

Deacons

In Acts 6:1-6, the office of deacon was first established in the Jerusalem church in response to the growing needs of the congregation. Although, not called “deacons” (diakonos) these seven servants called out were “to deacon” (diakonein). The issue or need arose concerning the providing of food to the Greek-speaking widows, who reported that they had been neglected in the daily distribution. The apostles called a church meeting to discuss the situation and resolved the problem by appointing seven to serve the needs of the widows. Though the deacons were not first officially called deacons, their first task was “to serve [diakonein] tables”. (Acts 6:2)

The qualifications for deacon have been: 1) good reputation; 2) full of the Holy Spirit; and, 3) full of wisdom. (Acts 6:3).

In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, one finds a more complete account of the requirements to serve as a deacon. It is at this scriptural point that deacon qualifications are given along with qualifications for the OVERSEERS; that tends to water down the intended responsibilities of deacon and merge them with the more administrative virtues of an OVERSEER. They are very different and not a co-existence of power for any church.

Deacons, pure and simple, need to be the spiritual servants of the church; to focus on the needs of the congregation and participate with a servant spirit in corporate worship. Their job is to bring spiritual comfort and ministry to others.

Churches, over time, have misdirected the role of deacon from its ecclesiastical beginning of servanthood to a corporate business focus of church administration. To this extent, some believe that the “deacon board” has become a church sponsored administrative clique of “good-ole-boys”, from one rotation to another, focusing most of their power and influence on themselves rather than the congregation. This is the picture of a “Deacon Board” which has no biblical presence in the church, and is creating discord with member-led governance.

This writer truly feels the role of Overseer is important and the role of Deacon is important, but they are not one-in-the same. Now, how can we separate these roles with biblical authority and create good Christian service?

Eliminate the “Deacon Board”, and biblically seek the meaning and purpose for Deacons in your church. Focus “Deacons” to serve the membership, communicate with the membership, and spread goodwill and productivity in a positive spirit. This will require a new focus of deliberate communication to the Deacons and also require accountability from Deacons to measure results.

The role of “Overseer” is strategic and administrative. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 offers a more complete account of the requirements. The fact that these two church roles are so similar shows the close association between the deacons and the overseers. This writer feels deacons are the serving arm for spiritual ministry of the church and overseers are the administrative arm for ministry. They are separated for the sake of ministry, so the spiritual gifts can be utilized to the glory of God.

Churches with strong Deacon-led administration are missing the Christ-centered intention of the role of Deacon. Why? Because they were trying to place too much responsibility on too few. Churches need to elect good men, responsible men, men of integrity and grace to this servant role. Keep the role of Deacon as pure service to the congregation. Those called to be Overseers (Administrators), with the gift of administration, will take care of business without jeopardizing ministry.

The title of bishop carries with it the job description of “overseer” and the title of pastor means “shepherd”, one who takes care of the flock; the title “deacon” refers to one who “serves”. (see 1 Timothy 3:1-13)

Congregational-led form of governance means the ultimate authority for governing the church resides in the members jointly. This authority comes from Christ who is the head of the body, and the entire body administers the church according to the patterns given in scripture. Congregationalism also means that each local church is an autonomous unit with no organization over it except Christ. This does not mean that the entire congregation must vote on every decision. Responsibilities may be delegated to leaders or any other member of the church; and every member -male or female, including pastor and deacons, has the same vote.

“Deacon Boards” usually have been all male, and voted on by popularity vote after limited screening of spiritual or personal attributes to hold such office. Deacons, who fulfill the role of

servants, should be: 1) of good reputation, 2) full of the Holy Spirit, and 3) full of wisdom. (Acts 6:3).

This writer strongly feels the role of the “Deacon Board” in a Baptist (congregational-led) Church is wrong. There is no scriptural justification. The true character of the position of Deacon found in the scriptures, in its servant role (diakonos), and is vital to the life and functions of the church.

So, why have Deacons confused their scriptural role from servant to overseer? How could this happen? Most often, the congregation allowed over time, the evolution of power to shift toward a Deacon Board; thus eroding the true scriptural basis for the true role.

How can the modern church correct the ills of the past decades?

First – admit the role of Deacon is best focused on servanthood, as proclaimed in scripture.

Second – develop means for Deacons to serve with purpose, integrity and intentionality to meet the scriptural needs of the congregation.

Third – redirect the Administrative concerns to church members – male and female, who have the Spiritual Gift of Administration and the Passion to Organize and administrate the business aspects of the congregation.

This writer feels the congregational-led Baptist Church of the 21st Century is better served by an Administrative Business Council – with the responsibility of conducting the administrative and legal aspects of the church. This council can be comprised of: Pastor, Clerk, Treasurer, Moderator, Chair of Trustees, Chair of Finance Committee, Chair of Personnel Committee, Chair of Nominating Committee, Chair of Missions Committee and Chair of Deacons. These leaders are nominated, voted on and rotated annually by the congregation, to do the work of “overseer” – and most often – are well qualified to do so.

From “Deacon Board” to Administrative Business Council – it’s the right choice!

Good resource: “Who Rules the Church?” by Gerald P. Cowen, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, 2003.