

What Do Deacons Do?

In our last study on deacons, we learned that the English word “deacon” is a transliteration of the Greek word *diakonos*. While the term “deacon” appears only three times in the English Bible, *diakonos* (and a couple of related words) appear 100 times in the New Testament! These words refer to servants, service, and serving. The New Testament is clear that all Christians are to serve one another.



Still, in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8-12, it is clear that there is also an official role within congregational organization

that goes by the title “Deacon.” But what do deacons do? How is it that these church “servants” serve?

Various Views on the Role of Deacons

The New Testament says very little (some might argue nothing) about the specific role and work of congregational deacons. Aside from being greeted in Philippians 1:1 and a list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:8-12, no passage specifically says what deacons do. Thus, it’s not surprising to encounter various ideas and approaches. The following views may not be exhaustive, but they are probably the most commonly held and practiced today.

1. The Board of Directors

Many groups establish a board of deacons that functions like an organizational board of directors. This is especially common among many denominational groups. In this model, deacons are often responsible for overseeing the congregation. Some groups might have deacons manage everything. Sometimes deacons oversee the “minister” or the “pastor.” Some groups have the deacons oversee business and operational affairs (like finances), while a group of elders focuses on overseeing the teaching.

This model is often used so that there is a system of “checks and balances” for the group of elders.

2. The Maintenance Department

Many congregations (both among denominations and in the Lord’s church) view deacons as a maintenance department. In this model, deacons become responsible for building maintenance, mowing the yard, changing lights, cleaning the building, and caring for everything regarding the “church building.” Sometimes this expands to other “administrative functions” like finances and paying the bills.

3. Elders in Training

Some view deacons as “Junior Elders” or “Elders in Training.” The diaconate becomes a training program for men who might be good candidates to be elders someday but may not entirely be ready or qualified to serve as an elder just yet. The idea is that this would allow younger men to train and grow into leadership without the full authority of eldership.

4. Ministers of Mercy

One view of the role of deacons is that they are responsible for caring for the congregations’ physical needs. They are responsible for distributing funds to the poor or caring for needy individuals. In this model, deacons function either on their own or at the direction of elders to assist the poor and needy members of the congregation.

5. Assistant to the Elders

Finally, some believe that the deacons function as assistants to the elders. When we think of an assistant, we might imagine an executive assistant to some corporate CEO—someone who manages their superior’s calendar, takes their phone calls, gets their coffee, and picks up their dry-cleaning. That’s not the type of assistant this model suggests. Instead, the idea is that the deacons are the official, church-appointed men who assist the elders in their various shepherding and overseeing tasks.

What are some strengths and weaknesses of each view? Is there one or more model you think is correct? Why do you agree or disagree with the various views on the role of deacons?

A Case Study: Acts 6:1-7

As stated, no passage in the New Testament refers explicitly to deacons and then outlines their exact function. There is, however, a passage that is the best model for us to consider and follow. That passage is found in Acts 6:1-7.

As we read Acts 6:1-7, we might ask, “Is this a story about the first deacons?” Some argue it is not. After all, the title “deacon” (Gk. *Diakonos*) is never used in this passage. While that is true, related words are used.

In Acts 6:1, the provision for the widows is called the “daily distribution.” The Greek word rendered “distribution” is *diakonia*. In verse two, the Apostles refer to the focus of providing food for the widows as to “serve tables,” which is the Greek verb *diakoneo*. So, if the seven were appointed *diakoneo* and take care of a *diakonia*, it doesn’t seem like a far stretch to conclude they were set to be *diakonos*—or deacons.

Also, the seven selected to help with caring for the widows in Jerusalem had to meet qualifications. The Apostles instructed the church to choose men who were “...men of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom...” (v. 3). While these are identical to the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:8-12, they are closely related. Also, we might recall slight differences even in the two lists of qualifications for elders that Paul wrote (cf. 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

Whether the seven were officially called “deacons” or not is unknown. But they were qualified men officially appointed to serve a function in the church. Given the lack of other instructions in the New Testament regarding deacons, it seems prudent to consider these men as either the first deacons or, at the very least, a sort of “proto-deacon.” And thus, we can use this story to help us learn some general guidance concerning the role and work of elders.

What Problems Led to the Seven?

Why were the seven needed? Considering the problems that led to their appointment, we can understand the nature of their purpose.

1. Daily Needs

The primary problem that led to the need of the seven was physical needs. The church had been trying to meet the physical needs of the members, especially the most impoverished and vulnerable, such as widows. This was the primary purpose the seven were appointed for—to see that the needy widows received the required care and provision.

2. Disgruntlement

We aren’t told why the widows were overlooked. It seems to be an accident caused by the sheer enormity of the task and the busyness of the Apostles. Whatever the reason, it led to understandable frustration and disgruntled complaint. To know how dangerous complaints can be, recall the frequent complaints of Israel in the wilderness. By rightfully ensuring the needy widows were provided for and overlooked, the seven could address the frustration brewing in the church.

3. Division

Due to the nature of the problem, a division could easily occur. While there are reasonable explanations why the Hellenistic widows were overlooked, it was a perfect opportunity for old prejudices to surface and create a division between people with different backgrounds.

4. Distraction

If Satan can’t overcome the church with persecution, corruption, or division, he will try distraction. Up to this point, the Apostles had taken care of collecting and distributing funds for needy saints. As crucial as caring for the poor was, it was not the Apostles’ only or even primary responsibility. Their primary focus was testifying about Jesus, praying, and preaching the Word. This focus itself was a “ministry” (*diakonia*). If they continued to spend the time and effort required to collect and distribute funds to the needy, it would take away from their focus on prayer and preaching. Such a choice simply “is not right” (v. 2).

This doesn’t mean that “serving tables” was unimportant. On the contrary, it was so important that a new role was created for the church. It did mean that neither the Apostles nor anyone else could do all

jobs. They needed to serve in prayer and preaching, and other qualified men could serve other congregational needs.

How the Seven Helped

Acts 6 doesn't record how the seven went about their work—it simply implies they did their job and solved the problem. Thus, we can determine a few things the seven did.

1. They Alleviated Needs of Church Members

The primary work the seven were appointed to was to ensure the church widows were cared for and provided for.

2. They Alleviated the Apostle's Burden

The seven freed the Apostles to focus on their primary responsibilities by shouldering caring for the widows.

3. They Promoted Unity

We can infer that through their role of service, the seven did much to help the cause of unity in the church. By solving a potentially divisive situation, they helped keep the church at peace and united.

4. They Helped the Church Grow

The story of the seven is bookended with comments about the church's growth. Acts 6:1 says, "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number..." Acts 6:7 reads, "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly." A potentially problematic situation threatened the growth of the church. By serving the congregation's needs and helping the Apostles maintain their focus, the seven played an integral role that helped the church continue to grow immensely. We should never take roles of service lightly—without them, the church will not grow as well as it could!

What Do Deacons Do Today?

Acts 6 may not provide specific answers. But it seems the best passage to help us understand in broad strokes how deacons function in the church. So, what do deacons do in the church today?

1. Deacons Help Meet Needs

The needs of the Jerusalem church in the first century might differ from those of an American congregation in the 21st century. But there are still needs. If we follow the example of Acts 6, we see that deacons are a group who can help a congregation ensure the needs of church members are seen to.

2. Deacons Assist the Elders

The seven helped assist alleviate the Apostles. Since deacons are listed with elders in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3, they seem to be connected to the elders. What better connection than to view them as doing for the elders what the seven did for the Apostles? Deacons are not personal or administrative assistants for the elders. But they assist the elders by caring for things that might otherwise pull them away from their responsibility of overseeing and shepherding the flock.

3. Deacons Serve the Church

Simply put, deacons serve the church. That may be more generic than we would like. Or perhaps that allows for flexibility and applicability. Directly and indirectly, deacons encourage the church, unite the church, and help the church grow.

Conclusion

The Seven were the first role established in the early church after the Apostles. Today, we can rest assured that the church still has needs that can best be fulfilled and aided by spiritually minded, wise, reputable men with servant's hearts.