



The Role of Deacon By Pastor Kyle Wells

1. The Role of the Deacon in the Bible.

The Bible tells us that from its earliest days the Christian church had elders (also called overseers) and deacons (Phil 1:1). It must be admitted that while the Bible makes it fairly clear what the role of an elder was, the role of a deacon is never directly spelled out. As Covenant Seminary Prof. Jimmy Agan states: “[W]e search in vain for a detailed description of the duties of deacons, or for an explicit indication of why the term [diakonos] was chosen as a title for the office.” What this means is that while we know that there were deacons and that we should have them, we have precious little insight as to what they did. Perhaps the best insight we have is to look at the word deacon and the service of the widows in Acts 6.

Deacon: While the Bible never gives us a list of diaconal duties, the root-idea of the word deacon is that of a go-between. In the ancient world, the word could describe one who carried a message between two parties, one who carried food from kitchen to table, one who performs various duties on behalf of a master. From this we can surmise that deacons are “go-betweens” or “middle-men”, especially serving the community by matching the gifts and resources of a congregation to the congregation’s need.

The Service of Widows in Acts 6: Another place where people often look to gain clarity on the the role a deacon is Acts 6. From the beginning christians have taken care of the weak and the vulnerable in society, and that especially included widows and orphans. So daily the early church would distribute food to their widows. An administrative problem arose, however, and the greek widows were not getting their daily meals (Acts 6:1). This was a problem for the Apostles as they didn’t think it was right for them to take time away from preaching to ensure that the widows got their food (6:2). So they appointed seven men to do it (6:3). But while this is often the passage people go to in order to teach on the diaconate, it must be admitted that these men were never called “deacons.” Nevertheless, they were ordained to some sort of office (6:6) and it is likely that this is a pre-cursor to the diaconate. Their role was to serve as a go-between and ensure the delivery of the communities resources to those in need.

2. The Role of the Deacon in History

If the Bible doesn’t give a detailed description of the duties of the deacon, do we get any insight into what a deacon might do from church history? Thankfully, wise Christians who have come before us do give us some guidance that we can lean on. The role of the deacon in today’s Reformed and Presbyterian Churches was established by the reformer John Calvin. Following the Bible, Calvin believed that the worship and ethics, love of God and neighbor are inseparable and necessary for the Christian life. The christian community should care for its neighbors and the church should give specific leadership to this task. Informed by passages like Acts 6:1-6, 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and 5:3-10, Romans 12:8, 1 Corinthians 12:28, Leviticus 19:9-10, Calvin then tasked the diaconate with feeding the poor, nursing the sick, housing the homeless, and rescuing newborn and abandoned infants.

Our own Book of Church order draws on this tradition and says that the office of deacon is one of sympathy and service, after the example of the Lord Jesus; and that it expresses the communion of saints, especially in their helping one another in time of need. It goes on to say that it is the duty of the deacons to

1. minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress.
2. to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church

3. to devise effective methods of collecting the gifts of the people, and to distribute these gifts among the objects to which they are contributed.

4. to have care of the property of the congregation, both real and personal, and shall keep in proper repair the church edifice and other buildings belonging to the congregation.

One can see how our own tradition has taken the sparse clues given in the Bible and sought to flesh those out. Following this tradition gives us a wise path for how to see the role of deacons here at CPC. As you consider deacons, look for wise, humble, godly servants who are intentional about using their own gifts and the gifts of others in service of the needs of our community.