



Deacons: Servants of the Church

Acts 6:1-7; 1 Tim. 3:8-13

1. The Duties of a Deacon (Acts 6:1-6)
2. The Qualities of a Deacon (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim. 3:8-12)
3. The Next Steps for Us (1 Tim. 3:10, 13)

Rock Valley Bible Church is a young church. I do not mean "young" in terms of demographic make-up. In fact several of us are older in terms of age. I do not mean "young" in terms of maturity. We do have some very mature saints in our midst. I mean "young" in the sense that we have not been in existence for very long. In fact, five years ago, "Rock Valley Bible Church" was only a dream in the hearts of a few families here in Rockford and a church family in DeKalb. Our first "formal" meeting together was Thursday evening in the Pearson's basement on July 2, 1998 when five families gathered together. Since that time, there have been certain mile-stones that we have crossed along the way. On July 2, 2000, we began meeting on Sunday evenings at Valley Baptist Church in Rockford. During the summer of 2001, I was able to leave my secular job and move here to Rockford. On March 3, 2002, we began gathering here in this facility on Sunday mornings. In terms of finances, we trust that God-willing we will be financially independent this year. Yet, we are still a young church that has much growing to do in years to come. In God's time, it will come.

This morning marks another key element in the growth and maturity of our church. I am presenting Lance Milton as a candidate for the office of deacon at Rock Valley Bible Church. I would like to spend some time this morning to explain the process that will take place over the next several months as Rock Valley Bible Church anticipates receiving our first deacon. God has given two offices to His church on the earth: the office of **elder** and the office of **deacon**. This office of elder actually is associated with multiple titles in the Bible. Sometimes elders are called "overseers" or "bishops" or "pastors" or "shepherds." Each of these titles refer to the same person. There are two key verses in the Bible that demonstrate this very clearly. Notice that in each of them, these various titles are used interchangeably.

- "I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd (i.e. pastor) the flock of God among you, [by] exercising oversight ..." (1 Pet. 5:1-2).
- "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd (i.e. pastor) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." (Acts 20:28)

When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he acknowledged both offices of elder and deacons when he wrote,

"Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons" (Phil. 1:1).

At this point in time, Rock Valley Bible Church has only one man in either of these offices. We have no deacons. I stand before you as the only elder (or pastor or overseer, whichever term you want to use). This is not the preferred situation. It is better to have a plurality of elders and deacons. When it comes to pass (Lord willing) that Lance is installed as deacon, we will have one elder and one deacon. In years to come, I anticipate that we will have several elders and several deacons to lead this body of disciples. But today, that is not the case. As a church, we are like a child that is maturing. In time, I trust that these things will take place. It is appropriate for us to focus our attention this morning on the office of deacon. I want to look first at...

1. The Duties of a Deacon (Acts 6:1-6)

These duties unfold for us in Acts 6. In Acts 6, we find the early church in its infancy. In terms of leadership, the church had no elders or deacons. The only leaders of the church were 12 apostles. Yet, we see here the office of deacon beginning to develop. It did not develop fully in Acts 6. It simply began to take shape. The narrative begins in verse 1, "Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number...." This is an understatement if there ever was one. Peter had preached a sermon at Pentecost, after which 3,000 souls "received [Peter's] word and were baptized" (Acts 2:41). A short time later, the church was numbering more than 5,000 men in Jerusalem (Acts 4:4). This was the first "mega-church." There were more than 5,000 men in this church (this does not include the number of the women and children who believed as well).

When this many people flooded the church in Jerusalem, there came to be a problem. In verse one, we find a description of that problem. It says, "a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food." In the times of the apostles, there were two types of Jewish people. There were the Hellenists and the Hebrews. The Hellenists were Jewish people who had adopted many of the cultural norms of the day. They spoke Greek which was the common language of the culture in that day. Their manner of dress was also in line with the Greek people. They engaged in the Greek culture. On the other hand, the Hebrews were the Jewish people who had rejected the Greek culture and had chosen to remain culturally unmixed. They spoke Aramaic or Hebrew. They also dressed differently than the Greeks. There was tension between these two groups as the Hebrews thought that the Hellenists were being unfaithful to their family by neglecting their culture.

At this time of growth in the church, the church was doing a good job in carrying out its duties to the widows. The church was feeding the widows. The problem arose, because those involved in the distribution of the food were playing favorites. They were neglecting the Hellenists in favor of the native Hebrews. Can you picture it? You had someone in the church with a armful of groceries to deliver to the widows of the church. Rather than giving half of the groceries to the Hellenistic widows and half of the groceries to the Hebrew widows, he gives all of his groceries to the Hebrew widows. This is not a chance occurrence. It takes place day after day after day. Verse 6 said that this was taking place, "daily." We do not know why they were being neglected. Perhaps it was because the church only had enough to support the Hebrew widows. Perhaps it was because of prejudice against those who had "sold out" to the culture of the day and had not remained pure. Whatever the reason, some of the widows were being overlooked, and a complaint arose.

These apostles heard about this complaint and "summoned the congregation of the disciples" in verse 2 to discuss how they were going to solve the problem. They agreed that something wrong was taking place. They knew it was not good that these widows were being neglected. They understood that it was necessary that the widows be served their needed food. Listen to what they said:

"It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:2-4)

As they evaluated the entire situation, I am sure that they thought about solving the problem themselves. After all, if anybody had the spiritual maturity to ensure that all of the believing widows received their proper help without favoritism, it was the apostles. I'm sure that they would have done a fine job. But, in doing so, they would have neglected their own God-given priorities to do this good thing. In other words, **the apostles refused to let the good take the place of the best**. They had been called to be devoted "to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (verse 4). Quite frankly, serving tables would interfere with this priority. So, they said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables." Yes, there was negligence in the church. But the apostles refused to solve one problem of negligence by creating another problem of negligence.

Imagine with me a heart surgeon. He has scrubbed up for surgery. He has taken his scalpel and has cut through his patient's sternum and pulled it back to get to his heart. He has begun the process of repairing the blockages in the heart. And then the phone rings at the receptionist's desk. For some reason or another, no one is able to answer the phone. The phone rings again and again. Now, imagine, the heart surgeon saying, "excuse me, I cannot neglect the phone." He then backs away from the operating table, takes off his surgical gloves, walks over to the phone, picks it up, and says, "Hello?" Answering the phone is a good thing. Perhaps it is a relative of the one who is being operated on, inquiring as to his condition. Perhaps it is another patient, who is experiencing pain in his chest. There is nobody better equipped to help these people with their inquiries than the surgeon. But answering the phone is not the best thing for the heart surgeon to do.¹ It is a good thing, but not the best thing.

Likewise, for the apostles the best thing for them to do isn't to serve tables of neglected widows. The widows had genuine need. The widows needed to be helped. But the apostles were not to neglect their priority to make sure that the widows were not neglected. This is the point of verses 2 and 4! John Piper has said,

"Without extended and consecrated prayer, the ministry of the Word withers up and bears no fruit. ... And what opposes the pastor's life of prayer more than anything? The ministry. It is not shopping or car repairs or sickness or yard work that squeezes our prayers into hurried corners of the day. It is budget development and staff meetings and visitation and counseling and answering mail and writing reports and reading journals and answering the phone and preparing messages" (Brothers, We Are Not Professionals, pp. 60-61).

And the apostles might easily add, "And serving food to widows."

Now, we have reached the point where we can see the role that deacons play in the life of the church. They help in the work of the ministry so as to keep the elders able to focus upon the priority of prayer and the ministry of the word. Deacons are servants in the church. The word we translate, "deacon" is the Greek word diakonoV(diakonos), which is most often translated "servant." In John 2:5, 9, it is used of those who were serving the tables at the wedding feast in Cana. In Matthew 22:13, it is used of the servants of the king, who gave a wedding feast for his son. Epaphras is called a "servant of Christ" (Col. 1:7). Paul considered himself as a "servant of [the] new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6). Jesus Christ, Himself, was a "servant to the circumcision" (Rom. 15:8). Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Other related words, diakonia (diakonia), and diakonew(diakoneo), is used several times right here in Acts 6:1-2:

"Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily **serving** (diakonia) of food. And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to **serve** (diakonew) tables." (Acts 6:1-2)

There are only two instances in all of the Bible where this word diakonoV(diakonos), is not translated "servant" (or something equivalent to this). It is the two instances in which the word, diakonoV(diakonos), is used to describe an office in the church (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8). It could just as easily be translated "servants". All Christians are called to be servants. "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 pet. 4:10). The deacons, however, are called to be model-servants. They are servants who lead. As the early church matured, the apostles were multiplied into pastors and elders. The model of the apostles seeking help in the ministry matured into the office of deacon.

While on vacation, we visited a church, which was pastored by a man whom Yvonne and I both know. He also graduated from the Master's Seminary. He is doing a great work in this little church in Kentucky, where he has been for two years. On the Sunday we visited, he was leading the Sunday School class for the men. Before the class began, he spent some time talking with the other men about the problems that the church was having with their septic tank. He explained how the night before, he had emptied it of the water on the top, but he saw the water fill it right back up. He was describing how there must be some type of leak in the tank. He was trying to see if any of them had any idea on how to fix it. He turned to me and said, "They did not teach us how to deal with these things in seminary did they?" I said, "No they did not." Then, I turned to the men in the class and said, "that's what the men of the church are for." He is doing a good work and he needs others to help him in the work. His priority needs to be prayer and the ministry of the word. He needs others to deal with the septic tank.

Let me simply say (on a real practical level) why you do not find me doing much with the set-up process here at Rock Valley Bible Church. You do not find me putting out many tables. You do not find me putting out many chairs. You do not find me at set-up on Saturday nights too often. I know that it is important. It is important for people who walk in here to feel that things are being done well. I don't mind the work. In fact, whenever there is a problem with manpower, I am more than willing to step in and help. But my priority is prayer and the word. I want to help cultivate the word in your life by teaching it to you and praying it into your hearts and minds. So, after we dismiss here from church, my goal is to do what I can do to see the Word of God impact your life and to know how I might pray for you. There are a bunch of other things that I have delegated to others because of my God-given priority to be devoted to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Here are a few items:

- The maintenance of the church directory.
- The scheduling, planning, and implementation of our potlucks that we have every month.
- The finances of the church.
- Nursery schedules and rotations.
- Refreshments after church.
- Copying of bulletins.
- Copying of music for Sunday.
- The creation of tapes and mp3's for our web site.
- The first-draft write-up of my sermon notes.
- The distribution of my sermon notes each Tuesday.
- The treasures for the children.
- The formatting, copying and distributing of our newsletter (*Food for the Flock*).

If you see me doing something that is pulling me (or one of the future pastors) away from the work of prayer and the ministry of the word, talk to me (or them) about it. Perhaps you could help in the ministry of this church by allowing the pastors to focus their effort more pointedly upon their priorities.

The apostles needed help if they were going to be able to keep their commitment to prayer and the word of God. This is the point of verse 3, "But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task" (Acts 6:3). The apostles surveyed the extent of the problem and determined that it would take seven men to adequately serve the neglected widows their food. The apostles wanted to see this great need being met. When these seven men would meet the need, it would accomplish two things: the need would be met, and the apostles would maintain their priorities. So, a cry went out to the congregation for this task for them to find seven men with these three characteristics:

1. Of good reputation
2. Full of the Spirit
3. Full of wisdom

Notice that the apostles did not solve this problem by asking for volunteers as if any person could take care of the task. These were not supposed to be any men. These were to be spiritual men of integrity who were capable of performing this duty well. It would have been no help at all to the apostles to delegate this task and see it not done well. In fact, that would have caused further problems.

We have looked at the duties of the deacons. Let's now turn our attention to...

2. The Qualities of a Deacon (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim. 3:8-12)

The Bible gives us a number of specific qualities that are found in the lives of deacons. This morning, we are going to look at twelve specific qualities of a deacon.

1) Of Good Reputation

The first quality we are going to look at is that of having a good reputation. The idea here is simply that they have a good name in the community -- both inside the church and outside the church. This is the same qualification that Paul would later give of elders in 1 Tim. 3:7, "He must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." His character is known and well thought of by all. When someone would ask, "Hey, what do you think about Philip?" (Acts 6:5). There would be a response such as, "He is a good man, stable, honest, sincere, trustworthy." When someone would ask, "What about Prochorus? Do you know him?" (Acts 6:5). The response would be, "Yeah, I know him. He has always been kind and gracious and charitable toward me." "What about Nicanor?" (Acts 6:5). "I do not know him personally, but I do know his neighbor. His neighbor told me that he has always been friendly and quite helpful to him. In fact, he said that whenever he makes a long trip and will be away from his home, that he entrusts his house and valuables to Nicanor, because he is a trustworthy man." This is what it means to be of good reputation.

2) Full of the Spirit

The deacon is to be full of the spirit. This phrase simply describes a man as being one in whom God is at work. By this man's faith in Jesus, the Spirit has come to indwell him and change him into a man of God. In Eph. 5:18-20, Paul describes the one who is "filled with the Spirit." He speaks to others in "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." He "sings and makes melody in his heart to the Lord." He "always gives thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God." In Col. 3:17, Paul parallels this thought with "the word of Christ richly dwelling within [him]." It is obvious that the man full of the Spirit loves God by the way he talks. It is clear that he follows after God by the way he is thankful. It is evident that he loves the things of God by the way God's word saturates his life. He is constantly meditating upon the word of Christ, the message of the gospel which is that God in His freedom chose to dwell among us and die a death in our place. This message of grace has instructed him "to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12).

3) Full of wisdom

A deacon is wise, not because he is a wise man naturally. The thought appears to be more that God has filled him with wisdom. He has gleaned wisdom from the Word of God. He has learned it, applied it, and practiced it. This quality begins to get past simply the character of the man, but begins to address his ability. He is able to accomplish the assigned task. He has the wisdom to deal with the problems that come up and will not have to come back to the apostles with questions about everything. The apostles wanted to delegate this task to these men with the full confidence that it will be accomplished. This is what they said at the end of verse 3, "whom we may put in charge of this task."

The good news of this story is that these seven men (Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas) were faithful in their task. The apostles were enabled to keep their priorities of prayer and the word. Verse 7 reads, "And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7) Had these men not been "full of wisdom," and able to be "put in charge of this task," the apostles would not have been able to keep their priorities. Perhaps eternity alone will reveal how many deacons in the church have been faithful in their task to allow the pastors to focus on their priorities so that God blesses the church mightily. Without the faithful servants in the church, the word of God fails to spread. How many times has the ministry of the word been stifled because of the lack of deacons to bear the load?

Let's turn our attention to some other qualities of deacons. For these, let's turn to 1 Timothy 3. In this letter, Paul was instructing Timothy, a young pastor, how to conduct himself in the church of the living God (1 Tim. 3:15). The qualifications for the leaders in the church are found in the first 13 verses of chapter 3. In the first seven verses, Paul writes about the overseers (or pastors or elders or shepherds). Beginning in verse 8, he writes about the deacons. He writes,

"Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus." (1 Tim 3:8-13)

In these verses, we have nine more qualities of deacons.

4) Be Dignified (1 Tim 3:8)

A deacon must be dignified. The idea behind this Greek word is that a deacon is somber and serious minded. He is level-headed, understanding the spiritual conflicts that are going on all around him. His life is under control and he is worthy of respect. He never laughs at the immoral jokes. He never makes light of a serious situation. I remember in the church in which I grew up, there was a highly successful business man on the board of deacons. But, he was a clown. In retrospect, I think that he saw the church as a place where he could unwind a bit and loosen up from the high pressures that he faced in his work. He was not dignified. Even as a child, my respect for him was diminished when I saw him behave like a jokester. Such behavior diminishes the seriousness of what we are doing at the church.

A few weeks ago, I was with a pastor on a Saturday evening. We spent some of our time praying for other pastors who would be preaching the next Sunday. His heart was especially stirred with the seriousness what he (and other pastors) are doing. Apart from the gospel, people are going to hell! The church is not simply a matter of life and death. The church is a matter of *eternal* life or *eternal* death. It takes serious men to lead the church in these matters.

5) Not be Double-tongued (1 Tim 3:8)

The Greek word here is literally "two-worded." It describes the one who speaks one thing to one person and another thing to another person. The tongue of a deacon speaks one thing: the truth. The Proverbs say,

"Do not eat the bread of a selfish man, or desire his delicacies; For as he thinks within himself, so he is. He says to you, 'Eat and drink!' But his heart is not with you" (Prov. 23:6-7).

Though the selfish man offers you of his food, he really does not want you to eat it. He is double-tongued and as vicious as a snake. This is why the New International Version translates this word, "sincere" (verse 8). A leader in God's church needs to lead with the truth, not with deception and lies. So, the speech of a deacon is important. In the next quality we will see that his drink is also important.

6) Not Be Addicted to Much Wine (1 Tim 3:8)

Alcohol is a dangerous beverage. It is addictive. It is deceptive. The Proverbs say,

"Do not look on the wine when it is red, When it sparkles in the cup, When it goes down smoothly; At the last it bites like a serpent, And stings like a viper." (Prov. 23:31-32)

It has destroyed many lives. It leads to violence. Prov. 20:1 says, "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler." It has lead many to the gates of hell: "Do not be deceived ... drunkards ... shall [not] inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:10). Simply put, "Whoever is intoxicated by [wine] is not wise" (Prov 20:1). As model servants in the church, deacons are to set a good example before the flock as one who is wise and leads with integrity.

Alcoholic drinks inhibit sound judgment. Consider this Proverb,

"It is not for kings to drink wine, Or for rulers to desire strong drink; Lest they drink and forget what is decreed, And pervert the rights of all the afflicted." (Prov. 31:4,5)

This is true of rulers and it is also true of deacons. Alcohol is a huge temptation in the world today. But leaders in the church are not to be a source of the temptation. This is not limited to wine only. It certainly applies to all other addictions. It applies to addictions to food; addictions to drugs; addictions to the news; addictions to video games; addictions to hobbies; addictions to sports; addictions to novels; and addictions to movies. A deacon must be free of addictions.

7) Not Be Fond of Sordid Gain (1 Tim 3:8)

Literally, this describes a man who is willing to "gain through shameful means." It describes the man who cuts corners. It describes a man who plays the lottery. It describes the man who take advantage of others to get what he wants. It describes the man who is willing to make a shoddy business deal, rather than dealing up front and honest with everything. Deacons need to be blameless in their desires for improper gain. This is an important quality for deacons, who deal with many of the financial matters of the church. When the apostles delegated the serving of tables, there were financial resources involved (food, money, resources). These seven men could easily have pilfered some of the food for themselves. But, the church has no place for greedy, self-centered leaders who will bend the rules for their benefit.

8) Hold to the Mystery of the Faith With a Clear Conscience (1 Tim 3:9)

Holding to the mystery of the faith is a synonym for believing the gospel of Jesus Christ. It means understanding the mystery of Christ that had been revealed. But the key to this phrase here is "with a clear conscience." The conscience is that part of us that tells us when we are doing wrong or are engaged in some wrong doing. Conscience is like Jiminy Cricket on Pinocchio's shoulder who should scream at you when you are about to do something that is wrong.

Conscience is to the soul what pain is to the body. Pain is what alerts our body to problems. Our conscience is what alerts our soul that we are in danger. When we ignore our pain, greater injury can develop. When we ignore our conscience, we face great danger with our soul. It was when Jiminy Cricket overslept that Pinocchio's problems began.

A deacon believes in the gospel and knows of nothing else that would incriminate him of any wrong. His conscience is clear. The deacon must affirm with Paul who told Felix, "In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men" (Acts 24:16).

9) Beyond reproach (1 Tim 3:10)

This means that you cannot call this man into account for anything. He is blameless. He is like Daniel. When some jealous leaders sought to trap Daniel in some wrongdoing, they could not do it. "They could find no ground of accusation or evidence of corruption, inasmuch as he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him" (Dan. 6:4). He is like Noah, who was a "righteous" and "blameless" man (Gen. 6:9). He is like Job, who was "blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil" (Job 1:1).

This does not mean, "perfection." It simply means that accusations made against him are foolish. He has established himself as an upright and honest man, against whom no accusations can be made. Perhaps you might look to the life of Charles Colson. He was jailed for his part in the Watergate Scandal in the 1970's. Yet, since his conversion, he has established himself as an upright and honest man. If one would accuse Mr. Colson of being a liar and a cheat because of his actions that sent him to jail, the accusations wouldn't stick. His past sins have been repented of and made right. He has demonstrated a character today that has overcome past difficulties. This is what it means to be "beyond reproach."

10) A One-woman Man (1 Tim 3:12)

There is great discussion about this quality. Most translations render this qualification as "a husband of one wife", as if to imply that the man cannot be a polygamist. Some say that this phrase automatically disqualifies a man who has been divorced (regardless of the circumstances surrounding the divorce). Some say that this phrase automatically disqualifies a man who is not married. Some say that this phrase automatically disqualifies a man who has married after his first wife died.

I believe that Paul is speaking about something far deeper than one's marriage history. I believe that the point is that a deacon will have a singular devotion to his wife. People will know of his love for his wife because he speaks highly of her. People will see his affection for his wife that has no rivals. Literally, the Greek reads that he is a "one woman man." He does not flirt with other women. He does not have eyes for other women. He is pure sexually in his mind as well as in his body. This disqualifies those who struggle with pornography. This disqualifies those who are in the habit of seeing the wrong movies. This disqualifies those who have inappropriate relationships with women. I remember working with a man, who was married and who always had lunch with another woman who also was married. It looked bad. He would be disqualified according to this standard, although I have every reason to believe that he was happily married and committed to his wife.

By the way this verse also points to the fact that a deacon must be a man.

11) Good Managers of Their Children (1 Tim 3:12)

This qualification points to a deacon's life at home. A man is a husband and father, the head of the house. As such, there are certain responsibilities that come with this. The children of a deacon "obey him in all things" (Col. 3:20). When he calls, they come. When he prohibits things, the children comply. When they disobey, he disciplines them (Prov. 22:15; 29:15). But, he does so in such a way that he does not "exasperate his children" (Col. 3:20) or "provoke his children to anger" (Eph. 6:4). His discipline is done in love, not uncontrolled rage.

He brings up his children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). He leads his family in spiritual matters. He reads the Bible with his children. He teaches them how to interpret the Bible. He encourages his children to memorize the Bible. He prays with his family. In other words, family worship takes place in his home. He has the responsibility to make sure that it happens. He manages the children well. He sees to it that his children get enough sleep. His children are clothed appropriately. He knows what they are learning in school (and helping them when appropriate).

12) Good Managers of Their Own Households (1 Tim 3:12)

The affairs of his house are in order. He oversees the financial matters of the household. His checkbook is balanced. His bills are paid on time. His home is clean and neat. His yard is not a mess. He is not wasting his resources. He does not make frivolous purchases. He does not leave his wheelbarrow outside to rust. He changes the oil in his car when appropriate. He paints the house when it needs to be painted. He repairs what is broken. Everything in his house is running according to plan.

These are 12 characteristics of a deacon. But, that is not all. I skipped a little word in verse 8. The word is "likewise." This is referring to the overseers (of verses 1-7). A deacon is to be like overseers -- not exactly like them, but similar. The qualifications for a deacon are similar to that of an overseer. A deacon must be like an elder in his character. As Kent Hughes has said, a deacon is to be "elder-like." There are 16 qualities given of an elder/overseer/pastor:

1. Above reproach (verse 2)
2. A one-woman man (verse 2)
3. Temperate (verse 2)
4. Prudent (verse 2)
5. Respectable (verse 2)
6. Hospitable (verse 2)
7. Able to teach (verse 2)
8. Not addicted to wine (verse 3)
9. Not pugnacious (verse 3)
10. Gentle (verse 3)
11. Uncontentious (verse 3)
12. Free from the love of money (verse 3)
13. Manages his own household well (verse 4)
14. Keeps his children under control with all dignity (verse 4)
15. Not a new convert (verse 6)
16. A good reputation with those outside the church (verse 7)

But, this is not all (like those old Ginsu knives commercials). These lists are not exhaustive. They are suggestive. They paint a picture for us. I believe that there are things that are not on these lists, which would disqualify a man from the office. For instance, suppose that a man was proud. Though these lists say nothing about a proud man being disqualified from leadership, I certainly think that this is the case. Suppose that a man was unloving. This would disqualify him as well. Suppose that a man was obese. Suppose that a man was inflexible. Suppose that a man was attending services at a Mormon church (I heard of this happening in a church). Suppose that a man was rude in his behavior. Suppose that a man's wife was contentious and inhospitable. In each of these instances, the man ought to be barred from the office of elder or deacon. You could probably find a slot for them which disqualifies them such as "above reproach". But the point is that you would have to do so by analogy or by implication.

I have given to you a flavor of the man who demonstrates the qualities of a deacon. You may have noticed that I have skipped verse 11. (I hope that you noticed that I skipped verse 11). Verse 11 says, "Women must likewise be dignified, no malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things." In many translations (KJV, NKJV, NIV), this phrase is translated, "their wives." However, the word, "their" isn't in the text. It is inserted to help explain what these translators believe is the best translation. Literally, this text says, "women" (which can refer to wives, if the context dictates it, but it doesn't have to mean "wives").

The big question about this verse concerns the identity of these women. Who are they? Some say that Paul is referring to

1. the wives of deacons.
2. women deacons (entirely the same as deacons)
3. a third office for the church (a deaconess), though this term is nowhere used in the scripture.
4. those who assist the deacons in any "official" way.

There has been much written about this. I know godly men who hold to all of these views. I would say that I would fall on the last option. "those who assist the deacons in any 'official' way." I believe that this best explains the way in which Paul neither identifies these women as "deaconesses," nor does he use the possessive pronoun, "their" to imply that he is speaking about the deacon's wife.

There are times in which women may be needed in the service of a deacon. One case perhaps would be in delivering food to a woman whose highly jealous and possessive husband may cause trouble. Perhaps there has been a sensitive case of sexual abuse, where a woman's help would be most appropriate. In such cases, the woman assisting in this service must be a mature, faithful woman, who will not

go about spreading the gossip of the state of these women in highly vulnerable settings. In most (if not all instances), this would probably be his wife.

We have looked at the duties and qualifications of a deacon. I want us now to turn our attention to the steps ahead for us at RVBC.

3. The Next Steps for Us (1 Tim. 3:10, 13)

This process with identifying Lance as a deacon-candidate did not begin last week or last month. Over the past 6 months or so, I have begun to meet with Lance. We have met for lunch together every 2 or 3 weeks to discuss what it means to be a deacon. We have walked through our doctrinal statement together, phrase by phrase. I have begun to seek his feedback in terms of future events and vision with the church. I have given to him schedules of how I have spent my time each week in my labors for the church. We have begun to go through an excellent book on deacons, entitled, "The New Testament Deacon: Minister of Mercy" by Alexander Strauch. (If you are more interested in what a deacon is and does, I recommend that you read this excellent book.) In our discussion, we have reached part 3 in the book: "The Qualifications for Deacons." I thought that it would be appropriate at this time to present Lance to the church. I want you all to know about Lance's desire for this office at this time and what has taken place in recent months with him.

Basically, we have come to verse 10, "And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons." (1 Tim 3:10). When verse 10 speaks about "testing," it describing an examination that takes place. It is time to "test, try, and prove" Lance for the office of deacon. I need your help in this process. Those who can verify these things are those who know him. Who knows him? His wife and family know Lance. Those at this church know Lance. Those who work with Lance in the workplace know him. We enter a process of examination/evaluation. I need you to take these qualities that have been placed before you and match them up with Lance. I need you to either affirm him in these things or to identify areas of weakness in his character. I would encourage you to go to Lance with any concerns you have. I would encourage you to go to Lance with any encouragements in this process. Over the next few months, I will go over each of these things with Lance personally, with his family, and with his employer. I will be getting together formally with his family. I will be getting together formally with those at Rubloff Development, where he works.

You might have realized that Lance has been doing some of the duties of a deacon already. He takes care of all of the financial matters of the church. I do not touch any of it. He brings the offering box each week and takes care of depositing whatever monies are given to the church. He pays the bills that we incur. He pays my salary from these monies. Furthermore, he has been placed in charge of administering the Lord's supper.

We are not going to rush this process. I imagine that we will be at this for several months. I want to give you ample time to be convinced that Lance would "serve well as [a] deacon" (verse 13). In an elder-rule church such as ours, it is all important that you trust your leadership. The day that the congregation loses trust in their leadership is the day that the church is over. I know of one church, who lost their confidence in their elder-board. They have spent years in trying to regain it. They have had many congregational meetings with the elders in attempts to be open and honest with what is going on in the church and why the elders are acting in certain ways. The elder board hasn't yet regained their confidence. Once trust has been breached, it is a long road to regain it. It is best to do it right from the start.

We have seen an example of this in the news this past week. The media has brought to our attention the lack of the existence of evidence given for justification in the recent war with Iraq, "Operation Iraqi Freedom." Before the war, all we heard from the White House was that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. We need to disarm Sadaam Hussein before he helps aid terrorists with these weapons. Since the war ended, there has been little evidence of these weapons of mass destruction. President Bush has received some pressure about the sorts of statements that he made in justifying the war. It looks like there might be some type of investigation of the credibility of the assertions given as to the reason for the war. In the aftermath of the war, we have discovered that there were many inhumanitarian things done in Iraq's totalitarian government, like mass graves, stories of chemical killings, and people who have lived in daily fear of the government. Each of these have given us reason to support the war effort. Yet, this wasn't the reason our government gave before launching the war. Perhaps it would have been better to communicate facts for which data existed, rather than communicating as fact, what is only presumed. As a result, the leadership of our country is being doubted. In the next few months, President Bush and his cabinet will be working hard to establish their trustworthiness.

I want to do everything that I can to give you reason to trust the leadership of Rock Valley Bible Church. My pledge to all of you is that I will lead this church in a straightforward and honest way. If there are doubts with Lance and his future leadership role, we will take longer than several months for him to be installed as a deacon. When I was placed before KBC as a potential elder at KBC (like we are doing with Lance this morning), it was two years before I was installed. That was fine with me. It is a protection for the church.

I would guess that this process is new for many of you. Perhaps you grew up in a church (or came to Rock Valley Bible Church from a church) that nominated people for office on one Sunday. Then, the next Sunday, they were voted in to serve a three year term. Throughout this process there wasn't much attention paid to the Biblical qualifications for the office of deacon. For instance, I know that my father was once involved in a church where he was nominated and elected to serve his 3 year term. I asked him about it yesterday and he told me they had an introductory meeting of all the deacons who were voted in (along with the current deacons). He told me how one of those who were elected shared how she knew that she should read the Bible, but somehow, she just cannot find time to do it. She had no business being a deacon in a church. Perhaps the three year term limits were blessings in disguise. Those who are not qualified will serve for only a little bit of time. You simply need to wait them out.

Our process with church leadership is different than nominations and elections of most churches. **We are anticipating appointing Lance for life.** I find no term limits in the Bible, nor do I find nominating committees or elections. I simply find a standard of moral qualifications that a man must continue to hold as long as he is in leadership. To this man's character, the congregation affirms it (Acts 6:3). I find no reason for a deacon or an elder to stop serving after any given number of years. As long as pastors or deacons (1) remain qualified (according to Biblical standards), and as long as pastors or deacons (2) continue to have a heart to serve the church (according to Biblical priorities), and as long as they are (3) able to serve, I see no reason why we should limit their service. I do foresee a time in which a pastor or deacon becomes

unqualified.

(1) An elder or deacon may fall into some sin and disqualify himself. His family may begin to fall apart. His character become manipulative and divisive. Paul warned the church of wolves arising from among the elders, who will speak "perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). In such cases, it is the responsibility of the leadership with the help of the congregation to remove such a man from leadership.

(2) I do foresee a time in which a pastor or deacon loses his heart to serve the church. Perhaps a disagreement occurs with the majority of the leadership of the church in the direction the church is heading. When these matters are preferential and not Biblical, it is appropriate for a man to step down and distance himself from the leadership of the church, rather than act contentiously and divide the church. I pray that this never happens at Rock Valley Bible Church, though unfortunately, I have seen it happen elsewhere on too many occasions.

(3) Circumstances in a man's life might prohibit him from serving a leadership role in the church. Perhaps a family tragedy occurs that requires a man to turn his attention to his home (e.g. a wife who dies, a baby born with Down's syndrome, an accident that leaves your teenager very sick). Or maybe a man's age or health comes to a point where he no longer has the energy to serve the church in these ways.

At Rock Valley Bible Church, we take these qualifications very seriously. This is why we are not going to rush this process. We desire for a pure church that would glorify our Lord Jesus Christ. This purity begins with the leadership.

I would like to finish this morning by pointing out that a deacon is not some type of "sub-office." A deacon is not a stepping stone to becoming an overseer. The primary difference in the function of the offices is found in verse 2, "must be able to teach.". Elders/pastors/overseers lead the church by teaching. Deacons lead the church by serving, as the word "deacon" implies. This does not mean a deacon cannot teach. Case in point is Stephen and Philip, who were early servants to the apostles, but later came to have great evangelistic ministries. Stephen in Acts 7. Philip in Acts 8.

I am not saying that a deacon cannot become an elder someday. Perhaps initially in a man's life, he simply wanted to serve the church in physical ways. But as he grows in maturity, he fosters a love for the Scriptures that continues to grow. He teaches a few things and is affirmed in his teaching gifts. He desires to devote himself to prayer and the ministry of the word, so he becomes an elder. Also, it is conceivable that an elder may even become a deacon someday. Perhaps the grind of study and the pressure involved with teaching the church has begun to wear on a man. He has a heart to serve and be with the people of the church, but not in the capacity of praying and preaching. He fosters a heart to help a certain group in the church who are particularly needy. The demands of the many hours of service and counseling, would reduce greatly his prayer and study time. In this instance, he should become a deacon and serve the church in this capacity.

Let me point out rewards of serving as a deacon. Look at verse 13,

"For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus." (1 Tim. 3:13)

An official servant of the church who does his work will put a smile on the face of God. God will bless this man with two things: a high standing, and great confidence in the faith. The path to greatness in the Christian life is a path of self-sacrifice and service to others. "Humble yourselves ... under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time" (1 Pet. 5:6). Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave" (Matt. 20:26-27). This is not the world's way, but it is God's way. God's path to life is down. God hates those who take pride in their righteousness and religious standing. God loves those who humbly look to the cross of Christ. It is when we are weak in ourselves that we are strong in Christ. You get right with God not by being great, but by realizing that Jesus is great on your behalf.

God delights in those who are low and humble and who serve others sacrificially. He will exalt these people at the proper time with a high standing. Jesus said, "If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him" (John 12:26).

God will also grant to these people a confidence in Christ that many can only wish for. Confidence in Christ Jesus comes when you know that you are in the center of His will. His will is that you see your unworthiness and trust in the worthiness of Christ instead. These are the promises that await Lance Milton, if he serves well. These are the promises that await all those who serve the Lord Jesus Christ with all humility.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on June 8, 2003 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

¹ (I am indebted to Jack Hughes for the seed to this illustration in a sermon he preached at Calvary Bible Church in Burbank, California on 5/20/01).