

# DEACONS

JOHN OWEN  
1616 – 1683

# DEACONS

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# DEACONS

**T**HE original institution, nature, and use of the office of *deacons* in the church are so well known as that we need not much insist upon them; nor shall I treat of the name,<sup>1</sup> which is common unto any kind of ministry, civil or sacred, but speak of it as it is appropriated unto that especial<sup>2</sup> work for which this office was ordained.

## 1. Foundation in Christ

The remote foundation of it lieth in that of our Savior: “The poor always ye have with you” (Joh 12:8). He doth not only foretell that such there should be in the church, but recommends the care of them who should be so unto the church: for He maketh use of the words of the law: “The poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy” (Deu 15:11). This legal institution, founded in the law of nature, doth the Lord Christ by His authority transfer and translate unto the use of gospel churches among His disciples.

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<sup>1</sup> The English word *deacon* comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, which means servant or minister.

<sup>2</sup> **especial** – particular.

And it may be observed that at the same instant hypocrisy and avarice began to attempt their advantage on the consideration of this provision for the poor, which they afterward effected unto their safety; for, on the pretense hereof, Judas immediately condemned an eminent duty towards the person of Christ, as containing a cost in it, which might have been better laid out in provision for the poor. The ointment poured on our Savior he thought might have been “sold for three hundred pence”—it may be about forty or fifty pounds—“and given to the poor.” But “this he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag,” out of which he could have made a good prey unto himself (Joh 12:5-6). And it may be observed that, although Judas maliciously began this murmuring, yet at last some of the other disciples were too credulous of his insinuation, seeing the other evangelists ascribe it to them also. But the same pretense, on the same grounds, in following ages, was turned unto the greatest advantage of hypocrisy and covetousness that ever was in the world: for under this pretense of providing for the poor, the thieves who had got the bag—that is, the ruling part of the clergy, with the priests, friars, and monks, who served them—allowed men in the neglect of the greatest and most important duties of religion towards Christ Himself, so as that they would give all that they had to the poor; not that they cared for the poor, but because they were thieves, and had the bag; by which means they possessed themselves of the greatest part of the wealth of the nations

professing Christian religion. This was their compliance with the command of Christ, which they equally made use of in other things.

This foundation of their office was further raised by *the preaching of the gospel among the poor*. Many of them who first received it were of that state and condition as the Scripture everywhere testified: “The poor are evangelized” (see Mat 11:5); “God hath chosen the poor” (see Jam 2:5). And so it was in the first ages of the church, when the provision for them was one of the most eminent graces and duties of the church in those days. And this way became the original propagation of the gospel; for it was made manifest thereby that the doctrine and profession of it were not a matter of worldly design or advantage. God also declared therein of how little esteem with Him the riches of this world are. And also provision was made for the exercise of the grace of the rich in their supply, the only way whereby they may glorify God with their substance. And it were<sup>3</sup> well if all churches and all the members of them would wisely consider how eminent is this grace, how excellent is this duty, of making provision for the poor—how much the glory of Christ and honor of the gospel are concerned herein; for whereas, for the most part, it is looked on as an ordinary work, to be performed transiently and cursorily, scarce deserving any of the time which is allotted unto the church’s public service and duties, it is indeed one of the most eminent duties of Christian societies, wherein the principal

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<sup>3</sup> were – would be.

exercise of the second evangelical grace, namely, love, doth consist.

## 2. Institution by the Apostles

The care of making provision for the poor being made in the church an institution of Christ was naturally incumbent on them who were *the first, only officers of the church*, that is, the *apostles*. This is plain from the occasion of the institution of the office of the deacons (Act 6:1-6). The whole work and care of the church being in their hands, it was impossible that they should attend unto the whole and all the parts of it in any manner. Whereas, therefore, they gave themselves, according to their duty, mostly unto those parts of their work which were incomparably more excellent and necessary than the other—namely, preaching of the Word and prayer—there was such a defect in this other part, of ministration unto the poor, as must unavoidably accompany the actings of human nature, not able to apply itself constantly unto things of diverse natures at the same time. And hereon those who were concerned quickly, as the manner of all is, expressed their resentment of a neglect in somewhat an undue order; there was “a murmuring” about it (v. 1). The apostles hereon declared that the principal part of the work of the ministry in the church, namely, the Word and prayer, was sufficient for them constantly to attend unto. Afterward, indeed, men began to think that they could do *all* in the church themselves; but it was when they began to do *nothing* in

a due manner. And whereas the apostles chose as their duty the work of prayer and preaching, as that which they would and ought entirely to give up themselves unto, and for the sake of that work would deposit the care of other things in other hands, they are a strange kind of successors unto them who lay aside that work, which they determined to belong unto them principally and in the first place, to apply themselves unto anything else whatever.

Yet did not the apostles hereon utterly forego the care of providing for the poor, which being originally committed unto them by Jesus Christ, they would not divest themselves wholly of it; but, by the direction of the Holy Ghost, they provided such assistance in the work as that for the future it might require no more of their time or pains but what they should spare from their principal employment. And the same care is still incumbent on<sup>4</sup> the ordinary pastors and elders of the churches, so far as the execution of it doth not interfere with their principal work and duty; from which those who understand it aright can spare but little of their time and strength.

Hereon the apostles, by the authority of Christ and direction of the Holy Spirit, under whose infallible guidance they were in all the general concerns of the church, instituted the office of deacons for the discharge of this necessary and important duty in the church, which they could not attend unto themselves. And whereas the Lord Christ had

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<sup>4</sup> **incumbent on** – required of; necessary for as a duty or responsibility.

in an especial manner committed the care of the poor unto the disciples, there was now a declaration of His mind and will in what way and by what means He would have them provided for.

*a. A new office*

And it was the *institution of a new office*, and not a present supply in *a work of business*, which they designed; for the limitation of an especial ecclesiastical<sup>5</sup> work, with the designation of persons unto that work, with authority for the discharge of it, set over this business, with a separation unto it, do completely constitute an office, nor is there anything more required thereunto.

But whereas there are three things that concur and are required unto the ministration unto the poor of the church: 1. The love, charity, bounty, and benevolence of the members of the church, in contribution unto that ministration; 2. The care and oversight of the discharge of it; and 3. The actual exercise and application of it. The last only belongs unto the office of the deacons, and neither of the first is discharged by the institution of it; for the first is both a duty of the light and law of nature, and in its moral part enforced by many especial commands of Christ, so as that nothing can absolve men from their obligation thereunto. The office and work of the deacons is to excite, direct, and help them in the exercise of that grace and discharge of the duty therein incumbent on them. Nor is any man, by the

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<sup>5</sup> **ecclesiastical** – having to do with the church.

entrusting a due proportion of his good things in the hands of the deacons for its distribution, absolved thereby from his own personal discharge of it also; for it being a moral duty, required in the law of nature, it receiveth peculiar obligations unto a present exercise by such circumstances as nature and providence do suggest. The care also of the whole work is, as was said, still incumbent on the pastors and elders of the church, only the ordinary execution is committed unto the deacons.

### ***b. A permanent office***

Nor was this a *temporary institution*, for that season, and so the officers appointed *extraordinary*, but it was to abide in the church throughout all generations; for: 1) The *work itself*, as a distinct work of ministry in the church, was never to cease; it was to abide forever: “The poor always ye have with you” (Joh 12:8). 2) The *reason of its institution* is perpetual, namely, that the pastors of the churches are not sufficient in themselves to attend unto the whole work of praying, preaching, and this ministration. 3) They are afterward, not only in this church at Jerusalem, but in all the churches of the Gentiles, reckoned among the *fixed officers* of the church (Phi 1:1). And, 4) Direction is given for their *continuation* in all churches, with a prescription of the qualifications of the persons to be chosen and called unto this office (1Ti 3:8-10, 12, 13). 5) The way of their call is directed, and an *office* committed unto them: “Let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon” (1Ti 3:10). 6. A *promise of*

*acceptance* is annexed unto the diligent discharge of this office (v. 13).

***c. Its corruption***

Hence those who afterward utterly perverted all church-order, taking out of the hands and care of the deacons that work which was committed to them by the Holy Ghost in the apostles, and for which end alone their office was instituted in the church, assigning other work unto them, whereunto they are not called nor appointed, yet thought meet to continue the name and the pretense of such an office, because of the evident institution of it unto a continuation. And whereas, when all things were swelling with pride and ambition in the church, no sort of its officers contenting themselves with their primitive institution, but striving by various degrees to somewhat in name and thing that was high and aloft, there arose from the name of this office the meteor of an archdeacon, with strange power and authority, never heard of in the church for many ages, this belongs unto the mystery of iniquity, whereunto neither the Scripture nor the practice of the primitive churches doth give the least countenance. But some think it not inconvenient even to sport themselves in matters of church order and constitution.

### 3. Its Nature and Purpose

#### *a. An office of service*

This office of deacons is an office of service, which gives not any authority or power in the rule of the church; but being an office, it gives authority with respect unto the special work of it, under a general notion of authority; that is, a right to attend unto it in a peculiar manner, and to perform the things that belong thereunto. But this right is confined unto the particular church whereunto they do belong. Of the members of that church are they to make their collections, and unto the members of that church are they to administer. Extraordinary collections from or for other churches are to be made and disposed by the elders (Act 11:30).

#### *b. To free the pastors*

Whereas the reason of the institution of this office was, in general, to free the pastors of the churches who labor in the Word and doctrine from avocations<sup>6</sup> by outward things, such as wherein the church is concerned, it belongs unto the deacons not only to take care of and provide for the poor, but to manage all other affairs of the church of the same kind; such as are providing for the place of the church-assemblies, of the elements for the sacraments, of collecting, keeping, and disposing of the stock<sup>7</sup> of the church for the maintenance of its

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<sup>6</sup> **avocations** – things which call aside, or divert, from ordinary or principal responsibilities.

<sup>7</sup> **stock** – funds; supplies.

officers and incidences, especially in the time of trouble or persecution. Hereon are they obliged to attend<sup>8</sup> the elders on all occasions, to perform the duty of the church towards them, and receive directions from them. This was the constant practice of the church in the primitive times, until the avarice<sup>9</sup> and ambition of the superior clergy enclosed all alms and donations unto themselves; the beginning and progress whereof is excellently described and traced by Paulus Sarpus<sup>10</sup> in his treatise of matters beneficiary.<sup>11</sup>

### ***b. Church collections***

That maintenance of the poor which they are to distribute is to be collected by the voluntary contributions of the church, to be made ordinarily every first day of the week, and as occasion shall require in an extraordinary manner (1Co 16:1-2). And this contribution of the church ought to be 1) in a way of *bounty*, not sparingly (2Co 9:5-7); 2) in a way of *equality*, as unto men's abilities (2Co 8:13-14); 3) with respect unto *present successes* and thriving in affairs, whereof a portion is due to God, "as God hath prospered him" (1Co 16:2); 4) with *willingness* and freedom (2Co 8:12). Wherefore it belongs unto the deacons, in the discharge of their office, 1) to acquaint the church with the present necessity of the

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<sup>8</sup> **attend** – wait on; serve.

<sup>9</sup> **avarice** – greed; covetousness.

<sup>10</sup> **Paolo Sarpi** (1552-1623) – Venetian historian, prelate, scientist, canon lawyer, and statesman; wrote *History of Ecclesiastical Benefices*.

<sup>11</sup> **beneficiary** – relating to benefices (church offices or property).

poor; 2) to stir up the particular members of it unto a free contribution, according unto their ability; 3) to admonish those that are negligent herein, who give not according to their proportion, and to acquaint the elders of the church with those who persist in a neglect of their duty.

### ***c. The state of the poor***

The consideration of the state of the poor, unto whom the contributions of the church are to be administered, belongs unto the discharge of this office; as, 1) that they are *poor indeed*, and do not pretend themselves so to be for advantage; 2) what are the *degrees* of their poverty, with respect unto their relations and circumstances, that they may have suitable supplies; 3) that in other things they walk *according unto rule*; 4) in particular, that they *work and labor* according to their ability, for he that will not labor must not eat at the public charge; 5) to comfort, counsel, and exhort them unto patience, submission, contentment with their condition, and thankfulness. All these might be enlarged and confirmed, except that they are obvious.

### ***d. Qualifications for deacons***

The qualifications of persons to be called unto this office are distinctly laid down by the apostle (1Ti 3:8-13). Upon the trial, knowledge, and approbation<sup>12</sup> of them, with respect unto these qualifications, their call to this office consists, 1) in the *choice* of the church; 2) in a *separation* unto it by

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<sup>12</sup> **approbation** – approval.

prayer and imposition of hands (Act 6:3, 5, 6). And the adjuncts<sup>13</sup> of their ministration are, 1) *mercy*, to represent the tenderness of Christ towards the poor of the flock (Rom 12:8); 2) *cheerfulness*, to relieve the spirits of them that receive against thoughts of being troublesome and burdensome to others; 3) *diligence* and faithfulness, by which they “purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus” (1Ti 3:13).

### *e. A few questions answered*

It remains only that we inquire into some few things relating unto this office and those that are called unto it; as,

1. *What is the meaning of the apostle where he affirms that the deacons, in the discharge of their office, βαθμὸν ἑαυτοῖς καλὸν περιποιοῦνται, “purchase [or procure] to themselves a good degree” (1Ti 3:13)?*

*Answer:* Βαθμός is “a step, a degree, a seat a little exalted”; and metaphorically it is applied to denote dignity and authority. This good degree, which deacons may obtain, is, in the judgment of most, the office of presbytery.<sup>14</sup> This they shall be promoted unto in the church; from deacons they shall be made presbyters. I cannot comply with this interpretation of the words; for, 1) the office of presbytery is called καλὸν ἔργον, “a good work,” nowhere καλὸς βαθμός, “a good degree.” 2) The difference between

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<sup>13</sup> **adjuncts** – attributes; characteristics.

<sup>14</sup> **presbytery** – eldership.

a deacon and a presbyter is not in degree but in order. A deacon made a presbyter is not advanced unto a farther degree in his own order but leaves it for another. 3) The diligent discharge of the work of a deacon is not a due preparation for the office of the presbytery, but a hinderance of it; for it lies wholly in the providing and disposal of earthly things, in a serving of the tables of the church, and those private, of the poor; but preparation for the ministry consists in a man's giving himself unto study, prayer, and meditation.

I shall only give my conjecture on the words. The apostle seems to me to have respect unto church-order, with decency therein, in both these expressions: "purchase to themselves a good degree" and "great boldness in the faith" (1Ti 3:13). Βαθμός is of the same signification with Βαθμῖς, which is a seat raised in an assembly, to hear or speak. So saith the scholium<sup>15</sup> on Sophocles,<sup>16</sup> Oedipus Tyrannus 142: "The place where the assembly (or church) met was divided round about with seats in degrees, some above others, where all that met might without trouble hear him that stood in the midst as they sat." And countenance is given hereunto by what is observed concerning the custom of sitting in the Jewish synagogues. So Ambrose:<sup>17</sup> "It is the tradition (or order) of the synagogue, that the elders in dignity

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<sup>15</sup> **scholium** – marginal explanatory note made by a commentator.

<sup>16</sup> **Sophocles** (c. 497 BC -c. 406 BC) – ancient Greek playwright.

<sup>17</sup> **Ambrose of Milan** (c. 339-c. 397) – theologian and statesman who served as Bishop of Milan from 374 to 397; had a notable influence on Augustine of Hippo.

(or office) should discourse sitting in chairs, the next order on forms (or benches), and the last on the floor.” So speaks Philo<sup>18</sup> before him: “When we meet in sacred places,” places of divine worship, “the younger sort, according to their quality, sit in orders under the elders.” And this James the apostle hath respect unto, in the primitive assemblies of the Christian Jews; for, reproving their partiality in accepting of men’s persons, preferring the rich immoderately before the poor, he instanceth in their disposing of them unto seats in their assemblies. They said unto the rich man, “Σὺ κάθου ὧδε καλῶς,” “Sit thou here in a good place,”—that is, in βᾶθμῳ καλῶ, “in the best degree”—and to the poor, “Stand thou there,” on the floor, or, “Sit at my footstool,” without respect unto those other qualifications whereby they were to be distinguished (see Jam 2:3). Wherefore, the apostle having respect unto church-assemblies, and the order to be observed in them, the καλὸς βαθμὸς here intended may signify no more but a place of some eminency in the church-assemblies, which is due unto such deacons, where with boldness and confidence they may assist in the management of the affairs of the church, which belongs unto the profession of the faith which is in Christ Jesus. If any shall rather think that both of the expressions do signify an increase in gifts and grace, which is a certain consequence of men’s faithful discharge of their office in the church, wherein

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<sup>18</sup> **Philo of Alexandria** (c. 20 BC-c. AD 50) – Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria, Egypt.

many deacons of old were eminent unto martyrdom, I shall not contend against it.

2. *Whereas there are qualifications expressly required in the wives of deacons, as that they should be “grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things” (1Ti 3:11), which are to be considered before their call to office, supposing that any of them do fall from the faith, as becoming Papists, Socinians, or Quakers,<sup>19</sup> [it is asked] whether their husbands may be continued in their office?*

*Answer:* 1) He who in his own person faithfully dischargeth his office may be continued therein, yea, though his wife should be actually excommunicated out of the church. Every one of us must give an account of himself unto the Lord. He rejects us not for what we cannot remedy. The sinning person shall bear his own judgment. 2) Such an one ought to take care, by virtue of his authority as a husband, that as little offence<sup>20</sup> as possible may be given to the church by his wife when she loseth the qualification of not being a slanderer, which is inseparable from such apostates.

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<sup>19</sup> **Papists** – Roman Catholics.

**Socinians** – followers of the teachings of Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), who rejected the deity of Christ, the Trinity, and original sin, and influenced the development of Unitarian theology.

**Quakers** – followers of the teaching of George Fox (1624-1691), who believed in direct illumination from God, which they elevated to a place of spiritual authority over Scripture.

<sup>20</sup> **offence** – stumbling-block; what becomes an occasion for someone to sin; see Free Grace Broadcaster #262 *Stumbling Blocks*; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

3. *May a deacon be dismissed from his office wholly<sup>21</sup> after he hath been solemnly set apart unto it by prayer?*

*Answer:* 1) The very end<sup>22</sup> of the office being only the convenience of the church and its accommodation, the continuation of men in this office is to be regulated by them; and if the church at any time stand<sup>23</sup> not in need of the ministry of this or that person, they may, upon his desire, discharge him of his office. 2) Things may so fall out with men as unto their outward circumstances, with respect unto either their persons in bodily distempers<sup>24</sup> and infirmities, or their condition in the world, as that they are not able any longer to attend unto the due discharge of this office; in which case they ought to be released. 3) A man may be solemnly set apart unto a work and duty by prayer for a limited season, suppose for a year only; wherefore this doth not hinder but that a man may, on just reasons, be dismissed at any time from his office, though he be so set apart unto it. 4) A deacon, by unfaithfulness and other offences, may forfeit his office and be justly excluded from it, losing all his right unto it and interest in it; and therefore, on just reasons, may be dismissed wholly from it. 5) For anyone to desert his office through frowardness,<sup>25</sup> covetousness, sloth, or negligence is an offence and scandal which the church

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<sup>21</sup> **wholly** – completely.

<sup>22</sup> **end** – purpose.

<sup>23</sup> **stand** – be.

<sup>24</sup> **distempers** – diseases; maladies.

<sup>25</sup> **frowardness** – perverseness; disobedience.

ought to take notice of. 6) He who desires a dismission from his office ought to give an account of his desires and the reasons of them unto the church, that the ministry which he held may be duly supplied, and love continued between him and the church.

*4. How many deacons may there be in one congregation?*

*Answer:* As many as they stand in need of for the ends<sup>26</sup> of that ministry, and they may be at all times increased as the state of the church doth require; and it is meet<sup>27</sup> that there should always be so many as that none of the poor be neglected in the daily ministration, nor the work be made burdensome unto themselves.

*5. What is the duty of the deacons towards the elders of the church?*

*Answer:* Whereas the care of the whole church, in all its concernments,<sup>28</sup> is principally committed unto the pastors, teachers, and ruling elders, it is the duty of the deacons, in the discharge of their office, 1) to acquaint them from time to time with the state of the church, and especially of the poor, so far as it falls under their inspection; 2) to seek and take their advice in matters of greater importance relating unto their office; 3) to be assisting unto them in all the outward concerns of the church.

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<sup>26</sup> **ends** – purposes.

<sup>27</sup> **meet** – fitting; proper.

<sup>28</sup> **concernments** – concerns.

6. *May deacons preach the Word and baptize authoritatively by virtue of their office?*

*Answer:* 1) The deacons, whose office is instituted [in] Acts 6, and whose qualifications are fixed [in] 1 Timothy 3, have no call unto or ministerial power in these things. The limitation of their office, work, and power is so express as will not admit of any debate. 2) Persons once called unto this office might of old in an extraordinary manner, may at present in an ordinary way, be called unto the preaching of the Word; but they were not then, they cannot be now, authorized thereunto by virtue of this office. 3) If a *new office* be erected under the name of deacons, it is in the will of them by whom it is erected to assign what power unto it they please.<sup>29</sup>



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<sup>29</sup> Owen is sarcastically alluding to the Roman Catholic view of the office, which is greatly expanded beyond the deacon's responsibility to care for the poor and outward concerns. In effect, he is saying, "If your office of deacon is your own invention, then you decide what the office entails!"