



“Responsibilities”

Acts 6:1-7

Idea: Deacons are leading servants in the church deputized to serve alongside the elders, executing their vision and freeing them up to shepherd the church.

Intro: It was a Sunday evening prayer service, and the senior pastor was spotlighting the ministry of a local crisis-pregnancy center. They had contacted the church, asking if there were any members who would be able to meet with a couple who had decided to keep their unborn baby. One of the deacons and his wife volunteered and met with Karla and her boyfriend several times. Karla and the deacon’s wife became very close. Unfortunately, the boyfriend excused himself from the situation. One of Karla’s greatest needs was wise counsel – like how in the world to raise a kid while working a job, arranging childcare, and attempting to stay sane. Amazingly, over the course of several months Karla’s heart warmed to Jesus Christ; she became a believer, was baptized, and became a member of the church. Of course, this enabled the deacon couple to connect her with even more brothers and sisters in the church. They got a front-row seat to watch Karla grow in her new faith. To be sure, none of this happened immediately. It was probably a full year from the time they first met with Karla to the moment she embraced Christ.

As one of the church’s deacons for practical member care, this deacon occasionally made a churchwide appeal for members to serve with them or consider donating resources to meet specific needs. After one such appeal, a member contacted the deacon to offer a car. Rather than trading or selling the car, he wanted to offer it to someone in need within the church. The deacon was able to connect Karla with the generous church member who had not yet met her. She was blessed to receive a good, working car for free.

The deacon and his wife were privileged to walk with Karla through some of her darkest days. It certainly was not a quick fix, and they did not do it alone. The deacon ran point as the leading servant, but the beautiful effort was churchwide. This story is one of many that Matt Smethurst shares in his book (*Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church*), highlighting the ministry of deacons.

Today, we continue with message #2 in a three-part series on deacons. As I mentioned last week, it is likely that your perspective on deacons in the church has largely been shaped by your experience with them. Experience, of course, is important and influential, but as believers who seek to live our lives and build our church on the foundation of God’s Word, it is imperative that we know and understand what the Bible says about deacons. For this reason, we are taking these Sundays to learn and better understand this office in the church. One of the reasons we are doing so is because this summer we are looking to restructure and redeploy our deacon ministry. We believe this change will enable our deacons to better care for our church by serving in

the areas of their passion and giftedness. Next Sunday evening, in a special called members' meeting, we will lay out for you what this change will encompass. In preparation for that meeting and in order for us to better understand this office, over these three Sundays, I am teaching on the roles, responsibilities, and requirements of these leading servants.

As we were reminded of last week, the New Testament lays out two offices of leadership in the local church. The first office is referred to as elders (πρεσβύτερος), overseers (ἐπίσκοπος), or pastors (ποιμήν). All three terms work together synonymously to describe the same office (Acts 20:17-28; 1 Pet 5:1-2). The second office is referred to as deacons (διάκονος). Together, they work to shepherd and care for the members of the church.

One of the first times we encounter the term διάκονος in the New Testament is in Acts 6. There the apostles found themselves on the verge of a crisis. The Hellenistic Jewish widows in the church were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The apostles told the church to select seven Godly men full of the Holy Spirit and appoint them to serve the needs of the widows. While the men chosen to meet this specific need did not hold the office of deacon at this point, it did foreshadow what would later become the office of deacons. As local churches grew and developed there became a need for official deacons to meet specific needs. They would function as models of spiritual virtue and service.

The two offices of the church described and prescribed in the New Testament are elders and deacons. As we try to understand how the leaders within the structure operate together, I believe a word picture brings clarity. Visualize the church as a group heading out on a journey. The elders decide where the church is going and cast the vision. The staff drives the bus that carries us all to the destination. And the deacons make sure we have enough gas to get to where we are going.

Today, we are building upon the roles we examined last week by looking at the responsibilities of these leading servants. We are going to use Acts 6 again as an early example of what the office would later become.

Read Acts 6:1-7.

Inquiry: In order to understand what is going on in Acts 6, it is important to know the backstory. At this point in the early days of the church, growth was explosive. It has not been long since the Day of Pentecost when 3,000 people were saved and added to the church (Acts 2:41). The church has continued to grow in the Word and prayer, which resulted in lost people being saved and added to the church each day (Acts 2:47). There have been a few bumps in the road too. Persecution has increased (Acts 4) and corruption within the church has emerged (Acts 5). Both bumps have been dealt with faithfully. Now, a new issue has arisen, which threatens the stability and testimony of the church. This new issue was different than the other two. It is equally as important, but the apostles handle it differently. They did not publicly denounce the issue like they had with Ananias and Sapphira. Neither did they stare down the widows like they did the high priest. This issue was a major and complex one. Therefore, it required a profound solution. Acts 6 is a story of church conflict handled well, and it has everything to do with seven men who *deaconed* well.

There were four observations we identified last Sunday. First, the selection of the seven prioritized preaching and teaching. It enabled the apostles to focus on their primary responsibility without the church suffering any loss in ministry. Second, the congregation was involved in the process. It was not a unilateral decision. They selected the seven and brought them to the apostles. Third, the type of character the seven needed was mandated. The church was to look for servants who had a good reputation, were full of the Holy Spirit, and possessed wisdom. Fourth, the selection of the seven to serve in conjunction with the apostles divided the labor. It spread out the work, fostering efficiency and ensuring each group could focus on their responsibilities.

From these four observations, it becomes apparent that the seven served two roles within the church. They were shock absorbers, muffling the shockwaves of ethnic and cultural differences that threatened the unity of the church. They did so by loving solutions more than drama and rising to respond to the needs of the Hellenist

widows. They did not just talk about the issue and how it needed to be fixed. They were problem solvers. They used wisdom to come up with a solution that met the need and brought unity to the church.

The selection of the seven and the solution they enacted resulted in further gospel advancement. Verse 7 tells us that the Word of God continued to increase and the church was multiplying. If the apostles had not recognized that the best thing to do in this situation was to delegate it to others, and if the church had not selected servants based on these certain criteria, then there would not have been this exponential growth in the advancement of the gospel. The church and the message would have stalled. This passage highlights for us the blessing and beautiful gift that deacons are to the church.

Let's again look closely at this passage. Building on these two roles, I want us to see three responsibilities of deacons. Again, I am borrowing these points from Matt Smethurst's book on deacon ministry.

1. Spot and Satisfy Tangible Needs

We are just a few weeks away from college football. Players will be reporting to camp soon, and the season will kick-off with every team vying for a spot in the playoffs. In preparation for the upcoming season, each conference will be holding their own version of media days. In these events, teams typically bring three or four of their star players to talk about the upcoming season and do interviews. Usually, the players brought to the event play skilled positions. They are quarterbacks, running backs, linebackers, and receivers. Occasionally, a team will bring an offensive lineman. Those poor ole big guys do not get the credit they deserve. If you know football, you know the most important players on the field are the linemen. Without them you will never have a star quarterback or running back. It is their blocking that enables the skilled positions to flourish.

Deacons are like a congregation's offensive linemen. Their job is to guard and advance the ministry of the Word, which is exactly what we see the seven doing in Acts 6. The inequitable distribution of food had stirred up a serious complaint and exposed a sensitive fault line in the church. The situation was urgent. Thankfully, the apostles possessed the conviction and wisdom to detect an even greater threat: shelving their primary responsibility of preaching and prayer. Tackling the short-term problem would only pave the way for long-term disaster. Putting the ministry of the Word on the back-burner in order to minister to the urgent would gut the very heart of the church. It is, after-all, the preaching of the gospel that the church is built upon not the meeting of tangible needs.

The apostles spotted the need and came up with a solution to satisfy it. This story from the early history of the church shows how important it is for deacons to spot and satisfy tangible needs in the church. Their ministry prevents elders from being distracted and derailed from their primary responsibilities. In saying this, we are not stating that deacons handle lesser things. All of it is important, it is just not primary for elders. Spotting and satisfying tangible needs are the primary responsibilities of diaconal work. Deacons have their eyes on the needs of the church, and they love to brainstorm solutions so that the ministry of the Word might flourish and the gospel advance.

As shock absorbers and problem solvers, deacons are responsible for spotting and satisfying tangible needs.

2. Protect and Promote Church Unity

The seven were tasked with protecting and promoting unity within the Jerusalem church. The fault-line was real and growing bigger. If the seven had not found a solution, the church would have split. They absorbed the shockwaves that were reverberating throughout the congregation.

The seven modeled the demeanor needed in deacons. These leading servants need humility, gentleness, flexibility, and possess conviction without being combative. They flesh out 1 Corinthians 13 in their lives. This “love” chapter is not a misplaced wedding sermon. Paul wrote it to make a divided church feel ashamed. Deacons protect and promote unity by working to help church members believe the best about one another, giving the benefit of the doubt, and being easy to please rather than easy to offend.

As shock absorbers and problem solvers, deacons are responsible for protecting and promoting church unity.

3. Serve and Support the Ministry of the Elders

God has built structure and purpose into every facet of His creation. Within the church, the Lord has embedded different layers of life-giving authority. King Jesus is the Shepherd of the church. He is the head. The elders serve as under-shepherds who exercise authority and care over the church. They serve at the pleasure of King Jesus. Deacons are formal assistants to the elders. They serve at the pleasure of the elders not because elders are ultimate, but because Jesus is. This structure is how Jesus has designed His church to function, and when it does so, there is health.

Acts 6 presents a clear distinction in roles and functions. Deacons, in other words, are not elders, and elders are not deacons. This distinction is even further portrayed in the structure of 1 Timothy 3. Paul’s description there suggests that deacons are paired with and subordinate to the elders they support. Therefore, the deacons are not a separate, autonomous body of officials disconnected from the body of overseers. Instead, what we see in 1 Timothy 3 is the *diakonoi* (deacons) assisting the *episkopoi* (overseers) by officially representing the overseers and standing ready to carry out tasks delegated by the overseers. It is as Matt Smethurst says, “The purpose of deacons is inseparably tied to the priority of elders.”

Illust: Years ago, in a different church, I was in a discussion with the deacons over roles and responsibilities. In this particular church, there was not a plurality of elders. The pastor was the only elder, and in reality, the deacons operated as pseudo-elders. One of the deacons disagreed with my position and understanding of deacons. This deacon stated that he “had been elected by the church to represent them.” He basically understood the deacons to be a ruling body positioned to check the authority of the pastor. In his understanding, deacons were a second chamber of government.

While this understanding may be the practice in some churches, it is not the description presented in the New Testament. Deacons are not chaperones to the elders. Instead, what we see is that godly deacons execute the vision and oversight of godly elders. The two offices work together for unity and the advancement of the gospel. The seven in Acts 6 assisted the apostles by relieving them of the burden of serving the widows.

As shock absorbers and problem solvers, deacons are responsible for serving and supporting the ministry of the elders.

What this looks like at Red Lane:

Deacons are mobilizers of ministry who lead our ministry teams.

For a number of years, the ministry of deacons has largely consisted of two things: family ministry and benevolence. In family ministry deacons have been assigned to individual small groups for the purpose of assisting the small group leader with the care of those members. In benevolence, deacons have collectively decided how and when to help members and non-members with financial needs. Our deacons have mobilized these areas of ministry and taken these burdens off the shoulders of the elders.

Going forward, we will expand this mobilization of ministry by placing deacons over ministry teams that serve the body. They will serve as the leading servant, recruiting and developing a team of servants under their leadership. We have several ministry teams (homeless, hospitality, audio/video, etc.). Under this new format, deacons will be released to serve and provide leadership in the areas of their giftedness and passion. They will serve over a specific ministry team or might have multiple teams under their umbrella of leadership.

Deacons will be launched out by the elders to meet the ministry needs of our congregation as needed. In the restructuring and redeployment, we will create two new teams to carry over the primary ministry that our deacons have been leading. Those two teams will be member care and benevolence. Some of our current deacons will serve on those teams. Others will head up other ministry teams in which they currently serve. We will then look to add leading servants to our roll who will lead the remaining teams. In all of this, our leadership and ministry base will be expanded, better serving the needs of our congregation.

Conclusion: Deacons are God's gift to the church. They spot and satisfy tangible needs. They protect and promote church unity. And they serve and support the ministry of the elders. As we restructure and redeploy the deacon ministry, this is how they will continue to bless our church.

Diaconal work is not reserved only for the deacons. In reality it is the calling of every Christ-follower. Peter says, *"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace"* (1 Pet 4:10). May we all use the gifts the Lord has given us to serve one another in the church. Use them to serve the Lord through the worship ministry, singing and playing instruments. Use them on our tech team. Use your gifts to make our church more hospital to guests by serving on our hospitality team. Allow God to use you through the teaching ministry in adults, students, or children. There are numerous ways to put your gifts to use at Red Lane. Are you serving? Where are you serving?

This passage ends with the number of disciples increasing. People were hearing the gospel, recognizing their sinfulness, and turning to Jesus in repentance and faith. There is a good chance that some here today need to do the same.

Good news: God loves you. He created you and desires to know you.

Bad news: You are a sinner in rebellion against your Creator.

Best news: God has done everything necessary to justly deal with your sin and bring forgiveness and restoration to your life. Today, He calls you to turn from your sin and self and turn to Him as Savior and Lord. Have you received forgiveness in Christ?