



STRATEGIC SERVANTS

A (RE)INTRODUCTION TO THE
DEACON MINISTRY

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INTRODUCTION

With the transition to an elders-led structure of church government, the deacon ministry at BBC has also been redesigned. I am excited about these changes, believing they are more faithful to Scripture's teaching. I am also excited because they will empower the members of the church to accomplish our mission with renewed passion and purpose.

Since being appointed in February, the elders have been busy working to launch the new deacon ministry. After months of prayer and planning, we are now ready to approach deacon candidates, walk them through their ministry responsibilities, and introduce them to the church who will vote upon them later this summer. Before we do that, however, I want to explain how the deacon ministry will operate in our new church model

This small booklet is my humble attempt to do that. I will explain

what a deacon is by looking at the biblical evidence. I will also contrast our new approach to the deacon ministry with the traditional Baptist understanding, which we previously operated under. Lastly, I hope to answer a couple of questions that you may be wondering about our new approach.

WHAT IS A DEACON?

We must begin with a simple definition of a deacon. What is a deacon? Or, even more importantly, what does a deacon do? While the Bible does not answer these questions exhaustively, it does provide two valuable clues to answer these questions. The first clue is found in the meaning of the Greek word from which we derive the term deacon. The second clue comes from a study of Acts 6. In this passage unlike any other in Scripture, we catch a glimpse of a New Testament deacon ministry in action.

The term “deacon” comes from the Greek word *diakonos*. This Greek word simply means “servant.” In John 2, when Jesus miraculously transformed water into wine at the wedding in Cana, this Greek term is used for the servants who carried the water containers.

When this Greek term is used as a verb (*dikoneo*), it usually refers to the kinds of serving that involves practical acts of meeting

material needs. In Matthew 4:11, the angels came *to serve* Jesus’ needs in the wilderness following his lengthy fast and temptation. In Matthew 8:15, Peter’s mother-in-law got up after being healed *to serve* the guests in her home. In John 12:2, Martha *served* in the kitchen while Mary sat listening at the feet of Jesus. In Matthew 25:44 providing for the needs of the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned is *to serve* them. In all of these examples, the service rendered involved practical, physical needs.

So what is a deacon? After looking at the various uses of the *dai-kon-* word group, we can conclude that a deacon is simply a servant. A deacon is a servant who meets the practical, physical needs of another. While the elders are to devote their attention to the spiritual needs of the church, the deacons focus on the day-to-day operations of church life. We see this clearly as we seek to answer a second important question.

WHAT DOES A DEACON DO?

While we have concluded what a deacon is, the question still remains: What does a deacon do? To answer this question, we can turn to Acts 6. Many scholars believe that this chapter captures the very beginning of the deacon ministry. In it we find a New Testament deacon ministry in action.

In Acts 6, the church in Jerusalem was beginning to rupture at the seams. The long-standing division that existed between Hellenistic Jews and Hebraic Jews was on the verge of splitting the church.¹ Hundreds of years of prejudice and tension were careening towards a collision because the Greek-speaking widows were routinely being overlooked by the church's benevolence ministry.

¹ Hellenistic Jews were Greek-speaking Jews who live outside of Palestine. Hebraic Jews were natives of Palestine and spoke Aramaic.

Instead of tackling this problem themselves, the Apostles called on the church to appoint seven men to oversee the food distribution. They said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4). These seven men then served the Apostles and the church by overseeing the distribution of food to widows, ensuring that it operated for the good of the entire church.

In Acts 6 we see two important aspects of a deacon's task. First, like these seven men, deacons are servants who labor to meet specific, temporal (that is, non-spiritual) needs within the church. Second, by focusing on these important, non-spiritual needs, the deacon ministry enables the elders to devote their attention to the essential tasks of prayer, proclaiming the Word, and providing spiritual oversight to the church.

So what does a deacon do? A deacon ensures the church functions properly by overseeing practical, temporal needs within the church. John Piper says, “the deacon office exists to assist the leadership of the church by relieving the elders of distractions and pressures that would divert them from the ministry of the word and prayer and the general, visionary oversight of the church.”

TRADITIONAL BAPTIST UNDERSTANDING

While the biblical evidence reveals that deacons functioned as faithful servants who oversaw specific, non-spiritual areas of need within the life of the church, in the 1800’s Baptists began drifting from this understanding.

In 1846, Baptist minister R.B.C. Howell introduced the idea of deacons as “a board of directors” who “have charge of all the secular affairs in the kingdom of Christ.” From Howell’s writings the idea of a “deacon board” originated. Instead of overseeing particular areas of temporal need, the deacons became a board of leaders who oversaw a large swath of responsibilities. Slowly throughout the 1800’s this idea of a “deacon board” became the traditional Baptist understanding.

This idea is still common today within many Baptist churches. The deacon ministry operates as a board of counselors or advisers for the pastor. In these churches, many items of business must first receive approval from the deacon board before they can be presented to the church.

Sadly, because pastoral tenure has been so short at many churches, sometimes 3-4 years on average, a board of deacons who would run the church became the only stable leadership structure within the church. Even though there were pragmatic reasons for the “deacon board” to become an entrenched structure in Baptist churches, I believe the Bible shows us a better way—the New Testament model we catch a glimpse of in Acts 6.

A MORE FAITHFUL APPROACH

While the biblical evidence concerning the role of a deacon is far from exhaustive, I believe that there is a more faithful approach to the deacon ministry than the traditional Baptist understanding. In our new bylaws we have returned to a deacon ministry more in line with Scripture’s teaching. In Article 3, Section 3, our bylaws read: “Deacon and deaconess shall care for the temporal needs of members, attend to the accommodations for public worship, and encourage and support those able to help others and those with gifts of administration.”

Under the spiritual oversight of the elders, the deacons will oversee specific, strategic areas of non-spiritual need within the life of the church. Instead of a board of deacons tasked as a group to oversee a litany of areas, a single deacon or small team of deacons will

target specific ministry areas. We will have a Deacon(s) of Guest Ministries, a Deacon(s) of Worship Support, a Deacon(s) of Member Care, among others. By providing pointed, passionate leadership to these specific ministries of need, the deacons will relieve the elders from these concerns so that they can focus on their essential responsibilities of prayer, the ministry of the Word, and the spiritual oversight of the church. (See the sample deacon job description on page 20)

In his book *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, Benjamin Merkle succinctly captures our new understanding of the deacon ministry. He writes,

“Where as elders are charged with the tasks of teaching and shepherding the church, deacons are given a more service-oriented function. That is, they are given the task of taking care of matters related more to the physical or temporal concerns of the church. For example, they might have responsibility over areas such as facilities, benevolence, finances, and other matters related to the practical logistics of running a church.”

WOMEN IN THE DEACON MINISTRY

One of the most visible shifts in our new deacon ministry is that women are allowed to serve. In the traditional Baptist understanding, since the deacon ministry assists the pastor in overseeing the spiritual needs of the church, women are rightly excluded from service. But when the deacon ministry is organized as caring for physical needs within the church, then the biblical reasons for excluding women from service are removed. There are several pieces of evidence within the New Testament to support this conclusion.

1 Timothy 3:11

In the middle of the qualifications for deacons outlined in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Paul says, “The women likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.” While this could refer to the wives of deacons (reflected in the ESV translation),

the Greek is ambiguous and could also refer to women deacons.

There are a couple factors that incline me to believe that women deacons (called deaconesses in our bylaws) is the proper interpretation. First, if Paul wished to refer to the wives of deacons he could have done so unambiguously by adding the word “their.” While many English translations include this word, it is absent from the original Greek. It is best, then, to translate the text simply as “women.”

Secondly, it is unusual that Paul would require qualifications for a deacon’s wife in 1 Timothy 3:11, yet not require any similar qualifications for an elder’s wife in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. It seems more probable, then, that Paul is not speaking of deacons’ wives but to women deacons.

1 Timothy 2:12

Additionally, it is important to recognize that having female deacons does not violate Paul’s restrictions in 1 Timothy 2:12 (“I do not permit a women to teach or to exercise authority over a man;

rather, she is to remain quiet”). John Piper says, “The deacons were distinguished from the elders in that they were not the governing body in the church nor were they charged with the duty of authoritative teaching. So the role of deacon seems not to involve anything that Paul taught is inappropriate for women to perform in church.”

Romans 16:1

A final piece of evidence supporting women in the deacon ministry comes from Romans 16:1. There Paul says, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [literally, a *diakonos*] of the church of Cenchreae.” In this verse, Paul uses the masculine form of the term *diakonos* to refer to a woman when the feminine form would normally be used for a female. Paul’s unusual usage suggests that he is referring to her, not merely as a normal servant, but as one who holds the official church office of a deacon.

In addition, this is the only place Paul speaks of a person being a “servant” of a local church. Tychicus is called “a servant in the Lord” (Ephesians 6:21) and Epaphras is called a “servant of Christ”

(Colossians 1:7), but only Phoebe is specifically said to be a servant of a particular local church. Many scholars believe this is because she was officially a deacon of the church at Cenchreae.

From this evidence, John Piper concludes, “It appears then that the role of deacon is of such nature that nothing stands in the way of women’s full participation in it.”

BBC Has Always Had Ladies Serving In These Ways

Yet, even if you are still grappling with the possibility of female deacons, consider this: When deacons are understood as servants caring for strategic, non-spiritual needs within the church, then BBC has had women doing that all along! For decades we’ve had women oversee the nursery ministry, aspects of member care, outreach, and guest ministries. We just never called them deaconesses, even though they were function as ones. But now that we have a plurality of male leadership in the elders, we can realign our deacon ministry to the New Testament’s example and rightly honor the women servants that God has given as gifts to our church.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU ARE ASKED TO BECOME A DEACON?

In light of all this information, let me end with some practical advice. What should you do if you are asked to become a deacon?

First, realize that this is the beginning of a new deacon ministry. Remember that it isn’t a board of spiritual counselors, but instead a team of strategic servants.

Second, ask yourself several questions: Am I qualified for this ministry? Am I gifted for this ministry? Am I passionate about this ministry? Talk to your spouse and close friends to get their input. The elders wouldn’t have asked you to serve if we didn’t think you were an ideal fit, but make sure you feel you are qualified, gifted, and passionate to serve.

Third, after processing your potential nomination, talk with the elders. Ask questions and share concerns you may have. Get clarification. I would hate for anyone to turn down an opportunity to serve God and strengthen the church because that person never sought clarification about the position.

Fourth, count the cost. The deacon ministry is a great privilege. God will use you to serve His church and strengthen His people to accomplish a mission with glorious, eternal ramifications. Yet, while this is a privilege, it is also a responsibility. Pray together with your family to ensure you have the time and commitment to serve effectively for at least one year.

Fifth, know that you have real Christian freedom here. If you feel that this is God's will, great! Praise the Lord! But if you don't, if your conscience is pricked at the thought of being a female deacon, or you don't think you have the time or passion, then let the elders know. We won't coerce you or guilt you into serving. We won't conclude that you are not really committed. We trust that you have

sought God's will and yearn for BBC to flourish in God's favor. So please don't feel any manipulative pressure.

Of course, we hope you will serve—after all, we are asking! But we will not criticize you if you don't.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully this little booklet has helped reintroduce you to the-deacon ministry at BBC. While the ministry will operate a little differently than in the past, I believe this will strengthen the church by empowering members to serve strategic needs within our Body.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to speak to the elders. We would love to hear your thoughts.

Deacon of Guest Ministry

Sample Job Description

Description

The deacon or deaconess of guest ministries will be required to develop and maintain a friendly and welcoming environment at BBC.

Qualification

- Qualifications of a deacon as outlined in 1 Timothy 3:8-13
- Ability to build and lead a team for service
- Exhibits a passion of care and kindness towards guests
- Administratively gifted and reliable

Duties

- Oversee and coordinate after service fellowship
- Organize and lead greeter ministry by scheduling greeter teams
- Staff and resource the welcome center
- Develop and maintain budget for guest ministries.
- Follow up with guests via phone call / card



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