

Servants in the Church

Tyler Velin | 1 Timothy 3

April 30, 2023

You may have noticed in the passage just read for us, that we are taking a quick break from our study through the book of Luke. We are doing so to address an area of development inside our church that impacts all of us.

I hope you noticed that the passage we just read ended with some really profound doxology and worship. Did you notice that in **1 Timothy 3:14-16**.

So what is Paul doing here in this text? Well he's concluding with this explosive worship of Jesus and his gospel ministry. But did you notice what lead him there? Well first, it is because he is rejoicing in the confession of Christian faith which he calls, "the mystery of godliness." It was sound doctrine which led him to the thick of worship.

But he locates the source of this truth, and therefore the engine of his worship, in the local church. He calls the church the pillar and buttress of the truth. The local church matters because truth matters, and truth matters because through that truth the radiant mystery of the glory of Jesus is declared.

In this letter to Timothy, Paul is showing him that when a church behaves and believes according to God's will worship and evangelism flourish. Paul wants Timothy to see how the church declares the gospel and he makes on part of that clear in chapter 3: by appointing faithful elders and deacons in the church.

For over a decade now God has gently been reforming the pastors of this church by holding up a biblical vision and qualifications of the elder office. The candidacy of Marshall is part of this long line of development. But we also want to bring greater faithfulness and emphasis to the office of deacons in the church.

So what we are wanting to do today is to cast that biblical vision. This might seem like a real dud of a sermon compared to what you were hoping for. But let's not forget that Paul is writing this to the church so that we as individuals might know how to behave for the sake of truth, godliness and glory.

It's not only what we confess which glorifies God and proclaims the gospel, but it's how we act as the local church. Paul says in Romans 12 that we in the church are "individually members of one another."

So our goal today is to establish this biblical vision of deacons by walking through three points and one application. We will see the biblical **History of Deacons**, the **Help of Deacons** and the **Heart of Deacons**, and lastly we will look at **A Call to Serve**.

To begin let's get into the biblical **History of Deacons**.

First, what in the world is a deacon? The title deacon comes from the Greek verb *diakoneo* which simply means "to serve or to attend" to something. So the title, or noun, *diakonos* simply means, "servant." A deacon is a servant who attends to something.

Now the Bible uses the term broadly. Jesus himself says in **Matthew 23:11** that, "the greatest among you shall be your servant (*diakonos/deacon*)." And while all Christians are called to be little "s" servants, over the course of the New Testament there was developed a role of capital "S" servants who were called "deacons."

The New Testament only talks about this office with any sort of clarity four times. Most of this instruction is in the text we are looking at today. So the Bible doesn't give a ton of specifics on this office, but it does make it clear that it is important and exists. That means that churches over the millennia have approached this issue with humble charity. While all faithful churches try to uphold what is clear about deacons in scripture, they also humbly have to work in areas where it's not clear.

How we use and establish deacons might be different than other churches, and vice versa. So it's with humility we approach the subject, but it's also with a biblical precedent that we do so as well.

The first place we will look regarding the history of deacons is in Acts chapter 6. In this passage the early church is growing under the oversight of the 12 apostles. But the growth of the church had created a sort of conflict. As the church was caring for her members, the Greek Christians brought a complaint to the apostles because the Jewish Christians were prioritizing their own ethnic groups first and not caring for the Greek widows.

This was a relatively tricky issue because there is not only the logistics of food distribution, but there's apparently an aspect of greed at play, and the greed seems to be racially driven as well. It would have taken significant time and energy from the apostles to not just fix the issue, but to get to the heart of it, so look at what they did: **Acts 6:2-6**.

So here we see men selected by the church in Jerusalem, who were commissioned by the elders to care for this specific need so that the apostles could continue to care by teaching and preaching the world.

Now we don't see these men called "deacons" in this text, but church history largely sees this as the prototype of what would later develop.

Within a handful of years, Paul opens his letter to the church in Philippi saying this (**Phil. 1:1**). "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons."

So by the time of Paul's, writing it was understood that there were in the church Christians (saints) but also two recognized groups among the church: overseers (pastors/elders) and deacons.

So first we see that there is a distinction between elders and deacons. Biblically speaking the word elder (*presbyteros*) and overseer (*episkopos*) define the same office—that of the pastor (Acts 20:17,28).

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 we learn more about this office. As "overseers" are called in verse 5 to "care for the church" in with a unique management and authority. We never see that kind of oversight language given to deacons. 1 Peter and Hebrews call the church to submit to their elders and obey them, but we never see that kind of submission to the office of deacon.

We also see in Titus 1:9 that an elder must be able to teach sound doctrine while also publically refuting and correcting false doctrine. Deacons are not called to such a teaching office, but instead are said to simply hold the mystery of faith with a clear conscience.

We also see that the office of elder is only exclusively spoken of as a male office. But here in 1 Timothy 3:11 there are instructions at least to wives of deacons who are obviously participating in that ministry. But the Greek word there is simply "women" not wives. Further in Romans 16:1, Phoebe is recognized by Paul as a *diakonos* (a deacon/servant) in the church. So while the office of elder is exclusively male, the New Testament leaves room for the potential of female deacons because it's not a position of overseeing authority or public teaching and instruction.

The deacons therefore aren't meant to be a checks and balance alongside the elder board like the US House and Senate. But instead, even as Paul positions them in 1 Timothy 3, they are meant to serve under the elders for the purpose of applying specific and commissioned care.

So, with all that said, what do deacons do? Here is our second point this morning: **The Help of Deacons**. The kind of help deacons give is potentially endless. But any service the deacons give is meant to help produce and protect two important aspects of church life.

First, **Deacon's service promotes the ministry of the word**. This is what we saw in the book of Acts. The apostles did a lot of serving in the early church, and all of our elders are servants in that same vein. But there comes a times where the needs of a church are so great that if all the elders did was meet needs, the ministry of the word would suffer.

I've heard it said, "Elders serve the church by leading and deacons lead the church by serving."

Deacons step up and are commissioned by the congregation and the elders to meet specific needs inside the body so that the church is served by the hands and the heralds. Deacons in this sense are servants of the ministry of the word because they free up elders to teach, preach and counsel.

Secondly, **Deacon's service protects unity in the church**. In this way they proclaim the beauty of Jesus' service of us. It adorns the gospel and loves people.

There are few things more counter cultural in our world that those who excel in service. Remember, functioning deacons are tied to glorious display of Jesus Christ in 1 Timothy 3:16. When James and John were arguing about who would be the greatest look at how Jesus turned that on its head: **Matthew 20:25-28**.

Nothing divides like a lack of care. Deacons are dispensers of care in and among the body. Sometimes they see needs and move towards them. Other times the elders see a need and send a deacon on their behalf. The result is that dissention, bitterness, and hostility are quelled by the interpersonal care of the deacons. Remember in Acts 6 the seven were commissioned to wage war against the effects of racism in the church and in doing this there was a beautiful display of how the gospel brings people together.

The pastor Matt Smethurst calls deacons, "shock absorbers in the church."

I love that analogy. The elder's job is to drive this janky old church through the rugged terrain of this world. Maybe you've had a time like that, you've got to get somewhere and you know it's going to rattle the snot out of you, but you need to do it. Deacons work with the elders by adding just a little bit of tenderness to the direction of the church. They wrap themselves around as shocks and they help bring comfort and care while we make our way towards the smooth roads of glory.

But because of this, deacons are not just servants. They are servants like Jesus is a servant. 1 Timothy 3:10 says they are servants who must be tested first. They are servants who are publically held up by the congregation, commissioned by the elders and able to wisely and winsomely care for others.

This is why when Paul gives us the largest portion of scripture on deacons, he doesn't focus on their competency as much as he focuses on their character. This is our third point this morning: **The Heart of Deacons.**

We love pragmatism in the western church. The principle we often worship is immediate effectiveness not faithful endurance. So our tendency when we see the Bible talk about deacons, and we see so many ways deacons can serve, we get excited about the care that can be given to mercy, men, women, kids, families, facility, and we rush forward saying, "This guy has these skills, let's do it."

But the office of deacon is not a pragmatic position. Just because you see a need doesn't qualify you as a deacon. Just because you can meet a need doesn't qualify you as a deacon. Deacons are servants, but they are unique servants. A local church may give a deacon their job description, but God gives deacons their required qualifications.

Read this with me again: **1 Timothy 3:8-12**

I grew up in the golden era of marketing and Michael Jordan. I remember the ads that played in the early 90s where the slogan of the song was, "I wanna be like Mike." Why? Because he's Michael Jordan, he's the greatest.

But as the years went by, and we saw Michael Jordan retire, and we saw his acceptance speech, and we watched his documentaries, we realized that Michael Jordan had a lot we would desire on the court, but off the court, he wasn't the greatest guy. He was bitter, arrogant, and petty at times.

Biblical deacons are those who not only when they serve, but when the eulogy of their funeral is read, when their documentary airs, we say, "I want to be like that guy." That doesn't mean that the deacon is sinless, but it means that they exhibit a pattern of godly growth and faithful repentance which we would hold up as admirable.

If you wonder if you could be a deacon run your mind through this list: Are you dignified and well thought of? If other people saw you serving would they say, "The church lets him do that?" Are you the one who when you have friends over, or when you go out, you drink a little bit more wine than you should? Maybe not enough to get you knock-down drunk, but even enough to just make you a little silly? That disqualifies you from this position.

Are you self-controlled? Are you able to prioritize the service of God and the service of others over the immediate indulgence of your flesh? If you have a spouse and a family, are you faithful to them? Would your teenage son see you presented as a deacon candidate and say, "Wow, my mom is a shoe in for this

because I've received her service at home." Dads, if you're volunteering to lead 20 men on a construction project but you haven't had a pattern of leading your kids to prayer and God's word in the home—that's not befitting the office of deacon.

This period of testing Paul prescribes has a potential deacon serve in that role, but what are they looking for? Blamelessness. They aren't just saying, "Did you consistently make sure the coffee was ready?" But they are saying, "When you did that, did your godly conduct and hope still thrive in public and in private?"

If so, then let them receive the title of deacon and serve in that capacity.

Now serving sanctifies. It really does. Look at how Paul speaks of the service of others in **Philippians 2:1-11**.

If you wrestle with finding Jesus beautiful, if you feel stuck in your growth as a Christian, if you feel the chords of sin frequently entangle you, if you feel discouraged in your walk, serve others as Jesus served us. That doesn't earn us anything by our flesh, but what it does is it gets our little boat which got caught on a sandbar and places it back in the river of grace and gets us moving downstream again.

All Christians are called to be servants. But the office of Deacon is not for those who are just beginning to show signs of God's grace in this area. Instead, it's for those who have a public track record of being carried along by the generous river of grace in service to Christ and care of others.

Why do they do this? In all reality, by worldly standards this sounds like the worst position anyone could ever have. They work under the authority of the elders, in service of people who are different than them, are subjected to greater vetting and are typified by other-oriented care.

There's not by nature a long line for that check-in desk. But look at the reward Paul holds out for the deacon in **1 Timothy 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."

Serving as deacons gives you high standing in the eyes of God and of the church. It comes with the applause of all who have spiritual eyes to see Christ in your role. But more than that it adds more confidence to your life that you are indeed, loved, redeemed, washed and confidently secured by faith in Jesus Christ.

That's a good reward.

With all this said, where are we in this process of having these kind of deacons?

This is our last point today: **A Call to Serve**.

We have had deacons at Sovereign Hope, but the elders haven't lead them well or consistently.

By God's grace we made it through Covid, homelessness, and the purchase and remodel of this building without aving functional deacons in place. That's in part because the church stepped up bigly in those years, and it's in part to the elders stepping in to do a lot of deacon type duties.

In God's additional kindness, he gave a blanket of protection over our church spiritually during that time. There were some very heavy things the elders did have to deal with. But compared to the normal rate of pastoral care, we had fewer cases of pressing concern during that time.

But now, as we are established with a physical footprint and as we are ramping up more word-based ministries in the building, we have needs for both pastoral labor and people labor. The reason why we are taking time to talk about this now. It's not only corrective, but it's also needed. If God continues to grow our church in size and in desire for teaching, then what we have is not sustainable and it's not sustainable because it's not biblically faithful.

So in order to help us, and therefore help all of us, we want you to do three things right now: Pray, Process and Preauthorize.

First, **Pray**. Just as God appoints elders, it is God who sanctifies deacons. We can't appoint or establish any more deacons than God has given us by his grace in this church. We won't budge on the biblical demands because we actually trust God with the church more than we trust deacons with the church.

But would you join us in praying that God would raise up qualified men and women to serve in some deacon roles. My guess is that if you see a gaping hole here at the church, it's not because the elders don't see it, it's because we are trying to be faithful with what God has explicitly called us to do, and the limitations of our own time and capacity.

Pray that we might recognize, nominate, test and appoint servants to help us in these spaces.

Second, **Process**.

As we have seen, deacons are publically recognized servants from within the church. So if you have seen someone in the church who consistently and faithfully meets needs a space without being asked, while potentially meeting these qualifications—hold that person in mind. If you think that person is you, submit yourself to this list of requirements, process it in your heart. Talk to your Community Group leader and see if they see those traits in your life as well.

We want to be a church eager to encourage those who are showing deacon gifts to grow and think about how they might use that in an official capacity for the church.

Lastly, **Preauthorize**.

Because the whole church is called to be servants, the establishment of deacons doesn't mean the issue of service is solved. It means the recognition and facilitation of care is streamlined. But we are all called to serve.

We are going to ask all of you who are members, or if you consider Sovereign Hope your church home, to fill out a volunteer service questionnaire. I'll give you the details of how to do that in just a moment.

But on this questionnaire we want to get your preauthorization in places where you might be willing to serve simply as a Christian. Moving forward when new members apply at the church, they will fill this out too. There are so many places you can find to serve here.

Let us know if you'd be willing to help move people, help a single mom by taking her boy hunting, provide emergency housing, visit the sick, cook meals...the list goes on and on.

And here is what we are going to do with this list. We don't have deacons in place right now, but we do have needs. Which means that the elders have either been doing much of this on their own, or there are a few select people who we always ask to do something in the church. Immediately this list will go to the elders and if there is a need, we will look and see who gave us preauthorization to help, and we will reach out and ask you if you're able to help with that.

It helps us create a database of who has the desire and skills to serve in various ways which makes it easier for us to hand off the work and put our hand to the ministry of the word, pastoral care and counseling.

When we get deacons in place, they will get access to this list and it will be a resource for them. For example, if we have a deacon of hospitality, they would be notified that we have a funeral coming up, and they would go to their list and see everyone who said they'd be willing to help set up a special event and they would see if some of those people could help set up, they would also look at those who said they'd like to help decorate and they would contact them.

If the deacon of facility can't fix something on his own, he might reach out to a guy who said he had a specific skill in that area.

The deacons are lead servants, but they aren't exclusive servants. They help mobilize the body in a way that doesn't burn out one or two, but instead utilizes the desire and skills of the whole.

To help us gather this information and hopefully start caring better sooner rather than later, please take this survey. It will be online on our homepage as of today, there is also a QR code in your bulletin if you have a phone you can scan that and it will take you there. It would help us a lot if you could take it online, but if you don't have email or struggle with technology we do have some physical copies at the info desk and please take one of those and return it when you're able.

But I do want to give some caveats to this list.

First, if you are a member, or if you're hoping to become a member, please fill this out. Some of the positions you'll see on this list are member only positions and that's because for safety or accountability we want to make sure we know the people serving in that role.

Second, if you're new here, please don't take this. Feel free to look at it and see what our church is passionate about. But we want you to first and foremost see how Jesus has served you in the gospel. Your service of Christ or his church can't save you, only faith in how he served us on the cross saves you. That's what we want you to see first and foremost. We want to serve you first with the gospel, we don't need you to serve us right now.

Third, checking a box on this document does not make you a deacon, nor does it nominate you as a deacon. We will talk more about that process at an upcoming congregational meeting. I don't want anyone leaving here thinking, "I check the box to be the deacon of security and they didn't do it." That's not what this is for. This is a tool to help us meet needs as they arise.

However, as you process and you think of someone who might be a future deacon, go to that person and encourage them to check those areas on the form.

Lastly, checking this box is not an immediate call to fill an immediate need. There are some service opportunities on here that we want to grow into, but we don't have an immediate need. So by checking a box, you're not going to be getting a phone call or email saying, "Show up on this day to do this." Instead we are just gathering data so we know how God has gifted our church at this time.

I want to close by holding up the result of the seven chosen to serve in Acts 6. Look back at **Acts 6:6-7**.

As the church grew in spiritual service and spiritual teaching, the word of God increased, people came to faith, and lives were changed.

This is no mere pragmatism. This is God's divine gift to his church for the growth of his kingdom. We want to be a faithful church, competent in teaching and in care, because we want people to see the beauty of King Jesus. By having elders, by having deacons, by volunteering to care and serve as ordinary members we are not trifling in merely what is expedient. We labor for what is eternal--this is the mystery of godliness displayed: Christ at work in the church for the world to see.