

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time*

Qualified Servants for the Church: Deacons (Part 1)

INTRODUCTION

When I think of the word "deacon" I remember a certain austere man who grabbed me by the ear and marched me out of my Sunday school class. I hate to admit it, but that happened on several occasions! In my younger days deacons represented authority in the church. In most of the churches I grew up in they were the spiritual leaders of the church. In many churches today they are the ruling body, even the pastor may be employed by and work for the deacons.

Many people in churches seem to attain the title of deacon because with it comes honor and respect in the community. Other churches have no deacons. In still other churches, particularly in liturgical churches, deacons are identified as a sub-order to the priests. They serve as a clerical order maintaining the facilities or administering the business of the church.

LESSON

I. A STUDY OF DEACONS

However, if we're to understand the biblical meaning of deacon, we need to eliminate any preconceived definitions. Paul refers to the office of deacon four times in 1 Timothy (vv. 8, 10, 12, 13). In that passage we will study the responsibility of the deacons in the church. Understand that in no sense does Scripture present deacons as inferior to elders, overseers, or pastors. In fact, you will find that the qualifications for being a deacon are not unlike those for an elder. The qualifications for both examine a man's personal life, character, home life, leadership capability, and commitment to serving the Lord's church.

In 1 Timothy 3:8-13 Paul says, "In like manner must the deacons be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre, holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let the deacons be husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good standing, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus." As you can see, there is no less a premium on spiritual maturity and moral purity for a deacon when compared to an elder.

A. An Overview of Diakonos

The Greek words "diakonos" ("servant"), "diakonia" ("service") and "diakone[ma]o" ("to serve") are used at least one hundred times in the New Testament. The original sense of those words referred to serving. In 1 Timothy 3 "diakonos" is transliterated rather than translated. In only two New Testament passages did the translators of the King James version choose to transliterate those terms rather than translate them (four times in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and once in Philippians 1:1).

1. Its original meaning

"Diakonia" originally referred to serving tables. "diakonos" was probably the word for waiter. Eventually "diakonia" was broadened to mean any kind of service.

2. Its specific meaning

The meaning of "diakonos" is primarily non-specific except for its uses in 1 Timothy 3 and Philippians 1:1. Only in those two cases did the editors transliterate it, as if to set it apart in a specific sense to refer to a group of select people called to serve the church.

3. Its general meaning

Every other use of "diakonos, diakonia, and diakone[ma]o" is general, not necessarily referring to any specific office in the church. The New Testament writers used them like we use the words servant, serve, and service. We go to a service station for gas. When we play tennis we serve the ball. We serve our employer. We serve our nation.

For the most part "diakonia" is translated "service" or "ministry." In some cases it is translated "administration" because of the context. In Acts 11:29 it is translated "relief" because the service referred to was giving resources to people suffering from a famine.

B. An Example of Diakonos

The original and most limited meaning of "diakonia" has to do with serving food.

1. John 2:5, 9-

When Jesus was at a wedding in Cana, "His mother saith unto the servants [Gk., "diakonos"--the waiters], Whatever he saith unto you, do it" (v. 5). Then verse 9 says, "When the ruler [head waiter of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not from where it was (but the servants who drew the water knew), the governor of the feast called the bridegroom." In that passage "diakonos" was used for a group of waiters at a wedding.

2. Luke 4:39-

Peter's mother-in-law became very ill. After Jesus healed her, the text says, "Immediately she arose and ministered [Gk. diakone[ma]o] to them." The context implies she ministered by serving a meal.

Three other texts in the gospels use "diakonos" in reference to serving a meal (Luke 10:40; 17:8; John 12:2).

C. The Meaning of Diakonos

1. Level one--general service

"diakonos" was broadened from its limited meaning to apply to all kinds of general service.

a) Romans 13:4--Here "diakonos" is used to describe a government official or servant. Such officials punish evildoers and reward those who do well.

b) John 12:26--Jesus said, "If any man serve me, let him follow me." Following Jesus constitutes "diakonia"--service or ministry.

As the gospel and epistle writers adapted the term, they used it in a broad sense for all kinds of spiritual service. Based on what Jesus said, they identified following Christ with serving Him. Spiritual service is the major emphasis of the Christian life. Anything we do in obedience to God's Word is service. In that sense we're all in the ministry. In no sense do deacons serve and everyone else watches. There isn't a leadership level made up of elders and pastors, a service level made up of deacons, and a spectator level made up of all other believers. There is no audience in the church--we are all in the ministry. We've all been called to submit ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. He said, "Where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honor" (John 12:26). We all are His servants.

c) 1 Corinthians 12:4-5--Within this broad range of service, "there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations [Gk., diakonia]."

All Christians are in some form of spiritual service. All are deacons in that general sense because we all are to serve in a variety of ways.

d) 2 Corinthians 9:1--"As touching the ministering to the saints..." Here Paul begins a discussion about our common role of serving the saints. We're all to be engaged in service. We serve God every time we obey His Word and His Spirit. Every time I do that which is right, I offer service to Him. And we serve one another when we meet each other's needs.

e) Ephesians 4:11-12---"He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting [maturing] of the saints for the work of the ministry [Gk., diakonia]." My job as an elder and pastor is to mature the saints so they can serve others.

All of us are called as servants of Christ. We're under orders. Christ is our Lord and master. He has called us into spiritual service. We serve Him by obeying the Word of God, following the promptings of the Spirit of God, coming under the authority of the church, and meeting the needs of those around us. It's one thing to say, "I'm proud to be able to serve my country," or "I'm proud to have served this great cause." But that doesn't come close to being able to say "I have been called into service by the King of kings and Lord of lords--Jesus Christ Himself." That is our high and holy calling--the vocation to which we are called (Eph. 4:1).

2. Level two--gifted service

In Romans 12:4-7 Paul says, "As we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry [Gk., diakonia], let us wait on our ministering [Gk., "diakone[ma]o]."

Here Paul identifies special gifts of service. It is parallel to his use of the gifts of helps in 1 Corinthians 12:28. God has uniquely designed some people to serve. While everyone is in the service of Christ, some have been specially gifted by the Spirit of God to serve.

In 1 Corinthians 16:15 Paul says, "I beseech you, brethren (ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the first fruits of Achaia [the first converts in the province of Achaia], and that they have devoted themselves to the ministry [Gk., diakonia] of the saints)." The entire family was characterized by serving others. We all are to be serving others, but some of us are especially gifted in that area.

3. Level three--official service

In my judgment the only specific scriptural discussion of the office of deacon is in 1 Timothy 3. It constitutes a third level of spiritual service in addition to every believer's general service and the gifted service of specific believers. Deacons serve in an official capacity as servants of the church. We could just as easily call them servants.

a) The similarity to elders

Although they are servants, deacons aren't supposed to do all the work---they are to be models of spiritual virtue for everyone else. In that sense they stand alongside the elders. Elders and deacons

are not on different spiritual planes. Elders have been given authority because they exercise the power of God's Word in their teaching. But deacons are to be equal to elders in every other respect.

In fact, there's no difference in their spiritual qualifications.

b) The difference from elders

While deacons are to be as godly as elders, they differ from them in terms of their ability to teach. The authority of pastors and elders is based on their proclamation and exposition of God's Word. Yet right alongside the elders come those who implement what's been taught and whose lives are no less godly than theirs. Deacons are to seem to raise the congregation to the highest level of spiritual virtue, not to set themselves apart as abnormally pious people whom the congregation could never expect to imitate.

In Philippians 1:1 Paul addresses his letter to "bishops and deacons [Gk., diakonos]" at Philippi. That could be a reference to official deacons, or it could be simply a reference to the leaders and followers in a general sense. However the references in 1 Timothy 3 are definitely specific about the office of deacon.

D. The Alleged References to Diakonos

Some have argued that there are other specific references to deacons elsewhere in Scripture. We will examine those alleged references.

1. Regarding certain men

a) Paul

Some believe Paul was a deacon. That's a major issue for those who advocate deacon rulership in the church. But Paul was an apostle, not a deacon. He himself said, "I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office" (Rom. 11:13). The Greek word translated "office" is diakonia. Paul was saying that he gloried in serving Christ. He was a deacon in a general, non-specific sense. All of us, whatever our ministry involvement may be, are to render service to God. But Paul's office was that of an apostle. Paul talked about his service many times, but he was always clear to say that he was an apostle (e.g., 2 Cor. 10-12).

b) Timothy

In 1 Timothy 4:6 Paul says to Timothy, "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister [Gk., diakonos] of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, unto which thou hast attained." Based on that verse some have said Timothy was a

deacon, and a good deacon at that. But we know that Timothy was not a deacon in the traditional sense. In 2 Timothy 4:5 Paul says to him, "Do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry [Gk., diakonia]." Timothy's "diakonia" was his office as an evangelist--a proclaimer and preacher--a role quite distinct from the office of deacon.

c) Tychicus

In Ephesians 6:21 Paul calls Tychicus "a faithful minister [Gk., diakonos]." Three times in Ephesians Paul used diakonos, but never in a technical way. He always used it in reference to general service. Therefore we can't assume Tychicus was a deacon.

d) Epaphras

In Colossians 1:7 Paul called Epaphras "a faithful minister [Gk., diakonos]." Paul also referred to himself as a "diakonos" in Colossians 1:23, 25. Since we are certain Paul wasn't calling himself a deacon, it is unlikely he was calling Epaphras one either.

2. Regarding Acts 6

Many people believe that the first deacons in the church are the seven men referred to in Acts 6. However those men are never called deacons.

a) The account

Acts 6:1 says, "In those days [the time of Passover] ... the number of the disciples was multiplied." There was as many as twenty thousand believers in Jerusalem, a good percentage of them pilgrims who came to the city for the feasts. When they believed in Christ, many remained and became part of the church.

There were two kinds of Jews in the world--Palestinian Jews (those who lived in Palestine) and Hellenistic Jews (those who had been born and raised outside of Palestine in the Greek world). The Hellenistic Jews would travel to Jerusalem for the Passover.

(1) The problem

With such a large number of Hellenistic Jews joining Palestinian Jews as Christians within a rapidly growing church body, a problem surfaced. Acts 6:1 says, "There arose a murmuring of the Grecians [the Hellenistic Jews] against the Hebrews [the Palestinian Jews], because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations." There may have been several hundred widows in the church who needed care--many of them being Hellenistic Jews.

Caring for the Poor and Needy

Christian widows came under the care of the church--a function the church inherited from a common Jewish practice. The Jewish people had--and still have--a strong commitment to caring for the poor and needy. That commitment was based on God's instruction in the Old Testament. Over the years they developed sophisticated means for meeting needs. William Barclay tells us that every Friday morning in the synagogue two collectors went to the marketplace and homes to collect money and goods to give to the poor and needy. Those resources were then distributed to those in need in the community.

Those who had a temporary need received just enough to see them through their difficulty; those who required regular support received enough for fourteen meals--two meals a day for seven days. They called that distribution the "Kuppah" or Basket. In addition a daily collection of food was made from house to house for those who were in an emergency situation and needed food for that day. That distribution was called the Tamhui, or Tray (The Acts of the Apostles, revised ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976], p. 51).

The Jewish people didn't emphasize one person giving to another in need; they emphasized that the resources should be given to the synagogue so that wise men in positions of leadership could distribute it properly.

The church picked up the practice of the synagogue. But an argument ensued in the church when the Hellenistic Jews complained that their widows weren't receiving their fair share of the food that was distributed.

(2) The solution

How were the leaders of the church going to solve that problem?

(a) The dilemma of the twelve

Acts 6:2 says, "The twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not fitting that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables." That is a stated line of demarcation: some people in the church need to be teaching the Word of God and others need to be taking care of the business of the church. That line of demarcation stands intact in the pastoral epistles. The priority for the apostles was not to leave the Word of God to distribute food. They were trying to disciple thousands of brand-new converts. That was a tremendous task--one they couldn't leave to spend time determining how to bring equity in the matter of food distribution.

(b) The decision of the twelve

Acts 6:3 says, "Wherefore, brethren, look among you for seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business."

Notice that they were appointed for a specific task. There's no reference to an office in that verse. Then verse 4 says, "We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry [Gk., diakonia] of the word."

The only uses of "diakonia" were in reference to the apostles (v. 4) and to the daily "diakonia" of serving the widows (v. 1). There is no place where the seven men are called deacons. The apostles performed their service (proclaiming the Word) and the people performed theirs (passing out food to the widows). But those two verses do not refer to deacons specifically.

Based on Acts 6:2, the post-apostolic church of Rome allowed for only seven deacons to pass out goods to the poor. But I don't believe the Holy Spirit intended for Acts 6:2 to establish some ongoing order.

(c) The delegation of the twelve

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

b) The answer

There are three reasons I don't believe those seven men were actual deacons.

(1) The general use of diakonia

Luke (the author of Acts) used diakonia" in a general sense to mean service. The only time it is used in reference to certain individuals is in verse 4, where it is connected with the apostles.

The New Testament never refers to the seven men as deacons. In fact, the book of Acts never refers to deacons, something we would expect if those seven men were the first of a new order. One would expect them to be in evidence in Acts 11 when a famine occurred in Judea. Acts 11:29-30 indicates that the church at Antioch as a whole, not a special order of deacons, sent relief to the elders in Judea.

(2) The specific nature of the task

Those seven men were chosen for a specific task. They were honest so they could be trusted with money, and they were full of the Spirit and wisdom so they could discern the needs of people. They were chosen for a one-time crisis, not installed into a full-time office. If they had been chosen as deacons, we can be confident they would have appeared later on in the book of Acts.

Interestingly all seven of them had Greek names. If they were to be an ongoing group of deacons in the church at Jerusalem, it seems strange that they would have all been Greek Jews. But if they were appointed for the specific task of relieving Hellenistic widows, it makes sense that the people would choose Greeks to do that.

However, Acts 6 does provide us with a preliminary look at the function of deacons. Here the apostles were devoted to the Word and prayer while the seven took care of a certain task. That kind of organization is basic to the church. According to 1 Timothy 3 the elders are to focus on teaching the Word and overseeing the church while the deacons are to focus on implementing and applying the Word.

(3) The implied elder role of the men

Acts 6 does give us an historic precedent of the function of deacons, but the seven men were not actual deacons. In many ways they were more like elders. Acts 6:7 says, "The word of God increased." Why did it increase? Because the apostles were free to devote their time to the Word and prayer. Verses 7-8 continue, "The number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. And Stephen [one of the seven], full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people." Could it be that the others did the same? Those seven men may well have been specially gifted evangelists who went out into the city performing signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds as they preached.

We know that Philip, another of the seven, was a powerful, wonder-working preacher (Acts 8:5-8). If the other five were like Stephen and Philip, they were more like apostles than deacons.

II. THE SETTING OF 1 TIMOTHY 3

Paul wrote 1 Timothy about A.D. 64. The church had been in existence for approximately thirty years. (Christ was crucified just after A.D. 30.) Timothy was serving as the pastor of the church at Ephesus--a church that had grown and developed initially under Paul for three years (Acts 20:31), and then under leaders trained by Paul.

It had become apparent to Paul that the church at Ephesus needed not only teachers of the Word who served as overseers and elders, but also administrators and workers to implement what the

elders taught. A growing number of people had risen into places of official service. So Paul instructed Timothy on the type of men that he should choose to do that work.

There is a level of service we're all to be engaged in, a level of service for those specifically gifted to serve, and a level of service for properly qualified people who represent and implement the authority of the elders and pastors of the church. We don't know exactly when elders and deacons became established roles in the church, but we do know that by the time Paul wrote 1 Timothy those offices were recognized and filled by models of spiritual virtue. Elders and Deacons Compared and Contrasted

First Timothy 3:8-13 mentions nothing about the specific duties of deacons. But it does discuss personal characteristics, just like the section on elders in verses 1-7.

1. Elders

If I had to define my task as a pastor and elder, I would sum it up simply by saying this: win, teach, train, send. We don't have to work hard to determine what we're supposed to do. We are to teach the Word of God. Why? To win people to Christ. Why? So they can grow in the faith. Why? So they can be trained to win people to Christ. Then we send them out to do that very thing.

2. Deacons

Deacons help the elders implement their task. The distinction between the two is that Scripture says the elders must be able to teach. That doesn't mean deacons can't teach or shouldn't teach. They certainly should be strong in sound doctrine. Also they should be full of faith, full of the Spirit, full of wisdom, and possessing a good reputation--like the men in Acts 6. They ought to be people of integrity. To state that deacons are not the primary teachers in the church doesn't mean that they are ignorant theologically. First Timothy 3:9 says they hold "the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience." That means they not only know the truth but also live the truth.

Conclusion

Everyone in the church is to serve in some way. Some serve with unique gifts and some serve in an official capacity. And they can be men or women (1 Tim. 3:11). They are models of service to Christ and His church. The qualifications for both elders and deacons are the same, but deacons function under the leadership of the elders. Nevertheless deacons, whether male or female, must be considered as leaders in the church. They are to lead by example. Every church needs both pastoral leadership and servant leadership. We couldn't accomplish a thing if it weren't for the men and women who carry out the administration, implementation, and application of God's Word.

Focusing on the Facts

1. In what ways are the qualifications for elders and deacons parallel?
2. Define "diakonia" and the related words "diakonos" and diakone[ma]o. For the most part, how did the New Testament writers use those words?
3. What was the original and most limited meaning of "diakonia"?
4. In what sense are all Christians in the ministry?
5. What does Romans 12:7 indicate about the service rendered by some people?
6. In what function are do elders differ from deacons?
7. Why couldn't Paul have been a deacon?
8. Why couldn't Timothy have been a deacon?
9. What do many people assume happened in Acts 6?
10. According to Acts 6:1, what problem surfaced in the church at Jerusalem?
11. What practice did the church adapt from the synagogue? Explain.
12. How did the leaders of the Jerusalem church solve the problem?
13. Why are the seven men mentioned in Acts 6:5 probably not deacons? Explain each reason.
14. Why did Paul write to Timothy about the qualifications for elders and deacons?
15. Compare and contrast elders to deacons.

Pondering the Principles

1. Read John 12:26. What kind of people does God honor? Does that mean He honors elders and deacons only, or all believers? What does it mean to follow Christ? Based on your answers, does your life prove you are a follower of Christ? A true believer cannot merely come to church, listen to the sermon, enjoy fellowship with the people, and then leave. He or she must be actively involved in

serving Christ.

What can you do today to begin to fulfill your role as a follower of Christ? To help you in your task, memorize John 12:26: "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" (NASB).

2. According to Acts 6:3 the people were to look for men who were "of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." Acts 6:5 mentions that Stephen was also "full of faith." Those characteristics identify seven men of integrity. Can you be characterized as a person of integrity? On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate yourself in each of those four characteristics? Which one are you weakest in? Make it your goal this weem to improve your Christian walm in that area. For example, if you are weakest in your faith, look up "faith" in a concordance and do a word study on that topic. Or you might make a list of all the times God has been faithful in blessing your life, and that in turn will increase your faith in Him.

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