

What it means to be a church deacon

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 November 2025

Preacher: Steve Palframan

[0 : 0 0] Okay, let me pray for us and then we'll come to look at this topic together. Let's pray. Lord, we want to thank you for your words to us and that it's so practical and helpful as we think about organizing church.

We want to thank you that it's not us building church, but it is you building your church. We want to pray that we would take your words seriously, that we'd listen carefully to it as we seek to organize our church life together. Help us to be men and women of conviction, we pray. And help us, Lord, to do all of this for the sake of your glory and that many more people might hear about Jesus as we pray in his name. Amen.

So, we've been thinking these last three weeks about how church is structured and these building blocks of church life. So, church members, church elders, and now this week, church deacons.

So, we looked at what it means to belong to a church, to be a member of the church, how the church has a boundary around it, that the church is to recognize who the church is and that that authority to bound the church is given to church members.

We looked at elders last week and how they're to lead in the life of the church, how they're to lead through teaching the church and encouraging and pastoring the church. And then this week, we're to think about this final office, the office of deacon.

[1 : 2 9] Now, you might remember last week, I started with two assumptions about elders. And this week, I want to start with just one assumption about deacons. Now, it's worth saying that there is not a huge amount of material in the New Testament on the office of deacons.

Now, I think that has a number of implications. One of which is that I think we have to allow people liberty of conscience to disagree on some of the things that we'll talk about this evening.

So you might think, oh, I'm not sure that I agree about that. Well, that's absolutely fine. And you can talk to me about it later if you like, or you can simply shout that out if you really wanted to. But I think the material does mean that we should take seriously what is there, but also that there are room for disagreement.

But I think people do disagree about this, but I think there is a consensus among a lot of evangelicals, not all, but a lot, that the office of deacon is open to both men and women.

Now, the reason for that is that in 1 Timothy 3, you get an interesting section on the wives of deacons, which seems, I think, probably to be more likely talking about deaconesses, female deacons.

[2 : 4 6] And then in 1 Timothy 5, you get a lot of material on widows as well in the church who also seem to be performing a very similar function to the deacon type role. Then in Romans 16, verse 1, Phoebe is called a deacon who is in the church of Sensory.

And I think that's probably referring to a woman holding this office in the life of the church. So there you go. I think the assumption is, and it's certainly in our church handbook and constitution, that men and women are able to serve as deacons.

But what I want us to do for the rest of our time is spend it in Acts 6. So either turn in your Bible to Acts chapter 6, or you can look down on your handout because I've printed out the verses for you.

You can thank me later for that. And I'm going to read to you Acts 6, verses 1 to 7. Let me read those verses to you and we'll spend the rest of our time there. In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom.

[4 : 16] We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. This proposal pleased the whole group.

They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. Now, I don't know how much you know about the book of Acts.

I don't want to make too many assumptions, but it's probably helpful just to give a little bit of background. Helpful to know at this point in church history, there is one church. It's a very big church. It's there in Jerusalem with several thousand members.

And the church is growing. We're told that, aren't we, even in chapter 6, verse 1, the number of disciples was increasing. Chapter 2, verse 47, the Lord is adding daily to their number.

[5 : 28] But in that growing scenario, they're also being attacked. See, there is a steady increase in persecution as the apostles are being persecuted by the same people who crucified Jesus.

And then also there seems to be trouble within the church as well, sin inside the church. So Ananias and Sapphira famously in chapter 5 drop dead because of their lying to the Holy Spirit about their generosity.

And then here in chapter 6 comes a different kind of trouble to the church, which is the threat of disunity. And the disunity seems to be specifically around this complaint of the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews about the care of their widows in what is the daily distribution of food.

It seems to be that the church in those times, and you can see this in the early chapters of Acts, are seeking to meet one another's practical needs, especially the needs of those who are unable to meet them in other ways.

And it seems as though there is a division between those Hebrew Jews and those Greek-speaking Jews, Hellenistic Jews. And it seems to be that care is not being provided evenly.

[6 : 41] Now, it's worth noting that this is a serious matter. It's a serious threat, not only just to the unity of the church because of these two groups arguing with one another, but also, it seems, to the ministry of the Word of God in verse 3, as the apostles have discovered that they're no longer able to carry on with the ministry of the Word and the daily distribution of food.

And the solution that's given is not what you might expect, which is to tell the Hellenistic Jews, you know, stop complaining and get over it. We've got more important matters to deal with here.

But rather, the apostles call the believers together in verse 2 to discuss the matter with this desire to hand on the responsibility to others. It's worth noting, isn't it, just really as an aside, but it's just worth noting that the apostles' instinct, when faced with a problem in the church, is not to impose a solution of their own design, is it?

It is to gather the church together to seek the will of God as a company of God's people, and then pursue a solution. Matt Smethurst, who wrote a book called Deacons for Nine Marks, calls this the first members' meeting in history, which I guess is an interesting way of looking at it.

I don't know how you run a members' meeting with several thousand people discussing this, but anyway, I wonder what it was like. The result of the meeting, though, is that seven men are chosen, men who, we're told, are full of the Spirit and wisdom, who then serve practically in that ministry, and verse 5 lists them, with verse 6 saying that these men are presented to the apostles by the church, who then commission them with the laying on of their hands.

[8 : 20] And to go back to Matt Smethurst's book on deacons, he points out from this passage three things about deacons, which I think are so helpful, I couldn't think of any better way of doing it, and so I'm just, is it cheating, or is it research?

I don't know, it's one of the two you can decide for yourself. Now, one of the things that's just worth noting is that these guys aren't called deacons here, so it's probably not quite right to say these are necessarily exactly what deacons are, but it does seem that what's being set up here is a sort of paradigm for how church works, with care for practical needs, focus on the ministry of the Word of God and prayer, which is picked up later in the New Testament by the office of deacons.

So I think there are things to learn here, even if they're not directly deacons or called deacons. So three things. Firstly, deacons meet tangible, practical needs.

Unlike the office of elders, it seems that deacons here are appointed to meet a specific practical need. So obviously, we do have people in the church who are committed to the Word of God and prayer, that is the elders of the church are committed to that, right?

I, as the pastor of the church, that is my responsibility that you have entrusted to me, that I might shoulder the preaching ministry and that we might be prayerful and praying for you and pastoring for you in that way.

[9 : 49] We don't, on the other hand, have a group of seven men who are seeking to distribute daily food to widows, right? It seems to be a particular practical need at a specific point in a local church, which is met by the office of deacons.

And the deacons, therefore, will vary according to any given church context or situation, as they seek to organize the response of the church to a particular practical need. There, I suppose, getting others serving as well.

I don't suppose that these seven did all the work themselves. They probably got other people to work alongside them. Now, it's worth saying then, isn't it, that the word deacon really just means servant.

So most of the time, the word deacon appears in the New Testament. It is simply referring to service or serving. Mark 10, 45, probably the most famous verse with service or serving in it.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be deaconed, but to deacon and give his life as a ransom for many. He didn't come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[10 : 54] And in such a high view of service is given in the New Testament that the deacon word becomes the tag then for those who serve in this way in the local church. So Philippians chapter one, verse two.

I think I've printed that out in your handout as well. Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus to. All God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers or the elders and the deacons.

So you've got all three of the offices that we've been talking about. All of the people, the members, the overseers and the deacons. It's the same in 1 Timothy chapter three.

In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.

They must be tested. And then if there's nothing against them, let them serve as deacons and serve as service. It seems to be that the high view of service leads to this particular office in the church.

[11 : 56] Now, this focus on practical needs, I think, means that deacons are not meant to function like elders in the life of the church. Elders, like we saw, have that particular set of responsibilities and they lead together as a team.

But the deacons here seem to be organized around needs. I think what sometimes happens in church when you have an eldership and a diaconate, as they would call it, or a group of deacons, is that the elders operate like the houses of parliament and the deacons operate like the house of lords.

So these guys try and pass a rule and then the house of lords argue about it and kick it out or something. So as if there's like two decision making bodies in the life of the church. I don't think that's how it's meant to work.

I think actually what's going on in the New Testament is that the elders are meant to lead. The church members are that decision making body, as we were seeing in the first week. And the deacons are there to serve.

I think someone, I think it was Matt Smithurst, put it like this, that the deacons lay the track that then the train of the church runs on as they seek to serve practical needs in the life of the church.

[13 : 00] Now, I want you to discuss with the person next to you, then, what kind of deacon roles do you think a church like ours should have? If we don't need to distribute daily food to Hellenistic and Hebraic Jewish widows, what should we be organising deacons around?

So have a think with the person next to you. Come up with a list as long as you like. Go for it. Okay.

What did you come up with? Well, what are you still coming up with? If you're still talking. Any suggestions?

Should we just go round? We'll have a... Well, okay, you're at the front. Okay, come on then for us. So we came up with two.

We were saying that celebrate people's birthdays. Okay. Practical. Practical. Yeah, you might want to help people celebrate special occasions. And then we also said visits. Right.

[14 : 10] Yeah, there might be certain elements of the sort of practical care that's going on in... Yeah. Which might be needed, yeah? That's great. Lola, Jen?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Cleaning and prayer. Interesting. Why did you say prayer? Prayer is on the list of the ones for the...

Oh, of like organising the distribution of information. Oh, I see.

Okay. So like communication of information. Yeah. Yeah. Rather than someone who's actually just praying. Yeah. Okay. Right. I'm with you here.

Great. Grace. And also... Go on. Let's keep going because otherwise you'll get more. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

[15 : 12] Yeah. So we just thought that you needed more of them.

You didn't think what they might do. Oh, I see. Right. Yeah. That's right. It's really clear that, isn't it, at the end of verse 2.

That we might devote ourselves to golf. Yeah. Right. So... Liz, Rebecca, Vida, anything more sensible than that?

yeah yes yes yep yes yeah yeah yeah okay that's great I mean when you've not been for a few weeks you get a text don't you sometimes so I will sometimes send texts out to people saying we're missing you sorry but yes I think you're right where do you think that's an elder responsibility and where do you think that's a deacon responsibility yes yes yeah yes it might it might be easy to you can think about it in another category can't you say money for example so you might have a deacon for money like a church treasurer and they might spot something in the giving which says hey this person stopped giving last month and they've never given again that they might then take to the elders and say we think there might be a pastoral problem here that you might want to go and talk to them and deal with them on might be the same might say that he says actually we've not I keep a kind of note of who we've been seeing in the children's ministry and we've not seen this family for several weeks that might there might be a problem there or you know you say do you want to go and see them yeah so there's definitely overlap yeah yes I totally agree let's not draw the lines too sharply but yes yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah so you might actually so there might be two ways of doing it right there so I think when we were talking about elders last week we're talking about recognizing elders in the life of the church so there might be two ways of doing it right there yeah yeah yeah so you might actually so there might be two ways of doing it right there so I think when we were talking about elders last week we're talking about recognizing elders in the life of the church so these are people doing eldering and you're recognizing them as elders and it seems to be there's a particular practical concern and there's a seeking after people who will help solve that but it might also be that there are people in the church who are serving practically and you recognize them as deacons in order to affirm them in what they're doing and establish them in what they're doing yeah anything from down the front to add to what we've said yeah yeah yes we're going to come and talk about character in a moment yeah but yes you're right to endorse importance of character gone yes no that's great let's let's pin that question we'll come back to that in a moment yeah about staff

anything else okay building catering center school youth great okay yeah that's just one deacon role great anything else from you through at the front admin yeah she might have a church administrator doing a number of those things you would pick up the sort of list of names things that you were talking about back yeah okay so there you go first first one about serving uh particular practical needs secondly deacons promote unity i think what's obvious from this passage in acts is that the practical problems in the church were a real threat to unity and it's just worth thinking isn't it that church unity is not just threatened by theological issues but also by practical issues so churches don't just fall out over questions regarding the lord's supper or charismatic gifts or the atonement or whatever it is but churches can be split just because they're badly run or badly organized that's the threat isn't it here in act six and like we've seen it's taken seriously and so for us churches today can split can't they because maybe the children's ministry has been neglected or overlooked and it needs some care or maybe because the building is not being looked after or because the money is badly managed or because the rotas are poorly organized that people don't get an opportunity to serve or they're serving all the time or whatever it is and so for us one example i came across this week was the appointment of a deacon for car parking so this was a city center church with a very small car park and people were getting sort of stressed and anxious and annoyed with each other because when they came they had to double park and then they could never get their cars out and it was it sounds completely unfamiliar doesn't it but anyway they uh what they did is they think well okay here is here's a threat to the unity and peace of our church what do we need we need a deacon for car parking we need someone who is willing to serve in that area to be what they called a shock absorber to the trouble in the church so that they could take the stress out of that situation and that's it here in act six isn't it i think that we can be even more specific than just general problems it seems that practical divisions in the church often fall around ethnic or even economic lines seems here that it's the jewish background widows who are um sorry the hebraic jews who seem to be getting the food and the helen hellenistic jews not getting it seems to be falling around kind of ethnic divides in one corinthians and in the book of james it seems like it's the poor who are being neglected in the life of the church and that's how it often works out isn't it in the way that something is run or organized it makes certain assumptions that become inaccessible to other groups or because of pressure points in the life of the church we just fall into worldliness in the way that we divide our church up so we need to be careful don't we if it's difficult for a particular person from a certain background to understand what we're doing or if church is so poorly organized that it's impossible for people without a church background to understand what's going on then we need to be careful don't we and what will happen is we'll just divide in the same way that the world does so this is the role of the deacon they promote church unity by taking practical problems in the life of the church and solving them on behalf of the body so that they don't become a big issue or a threat to unity now to pick up mike's point louise's point i guess it was probably also clifford's point as well if this yeah if this is the role of a deacon in the life of the church if a deacon is to be a promoter of unity a shock absorber to trouble in the church what kind of person are you looking for to be a church deacon what kind of character should you be looking for have a think with the person next to you about that you might want to have a look at the passage and at 1 timothy 3 as well if you'd like to

[23 : 53] okay oh my goodness look at the time right let's carry on i am hoping i'm not going to go around and get you to all tell me your answers but i'm hoping that you said things like they need to be a peacemaker they need to be someone who is gentle with others someone who is godly and wise and discreet so what i think i was trying to get you to say so that you can see some of those qualifications in the passage from 1 timothy what i think i'm trying to get you to see is that it's not just an ability to serve in that particular practical way they need to serve that practical way in a manner that breeds unity right so that doesn't stir up division they need to be somebody who is gracious and kind and gentle with others okay thirdly deacons support the ministry of the word if you have a look back at acts chapter 6 the apostles are concerned that the overwhelming practical needs of the church and the right demand of fairness are going to be too difficult for them to bear practically and the ministry of the word will suffer so the instruction to appoint is given in verse 4 so the apostles can give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word and the result of their appointment verse 7 is that the word of god spread and the number of disciples in jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith fascinating isn't it that the result is not said in that the hebraic jews and hellenistic jews stop falling out with one another but that the consequence of them not falling out with one another is that the word of god spreads and that there are more people becoming christians including especially a large number of priests now this is really important isn't it deacons serve the church not only by meeting the particular practical need but also by ensuring that the elders of the church are able to devote themselves to the ministry of the word of god and prayer and that benefits not only the people that are practically serving but also the rest of the church which is as a result better cared for and pastored and also the community which gets to hear the gospel more clearly now i think that's why in 1 timothy 3 paul talks about elders and then immediately goes to talking about deacons not because they're doing the same thing but because their mission essentially has the same goal that the word of god might be heard that people might be committed to the ministry of the word and prayer and the gospel might go forward and one serves the other so in that sense and to rob another bit from matt smethurst's book um i think he probably robbed it from someone else deacons are in some ways assistance to the elders so they are to assist the elders in their work not by necessarily being directly involved in the same thing but by liberating them by serving practically in the life of the church now i hope you can see that makes the ministry of the deacons really serious it's not a second-rate office is it it's not a role that doesn't really matter a church without deacons is poorer in lots of ways one because there'll be lots of practical needs that are not met and unity tensions that are building but also because the elders won't be elvering properly because they'll be giving their attention to things they shouldn't be having to give their attention to it also means doesn't it if you have just deacons and no elders then deacons become de facto elders right so what happens if you don't have elders but you just have deacons those deacons then assume all the responsibilities of leadership and become de facto elders which doesn't serve the church either probably because those deacons who are acting as elders are focused on practical need and not spiritual need and so the ministry of the word of god will suffer now that's a quick whistle through of what i wanted to say i wanted you to discuss one last thing in

groups in what ways do you think the practical needs of the church can prevent the ministry of the word of god and prayer happening today so maybe just for a couple of minutes with the person next to you and then we'll take some feedback and questions before i close in prayer go for it okay anyone want to feed anything back or ask another question we have a hanging question about staff teams so let me answer your question directly and then you can come back at me if you think i'm wrong okay i think you might decide in the life of a church that there is such a significant practical need that it is worth using the financial resources of the church to set aside someone to do that deacon role full time i i think actually this is particularly pertinent in churches now as opposed to like 20 or 30 years ago the administrative burden on churches now when you have to run a safeguarding policy a gdpr policy financial policies uh recruiting policy all these sorts of things the the administrative burden is so great that i think is almost impossible for even a quite sort of small to medium-sized church to run without someone being paid to do the admin because it's just really difficult in volunteer hours so that's then you might also because i think again we looked at this last week didn't we that you might also decide that it is worth the resource of the church to set someone aside in order to spend their time studying the scriptures in order to teach and shoulder the majority of the preaching responsibility so they become a staff and then you end up establishing a mini staff team which i think are essentially working alongside either as paid deacons or paid elders and that's how they form into that yeah so yeah you might so you might call them deacons or elders but i think you might also call them a staff team and there might be people that you employ in the life of the church who never become an elder or a deacon for example you might employ a cleaner who wouldn't necessarily become a deacon or you might employ someone for a season to do a certain set of jobs so you might get someone to paint the church who doesn't become a deacon by doing it yeah yeah any other anyone want to feedback on the question particularly where do you see practical needs of the church over running ministry yes yes yeah yeah yeah right uh let me just check up understood your question rightly so um are we saying essentially that deacons are not are doing things that we're all all should be involved with a lunch yeah okay yeah right yeah yes okay so so things that christians are commanded to do like particular care outreach with the homeless supporting particularly needy groups that are in the orbit of the church yeah so they see those and respond to those yeah i think you're right yeah i

i don't know whether this is sort of connected to that question but i also think there's a responsibility of deacons to sort of encourage other church members to be involved as well so i think it's the organization of as well as the doing of yeah yeah yeah yeah yes yeah yeah yeah yeah yes so it's our and it's interesting this in act six that responsibility is on the whole church isn't it to find those people it's not my job or the leader's job it's it's all of our job to identify these people and to get them serving so that with the ministry of the word of god can go forwards yes i think so i think that's i think that's right that's helpful let me just say one very concrete thing about our own church situation at the moment what's happened in the merge of our church is we have combined um say redeemer had only elders and no deacons and west kilburn had deacons and no elders and so now we've got to smooch that group into what is a joint leadership team who are performing the functions of both elders and deacons all together and then we have a few staff teams along staff team members alongside them as well the reason that we are moving towards separating that out into elders and deacons is because of these things in the bible it is not good for one group of men to own all of that responsibility in the life of the church and so we need to pass that out in order that we really want to see don't we that the word of god spreads and the number of disciples in kilburn and queens park increases rapidly right that's that's that's our desire and so all of us working together to identify leaders deacons and elders people who are going to serve in particular areas of the life of the church that's really important if we want to see the gospel go forwards so desiring to do these roles to be the kind of people who can do these roles it's really important for the ministry of the word of god and you might think well how on earth is doing this kind of you know running the cleaning rota how is that kind of helping the ministry of the gospel well it is exactly helping the ministry of the gospel because we need a clean building in order to meet and gather in don't we how is you know organizing the money how is that part of that well it's all the same it's all the same sort of thing as we're working together and we don't want one group of people owning all that responsibility on their own so let me pray for us that the lord would provide for us and then we'll go home let's pray heavenly father i want to thank you just especially for um the people in this room he's serving lots of different ways in the life of our church and we want to pray that together as a church family we would organize the life of our church in such a way that the ministry of the word of god goes forwards for the glory of your name we want to pray that it wouldn't just be one group of people owning all the responsibility and decision making in the life of the church we want to pray that it wouldn't just be one individual who feels the responsibility to find and solve every problem but lord that we would work together as a church family for the sake of your glory thank you for the wonderful ways you've provided for us thank you that you've provided for all of our needs and pray that you would continue to do so for the sake of your name amen amen thanks everybody