

DEACONS: THE SERVANTS FOR THE MINISTRY // Acts 6:1-7; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8-13

Message from the series, Polity: Church Structures in Baptist Life

Now is a good time to assess the role of deacons at Coats Baptist. We never want to wait until we are in crisis to consider what changes might need to be undertaken. We can be proactive rather than reactive. Over the last many years, pastors and personalities have changed, but our polity and processes have not—which means that the pump is primed for problems. Polity shapes ministry, and it also shapes souls.

1. Biblical Material

The term deacon is used only four times over two passages (Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13), with an additional implicit description of the role in Acts 6. **What do deacons do?** In short, they serve. The term is from a transliteration of the Greek word *diakonos*, which means servant. The related term *diakoneō* is the verb “to serve” and is used over 30 times in the New Testament. If pastors serve by leading, then deacons lead by serving. Deacons are practically focused, but spiritually aware, while pastors are spiritually focused but practically aware.

How do deacons serve? There are three views, each related to one of the passages of scripture:

1. Assistants to elders (Philippians 1:1). We should note that deacons are not second-rate or JV elders, but the passage from Philippians suggests that they may serve as assistants to elders.
2. Benevolent servants of the local church (Acts 6: 1-7). Although the word *diakonos* is not used in this passage, we see the same word grouping and the same qualifications mentioned, so a strong argument can be made that this passage describes the origin of the office of deacon. Here we may see a “deacon family ministry” role with the goal of meeting needs.
3. A practical help to the ministry (1 Timothy 3: 8-13). This passage seems to emphasize a “ministry-focused” approach. Deacons are appointed to serve with a particular skill set or gifting in mind.

There is some ambiguity in the role of the deacon, perhaps intentionally. Unlike the parameters around what elders do (teach, lead, and shepherd), there is more flexibility in the tasks that a deacon might take on—they are generalists who can tailor their ministry around their giftings and the church’s need. Ultimately, however, like elders, deacons are called to live exemplary Christian lives—character is king.

2. Current Reality

The current reality of the diaconate at Coats Baptist is directly tied to the fact that we don't have elders. Without a Biblical model of eldership, we cannot have Biblical deacons. Three observations:

1. We have godly, over-qualified men serving as deacons. We are an overstocked pond.
2. We have elders in role, but deacons in name. This is a reactionary result of past history in which deacons have had to step up to handle the "cracks and crises." Good men trump good polity, but a hybrid model has developed in which our deacons may not look like the New Testament definition of deacons.
3. We have possibly too many deacons. We currently have 18 deacons, down from 24 recently. Although the New Testament specifies no set number, this seems high, given our current attendance. This high deacon count, however, is the result of other trends, primarily the outsourcing of the responsibilities of elders. The SBC promoted the concept of deacon family ministry in the 1990s, and we can see now that that was a way for deacons to compensate for a lack of eldership by taking on the shepherding role, in addition to the overseer role as they functioned as a deliberative body.

Three results: 1) We don't have true deacons. 2) We have two deliberative bodies. 3) We are set up to blow up.

3. Remedial Suggestions

1. Re-evaluate the deacon role and responsibilities. This is something that would have to come after eldership is established.
2. Re-evaluate the deacon-selection process. There is no shape for the deacons together, no direction for them serve. The deacons are already working on revamping the selection process.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do the Biblical passages on deacons reveal the role deacons are to play in the church? How does this compare to the current reality at CBC?
2. What is the relationship between the congregation, eldership, and the diaconate? How are these various roles meant to work together?
3. What steps might the church consider taking on polity and why does the order matter?