

Of the Office of Deacons.

by John Gill

The office of deacons is an ecclesiastic office instituted to serve tables, provide for the poor, and distribute church funds, and deacons must have a good personal and domestic character, as well as a spiritual and evangelical character.

Scripture: Acts 6:1

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Role of Deacons"

Description

John Gill discusses the office of deacons within the church, emphasizing its ecclesiastical nature and the original establishment as a response to the needs of the growing church. He outlines the qualifications required for deacons, their specific duties, and the importance of their role in serving the church and its members, particularly the poor. Gill highlights that deacons are not to preach or rule but to assist in practical matters, ensuring the church's needs are met while allowing pastors to focus on spiritual ministry. He also encourages the church to support and pray for deacons, recognizing their vital contribution to the community.

Transcript

A Body of PRACTICAL Divinity

Book 2--Chapter 5

OF THE OFFICE OF DEACONS

The other officers in the gospel church are deacons; and the things to be treated of respecting this office, are the nature and original of it; the work to be performed by those who are appointed to it; their qualifications for it, and the encouragement to the diligent performance of it; with the duties of a church respecting them. 1. First, the nature and original of it: It is not a political, but an ecclesiastic office; sometimes, indeed, the word is used in a political sense, for the civil magistrate; who is said to be yeou diakonov, "the deacon of God;" we render it, the "minister of God," (Rom. 13:4) one appointed by him, and who serves under him, for the public good: but it is commonly used in an ecclesiastic sense; sometimes for extraordinary ministers, as apostles, whose ministry is called diakonia, a "deaconship," and is joined with apostleship (Acts 1:17, 25), and the apostle Paul calls himself and Apollos diakonoi, deacons or ministers, by whom ye believed (1 Cor. 3:6), and even our Lord Jesus Christ has this name and title, as the prophet of the church, and a preacher of the everlasting gospel; Now I say that Jesus Christ was a

deacon or minister of the circumcision, or to the circumcised Jews (Rom. 15:8), not to take notice, that the ministry of angels is called diakonia, a deaconship (Heb. 1:14).

To proceed, it is oftener given to ordinary preachers and ministers of the word; as to Tychicus, Epaphras, and others (Eph. 6:21; Col. 1:7, 4:7), but elsewhere a deacon is spoken of as a distinct officer from either ministers extraordinary or ordinary; so the apostle speaks of the office of an elder, bishop, or overseer, and of the office of a deacon, as two distinct offices; and after he had given the qualifications of the one, he gives the qualifications of the other (1 Tim. 3:8-13), and the officers of the church at Philippi are distinguished into bishops and deacons (Phil. 1:1).

Now the original of the institution of this office we have an account of, as is commonly thought, in Acts 6:1-5 by which it seems to have been originally a branch of the ministerial office, as executed by the apostles; and, indeed, the whole of the ecclesiastic ministry was in their hands, the management of the secular, as well as of the spiritual affairs of the church: the first Christians, the members of the church at Jerusalem, sold their possessions, and had all things common, and parted them to all, as every man had need; and the apostles had the disposal and distribution of them; for they were brought and laid at their feet for that purpose (Acts 2:44, 45, 4:34-37, 5:2), this church becoming very numerous, which at first consisted of about an hundred and twenty, increased to some thousands; and their poor likewise increased; for the poor from the first had the gospel preached to them, and received it; and these were chosen, called, and brought into the church; and this being the case, there was a murmuring of the Grecians, of the Hellenistic Jews, who were born and lived in Greece; but coming to Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost, were converted, and joined themselves to the church at Jerusalem: now a complaint was lodged by these against the Hebrews, who were natives of Judea, and particularly of Jerusalem, that their poor widows were neglected in the daily ministrations, suggesting, there was some partiality used; that the widows of the natives of Jerusalem were more favoured than the widows of such who had lived in foreign parts; this greatly affected the apostles, and embarrassed them in the spiritual part of their ministry, in which they were hindered by their attention and application to the secular affairs of the church; and therefore called the church together, and thus argued with them; "It is not reason, that we should leave the word of God and serve tables;" as it is not proper that any ordinary minister of the word should be "entangled with the affairs of this life," if possible; that he may "give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine and meditate upon them, and give himself wholly to them".

Wherefore the apostles proposed to the church, thus called together, to look out and choose from among themselves seven men, of such qualifications they mentioned, to attend this service: and as for themselves, they would "give up themselves continually to prayer, and the ministry of the word;" and this proposal being acceptable to the people, they chose men so qualified, and presented them to the apostles for their approbation; and so they were installed into their office[1].

This seems to be the original of the institution of this office. By which it appears, 1a. That those who are chosen to this office must be members of the church, or they are not eligible; and that they are to be chosen by the vote and suffrage of the church; and their destination is only to that church to which they belong; they cannot officiate in another; nor have they any concern with the poor of another church; the collections of that church to whose peculiar service they are appointed, are to be received by them, and to be distributed to the members of that church, and of that only.

Extraordinary collections from other churches, we may observe, were sent to the elders, to be disposed of by them (Acts 11:30). Wherefore, 1b. The apostles, though they gave up themselves more especially to

prayer, and the ministry of the word, yet they did not divest themselves wholly of this service; (see Acts 12:25) and deacons now have a connection and concern with elders and pastors of churches in the discharge of their office; they are to acquaint them with the state of the church, and the cases of the poor, and to take their advice in any matters of moment and importance, and to be assisting to them in the outward affairs of the church, and may be what the apostle calls "helps," in 1 Corinthians 12:28 being helpful to the minister, church, and poor. 1c.

This office was instituted when the church was numerous; wherefore the number of seven in the first church, is not a rule and example binding on all future churches[2]; but such a number are to chosen, and may be increased, as the exigency of churches requires; and some have thought, that where a church is very small, a pastor may perform the whole work, with a little assistance from the church; but I cannot but be of opinion, that one deacon at least, if not two, are necessary to form an organized church. 1d.

The objects of this office, are the poor of the church, which were in all churches in all ages; "The poor ye have always with you," (John 12:8) and to be taken care of; so that the reason of its first institution continues, namely, to ease the ministers of the gospel from too much concern in the secular affairs of the church (Acts 6:2), and such officers were appointed not only in the first church at Jerusalem, though extraordinary ones, as some think, but in other churches of the Gentiles, at least ordinary ones; as at Philippi (Phil. 1:1), and the particular qualifications are given of these officers; which seem to be given as a direction to the churches in future ages for the choice of them (1 Tim. 3:8; &c). 2.

Secondly, the work and business to be performed by them who are appointed to this office. 2a. Not to preach the gospel, and administer ordinances, as baptism and the Lord's Supper; and therefore ministerial qualifications are not required of them; Philip, indeed, one of the seven, did both preach and baptize (Acts 6:5, 8:5, 38), but then he did both by virtue of his office as an evangelist (Acts 21:8). In Tertullian's time deacons were allowed to baptize; he says, the first right belongs to the bishop, then to the presbyters, then to the deacons[3], but not without the authority of the bishop; but this appears to be an intire innovation. 2b.

Nor is their work and business to rule in the church; we read of ruling elders, but never of ruling deacons; if they were, women might not be deaconesses, as Phebe was, for they are not to rule: deacons may and should be assisting to pastors or elders in the care of the church; as to watch over the walk and conversation of the members of the church, and to observe that they keep their places in it; and to exhort, admonish, and reprove, as they may find it necessary; and to visit the sick, and such that are in distress of any kind; and to report the state of the church to the elder or pastor; and to reconcile differences between one member and another, and to prepare matters to be laid before the church at church meetings, when needful. 2c.

But their principal business is to "serve tables," which the apostles relinquished and gave up to the seven, at the first institution of them (Acts 6:2). As, 2c1. The Lord's table, as it is called (1 Cor. 10:21), that is, at the administration of the ordinance of the supper, their business is, to provide everything necessary for it; as the bread and the wine, and all kind of furniture needful on that occasion; and when the elements are blessed, and the bread broken, and wine poured out, and these given into their hands by the pastor or elder, they are to deliver out to the members; so in Justin Martyr's time, they that were called "deacons," he says, gave to everyone that were present, that they might partake of the bread and the wine, for which thanks were given by the president[4]. 2c2.

The minister's table; to take care that a proper provision is made for the subsistence of himself and family; that whereas Christ has ordained, that those who preach the gospel, should live of it, and that he that is taught in the word, should communicate to him that teacheth in all good things; the business of deacons is to see to it, that every member contributes according to his ability; and that there be an equality, that some are not eased and others burdened: and it lies upon them to collect what the members give, for it is not proper the minister should collect for himself; this would be to prevent the design of the institution, which was, that those who are employed in the sacred office of the ministry of the word, should not be hindered in it.

Besides, such a practice would not comport with the case and character of a minister, who would be obliged to receive what the people gave him, without making any remonstrance against it, as failing in their duty to him; and he might also be exposed to the charge of avarice; to which may be added, that a church would not be able to judge whether their pastor was sufficiently provided for or not. 2c3. The poor's table; it was an apostolical order given to the churches, that they should make a collection for the poor saints, on the first day of the week; and it seems as if it was designed to be every first day; to which everyone was to give, having laid by him a store for it, as God had prospered him (1 Cor. 16:1, 2), which collections, and those made at the Lord's Supper, are to be received by the deacons, with whatsoever gifts may come into their hands, and be distributed to the necessities of the saints; and they are, both by their own example, and by their exhortations, to stir up the members of churches to contribute liberally to the relief of the poor: and what they receive they are to communicate, 2c3a.

Impartially, that is, as the apostle expresses it, "with simplicity," without partiality, and without favour and affection; showing no respect to persons, taking more notice of, and giving more liberally to one than to another, which was the original complaint in the first church, and made the office necessary; and therefore the deacon should be careful to avoid any cause of it: the principal rule he should go by is, to give as everyone needeth; to some more, and others less, as their case requires. 2c2b.

This should be done with "cheerfulness," (Rom. 12:8) without any frowns in the countenance, and without any hard and rough words, which the tender minds of the poor, broken with distress, cannot well bear; when what is given cheerfully and pleasantly, does them double good; nor should they be upbraided with misconduct in former life, which may have brought them into low circumstances. God loves a cheerful giver, and he himself gives liberally, and upbraids not. 2c2c. This should be done with compassion and tenderness.

The work of a deacon is expressed by his "showing mercy," (Rom. 12:8) and he should exercise it in a pitiful and merciful manner, as sympathizing with them in their poor and low circumstances; in imitation of the great High Priest of our profession, who is touched with the feeling of the infirmities of his people. 2c2d. This office should be executed with great faithfulness; deacons are the church's stewards, and are intrusted with the church's stock; and it is required of stewards, that they distribute with fidelity what is put into their hands, and for the uses for which it is given.

The next thing to be inquired into, 3. Thirdly, are the qualifications of persons for such an office; some of which may be taken from Acts 6:3. As, 3a. That they are to be of "honest report;" of whom a testimony can be given of their honesty, integrity, and good conversation; who have a good report of them that are without, of all men, of the men of the world, and of them that are within; and who are well reported of by the brethren, by the members of other churches, especially by the members of the church to which they belong. 3b.

"Full of the Holy Ghost," of his gifts and graces; though they may not be so eminently endowed with them as Stephen and Philip were, which is not to be expected; yet that they should appear to be partakers of the grace of the Spirit, and to have such gifts as to "comfort the feeble minded, support the weak," and speak a word in season to those who are in distress. 3c. Men of "wisdom;" for as they are stewards, wisdom, as well as faithfulness, is required of them; to give to everyone of the poor a portion of the church's monies, as they need; and to distinguish cases and circumstances requires wisdom; besides, persons in such an office are sometimes called upon to make up differences between member and member; which is often a difficult task, and calls for all the prudence a man is possessed of; and to these, or such as these, the apostle refers, when he says, "Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one, that shall be able to judge between his brethren," without going to law before unbelievers (1 Cor. 6:5, 6).

There are other qualifications of a deacon observed in 1 Timothy 3:8-12. 3d. As to his personal character; he must be "grave" in his speech and gesture, and not light, frothy, and vain; and not only modest, chaste, honest, and of good behaviour, but as the word, may signify also one that has some weight and influence, who is venerable^[5] and respectable, and has some degree of reverence and esteem with the people: "Not double tongued;" so as to express pity to the poor, yet show no concern to relieve them; and to say one thing to them, and another to the church and minister; or to say one thing to one member, and another to another, which may tend to alienate the affections of one from another.

"Not given to much wine;" which, though lawful to be used, yet not to excess; which would both destroy his character in the church and in the world, and render him unfit for the business of his office. "Not greedy of filthy lucre," or covetous; such may be tempted to make a wrong application of the church's money; and besides, persons in such an office should be liberal themselves, according to their abilities, and set a good example to others; or otherwise they cannot, with a good grace, stir up others to liberality; which is one part of their office. 3e.

Others concern his domestic character; he should be "the husband of one wife;" it is not necessary that he should be a married man; but if married, he should have but one wife, that is, at the same time; polygamy had been much in use among the Jews and Gentiles; and the first Christians were not soon and easily brought to the disuse of that practice; but the apostle, by divine inspiration, judged it necessary that no officer of a church, bishop or deacon, should have more wives than one; since it would serve to continue and encourage the practice, set an example of it, and expose to reproach and censure: the apostle adds, "Ruling their children and their own houses well;" both wife, children, and servants; such ought to keep a good decorum in their families; or how else can it be expected that the affairs of the house of God, so far as they are concerned therein, should be dispatched with honour, faithfulness, and diligence.

The apostle has also thought fit to give the qualifications of their wives, who must be grave in their speech, gesture, and dress; as well as modest, chaste, and of good deportment: "not slanderers, or accusers;" false accusers, acting the part of the devil, as the word signifies^[6]; for such may do a great deal of mischief in the church, through their influence on their husbands: they must be "sober," temperate, not given to excessive drinking, which would be scandalous; "faithful in all things," respecting their husbands and family; and this is the rather mentioned, since otherwise they might have opportunities of embezzling the church's money, and which, in some cases, they might be intrusted with to dispose of to the poor, in the absence of their husbands. 3f.

With respect to the spiritual and evangelical character of deacons, they should be such who "hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience;" are sound in the gospel, and the doctrines of it; for by "faith" is meant the gospel, the faith once delivered to the saints; and by the "mystery" of it, the more sublime and mysterious doctrines of the gospel, especially the doctrine of the Trinity; which, with the Jews, was commonly called, "the mystery of the faith;" and is the same the apostle calls, "the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ," (Col. 2:2) such doctrines which relate to the distinction of Persons in the God head; the divine Sonship, proper Deity, and distinct personality of Christ; the Deity, personality and operations of the Spirit; the incarnation of Christ, and the union of the two natures in him; the resurrection of the dead; with others: these things deacons are to hold, with a conscience purified by the blood of Christ, and with a holy, becoming life and conversation: this qualification is necessary in them, that they may be able to instruct and establish others in the faith, and to confute the erroneous; for should their principles be bad, their influence on others might be pernicious and fatal.

Now these must first be proved, and "then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless;" not that they are to exercise any part of this office first, that it might be known how capable they are of it; but that it should appear that they are men of the above characters and qualifications; are of some standing in the church, and are well known and approved of for their soundness in the faith and purity of conversation. There is but one sort of deacons of this kind mentioned in scripture; unless it can be thought there were women deacons, or "deaconesses;" and, indeed, Phebe is called diakonov, a "deacon," or "deaconess," of the church of Cenchrea; we render the word "servant," (Rom. 16:1) and some render the "wives" of deacons, "their women," (1 Tim. 3:11) and by them understand "deaconesses;" and if the same with the "widows," as some think, their qualifications, as to age, character, and conduct, are described (1 Tim. 5:9, 10) and it seems certain there were such in the second century, whether virgins or widows; such seem to be the two servant maids Pliny[7] speaks of, whom he examined on the rack, concerning the Christians, and by whom he says they were called "ministrae," ministrresses, or deaconesses; and Clemens of Alexandria, in the "second" century, makes mention expressly of women deacons, as spoken of by the apostle in his epistle to Timothy[8]; so Jerom[9], in the fourth century, speaks of them as in the eastern churches: and, indeed, something of this kind seems not at all unnecessary, but of service and usefulness; as to attend at the baptism of women, and to visit the sisters of the church, when sick, and to assist them.

In the third century an officer was introduced, called a "subdeacon," an under deacon, who seems to have been an assistant to the deacon, when the churches became large, and their poor numerous, and the deacons required assistance; though it would have been much more proper to have increased their number of deacons; but as for that "meteor," as Dr. Owen[10] calls him, an "archdeacon," he was not heard of until the fourth or fifth centuries; and then not as the creature which now exists under that name.

4.
Fourthly, the encouragement given to the diligent and faithful performance of the office of a deacon. 4a. Such "purchase," or get, "to themselves a good decree". The conjecture of Dr. Owen's[11] is very trifling, which I should not have expected from so great a man, as that it signifies a place of some eminence, a seat more highly raised up to sit in, in church assemblies; something like the chief seats in a Jewish synagogue: nor by it is meant a higher degree in his own office; for there are no degrees of higher and lower in the office of a deacon; no subdeacon nor archdeacon, as before observed: nor is it preparatory to an higher order: as of presbytery or eldership; since the office of a deacon lies chiefly in the management of temporal things; and not in study and meditation of spiritual things.

In after times, in the third century, such a practice began to take place, as to go through all ecclesiastical offices, to the office of a bishop, as Cyprian[12] says Cornelius bishop of Rome did; and it is said to be ordered by Caius, bishop of the same place, in the same century, that the degrees to a bishopric, through which men should pass to it, were a door keeper, a reader, an exorcist, an acolyte, a subdeacon, a deacon, a presbyter, and then a bishop[13]; but this is all of mere human and antichristian appointment: nor is a greater degree in glory meant, which it is questionable whether there will be any; but rather an increase of gifts and graces is designed; which, under a divine blessing, may be attained, through a deacon's more intimate conversation with the pastor and the members of the church, and even the poor of it: though it seems chiefly to intend a good degree of honour in the faithful discharge of his office, from both minister, church, and poor. 4b.

Such obtain "boldness in the faith;" in the exercise of faith at the throne of grace; and in asserting the doctrine of faith; and in vindicating their own character before men, as faithful men; and in reproof for immorality or error. 5. Fifthly, the duties belonging to a church and its members, to persons in such an office. 5a. To supply them with what is sufficient to relieve the wants of the poor; for they are not to supply them out of their own purses; but to distribute faithfully what is put into their hands by the church. 5b.

They should be applied unto for direction and counsel in any, private matters, and especially which relate unto the church; since they are supposed to be men of wisdom, and capable of judging of things, with respect to particular persons, and between one member and another. 5c. They are to be esteemed highly for their work's sake; their office being a very useful one to the church, when diligently and faithfully performed. 5d. To be prayed for; for if we are to pray for all civil magistrates and officers, then certainly for all ecclesiastical officers; not only pastors of churches, but deacons also; that they may be supported under all discouragements and difficulties; and that they may be able to discharge their office with reputation and usefulness. ENDNOTES:

[1] Of their ordination and instalment see chap. 3. book ii. p. 632, 633. See on topic 1229.

[2] Though the council at Neocaesarea ordered, that there should be seven deacons, according to the rule in Acts, Can. CIV. apud Magdeburg. cent. 4. col. 349. And in the Roman church there were seven, and no more; but in other churches the number was indifferent, or indeterminate, as the historian says, Sozomen. Eccl. Hist. I. 7. c. 19.

[3] Deut. Baptismo, c. 17.

[4] Apolog. 2. p. 97. vid. Cyprian. de Lapsis, p. 244.

[5] semnouv.

[6] diabolouv.

[7] Ep. I 10. ep. 97. vid. Pignorium de Servis, p. 109.

[8] Stromat I. 3. p. 448.

[9] Comment. in 1 Tim. iii. 11.

[10] True Nature of a Gospel Church, ch. 9. p. 184.

[11] Ibid. p. 187.

[12] Ep. 52. p. 96.

[13] Platinae vit. Pontif. p 34.

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