

Give Me a D-E-A-C-O-N! What's That Spell? It Depends on Whom You Ask!

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Deacon—the very word sends shudders up some people's spines, not the least of which includes many pastors. Ask a group of Baptists to list whatever comes to mind when they hear the word *deacon*, and you will find responses like “godly,” “controlling,” “mean-spirited,” “helpful,” “compassionate,” “negative,” and more! Most likely, the words *servant* and/or *leader* will also surface. While the same kind of responses could describe many people's views of *pastor*, this article examines various matters surrounding the role of Convention Press in the deacon ministry, particularly the nature and duties of deacons, in order to answer definitively what a deacon should be.

Out with the Old, In with the New—Transitioning Eras for Deacons in Baptist Life

Researching the influential books from Convention Press (and the Sunday School Board) on the role of the deacon brings an unmistakable shift to light. Popular Baptist works from the 18th and 19th centuries that at least touched on deacon ministry include the *Charleston Confession of Faith* (1774), R. B. C. Howell's *The Deaconship* (1846), and J. M. Pendleton's *Church Manual* (1847). These treatises assign the material and financial aspects of the church to the deacons.¹ P. E. Burroughs' *Honoring the Deaconship* (1929) continued this trend. This volume was designed as a study course book, resulting in a widespread readership in Baptist churches. Furthermore, Burroughs' work became the standard for Baptist deacons for four decades.²

Howard Foshee's *The Ministry of the Deacon* (1968) ushered in significant change within deacon ministry. Foshee placed less emphasis on the material matters and gave more attention to spiritual matters in deacon service. Additional changes came with Robert Sheffield's *The*

Ministry of Baptist Deacons (1990), calling for an even “deeper commitment and resolve for ministry.”³ Thus, the late-1700s until the mid-1900s provided a common consensus of deacon ministry. The last forty years or so have challenged that consensus. Realizing these differences toward views of deacon ministry should aid the reader in what follows.

A Long Time Ago, in a Galaxy Far, Far Away. . . The Origin of the Diaconate

If you were to ask the average deacon when the deacon ministry originated, he will refer to Acts 6. Much of the early 20th century literature supports this view. P. E. Burroughs’ *Honoring the Deaconship*, traces the origin of the diaconate to Acts 6.⁴ Moreover, E. C. Dargan, an influential voice in Baptist ecclesiology, comments on the term *deacon* in Phil 1:1 and 1 Tim 3:8-13: “while the word in its general signification means a servant, it is clear that it came to be used of the officer, and this very likely originated out of the circumstance mentioned in the 6th chapter of Acts.”⁵ Furthermore, Robert Naylor writes about “the seven” in Acts 6: “It is a matter of general agreement, however, that the election of these seven qualified men is the real beginning of the deacon as a church officer.”⁶

Others, however, prefer to challenge this assumption, noting that “the seven” of Acts 6 were not called deacons. Moreover, it is not uncommon for contemporary writers to challenge previous writers who focused their attention on deacons from Acts 6.⁷ Regardless of one’s final views on Acts 6, all recognize the mandate for deacons “to serve” as well as their model in witnessing (see soul-winning in “odds and ends” below).⁸ Different views of Acts 6 and deacon origin often affect their understanding of how deacons function.

Board or Body (Management or Ministry)

Quite possibly the most contentious aspect of deacon ministry among Baptist churches is its function. Is a group of deacons a board or a body? Is their primary role that of management or ministry?

A few authors have sought to trace the role of the deacon throughout church history. The first few centuries reveal deacons expressing practical service, especially benevolence. The Middle Ages, however, shows the diaconate evolving into initial training for the priesthood. The Reformation Period recovered the emphasis on benevolent ministry to the poor. By the late-18th century, however, deacons began concerning themselves with the secular business, primarily by managing the material and financial issues (see endnote 1). It appears as though this management mindset arose out of secular problems, where business decisions were made during a meal around a wooden (board) table. “Boards” became known as any group that made decisions. Such a view eventually passed into the church among deacons, and by the 19th century, deacon boards were quite standard.⁹

Most of the 20th century saw this trend continue. Burroughs promotes deacon boards when he says that the deacon is

entrusted with the care of the material interests of the church. He is to care for the properties of the church, its building, its pastor’s home, and its other material holdings. He is to direct and safeguard the financial side of its ministry. As contrasted with the pastor he is to serve in what may be properly called the materialities of the church.¹⁰

While championing the deacon’s authority, he offers a word of caution: “deacons, by virtue of their office, must share with the pastor this responsibility of leadership which really amounts to authority and rule. At the same time it should go without saying that deacons are not to be ruling elders or managing directors. The church is to be a pure democracy.”¹¹ Though caution is noted, Burroughs believes that the deaconship is not honored when church finances are managed by any

other group besides deacons or when church properties are managed by others. He adds, “Deacons were to be businessmen. Business service was to be required at their hands. They must possess business qualifications. These things were assumed. They were passed without mention.”¹² On a similar note, “deacons are to serve the church especially in the material phases of its life,” after claiming that, “no catalogue of duties is laid down in the New Testament. In the nature of the case no such specific guidance could be given. Such guidance was not needed then and is not needed now.”¹³ Furthermore, “the business of the church and its finances constitute the special and distinct assignment of the deacons.”¹⁴ Therefore, while Burroughs shies away from the *terminology* of deacons as managing directors, he clearly favors deacon-rule in business management *practices*.

Issues that signal when deacons function like church business managers include

- (1) When the deacons’ responsibilities are composed solely of business management matters.
- (2) When deacons administer the affairs of the church primarily as a business operation.
- (3) When deacons are viewed as the decision makers in most business affairs.
- (4) When business efficiency seems to predominate the activities of deacons.¹⁵

Foshee and Sheffield, on the other hand, aim to return deacons to an earlier era—one which highlights the *ministry* role of deacons rather than *management*. Foshee asserts, “The Scriptures do not list specific duties that deacons are to perform. The Bible focuses on deacon qualifications rather than the exact nature of the work.”¹⁶ He then adds, “Deacons who measure up to the biblical qualifications are equipped to minister to the spiritual needs of persons.”¹⁷ Thus, because they are spiritually qualified, deacons should help carry out the pastoral ministry areas of the church. Pastoral ministries is a large umbrella that includes caring for church members and people in the community through a Deacon Family Ministry Plan, counseling, preaching/witnessing, providing benevolence, maintaining fellowship in the church, and helping the church achieve its mission.¹⁸

Pastoral ministry is not the only area where deacons can benefit the church. The ministry options are virtually endless, including serving as greeters and ushers, helping in worship, administering the Lord's Supper, and serving on committees (finance, personnel, property, and more).¹⁹ Where Foshee and Sheffield break with Burroughs and his predecessors is that these more recent writers believe that deacons may serve in finances and material aspects, but they are not mandated to be the only, or even primary, financial/material decision-makers in the church.

Historically, Foshee asserts, many Baptist churches in the 19th century were small and rural with part-time preachers. Deacons stepped up to the plate to take care of the church property and eventually made decisions on other church matters.²⁰ The 20th century, however, has witnessed Baptist growth in other settings, especially in cities and metro-areas. These settings tend to keep pastors longer and do not expect deacons to make most of the church's decisions. Thus, the last forty years have argued against the deacon management (decision-making board) philosophy of the previous two centuries while underscoring a deacon ministry (service-oriented body) philosophy. Many older churches, typically rural or small town, still function with deacon boards in place. Newer churches, especially in larger cities, emphasize a body of deacons that serves.

War of the Worlds—Deacons Relating to Pastors

All-to-often a pastorate has come to an end because at least one deacon butted heads with the pastor. There are times, to be sure, that the pastor bears some, or most, of the responsibility in poor relationships to deacons. Because this article's focus is deacons, however, a few suggestions follow to enhance the ways deacons relate to pastors.

Deacons who recognize and appreciate that the pastor's business is the highest of all can maximize the pastor's time by meeting with him, when necessary, so that valuable time is not

spent in his travel to and from a deacon's home or place of business. Moreover, deacons serve the pastor well when they ensure that he receives a fair and reasonable compensation from the church. Helping bear the pulpit ministry, especially on Sunday or Wednesday evenings, when the pastor needs to be away, also ministers to both the church and the pastor, who does not have to go to great lengths to secure a replacement.²¹ Finally, regular prayer for the pastor and clear communication indicate support and cooperation in serving together to accomplish the church's mission.²² Deacons who pursue good relations with their pastors, especially in these areas, usually find enjoyment and fulfillment in serving the church together.

A High Pedigree—Qualifications for Deacons

Nearly every volume on deacons covers the important qualifications outlined in Scripture. Those who believe Acts 6 describes deacons attribute matters like being full of the Spirit, wisdom, and faith to their qualifications.²³ Everyone agrees on the moral, doctrinal, and familial prerequisites in 1 Timothy 3, except when it comes to one issue: “the husband of one wife.”

Burroughs argues for the interpretation that Paul is speaking against polygamy. He ultimately favors a “one wife at a time” kind of deacon, if the deacon is married at all.²⁴ Naylor, a generation later, promotes only one living wife at a time, if married, and even cautions against deacons' wives from non-Baptist denominations.²⁵ Foshee believes Paul gives his stamp of approval to Jesus' absolute rejection of divorce.²⁶ Sheffield remains more neutral on the issue, citing that “the sanctity of the marriage vow. . . forbids adultery, does not allow plural marriages, and encourages sexual faithfulness in marriage.” The final decision of single, divorced, and/or remarried deacons, Sheffield says, is left in the hands of the local church, preferably decided without personalities involved and with much prayer.²⁷

Duck. . . Duck. . . Deacon—Electing Deacons

When it comes time to elect deacons, churches employ a variety of ways. A few practice open nomination from the floor, some accept nomination by a committee, too many allow the deacons to name their newcomers, a small number allow the pastor to nominate them, and still others call for a precise number of names to be written on a ballot.

No one system is fool-proof, but the written method seems to be the most practical. The church determines how many deacons are needed and the moderator instructs members during business how many names of qualified men should be written down (or checked off on a provided list). This practice saves those men with little or no votes from the embarrassment that could come from an open nomination. With every voting member of the church stating their preference, deacons, nominating committees, and pastors have less control over this facet of the church's life. No matter what method churches use, they are wise to state deacon qualifications clearly and screen/interview potential candidates in advance to determine if any questionable areas might exclude the man from deacon-service.²⁸

Serving 'Til the Cows Come Home?—Tenure

Just as differences of opinion exist over electing deacons, so it goes with their tenure. Some Baptists believe, "Once a deacon, always a deacon." This view finds little support among the influential writers and thinkers of the 20th century.²⁹ Burroughs cites five reasons to jettison lifetime service. First, a deacon may leave the church and go elsewhere. His new church is under no obligation to allow him to serve as a deacon. Second, a deacon may request to step down from service due to a number of circumstances. Third, a deacon's old age and limited activity may prevent him from serving, at least in an active role. Fourth, the church may ask the deacon to step down due to immorality, doctrinal heresy, or a hindering attitude. Finally, the church may

have a rotation system in place where every deacon ceases to serve for one or more years after a period of active service (usually three to five years).³⁰

Many churches now follow the rotation system. There are certain merits to this method of service, for it

1. Provides a broader base of leadership, enabling more qualified persons to serve their church as deacons.
2. Provides a way for deacons who no longer want to serve to retire with grace.
3. Provides a way for deacons to renew themselves spiritually for greater ministry effectiveness.
4. Provides for a continually effective Deacon Family Ministry Plan.
5. Provides the church the opportunity to replace those deacons who, because of age, infirmity, or loss of interest, have become inactive and ineffective.
6. Provides the church with safeguards against the “board of directors” mentality among deacons.³¹

Though a few disadvantages exist with rotation, the most obvious being that an extremely good deacon has to sit out for a period, the advantages clearly outweigh the disadvantages.

Odds and Ends—Ordaining, Organizing, Training, and Soul-Winning

While chapters could be written on each of these areas, a common consensus exists about what each area is. Deacon ordination is a planned service, usually accompanied by the laying on of hands by either those already ordained or the whole church, whereby the church officially sets the new deacon apart for service. The preaching, singing, and praying should aim to honor the Lord while recognizing His involvement in the deacon’s life. Even though ordination does not impart any special power, the service should be meaningful to the deacon, his family, and the church.³²

On a different note, the deacon body which functions best is the one where organization is in place. A chairman and a secretary are necessities, for planning and recording deacon meetings and service. Depending on the size of the deacon body, a vice chair may be necessary. A few more organizational levels may be needed for larger churches to be more effective.

Clearly written expectations of each officer and deacon bring a sense of purpose and mission to each deacon as he relates to his fellow deacons and to the church. Where a Deacon Family Ministry Plan is in place, eight to fifteen families fall under each deacon's care for one year. Each year the families are disbursed anew so that deacons get to know more people and so that families that may have been neglected receive the care they need.³³

Providing training for deacons, at least annually, enhances their effectiveness for ministry. Training may come from individual study books recommended by the pastor or deacon body, or seminars may be offered by the church, association, state, or a national conference/retreat. The purpose of such training is to help each deacon grow in the faith and his walk with the Lord, as well as his role among fellow deacons and within the church.³⁴

Ultimately, the best deacon is a soul-winning deacon. Burroughs claims, "The best service of the deacon, his highest function, is winning men to Christ."³⁵ The most obvious expectation of deacons is in the proclamation of the gospel through preaching or witnessing, for every volume on the diaconate covers this subject.³⁶ Thus, the best way a deacon can serve the church is through serving the lost by sharing the good news.

Conclusion—Is a Deacon a Servant or a Leader?

Having traced the role of Convention Press on deacon ministry, the original issue resurfaces: is a deacon a servant or a leader. Every book on deacons underscores that deaconship "is distinctly a call to serve. . . . Men are to be elected to the office of deacon with a view to service."³⁷ In addition to service, however, each volume highlights the leadership office of deacons. Discouraged in recent decades from being the leaders of the church through a board of directors, deacons should be a part of the larger leadership team. They "are leaders in their churches. Church members look to their deacons for leadership. The Bible pictures deacons as

significant leadership figures in the New Testament church.”³⁸ In the end, deacons are servant-leaders, carrying out ministry to the congregation while helping lead the church to fulfill its mission.

¹See, for example, the Charleston Association’s belief that “the office of a deacon is to relieve the minister from the secular concerns of the church; hence they are called Helps, *1 Cor: 12:28*. Their business is to serve tables” (Charleston Association, *A Summary of Church Discipline* [Charleston: David Bruce, 1774] in Mark E. Dever, ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* [nc: Center for Church Reform, 2001], 121).

²For a brief history of this trend, see Howard B. Foshee, *The Ministry of the Deacon* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1968), 35-36, and Robert Sheffield, *The Ministry of Baptist Deacons* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1990), 22-23.

³Sheffield, 11.

⁴P. E. Burroughs, *Honoring the Deaconship* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1929), 8-9. See also Sheffield, 17-18.

⁵E. C. Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches* (Louisville: Chas. T. Dearing, 1897), 60. A few lines later, Dargan adds this clarifier: “Perhaps it would be going too far to say that these seven were actually deacons, in the later sense, at Jerusalem.”

⁶Robert E. Naylor, *The Baptist Deacon* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), 7. Though outside the scope of Convention Press, Naylor’s work is included in this study because of its vast influence in Baptist life.

⁷19th-20th century works simply misunderstood Acts 6 (Sheffield, 24).

⁸See Foshee, 17-18. More recently, John Polhill notes, “Often the present passage is seen to be the initiation of the diaconate. The word “deacon” (diakonos) never occurs in the passage. The word “ministry” (diakonia) does occur several times, but it is applied to both the ministry of the daily distribution (v. 2) and the ministry of the word, the apostolic witness (v. 4). In fact, the word “deacon” never occurs in Acts. . . . If one is inclined nevertheless to see the diaconate in this passage, that person should take a cue from Steven and Philip. In the rest of Acts, nothing is made of their administrative duties. What one finds them doing is bearing their witness, even to martyrdom” (*Acts*, vol. 26 in *The New American Commentary* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992], 182-183).

⁹See Foshee, 32-36; Sheffield, 20-25; and Henry Webb, *Deacons: Servant Models in the Church* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1980), 75-76. Burroughs references John A. Broadus’ stance against deacon boards in Baptist life because of the tendency to leave Baptist democracy in favor of governing boards (Burroughs, 16-17). While not particularly favoring deacon boards, Dargan believed temporal, administrative duties were assigned to deacons from the New Testament: “primarily the care of the finances, looking after the business affairs of the church, attending to the poor, and probably the care of any other matters of administration which should be devolved upon them by the church” (Dargan, 61).

¹⁰Burroughs, 13-14.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹²*Ibid.*, 22.

¹³*Ibid.*, 42. This writer cannot help but wonder where these kinds of assumptions might take Christianity.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 62. Naylor says that deacons are businessmen in the sense of secular matters, but then adds that “there is no scriptural authority for the deacons to make the financial decisions of the church” (Naylor, 20-21).

¹⁵Foshee, 35-36.

¹⁶Ibid., 32. Naylor voiced this same issue a few years earlier, but he does not connect it to pastoral ministries in the same way that Foshee and Sheffield do (see Naylor, 61-62).

¹⁷Ibid., 39. Sheffield, who admits to writing something of a follow-up volume to Foshee, states, “*Deacons relate to the church as Christian ministers*” (14, emphasis original).

¹⁸See *ibid.*, 39-40, 46-89; Naylor, 11-13, 69; Sheffield, 83-97; and Barbara Sheffield, *Help! I’m a Deacon’s Wife* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1992), 13-14. For numerous suggestions for the care-giving role, see Homer D. Carter, *Equipping Deacons in Caring Skills* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1980).

¹⁹See Foshee, 41-42; and Robert Sheffield, 71-82.

²⁰Foshee, 35.

²¹Burroughs, 42-46.

²²Robert Sheffield, 33. Other relations that deacons can have with pastors fall under the deacon ministry section above.

²³Burroughs, 22-25.

²⁴Ibid., 30; see also Webb, 42-43.

²⁵Naylor, 121-124.

²⁶Foshee, 24.

²⁷Robert Sheffield, 40-41. A related issue concerning deaconesses (i.e., female deacons) has generally been frowned upon in Baptist life, cf. Burroughs, 31-32.

²⁸See Burroughs, 35-36; Foshee, 102-104; Webb, 15-16; and Robert Sheffield, 46-51.

²⁹See Naylor, 50-51, for the lone voice surveyed that sees considerable merit in lifetime deacon service, though he offers more advantages for a deacon-rotation system.

³⁰Burroughs, 37-40. See also Webb, 14; Foshee, 105-110; and Robert Sheffield, 112-116.

³¹Robert Sheffield, 113-114; see also Foshee, 106.

³²Robert Sheffield, 51-55; Foshee, 104-105.

³³Robert Sheffield, 98-112; Webb, 78-81; and Foshee, 92-99.

³⁴See Foshee, 28-30; Robert Sheffield, 111; and Burroughs, 54-55.

³⁵Burroughs, 66. It is hard to see how Burroughs genuinely means such a statement when most of his volume covers the financial and material duties of deacons, saying these “constitute *the special* and distinct assignment of the deacons” (62, emphasis added).

³⁶See Burroughs, 66-78; Naylor, 43, 95-97; Foshee, 46-55; Webb, 98-108; Robert Sheffield, 77-82; and Barbara Sheffield, 13-14.

³⁷Burroughs, 11-12. See also Robert Sheffield, 12-13.

³⁸Foshee, 58. See also, Naylor, 90; Webb, 116; and Barbara Sheffield, 13.