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Notes for the London church

16 March 2014

“Diakonos”

Proposal for Deacons

Appointing Deacons for the London Church

This is not an exhaustive paper on Deacons.¹ A great deal could be written on the topic, but a summary of the following issues will suffice for now:

1. *What is a Deacon and what does one do?* An outline of the Bible’s teaching.
2. *How should Deacons be selected and appointed?* The process that fits our need at this time.

Useful scriptures:

1. *Where the role is clearly in sight:* Phil 1.1, 1 Tim 3.8-12²
2. *Where the word ‘diakonos’ is connected with a role:* Acts 6.1-6 (‘diakoneo’)
3. *Where the word ‘diakonos’ denotes a quality expected of all:* Matt 20.26, 23.11³

¹ A book used in preparing these suggestions is: “Minister of Mercy - The New Testament Deacon”, Alexander Strauch

² The mention of deacons in Philippi is the earliest reference in the NT - and it is plural, implying teamwork amongst the deacons.

³ All references to ‘diakonos’ and its variants: Matt 20:26; 22:13; 23:11; Mark 9:35; 10:43; John 2:5, 9; 12:26; Rom 13:4; 15:8; 16:1; 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; 11:15, 23; Gal 2:17; Eph 3:7; 6:21; Phil 1:1; Col 1:7, 23, 25; 4:7; 1 Tim 3:8, 12; 4:6

1. What is a Deacon?

“...deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain.” (1 Timothy 3:8 NIV11)

- a. **A serving servant.** Such as the meaning of the Greek word ‘diakonos’ found in 1 Tim 3.8. It is both a title and a description (Phil 1.1). Those recognised as deacons with a role are already deacons in action.
- b. **A seasoned Christian.** Phrases from 1 Tim 3 such as “worthy of respect”, and “keep hold of the deep truths of the faith”, imply they have been Christians long enough for respect to be earned and the deep truths absorbed.
- c. **A spiritual person.** The qualities in 1 Tim 3.8-12 are those of someone who is spiritually minded. A clear conscience is attainable only by the godly-minded.
- d. **A practical person.** The practical seems to be emphasised more than the abstract. Perhaps the emphasis on managing his household as well as not pursuing dishonest gain and being tested implies a need for trustworthiness with administrative and material matters. If the hints we get from Acts 6 are combined with the very nature of the word ‘deacon’ it seems that their work might include helping the poor, jobless, ill, widowed, elderly, homeless, shut-ins, refugees and disabled to name a few. Their activities might include to counsel, guide, visit, relieve, comfort, protect, encourage and the like.
- e. **Someone who fulfils the qualities outlined in 1 Tim 3.8-13⁴**
 - a. *“Worthy of respect”* - someone worthy of imitation. Would you like your child to grow up to be like this man? Deacons may have to tell people uncomfortable truths from time to time. Therefore a Deacon is someone who is respected, but does not have to be liked.
 - b. *“Sincere”* - no “double-tongue”. What they say does not change depending on the circumstances. They are consistent in what they say.
 - c. *“Not indulging in much wine”* - i.e. someone in control of their appetites and habits. Strong in the area of self-control.
 - d. *“Not pursuing dishonest gain.”* Greed is absent from this person’s life. It might be wise to exclude people who have significant debts or other financial challenges, but this will depend on the circumstances. Perhaps this quality is emphasised because they will be charged with handling church resources to help other people and hence must be of a trustworthy nature.
 - e. *“Keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.”* They understand the Word of God deeply and holds to its teachings. Having a clear conscience implies someone

⁴ It should be born in mind that Paul wrote this in response to a number of problems in the Ephesus church which included the poor not being taken care of (1 Tim 5.3ff). Maybe Timothy had neglected the poor and the Deacons, or unqualified men had assumed the role, or perhaps the Deacons were not able to do their work because of a lack of respect for their office.

who is open and honest. They are steady, solid people. This is a person whose life and doctrine match up (1 Tim 4.16).

- f. *“The women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything”* - the NIV11 here uses the word 'women' instead of 'wives'. The word can be translated either way. The fact that these qualities are mentioned before the reference to a deacon being a ‘one-woman man’ makes it more likely that the role of deacon is intended for a man to fulfil.
 - a. Perhaps one reason sins of the tongue and trustworthiness are mentioned is that it is assumed that a deacon's wife will be involved in potentially sensitive situations when helping her husband in his role. Benevolent needs and the like can be potent sources of gossip. A deacon's wife is to have a balanced nature such that she will exercise spiritual discipline and not gossip about sensitive issues.
- g. *“Faithful to his wife”* - difficult to know whether this means he *has* to be married and have children, but certainly he is to treat them right according to scripture.
 - a. The ‘must be’ of this verse is a translation of “is to be” (*estosan*) and is in the imperative. This may imply he must be married as well as that he must be faithful to her.
 - b. The emphasis is that he is a 'one-women man', i.e. he is faithful to his wife. The emphasis does not seem to be anti-polygamy, or anti-divorce before he was Christian, but that he is faithful to the one woman in his life.
- h. *“Manage his children and his household well”* - the word 'well' is the emphasis, fitting with the significance of performing the servant role of administering help to people in a diligent way. Deacons should be *good* managers. This implies being a people person and an able project manager.

2. How should Deacons be selected and appointed?

“They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.” (1 Timothy 3:10 NIV11)

Although Acts 6 is not described specifically as a Deacon selection process, it does seem to be a good process to imitate. All the more so when we consider that the Deacons’ ability to carry out their duties will be greatly enhanced by knowing they have the trust of the congregation.

The process could be as follows:

1. **Teaching.** We need educating on the need for and Biblical description of Deacons. The leadership of the Jerusalem church in Acts 6 brought a problem to the congregation, and then the church willingly participated in the process. Outlining needs and Biblical solutions will engage people's minds and hearts.
 - 1.1.Suggestion: paper on Deacons placed on web site and distributed to members via email.
2. **Ask for nominations.** Such an approach enhances the congregation's ownership of the process. It should increase their confidence in the brothers ultimately chosen and create a greater sense of responsibility in the men who serve as deacons.
 - 2.1.Suggestion: after setting out the Biblical description of Deacons the elders and evangelists request members to nominate brothers to serve in this role.
 - 2.2.Elders and evangelists to sift the nominations and decline any that they feel do not meet the Biblical qualifications.
3. **Ask the nominees.** We cannot assume all those nominated will wish to or be able to serve.
 - 3.1.Suggestion: elders and evangelists ask the brothers they believe fit the Biblical imperatives and were nominated if they wish to serve and remind them of their spiritual and practical responsibilities.
4. **Testing.** The time for testing should be long enough to ensure issues are raised, but not so long that minds lose focus.
 - 4.1.Suggestion: the names of those who the elders and evangelists believe fulfil the Biblical criteria and who wish to be considered to serve as Deacons be put to the church.
 - 4.2.Suggestion: a period is specified for people to raise any questions with the elders and evangelists.
 - 4.3.Suggestion: people must give scriptural reasons for their objections if they have any. This is not a popularity contest.
5. **Choosing.** The elders & evangelists choose the Deacons. They will be delegating tasks to them, so it is vital all have confidence in those chosen.
 - 5.1.Suggestion: the elders and evangelists meet together as a group to pray over the names and choose those they feel can and should fulfil the role of Deacons.
6. **Appointment.** Having a public recognition of those chosen to serve in their roles brings honour on God who gave them their gifts. It also makes the Deacons 'visible' to the church and helps underline the significance to them and the church of their role.
 - 6.1.Suggestion: could be done at a service later this year
 - 6.2.Suggestion: a page could be added to the London web site containing their photographs, contact details (via the web site) and areas of responsibility.

Conclusion

"Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 3:13 NIV11)

Deacons stand to gain two things.

1. They gain honour and influence in the church. They do this by serving well. It is such people the world admires. Although the emphasis is within the church community there is also a significant evangelistic opportunity. In a pole of the top 10 most respected people in the world very few wealthy people were chosen. While she was alive, Mother Theresa came first every year.
2. Deacons also gain great assurance in their faith. The word can also mean 'boldness'. It takes spiritual strength to carry out a Deacon's duties, but as they do so they will become stronger and stronger in the faith so that they will have "much" boldness of faith. Perhaps this is because their words and deeds are, conspicuously, working together. How the church needs such people!

Anticipating FAQs

1. Does a Deacon have authority? He does in as much it is delegated to him by the elders or leadership team of the church.
2. Can women be deacons? The Bible does not forbid it, but neither does it describe it.⁵ Phoebe (Rom 16.1) is a 'diakonon', and the fact that Paul singles her out for mention and uses the word 'diakonon' must be significant, but this does not necessarily imply she has a role as a deacon.⁶ It is possible that women were recognised as deacons in the early church, but we cannot be certain. We take 'gunaikas' as 'wives'. 1 Tim 3.8-13 addresses men as deacons and calls for their wives to have qualities that would support the men in their role. We are taking the view that men are deacons, but their wives are vital to the effective performance of that role.
3. Are the seven in Acts 6 deacons?
 - 3.1. The relevance of Acts 6 is debated. Perhaps Luke included the story in part because it showed the development of the deacon role that later shows up in the church plantings of Ephesus (1 Tim 3) and Philippi (1.1).
 - 3.2. An interesting theory suggests that Paul was especially keen to make sure the deacon role was honoured because he was at least in part responsible for the death of one of the earliest proto-deacons, Stephen (Act 6.5; 7.57-60). Paul wanted to remember the

⁵ *"This type of Greek noun has the same form in both masculine and feminine genders, so it is simply a question of which English word is most appropriate"* Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine. Bits & Bytes/Accordance electronic edition, version 2.0. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.* In other words we must determine which English word is appropriate according to the sense and context of the passage as well as the rest of scripture.

⁶ Paul & Apollos are described as 'diakonos' (1 Cor 3.5), as are Tychicus (Eph 6.21) and Epaphras (Col 1.7).

poor (Gal 2.10), Stephen was appointed to help the poor. So, again, perhaps there is a connection.

- 3.3. Another possible reason for highlighting the appointment of the seven was to show the significance of the leadership (Apostles in that context) remaining focussed on “prayer and the ministry of the word.” (Act 6.4) as an example to future leadership teams.
4. Is a Deacon a permanent appointment? It will depend on many factors. There is nothing inherently temporary about the role. It may be that Philip’s role changed between Acts 6 & 8 from Deacon to Evangelist. Personal sin, changing life circumstances or new needs in the church could all see a Deacon change or relinquish his role.