

Weekly Reflection: Church Structure part 4: Deacons and Elders

1. Jesus is head of His church.
2. We're all priests and ministers.
3. Elder-led congregational ruled.
4. Some, not all, are called to be leaders in the body.
5. Elders and deacons.

Two Roles

According to the New Testament, there are two leadership roles in the church, elders and deacons. When we think about elders and deacons I wonder if it would be helpful to think of elder and deacon as a role and not really as a title. (example: Husband and wife) In his letter to a church in Philippi, Paul writes ***"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons."*** (Philippians 1:1) ("pastor" and "elder" and "bishop/overseer" refer in the New Testament to the same role.) The Scriptural qualifications show this as well. In 1 Timothy 3:1–13, Paul only gives qualifications for two different groups of people: overseers (or elders) and deacons. Elders and deacons are distinct in responsibility, united in purpose, and both are to be led by the Holy Spirit.

Elders

As we talked about a few weeks ago, we are an elder-led congregational ruled local church. So, we believe that God calls a few men to be elders and lead the church. Elders are charged with spiritual oversight, shepherding, teaching, guarding doctrine, and leading the church in prayer and direction. The function and role of an elder is well summarized by Alexander Strauch in his book Biblical Eldership: "Elders lead the church (1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1-2), teach and preach the Word (1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:9), protect the church from false teachers (Acts 20:17, 28-31), exhort and admonish the saints in sound doctrine (1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 3:13-17; Titus 1:9), and judge doctrinal issues (Acts 15:6). In biblical terminology, elders shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church".

Plurality of Elders

We believe the New Testament teaches that there is to be a plurality of elders. By plurality, I'm talking about shared leadership. Leadership in the New Testament was done by a team, not a one man show. When leaders acted, it was together as a team (Acts 13:1-3; 15:22-23). As Alexander Strauch writes, "By definition, the elder structure of government is a collective form of leadership in which each elder shares equally the position, authority, and responsibility of the office." Shared leadership has the benefits of balancing people's weaknesses, lightening the workload, and providing accountability. The book of Acts seems to indicate that Paul's regular practice was to appoint elders to lead the churches he planted, since after his first missionary journey we read: ***"And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed (Acts 14:23).***

Elders must be able to teach.

Elders are called to teach the Word of God, to admonish the church with sound doctrine, and judge doctrinal issues.

- **1 Timothy 3:2** *Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,*
- **Titus 1:9** *He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*

This does not mean that only elders can teach in the church, but that elders need to be able to teach. We do believe that people in the church can have the gift of teaching and not be called to be an elder. The elders do have the responsibility to oversee or make sure that all of the teaching that happens in the church is doctrinally sound. **1 Timothy 5:17** – *“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”* It’s not that all don’t have to be able to teach, they do, but some labor in it. That is, they devote more time and energy to it, perhaps earning their living by it. Not all elders need to be able to do public preaching.

Elders are called to govern, oversee, or shepherd the Church.

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” (1 Timothy 5:17) The word “rule” is used for leadership, guidance, and authority several times in the New Testament. They govern well. That doesn’t mean having slick and efficient meetings. It means are the people cared for successfully? Is the church mobilized and taught successfully? Are the people becoming more like Jesus? Elders are called to put structures in place that help the congregation do that and call them to account when they don’t?

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” (Hebrews 13:17) Obedience and submission imply a role of leadership and governance. My simple point is there are these texts that say the leaders of the church have a governing, overseeing, leading, managing role.

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.” (Acts 20:28-31) *“So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” (1 Peter 5:1-4)* The duty of elders to shepherd the flock implies oversight, a leading function, or governing. Shepherding brings in an element of care, provision, and protection. This is so crucial that we don’t see the power dimension, the authority dimension, and the oversight dimension as something that gives you a right to lord it over others, but rather to shepherd. Shepherds care for sheep. They rescue sheep. They feed sheep. They lead sheep so the sheep can grow and mature. They stay out late at night to protect the sheep from wolves.

Deacons

The basic meaning of the Greek word group behind the English translation "deacon" (*diakon-*) suggests the notion of service and servanthood especially in regard to providing practical help with respect to the basic necessities of life. Deacons are charged with leading the church's ministry of service, mercy, and practical support. The meaning of the word "deacon" ("servant") implies that they carry out tasks that are assigned by another. Taken alongside the meaning of the word "overseer" (another term for pastor or elder) from 1 Timothy 3, we can infer that the "servants" (deacons) of God's church perform the tasks assigned by the "overseers," (elders) who are charged with the leadership of the church. The service is done for the church and directed by the overseers (elders).

Acts 6

We first encounter deacons during a meal. As the early church began to meet and grow, Greek-speaking Jews who had been scattered outside of Israel ("Hellenists") returned to Jerusalem to join the church and follow Jesus. After a while, though, they came and complained to the Hebrew-speaking apostles because Greek widows were not receiving the food they needed (Acts 6:1). Urgent needs like this, as any church knows, require time and attention, sensitivity, and careful follow-through. This meant the apostles or elders would have less time and attention for teaching and prayer, and they knew the church would suffer even more if that were the case (Acts 6:2). So, the apostles called the church to appoint seven men to make sure these new needs were met. And because they did, ***"the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem" (Acts 6:7).***

How much or little we think of deacon ministry today rests, in significant measure, on what problem we think those first deacons were solving. Was this merely a matter of getting food for some lonely and vulnerable women, or was the church facing a deeper, more sensitive threat? Matt Smethurst, in his introduction to deacons, draws our attention to the greater dangers hiding beneath the surface: "How our churches react to conflict can make all the difference in whether our gospel witness is obstructed or accelerated. Acts 6 is a story of church conflict handled well... The seven weren't merely deployed to solve a food problem. Food was the occasion, sure, but it wasn't the deepest problem. The deepest problem was a sudden threat to church unity." Deacons are not just solving surface level issues, those surface level issues may be the occasion, but underneath, or the reason for solving those surface level issues is to allow the church to continue to grow and fulfill its God given purpose.

Many might hear deacon and immediately think of dull or menial tasks that few people want to do. That's definitely not how the apostles viewed the office of deacon. We know how much they thought of deacon work because of the kind of men they appointed: ***"Pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty" (Acts 6:3).*** They weren't content with someone who was handy around the house or good with spreadsheets; they wanted men filled with the Spirit and abounding in wisdom. Smethurst observes, "The apostles did not delegate this problem to others because it wasn't important, but because it was."

What do deacons do?

In short, they assist the elders by meeting needs in the life of the church. ***"Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:3-4)*** It would seem, then, that the deacon role exists to assist the elders of the church by relieving the elders of pressures that would divert them from the ministry of the Word and prayer and the general, visionary oversight of the church. They promote the word of God by allowing the elders to focus on praying, teaching, and governing. And in doing so, the deacons guard and encourage the church's love for one another.

Who can be elders and deacons?

First, the more general qualification for us here at Living Hope, only active members of Living Hope Ministries can serve as elders or deacons. Second, the Word of God lays out qualifications for both elders and deacons. 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9 are two clear lists of qualifications. It is worth noting that the Word of God emphasizes the character of the people who qualify to be elders and deacons much more than the tasks they are to accomplish. Most of these qualifications that are listed in the Word of God are straight forward. But there are a couple that people and churches land in different places on.

Let's start with elder. **1 Timothy 3:2 – “Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,”** “The husband of one wife,” what does that mean? If we take it at face value for how it is written here than it means elders and deacons must be married men. So, women and single men are disqualified. I do not think that is what Paul is teaching. One reason is that Jesus, Paul, and Barnabas functioned as spiritual-elders, over-seers, shepherds and were unmarried. This literally means “a one-woman man.” Whether a man is single or married, he must be living a sexually pure life. For a married elder, it also means that he must be faithfully devoted to loving his wife. Can women be elders? Paul says this in **1 Timothy 2:12-13, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve;”** Paul's focus here is the public worship of the church. God has established clear roles for men and women in the home and in the church, and in those spheres, God has ordained that men function as the head, meaning they are to function in the role of leader.

Where we stand at Living Hope Ministries is only men, single or married, can serve in the role of elder, overseer, shepherd, pastor. When we say elder-led, the elders who lead this local church must be members and they must be men. Elders are selected from the adult male membership of the Church as led by the Holy Spirit and affirmed by the Church membership.

Now to deacons. We believe both men and women can serve as deacons. It seems very likely that women and men served as deacons in the Bible and throughout church history. Here are a few of the arguments for that:

- The Greek word for deacon can be masculine or feminine. So, the word does not settle the issue.
- In the middle of the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Paul says in verse 11, **“Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.”** This could be the wives of the deacons, which could mean that only men could be deacons, but it could also be interpreted women deacons. **Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things (NASB).** The latter is suggested by the fact that the elders' wives are not mentioned in 3:1–7.
- The deacons were distinguished from the elders in that they were not the governing body in the church nor were they charged with the duty of authoritative teaching. In the list of qualifications for deacons, being able to teach is not listed as it is with elders. So, the role of deacon seems not to involve anything that Paul taught in 1 Timothy 2:12 is inappropriate for women to perform in the church.
- In Romans Phoebe is very probably called a deacon. **Romans 16:1-2 – “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, 2 that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.”** That word servant here is the word diakonos, the word for deacon. Some versions do translate this as deacon. In the context it seems to me that Paul is not just referring to her as a servant like the rest of the saints but rather identifying her as serving in the role of deacon.

We feel that deacons are called when there is a need in the church. So, when a need is identified, deacons are called to help make sure that need is met. We believe that there are needs that come up in the life of a church that could be more appropriately met by a woman, where having a woman leading a team to meet that specific need could be appropriate and beneficial.

Deacons are selected from the membership of the Church as led by the Holy Spirit and affirmed by the Church membership. At Living Hope how we envision the deacons functioning is a role of overseeing the various teams that connect to the needs of the church. The direction we are heading is to have several to a handful of deacons who are overseeing specific teams, in a way that each deacon knows which team or team they are overseeing, and each team knows which deacon they are working with.

Moving Forward at Living Hope

- We will be collecting names for deacon and elder on July 26th. We are asking that you continue to pray and discern who God may be calling to serve in the role of deacon or elder. Over the next few weeks write down names that come to mind and continue to pray over those names. Then on Sunday, July 26th we will hand out a sheet for you to write down names, and we will collect them that same day.
- Along with collecting the names for deacon and elder we will be asking members to affirm or reject the proposed terms for serving as elder or deacon and the process for adding elders or deacons. (This was handed out and will be available the next few weeks to read over)
- Once the names have been collected on July 26th the Leadership Team will prayerfully discuss and meet with candidates and do our best to make sure candidates meet the biblical qualifications and feel called by God to serve in the role of deacon or elder.
- We plan to bring names to the congregation in September, then give around 3 weeks for the congregation to pray and bring any thoughts, concerns or questions concerning the names to the leadership team. If everything is still good, we will have a commissioning service for the congregation to affirm and bring on these people as elder or deacon.

Biblical qualifications for Elders and Deacons. (Much of this came from 9Marks ministry)

Qualifications of an Elder

The following is a list of the biblical qualifications that an elder must possess. No elder will be a perfect man, but if he is clearly and persistently lacking in any of these qualities, he cannot serve in the church as an elder. An elder must be:

- **Above reproach** (“blameless”) 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7. This qualification is the summation of all of the rest. It means that there is nothing in his life that would justify a legitimate accusation of misconduct or call his character into question.
- **The husband of one wife** (“a one-woman man”) 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6. Whether a man is single or married, he must be living a sexually pure life. For a married elder, it also means that he must be faithfully devoted to loving his wife (Ephesians 5:25; 1 Peter 3:7).
- **Sober-minded** (moderate, not given to excess) 1 Timothy 3:2. In all areas of life, an elder must be calm, well-balanced, careful, and one who at all times is capable of clear thinking and sound judgment.

- **Self-controlled** (a sensible, serious person) 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8. This does not mean that an elder may not laugh or joke or play. It means he leads a disciplined life, not allowing frivolous activities to distract him from more serious and important concerns.
- **Respectable** (orderly) 1 Timothy 3:2. The opposite of the Greek in this case is chaos (utter confusion). An elder's outward behavior must demonstrate decency, orderliness, and self-control.
- **Hospitable** ("one who loves strangers") 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8. An elder must be one who shows genuine kindness and hospitality, not only to the members of his church, but also to people he does not know well.
- **A lover of good** ("one who is inclined to do good") Titus 1:8. Closely related to hospitality, an elder must be one who not only loves the concept of goodness but also is prone to doing good to others.
- **Able to teach** ("skilled in teaching") 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9. There is no biblical requirement that an elder have a formal education, but he must be an able teacher and defender of the truth (2 Timothy 2:2, 24; 2:15; Titus 2:7-8).
- **Not a drunkard** ("not a drinker" or "not addicted to wine") 1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7. Though not an absolute prohibition, this is a serious warning that an elder cannot be preoccupied with alcohol or known as a drinker. Due to abuse, however, it may be advisable for elders to abstain from alcohol altogether in order to avoid offense or damaging influence (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8).
- **Not violent** (not "a giver of blows," or "a striker") 1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7. An elder must be a man who solves problems and settles disputes peacefully, using persuasive words and calm demeanor, not his fists or other weapons.
- **Gentle** (patient, gracious, forgiving) 1 Timothy 3:3; 2 Timothy 2:24. An elder must not be a man who holds a grudge or is slow to forgive. He must be one who will patiently bear with those who are needy, difficult, reluctant to change, or slow to learn.
- **Not quick-tempered** (he must be slow to anger) Titus 1:7; James 1:19-20. Anger in itself is not always a sin. There is a righteous sort of anger. An elder, though, must be a man who recognizes and controls his own propensity to become angry.
- **Not quarrelsome** (not argumentative) 1 Timothy 3:3; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; James 3:13-18. He must be a man who will defend the truth strongly, but in a peaceable manner. He must not be one who allows himself to become embroiled in hostile disputes or petty arguments.
- **Upright** (righteous or just) Titus 1:8. He is a man who is known for doing what is right. He lives a life of practical righteousness, trying to reflect God's view in every decision he makes.
- **Holy** ("devout" or "set apart to God") Titus 1:8. An elder must be firmly committed to God and His Word. He must be faithful to the ministry and to biblical doctrine, not one who gives in to social, political, or religious pressure to compromise.
- **Self-controlled** (or self-disciplined) Titus 1:8. He must be a man who is disciplined in terms of his response to physical desires for food, pleasure, comfort, money, sleep, sex, or anything else which could cause him to stumble.
- **Not a lover of money** (greedy) 1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:2. An elder cannot be motivated in the ministry by financial gain or greedy in his lifestyle. He is a man who will trust the Lord, be content with what is provided, and be thankful.
- **One who manages his own house well** (a good manager and leader) 1 Timothy 3:4; Titus 1:6. An elder must have proven himself a good manager of his children (if he has children), his personal finances, and his household in general.
- **Having his children in submission with all reverence** (having obedient, respectful, faithful children) 1 Timothy 3:4-5; Titus 1:6. An elder must not be a harsh or brutal man but must maintain order in his family through loving leadership, consistent biblical training, and proper discipline.

- **Not a recent convert** (not a new or immature believer) 1 Timothy 3:6. An elder must be a mature believer, especially in relation to others in his particular church. If even a capable man is elevated to the position too rapidly, he will battle with pride.
- **He must have a good testimony among those who are outside** (well respected even by unbelievers in the community) 1 Timothy 3:7. An elder must have a consistently good testimony in all places and with all people (aside from those who would persecute him or accuse him falsely), even outside the church. He must be just, honest, peaceable, and loving in every context.
- **He must serve, not by compulsion, but willingly . . . eagerly** (he must desire to serve) 1 Peter 5:2; 1 Timothy 3:1. Elders must not be pressured into service if it is not their personal desire to serve in this capacity. An elder's desire to serve must be God-given and his motives pure.
- **Not self-willed** (not anxious to control others or to have his own way) Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:3. An elder must not be a man who is anxious to dominate or control others. He must be a team-player, realizing that while he is a shepherd, he is also one of the sheep.
- **An example to the flock** (lead by example) 1 Peter 5:3; Titus 2:7. An elder will not be perfect, but he must be a man who will lead the church, by instruction and example, according to God's Word.

Qualifications of a Deacon from 1 Timothy 3:8-13

Qualifications for all deacons:

- **Dignified** (v. 8): This term normally refers to something that is honorable, respectable, esteemed, or worthy, and is closely related to "respectable," which is given as a qualification for elders (1 Tim. 3:2).
- **Not double-tongued** (v. 8): Those who are double-tongued say one thing to certain people but then say something else to others or say one thing but mean another. They are two-faced and insincere. Their words cannot be trusted, so they lack credibility.
- **Not addicted to much wine** (v. 8): A person is disqualified for the office of deacon if they are addicted to alcohol or any drug. Such a person lacks self-control and is undisciplined.
- **Not greedy for dishonest gain** (v. 8): If a person is a lover of money, they are not qualified to be a deacon.
- **Sound in faith and life** (v. 9): Paul also indicates that a deacon must "hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." The phrase "the mystery of the faith" is simply one way Paul speaks of the gospel. Consequently, this statement refers to the need for deacons to hold firm to the true gospel without wavering. That is, the behavior of a deacon must be consistent with their beliefs.
- **Blameless** (v. 10): "Blameless" is a general term referring to a person's overall character.

Qualifications for female deacons:

- Women likewise (v. 11): According to Paul, women must "be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things" (v. 11).
- **She must be dignified** or respectable.
- **She must not be a slanderer** or a person who goes around spreading gossip.
- **She must also be sober-minded** or temperate. That is, she must be able to make good judgments and must not be involved in things that might hinder such judgment.
- Finally, **she must be "faithful in all things."** This is a general requirement which functions similarly to the requirement for elders to be "above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) and for all deacons to be "blameless" (1 Tim. 3:10).

Qualifications for male deacons:

- **Husband of one wife** (v. 12): The best interpretation of this difficult phrase is to understand it as he must be a “one-woman man.” That is, there must be no other woman in his life to whom he relates in an intimate way either emotionally or physically.
- **Manage children and household well** (v. 12): A deacon must be the spiritual leader of his wife and children.