

THE PRESBYTERIAN
DEACON
AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE

Earl S. Johnson, Jr.

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Contents

<i>Preface to the Second Edition</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1. The Biblical Background	5
2. Deacons in the Reformed Tradition and the Presbyterian Church	13
3. Who Are the Deacons and What Do They Do?	23
4. Ordination Questions	43
5. <i>Book of Confessions</i>	51
6. The Call for Creative Diaconal Ministry in the Twenty-First Century and Beyond	61
<i>Appendix: A Litany for the Recognition of Deacons</i>	73
<i>Glossary</i>	79
<i>For Further Study</i>	83

Preface to the Second Edition

Since the editors of Geneva Press originally asked me to write an introduction to the work of the deacons in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2000, a great many changes have taken place in the church as a whole and in our denomination in particular.

In the summer of 2011, for example, the General Assembly, after the requisite endorsement of the majority of presbyteries, approved a new *Book of Order* that created revised standards for ordained ministry (called “ordered ministry”). Not only was the title “minister” changed to “teaching elder,” but the church decided to endow our constitution with “a new openness to God’s mission in the world” (F-1.0404), a new energy, and a new flexibility that all make it possible “to see both the possibilities and perils of institutional form in order to ensure the faithfulness of these forms to God’s activity in the world.” Those who want to see a more detailed exploration of what being a

church leader means today (and in the future) can see my book *Selected to Serve: A Guide for Church Leaders*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2012).

As a consequence, the description of the work of the deacons has been considerably abbreviated (G-2.02), and many of the previous guidelines are gone. Some of them have been absorbed into directives about what teaching elders, ruling elders, and deacons all should do (see G-2.04 for example).

In many ways this reduction is healthy and necessary for the future work of deacons in our denomination. Most Presbyterians know how much the church and our culture have changed in the last few years. Many congregations are struggling to survive. All our churches are working to figure out what the meaning of ministry must be in the future in order to continue to witness to Jesus Christ and provide service in his name to coming generations that may not value Presbyterianism and previous styles of worship as much as their predecessors did. The fact that deacons have a shorter job description gives us the flexibility we need to respond to new opportunities and challenges and forces us to assess our weaknesses as well as our strengths. But it also makes us more and more dependent on the Holy Spirit to guide us and give us creativity, insight, and perspicacity to try, discard, and strengthen new types of diaconal and pastoral ministries.

It is necessary to mention another significant alteration in our polity that potentially influences the work of deacons. In 2011, after years of discussion and debate that began in

1973, the church decided to permit the ordination of gays and lesbians as deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders. Since all Presbyterians, regardless of sexual orientation, are now eligible to serve in ordered ministry, some congregations may discover that many men and women, once disqualified, are now available to use their gifts. It is to be hoped that their presence will enrich Christ's work, not only in the local church family but in the whole community in which the congregation resides.

Writing a second edition of guidelines for deacons is a welcome challenge since it calls us all to look afresh at an important part of our ministry together and think carefully and prayerfully about what it must become while keeping in mind, at the same time, the deep biblical and historical roots of diaconal ministry. Therefore with one foot in the past and the other in the future, let us step boldly into this new adventure, confident that God will lead us wherever we need to go. I explore some of the new possibilities for ministry in detail in the last chapter.

As discussed at the beginning of the first edition, we are endeavoring to strengthen a ministry that is first in the church in many ways:

- the first ordered ministry many church members assume;
- the first major commitment they make to the work of the wider church; and
- the first organized experience they have in taking part in the caring work of the congregation.

This book has been kept short deliberately in order to make it as useful as possible. A new deacon should be able to read it in one or two sittings to get a quick overview of the responsibilities now and a foretaste of what may be required in the years ahead. Those who have been deacons for some time will also find it useful as it explores the implications of a diaconal ministry based on a new, more flexible church polity.

Earl S. Johnson, Jr.
Johnstown, New York
September 2012

UPDATE TO SECOND EDITION

This revision reflects changes in the Constitution, particularly in the Directory for Worship and the *Book of Confessions*. The Directory was rewritten, and the Belhar Confession was added in 2016. In addition, the title “teaching elder” was changed back to “minister of the Word and Sacrament.”

Earl S. Johnson, Jr.
April 2020

Introduction

*F*or those who love people and want to follow in the ministry of Jesus Christ, there is no better office to assume than that of deacon in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As the *Book of Order* puts it, “The ministry of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress. Persons of spiritual character, honest repute, exemplary lives, brotherly and sisterly love, sincere compassion, and sound judgment should be chosen for this ministry.”

Traditionally, deacons are people persons. Their hearts go out to those in distress: to members who have suffered loss; to neighbors in the hospital; to friends who have lost their jobs; to new parents who are confused by a wonderful, sudden, and challenging change in the responsibilities of life; to new members who need a word of welcome; to

2 The Presbyterian Deacon

members who are shut in and lonely and cannot leave their homes; to people in the community who have lost their way and can no longer find God; to those who are economically oppressed and do not have adequate places to live or enough to eat; to those suffering from natural disasters or the ravages of war; to any people who need to experience the love of Christ in concrete ways.

Clearly deacons are not the only Presbyterians who provide these ministries of sympathy and caring. All Christians are charged to love their neighbors and care for one another. But the deacons provide an *organized* way of bringing the love of Jesus Christ to the church and the community. Deacons, by assisting the pastor(s) in pastoral care, by working closely with the session to bring justice to the village, town, or city in which they live, by taking seriously the admonition to love one another from the heart (1 Pet. 1:22), fulfill the command of Jesus to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12) in ways for the whole world to experience and see.

The *Book of Order* makes it clear that deacons do more than provide simple acts of caring and concern, as important as they are in a rushed and frantic society. The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) calls the whole church, and especially the deacons, to go beyond giving love merely to those we know, or those who ask for help, but to become “a community of hope,” “a community of love,” and “a community of witness” to the whole world (F-1.0301). If being compassionate goes beyond loving those who love

us, or who are related to us, to the showing of a deep, sympathizing love to all the children of God, then it calls deacons to the kind of love described in the New Testament as *agape* (Matt. 24:12; Luke 11:42; John 13:35; 15:9; Rom. 5:5; 8:39), to the love we see in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This love puts the other first and wants to serve rather than be served (Mark 10:45). It gives totally of itself, beyond all measure or asking. The love of Christ in us is the highest and greatest of all—patient, open, trustworthy, hopeful, enduring, and being so grounded finally in the plan of God. It can even be called eternal (1 Cor. 13), because it is of God (1 John 4:7–12).

This book is itself a work of love. It has been my privilege to work with deacons in four different churches in New York State, and I have learned to appreciate their open hearts, their willingness to dirty their hands, their high sense of calling, and their warm and friendly smiles. It is to the deacons in West Charlton, Plattsburgh, Pittsford, and Johnstown that I dedicate this book, with thanks for all they have taught and given me.

For new deacons, for those who are working to energize the work of the diaconate in their church, or for those who are considering the call to become a deacon, I hope that the enthusiasm I feel for this important work of compassion, witness, and service will be catching. Now is not a time to become discouraged or disheartened about deacons' work, when the world so desperately needs more, not fewer, acts of love in the name of Jesus Christ. God definitely calls us

through the agency of the Holy Spirit to a ministry of service, caring, and justice. Let us open our hearts and minds to respond to the call when it comes our way, knowing that all things are possible in the grace of God and the love of Jesus. May all of us be re-rooted in Christ's love so that the Spirit will enable us to comprehend how much power is available to "accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:17–21).

Chapter 1

The Biblical Background

After the positions of apostle and elder, the ordered ministry of deacon was one of the first ones established by the New Testament church. According to Acts 6, the early Christians faced an enviable problem of church growth. Disciples were increasing in number, and the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Christians, in contrast to those who came from an Aramaic or Hebrew background) complained that their people were being shortchanged in a ministry that had been established to distribute food. The twelve disciples of Jesus (by this time Judas Iscariot had been replaced by Matthias; see Acts 1:23–26) called a meeting of the church leaders, and it was decided that a new group of seven should be chosen to “wait on tables” (*diakonein trapezais*) so that the others could continue in the work of preaching and praying. It is not a coincidence that all of the first deacons (*diakonoi*) had Greek names. Obviously it was true

already in the first century: if you complain, you get the job! The fact that the leader of the initial group of deacons (Stephen) was stoned to death for teaching and preaching demonstrates that at the start the church had more in mind for them than menial tasks.

It is an interesting phenomenon that the early church decided to give one of its most important groups of church officers a mundane, commonplace name. In the modern world we would no doubt want people to feel important in their new position and give them a dignified title, something like Social Service Provider or Caring Minister. But the church chose the title *diakonos*, which, in its most literal sense, means a person who serves food to other people in a home or a restaurant, perhaps even akin to “slave.” Since their duties required them to meet the needs of others, even washing the feet of travelers, it was not always the most enviable of jobs.

Why did the early church choose such a humble title for their new leaders? Obviously they took it from the ministry and example of Jesus Christ, who taught his disciples that if anyone wants to be first in the kingdom of God, he or she has to be the servant of all (Mark 9:35). Jesus followed the example of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, the one who would be exalted and lifted up (Isa. 52:13) by being wounded for the transgressions of others (Isa. 53). This servant Jesus knew was not a sycophant, or one who curried the favor of others to get ahead, but the afflicted one who bore the sin of many.

It is one in whom God delights, and because God's Spirit is in him, or her, brings forth justice to the nations (Isa. 42:1). The servant of the Lord does not call attention to himself or herself, but to God who has commanded the service:

You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior. (Isa. 43:10–11)

The Gospels tell us repeatedly that Jesus called attention to the exalted status that comes from service:

- Those who want to be great among you must be your servant. (Mark 10:43, au. paraphr.)
- “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)
- Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, God will honor. (John 12:26, au. paraphr.)
- “Servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.” (John 13:16; see Matt. 10:24; Luke 6:40)

The earliest written reference in the New Testament to the ordered ministry of deacons (*diaconoi*) is found in Phil. 1:1 where Paul greets them with the bishops (*episkopoi*). A later writer (1 Tim. 3:8–13) provides the first list of personal

qualifications that were required of deacons. They must do the following:

- Be tested by the church.
- Be bold in faith, holding fast to the mystery of faith.
- Be good managers of their own households (see the requirements for bishops: 3:4–5).
- Be capable of sustaining long-term relationships.
- Be committed and serious minded.
- Be honest, not double-tongued.
- Have no addictive personality traits, “not indulging in much wine” (see a more detailed discussion of all these requirements in chapter 3).

In return, the deacons will receive at least two major rewards:

- good standing for themselves and meaningful service and
- the privilege of following Jesus’ example (see G-3.0102).

Throughout the New Testament, service to God (*diakonia*) is considered to be a central characteristic of those dedicated to being Jesus’ disciples. Paul indicates that beyond the fact that Stephen was one of the first deacons, his whole family “devoted themselves to the service of the saints” (1 Cor. 16:15). For the early Christians, several spiritual

traits were all bound together: “love, faith, service, and patient endurance” (Rev. 2:19). As Paul puts it in a well-known passage in 1 Cor. 12:4–6, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” The different gifts (*charismata*), services (*diakoniōn*), and action items (*energēmatōn*) all provide energy, enthusiasm, and power for the church “for the common good.” Deacons and other leaders are not called to suit themselves or to make themselves look good, but only to serve the Lord and the unity of the one church, for the purpose of interpreting the faith, healing the sick, prophesying, or providing spiritual discernment. God appoints different people to perform various tasks within the church (see a list in 1 Cor. 12:27–31), but the things they have in common are orders from the same God and the same desire to serve the body of Christ. Service is a characteristic not just of the deacon but of the apostle (Rom. 11:13; 2 Cor. 4:1; 6:3–4; Acts 1:17, 25), the evangelist, or the mission worker (2 Tim. 4:5), and even angels (Heb. 1:14: “Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”). It is a requirement of anyone who follows Jesus.

Although the admonition given to one Archippus in Col. 4:17 could apply to us all—“See that you complete the task [literally *service*] that you have received in the Lord”—the

work given by God through Jesus Christ was not considered by the first Christians to be an onerous chore. It was a “ministry” (NRSV; in Greek, *diaconia*) “of the Spirit come in glory,” “a ministry of justification [righteousness] bound in glory” (2 Cor. 3:7–11), a ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18–19), a ministry of generosity to the saints (2 Cor. 9:1, 12–13); it was, above all, a service of love, for indeed love is the highest of all the duties and gifts that God bestows (1 Cor. 13:13). Deacons may do a variety of things in many different congregations, but if they are not filled with the greatest gift to serve the greatest God, then they and their ministry will probably amount to nothing. Paul urges us all to pursue our callings with the utmost of energy and compassion. Let us use our gifts according to the grace given to us: prophecy in proportion to our faith; teaching in relation to our ability to teach; preaching in sermon delivery; giving and stewardship in generosity; ministry (*diakonian*) in serving (*diakonia*); and giving mercy and forgiveness in the absolute cheerfulness and abandonment of love (Rom. 12:6–8).

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. Read Acts 6:1–7. Can you see how the distribution of food to the hungry is to be considered an act of love given by God? What are the qualities that the disciples looked for in the first deacons? What does it mean to be “of good

standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (v. 3)? Do you see some of these traits in the members of your board of deacons?

2. Look at the qualifications required for deacons in 1 Tim. 3:8–13. Do you have all eight of them? Are there any you have to work on? Do you need to ask God to give you some of them?

3. What is meant in 1 Pet. 4:11 where it says that “whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ?” Is God strengthening you in your ministry as a deacon? Can you feel God’s power in the life of your church? What can you do as deacons where the congregation’s ministry is weak?