vol. 8, No. 3, April, May, June, 1978, p.33. Hereafter referred to as Nelson, "Special".

³ Zoe Ryan, "A Life-Changing Choice for Two." *National Catholic Report*, 48, No. 8, February 3, 2012, 10a-11a. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

⁴ Rebecca A. Meehan, "The Deacon's Wife; an Emerging Role." *The Deacon Reader*, Paulist Press, NY, 2006, p. 232.

⁵ Nelson, "Special," p. 32.

⁶ Louise Durkee, "You Are His Wife." *The Deacon*, Vol. 4, No. 3, April, May, June, 1974, p. 29. Hereafter referred to as Durkee, "His Wife."

⁷ Robert Naylor, *The Baptist Deacon*, Broadman Press, Nashville, TN, 1955, p. 125.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 124.

⁹ Mary Alice Grafton, "What God Expects of Me in Working with My Husband." *The Deacon*, Vol. 7, No. 4, July, August, September, 1977, p. 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 37.

¹¹ Durkee, "His Wife," p.29.

¹² S. Ray Crews, "Don't Forget the Wives." *The Deacon*, Vol. 8, No. 1, October, November, December, 1977, p. 53.

¹³ Martha Nelson, "A Special Word for Deacons' Wives." *The Deacon*, Vol. 2, No. 1, October, November, December, 1971, pp. 44-45. Hereafter referred to as Nelson, "Word."

¹⁴ Marie Hughes, "From a Deacon's Wife." *The Deacon*, Vol. 7, No. 3, April, May, June, 1977, p. 21.

¹⁵ Nelson, "Word," p. 46.



GODLY DEACONS I HAVE KNOWN

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The church is blessed to have men and women that serve the Lord in the various ministries of church. The group that I would like to share about is that of the deacon. This is a calling that God places on the hearts of men to serve the Lord. This is a very distinctive place of service, and those who are called to serve know the mantle of responsibility that is attached to that calling. Deacons set the tone for ministry in the local church. Without the support of the body of deacons, the pastor may have difficulty ministering to his fullest potential. When the deacons support the pastor, God is able to move in a great and mighty way.

The first deacons can be found in Acts 6:1-7 (KJV) in which it states: "¹ And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. ² Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples *unto them*, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. ³ Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. ⁴ But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. ⁵ And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: ⁶ Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid *their* hands on them.

⁷ And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.”

These men were called of God to serve Him with dedication and commitment to His leading. Acts 6 describes that they are to be, “men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom”, to be appointed to carry out the task of serving the church. Sometimes men are chosen that do not meet the most important requirement of being filled with the Holy Spirit. This is a crucial requirement in serving as a deacon. For without the presence of the Holy Spirit, it is difficult to serve faithfully in the office of deacon. The leading of the Spirit brings the deacon to action and empowers him with wisdom for dealing with difficult situations. Unfortunately, there have always been negative examples of men who failed in their calling to serve the Lord. These examples seem to stand out in society and in our minds more strongly than those who serve faithfully. I believe there are far more Godly, faithful, obedient deacons that serve without recognition or attention. For the purposes of this article, I would like to share a firsthand account of my experience with Godly deacons.

My first encounter with a deacon began in my home. My father and grandfather served as deacons. My grandfather, J C Kidd served for over 15 years as deacon of the Eastside Baptist Church of Dover, Florida. The church has since changed their location and name to the Countryside Baptist Church of Dover, Florida. He served faithfully as deacon until his death in 1995. People that knew him still tell fond stories of his influence on their lives. I know that his commitment and dedication to the Lord helped to make this preacher who I am today. He desired to grow in his service to the Lord, and would not make any move in service without a clear voice from the Lord. Preachers that heard him pray before the offering was collected still reflect on how sincere the prayers were offered. One former pastor once commented, “That it was as if he was alone in the room with God, and the two were just having a conversation”.

The next Godly deacon I would like to share with you about is my father, Joel Kidd. He has served at the Countryside Baptist Church of Dover for over 40 years as deacon. The first deacons waited on tables and cared for widows, but the tasks given to the modern deacon stretches far beyond those confinements. I can remember many occasions that my father has been called upon to respond to a need in the church. He has done everything from preach the Word to lawn care of the church grounds. His willingness to do whatever needs to be done also has influenced my view of ministry. Some may believe that a task or duty is somehow beneath their stature as deacon. My father serves with such a commitment to the Lord that everything is done for His glory. This means that each task no matter how small is done as unto the Lord. There have been many long nights I have seen my father deep in prayer about an issue or need in the church. He would pray till the answer came to him from the Lord.

I would also like to share about Brother Butch Goodson. Brother Butch also served at Countryside Baptist for many years. He was already serving as a deacon when I was in High School. I can remember that during a revival in the late 1980's, Brother Butch stepped to the altar and admitted that he was lost and needed to accept Christ. He later expressed that he was hesitant about going forward because of what others might think about him. He was already an ordained deacon, but had never had full assurance of his Salvation.

Some people may ask the question as to how could a man that does not have a personal relationship with the Lord become a deacon. The answer is in many respects a tough one. For you see, you can go through the motions of church leadership and commitment and still not have a personal relationship with Christ. I was born into a deacon family. I was faithful to church because my father made sure we were in church every time the doors were opened. I fell under conviction of my need for Salvation in April 1989. I knew that because of the courage of Brother Butch, this

deacon's kid could be saved without fear of the thoughts of others. Brother Butch is a man of large stature. I saw his courage and it helped give me that strength I needed to give my life to Christ. After he gave his life to Christ, he continues to serve with humility and dedication to the service of the Lord. He uses his voice to praise the Lord and his actions to glorify His Savior.

The ministry of yet another deacon has impacted my life. This deacon is Brother Eddie Mercer. This is yet another deacon from Eastside Baptist Church of Dover, Florida. Bro. Eddie was another deacon I watched while I was growing up. His dedication to service was great, and his love for the Lord is contagious to this day. The period I would like to address came in a dark moment in the life of Brother Eddie and his wife Darlene and their family. Their youngest child, and only son, Brett was diagnosed with Leukemia. The church rallied around this family and prayed that the Lord would heal Brett. He made some measured improvements, but unfortunately passed away from the disease. During this heart breaking period, there were a lot of eyes on Brother Eddie and his family to see how they would respond to such a tragedy. To the wonderful amazement of those watching, we saw a family drawn closer together to each other and to the Lord. As I watched them, I learned how to respond to challenges in life. That way is to draw closer to the one that can lift you up when you need it most. They had every opportunity to blame God outwardly, but chose to praise God for His awesome presence.

Another Godly deacon I would like to remember is Mickey Battles of Memphis Baptist Church in Dothan, Alabama. My first encounter with this brother was in the fall of 1996. I was a young ministerial student at the Baptist College of Florida at the time and a long way from home. This deacon, and his precious wife Shelby, took me into their home as one of their family. I was in my early twenties and did not know anyone in Dothan, but they demonstrated great love and acceptance to someone they had never met before. They opened the door to their home and helped

to meet any need I had. Every Sunday after church I would always be invited to share a meal with them in their home. Please keep in mind that I was a struggling college student living off of Hamburger Helper and Beany Weenies. Anytime a home cooked meal was offered, it was a welcomed distraction.

They were also great council to me and encouraged me in my early years of ministry. The first week after we first met, I was on my way to preach and the drive shaft on my 4x4 truck broke in front of their home. I had only just discovered where their home was. I used the front tires to pull my crippled truck into their yard and approached their front door. I knocked and was greeted by Brother Mickey. I explained what had happened to my truck and that I was on my way to preach. He excused himself from the door and returned with a set of keys to his personal truck. Without hesitation, he handed me his keys and said for me to give my keys to him. He said that his truck was full of gas, and to drive his truck until he could have mine repaired. This is just one example of the compassion he had on this preacher at my time of need. This is not an isolated incident.

In 1993, I surrendered to fulltime Christian service and was licensed to preach the Gospel. I attended college and hold a Bachelors of Arts Degree in Theology from the Baptist College of Florida. There have been so many positive influences in my life. I have godly parents, grandparents and extended family. I married Allison Taylor Kidd in 2001. She is the love of my life and my partner in ministry. She is the one that is by my side in caring for those in need. She is sensitive to the leading of the Spirit in reaching out to those who are hurting. I am so thankful to God for bringing the two of us together.

We currently serve at the New Home Baptist Church in Lakeland Florida. In my current place of service we have seven deacons. When I first arrived at New Home Baptist Church, we only had three active deacons, and one of them was gravely ill. The other two men Rick Bibby and John Kitchens, were doing all

they could to minister to the needs of the church. The church had suffered a great and tragic loss when their pastor Reverend C.W. McClelland passed away while serving as their pastor. The church was without a fulltime pastor for two and a half years before we came. The late Reverend Edwin Holton had served as interim pastor during this period. The need for these deacons to minister to New Home was challenging, but they both excelled in their commitment to caring for the church body. The church endured and today is growing and ministering to the needs of the community.

Today, New Home has elected 5 new men to the office of deacon with great enthusiasm and expectation to see what the Lord is going to do through them. We also have a Yokemen Ministry as a support group for the deacons. This is a group of men that may not meet the biblical requirements of a deacon, but serve as assistants to the deacons. We require prospective deacons to serve as Yokemen for a period of at least one year. This is a period of evaluation and growth for the prospective deacon. It also allows the prospective deacon to learn the heavy burden that comes with the calling.

I believe that some see the office of deacon as a badge of authority. They wield their influence to run the church or to control the preacher. The Lord never intended the office of deacon to be a place of honor, but a place of service. These men serve to bring joy to their Lord and honor to His name. I have seen deacons give up long hours to care for the sick, to visit the bedridden, and to bring comfort to the dying and bereaved. This is the goal of the true deacon. The deacon that is true to his calling will do their very best to live up to the original calling in Acts chapter 6 verse 6 and following which says, “⁶ Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid *their* hands on them. ⁷ And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.”

Throughout all my years I have seen great men serve the office of deacon. There are many, many more that are not listed in this article. Many of the acts of service that they have demonstrated over the many years will only be known in Heaven. Behind each of these men is a dedicated wife that sacrifices, and supports her husband. Without these loving and supportive wives, serving the office of deacon would be a greater challenge. I am convinced that I have been blessed and impacted by having such great men in my life. They have been God's hands and feet in my life. They have demonstrated the greatest need a person can have apart from knowing Christ, and that is to feel the love of Christ through his servants. I thank God for Godly deacons and their impact on the Kingdom of God. If you have the honor of the calling of deacon upon your life, please remember that we need you to allow the love of God to shine through you brightly. And never forget that some young preacher may be watching you. But always remember the blessings that come from obedience to the calling and the appointment to the office of Deacon.

PHILIP THE DEACON

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Acts contains Luke's account of the realization of the kingdom of God.¹ Conflict accompanied the spread of the gospel, but the gospel spread unhindered (28:31). Though much of the conflict came from external sources, the disciples themselves provided plenty of internal struggles. The earliest of these internal conflicts revolved around the exercise of righteousness for the purpose of being seen by man (Acts 5:1-16). The second revolved around the exercise of righteousness and cultural/social prejudices (Acts 6:1-7). Both conflicts ended with statements that the word of God spread and more and more people became disciples. How did the early church overcome these human obstacles so that the kingdom of God continued to be realized among men? Philip, and men like him, constitute a major contributing factor to the gospel's growth.

Of course, the true reason why the gospel spread was the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:7-8 Luke recorded Jesus' words that believers are empowered by the coming of the Holy Spirit. The result of this for the believer is not primarily miracles and jailbreaks, but witnessing (in terms of both lifestyle and the spoken word). Interestingly, the "table waiters" (deacons) selected in Acts 6 were to have the reputation² of being full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Notice that common, lowly servants were not so common as to be below high spiritual character. Many agree that "clergy" need to possess high spiritual character. Many also believe that the average layperson serving in the church, not having the high call to "the gospel ministry," need not be held to such high standards. However, when the church was affected adversely by common

human frailty,³ the solution was to elect Spirit-filled, wise men to serve on the "committee." This group of seven is the forerunner and example for deacons today, and should be also for all committees in churches today. Because they understood and applied (the wisdom requirement) spiritual principles (the "Spirit-filled" requirement) to a common, everyday situation and need, they led the church through self-inflicted hardship and the gospel continued to spread unhindered.

Among the seven elected to service in Acts 6 was Philip. He is mentioned in only three chapters in the book of Acts, but what an impact he had for the kingdom, and what an example he set for the deacons of the Church of all ages.

Philip in Jerusalem

The first mention of Philip is in 6:5. Judea was teeming with religious "workers." There were about twenty thousand priests, along with several thousand Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and others concerned with maintaining the institutions, traditions,⁴ special days, ceremonies, and purity from the perceived filth of the sinners and Gentiles. It was in this social context that Jesus proclaimed that the people themselves were like sheep that were tattered and scattered, a field ripe for harvest, but not having shepherds or harvesters.⁵ Few cared for the people as people.⁶ In Acts 6, this attitude seemed to be developing among Christ's disciples. What would they do? The answer: appoint men full of the Spirit and wisdom to serve *the people*.

From the universal perspective of "the ends of the earth," there were many more Hellenistic Jews and Gentiles than there were Judean Jews. Though we are not sure of the passage of time between Acts chapters 5 and 6, some time seems to have passed. Beginning in 6:1, Luke introduces a new group of believers – the Hellenistic Jews. Later, in 8:4, the reader is introduced to another group of believers – the Samaritans, who were (in the eyes of the Judean Jews) half-breeds, claiming to be descendants of Israel, but not truly Jewish. In Acts 10, the reader is introduced to the first explicitly named "Gentile" believer, Cornelius.⁷

As the gospel spread, the Judean Jewish believers became more and more of a minority. However, in the beginning stages of the gospel's spread to the ends of the earth, the Judean Jews, including the Apostles,⁸ had difficulty realizing that God is not a respecter of people. The Hellenized Jewish believers understood this much sooner. The Apostles loved people, but they had been steeped in "Jewish" traditions so much that they were slower in embracing humanity rather than a tradition. Some Hellenistic Jews were not as steeped in this Jewish exclusiveness.

The Apostles, recognizing this issue, recommended that the congregation select seven men to deacon the people.⁹ We cannot determine if all seven men were Hellenistic in personal culture,¹⁰ but they all had Greek names, so they most likely were. Notice that the key was not one issue – their culture or their relationship to God – it was both of them together.

Along with the other six, Philip possessed certain qualities that enabled him to see, have compassion for, and care for *people*, rather than an institution. First, he was not merely a believer, he was a true disciple. This is evident in that the people's testimony about him was a qualification for the office, not his personal testimony about his beliefs. The verb is passive, not active. It was not that Philip *had* a good reputation, but that others were "witnessing" about him. The Apostles did not say to ask who would confess faith in Jesus, but to seek out those whose lives conformed to Christ so much that others held them up as an example of discipleship.

Second, Philip was not merely knowledgeable of Scripture or God, he was truly spiritual. What did the people tell about Philip when they talked about him? They said that he did not merely possess the Spirit; he was filled up with the Spirit. The term refers to having an abundance of something. He did not have a smidgen, he did not have half a tank, he was filled to the brim with the Spirit! The idea is that Philip did not look at, or make decisions about, life and people from a human perspective, but a heavenly one.¹¹ He walked in the Spirit, and the congregation identified him as one full of the Spirit.

Third, Philip was not merely a hearer of the word, he was a doer of the word. Wisdom is not merely knowing what is right (this could also be labeled as knowledge), wisdom is also being able to apply what one knows to everyday life. It is not merely knowing something, but doing it. Philip did not just think spiritually, he lived spiritually. Spirituality is not merely receiving ability from the Spirit, but seeking and being submissive to the Spirit. When one does this, everything about him/her becomes spiritual. James discussed this type of wisdom in his letter. Philip exhibited it.

When these three qualities come together in an individual, you have someone who can truly deacon people. These traits qualified Philip for the high call of serving others. To realize how high of a position this is, simply think of your attitude toward your waiter when you go to a restaurant. Are you there to make their workday more pleasant, or for them to simply take care of you, regardless? Before Philip preached and won souls on a grand scale, he was a simple servant of the people, enabling the Apostles to tend to the ministry of the word. Jesus said, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much..."¹²

Philip in Samaria

The second appearance of Philip is in Acts 8:4-13. After a great persecution of the church in Jerusalem began, many believers left the city, save for the Apostles. Philip went to Samaria and began preaching to a people who would generally be considered his enemies – the Samaritans. While there, Philip encountered a magician, Simon Magus. Simon had developed a significant following, yet Luke portrays the power of the Spirit working through Philip as vastly superior. In fact, Simon recognized the greater power at work in and through Philip and wanted it for himself.

In this episode, Philip does not appear in a role generally considered as that of a deacon – traveling throughout Samaria preaching the word and baptizing new believers. The term "deacon" is used several times to refer to work not usually thought of as deaconing today.

In Acts 6:4, the Apostles used the term to refer to their gospel ministry: "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the 'deaconship' of the word."¹³ Previously in Acts this deaconship of the Twelve was depicted as preaching the gospel publically and teaching disciples. In 1 Timothy 1:12, Paul also used the term "deacon" to refer to his ministry. This is perhaps why Paul was willing to suffer so much in order to help take the gospel to the ends of the earth – his calling to the gospel ministry was a calling to serve, not be served. Thus, the ministry of the word is a deaconship. It is service.

Whereas in Jerusalem Philip served others with physical care, in Samaria he served others with spiritual care through the word. To understand how magnanimous Philip's service was we must remember the history and culture of the Jews and Samaritans.

The Samaritans descended from the same tribes of Israel as the Jews. The differentiation began shortly after the separation of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel. The southern Israelites became known as Judeans. The northern Israelites became known as Samaritans. The peoples were originally alienated because of politics.

The effects of the Assyrian and Babylonia captivities greatly devastated the Israelite population in Palestine. During this time, the bloodlines and religious identities of those remaining in Samaria were compromised significantly by the arrival of expatriates from other regions. Many of the Judeans returning after Babylonian captivity considered the Samaritans to be Gentiles.¹⁴ From that time, the "Samaritans" sought to frustrate the efforts of the Judeans. Through the years they became more alienated from one another due to ethnic, religious, and cultural factors. By New Testament times, Jews and Samaritans despised each other and had as little to do with each other as possible.¹⁵

Though Philip was compelled to leave Jerusalem because of the persecution against the Jerusalem church, he did not have to go to Samaria. The text does not state the reason why Philip went there. He could have been directed by the Spirit or chosen to

go of his own accord. Despite the animosity between the Jews and Samaritans, Philip chose to deacon them with the word in the same Spirit as he deaconed the Hellenistic widows in Jerusalem.

The Spirit's role is clearly depicted by portraying Philip as a traditional prophet. Performance of signs and wonders was traditionally viewed as a mark of a prophet.¹⁶ In 8:4-5, Philip preached the word of the Christ to the Samaritans accompanied by exorcisms and healings. The combination of preaching and miraculous signs caused many to accept Philip's testimony of Christ.

So strong was Philip's service that Simon Magos, a practitioner of sorcery, associated himself closely with Philip. However, whereas Simon's profession in Christ was driven by his desire for signs and power, Philip used signs and power to profess the redeeming message of Christ.¹⁷ Whereas the Samaritans had been flabbergasted by Simon's power, Simon was flabbergasted¹⁸ by Philip's power. Notice, though, that Simon used his "power" so people would follow him while Philip used his "power" so people would follow Christ. People paid attention to Simon because he flabbergasted them. They believed Philip because of his message. This is one of Luke's points.

Philip's deaconship was that he used signs and power to proclaim the word. Simon used words merely to proclaim his signs and power. The people marveled at Simon's power, but were not helped. They were delivered because of Philip's deaconship of the word.

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

The third appearance of Philip is in Acts 8:25-39. In this episode, Philip is led by the Spirit, through an angel, to an encounter with another person on the fringes of Judaism, an Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch of Acts 8 was either a diaspora Jew (a Jew who lived outside the land of Israel), or he was an Ethiopian proselyte to "Judaism" (an African convert to Judaism). There is no consensus on this, and Luke does not clarify the issue. The first explicit "Gentile" convert is not mentioned until chapter

10. Thus, most commentators view the current episode as part of Luke's narrative movement of the kingdom beginning in Jerusalem and extending to the ends of the earth.¹⁹

The ethnicity of the eunuch is not Luke's point. Even as a proselyte, he would be a "Jew." However, because of his physical deformity (being a eunuch) he would be prohibited from entering the temple and worshipping God. In other words, he was unclean, unacceptable, and excluded from the assembly of God's people.²⁰ He came to Jerusalem to worship God, but would not have been allowed in the temple because of his uncleanness. Interestingly, contained in the very scroll he was reading was God's hope for the unacceptable (Isa. 56:3-8).

Again we see Philip's sensitivity and obedience to the leading of the Spirit when he went to the chariot. He heard the Ethiopian reading from Isaiah 53 about the sufferings of God's servant. We see Philip's deacon spirit when the eunuch indicated that he could not understand without a guide. When the eunuch invited Philip to join him and explain the passage, Philip, as in Jerusalem and Samaria, was a deacon and served the Ethiopian by serving Jesus to him.

The Ethiopian's question of Philip is telling: "Here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" (8:36) Being in a desert area, water was scarce. That might have been a polite excuse for why a righteous Jew would not baptize and include a eunuch in God's assembly. Since there happened to be water nearby, that was no excuse in this case. The eunuch was probably going home dejected because he went to Jerusalem to worship in/with the assembly (the temple), but was excluded. Would his physical deformity exclude him from the church (*ekklesia* = assembly) of Christ as well?

In Philip's typical deacon style, he invited the eunuch to not only join him in the water, but in the church as well. Baptism was a ceremony of initiation into the community of God's people. By baptizing the eunuch, Philip did not merely indicate he was acceptable to God, but that he was acceptable to the assembly.

Whereas the eunuch had been described previously as simply returning home, after Philip served him he went home rejoicing. In *Luke* and *Acts*, joy is a sign of the gospel and the Holy Spirit.²¹

We know nothing more about the Ethiopian. Irenaeus believed he went back to Ethiopia and evangelized.

Philip's Later Activities and Family

We know little else about Philip. After he baptized the Eunuch he was carried away by the Spirit (Acts 8:39-40). Some say he was raptured (caught up), as in 1 Thess. 4:17. The term is related to the one used in 1 Thess., but not exactly the same. The word used in Acts 8 referred to being carried off, or drug away, as an animal does with captured prey. The emphasis is that Philip was compelled by the Spirit to go elsewhere.

As in every appearance of Philip, he was sensitive and obedient to the leadership of the Spirit. That leadership always led him to serve others, regardless of who they were or what others thought of them. They were acceptable to God, and that was good enough for Philip. He went to Azotus, a town east of Jerusalem near the coast, and deaconed the word from there, through Samaria, and into Galilee.

In Acts 21:8-9, we see Philip for the last time. He lived in Caesarea. Paul, after his third missionary tour, on the way to Jerusalem, stayed with Philip for several days. By that time Philip was known as the Evangelist. As he had deaconed previously to people on the fringes, he now ministered to Paul. Philip married and had four daughters who were prophetesses. According to church tradition, Philip moved to Hierapolis, which is near Colosse and Laodicea, about a hundred miles due east of Ephesus.

Closing Thoughts about Philip

Though Philip occupies little of the biblical narrative, he was a key figure in the realization of the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. Because of his willingness to deacon/serve anyone and everyone – not just physically, but spiritually as well – he

helped the gospel message transcend its Jewish confines. He also helped maintain the unity of the fellowship of disciples. The Holy Spirit gave him the guidance and power to overcome any frail, human prejudices (being full of the Spirit). His willingness to seek, be obedient to, and exercise the Spirit's leading (wisdom) brought about life-changing ministry. We should look for and select those who have this kind of reputation to be our servants and leaders today. This will not only enable the Church to continue to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth effectively, but maintain unity and include everyone in the fellowship as well. I am convinced the Spirit is as willing to move and work in the Church today as He did yesterday.

Endnotes

- ¹ "Realization of the kingdom of God" refers to the spread of the gospel, "...In Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8, NIV). This was the result of the power of the Holy Spirit. (cf. Lk. 4:43; Acts 28:23, 31)
- ² The term "good reputation" (v. 3: HCSB, ESV, NASB) has to do more with what others said about them, rather than about their moral character. Men about whom others testified that they were full of the Holy Spirit and full of wisdom were to be selected.
- ³ The cultural prejudice of the Judean Jews on the "benevolence committee" neglecting the needs of the Hellenistic Jews (6:1-2).
- ⁴ Cf., Mt. 15:2-3, 6; Mk. 7:1-13; Gal. 1:14; Col. 2:8.
- ⁵ Cf., Mt. 9:36-38.
- ⁶ Frank Stagg, *Book of Acts* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1955), pp. 89-90.
- ⁷ 10:45-11:18.
- ⁸ Note Peter's later confession of this is, Acts 10:14, 28, 34-35.
- ⁹ Note that the term "deacon" is a verb ("to serve" or "to take care of"), not a noun. The term describes action, not an office.
- ¹⁰ The name "Philip" was of Diasporan origin, but had become a common Palestinian name by the 1st century AD. Margaret Williams, "Palestinian Jewish Personal Names in Acts." Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, vol. 4, Palestinian Setting (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Paternoster

Press, 1995), p. 112.

¹¹ Cf., Mt. 16:23; Rom. 8:5; 1 Cor. 2:14; 13:11.

¹² Luke 16:10.

¹³ "Deacon" is translated as "ministry" in many translations.

¹⁴ Cf., Ezra 4:1-4.

¹⁵ Cf., John. 4:9.

¹⁶ Cf., Deut. 13:1-2; John 3:1-2.

¹⁷ David S. Dockery, 1990. "Acts 6-12 : the Christian mission beyond Jerusalem." *Review & Expositor* 87, no. 3: 423-437.

¹⁸ The term translated "amazed" (ESV, NIV), "astonished" (NIV), or "astounded" (HCSB) in Acts 8:9, 11, 13, in this context, referred to a state of mind in which could not explain or comprehend what had happened.

¹⁹ Ethiopia, an African country south of Egypt, was generally considered to be at or beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, and thus, at the ends of the earth.

²⁰ Lev. 21:20; 22:24; Deut. 23:1.

²¹ Lk. 2:10; 8:13. Cf., Isa. 51:11; 55:12; Rom. 14:17.

DEACONS AND PEOPLE-HELPING MINISTRIES

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Concerning a Deacon's counseling experience, I am so humbled and thankful to be able to reflect on my experience (about 45 years) from a reading, teaching, professional practice, church staff, and church-involvement point-of-view. But these thoughts also are an opportunity to give thanks to the influence of long-time deacons in my "growin-up church," men such as Preston Rehak, Colley Burns (no relation), Leo Burns (no relation), and especially my Dad, Harold C. Burns who served as a Deacon from the inception of First Baptist Church, Boling, Texas in 1949 until he was disabled by heart problems in 1972. These Godly men and my Dad, of course, served as Godly models and mentors in my spiritual development. They also "stood in the gap" to keep a small-town Baptist Church functioning so there would be a consistent place for a boy to go to church, to be discipled, and to have a chance for beginning attempts in church leadership. These men served as deacons, husbands, and fathers without a major word of dishonor or accusation from pastors, their congregations, or the communities from their ordinations to their passing on to their reward. They deserve their ample rewards in Heaven.

Deacon People Helpers— Who They Are!

When I was a boy, periodically I had migraine headaches. My brothers knew that if I dropped my books when getting off the afternoon bus and ran to the house, I was likely to be so afflicted. At that point, I would have two overwhelming motivations-- get

to bed and away from all the head-splitting sounds and get to my MOMMA!

My mother was very important because she had some mother's tricks to resolve some of the pain, although the very good local doctor had said, "Grin and bear it; there is no medicine to take for that." But MUCH more importantly, she brought a mother's caring presence and touch.

I can tell all of you that a mature, loving, relating presence in amid all pain, whether physical or mental, is a very powerful healing medicine. For example, I tell my Pastoral Counseling classes that 90% of any effective ministry for people problems is just that – GODLY PRESENCE! The scripture instructs us to "comfort yourselves together" (1 Thessalonians 5:11), and, especially for the struggling, we are to 'comfort him, lest perhaps such a one would be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow' (2 Corinthians 2:7). DEACONS CAN DO THAT!

From time to time in my rearing years, I have been amazed at what my Dad would ask us to do and assume that we could do it. On most summer days, my Mom and Dad would "hatch" the farm responsibilities before we got up and before he left for his other job. Mom then would be the foreman-announcer. On one occasion, it was time to get the corn "in" and my oldest brother had gotten an outside job. That left two of us of working age – one to drive the tractor and one to pick the corn. So Mom told this boy of 10, you will drive the tractor; Bubba (yep, we had one) will pick. Now previously, I had guided the tractor only with others in the seat and with limited moments alone. My first unofficial but exceeding loud thought was this: ME?!

Such a reaction is not new to most of us and certainly not new in the Biblical expositions of man's response to God's assignments. Who else said "ME?" Well, there's Moses who said, "I can't talk" (Exodus 4 10-13). Then there's Abraham who laughed at the idea of having a child at an old age. (Gen 17:17) There's Jonah, who said not me! (Jonah 1:1-2). There's Isaiah, who said,

"I am a man of unclean lips." (Isaiah 6:5) Hold on; I am not equipped; many Deacons will say! My response after 40 years of counseling and 36 years in the counseling-equipping ministry is this: yes you all have the essentials, if you have the scriptural qualifications for "deaconing," expressed in Acts 6:3: being "full of the Holy Spirit", being "of honest report", and being "full of wisdom". Not yet convinced? Here are the basic tasks of the counselor:

1. Being motivated to help. Certainly that is a Holy Spirit availability. 2 Corinthians 3:6 says, "He has made us ministers." Will that ministry be powerful? We are strengthened with might by the Holy Spirit...(Ephesians 3:16)
2. Will folks come to us? Will they receive us when we go? The answer is yes because deacons should already have an "honest report." (Acts 6:3)
3. Will we have the right things to say? When we have the Holy Spirit, He "guides us into all truth" (John 16:13)
4. Will we know what to say? The Holy Spirit will bring "all things to your remembrance." (John 14:26)
5. Will they listen? The wisdom from God that you have is "easily intreated" (James 3:17)

So the Scripture declares us to have the essentials! But is there more to be done, especially in my readiness?

1. We must meditate on the Scripture so that others may know they will profit from our words. (1 Timothy 4:15)
2. We must study so as not to feel unprepared and embarrassed. (2 Timothy 2:15)
3. We must meditate on the scriptures so that our words will be useful for answers. (Hebrews 5:14)

Yes, we have all the essentials for duty, but growth and readiness is up to us.

The Deacon-Helper and his "Laying Up!"

The people helping business is many ways like the farmer preparing for a successful next year; he has to "lay up" things like corn for feed in the silo, seed for the planting, hay in the barn, and meat in the freezer. The following are important for deacon-helpers to "lay up" in "full measure" before entering into the people-helping business. I will be using the main deacon qualifications as listed in Acts 6:3 to organize these thoughts.

He must be of good report. (Acts 6:3) It is my observation that hurting people will not go to those who may hurt them. Furthermore they will not tell their story to those not "trustable" for honesty and confidentiality. So deacons must have a good record of honesty, integrity, and in their business and vocation to get a hearing audience. Family and marriage must be a good model before the community.

Deacons must be working on the characteristic graces as listed in Galatians 5:22 so that folks can see that they are working on Holy Spirit fullness. (Acts 6:3) Such characteristics must be gained by long-term study and practice. Of course, daily devotionals and prayer are a fundamental part of that growth.

Deacon-Helpers must Lay Up JOY

Few persons are going to share their hurts, feelings, and problems with those that are unhappy. Why so? What story does unhappiness tell?

1. That they are weak in character and belief for "the joy of the Lord is our strength." (Nehemiah 8:10)
2. That they do not really like God's revelation, especially the Scriptures (Jeremiah 15:16)
3. That they have distress in getting through hard times (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

So to have that necessary "soul" strength to be people-helpers, and so that they see us stable in character and belief, we must build our joy!

Deacon-Helpers must Lay up PEACE!

From the following descriptions of persons, which do you think that people prefer as people helpers? (Assume they are the same age, have the same credentials, and give evidence of good practice capabilities.) The first is the perfectly groomed person whose office is perfectly organized with the best furniture. This person may act as though their life has been untroubled and perfect. The second is the person who by his appearance gives evidence of having been through troublings and has been “marked” by them. The answer of course, is that people talk more easily to those to whom they relate, to those who have encountered tribulation and have gotten through them. They want to know they are “overcomers” and have learned to be at peace. (John 16:33)

Deacon-Helpers Must Lay Up LONGSUFFERING

When distressed people are telling “their story,” they will be very sensitive to the receptive ear of the listener, even expecting that the listener will react with disapproval and condemnation. They will want to know that, in this very personal and delicate time, the listener will respect and love them through whatever they may say. So people-helpers have to be patient in their hearing of problems. That is, they need to be longsuffering.

Deacon Helpers Must Lay Up GENTLENESS

On the occasion of having a festering splinter as a child, you probably went to your Mother for treatment, having had many experiences with what most Mothers have – gentleness. It may be good to treat a burdened person as being “soul festered;” that is; they are greatly sensitive about every relationship contact. The Holy Spirit gives such gentleness. (Gal 5:22)

Deacon-Helpers Must Lay Up GOODNESS

When folks “mess up” or when they fall victim of a

distressing circumstance, they may feel in a very “soul depleted” state. In such depleted circumstances, persons are likely to want to fill the soul-hunger. It is this hunger that the people helper supplies in his patient, hearing encounter.

Deacon-Helpers Must Lay Up FAITH

One of the first goals of counseling is to open a window of hope, especially in laying out a planned vision for overcoming the problem. It will take a lot of faith victory practice for the people-helper to belief that God can win in some of the very distressing and tragic circumstances that they will encounter. This faith belief must be passed on to the sufferer.

Deacon-Helpers Must Lay Up MEEKNESS

Hurting people choose their relationship encounters very carefully, for both good and bad reasons. On the bad side, they may look for others who will excuse their immature or wrong behaviors. On the good side they may look for examples and mentors of self-improvement. The meek person, the person of quiet strength, often is a person of great focus. People not only watch them, but they go to them when in trouble.

Deacon-Helpers Must Lay Up TEMPERANCE

People are drawn to those who will “weep with them,” “rejoice with them,” and will not “curse them.” (Rom 12:14-15) In counseling, this gift is called empathy and is one of the central descriptors of good counselors.

Deacon-Helpers Must Sign Up – Duty Calls!

American “duty jobs,” some of which are fireman, law enforcement, and our military are mostly filled by volunteers. Perhaps because there is no general call to these, we as a population may have lost our connection to a sense of “call of duty.” We have come to depend upon hired public servants to accomplish many

things that have previously done by the church. Even at church, many people see the pastor and staff as those to do the work of the church.

There are of course, many deacons that disagree with that perception and are in agreement that the Deacon assignment is to free the Pastor for “prayer and the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:1-5). But many may have never thought nor have been taught that counseling may be part of that assignment and that it is their duty.

Counting the Cost

The Scriptures certify in Luke 14:28-30 that all persons should “count the cost” before choosing any ministry. Certainly that applies to any Deacon ministry including the ministry of people helping. But is there a special cost of being a problem healer? The answer may be, yes!

One cost may be the additional time involved in “hearing out” a problem, especially at its first presentation. Subsequent time may be spent in emotional support and in getting people to be accountable to their decisions. The Bible suggests that we be diligent in our brotherly kindness (2 Peter 1:5-7), and that we “put on” an abundance of long suffering (Col 3:12).

Perhaps you would say about Moses, Abraham, Isaiah, the apostles, “These are the big boys in the history of God’s kingdom; doesn’t the effect that they have when I read the scriptures leave little ole me ‘off the hook’?” Let’s see!

What would you say in the following scenario. You just entered the ER after hearing that a church member’s teen-age son had been tragically injured in an accident. Would you say, read about Abraham or Isaiah?

No; you would probably ask them to tell their story; how is he; how did it happen; what did the Doctor say? And then you would listen. The scriptures suggest that because you would be diligent in your brotherly kindness (2 Peter 1:5-7), and your

listening would be patient because “love suffers long” and love seeks the benefit of others (1 Cor. 13:3).

You would do this because you have counted the cost and believed the cost of missing some sleep is much less than a brother suffering alone, and that is what any ministry is all about – evaluating that the hurt or potential hurt is much more important than my inconveniences, fears, or my own hurts. It is this evaluation that led Jesus to come to earth and sacrifice himself for our loss. (Philippians 2:5-11)

Laying Aside

Every vocational journey, in fact, every goal-oriented activity requires that we consider the scriptures principle of “laying aside” as prescribed in Hebrews 12:1. These road blocks, or impediments, which so easily “beset us,” prevent us from fully engaging and “running the race” unhindered.

For the farmer, he must lay aside what is an 8-hour work day. For the mechanic in recent years, he must continually update himself on new, very-complicated engines and the use of computer analysis. If we must do this for every goal-oriented activity, then it follows that there must be things to lay aside in even a superficial counseling ministry. These are some that seem to be more solely applicable to counseling:

1. We must be down the road a good bit in dealing with our own personal issues. We will not be confident in helping others if we cannot help ourselves.
2. We need to be “confessed up.” People with problems blame everyone, including well-intentioned helpers. We must be free from personal guilt so that we can overlook these accusations and proceed with undisturbed, clear thinking.
3. We must lay aside judgment, (Matthew 7:1) and condemnation (Rom 8:1). People with problems make more life mistakes; they relapse. We must put on the grace of

God to lift them up again.

4. We must lay aside any doubt that our few words may not help.

5. We must lay aside any motivation to control a person's life, decisions, or morality. We must remember that the Holy Spirit is the only one to bring lasting change. (John 16:13)

Deacon People-Helpers: What They Do and How They Do It!

Regarding prayer life and a counselor's readiness, all Christian people -helpers must constantly take their counseling issues to the Lord to ask for wisdom. (James 1:5) Christian helpers go way up and beyond "the giving of advice and answers; we lead persons to have wisdom to solve their own problems. (Pro 13:16)

We must believe in the power of our ministry, for we will hear some very challenging problems. That power comes through multiple fulfilling experiences of calling on God. (Ps 91:15, Luke 11:9)

1. People-helpers must consider that those who pray are likely to be more caring, empathic, and giving. (Acts 10:2)
2. People-helpers must believe that praying people have the capability of helping their clients to prevent further difficulties (2 Corinthians 13:7, Acts 8:24)
3. They must believe that all possible progress is a result of prayer (James 5:16)
4. They must believe that prayer is directly involved in healing. (James 5:15)
5. They must believe that prayer and seeking God will give leadership and skills to find ways out of challenging situations. (Ezra 10:1-44)

What People-helpers say and do with the compassion needy.

The following suggestions have a philosophical foundation which, of course, I need to entail.

1. The counselor's job is to provide a supportive content by which the needy person works out his own problems. (Phil 2:12)
2. The Holy Spirit is the best counselor – the client must go to Him. (John 16:13)
3. The Scriptures are the best and sure word of solution – the client should go to them. (John 17:17)

Christian People-Helpers Listen

As I have said to my students so many times, the first task of counseling is to listen; the second is to listen; the third is to do #1. Most folks will solve their own problems if somebody listens patiently and actively. Active listening includes these:

1. Remaining in an attentive body position.
2. Finding ways to feedback that you are listening and understanding
3. Asking questions that connect and "fill in" the client's story.
4. Asking clients to balance their story with facts and feelings.
5. Wisely sharing a "clip" of your own story. (See more in "relating to the client")

It is even more important that counselors rely on listening and "presence" when ministering to those who have suffered loss, such as the loss of a loved one. That application is a reaction to death-loss, but such despairing felling could come as a result of divorce, a severe diagnosis (such as cancer), loss of children in custody battle, loss from fire, robbery, loss in disaster, or in moving.

Short prayer, appropriate short Bible reading, and "being there" delivers 90% of ministry amid the reaction to loss.

What to say in time of grief

Don't say these:

1. "I know what you're feeling" (or going through). First, you don't know what they are feeling and second, you have turned the focus to your story – that is deeply offensive.
2. "It could have been worse." In deep loss, folks consider that it could not be any worse. Voicing worse scenarios does not validate their feelings.
3. "It will get better soon." Remember to validate their point-of-view and feelings, not deny it.
4. "God took him home." It is better to say, "God welcomed him/her home"
5. Don't attempt an answer to the "why" questions. It is good to say "I don't know."
6. "I'll be here for you." Just be there!
7. "If there's anything I can do, let me know." Cooperate with others who are supervising grief ministry. Ask those who are acquainted with the needs: the mortician, the pastor, a supervising relative, or a ministering committee. Then do it.
8. "God will get you through this." Such a statement asks strength of faith when personal strength is depleted.

What to do and say in grief ministries:

1. Be sensitive to person choices and timings of grief emotions.
2. Make visits often but make them short, until a person wants to talk.
3. Do speak shortly of a deceased person's meaningfulness to you. Be careful about numerous memories.
4. Use the words, "I'm sorry...."
 - a. His/her death is a great loss."
 - b. This is news that really hurts"

c. About your great loss"

d. That you are having to go through this"

People-Helpers: What to do in problem treatment

1. Prompt them to tell their story: "would you like to share what's been happening?"
2. Hear their whole story patiently.
3. Wisely find a way to relate to their predicament, if possible. Most folks feel very guilty when they tell their story. It is very important that we help them find a place of unconditional acceptance-not of what they have done but their value in Christ.
4. Triage the intensity of the problem: If the problem cannot be handled with the techniques above, then refer the person to the pastor or a therapist. If you cannot handle the problem in four sessions, you probably need to refer. Contact your Pastor about referral.
5. Get them to read appropriate books. Your local Christian bookstore might have some suggestions.

Resources

Tim Clinton: *Biblical Counseling*

Tim Clinton: *Competent Christian Counseling*

Tim Clinton: *Caring for People God's Way*

The American Association of Christian Counselors: *The Bible for Hope*

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	\$56,500

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175 (1839)	75 (1939)
First, Jasper	Calvary, DeLand
	Cedar Creek, Jacksonville
150 (1864)	Hollyford, Jacksonville
First, Milligan	Immanuel, Fort Lauderdale
Kingsley Lake, Starke	Lakeview, Tallahassee
	Southside, Jacksonville
125 (1889)	Southside, Lake City
Bethel, Graceville	Warrington, Pensacola
First, Bradenton	
First Eau Gallie, Melbourne	50 (1964)
First, Jay	Berrydale, Jay
First, Oak Hill	Buckhead Ridge, Okeechobee
First, Punta Gorda	Calvary, Arcadia
First, Titusville	Dover Shores, Orlando
Lake Mystic, Bristol	Eastside, Punta Gorda
Leon Ebenezer, Tallahassee	Faith, Madison
Leonia, Westville	Farm Hill, Cantonment
Magnolia, Laurel Hill	First, Altamonte Springs
Pleasant Ridge, DeFuniak Springs	First Aurantia, Mims
	First, Fort Myers Beach
	First, Key Largo
100 (1914)	First, Lake Panasoffkee
Fellowship, Lake City	First, Lehigh Acres
First, Chiefland	First, Sanlando Springs,
First, Hilliard	Altamonte Springs
Greater Macedonia,	Haines Creek, Leesburg
Jacksonville	Holiday Hill, Jacksonville
Myakka City	Keene Terrace, Largo
Ona	King's, Vero Beach
Pedro, Summerfield	Lake Pierce, Lake Wales
Ridgewood, Orange Park	Lakeside, Lakeland
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25 (1989)

Bethel, Paxton
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