



“Roles”

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: “Deacon.” When you hear that title what thoughts come to your mind? Maybe you think of an older gentleman with a garage full of tools. He can fix just about anything, so he is usually found around the church campus working on something. Perhaps your thoughts are of a man who is good with numbers and has great business acumen. Others might picture a negative person who seems to only be able to say, “no” to things. This individual is usually at odds with the pastor and works as a veto to check the pastor’s influence. Possibly, you think only of a man, or there could be some who think of both men and women?

Today, we begin a three-part series on deacons. More than likely your perspective on deacons in the church has largely been shaped by your experience with them. Now, while experience is important and influential, 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. The elders and deacons have been discussing this together for a number of months. We believe this change will enable our deacons to better care for our church by serving in the areas of their passion and giftedness. In a special called members’ meeting on July 25th, we will lay out for you what the change will encompass. In preparation for that meeting and in order for us to better understand this office, over these three Sundays, I am going to teach on the roles, responsibilities, and requirements of these leading servants.

Before we go any farther, I think it will be helpful to clarify the leadership roles in the church and specifically our church. 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. We find these terms used interchangeably in two passages. Peter brings them together in 1 Peter 5:1-2, as he instructs the elders to be good overseers as they pastor.

1 So I exhort the elders (πρεσβύτερος) among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd (ποιμήν) the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight (ἐπίσκοπος), not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;

Acts 20 is the other passage where all three terms are used interchangeably. There Paul is addressing the Ephesian elders and instructs them to care for the flock for which they have been made overseers. We could say that *elder* emphasizes who the man is, *overseer* speaks of what he does, and *pastor* deals with his attitude and character.

The second office is the deacon. The word comes from the Greek term δίακονος (a servant). The term and its related versions are used approximately 100 times in the New Testament. Only in First Timothy 3:8-13 and Philippians 1:1 are they transliterated “deacon” or “deacons.” In every other case they are translated as servant or ministry. The original meaning of this term had to do with performing menial tasks such as waiting tables. The definition, though, gradually broadened until it took on the idea of any kind of service.

One of the first times we encounter this term 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. From this passage many delineate that the seven men appointed to serve the widows were the first official deacons of the early church. The text, however, nowhere calls them deacons. In fact, the only use of διακονία in Acts 6 is in reference to the apostles (vs. 4), and to the serving of food (vs. 1). In addition, the seven men are nowhere else in the New Testament referred to as deacons. Stephen and Philip, the only two mentioned elsewhere in Acts, were evangelists. It seems that these seven men were chosen for a specific task and did not actually hold the office of deacon. In fact, the term δίακονος is not used anywhere else in Acts.

Nevertheless, the fact that those chosen in Acts 6 did not hold the office of deacon does not mean their service did not foreshadow that of the later deacons. Paul wrote First Timothy about thirty years after the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost. The church had grown and developed to the point that there was a need for official deacons in local churches. 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. Both of these offices operate as pluralities, meaning there are more than one holding the office. The leadership structure of Red Lane follows the prescription of the New Testament. We are led by a plurality of elders. We also have a plurality of deacons who serve alongside the elders and help care for the needs of the church. Then we have a staff team of pastors and directors who execute the ministry of the church. How do these three leadership groups work together? Mark Dever offers a great word picture in his book *The Deliberate Church*. 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. The deacons make sure we have enough gas to get to where we are going.

Today, as we examine and try to understand the office of deacon, let’s first look at the roles of these leading servants. We are going to use Acts 6 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 risen up that 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. Let’s look closely at this passage. As we

do, I want you to see four observations, two roles, and one glorious effect. I am pulling these points from a really good resource on deacon ministry entitled *Deacons: How they Serve and Strengthen the Church* by Matt Smethurst.

Four Observations

1. Preaching / Teaching Prioritized

A quick reading of this passage may give the impression that the apostles were calloused and uncaring. In fact, the opposite was true. The apostles were sensitive to the needs of the Hellenists and cared about their welfare. At the same time, the apostles understood their primary responsibility to be that of preaching and praying. Smethurst offers an insightful perspective on this priority. He says, “The apostles recognize a fundamental truth: a church whose ministers are chained to the tyranny of the urgent – which so often shows up in ‘tangible problems’ – is a church removing its heart to strengthen its arm. It’s a kind of slow-motion suicide.”

It is essential for a church to strive to meet the physical and tangible needs of its membership, but if those needs are not able to be met there is still a church present. The same cannot be said when there is a neglect of biblical preaching and teaching.

We observe in this passage the priority of preaching and teaching in the local church. The “seven” (deacons) model for us how to prioritize the Word by taking burdens off the shoulders of the apostles (elders).

2. Congregational Involvement

It is critical that we recognize how these “seven” were selected and put into service. The apostles did not unilaterally select the seven men. Instead, they instructed the whole church to be involved in the process. In essence what we see in this passage is the very first members’ meeting (vs. 2-3). What we are observing here is congregationalism. In congregationalism, the church submits itself under the leadership and protection of its elders, but at the same time the elders are under the authority of the congregation. The congregation has final say on all matters.

The church in Jerusalem chose seven men from within them to serve and minister to the needs that had arisen. In this observation we see the beauty of the many in the body working together to meet the needs of the few.

3. Character Mandated

The apostles did not instruct the church to pick just anyone. They were to select gold-standard servants and spiritual giants (vs. 3). They were to be men “*of good repute.*” They were to be respectable in character and conduct. They were to be “*full of the Holy Spirit.*” They were to be mature believers known for submitting to the Spirit’s leadership. They were to be full of “*wisdom.*” They were to be known for exercising practical wisdom in life’s problems.

The church chose its best to care for its least.

4. Labor Divided

Again, we must recognize that the apostles in no way minimized the Hellenists’ complaint. They quickly sought to resolve the issue. The solution, however, was not to take on more duties themselves. Doing so would hinder the priority of Word Ministry given to them by the Lord. The solution was dividing out the labor so that needs were met while prioritizing the Word.

We observe that this strategic division of labor strengthens the church. Pastors and deacons who try to do everything end up doing a disservice to everyone.

With those observations in mind, what roles do these leading servants play in the life of the local church?

Two Roles

1. Shock Absorber

One of the things we must not overlook or miss in Acts 6 is the strategic role these seven men played in preserving congregational unity. It is easy to see how they solved a food shortage problem. There clearly was a need as a certain segment of the membership was being neglected. Food was the occasion, but it was not the deepest problem. The most pressing issue was the sudden threat to church unity.

This disruption in unity centered on a natural fault line. There were two main groups in the Jerusalem Church, Hebrews and Hellenists. The Hebrews were “insiders.” They were born and raised in Palestine. They saw themselves as authentic Jews. The Hellenists were “outsiders.” They were Jews who had immigrated to Jerusalem from other parts of the Roman Empire. Their main language was not the language of Jesus or the apostles. They had been in the city for Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came. They heard the gospel and believed, and as a result had stayed in Jerusalem.

The fault line of language, ethnicity, and culture was real and expected. These things have always been an area of division and conflict. When the church began to divide along these lines, the apostles immediately addressed it by delegating the problem to the seven men the church selected. They delegated not because it was not important but because it was. Verse 5 expresses the church’s approval of their decision.

Who was selected? The church selected seven men with Greek names. In other words, a majority-Hebrew congregation selected seven Hellenist leaders to bring unity. In the words Smethurst, “The very minorities feeling the sting of unfair food distribution are the ones given a voice, tasked and empowered to make decisions on behalf of the whole church.”

From this scenario, we discover one of the roles deacons should play in the life of the church is that of shock absorber. They should be those who muffle shockwaves, rather than reverberate them further. They love solutions more than drama and rise to respond in ways that promote harmony throughout the whole church.

2. Problem Solver

The fact that the apostles do not tell the church who to select is fascinating, but even more fascinating is that they also do not tell those selected what to do. The seven are deployed to fix the problem, but they are not given instructions on how to do it.

We see here that deacons should have the propensity to solve problems. They should be able to spot problems. When a problematic area is identified, they should want to safeguard unity within the church by thinking creatively and finding a solution.

Deacons are problems solvers. They identify issues that disrupt or threaten the unity and ministry of the church. They find solutions to fix the issue, thereby freeing up the elders to focus on shepherding the church.

One Effect

Diaconal work may often times be quiet and behind the scenes, but we should never allow the lack of publicity to detract from its profoundness. Verse 7 says, *“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.”* Why did the Word of God continue to increase? It happened because seven men recognized a need and worked to meet it, freeing up the elders to focus on their task of preaching. The effect was a continual increase in people coming to faith in Jesus.

This passage does not just present a pattern for diaconal ministry. It also screams out that the ministry of deacons has enormous spiritual implications. Deacons may largely work to meet physical and administrative needs, but according to verse 7 their work is part of the larger gospel work. It has a glorious effect!

Gospel Advancement

Public ministry is impossible without private service. If the seven men had not freed the apostles up to focus on preaching and prayer, then the gospel would not have advanced. There would have been no multiplication and no priests coming to faith. The church would have stagnated and lost its purpose.

Conclusion: Aren't you thankful for deacons and the roles they serve within the body of the Christ? They are God's gift to the church as shock absorbers and problem solvers. Through their service unity is preserved and the gospel is advanced. As we restructure and redeploy the deacon ministry, that 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 hospitable 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?