

Ordained Servant Online

Servant Training

If You Are a Deacon

Nathan Trice

If you are a deacon in Christ's church, you have been called by God to a high office indeed. You serve a vital role in protecting the church's primary calling of the ministry of the Word. You represent to the church our God's deep concern for the poor among his people, and particularly our Savior's own compassion toward the poor in his earthly ministry. And you have an opportunity to lead the church of Christ in adorning her witness to the world with deeds of mercy to accompany words of gospel truth.

This article seeks to refresh the perspectives of deacons regarding the true significance of their office as the Lord of the church has designed it. It is my hope that it will elevate in your mind, if you are a deacon, a sense of the tremendous importance of diaconal ministry in the church, as well as enlarge your insight into the heart of compassion of our Lord, to whom this office and its ministry is so important.

The Origin of Your Office

If you are a deacon, you should understand well the significance of Acts 6 to your office. According to the traditional interpretation of the church, dating back to the days of the church fathers, this is that portion of the biblical account in which Christ institutes the office of deacon through his apostles.

The background to the institution of the diaconate involved the church leaders' struggle with what we sometimes call "a good problem to have." As evidence of the recent outpouring of the Spirit upon his church, and the resulting overflow of the love for the brethren that was the distinguishing mark of Christ's disciples (John 13:35), there had been a remarkable outpouring of material generosity toward the poor within the Christian community. Earlier, in Acts 4:34-35, we are told:

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

No doubt the wise and equitable distribution of these funds for the poor weighed heavily upon the apostolic leadership, especially in light of the remarkable growth of the church in these days, and their primary concern for evangelism and discipleship. This burden of responsibility reached the breaking point in the account of Acts 6:1-7, triggered by a controversy that arose in the church over the distribution of funds for the poor. The Greek-speaking members of the church in Jerusalem were convinced that their widows were being slighted in the distributions, and the indignation that accompanied this conviction threatened the peace of the church. The apostles were apparently convinced that at least part of the reason for this state of affairs lay in their having too many items to directly oversee effectively. In a meeting of the whole church, the apostles say (vss. 2b-4):

It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

The Greek word translated "serve" in verse 2 is the verb form of the word *διάκονος* (*diakonos*), from which we get our word "deacon." It is the same word that is used elsewhere to describe a minister of the gospel as a "servant of Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 4:6). It is also a word that Jesus used to describe his

own kind of ministry: "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve." (Mark 10:45). However, ever since the apostles in Acts called for men to relieve them of the responsibility of "serving tables" (a reference to money tables, most likely: the mechanism for receiving and distributing funds for the poor), the word "deacon" (servant) has come to have a more specialized reference to a certain officer in the church. The apostle Paul uses it that way in Philippians 1:1:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers (or elders) and deacons (*διακόνους, diakonous*): Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

All members of the church are "servants" in a broader sense, but there are certain "servants" who are elected by the congregation and ordained by the apostles (or elders) to serve with authority.

Because the responsibilities of the new office would entail difficult decisions, interactions with members in delicate situations, and even the resolution of serious conflicts, the right men for this job needed to be "of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (v. 3). In that first deacon nomination and election process, seven such men were identified by the congregation, and the first deacon ordination in Christ's church was held: "These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them" (v. 6). The office of deacon was now in place.

The Reason for Your Office (Broadly)

If you are a deacon, you also need to recognize what is the most basic reason for your office. Acts 6 makes clear that the broadest reason for the existence of deacons in the church is to preserve and protect the church's primary calling of the ministry of the Word and prayer.

Recall that, before the first deacons were installed into office, the apostles were carrying the full burden of leadership in the church, including the administration of mercy ministry funds. In Presbyterianism the calling and office of apostle is viewed as having ceased, and it is now elders along with the minister who have the highest authority in the local church and the final responsibility for all the ministries therein. Thus, the same partnership in ministry that was created in Acts 6 between the apostles and deacons should continue today between elders and deacons. Though all of the affairs of the local church are under the ultimate oversight of the elders (the word "overseer" is interchangeable in the New Testament with elder), there are many important concerns of leadership that, in a congregation of any size, would inevitably divert them from what are their two most crucial tasks: ministering the Word both publically and privately, and interceding in prayer with and for the members of the church. Thus, potentially any leadership concerns that go beyond these two most vital ones may, and often should be, delegated to deacons for their oversight.

It is for this reason that the scope of diaconal duties is quite rightly very broad in our churches. This is in keeping with the broader principle of delegation established in Acts 6, in which a specific task was given to the deacons to preserve certain priorities in the apostles (elders today). Thus, not only the church's funds designated for the relief of the poor, but the funds of the church as a whole may be delegated to the diaconate for oversight. The many decisions that arise in connection with property ownership and maintenance, the logistics of facility use, and so on can be referred by the elders to the deacons. Elders may certainly retain direct oversight of these areas if necessary, and they always are subject to the review of elders. However, it will often be wise, where qualified men may be found, for the elders to delegate many of these responsibilities of leadership to deacons. As assistants to the elders, the deacons serve an indispensable role: that of enabling the focus of the elders to remain on the spiritual lives of the saints.

Of course, there are many forms of service in the life of the church that should be shared by all the members of the church, ordained and not. Deacons are not to be "the servants" of the church in the sense that they personally do anything and everything that needs doing. They are servant-leaders in the church, who on the one hand have hearts willing to do the most menial of tasks for the sake of the

body, yet who also have the authority to direct and oversee the involvement of the whole church in such tasks. The “deacon as church custodian” stereotype is shown for its folly by the high spiritual qualifications required by Scripture for deacons. With the exception of being “able to teach” (the ministry of the Word), the personal qualities prerequisite for the office of deacon are essentially the same as those required for elders (see 1 Timothy 3:1–13). The reason for this is that the office of deacon is one of leadership and authority in the church. Their service, then, should include enlisting the involvement of the broader congregation in the fulfillment of tasks fitting for every Christian to be involved with.

The Reason for Your Office (Particularly)

But if you are a deacon, you also need to be aware of what is the more particular reason for your office: one that most exhibits the glory of your office and the goodness of the one who ordained it. Acts 6 also attaches to the office of deacon in a special way the calling of the church to minister to the physical and temporal needs of the poor: what is often called “mercy ministry.”

The impulse of the early Christians to give to meet each other’s material needs grew out of a profound awareness of one of the implications of the gospel: it is an expression of a holistic love on the part of God; it aims at the ultimate well-being of the whole person, body and soul. This is part of the reason that Jesus’s earthly ministry consisted not only in a ministry of teaching, but also a ministry of healing. The latter, in addition to providing attestation of his true identity as the Son of God, was also an expression of his compassion for sinners who were suffering the physical consequences of sin. It also pointed to the kind of ultimate restoration that his kingdom would bring: the end of all human deprivation, spiritual and material, for those who put their faith in Christ. The king was revealed as one who had compassion and brought relief to sinners, both body and soul. And those who were made conformed to his image by the Spirit had an instinctive urge to meet both kinds of needs in others. As the widows in the church at Jerusalem found, life within the redeemed community was one in which relief from both spiritual and temporal woes could be found.

This mercy ministry itself has a very broad application. The form of mercy ministry found in the book of Acts was focused upon widows, those in the congregation who typically would have faced the most pressing needs. But the legitimate objects of such ministry, by extension, would include those within the church who, by reasons of health, disability, old age, or other providential circumstances, find themselves lacking basic necessities of life. Likewise, the needs felt by the widows of the early church were met primarily by means of the monetary gifts of the church. Yet there are many temporal needs within the body of Christ that are best or only met by gifts of time and effort. From this we can deduce that the mercy ministry labors of the deacons should go far beyond mere check-writing and fund management. The temporal and material needs of the body are the special concern of their office, and their calling extends to all manner of service on behalf of the needy that addresses those concerns. Whereas one member, through financial hardship, may find himself in need of help purchasing a vehicle, another member, through age or disability, may find himself in need of transportation itself by others with vehicles. Both are the proper concern of the diaconate. Again, one may need help with a mortgage payment; another may need help drafting a family budget: both are the proper concern of the diaconate. And again, the deacon serves the church best when he seeks to facilitate and coordinate the efforts of the whole congregation to minister to the needy in their midst.

Thus, the office of deacon represents a most fitting and essential complement to the office of elder in the church: together they represent the “two hands” of the church’s ministry. Whereas one has its primary expression in a ministry of Word, the other has its primary expression in a ministry of deed. According to 1 Peter 4:10–11, these are the two broad categories of gifts that the whole church partakes of—speaking gifts and serving gifts:

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies.

It is thus very natural and fitting that these two kinds of gifts be epitomized in the men that serve in the two offices of elder and deacon. And it becomes clearer why the mercy ministry of the church is a necessary complement to the gospel ministry. Without genuine compassion for the material needs of our brothers, our assurances of love for them will sound hollow (James 2:15–16). The calling of the deacons is to lead the church in such a way as to ensure that its love is not in word or talk only, but in deed and in truth (1 John 3:17–18). This is not to displace the ministry of the Word as the primary calling of the church. It is rather to strengthen it, and to render it more credible and effective.

The Significance of Your Office

If you are a deacon, therefore, the special calling of your office happens to be a reflection of one of the major themes of the Bible: our God has a special concern for the poor. This is not something revealed for the first time in New Testament church polity. Rather, the institution of the diaconate is the fulfillment of a long-standing record of God's heart for the poor.

For example, the call for compassion for the poor is written large in the instructions given to Israel by Moses. The Israelites' own deliverance by Yahweh from poverty in Egypt was to shape their responses to the poor within their own communities. Since they themselves as a people had been redeemed from poverty, they were told by God in Deuteronomy 15:11, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land." Just as God had demonstrated a heart for the poor in singling out Israel among all the greater nations of the world, so his people were to have their own heart for the poor in their midst. And legislation within the Mosaic law included provisions and protections for the poor, the enforcement of which was a precursor to the diaconal ministry of the new covenant community (Exodus 22–23; Leviticus 19, 25; Deuteronomy 15, 24). When the apostle Paul committed himself so zealously to an offering for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8–9), he was acting on an ancient impulse within the law itself.

Likewise, warnings are given against taking advantage of the weakness of the poor in the wisdom literature of Israel. The reason? God identifies with the poor in a special way: what is done to the poor he counts as done to him: "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him" (Prov. 14:31). Likewise, the poor who are abused will find a dreadful defender in God himself: "Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate, for the LORD will plead their cause and rob of life those who rob them" (Prov. 22: 22). God's people were to recognize that their treatment of the poor had a direct correspondence to their own relationship with God: a theme which would be reinforced in the New Testament by our Lord. Jesus made this clear when he said of ministry to the poor among his disciples: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Matt. 25: 40). God's jealousy for the poor is further underscored in a grim way as it forms a major rationale for his wrath against his people in the days of the prophets. Isaiah's opening words of rebuke for the guilty nation single out its crimes against the poor: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (1:16–17).

This is a message brought by many of the prophets of old; God's anger against his people is stirred by their neglect of the needs of the poor, and their actual abuse of that portion of the covenant community that God was so mindful of. The repentance and reformation that God calls for is repeatedly put in terms of mercy and justice toward the poor:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isa. 58:6–7)

This emphasis on mercy ministry as at the heart of true religion finds its echo in various places in the New Testament, particularly in the well-known words of James the brother of Jesus: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and

to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1: 27). The prophets and the apostles are one in underscoring—for all God's people—how a heart for the poor is indispensable to a heart after God's own heart.

Certainly the most spectacular way that the whole of Scripture underscores the significance of the work of deacons is in its casting of the work of the Messiah in "diaconal" terms. What will be the nature of the Messiah's rule? Isaiah writes:

But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. (11:4)

Who, consequently, will find the coming of the kingdom of the Messiah "good news"? We are told in Isaiah 29:19, "The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel." What will be this Messiah's sense of mission? Isaiah depicts the coming anointed one as saying: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (61:1). This is a text which Jesus himself claimed to be fulfilling in his life and ministry (Luke 4:18). All of this emphasis upon the coming of Christ as a ministry to the poor explains those opening words of our Lord's most famous sermon: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3, compare with Luke 6:20). It also further illuminates the reason Jesus devoted the larger part of his public ministry to the relatively poorer region of Galilee rather than Judea.

Of course, none of this biblical data suggests that God's favor lies in an unqualified way upon men of material neediness. The blessings of the gospel come to those who have suffered deprivation and oppression in this life *and* who in their need look to the Lord for help. It is those who embrace the gospel by faith who will inherit the kingdom of heaven. But our Lord's prioritizing of ministry to the poor and his relative pessimism about the prospects of gospel success with the rich (Matt. 19:23–24; Luke 6: 24), highlight the important place that ministry to the poor should have in the New Testament church. And it underscores the significance of that office which has a particular concern for this kind of ministry.

The Opportunity of Your Office

Finally, then, if you are a deacon, you should be keenly aware of the opportunity that comes with your office: the opportunity to adorn the gospel that the church offers to the world. It is only through the ministry of the gospel that any sinner can find relief from the eternal consequences of sin, and this must remain the central and primary work of the church. But deacons are in a position to make that message of divine love more winsome and credible to the world by leading the church in deeds of mercy.

This, of course, reflects a certain perspective on the question of whether or not the diaconal ministry of the church should extend to the world. Should diaconal ministry work only in concert with the ministry of the Word within the congregation (edification), or does it have a place as well complementing the ministry of the Word to the world (evangelism)? It is certainly true that the primary focus of diaconal ministry within the biblical record is on the covenant community. A special priority is given to providing aid to poor "brothers," or fellow Hebrews, in the Old Testament legislation (Deut. 15:11–12). The widows that Paul refers to as being eligible for ongoing diaconal support are obviously members of the church (1 Tim. 5:3–16), as were the widows in Acts 6. And the special offering for the poor that Paul takes among the churches is for the "saints in Jerusalem" (Acts 11: 29, Rom. 15: 26, 2 Cor. 8). All this is to be expected in the light of the fact that diaconal ministry is a vital component of the communion of the saints: it is a benefit of the unique bond of love that Christ has formed by his saving union with his church. Serving one another in love (Gal. 5:13), as well as speaking the truth to one another in love (Eph. 4:15), are both vital expressions of the unity of the Spirit. Just as the priority of the ministry of the Word each Lord's Day is for the assembled people of God, so also the priority of the diaconal funds is for the needs of that covenant community. The church is the primary object of

attention for both elders and deacons.

But it is precisely this parallel to the ministry of the Word that points to the propriety, and indeed the vital importance, of a diaconal ministry to the world. If the ministry of the Word is not intended by Christ to be exclusively for the benefit of the church, it would be surprising to find the ministry of deed restricted by Scripture for the sole benefit of the church. Even in the Mosaic law the resources of the covenant community were to be shared with the sojourner and stranger (Lev. 19:10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19–21; 26:11–13). This was because the Israelites themselves knew what it was like to be sojourners, and knew that God had a special concern for sojourners along with the fatherless and widows (Deut. 10:18–19). Likewise, we do not find the apostles limiting the ministry of deed to the church, but rather we find the apostle Paul exhorting the churches in this way: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10).

This principle seems to embody perfectly both the scope and priority of all the church’s ministry: it is first for the household of faith, but it is also to overflow intentionally into the lives of all that we meet as we go into the world. Indeed, is this not the broad trajectory of Jesus’s own ministry? He came with a ministry of Word and deed to the covenant community of Israel, prioritizing a ministry to them (though even then not excluding entirely those outside; see for example Mark 7:24–30). However, by the time of his “Resurrection Proclamation” (also known as the Great Commission, Matt. 28:18–20), we find him calling for this ministry to be carried by his disciples to all the nations. And again, what was the template of ministry that he himself had provided and that was now to go to all the world? It was a ministry of Word *and* deed. The ministry of the Word had the clear priority, but his labors to meet material needs also clearly “adorned” the gospel of the kingdom that he preached. This is how deacons today can see their own opportunity in the church’s outward mission: to adorn the church’s proclamation of the gospel.

Diaconal ministry “adorns the gospel” by providing the tangible evidence of our true motives in preaching the gospel: love for the lost. If verbal expressions of love apart from material assistance can sometimes sound hollow to our own brothers and sisters in the church (James 2:15–16), surely this is just as possible—if not more so—in our ministry to the world. The forgiveness of sins and a new life in Christ is what men fundamentally need, and all temporal needs are trivial in comparison. Yet a compassionate response to men’s temporal needs can encourage an openness of heart to the gospel’s provision for their deeper needs. Indeed, this seems to be our Lord’s perspective on ministry as he provided food for both body and soul to the multitudes, all the while aware that many would be initially drawn more to one than the other (John 6:26–27). It is for this reason that in the OPC we send to the mission field both missionaries and missionary deacons, theological instructors as well as medical doctors. Indeed, in certain circumstances the ministry of the Word is virtually unintelligible apart from a ministry of deed, which is why the OPC also has a mechanism for providing disaster response. The work of diaconal ministry alongside gospel ministry keeps the holistic nature of God’s love for man in clear view, and the former often opens doors of opportunity for the latter. Men are more inclined to listen to those who are undeniably and tangibly loving them.

So all this is to say that there is a kingdom-building component to the work of the diaconate, along with a covenant-nurturing component. Deacons have an opportunity to provide leadership to the church in her mercy ministry to those outside her doors, always with a view to creating avenues of access for the gospel itself. Just as elders should see themselves as having an opportunity unique to their office to lead the church in evangelism and discipleship of the lost, deacons should see themselves as having a similar opportunity in ministries of mercy. Not only can they themselves explore and pursue ministries in the community and beyond that wisely and compassionately address material needs in a Christian context, but they can promote involvement in such ministries within the congregation. Ministries of service are, in fact, accessible to many in a typical congregation who would be otherwise intimidated by pure evangelistic work. And it is often in the context of ordinary servanthood, and the human connection that it provides, that ordinary Christians find the courage to give a clear testimony to Christ and the gospel. Deed ministry opens doors for Word ministry in the heart of the giver as well as the receiver. Deacons have a unique opportunity, therefore, to lead the congregation in an outward orientation toward the needs of the lost. And few things are more needful

for us as leaders in the Presbyterian tradition today.

You, a Deacon!

So if you are a deacon, you have a calling that is utterly essential to the church's mission to be a Christ-like community. Without your service in support of the elders, the primary calling of the church—the ministry of the Word and prayer—is threatened. And without your service alongside the elders, the ministry of the Word, both within and without the church, is left unadorned with the compassion of Christ. If you are a deacon, may a heightened sense of the tremendous importance of your office lead you to a fuller commitment to the responsibilities and opportunities that it entails. For it is specifically to deacons that the apostle Paul issues this promise of reward: "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" (1 Tim. 3:13).

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