



HEALTHY BODY ⇄ HEALTHY DEACONS

WEEK 13: BIBLICALLY QUALIFIED, DIGNIFIED IN SPEECH, and FULL OF FAITH

The pastorate is not the only ordained office in the church. In the days of the early church, the burgeoning body of believers was tempted to grumble over food, much like the people of Israel in the wilderness. However, the New Testament people of God did not fall into sin but went another way:

"Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, '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 6:1-4)

The apostles realized that not only was Satan seeking to divide the church, he was also trying to distract the preachers of the gospel from the ministry of the word. The solution? *Deacons*.

The Apostle Paul shows us that these deacons were not just a temporary solution for the Jerusalem church but were meant to be a permanent fixture in the house of God. Here's a picture of what happens when the local church is served by healthy deacons:

"And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7)

Table Waiters

Three things are clear from Acts 6. Deacons are (1) selected by the church (2) to serve the church (3) under the authority and direction of the elders. The word *deacon* comes from the statement of the apostles: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to *serve tables*." Deacon means "table-waiter."

What are the duties of a table-waiter? How does this shift your understanding of the role of deacon?

From its inception, the office of deacon was a service-oriented seat. Deacons were to be concerned with caring for the needs of the church, particularly the needs of widows, orphans, and the poor.

MARK 1: BIBLICALLY QUALIFIED

In Paul's letters to Timothy he gives qualifications for healthy deacons just after the qualifications for healthy elders. These instructions establish the standard for any man being considered for the office of deacon:

"Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 3:8-13)

Notice first how similar these qualifications are to the ones Paul gave for elders. In fact, Paul seems to emphasize this fact with the words "Deacons *likewise...*" Just like elders, deacons must also not be driven by appetites for wine or money. They also must be blameless in their service. They also must manage their own households well. One distinction—which we will explore later—is that while elders must be "able to teach," deacons must simply have a firm grasp on gospel: "They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience."

Once again, the home becomes the primary proving ground for qualified men. Administration and management of resources to meet needs with servant-hearted compassion, intentionality, and wisdom are gifts that should be on display in a man's home before he is considered to serve in the household of faith.

Paul advises a trial period for prospective deacons: “And let them be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.”

Why would a trial period be advisable for men who deal with the management of the financial and practical matters of the church body?

It’s also interesting that Paul gives qualifications for a deacon’s wife, as well. It is a matter of debate as to whether the word is best translated “deacon’s wives” or “deaconesses”. Either way, a deacon’s wife is often involved in the ministry with her husband, and only women who are dignified, faithful, and sober-minded should be trusted with knowledge of the intimate needs of the saints in the local church.

MARK 2: DIGNIFIED IN SPEECH

The Apostle Paul specifically says deacons “must be dignified, not double tongued” (1 Timothy 3:8). As if to re-iterate the point, he also insists their wives “must be dignified, not slanderers” (1 Timothy 3:11).

How are deacons uniquely tempted to being double-tongued? Why is it essential for deacons to speak with sincerity and simplicity?

As servants of the mercy needs of the church, deacons will often work with the lowliest among the congregation. The deacons in the church must emulate Jesus Christ himself as they care for those the world has trampled:

“He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory.” (Matthew 12:19-20)

The first deacons in Jerusalem were men whose faithful service saw unity triumph over gossip and grumbling. However, deacons who are not dignified in speech but are themselves sources of gossip and slander become a part of the problem instead of the solution.

Healthy deacons relate to the congregation like table-waiters—treating even the poorest member as a prince of heaven. This means speaking to them and about their needs with dignity and respect.

MARK 3: FULL OF FAITH

When the apostles gave instructions to the church, they said to select men “full of the Spirit,” and Luke tells us particularly that one of the deacons chosen, Stephen, was “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5). Stephen would go on to be the first martyr of the faith—killed in the act of proclaiming the faith!

Why is faith necessary for an office geared around practical needs?

The office of deacon is solution-minded, seeking to find answers to problems and concerns. However, a danger lurks when deacons are not careful to begin thinking that mere men are the answer to our problems. Pragmatism can become the rule of the day. Instead, deacons full of faith know that all of their endeavors are impossible without the help and provision of God.

The Apostle Paul reiterates the necessity of faith. Not only are deacons to be dependent on the Lord, but they must also hold fast to the faith handed down from the apostles:

“They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.” (1 Timothy 3:9)

Merely well intentioned deacons will not do. Deacons must know their Bibles. They must be well acquainted, disciplined, and trained in the faith. They must understand the ins and outs of who we are as the people of God, who Jesus is as our Savior and King, and what our purpose is in this world. They must be able to clearly and sincerely articulate the truths of the faith.

Essentially, the deacon ministry is an activity of applying the Scriptures in very practical situations. However, if deacons do not know the Scriptures, they will begin to operate according to worldly wisdom or whatever seems to be working.

Healthy deacons, who minister and serve filled with faith will bring glory to God as the people of God flourish and grow in love, unity, and number by God’s grace.



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WEEK 14: NEED ORIENTED, SERVANT-HEARTED, and FULL OF SPIRITUAL WISDOM

Origin stories play a major role in literature—from mythology, to comic books, to Scripture itself. They reveal to us how a certain character, superhero, or group came into existence and can reveal a lot about intention and purpose. For instance, the book of Genesis is filled with origin stories that deeply shape our understanding of the universe, mankind, marriage, sin, and more.

Can you think of an example of an origin story?

This week, we return to Acts 6 as we ponder the origin story for *deacons*, and how it reveals the purpose of these behind-the-scenes superheroes.

MARK 4: NEED ORIENTED

The early church needed a hero, but not the kind you might expect. They didn't need a fireball shooting, skyscraper leaping muscle man. They also didn't need a board meeting attending, decision-making power broker. They needed a few humble heroes who weren't afraid to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty:

"Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, '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 6:1-4)

In this origin story, the seven deacons selected by the church were to be appointed "to this duty." What duty exactly? If we look at verse 1, we find the duty: *the daily distribution*.

The Daily Distribution

The crisis point in Acts 6 is a result of a pattern in the early church of believers pooling their resources, particularly financial resources, to care for the *needs* within the body:

"And they were selling their possessions and belongings and *distributing* the proceeds to all, as any had *need*." (Acts 2:45)

"There was not a *needy person* among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was *distributed* to each as any had *need*." (Acts 4:34-35)

The daily distribution mentioned in Acts 6 is this regular dispersal of church resources to the needs of the church. This necessary task became unwieldy over time. As needy widows began to slip through the cracks, it threatened to split the church.

The shepherds of the church made the wise decision to delegate the care for these needs to the deacons. Healthy deacons, therefore, direct their focus and attention to the temporal, physical needs of the church.

What are the temporal needs of the church? In Acts 6, who oversaw and directed the activities of the deacons?

Particularly, the deacons were to care for the needs of the widows in Acts 6, making sure they got the food they needed. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul explained how to keep a "widows registry", showing that this was a continual need in our churches:

"Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work." (1 Timothy 5:9-10)

As the early churches grew, it was easy to unintentionally overlook the neediest members of the church. Deacons were men intentionally ordained to make sure that didn't happen. Just like a good waiter, deacons constantly evaluate, ask about, and observe the needs of those they serve, being proactive to minister to widows, the poor, and those with sudden needs through the funds and resources allocated to them.

Does your church have a widow registry?

MARK 5: SERVANT-HEARTED

It's quite clear that the deacons in Acts 6 were not appointed to a prestigious task. In fact, the apostles call the duty "waiting tables" (Acts 6:2). The best table-waiters serve invisibly, tirelessly, and often thanklessly because they do so much behind the scenes that is never known to those they serve.

For these reasons, it is essential that healthy deacons understand they have not been appointed to make big decisions or to "run the church." They must be prepared to do the dirty behind-the-scenes duties that are necessary to meet the real needs of the members of the church.

To be honest, the office of deacon is a lowly, wearisome job. Certainly this is why Paul included this encouragement after describing healthy deacons:

"For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 3:13)

Think about all of the tasks waiters perform that never get noticed. They wipe down tables, clean up spills, remove empty glasses and dirty dishes, keep track of orders, receive payments, and make accurate change. No one ever goes to a restaurant for the waiters, but good or bad waiters can make or break a dining experience.

In the same way, a church's life together is much more than these menial tasks. However, faithful servant-hearted deacons can make for unity and growth in the body of Christ:

"And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7)

Let us not forget that our Lord Jesus was not ashamed to take on the form of a table waiter. Servant-hearted deacons become a visible picture of our Savior Jesus in the church:

"Jesus...rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began

to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him." (John 13:3-5)

MARK 6: FULL OF WISDOM

When the apostles first call for the ordination of deacons in the church, they specifically mention a handful of qualifications:

"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." (Acts 6:3)

The task was simple: make sure all of the widows were taken care of in the daily distribution. However, the administration of this task in a way that promoted unity in the body, gave glory to God, and furthered the gospel took wisdom.

How would you define wisdom?

Wisdom begins with a proper estimation of self. Wisdom recognizes to whom we will give an account for all of our thoughts, intentions, and actions:

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!" (Psalms 111:10)

Healthy deacons are not ultimately people-pleasers, though they do care for the needs of the people. A wise deacon seeks to please God alone and performs his task in fear and reverence before him.

Secondly, wisdom means the right application of Scriptural truth in daily life. Certainly, this means deacons must know God's Word. Moreover, they must be skilled at *applying* it. Healthy deacons' meetings will overflow with references to the Bible as they manage complex needs in the church.

Lastly, wisdom has a particular demeanor. James reminds us:

"But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere." (James 3:17)

Healthy deacons will exhibit these characteristics as they serve their brothers and sisters.



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WEEK 15: UNIFYING, JEALOUS FOR CHRIST, and NOT AN ELDER

Since deacons are engaged in need-oriented, problem-solving, practical-minded ministry, it can be easy to forget the purpose behind their office. Sometimes, a church can get wrapped up in the overwhelming list of tasks to be completed and begin to drift from the original—and essential—goal of deacons. These last three marks of healthy deacons will help current and future deacons to better understand their role in the church in order to be faithful in it.

How would you distinguish the role of deacon from the role of elder? What is the purpose of a deacon?

MARK 7: UNIFYING

We return to Acts 6, this time to consider what threat loomed large over the early church.

“Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. (Acts 6:1)

The key word we want to consider in this opening scene is the word *against*. We have two parties drawing up battle lines *against* one another: Hellenists *against* Hebrews.

A misunderstanding over practical, temporal issues in the church—something as basic as dishing out food—became a cause for complaint that bubbled up into a possible church split. Members of the church were taking sides. Naturally, they sided with the people who were most like them in the earthly sense, Hellenist with Hellenist, Hebrew with Hebrew.

Why is disunity dangerous in the church body?

The apostles immediately moved in to bring unity, and the unifiers, the men to stand in the gap, were deacons. As they discharged their duties, the church did not split but instead grew: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” (6:7).

An Answer to Prayer.

Deacons are a gift to the church given in response to the specific prayer of Jesus Christ. Unifying deacons are the Father’s willing, gracious answer to his Son:

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:20-23)

Twice in Jesus’s prayer, he asks for perfect oneness for his disciples so that the world will believe that he has come from the Father. Unity in the church, then, is not a peripheral issue or a nice bonus. It is at the core of our testimony to the rest of the world.

Therefore, unifying deacons who work tirelessly to answer complaints and anticipate possible rifts in the body of Christ are actual answers to the prayer of Jesus himself.

Deacons are to guard the unity of the church, willing to absorb the blame, if necessary, in order to promote unity in the church. Unfortunately, many churches have deacons who not only do not seek unity but actually foment factions, cliques, and dissension. Such men bring shame on an office that was only intended to exhibit the unifying, selfless humility that Paul commands in Philippians 2:

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” (Philippians 2:1-3)

Deacons, by definition of their office, are the chief humblers, men ordained to continually put the needs of the saints before their own.

MARK 8: JEALOUS FOR CHRIST

As we mentioned before, deacons are an answer to Christ's prayer for unity. Faithful deacons, then, are going to be jealous for Jesus Christ. What we mean is this: In a world filled with possible distractions, healthy deacons will do everything in their power to help the church remain singularly devoted to Christ.

In the history of Israel, many things drew their attention away from the Lord? Can you think of examples?

Deacons busy their minds with worldly, physical things so that the members of the church can continue to "set their minds on things that are above, and not on things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2). Deacons seek to remove obstacles, pitfalls, and worldly temptations from the path of the local church so that they can fulfill the call of Hebrews 12:

"Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus" (Heb. 12:1-2a)

As deacons shield the church body from temptations to fighting, fretting, or putting too much trust in worldly possessions, they also must realize their own hearts must be wholly devoted to Jesus and his kingdom. Men who constantly deal with money and financial resources will be strongly tempted to put their trust in something other than Christ. Let us not forget who served in a deaconing role for Jesus and his disciples:

"But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it." (John 12:4-6)

Deacons exist to seek Christ's glory, not their own. Those who are jealous for Christ will model their life, their service, and their speech as a resounding reminder to the congregation:

"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Matt. 6:33)

MARK 9: NOT AN ELDER

When we think of health, we don't normally think of a *lack* of something. However, a healthy body is characterized by a lack of cancer and toxins. To put it another way, a healthy human being realizes he is not, in fact, an airplane. Otherwise he might try to do something harmful—to himself or others!

After our study on healthy elders and healthy deacons, it should be abundantly plain that these are two very different offices in the church with different roles and responsibilities. Healthy deacons *know* that they are not elders.

Unfortunately, this truth, although plain in the Scriptures, is very cloudy in many of our churches. Deacons are not pastors. They do not make leadership decisions; they do not shepherd the people of God. They are servants—table-waiters.

Practically speaking, in many churches this is not the case. Many deacon boards function like a board of elders, often exercising authority over the pastor or pastors of the church, backwards from the pattern established in Scripture.

What is the answer? If the deacons abandon their leadership role as de facto elders to serve as healthy deacons, who will lead?

If your church has only one pastor with several deacons, it would be worthwhile to ask whether some of those men who currently serve as deacons are elder-qualified men. As we've seen, the biblical qualifications for pastor and deacon are very similar with one exception: *able to teach*. Rather than continuing in confusion, a healthy church body should ordain qualified men to the office of *elder* so that the church is no longer led by one man but several pastors.

Deacons, having been relieved of shepherding duties, can then look to the pastors for instruction and guidance as to how best serve the needs of the saints, just as they do in Acts 6. Healthy deacons are the final—and vital—piece of a healthy church body.

What concrete steps can your church take toward greater health as a body?