

Life Groups – For Leaders / Potential Leaders

Part 4: Qualifications and Functions of a Deacon

Download the audio version of this teaching at <http://cornerstonechurch.co.za/life-groups-qualifications-and-functions-of-a-deacon/>

In Part 3 we discussed why Life Groups are important for us today and how they are practically worked out in the life of a church, using Cornerstone as an example.

Now the course splits into two – for those who are involved in leadership or would like to be and for those who aren't. We've called these two parts "Leadership" and "Priesthood" for ease-of-use, knowing that, of course, all of us are the priesthood.

You are currently reading the first part for leaders and potential leaders, which is the fourth part of the course overall. In this part we will talk about the qualifications and functions of a deacon.

The leadership offices in a local church

Phil 1:1

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the *saints* in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers [*elders*] and *deacons*:

This is how the local church is made up. The highest order of life in a local church is *saints*. Within that, the offices of overseers and deacons are appointed by God.

Leadership is one of the many functions in the body of Christ. God has anointed elders and deacons to lead and it's important that we understand that this call is from God. Likewise, elders (overseers – the original Greek word means the same thing) have been appointed by God and are the one governmental leadership office for the local church.

It's rather strange how we, in our so-called wisdom, tend to add all sorts of other titles to 'elder' – bishops, founding pastors, senior pastors, arch-bishops, even CEO's. We create all kinds of hierarchy but leadership in the body of Christ has nothing to do with that. God has appointed only the elders and only the deacons and only the saints.

Relationships outside the local church

Every church also works in partnership and submission to servants. Paul and Timothy introduce themselves as servants in Phil 1:1 above. That's why we believe that every local church should work with a trans-local team made up of Eph 4:11 gifts (apostle, prophet, teacher, evangelist and pastor). These people with these gifts encourage and help churches and make sure they're healthy and help open the vision of that church. We see Paul and Timothy took this role and so we believe in following the same pattern for church today.

Our relationship in this context is with New Covenant Ministries International (NCMI). It's been like that since the beginning and we thank God for it. It's through this relationship that so much of the nations has opened up to us; and often truth has been revealed that we thank God for. With this relationship we can build our church on the foundation of apostles and prophets (Eph 2:19) with Jesus as the chief cornerstone.

Undoubtedly we build on Jesus Christ first and then apostolic-prophetic ministry. What does apostolic-

prophetic mean? It means we're a going church (apostolic) and we're a listening church (prophetic). We're going – we're not here for and about ourselves – we are gathering together for the sake of equipping the saints so that together we can do the ministry and reach out through doors God opens.

We don't shepherd for shepherding's sake with the objective of having a whole lot of healthy sheep. No, we shepherd to enlist people into God's army so that it can rise up and do His calling in this world.

Elders, deacons and accountability

The leadership of elders and deacons comes with great responsibility and accountability.

Heb 13:7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith

So, are you imitate-able?

God literally wants to put you in the front and say, "That's what I mean." We need to be comfortable with that. He wants to set us up as examples. In 1 Cor 11:1 Paul says "follow me as I follow Christ." So, you – as a leader – are the model of what we are showing the church, a model that showcases what God intends – that showcases passion, purity of heart, steadfastness, consistency, and so on.

It's important that God is raising us up – he is saying go and stand before the sheep and show them. This isn't a position of prominence where we strut around hoping people will notice us so that we can autograph Bibles and that! No, it's about a function in the body of Christ.

Heb 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Once the foundation of a real, authentic example has been set then we can say, as above, obey your leaders and submit to them. Not before.

We're going to give an account for our leadership. Sadly, there are many books and courses you can go on to recover from leadership abuse. Each of us may have our own story. But we must keep our hearts pure.

The obedience we as leaders command is in Christ because we're setting an example. We never impose – it's not because we say so and it's not because we can act like we're an expert. No, we're looking to find where God's going and follow that and do this well as a team and keep our hearts pure. As a leader, this is not your church, this is His church.

God looks for men and women of purity to stand in this incredibly important function. We need to let them do this with joy.

What a deacon is and what a deacon does

- A deacon is not a position of status or achievement.
- Deacons are not just the servants and gophers who must 'make it happen'.

While some of that takes place, it's deeper than that. The heart of service was first expressed by Jesus who regularly referred to himself as a servant. The word he uses to describe himself

as a 'servant' in the original Greek is the same word that means 'deacon'.

- The heart of leadership in Phil 1:1 is service. We, the leaders, come to serve.
- A deacon is not some kind of promotion because you've been a good saint. It's there as a call of God on your life.
- "Deacon" is also not a noun

While the word may be a noun in English the actual reference and the way it's used in Scripture (as well as elder / overseer) is a verb – a doing word. It's something God has called us to do, not be.

Functioning correctly

The perennial problem in the church today is that elders function as deacons; deacons are doing the work of the priests; and the priests spectate. In a post-modern world, spectating is the default. There's an expectation of 'show us' and 'we want to be entertained'.

In the first century church in Acts (at the end of chapter 5) there were about 15,000 people in the church with only 12 elders and seven deacons! How did they manage that? It's because the believers were operating as an active priesthood and not spectators. They weren't being told what to do – they wanted to be involved because of their inner conviction and lifestyle.

We're almost regulating their kind of lifestyle when it should be the normal, natural flow of things. Here is a Biblical model and value that's been lost and needs to be gained.

How else did they manage this? Acts 6 says the elders were giving themselves to prayer and the Word. Deacons should be holding the elders accountable for the ministry of the Word and prayer. When was the last time you asked an elder if they were giving themselves enough to loads of prayer and the Word?

The deacons were empowered to operate in much more higher levels than we see today. Yet the qualifications are simple and have never changed.

Qualifications of deacons

1 Timothy 3:8-13 (NLT)

8 In the same way, deacons must be people who are respected and have integrity. They must not be heavy drinkers and must not be greedy for money. 9 They must be committed to the revealed truths of the Christian faith and must live with a clear conscience. 10 Before they are appointed as deacons, they should be given other responsibilities in the church as a test of their character and ability. If they do well, then they may serve as deacons. 11 In the same way, their wives must be respected and must not speak evil of others. They must exercise self-control and be faithful in everything they do. 12 A deacon must be faithful to his wife, and he must manage his children and household well. 13 Those who do well as deacons will be rewarded with respect from others and will have increased confidence in their faith in Christ Jesus.

Basically, a deacon will have respect and authority because of a heart toward God. In essence, this passage above isn't just for the deacons but for the whole church. But out of the whole church, those who are doing it as a good example and taking kingdom culture seriously and have a call on their lives

are to be appointed as deacons.

Acts 6: 1 – 7 (NLT)

1 But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. Those who spoke Greek complained against those who spoke Hebrew, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food. 2 So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. "We apostles should spend our time preaching and teaching the word of God, not administering a food program," they said. 3 "Now look around among yourselves, brothers, and select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will put them in charge of this business. 4 Then we can spend our time in prayer and preaching and teaching the word." 5 This idea pleased the whole group, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (a Gentile convert to the Jewish faith, who had now become a Christian). 6 These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them. 7 God's message was preached in ever-widening circles. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.

Now, it's true that the word deacon is not mentioned in this passage but when you tie this up to the rest of the teachings on this subject you can see it was most definitely inferred.

Note this, they chose people who were "full of the holy spirit and wisdom" to serve at tables. So, it's not just hands that are needed! There's something more happening here.

Also note that as a result of building in God's way, God's message was preached in ever-widening circles and the number of believers increased.

What can we see from this? A deacon must have a good reputation and testimony in the home, marketplace and the church. It's about living your entire life like this, not just living like this on a Sunday.

Let's expound

1) Moral qualifications

Deacons must have integrity and not be double-tongued. If you say "I'll pray for you" it means you'll pray! You need to have heart, not charisma. You can't lead people on clichés and what you download on the Internet. You also can't show any partiality to rich or poor – serve them all equally.

What does it mean about not being a heavy drinker? It means you're not in bondage to anything, you don't need something external to pick yourself up; rather, your joy comes from the Lord.

2) Spiritual qualifications

A deacon must be committed to the revealed truths of the Christian faith. They must be devoted to the Word of God so much that they don't just read it, they take it to heart and live it out. The Word of God influences everything.

A deacon must be full of the Holy Spirit – committed to the Word and a relationship with the Holy Spirit. You need to be filled and know how to stay filled. It's about knowing how to go through storms and struggles but yet remaining in the Spirit, staying joyful, hopeful etc. We need to be able to persist through every season, producing fruit.

Once again, we need wisdom – not wisdom from below but wisdom from above (James 3:17). There are many people with a thousand opinions on absolutely everything. God's leaders, however, point people to Christ.

Deacons must be full of faith. We're a community of faith, we believe in God and that He will come through. Persist in prayer, there is no plan B. It's God; His word; His Kingdom. Plod faithfully and in due season you will reap.

3) Home life

A deacons must be faithful to his wife. You need to have this marriage covenant sorted out – one wife! Your marriage is going to tell others how you lead. Your ability to apply the Christian message is evident in how you shepherd at home.

The scripture in 1 Timothy above says a deacon must manage his household and children well. That word 'manage' becomes the word for leadership in the New Testament. It's the one who stands on the bow of the boat, who knows how to get the boat through the rocks and reef and guide it safely into the harbour.

Functions of a deacon

As per Acts 6 above, deacons release the elders to focus on prayer and ministry of the Word. Praying over others is a privilege of shepherding and should never be hindered by the repetitive processes that steal time.

Ministry of the Word isn't a Sunday morning download from sermons.com. Rather, ministry of the Word is birthed in a place of intercession and prayer and downloaded from heaven.

Elders are governmental but there are often blurred edges around that. Deacons serve the elders in a coming-alongside kind of way, even if some have more government on their lives which we see in action in business etc.

Deacons' responsibilities range from menial tasks to helping the elders sort out relationships in the church. Let's expound:

1) Deacons shepherd the flock with the elders

The Kingdom is about about discipling the nations. That requires work, focus, effort, hospitality, inconvenience and a whole lot more besides. There are too few leaders in the church with too large a job to do. Deacons and elders get involved in lives together. We're discipling people and working towards the same goal – God's Kingdom on earth

2) Deacons operate and grow in the expression of their giftedness and level of faith

God's got a call on your life. The man who waited on tables (Stephen from Acts 6) preached one of the most significant sermons in the history of the church later in the chapter in front of a hostile audience that stone him to death. Yet he becomes a seed for Paul and the event is a catalyst that helps to bring Paul in.

Philip is another great example of a deacon. We see him operate as an evangelist in Acts 21:18. He had one mandate from God, was called to be a deacon, and had a different mantle within all that. He started a fire in Ethiopia that still burns today.

Deacons need to operate at the level of their anointing and call. Some are captains of ten, some of thousands. Some deacons are going to do things that elders are never going to get to do, like open up cities.

4) Deacons work with the elders in bringing through the next generation of leaders

It's so important for deacons to work together and identify the next generation of leaders. Leadership helps all the other gifts in the church to be released, that's what it's there for. Part of the elders' responsibility is to pray and see who they can delegate to. As a deacon, look to delegate and raise up and keep asking the Lord who the next leaders are.

Some final pointers

- Deacons are leaders of a Life Group. Big things happen in small groups.
- Deacons help administrate the routine of the church
- Deacons should be gatherers at all times (be relational and work on your communication!)
- Deacons reach out to the lost
- Deacons should study and prepare themselves for where God is taking them
- Deacon must make sure they remain in a place of accountability
- Deacons are encouraged to work on the excesses of human nature
- Deacons should develop the scope of their ministry and influence. Our gift will make room for us.
- Deacons are not just involved in Life Group leadership but there are other practical areas where they serve (marriage counseling, etc.).
- Good deacons don't become elders. We don't have some hierarchy / corporate ladder going! If you're called to be an elder you'll know it and the elders will see the evidence.

What God won't do

When it comes to leadership there are three things God can't do for you. There are certain things God can't do, such as repent for you.

- 1) God won't work out your call – he'll give you a call but you need to work it out.
- 2) God won't put the gifts into practice – Timothy was encouraged to stir up his gifts (2 Tim 1:6). God pours out the gift and anoints with ministry but we have to work it out.
- 3) God won't be obedient for you – you must choose to be in obedience. That's what keeps us in this race, your choice to keep running.

Questions:

1. What are the two leadership offices in a local church?
2. What characteristics do you look for in a deacon?
3. What does a deacon do?