

ISSUE

19.15

BULLETIN OF
THE OLSEN
PARK CHURCH
OF CHRIST

Faithful Sayings

April 9,
2017

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter
Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Steve Dixon
Ryan Ferguson
Arend Gressley
Ben Hight
Blake McAlister
Brady McAlister
Walker McAnear
Sam Nunn
Lance Purcell
Rusty Scott
Justin Smiley
Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

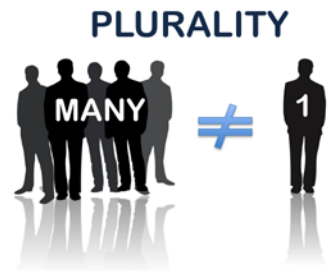
Kyle Pope



Can a Congregation Have Deacons without Elders? By Kyle Pope

Most understand that God’s plan for the organization of the local church is elders and deacons appointed to lead and serve each congregation based on qualifications spelled out in the New Testament. Circumstances arise from time to time, however, that lead us to consider whether it is authorized for a congregation to have deacons when there are no elders. To address this question let’s consider how we usually answer a different (but similar) question. On what basis do we argue for the necessity of multiple elders?—Because references to elders speak of them as a plurality (cf. Acts 14:23; 15:4, 6; 22-23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1, 5). Scripture does not speak of appointing “AN ELDER in every city”—so we properly argue that we cannot appoint only one man over a congregation with scriptural authority.

What do we find when it comes to deacons? Much less, but let’s consider it using this same rationale. The first is likely found in Acts 6 that records the appointment of seven men chosen to attend to Grecian widows



who were being neglected in the care the church offered to widows. While these men are not called “deacons” forms of the word were used in reference to the work they were to do. It was the “daily distribution (*diakonia*)” (Acts 6:1) in which there was the need “to serve (*diakonein*) tables” (Acts 6:2). This likely describes either men appointed as deacons or a similar work that served as a *proto-type* to the role that would later be revealed by the Holy Spirit. If it was the former there are some things we don’t know. Had elders already been appointed? Paul appointed elders (Acts 14:23) and commanded Titus to do the same (Titus 1:5). Had the

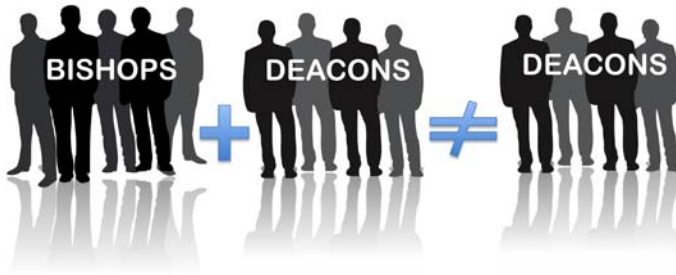
Holy Spirit yet revealed deacons as an ongoing appointed work within local churches? We are not told. If Acts 6 is a *proto-type* it would be similar to the role of the “elders of Israel” (Acts 4:8) or “elders of the Jews” (Acts 25:15). We don’t argue that these were the same thing as elders in the local church, but we do argue that their existence allowed for the speedy appointment of “elders in every church” only shortly after the gospel first began to spread (cf. Acts 14:23). Either way, we must be cautious how much we infer from the seven appointed in Acts 6.

There are only two certain passages on deacons: Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3. The first establishes the makeup and organization of a local church—“saints” together “with the bishops and deacons.” Scripture teaches that the designation “bishops” is one of the names used for the role of “elders” within a local congregation (see 1 Peter 5:1-3). Would we argue we could have “saints” together “with BISHOP and deacons”? No. What about “bishops and DEACON”? No. As noted above, these are spoken of as a plurality so we conclude properly that any alternative is not authorized. So, can we say that a local church may exist without one portion of this makeup? Well, obviously if Paul established churches and only later “appointed elders in every church” (Acts 14:23), obviously you can have “saints” without “bishops and deacons” (at least for a time). That would follow a biblical pattern.

What about “bishops” without “deacons”? We could argue that Paul did this (Acts 14:23) and commanded Titus to do the same (Titus 1:5). Scripture doesn’t say he “appointed elders AND DEACONS in every church,” but the fact they are not mentioned doesn’t necessarily tell us they weren’t appointed. Paul taught Timothy the qualifications for deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13). It may be that they are simply not mentioned. This could be like baptism—it doesn’t have to be men-



PHILIPPIANS 1:1



tioned in every account of conversion—it is still something required. Did Paul start with the appointment of elders and then later appoint deacons as they became qualified? Perhaps. Does the fact that it mentions elders alone infer that the leadership offered by an eldership is necessary to the functioning of a local church? Perhaps. All we know is that only elders are mentioned.

So, the question we face is can a local church be said to act with scriptural authority when it is made up of “saints” together “with **ONLY** deacons” (and no “bishops”)? If we look to our second certain text on deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13), it is interesting to note that it follows qualifications for elders that are listed first (1 Tim. 3:1-7). By contrast in Titus we find only qualifications for elders (Titus 1:5-9). Does that tell us anything? Is it significant that we find no comparable text that offers qualifications for deacons alone (with no qualifications for elders)? We should note that Paul was not said to have “appointed elders in every church **THAT HAD QUALIFIED MEN, OTHERWISE HE APPOINTED DEACONS.**” Scripture speaks to us by what it says, but also by what it does not say about a given subject.

What may we conclude from these things? I would argue that just as we cannot appoint one elder or one deacon and do so with biblical authority, the same is true of “bishops and deacons.” Since the only times (with the possible exception of Acts 6) when the appointed work of deacons is clearly cited it is listed with elders, we only act with biblical authority if we have both appointed works within the local church.

We should note, the issue is not about using special servants within a local church. There can be and are many “saints” who serve in this capacity with or without being qualified as elders or deacons. Phoebe was such a person. Scripture uses the same word translated “deacons” in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3 in a feminine form for her service to the church in Cencrea (Rom. 16:1). Did she serve in the appointed role of deacon? Was she a “dea-



coness” as many footnotes falsely assert? No. She was obviously not the “husband of one wife” (cf. 1 Tim. 3:12)—the word is used in a generic sense just as it is of Jesus in Galatians 2:17. A local church with or without elders and deacons should utilize all its members serving in the Lord’s work. This does not mean, however, that for a congregation to have special servants in a generic sense is the same

thing as having only appointed servants in a specific sense as “deacons.”

I realize that there is judgment that comes into play in this question. Could a congregation temporarily have deacons when an eldership dissolves until elders can be appointed? It could be argued that this would parallel the time period when Paul and Titus appointed elders before deacons were appointed (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). That assumes, however, that deacons were not appointed at the same time. That also assumes that what was true of elders can be equally true of deacons—but these are not the same work—elders carry out a role of leadership much different than that of deacons. While judgment comes into play here our challenge is not to assume that since it “makes sense” to us, or “seems reasonable” we are acting with biblical authority. When a congregation appoints (and has both) we know we are following the biblical pattern. When we do not we may well be relying more on our wishes or assumptions than we are on a “thus saith the LORD.”



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