

Thoughts Upon Bellicose Church Deacons

by Bryan Purtle

What Is A Deacon?

The Greek word from which we derive “**deacon**” is *diakonos*, and it simply means “**servant**” or “**minister.**” It is used a great deal in the NT, most often in a general sense that applies to the calling of all Christians, but in 1 Tim. 3 and Philippians 1 it is used in reference to a specific leadership role in the local church.

Generally speaking, Jesus Himself is the supreme “deacon/servant”, and all believers are called to be “deacons/servants.” But there is an appointed leadership role known as deaconhood in the local church, distinct from the general definition, and its role is ordained by God as an example for the whole of His flock. It is meant to build up the Body in these ways:

1. To serve as an example of servanthood for the building up of the Body and its mission.
2. To tend to the practical needs of the Body in day to day life and mission on a local level.
3. To carry out service in various ways by the wisdom, grace and power of the Holy Spirit.
4. To support the elders in the work of serving and building up the Body, and to make room for the elders to devote themselves to prayer and the teaching and preaching of God’s Word.

All deacons will not serve in exactly the same way in terms of roles, but they all serve to the glory of God and the good of the church. It is definitive of their calling.

Acts 6 provides one of the clearest examples of men who served as deacons in the early Jerusalem church (though “deacon” is not used in noun form). They were men of the Spirit, appointed to help with the “**daily distribution**” of resources/money/food to the saints who were in need in the community (cf. Acts 4.35). This freed up the apostles/elders to give themselves “**to prayer and to the ministry of the word**”, “**And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.**”

We hold that both men and women may serve as deacons. Phoebe in Rom. 16.1 was a deaconess (the Greek *diakonos* is used here) at the church in Cenchrae, and served the saints faithfully. Paul charged the church to “**help her in whatever she may require of you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well.**”

Qualifications for Deacons

The qualifications for deacons are laid out in 1 Tim. 3.8-13 and Acts 6.3. In the Acts account, it was clear to the apostles that deacons should be men (and women by later implication) of “**good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom...**” They were men who had a good reputation among outsiders, and a godly reputation within the church. It was also evident that they were full of the Spirit and people of notable wisdom- joyful, empowered, and discerning servants. These qualifications are important, for though deacons do not govern the church in the same way elders do, they are in fact leaders, setting an example for the rest of the flock.

1 Tim. 3.8-13 gets more specific. Here are the qualifications laid out in the text:

1. They must be “**dignified**”
They must not be given to foolishness. There should be a note of seriousness and honor about the way they carry themselves, the way they regard God and His Word, and the way they treat the church.
2. “**Not double-tongued**”
They should be a people of the Word and a people of their word. They should hold fast to the Scriptures and live as servants who are joyfully submitted to the whole counsel of God. They should not say one thing and do another, but should keep their word “**even when it hurts.**” (Ps. 15.4)
3. “**Not addicted to much wine**”
There should be no trace of a pattern of drunkenness in their lives.

4. **“Not greedy for dishonest gain”**

They should not be driven by money, for **“you cannot serve both God and money.”** This would not only make them idolaters, but on a practical level, it would make it impossible for them to sacrificially serve the church in terms of priority and schedule.

5. **“They must hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.”**

They should know and treasure the Gospel, know and treasure God, and know and treasure His purposes as set forth in the Scriptures.

6. If male and married, they should be the **“husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.”**

They must be a one-woman-man (or by implication a one-man-woman), and they must discipline and nurture their children in a God-honoring way. Both married and single deacons should manage their **“own households well.”** They should have a track record of decency in the way they handle their finances, their homes (cleanliness and care), and of good hospitality.

Deacons should be **“tested first,”** then appointed if they **“prove themselves blameless.”**

Lastly, there is a promise given for deacons:

“For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.” -1 Tim. 3.13

A life of service as deacons establishes **“good standing”** for the one serving, confirming the fruit of the Spirit in his or her life before the Body of Christ. We should not serve just to obtain a reputation or to climb a “ministry ladder,” but we should desire to **“prove”** the will of God (Rom. 12), to magnify His worth, and to beautify His house, which is the Church.

As the character of the suffering Servant is displayed through deacons, one glorious benefit of their service is that they **“gain great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”** It increases one’s assurance that he/she belongs to Jesus, and strengthens confidence in the faith. On the foundation of the Gospel, by the power of the Spirit, deacons serve Jesus Christ in the ministry of mercy to the Church, and the result is an increase of their own joy and faith. And when the Chief Servant appears, a glorious crown awaits them. The role of a deacon is no small thing. It is an indispensable gift to the church. As the Lord Himself declared, **“The greatest among you shall be your servant.”** (Mt. 23.11) Deacons serve as an example of this reality.

Alongside elders/overseers, it can be said that those who wish to serve as deacons desire a **“noble thing.”** It is a crucial role for the upbuilding of the Body of Christ.