

DISCIPLESHIP. SUPPLEMENT 20

[LEADERSHIP] DEACONS IN AN OFFICE

In this supplement we consistently translate the Greek word “diakonos” (singular) and “diakonoi” (plural) with the English words “deacon” and “deacons”. Who are the deacons?

In the New Testament we read of only three congregations that had deacons and in all three contexts, they are associated with the elders. However, deacons were chosen and appointed. NOT to lead the local church, but to serve (possibly by leading specific tasks within the church).

1. The limitations of deacons.

(1) Deacons were limited with respect to their appointment.

Biblical teaching. The New Testament teaches that Christians must appoint elders to lead the church, but not that the church should appoint deacons.

Biblical history. In the history of the Bible we read that the church of Jerusalem appointed deacons (Acts 6:1-7) and besides this that only the churches of Philippi (Philippians 1:1) and the church of Ephesus (1 Timothy 3:8-13) had deacons. Thus, most churches did not need deacons. The deacons in the church at Jerusalem were appointed for a very specific task and also for a limited time. For example, Philip was a deacon only for a limited period of time, because after that he was an evangelist (Acts 6:5; Acts 8:4-5).

(2) Deacons were limited with respect to their leadership.

The deacons may not take the place of the elders. The tasks of the deacons are different than the tasks of the elders. The office of deacon was never a leadership office over the whole congregation! “A board of deacons” may therefore never replace “the body of elders”¹ (1 Timothy 4:14) as the leadership of the whole congregation. It is better not to assemble “a board of deacons” at all. Every deacon ought to function under the supervision of an elder in the church. The task of a deacon is to serve and not to direct the affairs of the congregation (1 Timothy 5:17).

The elders may delegate specific tasks and activities to the deacons or to ordinary church members. But when the elders do this, the elders remain the responsible leaders of the church and of all the ministries and activities of the church.

(3) Deacons were limited with respect to their tasks.

The tasks of deacons are also different than the tasks of the ordinary members of the church. The word “deacon” actually literary means “servant”. And according to Acts 6:1-7, the deacons were chosen for a specific task in the church.

However, according to Ephesians 4:12 all Christians ought to be equipped for works of service and according to 1 Peter 4:10-11 all the members in the church ought to actively participate in the ministries of the church by making use of their specific talents (abilities) and spiritual gifts. Therefore the ministries of the deacons may never replace the ministries of ordinary members of the church.

2. The biblical qualifications of deacons.

Notes. The biblical requirements or qualifications for deacons are clearly taught in the Bible (Acts 6:3; 1 Timothy 3:8-13). Deacons may never be chosen because of their position, power or wealth in society, but they should be chosen on the basis of their personal behaviour, their family life and their ministry abilities.

3. The tasks of deacons.

(1) The tasks of deacons are different than the tasks of the elders.

The deacons may not take the place of the elders. A church may never appoint a Council of deacons to replace the Council of elders! The task of deacons is to serve and not to direct (lead) the affairs of the congregation.

(2) The tasks of deacons are also different than the tasks of the ordinary members of the congregation.

The deacons may also not take the place of the ordinary members of the church and thus carry out all the tasks that need to be done in a church.

¹ Greek: presbuterion

(3) The specific task of the deacons is to take care of the new conditions that arise as a result of the preaching of the Word and of the growth of the congregation.

Acts 6:1-7 relates that deacons in the first historic church at Jerusalem were chosen for a very specific reason. When the number of disciples increased to over 5 000, a specific problem or need arose within the church: - certain people were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food among the poor. The apostles together with the members of this church chose a number of men to take care of *this specific service*. The deacons were chosen because the elders did not have the time or energy to take care of all the needy members in addition to performing their own tasks (preaching of the Word and prayer).

Therefore, deacons should be limited to specific services, which require special skills or which are still neglected by the body of believers. Therefore deacons are often the leaders of specific tasks that are carried out under the responsibility and supervision of the body of elders. The deacons may be the leaders or teachers of specific groups within the congregation: youth leaders, Sunday school leaders, co-ordinators of evangelism and mercy projects, administrator of finances, etc. While the elders carry out the leadership tasks, the deacons carry out the serving tasks.

(4) The traditional task of the deacons is to take care of the needy members of the congregation.

The deacons in the New Testament were chosen because the elders did not have the ability, time or energy to take care of the needy members in addition to performing their own tasks (Acts 6;1-7; James 1:27; James 2:15-17; 1 John 3:16-18). One special task of the deacons is to gather the offerings, which Christians make to God and then to distribute these gifts in the proper spirit to the needy people within their own congregation (1 Corinthians 16:2-3). According to 2 Corinthians 8:4,20 and 2 Corinthians 9:1,12,13 they also administrate gifts that are intended for helping other congregations in need.

Summary. If deacons are chosen, they are not chosen to lead the church (congregation), but are only chosen to serve in *special tasks* in the congregation. Deacons may not replace the services of the other members of the congregation, but ought to serve in tasks that require special skills or are otherwise neglected by the members of the congregation. They serve where others can't or won't serve. The Bible determines their qualifications and tasks. They serve until their special task has been completed.