

Deacons: Service Leaders at EBF

An Overview of the Office of Deacon

The office of Deacon is not that dissimilar from the office of Elder. The biblical sense is that they stand along side the elders as *servants of the church*. Elders and deacons are not different levels of spiritual maturity. The key difference is that Elders have been given authority and responsibility because they are biblically qualified to teach God's Word accurately and with power. But, deacons are similar to elders in other respects.

The Key Differences Between Elders and Deacons

The key differences between elders and deacons are:

1. With regard to authority, elders are charged with “oversight” of the body and are therefore the final decision makers. Like all other responsibilities, this is to be a service to the body (1 Peter 5:4). It also removes any sense of power struggle between the two “boards”. Also note that elders are held responsible by the Lord for how they lead and oversee His Body.
2. Biblically, elders and deacons also differ in that deacons are not “required” to be able to teach. John MacArthur writes in regard to this point:

“While deacons are to be as godly as elders, they differ from them in terms of their ability to teach. *The authority of pastors and elders is based on their proclamation and exposition of God's Word*” (taken from *The Qualities of an Excellent Servant – Part 1* , emphasis added).

3. Biblically, there are limits to what deacons within the church can do. Alexander Strauch, in *The New Testament Deacon: The Churches Minister of Mercy*, highlights this when he writes:

“In many churches, deacons misunderstand their role. They think that they compromise a second group of overseer-elders or that they are to provide checks and balances for the shepherds. If deacons control the finances, they often think they control the church. This should not be. It is plain from everything we have studied that deacons are subordinate to overseers. We must also understand that shepherds can perform all the functions of deacons, but deacons cannot perform all the functions of shepherds. Unlike deacons, shepherds are responsible for the overall leadership, supervision, and teaching of the congregation. Deacons are not independent of the leadership oversight of the elders.”

An Overview of Diakonos

The Greek words “*diakonos*” (meaning servant, pronounced “dee-**ah**-kah-nos”), “*diakonia*” (service, pronounced “dee-ah-kah-**nee**-ah”), and “*diakoneo*” (to serve, pronounced “dee-ah-kah-**neh**-o) are used at least 100 times in the New Testament.

Diakonia, as we see in Acts 6, originally referred to serving tables. *Diakonos* was used for the official capacity of one who serves, such as a house servant or civil servant. *Diakonia* was eventually broadened to mean any kind of service. Alexander Strauch further writes:

“Although the word *diakonos*, the Greek word for *deacon*, does not appear in Acts 6, the concept of an official body of servants who lovingly serve one another does appear. Furthermore, although *diakonos*, does not appear, its corresponding noun, *diakonia*, and verb, *diakoneō*, do”.

Please note, also, that EBF currently holds the position that both men and women are biblically qualified to hold the office of Deacon (Romans 16:1). Therefore, when the term, Deacon, is used in this paper, it refers to both Deacons and Deaconesses.

The Meaning of Diakonos is Servant

Diakonos generally indicates three levels of servanthood within the church: General Service, Gifted Service, and Official Service.

- **General Service**

All Christians are in some form of spiritual service. All are deacons in that general sense because we all are able to serve in a variety of ways. All of us are called to be servants of Christ.

- **Gifted Service**

Romans 12:4f says, “As we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having then gifts according to the grace that has been given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: whether prophesy let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith; ... if *servicing*, in our *servicing*...” (emphasis added)

What this tells us is that while *everyone* is in the service to Christ, some have been especially gifted by the Spirit of God to serve.

- **Official Service**

Beyond the levels of General Service and Gifted Service there is a third level of service, which is the office of Deacon (*diakonos*), or serving in official capacity as servants of the church.

Choosing Deacons for EBF

EBF has instituted a New Testament model of leadership for our local body which empowers our Elder team to more effectively meet the biblical mandate given to them: the ministry of the word and prayer. Commenting on this term, Richard N. Longnecker, in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, writes:

“The word ‘devote’ connotes a steadfast and single-minded fidelity to a certain course of action. The apostles were on the right track: they were to steadfastly and single-mindedly give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”

Deacons, then, are to meet the service needs of the Fellowship in everything from finances to building maintenance and from hospitality to nurturing. In essence, deacons are involved with everything but those things specifically designated to the elders – namely, the ministry of the word (teaching, oversight, discipleship & missions) and elder prayer (general and specific).

A word of warning, provided by Strauch, is appropriate here:

“In their zeal for deacon renewal, many churches have gone too far, beyond the bounds of scripture. They have placed too much authority and diversity into the hands of deacons. In fact some of the same mistakes that churches made in the middle of the second century are being repeated again: deacons are placed in various positions of authority that God has not authorized.”

While appointing deacons is the appropriate model, the Elders must be careful to choose them according to biblical standards and instruct and lead them to serve within biblical parameters.

Deacon Selection

Selecting Deacons to serve EBF is made first and foremost in prayer, and secondly in line with the following points:

1. Deacons must be selected according to the biblical criteria of 1 Timothy 3: 8 – 13 (NASB).
 - Dignified
 - Not double-tongued
 - Not addicted to much wine
 - Not fond of sordid gain
 - Holding to the mystery of the faith with clear conscience
 - Beyond reproach
 - Wife of good character
 - Dignified

- Not malicious gossips
 - Temperate
 - Faithful in all things
 - Husband of one wife
 - Good manager of his children and his own household
2. Deacons must have the same spiritual character as Elders, but in regard to the spiritual responsibilities, they are to be in submission to the unanimous voice of the elders.
 3. Deacons use their service gift among EBF and the greater community to lead through service.
 4. Deacons need to be tested men/women within the body. They can be put to the test for the purpose of being approved, and having met the test, given authority to lead in service. In other words, not new to the faith and already serving in some capacity.
 5. Deacons are appointed/designated for service by the Lord through the calling of His Holy Spirit. As the Elders see people within the Fellowship that are already serving, the elders should seek the Lord's counsel, in prayer, as to whether those people are designated for 'Official Service' by Him. If prayer reveals this to be a possibility, then the elders may initiate the deacon qualification process.
 6. These positions are not 'rewards' for long time service, nor are they status symbols to give people a more respectable position in the church. Rather, they are a "call" from our Lord to serve Him as He leads His Church. For this reason, elders and deacons *potentially* carry this call throughout their lives. Elders and deacons can be removed from their positions should they become disqualified through sinful behavior. It is also understood that elders or deacons may serve for seasons in an 'official' capacity. When family needs, or other issues, require a deacon to discontinue his time of official service to the local church, the deacon or elder may choose to step down from their leadership position. This may be for a temporary, or extended, period of time.

Community and Task Deacons

Deacons at EBF will fill two roles: those of community deacons and task deacons. ***Community deacons*** are focused on people and their needs, while task deacons take care of all of the important 'in house' service needs. For example, community deacons, according to their spiritual gifts, minister to the needs of the people in their neighborhoods or in the greater fellowship of believers. The community deacon ministries may include, but a certainly not limited to: hospital visits; visitation and care of widows and orphans; home visits; rest home visits; new member care; looking for opportunities to welcome people to their neighborhood; and looking for service opportunities related to EBF families; strangers; and other community events. ***Task deacons*** will, on the other

hand, focus on: service in missions (care and support of missionaries and their families); hospitality; facility maintenance and upkeep; grounds maintenance and upkeep; retreat and seminar planning; and so on.

Both forms of deacon ministry – community deacons and task deacons - are crucial to the healthy functioning of EBF.

Jesus, the Ultimate Role Model

Deacons are to model themselves after Jesus in the fulfillment of their service to the Fellowship.

Alexander Strauch, once again, highlights this well when he writes:

“When our merciful Lord came to this self-centered, self-seeking prideful world, the virtues of humility and servanthood received radically new meaning and significance (Matthew 20:20-28; Luke 12:37). So if we want to truly understand the Christian idea of servanthood or service, we should study Christ’s life, which is a story of loving, selfless “service” to others. He was a servant *par excellence*.”

Writing further, Strauch succinctly sums up the value and role of deacons within the local church:

“Through the deacons, the local church’s charitable activities are effectively organized and centralized. The deacons are collectors of funds, distributors of relief, and agents of mercy. They help the poor, the jobless, the sick, the widowed, the elderly, the homeless, the refugees, and the disabled. They counsel and guide people. They visit people in their homes. They relieve suffering. They comfort, protect, and encourage people, and help to meet their needs. In contemporary language, they are the congregation’s social workers.”

Summary

Those who serve as Deacons do so out of their love for the Lord and to see His people thrive to His glory. Serving as a Deacon is an integral part of building one another up in Christ until we all attain the mature knowledge of the Son of God. It is a decision that should be made thoughtfully and with great prayer, knowing that serving with Christ-like humility is difficult and taxing. However, the value of knowing that one is serving his Lord and Savior, and encouraging and loving his fellow brothers and sisters brings a deep sense of satisfaction and provides a climate of God-honoring Christ-exalting faith and security for God’s people. In the end, it is all done for the glory of God through Christ by the strength of His Holy Spirit.

Soli Dei Gloria

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