

## **The sermon**

### **Intro**

What does a deacon do? Can women be deacons? What about congregational voting? What about term limits? We'll address these sorts of questions today.

### **READ PASSAGE**

#### **Body**

#### **Point 1: Why deacons?**

##### **Turn to Acts 6:1-7**

##### **READ Acts 6:1-7**

##### **6:1**

The church was exploding with new converts.

But some widows weren't receiving food ("*the daily distribution*"). The Hebrews were native Jews who spoke in Aramaic. The Hellenists were dispersed Jews who had returned to Jerusalem. They spoke in Greek. The early church cared for widows.

In the midst of massive growth, church unity was threatened by a poor food distribution process.

##### **6:2**

The apostles gathered the whole church for a membership meeting. Food concerns were interfering with preaching. This required a solution.

##### **6:3**

The apostles task the congregation with selecting seven men to solve the problem. The seven men are given freedom to solve the dispute on their own.

Men should be selected based on character, wisdom, and evidence of the Spirit's work in their lives.

##### **6:4**

Our priorities are the word of God and prayer, not table-serving.

##### **6:5**

The seven men selected have Greek names, indicating they were Hellenists. In unity, the Hebrews and the Hellenists allowed godly Hellenist men to resolve the dispute. They deferred to those affected.

##### **6:6**

The apostles prayed for the seven's success.

##### **6:7**

It doesn't say how they resolved the problem. But it was successful. The church continued to see new believers coming to faith. Disaster averted. Unity achieved.

## Application

Acts 6 is the origin of deacons. Some call them proto-deacons. 1 Timothy comes about 30 years after Acts 6, when deacon is a formal office in the church. I'm suggesting deacon origins informs deacon practice today.

1. Deacons prevent elders from getting bogged down in logistical matters.

Apostles appointed elders to lead the churches until Jesus returns. Apostle was a temporary office that ended. So today deacons assist elders, not apostles.

If the elders of Palermo Christian Church are bogged down in well issues, decoration disputes, overseeing the Exchange Shop, etc., we can't focus on spiritual matters. That's where deacons come in. That isn't to say an elder can't stack wood or paint a wall. But if I'm spending my days painting walls and putting away clothing, I'm not being a pastor.

2. Deacons are problem solvers.

I thank you for consideration in not moving the pulpit or revamping the whole sanctuary without mentioning it to me. On the other hand, there's a time for elders to leave it in the deacons' hands.

When there were questions about flowers and things being moved around and who was allowed to do what and who's in charge? I said give it to the deacons. Acts 6 is why.

3. Deacons protect church unity.

Deacons have been called "shock-absorbers." They solve logistical problems that threaten church unity.

A flushing problem in the church goes unaddressed. People want a solution. Some want new toilets. Others think it's a well issue. Division ensues. People are threatening to leave the church so they can go to a church where they have toilets they can depend on.

As crazy as it sounds, toilet problems can destroy a church. Satan's schemes are diverse! That's where deacons come in. They're proactive. Deacons see a problem. They jump on it. Problem resolved before the church self-destructs.

4. Deacons take care of tangible needs.

Historically, deacons have overseen care for the poor. Like distributing food to widows.

## Point 2: What's required? (3:8-10, 12)

Like elders, deacons have requirements. Very similar to elders with the exception of "able to teach."

**dignified** = their conduct is worthy of respect.

**not double-tongued** = not hypocritical. Not deceitful. You can trust their words.

**not addicted to much wine** = can't have much wine, but they can have some wine = don't get drunk. Can't drink enough wine that they're legally drunk.

**not greedy for dishonest gain:** Jesus said you can't serve both God and money. And you don't have to worry about them stealing from the deacon's fund.

**must hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience**

Mystery = truth that once was hidden but now is revealed. The “*mystery of the faith*” is the revealed truth which makes up the Christian faith, the gospel. “*with a clear conscience*” means agreement with the apostles’ doctrine without reservation. Things like sin, substitutionary atonement, salvation in Christ alone.

Deacons know Scripture. Students yes, teachers no.

**let them also be tested first...blameless**

Like the elders (“*must not be a recent convert*”), a time of testing is required. Blameless meaning without any legitimate accusations that would disqualify them.

**husband of one wife** = faithful to their wife. Not has to be married, can only have been married once, can never have been divorced, etc. The idea is the deacon needs good character today. Divorce should be handled in a case by case basis based on the biblical qualifications.

**managing their children and their own households well** = If they’re going to manage practical matter, they need to be able to manage their own home first. They make decisions. They devise solutions. They handle money.

Serving in the home is the proving ground for serving in the church. Sounds like men only right? Great question. See you in the next point.

**Application**

Can you see why character is required? Can you see why deacons are more than just handymen, people who can use spreadsheets, or successful businessmen? Deacons may have these skills, but they need character too. Dealing with people and dealing with money and dealing with potential church implosions requires character.

**Point 3: What about women deacons? (3:13)**

As a pastor I get questions like, “I’m a woman, I can’t be a deacon right?” Let’s tackle it.

*Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.* – 3:11

I want you to be confident in your English Bibles. So I rarely if ever question the English translation. I want you to have confidence you can know God’s word by reading your own Bibles so I rarely discuss Greek grammar.

In order to answer the deacon question I need to address the Greek. The ESV has “*Their wives likewise*” indicating the wives of the deacons. However, the ESV has a footnote after “likewise” which says, “Or *Wives likewise*, or *Women likewise*.” So the ESV leaves the possibility it’s discussing women in general, not deacons’ wives.

So let me explain why I think 3:11 is talking about women deacons, not deacons’ wives.

- 1) The office of deacon is not a position where authority is exercised over men.

1 Timothy 2:12 isn’t violated by having women deacons. Assuming deacons aren’t functioning like elders.

- 2) “*women*” in general not “*wives*” is in view in 3:11.

The word translated “*wives*” can also be translated “*women*.”

When wives are intended, there should be contextual indicators like “their” or “one’s own.” “*Their*” is supplied by the ESV, but it’s not in the Greek. Because there’s no indicators that wives are intended, we should understand these listed as women.

The NASB translates the word “*women.*”

- 3) Note these women have character qualifications which would seem to indicate an office.
- 4) So we have character qualifications expressed for women who are likely not wives of deacons mentioned in a section on deacon qualifications.
- 5) These women are located in a larger section that discusses both elder and deacon offices.
- 6) Whatever these women are, they have qualifications and they’re found in a section where church offices are involved.
- 7) That they’re found in a deacon context suggests they’re women, not wives, who carried out a deacon function.
- 8) Let’s ask another question.

If wives, why qualifications for deacons’ wives but not for elders’ wives? No elder wife qualifications indicates we shouldn’t expect deacon wife qualifications. This leads us to conclude female deacons are in view.

Here’s how 3:8-13 fits together:

\*3:8-10 = general deacon requirements

\*3:11 = female deacon specific requirements

\*3:12 = male deacon specific requirements

\*3:13 = general promise to all deacons, both male and female

### **Two more thoughts**

*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [“Or deaconess”] of the church at Cenchreae, <sup>2</sup> that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well. – Romans 16:1-2*

The word “*servant*” is the word for deacon. To deacon is to serve others. It’s possible Paul is mentioning a female deacon. The fact that Phoebe’s a *deaconos* of a specific church might indicate an office. Coming to collect monies and supplies fits with deacon tasks.

Deaconesses show up early in church history. About 50 years after 1 Timothy. The early church had female deacons assist other women. Women ministering to women fended off accusations of immorality.

Not as clear as other issues. More probable than not (like Tom Brady’s involvement in deflategate). I am comfortable in my conscience allowing my wife to serve as deacon. But isn’t Acts 6 men only? Good point. Answer? Acts 6 is the origin. 1 Timothy is the established office 30 years later. Later on the church incorporated female deacons.

### **Application**

As for the qualifications...

**dignified** = honorable.

**not slanderers** = bad-mouthing people by saying things that are untrue.

**but sober-minded** = good decision making; here specifically use of the mouth.

**faithful in all things** = trustworthy, dependable, reliable “*in all things*” like money and keeping private conversations private.

#### **Point 4: Odds n’ ends (3:13)**

*For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.* – 3:13

For indicates an explanation. Choose qualified candidates because good things happen when deacons serve well:

1. Serving well results in a good reputation.

Be a deacon so you can make a name for yourself? This sounds a little self-serving right? Aren’t deacons supposed to serve the body, not themselves? The idea is serving well results in congregational respect which will enhance their service in the years to come.

2. Serving well results in a bold faith.

“confidence” in the sense of greater confidence in God leading to a bolder faith. As they serve faithfully, they see God at work in the church. Which increases their confidence in God. And their boldness.

#### **Pastors**

Let me make a crazy suggestion. We should call every elder pastor, not just the paid Senior Pastor. Because elders pastor.

*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. – Acts 20:28*

“*to care for*” is the verb form of the noun “pastors” we find in Ephesians 4:11. One more.

*So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; <sup>3</sup> not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. – 1 Peter 5:1-3*

Elders are instructed to shepherd (= pastor) God’s flock. That’s what an elder does. They shepherd. They pastor. Consider calling Dennis, Gerald, and Ralph pastor. That’s what they do. Pastor isn’t limited to paid staff.

#### **Number of elders?**

More than one. The patterns we see in Acts 20:17 and 20:28 and Philippians 1:1 is multiple elders/overseers in the churches.

One danger of requiring a certain number in the Constitution is the church might be forced to put unqualified men into office if the church doesn’t have three suitable men. On the other hand, a Senior Pastor allowed to do everything he wants unchecked isn’t good either. Plurality is good.

#### **What about voting for elders and deacons?**

Three arguments:

##### Acts 6

The church body chose the seven proto-deacons.

### 1 Corinthians 5:4-5

*When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup> you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. – 1 Corinthians 5:4-5*

The whole church gathers together to perform church discipline. Not one Senior Pastor acting alone nor a group of four elders. The whole church has oversight of members, not just the elders.

### 2 Corinthians 2:5-6

*Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure- not to put it too severely- to all of you. <sup>6</sup> For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, – 2 Corinthians 2:5-6*

Church discipline again. The majority inflicted church discipline (punishment) on one member.

This implies that there was a minority not in favor. Sounds like a majority were in favor. Sounds like majority vote.

Taken together, these passages affirm congregational rule and congregational vote.

### **Elder and deacon term limits?**

The Bible says nothing of term limits. If anything, 3:13 opposes deacon term limits. Serving well benefits the deacon personally. So why make them take a break if they're serving well?

While nothing is said of elder term limits, 1 Timothy 5 deals with elders "*who persist in sin.*" The protection against an unfit elder serving for life isn't term limits. It's congregational rule and church discipline.

### **Christ**

The deacon office ultimately points us to Christ.

*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." – Mark 10:45*

The verb for "served" and "serve" is *diakoneo*. To deacon, to serve.

Jesus came from heaven to earth and took on human flesh not to be served but to serve humanity. By dying on a cross so that whoever believes and trusts in him would be saved from their sins and have eternal life.

When you think deacon, think suffering servant. Think Jesus.

Jesus offers salvation to all in this room. Ponder your sin. Ponder your brokenness. Ponder a suffering, serving Savior. Trust him. Follow him. Embrace his rule. Love the one who served on the cross.

### **Conclusion**

Christian, follow your Savior by serving with the gifts and callings he's assigned to you.

Deacons, serve the elders by freeing us to meet spiritual needs. Serve the body by protecting our unity.