

Biblical Truth About Deacons

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INTRODUCTION

Within religious circles there are many different views of what a deacon's role should be. Some see the role of a deacon as a stepping stone on the way to being a member of another ministry. (Pastor, Missionary ect.) There are those that view the role of deacons as a governing board over the affairs of the church. I've met some deacons who viewed their role as being "checks and balances" on the Pastor. In the eyes of others, the role of the deacon is simply just a title with no function. There are even those who deny that the role of a deacon within the realm of the church even exists.

Why are there such varied views on the role of a deacon? Could it be that some are viewing the role of the deacon through tradition, rather than the truth of the Word of God? Let us seek to understand the role of the deacon through biblical bifocals, "*Rightly dividing the word of truth*" (2 Timothy 2:15).

As Bible-believing Baptists, we often pride ourselves in the fact that the Bible is our only rule of faith and practice. Yet, if we are not careful, we can find ourselves viewing God's work through the lens of tradition instead of the truth. So, put aside your lexicons, Bible dictionaries, and Baptist church manuals, pray to God for wisdom, and then THINK. "*Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth*" (John 17:17).

A proper relationship among the pastor and the congregation is essential for building a Christ honoring, smoothly operating, effective and efficient local church. In a good church, many are considered for serving as a deacon who meet the spiritual qualifications, but for one or more reasons these men may not understand the role of the deacon in relationship to the pastor and congregation. It is my intent to present the scriptural teaching on this office, so men selected to serve as a deacon will be equipped to do so in a God honoring way. I want to examine the scriptural qualifications and duties of the position, as well as dispel some common misconceptions. It is my hope

that this booklet will be an aid to pastors and churches in selecting qualified men to serve as deacons and an aid to those selected, so they can serve effectively and scripturally.

"Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:" Philippians 1:1

It is obvious that the church at Philippi had "bishops" and "deacons."

These two roles are further distinguished in First Timothy chapter three.

*"This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work."
"And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless."* 1 Timothy 3: 1, 10

These Two Roles Are Distinct in Service

The titles bishop, elder, and pastor literally mean an overseer or ruler.

"The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;" 1 Peter 5:1-2 (emphasis added)

"And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves." 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (emphasis added)

"Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." Hebrews 13:7 (emphasis added)

"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." Hebrews 13:17 (emphasis added)

The title of deacon literally means a servant or waiter.

"Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre;" 1 Timothy 3:8

"Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables." Acts 6:2

The word serve in Acts 6:2 comes from the word deacons found in 1 Timothy 3:8 which means an attendant, a waiter, a servant, or one that runs errands.

Therefore, we see that these roles are very distinct in service. The role of a pastor is clearly that of an overseer, ruler, and edifier. The role of a deacon is that of a servant, one that waits on the needs of another.

These Two Roles Are Also Distinct in Selection

The pastor is God-chosen and God-appointed.

"And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church... Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." Acts 20:17-28

We see in these verses "*the Holy Ghost hath made you...*" it is God that chooses men for the role of pastor. It is also God that appoints these chosen men to accomplish their purpose within the church "*...overseers, to feed the church of God.*"

The deacon is pastor-appointed.

There is a vast difference between knowing what you are [your role] and knowing what you are supposed to do [your responsibilities].

A responsibility can be defined as something for which one is held accountable.

Much of the confusion over the office of a deacon revolves around its purpose. We know that deacons are servants in the church, but exactly what are they supposed to do?

I'm not sure when it actually hit me, but I finally came to the realization that I actually did not know of a Bible verse that CLEARLY defined the FUNCTION of the office of deacon.

The shocking truth is, The Bible only MENTIONS deacons in TWO places in the word of God: Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3. That's all. There's no more. In Phil. 1:1, Paul included the deacons in his greeting to the saints at Philippi, but he gave no hint as to their qualifications or their functions in that passage.

In 1 Tim. 3, qualifications of character are given for those who would serve as deacons, but there are no clear statements, as far as I have been able to discern, as to the function of their office.

Bible-believing Baptists hold that the deacon is one of the two offices in the local church, and the shocking truth of the matter is that the King James Bible does not even plainly declare the functions of that office. A man may claim to know what a deacon does, based on an encyclopedia, dictionary, lexicon, commentary, or other opinion, but I believe I have stated the fact of the case. The Bible is SILENT on the matter. So, what we will try to do is separate Baptist traditions from Bible truth! It is always healthy to examine our traditions in light of scripture. Additionally, we can often determine what something IS, by knowing what it is NOT.

THE EARLIEST DEACONS IN PRINCIPLE ONLY

Upon examination of Acts 6, there is absolutely NO mention of the word, "deacon," in the chapter. The word does not even occur in the book of Acts. So, to satisfy "the brethren", we will make a few comments on the passage.

At this time the church was in its infant stage of development, but was growing rapidly. On the day of Pentecost 3,000 were saved and we are told the Lord was adding daily to that number. In Acts 4:4, we are told the number had grown to 5,000 and in 5:14 we read, "and the believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women." By Acts 6, when deacons were selected, the church was probably numbering between 5,000 and 10,000 people.

To further understand what caused the selection of these men, we must go back to Acts 4:32-35.

"And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the price of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need."

We can immediately sense the spirit of love, unity and concern that marked these believers. They had been transformed by the gospel and were personally caring for the needs of lesser off brethren. As the numbers multiplied, however, the task of properly distributing to people's needs became an overwhelming task for the Apostles. These few men were unable to distribute food and other goods on top of handling the preaching responsibilities they had to fulfill. In fact, as Acts 6:4 suggests, they hardly had time for prayer. Let's examine the problems that arose from this situation and the response of the Apostles.

Acts 6:1-7, "And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then they called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Phillip and Prochorus and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. "

Luke tells us that a murmuring arose among the Grecians against the Hebrews, because the Grecian widows were being neglected. Just to clarify the situation, we should note at this point that all of these people were Jews, who had come to faith in Jesus Christ as their Messiah and Savior, but some of them were Grecian Jews; that is, they were "Hellenized" having been affected by Greek culture. The others were Jews who had remained quite strict in Jewish custom and practice. This group is referred to as Hebrews. There had been conflict between the two groups before they were saved and now that underlying problem surfaced again in the church. These new believers still had a lot of growing to do.

As we scan verses 4-7, we see the intent in having a group of men to take some burden off the apostles, so they could do a more effective job in preaching and praying.

Verse 6 tells us the seven men were presented to the Apostles, who prayed for them and laid their hands on them, setting them apart for the work. Luke tells us that these men obviously eased the pressures, because the Word of God went forth in power and fruitfulness (vs. 7).

I'm not sure if Acts 6 is talking about Deacons or not. No one knows for sure, but if they are the first deacons, they were supposed to take care of the widows. That's all the passage says. Following are some observations and suggestions that may help in the area of deacon's responsibility.

Responsibility to the Pastor of the Church

The primary responsibility of the deacon is to the pastor. The needs of the people could have been met by the pastors. They could have distributed to the widows.

However, the pastors' need to spend time in the Word of God and in prayer could not be met while they were meeting this particular need of the people. I guess you could say that there was a conflict of needs. The primary need of the two was for the preachers to continue to seek the face of God that he might lead the church of God to the glory of God. "*But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word*" (Acts 6:4).

The church at Jerusalem was being blessed with tremendous numerical and spiritual growth because of the ministry of these men. The problem was that the spiritual momentum of the whole church could have been stalled in order to meet the physical needs of a few. Therefore the primary responsibility of the deacon is to ensure that the pastor is able to spend time with the Lord in order to fulfill his role as the spiritual overseer and edifier within the church of God.

Physical Responsibility to the Pastor

This involves the time and wellness of the pastor. The deacon should always be looking for opportunities to free his pastor from tasks that could hinder his time with the Lord and his family. We have already seen the importance of the pastor's time with the Lord. It is also very important that the pastor have time to nurture his relationship with his wife and children. The Bible is clear that his first ministry is to his family. "*A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife...One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; [For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?]*" (1 Timothy 3:2-5)

The deacon should also be aware of the heavy spiritual and emotional load that the pastor carries, and make sure that he is given opportunities to get away for some rest and rejuvenation. The uniqueness of a pastor's heart is sometimes hard for us to comprehend. He never truly "clocks out." Whether he is at church, driving down the road, lying in bed, or on a family vacation, you are continually on his mind. Many of the burdens he is bearing can only be shared with the Lord. A good Deacon will be able to discern when he is running on empty or dealing with a difficult situation. When deacons sense this in their pastor, it is imperative that they provide him with the opportunity to pull up to the pump and refuel his tank.

Fiscal Responsibility to the Pastor

It is also the responsibility of the deacons to make sure that the pastor has the resources to take care of himself and his family. "*Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel*" (1 Corinthians 9:14). I don't know of any man that could give himself continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word when his family is lacking the necessities of life. Every year the deacons should evaluate the pastor's compensation package and make sure that his needs are being

met. This should include salary, housing, and transportation, as well as health and life insurance. It always amazes me when I ask folks if their pastor has health insurance. More often than not I just receive a blank stare in reply. Yet they would never think of going into their workplaces tomorrow and canceling the health insurance plan for their families. The Lord will take care of those who take care of the pastor. The poor widow at Zarephath experienced this wonderful truth (see 1 Kings 17:8-16).

Responsibility to the People of the Church

A wonderful part of helping the pastor fulfill his ministry is the opportunity that deacons have to minister to people. These responsibilities should be identified and appointed by the pastor. Every church is different and every pastor's needs in this area are different.

Below are four major areas that are often blessings to a pastor:

- Caring—meeting the physical and emotional needs of the widows and others within the church family
- Counseling—assisting at the altar, front door, and other occasions as needed
- Counting—taking care of the tithes and offerings of the church
- finance, building, missions, etc. that can be called into action to assist the pastor as needed

Deacons are scripturally qualified men who are appointed by the pastor to serve specific needs within the church that would otherwise distract the pastor from prayer and the ministry of the word.

A Deacon's Relationship

A relationship can be defined as a logical or natural association between two or more people. Relationships are very important in the business world. Corporations spend great effort and monies to develop and nurture relationships. They have entire departments dedicated to the task. They have HR (Human Resources) departments to take care of their employees. They also have PR (Public Relations) departments to develop and maintain relationships with those outside of the company. They do all of this just to sell a product.

The church of the living God is in the "business" of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek"*

[Romans 1:16]. It is not a product, it is the *"power of God."* May we devote our efforts in developing our relationships to the furtherance of the Gospel of Christ.

The Deacon's Relationship with the Lord

These men were to be, *"full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom"* (Acts 6:3b).

The filling of the Holy Spirit and wisdom can only be attained by spending time with the Lord. There are no shortcuts or substitutes.

"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel... Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus." Acts 4:8-13

There is hope for me! They were, *"Unlearned and ignorant men."* It was spending time with Jesus that made the difference. Are you spending time alone with Him each day?

The Deacon's Relationship with His Family

"Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well." 1 Timothy 3:12

I suppose one of the "dangers" of ministering to people is that of forgetting that your family members are people too. Be careful about rushing to the aid of a church member, and then complaining about a shopping spree with your wife or a school event for your children. Make sure that you are continually developing your family relationships. How are your HR [home relations]?

"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;" Ephesians 5:25

"Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered." 1 Peter 3:7

"And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Ephesians 6:4

The Deacon's Relationship with His Pastor

"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." Hebrews 13:17

The relationship of a deacon to his pastor might be likened to that of a soldier to his commanding officer. Many soldiers develop great respect, and even affection, for those that lead them well.

The deacon should sense and meet the needs of the leader that God has given him.

"And David longed, and said, Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate! And the three mighty men brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem, that was by the gate, and took it, and brought it to David: nevertheless he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the LORD." 2 Samuel 23:15-16

The deacon should also display loyalty and obedience to the pastor.

When Jonathan exhibited great faith in God by approaching the garrison of the Philistines the Word of God tells us that, *"His armourbearer said unto him, Do all that is in thine heart: turn thee; behold, I am with thee according to thy heart"* (1 Samuel 14:7b). Are you with your pastor according to his heart?

Stonewall Jackson was a deacon in his local church. In the book *Christ in the Camp* it is revealed that, "He frequently sought the counsel and instruction of his pastor, upon whom he looked as his 'superior officer,' and to whom he would sometimes 'report for orders.'" It's no wonder that these words of his pastor were recorded in the same book "Oh, sir, when Jackson fell I lost not only a warm personal friend, a consistent, active church-member, but the best deacon I ever saw!" How are your PR (pastor relations)?

The Deacon's Relationship with the Deacons

"Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up." Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

The deacon's relationship with other deacons should resemble a "band of brothers." When soldiers go into battle a bond develops that is hard to explain. Though they come from various ethnic backgrounds, parts of the country, and have differing talents and abilities they become one to overcome the enemy. Make no

mistake, the event we see in Acts chapter six was an attack by the enemy. The church was progressing and Satan hated it. He hates your church also. Don't let him divide and conquer. Unite and overcome.

The Deacon's Relationship with Church Members

Deacons should be godly examples to the church family.

"Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience."

1 Timothy 3:8-9

Church members are watching. What are they learning?

Deacons should anticipate and respond to the needs of the church family.

The Deacon's Relationship with the Community

Deacons should cultivate a good reputation in the community.

"Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report." Acts 6:3a

"Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation." 1 Peter 2:12

When co-workers and folks in the community call you "deacon" they may do it with a tongue and cheek mentality, but they know who you are, and who you represent. So *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."* Matthew 5:16

Deacons should be active in soulwinning.

Serving the saints of God is no substitute for seeking the salvation of sinners. God has mandated that every saved individual should be involved in reaching others for Christ.

"Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them." Acts 8:5

The relationships that we have on this earth can make a difference for eternity. Those who serve in the deacon ministry have the wonderful opportunity of being a servant of saints and sinners.

The Standard Traditions About Deacons

Deacons are not only a Biblical office, but they are also a long-standing Baptist tradition . One of the most popular pieces of written material on the office of the deacon is an animal called the church constitution and by-laws. This document is written by a pastor, deacons, or other church members in order to specify how that particular local church believes and practices. These papers, which usually have one or more paragraphs about the qualifications and duties of deacons, get passed around, as new churches are started, building a tradition about such matters . Sometimes a church will take the constitution and by-laws of another church without changing anything but the name of the church at the head of the document. Usually these constitutions and by-laws specify that the pastor is in charge of the spiritual oversight of the church (i.e., the pulpit, prayer, visitation, weddings, funerals, etc.), and the deacons are in charge of the finances [paying bills, salaries, maintaining the buildings, securing loans, etc.]. Because of this, it is very common for deacons, especially in larger churches, to be chosen from the business community. The thinking is that businessmen are more qualified to handle important financial decisions of the church .

Who is actually over the local church in authority? The pastor? The deacons? Practically speaking, most churches are deacon-run , rather than pastor-led . Many deacons think that part of their job is to hire and fire the preacher . More often than not, they do indeed fulfill that function . Part of this is due to the fact that deacons are often men who are long-term residents of a community. Pastors, on the other hand, often serve in a church for three years or less, before moving on to an-other field of service. In such cases, the deacons of a church see pastors come, and they see them go. It is not surprising that they feel it is their responsibility to insure that the church stays stable.

Another tradition often held is, 'Once a deacon, always a deacon.' This practice has caused horrible problems, especially when a person who is a deacon lapses into a bad spiritual state. It is not uncommon for churches to be plagued with deacons on their boards who smoke, drink, curse, lie, cheat, steal, withhold their tithes, and miss evening services.

Some churches have gotten around this by having a "rotating deacon board." A deacon serves in a active position for a couple of years, after which he takes a mandatory year off. If an inactive deacon is obviously spiritually unfit to serve, it is then an easy matter to simply not consider him as a candidate for reappointment to the office after his year of inactive status.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE POSITION OF DEACON

Before going any further, it would be wise to correct some common misconceptions that are most often found in USA churches. These misconceptions, resultant attitudes and problems no doubt hinder God's work. As you read the following paragraphs you may find that you hold to one of these misconceptions. If so, you may react to the corrections that are given here, but I want to encourage you to compare your ideas with the Word of God. Let's not simply rest on what we have always done or on what other churches do, but rather on the Scriptures.

Misconception 1 - Deacons are over the "business" of the church.

This idea is rooted in Acts 6:3 where the Apostles asked the brethren for seven men "...whom we may appoint over this business". From this simple statement has come the idea that the pastor is supposed to preach and pray while the deacons run the business of the church. The Apostles were not asking for men to take over the church. There was a need to be met which the Apostles could not handle. They asked for men to meet the need and seven men were selected. The pastor as the bishop (overseer) must oversee the entire work of the church. He will need men to lighten the burden, so he can maintain proper priorities. These men to help are deacons.

Misconception 2 - Deacons form a corporate board with the pastor as the Chief Executive Officer.

In corporate minded America this is a commonly held view especially in larger churches, but it is totally out of harmony with the Bible. To remove this common error in **thinking** may be offensive to some, because there can be some pride attached to "being elected to the board". But where can we find anything like this in the Scriptures? In Acts 6, no board was elected. Seven individual men were selected to help the Apostles. Each was considered on the basis of his personal testimony and walk with Christ. Each obviously stood out as a faithful servant of God who could assist the Apostles while bringing no reproach on the assembly of believers or on the Lord. Today, we have churches patterned after secular corporations where the pastor seems to work for the board and regularly reports to assure board members that policies are being carried out and all is well on the business front. Let it be acknowledged that in too many churches things are out of order. The overseer is too often the servant and the servants are the overseers.

Misconception 3 - Deacons are representatives of the congregation.

A final misconception is the belief that deacons are representatives of the congregation. This idea probably comes from our national government as a Constitutional Republic. Our church constitutions are thought to parallel the US Constitution; the congregation parallels the citizenry; the deacons parallel congress and the pastor parallels the presidency. This leads to some balance of power concept of church government where the congregation elects the deacons to represent them in dealing with the pastor. If the deacons try to make a rule the pastor can veto; or if the pastor wants to go in a certain direction the deacons can veto him. This idea is entrenched in our churches, but it has no scriptural foundation whatsoever.

The Sad Trouble With Deacons

Many have pointed out that a great percentage of church splits originate with church deacons.

Nearly all conflicts are over the issue of authority: WHO IS IN CHARGE HERE? While we know that the Lord is the head of the church, it is also true that He uses earthly representatives.

Most American Christians believe that a local church is ruled by a democratic vote of its membership. This is largely due to our own culture, not to any understanding of scriptures gained from diligent study. We are so used to majority rule, that we think God works that way. WRONG! As a matter of fact, God hardly EVER runs anything by majority rule. The majority is nearly ALWAYS wrong in any given situation. Although this would vary somewhat depending on the godliness of the ones involved, if the majority is for something, it is a good guess that God is AGAINST it. The majority (10 out of 12) of the spies said it was a bad idea to go into Canaan. The minority (two out of 12) said it was a wonderful opportunity. The majority was wrong, and an entire nation spent 40 years in the wilderness because they listened to the majority rather than the minority.

Majority rule is just POPULAR rule. That means, most churches are run as a popularity contest. Who has the most influence? The pastor? The deacons? Aunt Sue who has been with the church for 40 years and raised half of the trustees?

Luke 16:5 And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.

Matthew 7:13-14 Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: 14 Because

strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

The Bible is clear. A local church is to be ruled by the pastor (also called bishop or elder), not the deacons. Pastors are given the oversight of a flock by the Holy Ghost:

Acts 20:28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Those who rule the church are not those who serve tables (Acts 6), but rather, those who labor in the word and preach the word:

1 Timothy 5:17 Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.

Hebrews 13:7 Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God; whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.

However, deacons often usurp the authority of the pastor. Many of them feel that it is their DUTY to oversee the pastor and keep him from getting the church into a mess. If they don't like the direction in which the church ministry seems to be going, some of them feel they have an obligation to tell the pastor to "hit the road," before the church has to close shop.

Often, it happens that a good man who is made a deacon becomes ruined by this mentality. When he concludes that it is his job to oversee the church, he is mistaken. When he concludes it is HIS job to keep the pastor in check and protect the church from any harm the pastor might do, he is completely out of order. According to Acts 20:28, GOD (the Holy Ghost) is the one who makes a man an overseer of a church. Therefore, it is up to GOD, not anyone else, to manage the man of God.

The Scripture's Teaching About Deacons

The truth is:

NO VERSE OF SCRIPTURE TELLS CLEARLY WHAT DEACONS DO.

The fact that there is such a thing as the office of a deacon is clear, for the Bible mentions it specifically:

1 Timothy 3:13 For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

Additionally, the Bible DOES give QUALIFICATIONS, or spiritual requirements of deacons, in 1 Tim. 3:8-13.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; 9 Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. 10 And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. 11 Even so must their wives be grave, not slandrlrers, sober, faithful in all things. 12 Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. 13 For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

The Truth About Deacons

We recognize that the scripture does not plainly tell us the function of the office. Since God is not the author of confusion, I believe it is safe to assume that the nature of the office must be so obvious that it doesn't need to be specified. Well, if it's so obvious, why are we overlooking it?

I believe our problem is that we are making three errors:

1. We are basing our opinion about the function of deacons on church traditions;
2. We are basing our opinion upon a scripture that does not mention the word [Acts 6]; and
3. We are ignoring the scriptures and context which give details on the qualifications for the deacons.

First, let's forget and ignore, for the moment, Baptist traditions about the role of deacons. That's hard . We Baptists have our traditions, and some of them are just as unscriptural as those of other religious groups. Second, let's move Acts 6 from the forefront of our thinking, at least for the moment, since it doesn't clearly mention the subject at hand . Third, let's look more closely at the scriptures and context which give details on the qualifications of deacons and see if we cannot discover what I believe is the obvious role of a deacon .

As we look at the qualifications of the deacons in 1 Timothy 3, the first thing that we notice is that the bishop is mentioned in the singular, while deacons are referred to in the plural, in the first statement introducing each list of qualifications :

1 Timothy 3:1 This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.

1 Timothy 3:8 Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre;

So, although there is no statement of a requirement about the number, what is obvious, but usually overlooked, is that in 1 Tim. 3 each list of requirements starts with the mention of ONE bishop (pastor or elder - see Tit. 1 :5-6) and MORE THAN ONE deacon .

The next thing we notice is that the qualifications for deacons are VERY similar to that of the pastor . Notice the word, "Likewise," in 1 Tim. 3 :8! THIS IS A KEY IN DISCOVERING THE ROLE OF DEACONS!!! Observe the similarities :

The deacons are to be grave:

1 Timothy 3:8 Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre;

The term, "grave," which generally refers to being serious, is only used as a character trait in two chapters of the Bible: here, in verse 11 with regard to the deacon's wife, and in Titus 2:2. In both 1 Tim. 3: 11 and Tit. 2:2, the word appears alongside the word, "sober". Among the meanings of sober is that of being serious. To be sober is also one of the requirements for the bishop:

1 Timothy 3:2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;

Titus 1:8 But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate;

Another qualification for deacons deals with literal sobriety, with regard to wine : Both the Bishop and Deacons have restriction of wine in their qualifications.

The next requirement for deacons is that they be not greedy of filthy lucre:

This commandment, which is a warning about the love of money (1 Tim. 6:10), is an exact match for the qualification for a bishop:

1 Tim. 3:3 Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous;

The next requirement for deacons is that they hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience;

1 Tim. 3:9 Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.

While there is no exact match for this deacons' requirement in the bishop's list, it is similar to the requirement that a bishop be "apt to teach" and that he "hold fast the faithful word as he hath been taught".

1 Timothy 3:2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;

Titus 1:9 Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.

Incidentally, if the only task of deacons is to handle the "secular" business, that is, to do things OTHER than prayer and the ministry of the word of God (Acts 6:4), such as waiting on tables, paying bills, cleaning restrooms, mowing the church lawn, etc., why is it necessary that they hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience? Why would their ability with the word of God have a bearing upon their ability to count the money and pay the bills?

The next requirement for deacons is that they must be proved:

1 Tim. 3:10 And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless.

Deacons are not to use the office without having exhibited the above character traits. Similarly, a bishop is to not be a novice. Notice the word, "also," in 1 Tim. 3:10. I believe it refers to the bishop as well.

1 Timothy 3:6 Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.

The next requirement of deacons is that they be found blameless:

1 Timothy 3:10 And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless.

This is also the qualification for a bishop:

1 Timothy 3:2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;

Titus 1:7 For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre;

The term, "blameless," in 1 Tim. 3: 10 apparently means with regard to the qualifications . No person is completely sinless. Giving the qualifications, the Bible calls for "proving" the men, after which it says they could "use the office of a deacon, being found blameless ."

The next requirement for deacons is that their wives be godly:

1 Timothy 3:11 Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things.

Strangely, this requirement is not found in the list of requirements for the bishop . Although this study is about deacons, this fact is significant in that churches often hold unusual expectations for a pastor's wife, wanting her to run the nursery, supervise ladies meetings, send flowers to the sick, clean the church, and a number of other sundry chores.

The next requirement for deacons is that they be the husbands of one wife:

1 Timothy 3:2 Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.

This matches the requirement for a bishop:

1 Timothy 3:2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;

Titus 1:6 If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly.

The next requirement for deacons is that they rule their children and their own houses well :

1 Timothy 3:12 Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.

This is a match for the requirement of the bishop :

1 Timothy 3:4-5 One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; 5 (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God)

Titus 1:6 If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly.

The passage closes with a statement about the privilege of the office :

1 Timothy 3:13 For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

This matches the high calling of the pastorate, referred to at the beginning of the chapter:

1 Tim. 3:1 This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.

The similarities between the requirements of the two offices are startling. Having considered them, let us honestly point out that there are a few differences . For instance, the bishop is also required to:

Be vigilant- 1 Tim 3:2

Be given to hospitality- 1 Tim. 3:2 Titus 1:8

Be apt to teach- 1 Tim. 3:2

Be no striker, but patient, and no brawler- 1 Tim. 3:3

Take care of the church of God- 1 Tim. 3:5

Have a good report of them that are without- 1Tim. 3:7

Not selfwilled- Tit 1:7

Not soon angry- Tit 1:7

A lover of good men- Tit 1:8

Just- Tit 1:8

Holy- Tit 1:8

Temperate- Tit 1:8

Obviously, even though the two offices are ALMOST identical in qualifications, the bishop (elder or pastor), which is said to be the overseeing office (Acts 20 :28; 1 Pet. 5:1-2) of the flock, has more qualifications.

Based on the similarities in the requirements of the two offices, the additional requirements for the pastor, and the fact that the lack of a clear statement on the function of deacons indicates that said function is obvious.

Even as the bishop is what we Baptists most often refer to by the term, "pastor," I believe the deacons are what we Baptists most often refer to by the term, "assistant pastors."

In other words, the bishop is the minister in charge, and the deacons are the ministers in training.

What do they do? They do exactly what the pastor does, with the exception of the fact that they do not have the oversight of the church, that duty being specifically given to him (Acts 20 :28; 1 Pet. 5: 1-2). They pray, they minister the word, and they set an example for the rest of the flock to follow. That's why the qualifications are so similar. In so doing, they follow their pastor as he follows Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).

The use of the term "bishop," in the singular rather than the plural indicates that there is one main overseer of a local church: the bishop . (Of course, there might be many bishops in a town which contains many churches.) Although a church would have only one bishop, ordinarily they would also enjoy a plurality of ministers in training .

The fact that the deacons are to hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience shows that they need to *be* able to minister the word of God . Thus, they are able to assist the pastor in this area of his work, teaching smaller classes, preaching to groups in the church with special needs (language, age, etc.), getting the message out into the community, and standing in for him while he is away. As the deacons mature, they might actually be placed by the pastor over other congregations, specifically, mission churches sponsored by the home church, but also over other established churches in need of a pastor, who have a respect for the deacons' pastor.

The fact that the pastor has a number of additional qualifications bears witness to the added responsibility of his office. However, there were also a couple of qualifications for deacons, noted above, which were not on the pastor's list:

1. not doubletongued (1 Tim. 3:8)

2. their wives must be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things .

The caution about the tongues of deacons points to the fact that "second fiddle" is a very difficult instrument to play. If he is not careful he will slip into the sin of Absalom, desiring the "prestige" of the office, and courting the people in order to win their hearts. This is a very common danger and occurrence among assistant pastors (Biblical deacons).

The special concern about the godliness of the deacons' wives, especially noting the requirement about being "not slanderers," points to their natural tendency to envy the pastor's position for their own husbands, especially if they feel their husband is not being honored, or if they are envious of the pastor's wife.

A good example of this problem is the case of Aaron and Miriam, who criticized Moses, and one focal point of their criticism was his wife. Although both of them spoke against Moses and were rebuked, Miriam alone was stricken with leprosy. The implication is that her sin was more serious than that of her brother. Perhaps, even as Eve led Adam astray, Miriam instigated the criticism in which Aaron also participated.

In training for the ministry, it is a natural thing for a devoted trainee to do more than simply help the preacher with his preaching. Witness the "servant heart" of Joshua toward Moses; of Elisha toward Elijah; and of Timothy and Titus toward Paul. They were willing to do whatever was necessary to assist their mentors in their calling. These men humbled themselves under the mighty hand of God, and He exalted them in due time.

It is my conclusion that what the Bible calls deacons is what we call young preachers, assistant pastors, associate pastors, ministers in training, etc. This does not, by any means, rule out the need for other faithful men in the church to be helpers in the ministry in various respects. God can use men, women, boys and girls in the work of a local church. However, I am almost certain that we Baptists have "missed the boat" in this area of identifying the Biblical role and function of deacons, and our churches have suffered for it.

2 Tim. 2:7 Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things.