



***A Position Paper on Deacons at
Faith Bible Church***

***FBC Elders
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The Biblical Office of Deacon at Faith Bible Church

The following is presented to give the reader an opportunity to study and understand the recommendations of the Elders of Faith Bible Church regarding the establishment of the office of Deacon. This recommendation comes after many years of study, letters, prayer, and discussion. Several current and former Elders (the Advisory Council) have worked through this topic looking for what we believe the Lord would have us do at this time in the growth of our church.

As you read through this paper, you will see that there are several issues that are difficult. Not all Elders saw things the same from the initial discussions. Not all Elders believe there is a clear Biblical mandate that things MUST be done in this particular way. However, we all DO agree that the path we have chosen is clearly Biblical in its foundation and precedent.

Our prayer is that making this change will enhance our ability to serve the needs of our flock at Faith Bible Church.

Why Is There A Need To Change Now?

Faith Bible Church is blessed with many, Caring Ministries today. To list a few: The Faith Seekers, Care Baskets, Kitchen Care, Servant's Kitchen, Funeral Luncheons, Elder Flock Groups, Nursery, and Parish Nursing. There also are several other informal caring ministries where brothers and sisters in Christ reach out to meet the needs of others when a need is perceived. Every one of these ministries is meeting a need and is to be commended.

Over time, our family at FBC has grown. What a blessing this has been! Sometimes, however, we find out there was a need that no one knew about. There is no desire to exclude anyone from participating in these valuable ministries, but we do see a need to "coordinate" the efforts. The primary objective of the Deacon ministry is to knit together the many efforts so that no needs go unmet.

At the same time, we do not want to hinder these caring ministries with an overbearing bureaucracy. For this reason, we have not stipulated the design of the Deacons. It is our desire that the Deacons come alongside the various ministry areas to even better meet the needs.

Background of Deacons Consideration at FBC

The leadership structure at FBC is modeled after the New Testament church. In this model, the office of elder is clearly prescribed by Paul as an expected office in each church. The office of deacon, on the other hand, does not seem to be universally prescribed in Scripture, but instead, is established in churches as there is need for oversight of ministries that meet physical needs. Up to this point in FBC's history, we have fulfilled this oversight role in various ways but often not consistently or comprehensively.

Over the past several years, the elders have addressed this missing element in our ministry by considering the doctrine and application of deacons at FBC. The topic has been considered several times over the past decade but has been examined in more depth since the elder's retreat in late 1999. With study, prayer and much discussion, the elders have been working since that time to develop an approach that is Biblically based, practical and inclusive.

One of the elements in this process has been the involvement of the Advisory Council (previous elders). Since the addition of deacons to our church will require a constitutional change, the Advisory Council is required to be involved. Through their insight and input, some concern areas were raised: clarity around the role of women as deacons, inclusiveness of people currently serving to meet physical needs and avoidance of additional bureaucracy in the church. These concern areas were further studied, discussed and prayed over. The following sections seek to address these concern areas along with other deacon doctrinal questions and describe the conclusions we've come to on how to add deacons to our ministry.

Questions and Issues Relating to Deacons

Is there a Biblical office of Deacon?

We believe the answer is yes although the New Testament does not provide an abundance of material on the subject of the office of deacon in the local church. Taking the New Testament Greek word from which the word deacon is derived gives an indication of the function of the deacon. The root word *diakoneo* means "to serve" or "to minister" and can carry the idea of waiting on tables. The particular word *diakonia* is a nominative form and refers to service. Although the word *diakonos*, meaning servant or minister, does occur numerous times in the New

Testament, the more technical idea of “deacon” is limited in its appearance. The 3 passages that use the word in a reference to the office of deacon are: Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8-13; and Acts 6:1-6. There are some who might question the inclusion of the Acts passage as one that addresses the office of deacon. For our purposes, however, we will assume that it does speak to the issue and that there are principles that can be drawn from the pattern of the church in Jerusalem.

We choose to use the term office because the New Testament does indicate that the role of deacon was recognized as a designated role within the church that set it apart from the general idea of ministry. In his salutation to the church at Philippi, Paul addresses his greeting as follows:

“ . . . to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.” Phil. 1:1

The letter is addressed to all the saints, but then he specifically includes two groups, the overseers, or elders, and the deacons. Paul recognizes a distinct group that is functioning within the church at Philippi, and he designates them as deacons. This is in harmony with the other specific group that is singled out, the overseers. Because they are addressed apart from the general greeting to the saints, we believe it would be right to assume that Paul is addressing those who hold a particular office in the church, either elder or deacon.

The idea of two offices presented in Philippians 1 is strengthened when we compare that idea to the teaching of 1 Timothy 3. There would be no debate that Paul has established the office of overseer or elder. This was the normative pattern for church government that Paul employed. In his letter to Timothy, he details the qualifications that are necessary for individuals to hold such an office of leadership. We know that elders had been appointed to serve at the church in Ephesus from the account in Acts 20. That generation of elders needed to be replaced or complemented by others, and so Paul was providing Timothy with instructions on the appointment and needed qualification for such individuals.

In verse eight Paul turns his attention to the role of a deacon. He proceeds to lay out the needed qualifications for an individual to serve in this capacity. One major difference between the qualifications of elder and deacon is that of being apt to teach. The role of elder seems to have been one that involved communication of the Scripture. By placing these two in parallel, we believe that they are distinct roles within the church. Because the elder is an official within the church, it is natural that the deacon be considered likewise but with a different function.

Paul also adds that those who serve well as deacons will be rewarded. This is not speaking of rewards in general but is specified to those who serve as deacons. This seems to give credence to the status of deacon as an office.

What is the role of deacons?

The Pauline passages do not give any information regarding the nature of the office. Paul does not give instructions on the function of deacons. His assumption is that the church knows what the job description entails. If we utilize the Acts 6 passage to help us understand the role of deacons, we can draw out some conclusions that give us direction in defining function.

The problem that the church at Jerusalem experienced was the neglect of Hellenized Jewish widows. The neglect probably was the fruit of prejudiced hearts. The Jews that had assimilated the Greek culture were held in low regard by those who had maintained their Jewish distinctiveness. The church consisted primarily of Jews who had believed that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah and that he had both died and been raised again to life. As that message was proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit, the church exploded in growth. Thousands believed the message proclaimed by the apostles. But this group within the church was lacking the care that was needed. When this problem was brought to the attention of the apostles they charged the congregation with appointing a group of men who would be able to manage this care ministry of the church. This care ministry was a mark of fellowship in the early church.

The apostles who were functioning as elders in the early church recognized that a priority of ministry had been placed upon them. They were to be devoted to the ministry of the word and to prayer (vs.4). But the need of the widows was a real need that demanded attention. In order not to neglect their primary responsibility and yet meet the need, they chose to delegate the administration of this task to qualified men. They were to be men that were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, and also possessing a good reputation. These men were to oversee the care of this group of widows. It is interesting to note that the men who were chosen were themselves Hellenistic Jews. They were men familiar with the particular needs of this group. They would know the cultural needs, the outlook on life that was common, and the challenges of living within the city of Jerusalem. It is these men who supervised the “waiting on tables” or *diakonein*.

It is this assignment in Acts 6 that seems to give rise to a group within the church who are designated as deacons. Their function was to assist the elders in the care ministry of the Christian community. The mark of community was a testimony of the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and thus must not be neglected. After having been approved by the apostles/elders, they were officially commissioned into their ministry by the laying on of hands. This official recognition also lends itself to the argument for designating the role of the deacon as an office.

Although the scope of information on deacons in the New Testament is limited, we draw the following conclusions from the preceding discussion and the three biblical passages.

1. There is an office in the church that can be described as deacons.
2. Although it can be assigned the status of an office, the office of deacon is not essential to the church. It is an office that is designated and organized on the basis of need. The office did not exist in the church at Jerusalem until the need arose. In his instructions to Titus, Paul directed him to set things in order in the church at Crete and to appoint elders. He does not mention deacons, and although there is a parallel to 1 Timothy in the qualifications for elders, there is no parallel for deacons. The pattern of church planting in the book of Acts includes the appointment of elders but not deacons (Acts 14:23).
3. Deacons are appointed to oversee the care within the community of faith. They are “ministers of mercy” who serve under the authority of the elders of the church. They are a designated group who must meet spiritual qualifications because of the nature of their work and accountability within the household of faith.

Can deacons be women?

An interpretive issue arises when considering the qualifications of deacons in 1 Timothy 3. It is an issue that carries with it practical considerations as well. The issue in question is the interpretation of women in verse 11. Should the term *gunaikas* be understood as referring to “wives” or to an office of “deaconess?” We recognize that there is no consensus among interpreters. The varying translations certainly indicate such. In recognizing the different conclusions, we also readily admit that it would be difficult to be dogmatic in any conclusion that we might come to.

The argument for understanding the term as deaconess is made primarily on two lines of evidence:

- 1.) The parallel use of the term “likewise” in the 1 Timothy 3 passage. In verse 8 there is a transition from elder to deacon that uses the term *hosautos*. In verse 11 the same transitional word, translated “likewise,” is applied to the class of individuals called *gunaikas*. Because of this parallel structure, some argue that Paul is referring to an office for deaconess. Thus, the word *gunaikas* is to be understood in its general usage and meaning, simply “women” and thus “women deacons”.
- 2.) In his letter to the Romans, Paul refers to an individual named Phoebe, whom he calls a “servant” of the church in Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1). The word translated “servant” is *diakonon*. It might be assumed that Phoebe is an example of the woman of 1 Timothy 3:11. The commendation of this faithful woman as a helper and worthy of being received can be seen as the outworking of the commendation of deacons that Paul speaks of in 1 Timothy 3:13.

In favor of understanding the word *gunaikas* as referring to wives consideration is given to the following:

- 1.) The normative use of the term is women or wives. If Paul had wanted to communicate the idea of a deaconess, he could have specified it with the use of a more particular word or term.
- 2.) It is a strange place for the parallel argument since Paul then immediately returns to the subject of the male deacon by stating that the deacon is to be the husband of one wife.
- 3.) The characteristics that are given in 1 Timothy are masculine in form and application.
- 4.) If the Acts 6 passage is applied to the office of deacon, Luke chooses the word *andros* when the church is instructed to choose seven qualified individuals. The use of this word is clearly intended to speak of a male as opposed to the more generic word *anthropos*.
- 5.) Although it might be asked why there is no qualification given for the wife of the elder, we believe it is best answered on the basis of the function of each office. The role of the elder is more proclamational and judicial, whereas the function of deacons is primarily relational.

After carefully considering these alternative interpretations, we believe preference should be given to understanding the normative use for interpreting 1 Timothy 3:11. This then leads us to the conclusion that deacons are to be men. This in no way is to limit the role of women in the ministry of the church and in particular the care ministry. Obviously, by the inclusion of the qualification given in verse 11, it must certainly be inferred that women are indeed involved in this ministry and provide a valuable element to the care of the community of faith. We have intentionally left open the details of the organization of the deacons so as to neither violate the interpretation of the passage, nor override the intention to have women contribute gifts, skills and Christlike character in a ministry of mercy.

How will deacons be structured at FBC?

As there is limited Biblical information around the structure of the office of deacons, we believe there is wide discretion as to precisely how they are administered, how many there should be, and the specifics of the roles they play with other caring ministries. Because of this openness, we will give the deacons wide latitude in working with the caring ministries to develop the most effective structure.

Can't we have a caring ministry without deacons?

Yes, and in fact we already do. The deacons will simply provide the oversight to help ensure that people with needs don't fall through the cracks and that various ministries are coordinated. Some churches have worked around the issue of deacons by calling their role something different like "Care Leaders" or the "Stephens Ministry". We believe that this particular office of deacons is called out in Scripture and so should not be called something different simply as a "work around" to avoid difficult questions.

Conclusion

We are excited about the direction God is leading FBC in regards to deacons. Although a number of issues and questions arise with the careful consideration of this topic, we trust this paper has helped explain how we have come to our specific conclusions. We realize, however, that some in our fellowship may still disagree on particular points. That's OK. We don't expect a unanimous opinion on every topic

like this. We do hope, though, that you're looking forward to how God will use this ministry to more effectively care for our church family. We also trust you're anticipating the enhanced impact of our church on our unbelieving neighbors as they see us continue to reach out in love to those in our body who are in need. As Jesus said in John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."