

Paul's Vision for Deacons (and you) – Phil. 1; 1 Timothy 3

Please turn to the book of Philippians. I mentioned we would be starting a new book study through Colossians after Easter but we're continuing a brief miniseries on the church for the 1st quarter of 2020 under the idea of 'vision for body life.' Today is maybe one of the most important messages planned out and talked about as elders, looking at Paul's vision in the NT for servant leaders, deacons, your service and each members partnership and ownership (that's the word Paul uses in Phil 1:5 for partnership in the gospel, this is a fellowship of mutual ownership of your fellow members you share life w/)

Messages: 2020 vision for body life

- ... stirring encouragement
- ... growing in communication (convicting to me)
- ... gospel as motivation (Bible memorization)
- ... church commitments
- ... church unity
- ... church servant-leaders and your service

It's good to review why we do what we do as a church, ministry philosophy. I want to start with a visual that was how last Wednesday started for me at the Shepherd's Conference. I saw this man handing out welcome flyers and it moved me to tears. His name is Burt Michaelson. He's 90 years old and I think for 60 years or more he's been faithfully serving at GCC with his wife

SLIDES – buildings on campus, fixture at SC, grilling and serving hotdogs
 SLIDES – volunteers, saints do the work of ministry as you go up the stairs. Some get up at 3 or 4 AM to help fill a role before going to work a f.t. job. Some serve in wheelchairs, some are elderly, some are teens with ice cream. There were over 800 serving us who weren't elders or deacons, just faithful saints who see themselves as partners in ministry. Many of them taking days off work to serve and build up men from churches like ours, refreshing them to go back as thankful shepherds and servants and to stir that in their church

A beautiful joyful visual of Phil. 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: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

Today our #1 focus will be on deacons who Paul mentions at the end of v. 1. Secondly, we'll see their connection to overseers/elders in v. 1 right before. #3, we'll see we're all servants as v. 1 says (and saints, or set apart to serve). 4th and final point will focus on Christ in v. 1. There's application for all of us as we study what it means to be ministry partners, elder-deacon, and you.

1. The Explanation of Deacons
2. Their Relation to Elders
3. The Congregation of Servants
4. Our Motivation in Christ

4 points from 4 key words in v. 1: Deacons, Elders, Servants, Christ. I'll explain what deacons are related to elders and other servants, and to Christ. And the prayer in all this for leaders and all believers is in v. 9: *And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

That takes us back to our church purpose statement, glorify God in all we do – and v. 11 is for those in v. 1, elders, deacons, and servants in Christ. How we pursue love more and more, which has been the prayer of servant-leaders of this church, how we grow in knowledge of deacons and our roles, and discern the most excellent way of working together, it's all to His glory.

#1. The Explanation of Deacons (end of v. 1 has the word “deacons”)

The Greek word here *diakonos* was originally used of those who served as waiters at a table. But it's usually just translated 'servant' in the NT, except for 2 places, here in Phil 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3 that was read earlier. It's not just a general term here for the kind of servant every Christian is, v. 1 lists overseers and deacons along with all the Christians. 1 Timothy 3 starts 'if anyone aspires to the office of overseer...' then later 'deacons, likewise...'

So we're talking about the office of deacon, official leaders, church officers. Just like the English word elder can mean an old person or a church leader called an Elder, the Greek word *diakonos* can mean a servant or a church leader called a Deacon (a recognized servant-leader). Paul and Timothy are *servants of Christ* writing to all the church with *the overseers and deacons*. In v. 1 *saints* (set apart ones) and *servants* are NT titles for all believers who are set apart to serve, but v. 1 ends with leaders with believers. And notice v. 1 says they're *with* the overseers and the people, they're not above them.

In some Baptist churches, deacons are like a ruling body along with trustees. In others they don't do much but sit on a board, business, or building stuff. I was at a big church with hundreds of deacons, including women, but they never met, and it was more a title for those serving various ways. One local Bible-teaching church has Elders but doesn't believe in or have Deacons.

Others make anyone with a responsibility or ministry a deacon (coffee bar deacon) or others limit deacon work to financial benevolence, or facilities. Good churches limit it to Acts 6 or physical help, spiritual done by elders. Those are traditional understandings, but no biblical text actually says that.

'A woman who was concerned about a friend of hers who had not attended church in a long time asked her pastor if he would call the man. She said, "If you ask him to be a deacon, maybe he would start coming to church again and get involved." Although [she] meant well, her request shows a lack of understanding about the biblical requirements...there must be something very significant about the deacons' ministry that requires both specific, elder-like qualifications and [church] verification of such qualifications...'¹

Why this message today: new deacons vote tonight, PM ministry updates on how God is growing us as elders and deacons, where we hope to be going.

As members vote to affirm, what are we affirming or asking deacons to do? But also to give Paul's vision for deacons that I hope is something men will aspire to, including young men (I think of guys in YAG who could become deacons in their 20s). Also this is a pivotal time in our church as the elders and deacons have been studying Paul's vision for deacons in Phil 1, 1 Tim 3

Diakonos in Grk can mean commissioned messenger, or an agent/assistant. Outside of the church, Paul uses this word in Rom 13:4 to say a government agent 'is God's servant [diakonos] for your good...he is the servant of God.' That's talking about agents in law enforcement, officers who protect and serve the people. Paul adds they're carrying out God's will as ministers of the state, recognized and authorized to act on behalf of those over them. Our deacons don't bear swords, but they serve (some protect on security team). They're officers recognized and authorized by overseers as spiritual agents.

The most extensive study of over 700 uses of this word from 600 BC to 300 AD concludes the word deacon in Phil 1 and 1 Tim 3 isn't the idea of just a servant, it has the idea of 'Agency...one who carries out the will of another, or a task on behalf of another [an agent] carrying out an assignment on a [leader]'s behalf and having full authority to execute the...delegated task.'

In other places this root word is used for one given a mission or an assistant.

One Greek dictionary said it was used for one who would give direction to a thing or ‘preparation and organization...dispensers and overseers’ who have ‘practical love’ (*Ibid.*, 2:84). These are authorized empowered agents. The most authoritative 3rd edition of A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature [BDAG] lists a definition of *diakonos* as ‘one who gets something done, at the behest of...assistant to someone.’ It cites Phil 1:1 and 1 Tim 3 to mean ‘attendant, assistant, aide.’

Mt 22:13 uses this plural form of *deacon* for “the king’s attendants” (ESV, NIV) or “aides” (NLT). Greek OT used this in Esther 1 for king’s assistants, some versions say ‘attended’ or ‘served in the presence of King Ahasuerus.’ In Esther 6:5 one translation of this Greek word has ‘personal attendants.’ In the context of Phil 1:1 think attending to or serving overseers of King Jesus. Another study concludes deacons are church-approved assistants to Elders.

So from #1. the explanation of deacons, we go to #2. their relation to elders
Paul’s vision for deacons is assistants to the elders. Not general servants, but linked with overseers. Only 2 times the NT mentions: *overseers ... deacons*. They’re closely related to overseers and we need to be relating more closely

SLIDE–Strauch, talk about his book by that title, changed from former book focused on Acts 6, this focuses on what *diakonos* meant in ancient Greek lit.

In past years we’ve described deacons as recognized servants, ministers of mercy, and shock absorbers. But we think the best biblical explanation of deacons is ‘assisting the elders in the care of the church.’ You heard one of our deacons read 1 Tim 3 earlier, where it says in v. 3 elders need to ‘*care for God’s church*’ (v. 5). Then the same character qualities for deacons, but teaching isn’t required of deacons. Deacons don’t have to teach the church, though some can, but they need the same character and care for the church.

And elders need help caring for the church. Paul himself needed assistants. Not just servants, which all Christians are, but designated dedicated helpers. Timothy in Phil 1:1 was Paul’s protégé he personally mentored/disciplined. Acts 19:22 uses the root *deacon* for Timothy as one of his ‘helpers’ (ESV), ‘assistants’ (NAB, NET, NLT), ‘assisted’ (HCSB). Same verb in Acts 6:3-4 for the Seven *servicing* tables so the apostles didn’t neglect *servicing* the Word. They’re not called deacons in Acts but the elder’s calling is clear in Acts 6:2

‘writings from the early centuries of the church do not show that those teachers understood Acts 6 as determinative for the office of deacon... early church practice did not follow a limitation of deacons to the physical needs of the church... In the 3rd and 4th centuries, the office of deacon had four kinds of duties ... deacons assisted the elders in the serving of [communion], reading the Gospel, teaching... and sometimes attending general church councils. Sometimes, deacons were full-time paid positions’

A scholar named Edmund Hiebert writes that deacons and elders ‘stand in the closest relationship... mentioned [together] in the earliest sources, and... never separate from it. The *diakonos* is not merely the servant of the church, but also of the [elder]... two integrated offices came into existence... The order and basic meanings of the two terms [overseers and deacons] suggest that the deacons somehow assisted the [overseeing elders] in their ministries ... context suggests that the deacons served as assistants to the overseers. It may be suggested that “they were the church’s relieving officers.” In view of the designated qualifications, they would be men who shared with the overseers a concern for the total needs of the congregation, and under the guidance of the overseers they aided in relieving those varied needs...’²

I want to say with Paul in v. 3 I’m thankful for the deacons of this church. I’m thankful for servants who don’t have the title who’ve been helping us (thinking of 5 men in particular without those titles we met with recently). As v. 5 says from day one there’s been a partnership in this church of godly faithful servants. Sometimes people will ask me ‘how long did it take you to prepare that sermon?’ Today’s answer would be about 13 years. This isn’t a study from the limited hours I had this week being gone at the conference, this has been a study over years, and with elders and deacons 2019-2020. Review GCBC History (executive board, first year here one of my 1st board meetings a guy showed up for the meeting, they said “you’re off this year”).

Original GCBC constitution/bylaws, 1980: The authority of this church is vested in the voting members. The administrative government of this church shall be vested in the executive board, consisting of the pastor(s), the elders, deacons, clerk, treasurer, and other officers as approved by the church... The executive board shall be responsible for establishing and maintaining the basic policies, practices and operation of this church. A quorum for regular executive board meetings... 1/3 of the elected elders... All decisions must be approved by 2/3 majority vote’ [deacons/elders only serve 3 years]

2008 Revision: ‘The governing authority and head of this church is Jesus Christ alone. As head of the church, Jesus Christ in His Word has given Elders to be the spiritual leaders...responsible for shepherding and having oversight of the flock... Elders shall have oversight of church ministries ...Elders may also delegate responsibilities to Deacons or other qualified servants as necessary to fulfill their priorities. Because unity and harmony must be modeled by the spiritual leadership, the Elders by prayerful consideration with humility, are to be unanimous in all decisions...

[that continued from original, 3-year limits gone, annual affirmation]

Deacons are recognized servants who shall aid the Elders so that the Elders may be devoted to prayer and the ministry of the Word. These officers shall aid in the physical and spiritual care of the church, and perform other duties under the direction of the Board of Elders. Deacons and Elders shall work together in a collaborative fashion to effectively meet the [church’s] needs’

That makes me think of partnership in v. 5. Or in v. 27, specifically striving together more closely with members and deacons (“side by side” laboring). That’s the word we get athletics from, it’s teammates on an athletic team. SUB-Team concepts rather than committee (Steve to share more in the PM). We started 2020 asking guys for passions, interest and what gives joy rather than where they may not be gifted, encouraged or aren’t encouraging others. We’re also working to do away with the material vs. spiritual dichotomy or needs of this building vs. building up needs of people (assisting us in care). Each area of need has at least 1 deacon and elder overseeing and supporting.

That takes us from #2. the deacon’s relation to elders to ...

#3. The Congregation of Servants

Remember v. 1 starts with ‘*servants of Christ Jesus*’ and ‘*all the saints in*’ the church, and v. 5 says to all of them they have a partnership together. A 9Marks journal article we studied as elders and deacons last year says well ‘deacons facilitate congregational ministry under the leadership of the elders...elders should make directional decisions while deacons facilitate congregational involvement ... *Elders lead ministry, deacons facilitate ministry, the congregation does ministry.* That, I believe, is the NT model, and that biblical clarity in deacons’ role and function is invaluable...’³

Elders need the help of deacons and deacons need your help. Ministry is for the congregation. That’s who Paul’s writing to in v. 1, who had partnership in the gospel ministry, according to v. 5 (other translations ‘participation’).

This is the word for a deep fellowship relationship of mutual cooperation, a giving of time, talent, and treasure to support the work of the Lord together. Are you doing that? God doesn't need your money or ministry but He calls you to invest yourself in the church for your good, sacrificing you for others

I like the 'partner/participate' words because it literally meant to 'take part in' or 'have a part/impart.' Close association, community with comraderie, a companionship, a communion, a common ownership with contribution of resources. It was used of commitments to work with someone as a partner in a line of work (like fishing partnership of Peter, James and John in Lk 5:10). This word partnership is joined with being yoked together to work, 2 Cor 6.

1. The Explanation of Deacons (who all assist elders in ministry)
2. Their Relation to Elders (who oversee all ministry)
3. The Congregation of Servants (who all do ministry)
4. **Our Motivation in Christ (who ministry's all about)**

Come back tonight to hear areas where elders/deacons need your help but I want to end focused on Christ. He said whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant [diakonos] ... just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Phil 2 says Christ emptied Himself by taking on the form of a servant, and humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross for our salvation. It says we must confess Him as Lord. Have you done that?

Closing song: He became sin, who knew no sin
That we might become His righteousness
He humbled himself and carried the cross
Love so amazing, love so amazing

'Paul used the word *diakonos* of Christ Himself: "Christ has become a servant..." (Rom. 15:8)...In the Upper Room ... "I am among you as a servant ..." voluntary, love-prompted service for the benefit of others. It is a service that desires the true welfare of those ministered to...The work of the deacon, related to the local church and to the whole cause of Christ, must be spiritually motivated and be Christ-centered. It finds its motivation and encouragement in the self-sacrificing example and call of Christ. "The diakonos is always one who serves on Christ's behalf and continues Christ's service for the outer and inner man; he is concerned with the salvation of men." It is a demanding and consuming service, but it has Christ's sure promise of reward: "If any one serves Me, the Father will honor him"⁴

¹ Alexander Strauch, *Paul's Vision for Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God's Church*, chapter 1.

² D. Edmond Hiebert, "Behind the Word 'Deacon': A New Testament Study," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140 (1983).

³ SOURCE FOR DEACONS AS SHOCK ABSORBERS.

⁴ Hiebert, 160-61.