

**On Behalf of Deacons**  
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What do you think when you hear the word, “deacon”? In various preaching venues in convention life, it seems to have become regrettably fashionable in recent years to caricature deacons in negative terms in anecdotes or jokes. Although these stories or jokes about deacons are usually said at least partially in jest, they often stereotype deacons as being wrong-headed, stubborn, difficult to work with, and unspiritual. A church’s deacons are sometimes presented as being resistant to God’s plan (or the pastor’s plan) for the church and as obstacles to progress. One formerly Baptist college has even made “Demon Deacons” its mascot!

Perhaps my experience is limited, but I’ve never experienced a demonic deacon. Deacons aren’t perfect, of course. I have experienced very human deacons who had strengths and weaknesses, just as do we all. I have experienced deacons whose convictions or judgment differed on some issues from that of their pastor. I have seen some deacon fellowships become more like of a board of directors, losing the focus on servanthood that the office was originally created to be. In rare cases, I have seen deacons who so disagreed strongly with the pastor’s leadership (or they were called upon to voice the disagreement with the pastor or staff by a significant segment of the congregation), that they forced a confrontation that led to the forced termination of the pastor’s employment or a split in the church fellowship. But overwhelmingly, I have found deacons to be devout and dedicated Christian men who want the very best for the church and for God’s kingdom.

Deacons Are a Scriptural Office

I would like to suggest two reasons that I think we should be cautious about stereotyping deacons in a negative light. First, the office of deacon was not a human invention. The office of deacon was created by God to meet a genuine need within the church (Acts 6:1-8). Some younger ministers, responding to “horror stories” about “demon deacons” have replaced the role of deacons with elders. However, this is inconsistent with Scripture, with Baptist ecclesiology and doctrinal confessions, and with the historic practice of Baptist churches. In Scripture, we see that the office of deacon is one of two valid offices created in the New Testament church (1 Tim. 3:1-13). Pastors, bishops, and elders are synonymous for the same office in Scripture (Titus 1: 6-7, 1 Pet. 5:1-3).

Although some currently debate the role of elders in Baptist life, *all* the major confessions in Baptist history identify two offices in a New Testament church. The first office is known variously as pastor, bishop, or elder, and the second office is that of deacon. The 1925 Baptist Faith and Message echoes the language of the earlier Philadelphia Confession of 1742 in identifying the two scriptural offices as “bishops, or elders, and deacons.” The subsequent 1963 and 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message*

statements omit reference to elders altogether, referring to just two scriptural offices, “pastors and deacons.”

What is affirmed in Scripture and in Baptist confessions has been consistently practiced in Baptist churches. My first full-time pastorate was in a historic Texas church which still had its church Minutes going back into the 1880s, when this area was on the edge of the frontier. Circuit-riding bivocational preachers or pastors (often called elders) filled the pulpit on alternating weeks for two or three churches. While many churches today utilize multiple persons in pastoral staff roles (sometimes called a plurality of elders), churches who replace deacons with elders have departed from Baptist ecclesiology.

If the office of deacon is created by God, we should be very cautious to “raise a hand against the Lord’s anointed” (1 Sam. 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam. 1:14, 16; 19:21). Just as Scripture protects the office of pastor against rumor mongers (1 Tim. 5:19-20), we should likewise recognize the sanctity of the office of deacon. Even if the *person* in the office has made mistakes, we should be careful not to diminish the *office* of deacon. We should be careful that criticism or concerns about a deacon (or a deacon fellowship) that does not live up to the highest Christian ideals does not diminish the role of deacon in the eyes of the congregation. (We should do the same when a pastor or church staff member disqualifies himself from service).

### Deacons Are Trusted Church Leaders

Deacons are respected Christian leaders in their congregation. The reason that the church chose them as deacons is that the people already had great confidence and respect for these men. How did these men come to be respected in their churches? Because of their long record of faithfulness in the church. Because of their good reputation in the community. Because they ministered to families in the church at a time of crisis. Because they were there when people needed them. Because the church respected them as being among the most outstanding Christian examples in the church.

There are two kinds of respect and authority – we respect persons in *positional authority* because of the position that they hold; we respect persons in *personal or earned authority* because they have demonstrated that we can trust them to do something effectively. Most deacons are elected to *positional authority* (the office of deacon) because they already achieved *earned authority* through their faithful service in the church. Deacons tend to have longer terms of service in a particular church than do pastors or other staff members. Deacons therefore often minister in a congregation before a pastor or church staff member arrives, and continue to do so after he leaves. The “staying power” of deacons in faithful service increases the earned authority that the congregation invests in them.

If deacons are acknowledged leaders who have already earned the respect of their congregation, why would a church staff work around or against the deacons? Getting the “buy in” of the deacons is a crucial step in achieving the approval of the congregation as a whole. Deacons can be a great help rather than a hindrance in accomplishing the work

of the church. While deacons should not be an administrative board of directors, they are a valuable sounding board for the church staff regarding where the laity of the church are on an issue.

Pastors and staff should consult the deacons before major decisions not so much for their approval as for their “buy-in” and affirmation of the proposed initiatives. Presenting new initiatives to the deacons before doing so to the full congregation provides a valuable feedback loop for the church staff. The wise pastor will hear the concerns and questions of the deacons, and make any needed adjustments to respond to these concerns before it is presented to the full church, and thus help accomplish the work of the church with a greater sense of unity and consensus. This approach may take a little more time, but having the deacons “on board” will go a long way toward the approval of the church as a whole.

Let’s lift up our deacons rather than put them down. Let us honor the office of deacon and the men who serve in that office in the way that pleases God and that Scripture requires!

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