

Introduction

What is a deacon? Someone whose principle task is to provide benevolent support for members of the congregation in their times of special need? Someone who plays a “leading” role in attending all worship, study, and fellowship events in the life of the congregation? Someone who by word and deed models and demonstrates the fruits of the spirit as listed in Galatians 5:22-23 as that person interacts with the pastor and with members of the congregation?

Or is the deacon someone who seeks primarily to exercise an oversight role where the activities of the pastor and the general administration of the church are concerned? Many boards of deacons seem to view themselves as a board of directors who meet to approve programs and establish policies. This seems to be the case even if the majority of the members of that board do not attend one night of the church’s annual revival service, or one day of Vacation Bible School, and even if they seldom attend a funeral service—not even for long-standing and active members of the congregation.

This lack of clarity about the appropriate roles and responsibilities of deacons can result in tensions and conflicts that can have a negative effect on the congregation in which they are serving. When deacons see themselves as being there to serve the spiritual and benevolent needs of the congregation, and when they see themselves as fulfilling that role in partnership with the

pastor of that congregation there should be no problem. On the other hand, when deacons set aside their role as servants of the church and adopt instead the role of supervisor or “boss of the pastor” the stage is being set for a power struggle that has the potential of diverting the entire congregation away from the work of ministry that should be its primary focus.

Our understanding of the role and responsibilities of the deacon in the Baptist church in general, and in the black Baptist church in particular, has come to a critical crossroad. Enough contentious business meetings have been held, the tone of which could have been avoided if there had been in that meeting a clear understanding on the part of everyone present as to the precise role of deacons in the Baptist church. Enough congregations have become divided, enough pastors have been dismissed or chosen to resign, and enough deacons have been removed from their positions as a result of there not being an agreed upon view in those churches of what is the role and work of deacons in that church.

Corporate Models and Baptist Church Dynamics

Many deacons and other lay leaders in Baptist churches generally and black Baptist churches in particular come to their understanding of their role by looking at how relationships work in the secular work setting. Relationships between employers and employees, supervisors and policy-makers on the job get carried over into our understandings of how the church should operate. When the governance structures and work-place relationships are imported from secular institutions into the life of the church, there comes the belief that the pastor is “the employee” of the congregation rather than its spiritual and operational leader, and that the deacons’ chief responsibility is to oversee and supervise all pastoral activities and initiatives.

People who hold jobs such as school principal or administrator, department manager, section leader, or corporate executive will spend every day of their working lives navigating the terri-

tory of power and position, mindful of who is accountable and answerable to whom. When that same person becomes a member of the church deacon board, they are inclined to bring with them that same corporate mentality. The question is whether that corporate approach is useful or appropriate when it comes to church governance in general and to the relationship between pastors and deacons in particular.

Not surprisingly, as more and more African Americans move into positions of ownership, supervision, and authority on the job, much of that ethos of corporate organizational life filters into the understanding of the roles they may play in the life of their churches. Using such a corporate model, today's deacons may approach the role as one of oversight, accountability, and even approval in relation to pastoral decisions and initiative. A key purpose of this book is to consider the role of the deacon as it was formulated in Scripture and as it has evolved in history, and thus determine the most appropriate and advantageous relationship between deacon and pastor and between deacon and congregation. What does the ministry of deacons entail? How should the church identify candidates for deacon? What qualities are required or recommended for a deacon? What was the biblical purpose for the office of the deacon? How has the historical context of being black and Baptist in America influenced the evolution of that office? How do we fulfill the scriptural purposes of a deacon ministry in our local black Baptist churches today? These are among the questions this book will seek to address.

Chapter 1 will trace the office of deacon to its origins in Acts 6:1-7. It will show the Greek word for deacon is used in a verb form to suggest an action that should be taken and not a noun form that would suggest a position to be assumed or a title to be held. More importantly, that position will be shown to be one of service rendered and not supervision over the service of others. Chapter 1 will also seek to point out the relationship between the first deacons and the original twelve apostles who ordained the deacons and assigned them to their position. That

will lay the foundation for how pastors and deacons should work together today.

In Chapter 2 attention will be given to 1 Timothy 3:8-13, which is the other biblical passage that offers an in-depth look at the role and responsibilities of the deacon. When considered alongside Acts 6:1-7, this passage establishes the deacon as one of only two offices in the church with roots in the Bible (the second office being the preacher or pastor). These two passages not only describe the qualities and characteristics desirable for anyone who is named to become a deacon, but they also describe a working relationship that can safeguard against the influence of corporate models or cultural traditions serving as the basis for deciding on the duties of the deacon.

In Chapter 3 the focus will be on how the role of the deacon has evolved from its biblical origins to how it is understood and practiced in today's Baptist church in general and in the black Baptist church in particular.

Chapter 4 will suggest essential components of a training program for prospective deacons. Such a program could also be used as the basis for a continuing education for persons already serving as deacons in local churches. This chapter is not intended to set out a required curriculum for use in every church. Rather, it offers broad areas of activity and responsibility of which every new deacon should be made aware, including the ordination or installation process by which a trial deacon is established as a full member of the board of deacons. It will also urge local churches to be sure to introduce new deacons to any expectations about the office that may be unique to that particular, autonomous Baptist congregation.

Chapter 5 will break new ground concerning the role of deacons in the black Baptist church. It will consider what the Bible does and does not say about women serving as deacons, giving attention to 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 to determine if Paul's injunctions concerning women's roles in the first-century church should be maintained in today's black

Baptist church. Attention will also be given to Romans 16:1-2, where Paul refers to Phoebe using the title *diakonos*.

Chapter 6 offers a detailed look at how one black Baptist church came to the decision to ordain women as deacons. It will also point out some of the consequences that can result when churches do proceed with choosing women to serve in this position, especially as it concerns interchurch fellowship.

Chapter 7 focuses on insights gleaned from a nationwide survey that was conducted as part of this study to determine how the work of the deacon is understood in 44 congregations across the country. These survey results will offer a fairly clear glimpse into the work of deacons in the twenty-first century black Baptist church.

Finally, Chapter 8 provides a series of profiles of deacons of various ages, from various churches, and with diverse life experiences. Through their voices and perceptions we will gain added insight into the roles and responsibilities of deacons in today's black Baptist church.