

"THE OFFICE OF DEACON"

**I. Introduction**

- A. In last week's sermon, we noted how the church's elders represent Christ in their office of spiritual oversight in the church.
1. Jesus is the only Head of his church, which means he is the supreme Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.
  2. At the same time, Jesus tends his flock through the ministry of men.
  3. He does this through those whom he calls and equips to serve in the office of elder.
- B. In today's text, the apostle Paul sets forth the qualifications for the church's other special office: the office of deacon.
1. The Greek term for deacon has the general meaning of "servant."
  2. The office of deacon is an office of service, and it too is representative of Christ.
  3. In his Messianic office, Jesus is the supreme Servant.
  4. He perfectly submitted to the will of the Father in the outworking of the plan of redemption.
  5. And in doing so, he performed a service of inestimable worth for those whom he was given to save.
  6. But Christ's service to his people did not end when he completed his redemptive work.
  7. He continues to attend to our needs, and one of the ways he does this is by making use of the ministry of those whom he calls and

equips to serve as deacons.

## II. The Origins and Nature of the Office

- A. Before we look at what Paul says in these verses about the qualifications that need to be met by those who serve as deacons in Christ's church, I want to take a few moments to consider the origins and nature of this office.
1. Unlike the office of elder, there is no office of deacon in the Old Testament.
  2. At the same time, the function that the diaconal office serves in the covenant community is certainly present in the Old Testament.
  3. One such function is caring for the church's poor.
  4. In ancient Israel, it was the responsibility of the family to take care of its needy.
  5. If support from the family was not available, the larger community had the responsibility to step in.
  6. Ultimately, it was the responsibility of the king to ensure that the poor in Israel were not neglected or mistreated.
  7. Over time, the synagogues took on the task of providing organized care for the needy, and this was well-established by the time of the first century.
- B. Another Old Testament background for the office of deacon is seen in the service that was rendered by the Levites in the temple.
1. The Levites tended to the temple's physical needs so that the priests could focus on carrying out the functions that were specially assigned to them.
  2. The Levites were responsible for keeping water in the basin that was used for ceremonial washing, for keeping the fires burning,

and for tending to various other tasks in the sanctuary.

3. Though the Levites' duties were fairly mundane, they were essential to the functioning of the temple system.
- C. The Gospels provide a background for the office of deacon in that they clearly show us that our Lord was concerned about people's physical needs.
1. Even though Jesus' priority was on proclaiming the gospel, he often extended compassion and help to the poor, the needy, the hurting, and the marginalized.
  2. Even though he is King of kings and Lord of lords, he said that he did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.
  3. Just before his death he illustrated this in a powerful way by performing the menial task of washing his disciples' feet, setting an example of service for all of his people to follow.
- D. In light of this backdrop, we can see that the office of deacon did not come out of nowhere at the time of its formal beginning in Acts 6.
1. In that chapter, Luke tells us that when a dispute arose in the church over the distribution of food to widows, the apostles responded by saying this: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:2-4 ESV)
  2. In handling the dispute in this way, the apostles affirmed two things.
  3. On the one hand, they made it clear that the church should address the physical needs of its members.

4. On the other hand, the apostles showed that helping the needy should not distract the church from its primary commitment to the ministry of the Word.
5. In the decades after those events in Acts 6, the office of deacon emerged so that the church could maintain both of these commitments.
6. By the time Paul wrote his epistle to the church in Philippi, the office of deacon was so established that he could address the letter this way: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons." (Phil 1:1 ESV)

### III. The Qualifications for the Office

- A. Having considered the background for the office of deacon, we turn now to the qualifications that Paul sets forth in this text for those who serve in this office.
  1. The first thing that he says is that deacons must be "dignified."
  2. This is an overall summary of the kind of character that should be possessed by a deacon.
  3. A deacon needs to be a man who takes the Christian faith seriously, a man who is worthy of respect, a man who has a good reputation.
- B. This is followed by three statements pertaining to qualities that should not be present in a deacon.
  1. First, he is not to be double-tongued.
  2. A double-tongued person says one thing to a person's face and then something else behind that person's back.
  3. The fact that deacons often work with people when they are at their most vulnerable makes it of the utmost importance that they have integrity with their tongues.

4. Another thing that a deacon must not be is addicted to much wine.
  5. Addiction is a matter of enslavement, and it is not fitting for an officer in Christ's church to be enslaved to anything.
  6. The third thing that a deacon must not be is greedy for gain.
  7. Aside from being a serious character flaw, greed should certainly not be present in those who handle the church's money.
- C. The next trait that Paul mentions is a positive one: deacons must hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.
1. The term "mystery" is used by Paul throughout his letters to refer to God's plan of salvation.
  2. It is called a "mystery" because it was previously kept hidden and has now been made known in its fullness in the gospel of Jesus Christ.
  3. The point that Paul is making when he speaks of "the mystery of the faith" in this text is that deacons need to embrace the gospel and live in accordance with it.
  4. Even though diaconal work is more focused on the physical than the spiritual, it is to be conducted under the direction of God's revealed will in Scripture.
  5. This makes it imperative that deacons be both theologically astute and spiritually mature.
  6. As John Calvin put it, "it would be exceedingly absurd to hold a public office in the church, while they were ill-informed in the Christian faith, especially since they must frequently be laid under the necessity of administering advice and consolation."
  7. As deacons carry out their duties, the counsel and comfort that they extend to God's people need to be in accord with sound doctrine.

- D. Paul also says that deacons are to be tested before they are ordained and installed to their office.
1. Though the precise nature of this test is not specified by Paul, his basic point is clear enough.
  2. The church needs to make sure that all of its officers are men whose faith is proven.
  3. Their life, their reputation, and their knowledge of God's truth should be examined in a careful manner before they are elected to office.
- E. This brings us to verse 11, which says, "Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things."
1. This verse has been the subject of a measure of controversy.
  2. Some contend that the term "wives" should be translated as "women" and taken as a reference to women deacons or to a parallel office of deaconess.
  3. While it is true that the Greek term can mean either "wives" or "women," it is highly unlikely that this is a reference to women deacons.
  4. For one thing, why would Paul add separate qualifications for women deacons if they serve in the same office as men deacons, especially when the qualifications listed here are not any different than those listed in the rest of the paragraph?
  5. Furthermore, the immediate context favors translating the word as "wives."
  6. After all, it is used in the very next verse to refer to wives, just as it was back in verse 2.

7. Most significantly, in this chapter Paul says that both elders and deacons need to be men who manage their *households* well.
  8. And then in 3:15 Paul says that he is writing these things so that Timothy “may know how one ought to behave in the *household* of God.”
  9. This tells us that there is a parallel between the management of the family household and the management of the church as God’s household.
  10. That being the case, Paul’s teaching about male headship in chapter 2 applies not only to the office of overseer but also to the office of deacon.
  11. Both overseers and deacons are involved in the authoritative management of the church as the household of God.
  12. The fact that both are ordained offices in the church means both have authoritative functions in the church.
  13. Overseers are responsible for governing the church and tending to its spiritual needs.
  14. Deacons are responsible for serving the church and tending to its physical needs.
  15. The fact that both offices are engaged in the authoritative management of church life means that the women deacon interpretation of verse 11 is ruled out by what is said in chapter 2 about women not being permitted to have authority over men in the church.
- F. The meaning of verse 11 is that the character of a man’s wife needs to be taken into account when he is being considered for the office of deacon.
1. Of course, common sense would tell us that this is also true for prospective elders.

2. In fact, John Calvin may have been correct in thinking that verse 11 is an aside that refers to the wives of *both* elders and deacons.
  3. But even if Paul only has the wives of deacons in view here, it is understandable that he would make special mention of them.
  4. Diaconal work often involves ministering to women who are in need.
  5. This was especially the case in the first century, as the church played a vital role in the care of its widows.
  6. This made it necessary for deacons to enlist the help of godly women as they carried out their work.
  7. In many cases, their wives would be the most natural people to assist them.
  8. The basic principle that is conveyed by verse 11 is that the wives of church officers need to be exemplary Christians who are able to be a good support to their husbands as they carry out the duties of their office.
- G. Turning now to verse 12, we see that Paul concludes his list of qualifications for deacons by setting forth the same family requirements that he gave for elders in the passage that we studied last week.
1. Since we considered this in last week's sermon, I will only give a basic summary here.
  2. The point is not that the office of deacon is only open to men who are married.
  3. Instead, Paul is saying that if a deacon is married, he needs to be a man who is faithfully devoted to his wife and who manages his children and his household well.
  4. From this we can also infer that a deacon who is unmarried needs to be living a well-ordered and sexually upright life as a single

man.

#### IV. A Special Promise for Deacons

- A. Our text concludes with a special promise for deacons.
1. This is similar to the saying that Paul set forth about the office of overseer back in verse 1.
  2. In that verse, Paul encouraged elders in their work by reminding them that they are engaged in a noble task.
  3. In the same way, here we see Paul encouraging deacons in their work by assuring them that their service, though often under-the-radar, is noble and productive.
  4. Those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great confidence in the faith.
- B. The reason why Paul emphasized this was because servants were not held in high regard in the ancient world.
1. Ancient people did not think that the last would be first.
  2. They thought that the last would be last.
  3. And really, people still think this way today.
  4. But as we see in Philippians 2, one of the key marks of a disciple of Jesus Christ is to count others more significant than yourself, and to look not only to your own interests but to the interests of others.
  5. After all, this is exactly what Jesus did when he made himself of no reputation and took on our human flesh so that he could secure our redemption.
  6. Servanthood is at the very heart of the Christian faith.

7. Where would we be without the humble service that Christ rendered on our behalf?
  
8. Surely one of the reasons why our Lord instituted the office of deacon in his church was in order to give us a tangible assurance of the fact that we really do belong to him both in body and in soul, and that his grace is sufficient for all our needs, whether spiritual or physical.