

Deacons: A Theological Study

By Robert H. Thune, July 2007

INTRODUCTION

The leadership of Christ's church is a matter of crucial theological importance. Scripture cautions us to be on guard against church leaders who teach false doctrines, promote controversies, and turn aside to meaningless talk (1 Tim. 1:3-7). In spite of these warnings, we live in a day and age when the average Christian's understanding of biblical church leadership is anemic at best and nonexistent at worst. To further complicate the matter, theologians propose widely divergent opinions on issues of leadership ranging from the role of women to the value of paid pastor-elders.

Thus, it is important for the eldership of a local church to articulate biblically and theologically its position on matters of church leadership. In this essay, I will seek to articulate our church's understanding of the biblical teaching on deacons and their role in the church. This is not a *primary* theological issue (i.e. a belief necessary for Christian orthodoxy). Nevertheless, it is an important *secondary* issue that has great bearing on the life and conduct of a local church body.

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1. Current Reality

1.1 *The Non-Existent Office*

Across the landscape of American evangelicalism, one must look long and hard to find a church that has a thriving diaconal ministry. The average church may have multiple staff, an elder board, and “directors” overseeing various aspects of ministry, but rarely does one find deacons listed among the leadership. I personally have never served or worshipped in a church where deacons were a significant part of the ministry. If deacons existed at all, they were relegated to a behind-the-scenes role, overseeing the food pantry or purchasing communion supplies.

Some churches have self-consciously removed the office of deacon. At one well-known megachurch in Georgia, “There are no deacons, per se... Instead, they have developed groups called Ministry Team Representatives (MTRs). An MTR is an individual chosen by a ministry within the church to represent that group at a quarterly meeting with the senior pastor and other key staff members.”¹ Other churches have kept the language of deacon while divesting the office of its biblical functionality. Many Southern Baptist churches, for instance, are governed by a “deacon board” that more closely resembles a nonprofit corporate board than a biblically qualified diaconate.

It is a fair conclusion to say that by and large, the biblical deacon is a non-existent office in the American church. Though Scripture clearly teaches that such an office exists and should be filled by mature, qualified Christians, it seems that modern churches have deemed it unnecessary.

1.2 *Why Biblical Deacons Matter*

When they ignore the biblical teaching regarding deacons, churches end up creating positions of leadership that carry no biblical authority. A survey of the average church’s leadership structure will reveal titles like “Children’s Ministry Director” or “Women’s Ministry Director” or “Lay Counselor.” The people who serve in these roles are often involved in significant biblical teaching and discipleship and pastoral care. But what biblical precedent do these titles have? What criteria can we hold these individuals to? If we allow these sorts of roles to fall under the purview of deacons, then God’s people have a clear set of biblical qualifications and expectations for their leaders. If, however, we create titles and ministry positions according to the need of the moment, the long-term result will be a weakening of the authority of Scripture as man-made roles take the place of God-ordained offices.

If we seek to build churches that are faithful to the teaching of Scripture and aggressive about engaging the culture around them, we must renew our biblical understanding of deaconship and its place in Christ’s church. This paper is written with that end in mind. Let us begin, then, by understanding the origins of the biblical word for “deacon.”

2. Etymology

2.1 Overview of diakonos

The Greek term translated “deacon” is *diakonos*, meaning “servant.” This word appears 29 times in the New Testament. Related terms are the verb *diakoneo* (“to serve,” 36 times in the NT) and the noun *diakonia* (“service, ministry, office,” 33 times in the NT). “The original frame of reference for the use of the entire word group of the *diak-* stem in secular Greek was that of table service. The basic meaning of the verb, correspondingly, was *wait on tables*.”² From this more specific beginning describing a “waiter,” the term developed a more general sense to connote “one who serves.”

2.2 Servants vs. Officeholders

The term *diakonos*, like many biblical words, has both a broad general meaning (*servant*) and a specific technical meaning (*deacon*). Most of the instances of *diakonos* in the New Testament have the broader sense. In other words, they are *not* referring to the specific office of deacon, but rather to the general role of helping or serving. The context determines how the word is used. Consider the following instances:

- John 2:9: “...The master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants (*diakonoi*) who had drawn the water knew.”
- Luke 22:25-27: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them... But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves (*diakonon*)... I am among you as one who serves (*diakonon*).”
- John 12:26: “Whoever serves (*diakone*) me must follow me; and where I am, my servant (*diakonos*) will also be. My Father will honor the one who serves (*diakone*) me.”
- Romans 13:4: “[The ruler] is God’s servant (*diakonos*) to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant (*diakonos*), an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”
- Eph 3:7: “I became a servant (*diakonos*) of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given to me through the working of his power.”
- 1 Timothy 4:6: “If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister (*diakonos*) of Christ Jesus...”

In all of these cases, *diakonos* expresses some nuance of the general term “servant.” However, the same Greek word is used in a more technical sense in certain places in the New Testament to describe the formal office of deacon.³ The latter use is found in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

- Philippians 1:1: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the **overseers** and **deacons**...”
- 1 Timothy 3:8-13: “**Deacons** likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as **deacons** if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let **deacons** each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as **deacons** gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”

So the term *diakonos* has both a broader meaning (*servant*) and a narrower meaning (*deacon*). A deacon is a servant of Christ and His church. But not everyone who serves God or the church does so in the official capacity of deacon. In other words: while every deacon is a servant, not every servant is a deacon.

3. Ecclesiology

3.1 Did the Office of Deacon Exist in the NT?

The fact that there are only two clear references to the office of deacon in the New Testament has caused some Bible scholars to question whether such an office actually exists. Ralph Martin, a respected British scholar, sees *elders and deacons* in Philippians 1:1 as “terms taken over from contemporary society” to describe *roles* within the church in Philippi but not “definite offices.”⁴ Likewise, the editors of the New Bible Dictionary take an intermediary position: “There is little to suggest that in New Testament times the term ‘deacon’ is ever more than semi-technical.”⁵

Other scholars disagree. Hermann Beyer, in a respected work of Continental scholarship, sees Philippians 1:1 as a conclusive reference to the *office* of deacon: “Already in this phrase there emerges a decisive point for our understanding of the office, namely, that the deacons are linked with the bishops [elders] and mentioned after them. At the time of this epistle there are thus two co-ordinated offices.”⁶

Where we land on this question matters. If a deacon is simply a role within the church, then that role can be filled informally as church members use their spiritual gifts to serve the body. But if the word “deacon” denotes an office within the church, then a properly organized, biblically functioning church should have both elders and deacons serving officially in their God-ordained capacities.

At least two lines of evidence lead us to conclude that the New Testament mandates the *office* of deacon.

First, in both Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3, deacons are mentioned in close connection with the elders. There is no doubt that the New Testament sees eldership as a formal office, instituted by the apostles to provide doctrinal oversight and shepherding care to the churches (see Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-3; Titus 1:9). Barnabas and Paul “appointed elders... in every church” (Acts 14:23). Paul commanded Titus to “appoint elders in every town” on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5). Scripture clearly lists qualifications that every potential elder must meet (Titus 1; 1 Timothy 3). But right after the list of elder criteria in 1 Timothy, we read, “Deacons, likewise...” The mention of deacons in such tight connection with eldership and the fact that deacons must meet a list of qualifications in order to serve strongly suggest that deacon, like elder, was a formal office in the New Testament churches.

Second, Acts 6:1-4 shows an apostolically authorized division of labor in the church that lays the groundwork for the offices of elder and deacon.

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 of food. So 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 tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you 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."

The twelve apostles, charged with the proclamation of the gospel, were instead being burdened with the practical difficulties of mercy ministry. They made a decision to delegate this important aspect of ministry to “seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom,” freeing the apostles to focus on prayer and preaching. The noun *diakonos* is never used here, so we should not see these seven men as “the first deacons.” The apostles are not establishing the formal office of deacon. However, they are making a distinction in roles that influences the organization of churches in the later New Testament.

Luke introduces the narrative in Acts 6 with the pregnant phrase, “At this time... the disciples were increasing in number” (Acts 6:1). As the church in Jerusalem grew, the apostles found themselves unable to carry the burden of both theological and practical leadership. So they lightened their load by delegating important ministry tasks to proven men who demonstrated appropriate character and gifting.

It seems highly probable that as Paul and his companions planted churches, they followed the apostolic pattern in Acts 6. They started by appointing qualified men to fill the most important office: elders who would teach Scripture and guard the integrity of the gospel. They expected those elders to follow the pattern of Acts 6, teaching the Bible, growing the church, and eventually delegating some aspects of ministry to qualified disciples. This explains Paul’s emphasis on appointing elders first (Titus 1:5), the sequence of 1 Timothy 3 (elders, then deacons) and the differing requirements for each office. “When the churches were young, Paul appointed overseers, not deacons. But in the more established churches of Philippi (Phil 1:1) and Ephesus (1 Tim 3:8-13)

there were both overseers and deacons. Perhaps the latter office developed on a church-by-church basis as the size and needs of the church increased.”⁷

Because of the strong textual connection between deacons and elders, and because of the echoes of an Acts-6-style division of labor in the churches of the New Testament, we conclude that the New Testament mandates the office of deacon in the local church.

3.2 Deacons and Elders

If it is true that both deacon and elder are formal offices in the church, then we must ask: how do these offices differ? How do deacons and elders serve together for the good of the church? The foregoing biblical discussion allows us to draw the following conclusions.

- *Elders are appointed first, then deacons.* The first step of organizing a local church is to appoint qualified elders. This was Paul’s consistent practice in New Testament church planting (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). It seems that the office of elder/overseer/pastor is given primacy in the New Testament because of the importance of sound doctrine and biblical teaching in the life of a young church (1 Timothy 1:3-7). Elders must be raised up as soon as possible in order to guard the gospel and refute error (Titus 1:9). Deacons may be appointed later as the practical ministry needs increase.
- *The main task of elders is theological oversight; the main task of deacons is practical ministry.* Only one important qualification distinguishes elders from deacons: elders must be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2) and “able to... refute those who contradict [sound doctrine]” (Titus 1:9). There is no such requirement for deacons; they simply “must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Tim 3:9). Elders, then, are charged primarily with the theological, doctrinal, and moral leadership of the church, focusing especially on the faithful teaching of Scripture. Deacons are charged with the practical leadership of the church under the oversight of the elders. Again, this clearly parallels the division of labor in Acts 6: the Apostles devoting themselves to “prayer and the ministry of the Word” and entrusting the Seven with the daily ministry to widows.
- *Elders delegate tasks to deacons.* While the New Testament outlines in copious detail the practical duties of elders,⁸ it offers almost no teaching about the roles

and responsibilities of deacons. Based on the primacy of eldership and the apostolic pattern in Acts 6, it seems that the job of a deacon is to serve as a “pastoral assistant” under the oversight and direction of the elders. As the Apostles delegated practical ministry tasks to the Seven, so the elders delegate practical ministry to the deacons as the size and needs of the church increase. This is certainly the way the early church understood the office of deacon: “Deacons... are to be honorable and sincere in performing *the duties assigned to them by the presbyters* [elders],” wrote Theodore of Mopsuestia.⁹

4. Practical Theology

4.1 Qualifications for Deacons

First Timothy 3:8-13 outlines a clear set of qualifications for deacons. All who wish to serve as deacons in the church must meet these criteria.

- *Men worthy of respect* – dignified, honorable, noble, highly esteemed; men whom younger Christians want to be like
- *Sincere* – lit. “not double-spoken;” honest and truthful; careful in speech
- *Not indulging in much wine* – no addictions; self-controlled in habits
- *Not pursuing dishonest gain* – not greedy; not “in it for the money” (i.e. aren’t serving in hopes of eventually getting paid by the church)
- *Must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience* – hold to sound theology; understand the gospel; no discrepancy between what they profess and how they live
- *Must first be tested* – proved faithful over time; stand up under examination
- Additional requirements for wives or female deacons:
 - *Women worthy of respect* – dignified, noble, honorable; women whom younger Christians want to emulate
 - *Not malicious talkers* – not slanderers or gossips
 - *Temperate* – clear-minded; self-controlled in habits
 - *Trustworthy in everything* – totally reliable; doing well in all life roles (wife, mother, etc)
- Additional requirements for married male deacons
 - *A one-woman man* – faithful to wife; sexually pure
 - *Manages his children and household well* – leads, manages, and provides for his family; kids respect and obey their father

4.2 Should Women be Deacons?

The question of whether women should serve as deacons is a hotly debated one. The Bible renders no conclusive judgment on the matter. Romans 16:1 uses the word *diakonos* to describe a woman named Phoebe: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a

servant [*diakonos*] of the church in Cenchrea.” But Bible scholars are divided over whether we should see Phoebe as a “deaconess” (office) or simply as a “servant” (role).

Either way, good exegesis precludes us from arguing conclusively for female deacons from only one verse. So to answer the question of whether women can be deacons, we must take into account the broader teaching of Scripture concerning men’s and women’s roles in the church.

It is the position of our church that women can and should serve as deacons, provided that the church is led by properly qualified biblical elders. This position seems to best allow for the diverse gifting of godly women while still honoring male headship in the family and the church. The following lines of reasoning support this conclusion.

- *The only office specifically restricted to men in the Bible is eldership.* Because of the headship established by God in the creation order, Scripture teaches that women must not lead authoritatively in the church.

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. (1 Tim 2:11-14).

Though these verses are complex, the scope of the current study allows for only a brief explanation. Women are prohibited from “teaching or exercising authority over a man.” In the context of 1 Timothy, this seems to be a restriction on *authoritative* leadership in the church. Women are certainly not prohibited from knowing the Bible and teaching it to others. Scripture even records instances of women being involved in the discipleship of men (for example, Priscilla and Aquila’s teaching of Apollos in Acts 18:23-28). Taken in light of the rest of the New Testament, this passage in 1 Timothy is not restricting women from *all* types of teaching and leadership in the church. But it is restricting women from *authoritative* teaching and leadership in the church, which is the role of the elders. Scripture demands male elders in order to preserve the biblical roles of headship and submission that are expected of men and women in the home and the church: “The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (Ephesians 5:23). Female deacons operating under a plurality of male elders maintains this creation order.

- *The biblical qualifications for eldership are specific to men, while the qualifications for deacons include women.* The elder criteria listed in 1 Timothy 3 are specific to men (for example, “husband of one wife”). The list of deacon qualifications, however, includes qualifications for either female deacons or the wives of deacons: “Their wives [lit. *women*] likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things” (1 Tim 3:11). Since eldership is the highest office in the church, it would be strange for God to require something of deacons’ wives that he does not require of elders’ wives. So it seems that these verses are referring to female deacons and not to deacons’ wives. “[T]he requirements of 1 Timothy 3:8-10 are for both male and female deacons... [verse 11] lists the additional requirements for female deacons, and 3:12-13 lists the additional requirements for male deacons... Paul

is indicating that a male deacon is most vulnerable to sexual sins, while a female deacon is most vulnerable to emotional and verbal sins; the women who are prone to disagree with his words merely prove his point.”¹⁰

- *The office of deaconess arose very early in church history.* Appeals to history are secondary to biblical exegesis. But it is instructive to note that the earliest churches had no problem with appointing female deacons. “It is indisputable... that an order of deaconesses did quickly arise in the church.”¹¹ John Chrysostom, one of the dominant church fathers of the 4th century (c. 349-407), understood 1 Timothy 3:11 to refer to “those who hold the rank of deaconesses.”¹² In cultures which were strongly patriarchal, the early fathers of the church saw the appointment of deaconesses neither as a threat to male headship nor as an affront to Scripture.

In light of this biblical and historical evidence, it is our conviction that the church is to be led by biblically qualified male elders who then appoint both male and female deacons to assist with the many practical areas of pastoral ministry. Women can and should serve as deacons under the oversight of a plurality of male elders.

5. Practical Theology

5.1 Summary of Biblical Teaching

To summarize our study, the Bible teaches that a deacon is one who serves. Though the word “deacon” (*diakonos*) is used broadly in Scripture to describe various aspects of serving, it is also used narrowly to speak of the office of deacon/deaconess within the church. A properly functioning, biblically organized church will be led by a plurality of male elders who give theological, doctrinal, moral, and missional leadership to the congregation, and by male and female deacons who serve as pastoral assistants, helping with the practical work of ministry as delegated by the elders. All potential deacons must meet the qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Deacons are selected and appointed to various tasks by the elders as the size and needs of a church increase.

5.2 Our Practice for Installing Deacons

As the size and scope of our ministry increases, we will appoint both male and female deacons to assist the pastor/elders in the work of ministry. Deacon candidates will be selected by the pastor/elders from the ranks of the covenant membership. Candidates will undergo a period of study, training, and examination, and will be appointed to the office of deacon upon successful completion of candidate requirements and affirmation of the body. Some deacons will serve in an “at-large” service capacity; others will fulfill specific ministry roles.

Responsibilities of at-large deacons:

- Assist broadly in shouldering the load of ministry, with an emphasis on current needs and problems (basically: help with all aspects of practical leadership, freeing the elders to focus on spiritual and visionary leadership)

Examples of specific roles for deacons:

Directing/overseeing children's ministry
Serving on the Financial Team
Serving in non-pastoral staff roles (administrator, assistant, intern, etc.) Assisting with sermon research
Administering material help to those in need (benevolence) Teaching training and/or membership classes
Interviewing potential church members
Leading in ministries of intercession and prayer
Counseling
Managing our social justice work in the city
Planning and leading worship Overseeing Sunday morning activities Coaching/discipling missional community leaders Planning retreats, conferences, and events Assisting in matters of church discipline

It is our hope and prayer that by following the biblical directives regarding elders and deacons, we can structure a church that is obedient to God's word, maximizes the spiritual gifts of his people, and provides efficient and effective ministry for the glory of God and the good of our city.