

{sōma}church

Elders and Deacons

In Acts 6, the Early Church was growing exponentially, as were the needs of the church. For the 1st time, leadership beyond that which the 12 Apostles could personally provide was needed. **Life was begging for structure.**

The Twelve, knowing how important their role of prayer and preaching was to the Church, instructed the people to select 7 men confirmed to be “full of the spirit and wisdom” and assigned them the practical task of distributing food to the widows of the church, resolving the very first logistical issue the church had faced. Without a doubt, there would have been other administrative tasks delegated to other spirit-filled and wise men and women, creating a vital role in the Body of Christ.

As the church grew even more and spread out from Jerusalem, two leadership roles became obvious. Elders and Deacons.

ELDERS

Men who lead by example as they oversee the health of a church

There are 3 words used to describe “Elders” used in The New Testament.

- **[presbuteros]** – Men with AGE; Men from ANTIQUITY; Men with AUTHORITY
- **[episkopos]** – Overseer; Guardian; “One who watches over”
- **[poimēn]** – Shepherd; Pastor

In **Titus 1**, The Apostle Paul commissioned his associate, Titus, to appoint Elders in every city of the area of Crete. He goes on to qualify what an Elder must be like.

Titus 1:5-9 **5**The reason I left you in Crete was that you would set in order what was unfinished and appoint **elders** in every town, as I directed you. **6**An **elder** must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, having children who are believers and who are not open to accusation of indiscretion or insubordination.

7As God’s steward, an **overseer** must be above reproach—not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not greedy for money. **8**Instead, he must be hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. **9**He must hold firmly to the faithful word as it was taught, so that he can encourage others by sound teaching and refute those who contradict it.

Acts 14 tells us that Paul and Barnabas “appointed Elders in each church” while in the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. It seems that The Apostle Paul’s pattern was to establish Elders in every church in every city.

Godly leadership became essential to the health of a church. In **Acts 20**, Paul says his final farewell to the Elders (whom he appointed) and warns them to guard the ministry.

Acts 20:28-31 **28**Keep watch over yourselves and the entire flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**. Be **shepherds** of the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood.

29I know that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. **30**Even from your own number, men will rise up and distort the truth to draw away disciples after them. **31**Therefore be alert and remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

Prophetically, Paul knew that at some point, ungodly men would become leaders and cause problems in the church. This came to pass in just a few short years. Paul eventually leaves Timothy in Ephesus as the Lead Elder/Pastor and instructs him to:

1 Timothy 1:3-19 **3**As I urged you on my departure to Macedonia, you should stay on at Ephesus to **instruct certain men not to teach false doctrines** **4**or devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculation rather than the stewardship of God’s work, which is by faith...

...**18**Timothy, my child, I entrust you with this command in keeping with the previous prophecies about you, so that by them you may fight the good fight, **19**holding on to faith and a good conscience, which **some have rejected and thereby shipwrecked their faith**.

Paul goes on to give instructions on what qualities to watch for when selecting leaders in the church, beginning with Elders.

1 Timothy 3:1-3 **1**This is a trustworthy saying: If anyone aspires to be an **overseer**, he desires a noble task. **2**An **overseer**, then, must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, **3**not dependent on wine, not violent but gentle, peaceable, and free of the love of money.

4An **overseer** must manage his own household well and keep his children under control, with complete dignity. **5**For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for the church of God? **6**He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same condemnation as the devil. **7**Furthermore, he must have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the snare of the devil.

Being selected as an Elder of a church is a great honor but comes with a fearful responsibility: overseeing the spiritual well-being and direction of the church.

According to the New Testament, the role and function of an Elder includes:

- **LEADING** - Elders are “Under-Shepherds” who discern and direct God’s people with love by feeding, caring for and guarding their souls. (*1 Pet. 5:1-4, Hebrews 13:17, John 21:15-16, Acts 20:28, 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1-2*)
- **MODELING** – Elders lead, not by “lording”, but living among the flock and setting an example of what loving Christ and loving His Church looks like. (*1 Cor. 11:1, Phil. 2:2-3, 1 Tim. 4:16, 1 Tim. 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4*)

- **PRAYING** – Elders understand they are powerless to lead God's holy people and so devote themselves to prayer and hearing the voice of The Good Shepherd (Jesus) who knows what the church needs before we even ask. (*Acts 6:4, Matthew 6:8, Philippians 4:6, James 5:14*)
- **TEACHING** – Elders are students of God's word who are able and eager to instruct God's people and provide sound doctrine. (*1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:9, 1 Timothy 4:13, 2 Timothy 3:13–17 Titus 1:9, Acts 15:6*)
- **PROTECTING** – Elders understand Spiritual Warfare and are willing and able to boldly confront and correct doctrines and behaviors that are misaligned with The Word Of God. (*Acts 20:17, 28–31, 2 Timothy 3:13–17; Titus 1:9, 1 Cor 5:1–2, 2 Peter 2:1–3, Titus 3:9–11*)
- **TRAINING** – Elders diligently identify, equip and empower Godly men who go on to effectively lead in the church. (*1 Timothy 5:22, 2 Timothy 2:2, Titus 1:5*)

On any given day, an Elder may find themselves praying for the sick, leading a group, equipping a leader, determining church policy, or confronting divisive behavior. This is why the role requires experienced wisdom and discernment and temperance. **Seasoned maturity is essential for guiding a community.** Being qualified doesn't mean being perfect, but a person must be faithful and consistent and committed to the task of "shepherding" God's people.

PASTORS

Elders are Pastors and Pastors are Elders.

1 Peter 5:1-4 **1**The **elders** [sumpresbuteros] who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow **elder** [presbuteros] and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: **2****Shepherd** [poimainó] the flock of God which is among you, serving as **overseers** [episkepeó], not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; ; **3**not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. **4**And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Acts 20:28 **28**Keep watch over yourselves and the entire flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers** [episkepeó]. Be **Shepherds** [poimén] of the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood.

Peter and Paul tell us that all elders are shepherds in the church, but most churches have at least one Elder who devotes himself full-time to the daily oversight of the church and public preaching and teaching of God's Word, most often referred to as the senior or lead pastor/elder.

Ephesians 4:11-13 **11**And it was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be **pastors** [poimén] and teachers, **12**to equip the saints for works of ministry and

to build up the body of Christ, **13**until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, as we mature to the full measure of the stature of Christ.

“Pastor” or “Shepherd” is one of the five offices given by Jesus as a gift to strengthen The Church. Because “shepherding” and “teaching” are two primary responsibilities given to Elders, some believe there are only four offices, the fourth being “Elders.” Either way, the significance of the Lead Pastor role within the church is obvious.

- Timothy seems to have been the Lead Pastor/Elder in **Ephesus**.
- James seems to have been the Lead Pastor/Elder in **Jerusalem**.
- Titus seems to have been the Lead Pastor/Elder in **Crete**.
- Jesus’ letters to the **7 Churches in The Book Of Revelation** were written to the “Messenger” or “Pastor” who was responsible to convey His message and correct the issues.

Pastors are not “presidents” or “CEOs”. They are Lead Elders who give visionary direction to the church, confirmed or clarified together with a plurality of other Elders as they work in unity to see its mission come to pass.

DEACONS

Servants who love and lead other servants within the church.

The word for Deacon in The New Testament is [**diákonos**], which simply means “servant.” Every born-again Believer is called to be a servant (Mark 9:35), but there are those who are called to serve the church by **assisting the Elders in the organization and mobilization of the congregation to do the works of ministry.**

The Bible gives very little instruction on how to deploy Deacons within the church but clearly expresses a high vision for the role.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 **8****Deacons** [**diákonos**] likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued or given to much wine or greedy for money. **9**They must hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. **10**Additionally, they must first be tested. Then, if they are above reproach, **let them serve** as deacons. [**diakoneó**]

11In the same way, the women must be dignified, not slanderers, but temperate and faithful in all things.

12**A Deacons** [**diákonos**] must be the husband of but one wife, a good manager of his children and of his own household. **13**For those who have served well as **deacons** [**diakoneó**] acquire for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

It's important to note that the transitional word “likewise” in **Vs. 8** implies that the qualifications and ultimate mission are the same for both Elders and Deacons. The only recognizable difference is that **Deacons are not required to be able to teach.**

Though the word “Deacon” is not used in **Acts 6**, this chapter of scripture gives us great insight into the role of a Deacon.

Acts 6:1-7 **1**Now in those days, when *the number of* the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. **2**Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. **3**Therefore, brethren, **seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business**; **4**but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

5And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, **6**whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

These seven men have become known as the first Deacons.

The Apostles, no doubt, remembered Jethro's admonishment to Moses in **Exodus 18**, where Moses, “*sat alone as judge with all the people standing around him from morning till evening.*” (**Vs. 14**)

Exodus 18:17-23 **17**But Moses' father-in-law said to him, “What you are doing is not good. **18**Surely you and these people with **you will wear yourselves out**, because the task is too heavy for you. You cannot handle it alone.

19Now listen to me; I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. **You must be the people's representative before God** and bring their causes to Him. **20**Teach them the statutes and laws, and **show them the way to live** and the work they must do.

This is a very clear picture of the role and need of a Lead Elder/Shepherd.

21Furthermore, **select capable men from among the people**—God-fearing, trustworthy men who are averse to dishonest gain. Appoint them over the people as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens.

Notice how similar the qualifications are to “deacons” found in **1 Timothy 3:8-13 & Acts 6**.

22Have these men judge the people at all times. Then they can bring you any major issue, but all minor cases they can judge on their own, so that your load may be lightened as they share it with you.

23If you follow this advice and God so directs you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people can go home in peace.”

We know from **Exodus 3:16** that Israel already had a plurality of Elders from each tribe before God ever delivered them from Egypt and that God would eventually instruct Moses to select 70 Elders to experience God with him in **Exodus 24:1** and later, in **Numbers 11**, a different, though possibly overlapping, group of 70 elders was chosen from the general Elders of Israel to receive God's Spirit and formally help Moses lead the people.

But, here in **Exodus 18**, we clearly see a “type” of deacon being set apart to watch over and lead smaller segments of the congregation of Israel on behalf of Moses and The Elders.

So, we can see from both the Old Testament and the New Testament the effective results of delegating to a qualified group of [**diákōnōs**]:

1. Elders and Pastors are able to endure.
2. The people can experience peace.
3. The Word of God will spread.
4. The number of disciples will multiply greatly.

What does a Deacon Do?

1. Deacons **SERVE** and **SUPPORT** the Elders

- **Elder and Deacon are distinctively different roles.** (Acts 6:2-4)

It is clear that Elders are primarily focused on spiritual leadership, teaching, and overseeing the entire congregation, while Deacons are called to serve the congregation through practical service, often focusing on specific areas like physical needs or administrative tasks.

- **Deacons serve under the direction and authority of The Elders.** (Acts 6:2-4).

The 12 Apostles were essentially the first “Elders” in the church and are the ones who envisioned and implemented the Deacon role and gave them their directives. As previously stated, The Apostles appointed Elders in every church in every city who clearly went on to follow the model of appointing Deacons who would assist the Elders. In addition, everywhere you see Elders and Deacons listed together, Elders are always listed first. (**1 Timothy 3, Philippians 1:1**).

These two roles are meant to be less “hierarchical” and more “relational”. Just as husbands and wives have their distinct roles in a marriage, first and foremost, Paul admonishes them to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (**Eph 5:21**) Elders and Deacons are brothers and sisters in Christ who have received the same saving grace. We are disciples who love and respect one another and find it to be a joy to serve alongside one another in our respective roles, without contention or competition.

2. Deacons **SPOT** and **MEET** tangible needs.

The issue of inequitable food distribution in **Acts 6** exposed a sensitive fracture in the Church. The Elders understood that resolving this tension/conflict was not only important, it was urgent. At the same time, they had the wisdom and foresight to discern an even greater problem.

Taking on every “short-term problem” will only lead to “longer-term disaster”.

The Deacon role was created as a necessity to spot and meet “mercy” needs amidst the congregation; tending to widow and orphans, for example. But the scope of their deployment extends to **anything in a church's life that threatens to distract or derail Pastors and Elders** from their primary responsibilities of leading and feeding.

This suggests that one of the greatest “capabilities” of a Deacon is to spot practical needs and take the initiative to meet them efficiently and effectively. It has been said that...

“The best deacons don't just react to present problems, they **anticipate** future ones!”

Without effective Deacons, Elders and Pastors will struggle with a constant distraction of practical demands. This is why in addition to good character; a Deacon needs to be...

- ...fairly **ORGANIZED**.
- ...very **RELIABLE**
- ...willing to **SACRIFICE**.
- ...quick to take **INITIATIVE**.

3. Deacons **PROMOTE** and **PROTECT** **unity**.

In Acts 6, a disagreement over food distribution arose between two groups of widows, with some misinterpreting a simple mistake as prejudice. Though the issue appeared to be about food, it was actually a symptom of a larger disunity within the community. The first deacons were chosen to manage the food supply and, by extension, to resolve the communal conflict.

There will always be situations that need to be tended to on an Elder level, but it is extremely important for Deacons to function as “Shock Absorbers” and safeguard the harmony of the church by:

- **Anticipating Problems:** Proactive deacons don't just react to existing issues but also identify potential problems that could threaten church unity before they escalate.
- **Addressing Physical Needs:** By meeting tangible needs within the congregation, deacons resolve issues that could cause division between members, as seen in Acts 6.

- **Acting as a Buffer:** Deacons serve as a "shock absorber" for the church, reducing pressure on elders by handling practical matters.
- **Supporting Leadership:** This support enables the Elders to concentrate on their primary mission of teaching and spiritual leadership, which is vital for the church's overall well-being.
- **Fostering a Culture of Cooperation:** Their actions help build a positive environment of support, respect, and cooperation that reflects the heart of Christ.

Coming alongside The Elders to promote and protect unity is very important and requires an extreme amount of trust of a Deacon. This is why Deacons must be:

- **Humble** – A Deacon must be modest and not boastful, recognizing their own limitations and acknowledging the worth of others without feeling superior.
- **Gentle** – A Deacon must always respond with compassion and kindness, even when met with hostility.
- **Flexible** – A Deacon is ready and able to adapt to new information or a change in the situation.
- **Peaceful** – A Deacon is convicted but not combative; courageously welcoming conflict and able to amicably resolve issues and work towards harmony.

An effective Deacon will have a good grasp on what The Apostle Paul says about love in **1 Corinthians 13**, which was designed to promote and protect unity in the church.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 **4**Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. **5**It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no account of wrongs. **6**Love takes no pleasure in evil, but rejoices in the truth. **7**It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. **8**Love never fails.

Acting in love is more important than a gifting, preference or opinion. No matter the situation, acting in love will "never fail" and will "cover a multitude of sins". Faithful Deacons who act in love Deacons will...

- ... see their fingerprints on every **SERMON** that is preached.
- ... see their fingerprints in the **UNITY** of the church.
- ... see their fingerprints in the **HEALTH** of the congregation.
- ... see their fingerprints in the **GROWTH** of the church.

A few important things to note about the role of Deacon in a church.

- **The Deacon role is not a pitstop to being a Pastor or Elder.**

An Elder does not have to first be a Deacon and a Deacon may never become an Elder. All leaders must be content and faithful where they are assigned and surrender their future leadership to The Lord.

- **The Deacon role is Biblical and must be embraced as such.**

Churches who under elevate (glorified Janitors) or over elevate (de facto Elders) the role of a Deacon will never be as effective as Christ intends them to be.

What about women?

We believe that the positions of Elder and Lead Pastor are reserved only for men since Paul only speaks of men in 1 Timothy 3:1-3...

1 Timothy 3:1-3 1This is a trustworthy saying: If anyone aspires to be an overseer, **he** desires a noble task. 2An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the **husband** of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3not dependent on wine, not violent but gentle, peaceable, and free of the love of money.

4An overseer must manage **his** own household well and keep **his** children under control, with complete dignity. 5For if someone does not know how to manage **his** own household, how can **he** care for the church of God? 6**He** must not be a recent convert, or **he** may become conceited and fall under the same condemnation as the devil. 7Furthermore, **he** must have a good reputation with outsiders, so that **he** will not fall into disgrace and into the snare of the devil.

In the follow instructions given about Deacons, Paul refers to “them” and “they” which suggests that this may include women.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 8Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued or given to much wine or greedy for money. 9**They** must hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10Additionally, **they** must first be tested. Then, if **they** are above reproach, let **them** serve as deacons.

Paul continues with his instruction on Deacons by quickly turning his attention to women and brings up a few unique reminders for them as they uphold this leadership position.

11In the same way, the women must be dignified, not slanderers, but temperate and faithful in all things.

Since this word for “women” in Greek [**gynaikas**] can also be translated “wives”, some believe that Paul is addressing the “wives of deacons” rather than suggesting women can be Deacons. This seems unlikely since there is not a “their” in front of “wives” and Paul uses [**gynaikas**] eight other times in **1st Timothy** where he clearly means “women” and not “wives”.

It's also important to note that Paul never addresses the wives of Elders, despite their potential for significant influence within the Church.

In **Romans 16**, Paul refers to a women named Phoebe as a **[diákonos]**.

Romans 16:1 **1I command to you** Phoebe our sister, who is a **servant** **[diakoneó]** of the church in Cenchrea, **2**that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in **whatever business** she has need of you; for indeed she has been **a helper of many** and of myself also.

Since Paul adds "*of the church in Cenchrea*" to **[diákonos]** and is sending her with high commendation and admonishes The Church in Rome to assist her as she, no doubt, attends to some specific needs within that congregation, it is easy to conclude that Phoebe had the official was a "Deaconess".

Many Scholars believe that Phoebe actually delivered Paul's letter to The Church In Rome which definitely falls in line with the Diaconal position.

SomaChurch is committed to empowering women in ministry and leadership. We believe in celebrating and leveraging the gifts of all who demonstrate a biblically faithful life to teach and lead, working together in submission to the Lord and the church's leadership structure.

IN CONCLUSION

The church is the hope of the world, because it brings the truth of God to bear on the needs of society and individuals as it reaches out in ministry. In order for the church to have its most powerful impact, it must have a working structure of government. No church will grow larger in terms of the number of its members or the scope of its ministry than its government will allow. **No church will achieve its full impact of ministry without an effective structure of organization and government.** When a church chooses its government, it molds, shapes and casts its destiny.

We believe that **Elders and Deacons working together to love and lead The Church** is biblical and pleasing to God and when operating effectively and in harmony, creates a solid structure that ministers to the whole person – spiritually through the Eldership and practically through the Diaconate. Our prayer is that the Lord will pour out every spiritual blessing as we love and lead the saints here at SomaChurch.