



A Vision for Service
At Living Proof Baptist Church
Williamsburg, VA

This document is intended to outline the biblical teaching concerning deacons as well as to lay out a plan for selection of those deacons for service at LPBC. The elders of LPBC will be recommending that the church body replace the existing information concerning deacons in our church constitution with the following position and policies. Once this change has been made, the church will be asked to begin working through the proposed selection process.

The Deacon's Identity

- **Word Family**

- Noun- *diakonos*- often translated as “servant” or “minister”
- Verb- *diakoneo*- to wait on someone at a table, to care for someone’s basic needs, or to serve in a general sense (K. Hess, “Serve, Deacon, Worship,” in Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3:545.).

- **Biblical Usage**

- **Referring to service in general**
 - **Acts 19-** (22) And having sent into Macedonia two of his *helpers* [*diakonounton*], Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.
 - **1 Corinthians 16-** (15) Now I urge you, brothers – you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they devoted themselves to the *service* [*diakonian*] of the saints.
- **Referring to a servant employed in a particular ministry for God**
 - **Romans 13-** (4) For he is God’s *servant* [*diakonos*] for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the *servant* [*diakonos*] of God, and avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.
- **Referring to the care of physical needs**
 - **Matthew 25-** (44) Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not *minister* [*diakonasamen*] to you?’

- **Referring to waiting tables**
 - **John 2-** (5) His mother said to the *servants* [*diakonois*], ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ (9) When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the *servants* [*diakonois*] who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom...
- **Referring to Christ’s service**
 - **Matthew 20-** (28) ...even as the Son of Man did not come to be *served* [*diakonethona*] but to *serve* [*diakonasa*], and to give his life as a ransom for many.
 - **Luke 12-** (37) ...Truly, I say to you, [the Master] will dress himself for service and have [his bondservants] recline at table, and he will come and serve [*diakonasei*] them.
- **Conclusion**
 - *The major importance of knowing the broader background of diakonos is in understanding the role deacons were designed to play. There was no counterpart to deacons in Judaism, and with the scanty material in the New Testament, theologians have taken the normal meanings associated with diakonos as indicating the types of activities appropriate to deacons, namely, caring for material needs and general serving. Nothing in the background suggests that it is a role of leadership or authority (Hammett, Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches. 2005, 192).*

The Deacon’s Function and Role

- Acts 6 is the only place in the New Testament where we actually see Deacons serving in the church. From this account of the early church, three aspects of the deacons’ ministry can be noted.
 - **Diacons must care for physical needs.**
 - In Acts 6:1, 2 we read that some of the widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The Apostles assigned this task to the newly appointed deacons. This service met the physical needs of people in the congregation. Meeting physical needs is often related to meeting spiritual needs. Mark Dever writes, “It encourages the recipients of the care, it embodies God’s care, and it acts as a witness to those outside the church (Dever, *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel Akin, 799).”
 - **Diacons must strive for the unity of the body**
 - By caring for these widows, the deacons made the food distribution more equitable. The physical neglect of some of the widows was leading to

spiritual disunity in the church. The complaining within the church seems to be what got the attention of the Apostles. The appointment of the deacons, therefore, was not ultimately for the streamlining of the church's benevolence ministry, but rather to preserve the unity among the brethren. One pastor calls these deacons, "shock-absorbers and servants" (Dunlop, Jamie. <http://www.9marks.org/journal/deacons-shock-absorbers-and-servants>. Accessed, April 24, 2014.).

- **Deacons were appointed to support the ministry of the apostles.**
 - The Apostles acknowledge the responsibility of the church to care for the widows among them (Acts 6:3). While this is the responsibility of the church, they also see the need to give this responsibility specifically to a group within the church that was gifted and willing to serve. This allowed the Apostles to focus on their primary responsibilities of the ministry of the Word and prayer. The deacons were supporting not only the widows, but the entire body as well. In our context this transfers well as deacons are fundamentally encouragers and supporters of the ministry of the elders to the entire body.
- Other than Acts 6, the New Testament seems to be somewhat silent concerning specific roles for Deacons in the church. Hammett suggests that one reason for this absence is to allow for flexibility to serve in a variety of roles that allow the elders to focus on those things that most utilize their gifts and most match their calling.
- Dr. Ben Merkle notes that each local church is free to define the tasks of deacons based on their particular needs (Merkle, Ben. <http://www.9marks.org/ejournal/biblical-qualifications-and-responsibilities-deacons>. Accessed, April 24, 2014).

The Deacon's Qualifications

- The qualifications for deacons are found in **1 Timothy 3:8-13**. The narrative in Acts 6 does include the requirements that the Apostles put forward for the first deacons. The original seven were to be men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Paul's more detailed list to Timothy encompasses these original qualifications, so we will deal only with the passage from his pastoral letter.
- Many of these qualifications are similar to those listed for elders. It is important, though, to notice a few differences. First, there is no prohibition against a new convert serving as a deacon while there is such for elders. However, the potential deacon must still be tested. Second, while the deacon is to have a clear understanding of the gospel, it is not a requirement that he be able to teach. Third, both men and women may serve as deacons (discussed below) while it is clear that only men are to serve as elders. Finally, the listing of qualifications for deacons is much shorter than that for elders. This leads us to think that the office of elder has more stringent requirements than the office of deacon.
- We can divide the qualifications for deacons into four categories: Reputation, Discipline, Doctrine, and Family.
 - **Reputation**

- Key interpretive data to support this conclusion:
 - The term, “likewise” is used in verses 8 and 11. In verse 8 Paul uses it to signify that he was no longer speaking of elders, but like elders, deacons were to possess certain characteristics. In verse 11, Paul used the same grammatical structure to say, “The women likewise.” Once again, Paul was no longer speaking of one thing, he was moving on to something else that was different, yet was still to adhere to certain parameters. In this case, he is speaking of another office in the church, that of female deacons, or deaconesses.
 - If Paul were referring to the wives of deacons in verse 11, why would he give no instruction to the wives of elders in verses 1-7? It would seem that if the office of elder was one that was governed by stricter regulations than the office of deacon that he would have included some instruction for the wives of elders, even if it were only to serve as an example of how they managed their homes well.
 - Romans 16:1 mentions Phoebe, the “deaconess of the church.” While it is unclear if Paul was using this term to describe her official office or just her function, there is no doubt that he sets her apart as someone to be commended for “deaconing.” This, coupled with the several other examples of women who served in the New Testament (and many who served Jesus himself) seems to give us no indication that women were prohibited from serving the church or the Lord, even in an official capacity.
 - On an observational note, many contemporary churches that prohibit women from serving as deaconesses do so from a distorted view of their overall ecclesiology. There are plenty of examples of churches that have given deacons the unbiblical responsibility of spiritual oversight and leadership, a responsibility reserved for elders. Many of these same churches will then try to uphold the teaching that the role of spiritual oversight and leadership is reserved for men. (On the issue of the eldership being reserved for men, see *A Vision for Leadership at LPBC*.) As they mix the teaching on these two distinct offices in the church, they take the position that women cannot be deacons because deacons are the spiritual leaders in the church. When elders do the work that elders are given to do (lead and shepherd) and deacons do the work that deacons are given to do (serve) there is no problem with women serving as deacons.

- **Conclusion**

- All members of a local church should be encouraged to serve in following the example of their Savior, Jesus Christ. There are those, however, whom God specifically equips, qualifies, and prompts to serve in a way that is highly beneficial to the overall ministry of the church body. When the church recognizes these individuals, they should serve as deacons/deaconesses. The office of deacon is not a first step up the ministry ladder and should not be seen as a lesser role than any other in the church. Jesus had a very high view of those who were willing to lay down their lives for the sake of his bride.

The Deacon's Call and Selection

- There is no scriptural mandate concerning how many deacons should serve within a local congregation. Gerald Cowen, though, in his book, *Who Rules the Church?* (Cowen 2003, 114), notes that only seven deacons were chosen to care for a church of several thousand. This may suggest that most churches have more deacons than they actually need.
- The church should determine the number of deacons needed based on two factors:
 - The needs of the church
 - The number of qualified candidates
- Jeremy Smith points out that a good diaconal ministry depends on the candidates, not the model (Smith, Jeremy. <http://www.9marks.org/ejournal/what-makes-good-diaconal-ministry>. Accessed April 24, 2014).
- The church should always have its eyes open in order to see those who love to serve and exemplify the qualifications listed for the office of deacon. As needs arise in the church, the body will be called upon to nominate new deacons.
- **Selection**
 - Upon request of the elders, church members can submit the names of individuals to be considered as a deacon or deaconess along with a rationale showing how the individuals nominated match the biblical qualifications.
 - The elders will screen the names and move forward with those whom they know to be eligible for consideration. At this point the elders have the responsibility to eliminate certain candidates based on information that may only be known to the elder body.
 - The candidate will be notified and asked about his/her willingness to serve the church in this capacity, the candidate's own evaluation of his/her fitness to serve, and his/her sense of calling to this particular ministry.
 - The candidate will be asked to pray about this matter for a time. If, after this time of prayer, both the candidate and the elders believe that God is moving the church ahead, the candidate's name will be submitted to the congregation.
 - The church will be asked to vote on each name submitted and all qualified and approved individuals will be ordained as deacons by the laying on of hands and prayer.
 - There is no need for an annual election of deacons. Rather, new deacons should be selected as needs arise and as existing deacons need to withdraw from active service.

- A mandatory rotation of deacons is not necessary, though deacons should be allowed to step down without any sense of failure or disqualification if they feel called to a different area of ministry, simply need rest, or if the elders feel that a rotation would be in the best interest of the church and the deacon.
- After three years of service the elders will evaluate each deacon's willingness and ability to continue to serve.
- Deacons will be selected when vacancies arise or new areas of need are identified.

The Deacon's Specific Functionality at LPBC

• Corporate Functionality

- Deacons at LPBC will serve according to the ministry needs within our church body. They will do so by not only serving but also by recruiting others to serve and caring for those who are in positions of service.
- Each deacon will be assigned to an area of service. It will be that deacon's responsibility to recruit others to assist in meeting specific needs. All those recruited by deacons will serve the church on a voluntary, non-paid basis.
- The deacons/deaconesses will serve in accordance with the leadership of the elder body. Specific areas of need will be determined by the elders in cooperation with the congregation.

• Sheep Fold Ministry

- Deacons will work in conjunction with elders in our family ministry. Each deacon will be paired with an elder in order to share the joint privilege of serving a specific group of individuals and families within the congregation. Each of these groups will be called a "fold." This grouping is good for the congregation and also for the officers as it reinforces a complimentary view of the church offices.
- The elder will have the responsibility to minister to the families and individuals with the Word and prayer, while the deacon will seek ways to specifically minister to the fold's physical needs. Obviously these two functions will overlap as ministry is happening within our church body.
- While the deacon is more oriented to meeting the physical needs of a family, he must keep in mind that ultimately he is serving in a way that is caring for the overall spiritual health of his fold.