

Deacons

Introduction

- † Just before Christmas, we were studying God’s plan for the structure of the church.
 - The first week, we learned that the apostles developed a structure for the church, with Christ in total authority at the head; his chosen apostles in complete authority under Christ through the scripture they left us; a senior pastor/lead elder guiding a team of pastor/elders to represent the apostles as they lead each local church; a supporting cast of deacons and other spiritual leaders to help the pastor/elders; and the entire church body engaging in the work of the ministry.
 - The second week, we looked in detail at the criteria and responsibilities of pastor/elders in the church. The third week, we talked about God’s expectations for every believer. Today, we consider the specific issue of “deacons.”

Deacons

- † The New Testament is much vaguer about “deacons” than it is about elders. The Greek term, δίακονος, means an agent, intermediary, or assistant for someone else.
 - In the gospels, the term appears in seven passages, always meaning a servant who assists in getting something done. For example, in **John 12.26 NET**: [Jesus says] **“If anyone wants to serve me, he must follow me, and where I am, my servant will be too.”**
 - In the epistles, the term appears in eighteen passages, and in fifteen of them it clearly means an agent or intermediary. For example, in **1 Corinthians 3.5 NET**: [Paul says] **“What is Apollos, really? Or what is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, and each of us in the ministry the Lord gave us”**; so Paul called himself a servant or agent of Christ. At the start of the letter, he called himself an apostle, which was the highest office a person could have under Christ, so we know here he means he is an agent of Christ, not a church deacon.
 - Twice in his letters, Paul used the term differently. E.g. **Philippians 1.1 NET**: **“From Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the saints [believers] in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.”** Here, the deacons appear to be a particular group of people, distinct from the overseers [pastor/elders] and distinct from the rest of the church [saints or believers]. So we tentatively concluded before that deacons here represented a group of spiritual leaders who were helping the elders in the local church.
- † There is a similar verb form, διακονέω, which meant to act as an agent, to serve, to help, to minister, or to wait on a table. Verbs and nouns with similar structure do not always carry the same meaning, but here we see these are somewhat related.
 - In the New Testament other than Paul’s letters, the verb never seems to refer to official ministry; it refers to serving, helping, waiting on tables, and once acting as an agent.
 - The only exception might be in Acts 6.2, where the usage is ambiguous. We’ll talk about that passage later.
 - In Paul’s letters, he uses this verb eight times, and six clearly mean to serve or act as an agent, but in 1 Timothy 3 he uses it twice in the context of discussing official deacons. E.g. **1 Timothy**

3.13 NET: For those who have served well *as deacons* gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

- † I am sharing all this data with you so you can know I have studied this thoroughly and so you can see that there is not a lot of biblical data about the office of deacons. Philippians 1.1 declares they exist and 1 Timothy 3.8-13 gives some criteria for them. But there is no clear biblical teaching on what they did, though we can assume they helped the elders with ministry duties in the local church.
- The early church documents are general also. 1 Clement [42.4] affirms that the apostles established the office of deacons and appointed many of the original deacons in local churches.
 - Ignatius' letter to the Magnesians [6.4] says the deacons, along with the elders, have been entrusted with the ministry of Christ.
 - The Didache [15.1] says the church should appoint deacons as needed to carry out the ministry.
 - The Shepherd of Hermes says deacons were in charge of ministry to widows and orphans [Parable 9.26.2]. So here is our first detail about what they did.
 - The third century writing, the Didascalia [16] says deacons assisted with water baptism and people's preparation for it, which involved teaching them the basics of faith.
 - Ministering to widows and orphans, helping with water baptism, and preparing people theologically for baptism; that's all we know.
- † So there is not much to go on. One problem today is we get fixed ideas in our minds which are based on post-reformation traditions more than biblical or early church traditions.
- There is no indication in scripture that deacons were outside the authority of the elders as you see in some Baptist churches; there is no indication the deacons met as a board; there is no indication the deacons had to handle specific issues like buildings or finances. All we know for sure is they helped the pastor/elders carry out the ministry.
 - We have seen what pastor/elders are supposed to be doing. I can speak from experience that it would be helpful to have spiritual leaders from the congregation to help carry out those responsibilities. Pastor/elders could focus better on their scriptural duties if others were taking care of ensuring the logistical needs of the ministry are met, helping with volunteer recruitment, and overseeing the ministry teams.
 - We also need help with the teaching, mentoring, and evangelism of the church. It is possible that deacons were some of the other teachers in the church mentioned in Ephesians 4. Another common preconception is that elders teach while deacons don't, but that is not found in scripture, while scripture does teach that people other than elders were teaching in the church and at least by the third century it was the deacons who were teaching new converts sufficient theology to prepare them for water baptism and entrance into the church community.
- † It would be handy if we could say that the term deacon is generic for ministry team leaders and spiritual leaders under the elders. But there are some indications that not all spiritual leaders were deacons. It could be that the deacons headed up ministry teams while others who taught, exhorted, mentored, and evangelized were spiritual leaders in that sense but not in charge of teams. Again, there just is not enough information from the New Testament and early church literature for us to be dogmatic about it.

- I would say that everyone in the church should aspire all the time to spiritual maturity and leadership at least in the sense of contributing to the ministry through evangelizing, mentoring, teaching, encouraging, giving, and otherwise serving. Many of you are already doing this, particularly a proportionately large number of you who teach our children and youth. [Yay!]
 - You also should aspire to grow to the point that from time to time you can head up one of our teams or lead a small group under the authority of the pastor/elders.
 - Mark, Linda, Cheryl, LeeAnn, Peter, and Shannon have all led adult small groups since I arrived.
 - Dan and Jesse led the youth group for years. Linda heads up the children’s ministry, including VBS. Matt now is the head of our Christian Service Brigade for young men, and Carolyn B. leads a small group for young women.
 - Carol and Cheryl are our worship team leaders, while Wade every year oversees the Christmas program. Steve leads our audio/visual support team, Denise is in charge of keeping our supplies ready, and Deb has been in charge of the care ministry that provides meals to those in need.
 - I would like to think the early church would have referred to all these people as deacons.
- † That brings up the question many of you will have about women being deacons. We saw in our sermon a couple of weeks ago that women were considered disciples of Christ, were Spirit empowered just like men, and were involved in the ministry of the New Testament church through prophesy, care and service, hospitality, church hosting, and mentoring and teaching other women and children.
- † **Romans 16.1** provides a provocative use of the term διάκονος. The NIV translates what Paul wrote: **“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae [Κεγχρεαί; the seaport of Corinth].”**
- Most other English translations say Phoebe was a “servant of the church” instead of “deacon.” This is possible, based on what the word could mean, as we saw earlier.
 - But scholar Michael Svigel points out that in the New Testament and the early church literature, whenever the text says someone was “X of the church,” X is an official office. He claims that is true in all ten instances in scripture [Acts 20.17; Ephesians 5.23; James 5.14; Revelation 2.1, 8, 12, 18; 3.1, 7, 14] and all ten instances in early church literature [Ignatius, *Trallians* 2.3; *Philadelphians* 5.1; *Polycarp* 1.1; *Shepherd of Hermas*, Vision 2.2.6; 2.4.3; 3.9.7; *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 16.2; 19.2] That suggests Romans 16 says Phoebe was an official deacon of the church in Cenchreae.
 - Svigel also points out that in Romans 16.2, Paul uses a different term to refer to Phoebe as a “benefactor” [προστάτις] of many, including himself. Svigel argues that v.1 identifies Phoebe with her official office in her home church [a deacon], while v.2 describes her character as a general servant beyond her local church.
- † We know from early church literature that the church in Rome in the late first century had a female named Grapte who was tasked with instructing widows and orphans, which was considered a responsibility for deacons [*Shepherd of Hermas*, Vision 2.4.3; Parable 9.26.2].
- Historical documents from the third century show the early church had female deacons [Pliny the Younger, *Lib.* 10.96, *Plinius Traiano Imperatori*] who ministered to women and assisted in

their baptism, in a role parallel to what male deacons did for men [*Didascalia* 16]. This was necessary, because people were baptized naked at that time.

- Thus it appears to me that during the apostolic period and into the post-apostolic period, the church developed an office of deacon for both men and women, with women teaching, baptizing, and mentoring other women and children, in a role parallel to that of male deacons, all under the authority of the pastor/elders. Not everyone agrees with that analysis.

† **1 Timothy 3.8-13** give the requirements for deacons [NIV]: **“In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.”**

- From this we see that most criteria for deacons involve character, just like with elders. Spiritual leaders in the church must live like spiritual leaders who represent Christ.
- What does this say about women? As with the Romans 16 verse, there is disagreement here. Most English translations say the deacon’s wife must be worthy of respect in v.11, noting that v.12 obviously refers to men, and thus many scholars conclude the deacons had to be men.
- But Svigel points out that it would be odd for Paul to dictate how the wives of deacons should be when he neglected in the same chapter to even mention the wives of elders; why would the character of the wives of deacons be more important than the character of the wives of elders?
- And the word translated as “wives” really is the Greek term for “women,” though it could be used to refer to wives; and the possessive pronoun in the English translations is absent in the Greek. So maybe Paul said women deacons likewise had to have this exemplary character.

† Some people argue that Acts 6 speaks about deacons and implies what they should do and that they must be men. **Acts 6.1-6 NET: Now in those days, when the disciples were growing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Greek-speaking Jews against the native Hebraic Jews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the twelve called the whole group of the disciples together and said, “It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to wait on tables. But carefully select from among you, brothers, seven men who are well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this necessary task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” The proposal pleased the entire group, so they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a Gentile convert to Judaism from Antioch. They stood these men before the apostles, who prayed and placed their hands on them.**

† What do we see here? No mention of the noun *διάκονος*, meaning deacon; so we cannot conclude with certainty that this is about deacons, though most people assume that is true.

- They assume this because the verb, *διακονέω*, does occur, in v.2, but this itself is **ambiguous**.
- It might be about how the apostles handled a specific situation, which Luke included to show us something about apostles, rather than to show us something about deacons.

† If this is about deacons, then it gives us an apostolic example we might follow.

- We see again that the apostles were in authority, nobody was questioning that. They received the complaint, they called a meeting of the church, they decided how to fix the problem.
 - We might say the apostles, serving as the elders of the Jerusalem church at this time, initiated the process of selection and remained in authority over it throughout.
 - The apostles [as elders] sought insight from some trustworthy people who were interested in this particular need of the church. Those people suggested good leaders who could oversee the ministry to meet this need.
 - The apostles [as elders] validated those selections and consecrated the new deacons.
 - Those deacons were now in positions of authority for this specific ministry, having that authority delegated to them by the apostles [as elders], and operated under the guidance and leadership of the apostles [as elders].
 - The deacons functioned as ministry team leaders for a particular ministry of the church; their appointment was not permanent, nor was it over the entire church.
 - The deacons were publically “ordained,” in a ceremony of congregational recognition of their qualification and calling to the position, and prayerful support by the rest of the leadership.
 - So we might say this is an example of how to select deacons for the church.
- † This might be how the apostles initially selected elders from the believers in Jerusalem!
- Look at the caliber of people they chose: Stephen, who was doing miracles, was one of the greatest teachers in the early church, and became its first known martyr; Philip the Evangelist, who brought the first Samaritans into the church and sent the gospel to Africa. These are top level people. This is the first delegation of responsibility by the apostles, and we note that they insisted on a team of men who were well respected within the church and obviously both Spirit led and mature in faith, which probably means someone from among the original 120.
 - Maybe this was the apostles choosing elders for the Jerusalem church, so they could go act like apostles? When we were discussing the development of church ministry structure, we said these men were local church leaders who helped the apostles administrate; that role developed into the pastor/elder role over time.
 - Or maybe Acts 6 just shows us how the apostles handled a specific situation in the earliest church and has nothing to do with elders or deacons.
- † If this is about deacons, does it reveal anything about what deacons were to do? Whatever these guys were considered as far as an office goes, the apostles delegated to them some ministry responsibility with corresponding authority to resolve a ministry issue. Does this example define what deacons were supposed to do?
- It comes down in part to what the apostles were saying in v.2. Were they saying they did not want to wait on tables or that they did not want get bogged down in the details of administrating? There possibly is some word play there which would suggest the latter, but most translators go with the tables thing.
 - **Acts 6.2 NET: So the twelve called the whole group of the disciples together and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to wait on tables."**

- **Acts 6.2 HCSB: Then the Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, "It would not be right for us to give up preaching about God to handle financial matters.**
 - **Acts 6.2 NLT: So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program.**
 - Even if they meant wait on tables, does that limit what deacons should do? If this was the first need for ministry leaders other than the apostles, then they appointed people to do what had to get done, but that does not mean they did not appoint people to do other things as they arose, right?
- † My conclusion is that the biblical data is too vague to know for sure almost anything about deacons other than they existed to help the pastor/elders with ministry.
- When you include the early church writings beyond the New Testament, it influences how you see Romans 16 and 1 Timothy 3, and provides data for including women as deacons.
 - And then we see some solid information about what they did: teaching new believers, baptizing, helping with administration, maybe leading ministry teams. But we cannot know much for sure, and there are no biblical commands limiting how we would adopt this role into our church.