

Notes from the book, *The New Testament Deacon Minister of Mercy* by Alexander Strauch

1. Many church deacon boards either exert unbiblical authority, acting as ruling executives or sub-biblical buildings/grounds committees giving little attention to people in need. Just as bad are using them as a 'catch-all' committee of leaders responsible for anything beyond elder responsibilities. All these are to be strenuously avoided.⁷¹
2. "My heartfelt burden is to help deacons get out of the boardroom or the building-maintenance mentality and into the people-serving mentality."

Chapter One: The Shepherd's Priorities

The correctness of a deacon board's nature as well as the effectiveness of its biblical ministry will stand or fall based upon the biblical faithfulness of the elders directing them. Elders need to know and keep always in clear view their primary calling/responsibilities: studying/communicating the Word of God and praying. In the ages of church history where they took center stage God moved most powerfully. In the ages when they waned so did the life and mission of the church. Elders/pastors must not be diverted from this central calling. They must delegate it to others.

Chapter Two: Appointing Ministers of Mercy

The 'seven' in Acts 6 were responsible to: - collect money/goods for the needy in the church - distribute money/goods for the needy in the church - ensure the church justly distributed them - coordinate the church's overall charitable services = They were the church's 'Ministers of Mercy'

Chapter Three: Public Recognition

The apostles sought to involve the whole congregation in the decision to
* help them take responsibility for the ministry - respect the work of God's Spirit in and through them - protect themselves from the corruption of demagoguery and extortion
Acts 6:3 - The congregation had the job of selecting the deacons. - The apostles had the job of directing the deacons' duties.

Acts 6:6 The apostles laid their hands on the deacons and prayed publicly for them as a sign of commission from the elders of the community to carry out a specific work of God and a sign of transfer of practical responsibility to the deacons. Strauch makes the point that though today often only those with highest ecclesial office are commissioned through the laying on of hands, here men called to humble, practical service were so distinguished. According to James 1:27, the proactive care of poor and needy Christians should be paramount to the church's ministry. Therefore, the work of deacons should both focus primarily on people served as well as heighten our awareness of the crucial importance of their work. In many ways the degree to which a local church seeks to minister to Christians in need, be it providing food for a homeless man, helping a single mother with car repairs, searching out ways to best minister to a special-needs member of the church, facilitating a big brother relationship for a boy without a dad or organizing

regular congregational visitation of Christian shut-ins, reveals their true devotion to Christ.

Chapter Four: Acts 6 – The Prototype for Deacons

1. Although some scholars argue that the lack of term 'deacon' in Acts 6 should not connect 'the seven' with the later diaconate of I Timothy 3, Luke, as a good historian, chose simply to refer to them by their contemporary title 'the seven' not the later title of deacon, though the seven gave way and served as the prototype for the later diaconate.
2. The examples of Stephen and Philip, both of whom exercised significantly public spiritual gifts (both were qualified preachers of the Word – Acts 7, 8:4-8 and Philip was later called 'the evangelist' – revealing one of the gifts of Ephesians 4:11), prove that such gifted men are not necessarily to be excluded from diaconal service but rather it underscores the high calling and spiritual maturity expected of deacons, yet not requiring such giftedness but rather such godly character.

Chapter Five: Overseers

1. Even in the early decades of the 2nd century, only two offices are referred to in the church: elders and deacons.
2. The biblical terms elder, overseer, shepherd and pastor all refer to the same office. The only distinction made is designating financial provision for those elders who 'rule well' and 'labor in preaching and teaching' (I Timothy 5:17). The Bible never presents a clerical distinction between 'professional ministers' and lay elders.
3. The primary duties of elders (overseers) are to - protect the church from unbiblical error - teach the church biblical truth - shepherd the church toward biblical holiness - lead/rule the church in biblical order
4. Biblical elders are not temporary board members but constitute the pastoral body of the local church. Biblical deacons take their cues from the elders and carry out their directions to care for the practical needs of the saints.

Chapter Six: Deacons

1. The Greek noun 'diakonos' means 'servant' or 'slave'. In general it refers to many who assist the gospel, God or other people. In other passages it refers strictly to servant officers in the local church (Phil. 1:1, I Tim. 3:8, 12).
2. One of the chief distinctions between elder and deacon is that only eldership requires with it the teaching function.
3. A second distinction is that deacons seem to exercise no ruling function. That is the sole domain of the elders.
4. It seems clear from the NT function of deacons that deacons serving in the local church today primarily be not decision makers (i.e. board members) but active servants carrying out the various helping ministries.
5. It is crucial that deacons not see themselves as a second ruling board in the church: the elders the rulers of the people, the deacons the rulers of the finances/facilities. Rather, the decisions made by the deacons must reflect the will, spirit and vision of the elders since only they are given such biblical authority. Because of this the elders must regularly and clearly communicate to the deacons what their responsibilities are and not

be allowed to operate independently. Deacons are helped when the elders both limit the scope of their ministry, focus it and clearly define it. At the same time, elders need to respect and trust the actual realm of the deacons and not usurp their responsibilities by stepping in and serving where they have not been called.

Chapter Seven: Character Qualifications of Deacons

1. I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 teach us two things: - The organization of the church distinguishing elders and deacons is important. - Even more important are the character qualities which distinguish church leaders.
 2. False motives which lead some to seek church leadership: - pride about their ability - a lust for the control of the church's people, mission and/or money - pride about their character - a compulsion to 'straighten things out' - 'earned the right' through long years of attendance/service/giving
 3. False motives which lead parishioners to encourage some toward church leadership: - popularity - partisanship (socially or theologically) - wealth and influence - social ability - natural competencies - natural leadership ability - long-time member
 4. Leaders with proven character provide God's people with wise judgment, guidance, balance, and stability. They must be prepared to respond in a godly manner to sensitive, unstable and often chaotic situations and people requiring supernatural patience, love, wisdom and care.
 5. It is always better to have a small number of qualified leaders serving than to compromise the Bible's standards to meet some specified 'quota' of leaders.
 6. The similarity of qualifications for deacons testifies to the importance of their role in the life of the church.
 7. Elders are uniquely required to be seasoned believers, able to teach and refute error, be hospitable (a shepherding function) and to display a list of qualities revealing unusual mental and emotional stability not required of deacons given the fact that elders 'deal with a multitude of troublesome leadership problems and difficult people.'
 8. Both elders and deacons are required to be above reproach, faithful to their wives (if married), good managers of their families, not lovers of money and not addicted to wine.
 9. Deacons are uniquely required to be honest in speech, marked by dignity and hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.
 10. Official deacons are always listed as a group in the NT, not as individuals. It is important that they work together for means of accountability, balancing of spiritual gifts and major ministry impact on the needs of the Body.
- Dr. James Boice comments, "...there is no reference anywhere in the New Testament to the appointment of only one elder or one deacon to a work. We would tend to appoint one leader, but God's wisdom is greater than our own at this point. In appointing several persons to work together, the church at God's direction provided for mutual encouragement among those who shared in the work as well as lessened the chance for pride and tyranny in office."

Chapter Eight: Five Character Qualifications for Deacons

1. Just as we would never entrust our small children or family finances to an untested person with a questionable character, so the Bible finds it unthinkable that the elders of

the local church would entrust personal care ministry and financial distribution to any but the most honorable in character and maturity.

2. Dignity (I Timothy 3:8) is well translated by the NIV 'worthy of respect'. In a sense it means that a qualified candidate is a natural choice to whom the body already looks with respect. When they speak their words carry weight. People seek out their advice and take them very seriously.

3. According to Acts 6:3 deacons needed to be 'full of wisdom,' presumably biblical wisdom and discernment in helping people with their problems – both personal, practical and financial.

4. 'Not double-tongued' (I Timothy 3:8) means honest without guile, sincere not only in speech but life. Such a person's honest life reveals no deception in heart. The last thought on his mind in discerning how to bring a problem to resolution would be through coy manipulation, personal lobbying or slick politicking.

5. Not addicted to much wine (I Tim. 3:8) not only indicates temperance toward alcohol but carries with it the implication that a qualified deacon is a man who is mastered by none but Christ. He is free from the charge of over indulgence to any earthly thing but his perspective is primarily heavenward.

6. Not greedy for dishonest gain (I Tim. 3:8) originally pointed to men who wormed their way into church leadership positions so as to extort church funds or dishonestly make money at the expense of parishioners some other way. Given the fact that deacons are charged with the management of church funds, their lack of personal greed must be paramount. This would include not only money itself but also tendencies to use church for gain through pyramid schemes, business contacts, personal use of church property, etc. A deacon serves to benefit others, not himself.

7. Holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience (I Tim. 3:9) likely points not only to a solid grasp of the biblical gospel but to a consistency between religious profession and a holy life. A deacon must be consistent in his life twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This does not mean perfection. It means that his constant desire is to live what the Bible teaches, even though he may often stumble and sin. The long-term trajectory of his life points upward.

Chapter Nine: Qualification Demands Examination

1. It is very possible for a deacon candidate, as well as others in the church, to think that he exemplifies the biblical qualities required for service and yet be deceived. Therefore, I Timothy 3:10 calls the church to require some kind of examination to prove his fitness. Literally, the verse reads, "And let them also be tested first; they if they prove themselves blameless let them serve as deacons." Though it is possible that the 'also' (which the NIV unfortunately leaves untranslated) could refer to yet another point about diaconal qualification, S. is sure it refers back to the elders, meaning that, in addition to the necessary testing required of elders, the deacons also must first be examined for fitness in service. It only makes sense that if the deacons are tested, the even more responsible group of elders should be as well.

2. Paul is not clear about who and specifically how candidates are to be tested. Whatever form that takes, the church is required to ensure that:

- the candidate meet all biblical requirements listed - the candidate be examined to confirm those character qualifications - no deacon be appointed to office in a hasty, careless manner
- 3. Additionally, Strauch maintains that the following should mark such examination: - elders should direct the process - the congregation must be actively involved - inquiry should be made about his beliefs, interests, family and use of time
 - elders should publicly approve and install deacons - the process should be bathed in prayer
- 4. The word 'first' in I Tim. 3:10 teaches us that testing must not merely be part and parcel of a deacon's initial service but his character must be tested and approved before service begins.

Chapter Ten: Qualifications for women deacons or deacons' wives

1. It is much debated as to whether the Gk. term 'Gynaikas' means female deacons, female assistants to male deacons or wives of deacons.
2. Arguments for female deacons: - The Gk. word for deacon can be masculine or feminine and is inconclusive. - The possessive pronoun 'their' never appears which would have made a reference to wives clear. - A separate list of qualifications for deacons wives seems very out of place when no such list exists for elders' wives which one would think even more important. - In Romans 16:1 Phoebe is probably called a deacon.
3. Arguments against female deacons (for female deacon assistants or deacons' wives):
 - If Paul meant women deacons, then why did he use 'gynaikos' instead of a feminine ending on 'deacon' in v. 11? - 'Deacon' in Romans 16:1 of Phoebe could easily mean simply 'servant' - If women could be deacons, why the need for a distinct address to women at all?
 Yet no unique qualifications or duties for women are given. - The placement of a new category in the middle of the discussion of male deacons seems ill placed if Paul is shifting categories to women, not to wives. - In light of the prohibition for women to 'exercise authority over men' in v. 12, the invitation for women to hold official office, which S. assumes will include exercising authority over men, seems contradictory. - The first conclusive evidence of female deacons in office in a church does not occur until AD 230 and even then a sharp distinction was made between male and female deacon roles. - In the context it makes sense that the wives of deacons would need to display impeccable character since they would likely join their husbands in practical service to the needy, whereas elder's wives could not teach or exercise authority with their husbands.
 - Most of the best modern Bible translations use 'wives' not 'female deacons' or 'deaconesses'. Perhaps the NASB is the best rendering: 'women' which leaves interpretation/application up to the exegete.
 - Acts 6:3, upon which the later deaconate was based, reads "Brothers, choose seven **men** from among you...."

4. In my mind (Andy), the evidence is not perfectly conclusive, though it heavily leans toward 'wives' or possibly 'female assistants'. What is clear is that if a church does install women as deacons, some distinction must be made between the men and women serving to ensure that women practically serve needy men only and never make decisions regarding men or exercise of authority over them. For a church which concludes that v. 11 speaks of the wives of deacons, then it seems clear that their wives, also, must be included in a process of testing for fitness.
5. According to I Tim. 3:11, deacon's wives (or female deacons) are to be 'dignified,' that is generally respected by the community – one who is well spoken of and looked up to.
6. They must also not be 'slanderers' or malicious gossips. As James 3:3-8 makes clear, the tongue is powerful for edification or destruction. She must be a woman with a track record to edifying, God-glorifying, gracious and honest speech.
7. She must also be 'temperate' or 'sober-minded'. That is, she exercises great self-control, shows balanced judgment and is not prone to depression, anger or anxiety. In short, she keeps a God-centered perspective.
8. Finally, she must be 'faithful in all things.' She is not a fair-weather servant but serves without recognition in hard times, too. Whatever the opinions of others, her faithfulness to serving God, her family, the needy and lost remains unmoved.

Chapter Eleven: Family requirements for deacons

1. It follows naturally that qualifications probably aimed at deacons' wives (I Tim. 3:11) would be followed by some final comments distinguishing a deacon's family life in v. 12.
2. The OT is filled with painful accounts of the leaders of God's people who led Israel astray by rejecting marital faithfulness. Those holding office in the church will either lead God's people astray or lead them toward greater faithfulness through the example of their own marriages and families.
3. "Husband of one wife" does not mean that a deacon must be married or cannot be widowed and marry again or even that polygamy is primarily being prohibited but that deacons be one-woman men. Even for the unmarried deacon, this means that he will guard his heart from lust and his eyes, body and mind from its expression sexually until married.
4. "...and must manage his children and household well" means not that he is a perfect parent and overseer of his home but that he does so according to biblical principles with faithfulness, responsibility and grace. Similar to 3:4, his children should respect him as a man of God and God's appointed authority over them for their good. He must be an active shepherd of their souls.
5. The reason for v. 12 is to drive home the point that if a man has not proven a godly, servant leader at home, he is not prepared to be such a leader in the church.

Chapter Twelve: The Significance and Rewards of Deacons

1. I Timothy 3:13 says, "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." This verse "provides encouragement and rich incentives for deacons to serve wholeheartedly."
2. Verse 13 is meant to encourage deacons like v. 1 is meant to encourage elders.
3. Given the fact that the church is the only earthly organization created by God, high standing in it through faithful diaconal service should be more highly esteemed and

sought out than political, business or military high rank. Our Christian worldview should inform our view of 'honor'.

4. "...great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus." likely means both a greater boldness of speech and relationship for the gospel's sake in the course of their service as well as assurance of one's salvation – that their faith is real – in the presence of God. Therefore, serving well as a deacon holds promise both for now and eternity.

Chapter 13: Agents of Christ's Mercy

1. On p. 156 S. gives his definition of a deacon: "Through the deacons, the local church's charitable activities are effectively organized and centralized. The deacons are collectors of funds, distributors of relief and agents of mercy. They help the poor, the jobless, the sick, the widowed, the elderly, the homeless, the shut-in, the refugees and the disabled. They counsel and guide people. They visit people in their homes. They relieve suffering. They comfort, protect and encourage people and help to meet their needs."

2. "The NT diaconate was never intended to be a building-maintenance committee....We must not forget that the real treasures of the church are its people, not its pews and buildings. Yet, so often the needy are left unattended and the church building receives priority attention both in time and funds."