



The Biblical Role of **DEACONS**

Dr. Jim Vogel, Northeast Fellowship

There seems to be more confusion than ever these days about the role of deacons in local church leadership. While I recognize that good people differ on church polity and governance issues – may I share what I believe the Scriptures teach about these local church servants? First, in order to put this subject in a larger NT context, note that there are only two biblical officers in a local church – pastors and deacons (See Phil 1.1 and 1 Tim.3. Note that these texts mention only two leadership positions, not three. Pastors, elders and overseers are terms used in the NT to refer to the same office. Despite this – some churches distinguish between three: pastors, elders, and deacons). Secondly, and more to the point of this writing, the Bible affirms that deacons are not merely

table servers, property managers or hospital visitors. Rather, they are spiritual leaders assisting pastors – not only in service functions – but also in the spiritual guidance of the body of believers. This perspective is affirmed by:

“...the Bible affirms that deacons are not merely table servers, property managers or hospital visitors. Rather, they are spiritual leaders assisting pastors...in the spiritual guidance of the body of believers.”

- The significant list of spiritual qualifications mentioned in 1 Tim 3 (note the references to being godly examples, doctrinally sound convictional men, family spiritual leaders, etc.) which parallels - and in places expands on - the qualifications of pastors! The “caregiver

only” view of deacons does not seem to fit this rather complete description in 1 Tim 3!!

- If early deacons are in view in Acts 6, as most Bible students believe, then the reference to them as

spiritual leaders in this passage (see v.5 – “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom”) affirms this understanding as well.

- As a further affirmation, note that these early leaders were set apart for their work by the laying on of hands (Acts 6.6 – a practice often highlighting appointment or commissioning for special service – cp Acts 13.3; I Tim 4.14; 5.22) and they were to be evaluated (“tested”– I Tim 3.10) prior to their service regarding a blameless reputation and thus fitness for their leadership. Such actions indicate that these early deacons were involved in significant spiritual service – and they are consistent with the understanding of the Diaconate as an important leadership office from the earliest days of the church.
- Perhaps most significantly, in the larger context of Acts 6 – notably chapters 7,8, - we see that some of these early deacons are preaching and doing evangelistic work. Surely they were more than mere “kitchen helpers.”
- Finally – while the root meaning of the Greek word for deacon in the New Testament speaks of servanthood, it does not preclude deacons from exercising spiritual leadership roles. The Bible says that all godly leadership – be it pastoral or diaconal - is to be marked by servanthood (see 2 Tim 2.24 -26 and Christ’s words about serving in Matthew 20). Even Paul, as an apostle, referred to himself as a servant (2 Cor. 4.5). Deacons are servant oriented spiritual leaders. So are pastors!

While many in evangelicalism (and even some Baptists) in our day have begun to adopt a more “Presbyterian friendly” polity . . . I suggest that

“...the best sense of the complete NT teaching regarding deacons is that they are spiritual leaders working closely with pastors.”

we not jettison our long-standing “two officer” conviction. Elders are pastors and plurality is common in today’s multiple pastoral staff settings. Additionally, the best sense of the complete NT teaching regarding deacons is that they are spiritual leaders working closely with pastors who have the overall authority. They do not run churches or oversee pastors. The Biblical

design is that Pastors lead local churches and deacons provide support and assistance. They should be marked by a collaborative leadership perspective and they often provide administrative oversight/assistance. (Those first

deacons – again, if one considers Acts 6 to be the foundation of the diaconate – could not possibly have done all the serving for thousands of believers! They were surely administrators and spiritual leaders guiding others.)

Is this view regarding the role of deacons out of touch with the beliefs of other students of God’s Word? Clearly it is not. Note that:

Dr. Charles Ryrie writes in his *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*: “The standard qualification for deacons (1 Tim 3.8-10) indicates that they preformed a spiritual ministry, so that the distinction between elders and deacons was not that the elders had to do with spiritual things while the deacons concerned themselves with material matters (cf Acts 11.30). Rather the distinction was that the deacons were the subordinates functioning under the general oversight of the elders.”

Professor Philip Sell writes in an article on Acts 6 in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January-March 2010): “This division of labor, which relegates deacons to meeting temporal needs but not proclaiming or teaching Gods Word is not supported by the Book of Acts. Two of the seven – Stephen and Philip – were engaged in preaching the Word of God. Stephen performed miraculous signs and was teaching and defending the faith (6:8-10).”

To review, some of our brothers in ministry tend to minimize the diaconate (the view of Presbyterian and Reformed ecclesiology – and most mega-church leaders these days). They view deacons as merely humble caregivers - and they wrongly think Baptists elevate them to high level “board” authorities! The truth is that the Bible teaches neither, but affirms a local church governance model where the diaconate is neither demeaned nor elevated. Deacons simply serve alongside Pastors, and under their authority, in spiritual oversight and servant-oriented leadership. This leadership perspective, I believe, is taught in the New Testament.

