

THE DEACON MINISTRY: A NEW TESTAMENT STUDY

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Pastoral leaders are destined to fail unless they possess and implement the New Testament understanding of the diakonate, that is the ministry of the deacon; however, this information alone does not insure successful ministry. The facts must be apprehended by both pastoral leaders and those who serve in the deacon ministry. Ideally speaking, these details should also penetrate the entire membership of the church in order to equip them to select suitable candidates for the diakonate and to familiarize the servants of tomorrow with a New Testament concept of the diakonate.

Far from being a consensus among Christians, disagreements over various aspects of the diakonate have haunted more than one Christian congregation. These disputes are precisely why a biblically-based study is essential. In an era when Christians are caught up in quarrels over authority, a biblical standard is most timely. This is exactly what the writer has set out to do: provide a biblical standard on the subject of the diakonate. In so doing, he shall attempt to examine resource material related

to biblical texts in an effort to achieve a suitable biblical standard for understanding the diakonate.

In order to grasp what the deacon ministry should be like now, one must first resolve what the deacon ministry was like at its outset. Determining the present functions of the deacon ministry is inseparably predicated upon determining the past functions of the deacon ministry. In keeping with this objective, the writer will emphasize the historical interpretation of the diakonate and report several contemporary applications of said interpretation. Insofar as this present study is a research project, and, therefore, a survey of information relative to the subject, the writer hopes to equip his readers with the requisite information such that they may either embark upon a similar study, or adopt this survey of information as a foundational base for understanding the ministry of the deacon.

## II. DEFINITION

The English noun "deacon" comes from the masculine Greek noun "diakonos," which primarily denotes a servant, one engaged in servile work, or one functioning as an attendant expecting no remuneration for services rendered. The word has no particular reference to the character of the work and is to be distinguished from the Greek word *doulos* (servant or slave) in that *diakonos* (deacon or servant) is usually employed when describing a servant in relationship to his or her work (function), whereas *doulos* (servant or slave) is generally utilized to describe a servant in relationship to his or her master.<sup>1</sup>

In its verbal form *diakoneo* (I serve) describes the activity of someone waiting upon a table, serving, delivering a message, caring for someone else, helping or supporting another, or is connected with one who serves in the ecclesiastical office of deacon.<sup>2</sup> The present study is primarily concerned with this final

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<sup>1</sup>W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (McLean, VA: McDonald Publishing Company, n.d.), 274-5.

<sup>2</sup>William F. Arndt, Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 184.

nuance, although basic forms of diakonos (deacon or servant) appear in the New Testament in which the word may be used to identify followers of Christ in relation to their Lord (John 12:26; Eph. 6:21; Col. 1:7; 4:7) and in relation to one another (Matt. 20:26; 23:11; Mark 9:35; 10:43).<sup>3</sup> This same word is also employed to denote domestic servants (John 2:5, 9),<sup>4</sup> false apostles who are servants of Satan (2 Cor. 11:15), and, apparently, there is one occurrence where angels are implied (Matt. 22:13).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the word is used to specify civil rulers (Rom. 13:4) and even Christ himself (Rom. 15:8; Gal. 2:17).<sup>6</sup> Finally, this word commonly refers to the servants of Christ Jesus in their work of preaching and teaching (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; 11:23; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23, 25; 1 Thess. 3:2; 1 Tim. 4:6).<sup>7</sup> These citations are generally regarded as non-technical references and will, therefore, be laid to rest. This study shall attempt to focus on, and elaborate upon, the more technical references recorded in the New Testament and generally agreed upon by scholars as such, although some see no trace at

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<sup>3</sup>Vine, 274-5.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 274.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 275.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 217.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 275.

all of the technical meaning relating to a specialized office in the church, preferring, instead, the functional meaning.<sup>8</sup>

In summary, the words diakonos, diakoneo, and their derivatives occur about one hundred times in the New Testament and came to be linked with the idea of ministering or rendering service, and are often connected with the supply of material needs of people.<sup>9</sup> Some feel that the diakonate was one of two main orders of ministry in the apostolic church. This order, as shall be explored below, is usually traced back to the events recorded in Acts 6:1-6, wherein seven men were selected and appointed to meet needs in a crisis situation. Eventually, the office itself was established and subsequently filled by Christian males of sound character who possessed a firm grasp of the faith. Their function may well have been primarily financial and administrative; however, there is no mention of them teaching.<sup>10</sup> Still, others feel that the office was correlative to that of the bishop, and the deacons were, therefore, to be their helpers or assistants. These academicians suppose that the bishops were considered as the elders, while the deacons were the

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<sup>8</sup>A. F. Walls, "Deacon," in *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 297.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Leon Morris, "Deacon," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960), 156-7.

active young men in the congregation who were responsible for the distribution of alms, preparing rooms for meetings, maintaining order, baptizing new converts, and distributing the elements of the Lord's Supper.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>William Smith, "Deacon," in *Smith's Bible Dictionary*, ed. F. N. and M. A. Peloubet (N.p.: Porter and Coates, 1884; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 140-1.

### III. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

#### A. Pre-New Testament Era

A review of the pre-New Testament era suggests that, unlike many New Testament Christian institutions and orders, the diakonate has no specific Old Testament Judaistic parallels,<sup>12</sup> but one Old Testament event might be useful in principle; it is the Exodus. While the Hebrews of the Exodus, and those accompanying them, were wandering in the wilderness, Yahweh fed (served) them with manna from heaven. Correspondingly, in the New Testament era, Jesus claimed to be the bread of life and served hungry people bread and fish. Although unrelated to the diakonate, there is illustrative value in the fact that the Hebrews circumcised their male children to signify, outwardly, that they were people of the Covenant, uniquely related to Yahweh. Christians baptize those who claim to have had their hearts circumcised by the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, while many foreshadowings of New Testament concepts appear in the Old Testament, the office of the deacon, that is to say the

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<sup>12</sup>E. Glenn Hinson, *1 Timothy*, in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen, vol. 11, *2 Corinthians-Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1972), 319.

diakonate, seems to be uniquely Christian, and, therefore, strictly New Testament; however, it is possible that the deacons took their name from those in the secular, Graeco-Roman world who were responsible for the welfare duties in the community.<sup>13</sup>

#### B. New Testament Era: Acts 6:1-6

Many Jews who were natives of Palestine during the first Christian century spoke Aramaic. Hebrew, the native language of their forefathers, had rapidly fallen by the wayside following the Babylonian captivity begun after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. On the other hand, those Jews who were not natives of Palestine during the first Christian century spoke Greek. Many Jews of the diaspora, that is to say dispersion, were returning to their fathers' homeland of Palestine to live. Many of these returnees elected to take up residence in Jerusalem. Many of those who repatriated were converted to Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Tension between the Aramaic speaking Jews and the Greek speaking Jews was carried over into the community. This tension surfaced as daily allocations were being made to the poorer Christians of the congregation in Jerusalem. Apparently, the allotments were made possible by the presence of a common pool of money or resources

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<sup>13</sup>R. P. Martin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, in *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 11, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 58.

<sup>14</sup>George E. Ladd, *Acts*, in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Nashville, TN: The Southwestern Company, 1962), 1334-5.

which wealthier Christian members had begun by contributing their estates.<sup>15</sup> The sin and ensuing death of Ananias and Sapphira might well be related to this pool of resources (cf. Acts 5:1-11).

Favoritism for the Aramaic speaking Jews was being shown, or at least strongly imagined, in the distribution of food to the widows.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this was not necessarily an openly observable falling-out, but a hidden burning within the heart.<sup>17</sup> The Apostles quickly, and wisely, recognized that care for the poor was demanding much of their time, causing them to neglect their primary ministry of proclaiming the word; therefore, they proposed that the congregation should select seven men who could be entrusted with the task of ministering to all the widows, among other things. The arrangement was, it appears, that the people would choose men; the Apostles would then ratify those selected by the people by way of the ancient Jewish practice of laying on of the hands, which signified the ordination or

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<sup>15</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 128.

<sup>16</sup>Ladd, 1134-5.

<sup>17</sup>Matthew Henry, *An Exposition with Practical Observations of the Acts of the Apostles*, in *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 6, *Acts-Revelation* (McLean, VA: McDonald Publishing Company, n.d.), 69-71.

appointment for service of those selected.<sup>18</sup> There is no biblical evidence that such laying on of the hands, or appointment for service, was ever done with a female.

The people agreed to the proposal and selected seven men in whom they had the utmost confidence, based upon the way these candidates had already been conducting themselves for some time. All seven nominees had Greek names,<sup>19</sup> and may have been, initially at least, the intentional Hellenistic counterparts to the twelve Apostles, all of whom were Jewish.<sup>20</sup> Like Barnabas (Acts 4:36, 37), it is possible that these seven men had sold their estates and put the money into the church treasury.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, these seven men were not specifically called deacons,<sup>22</sup> although their duty was most certainly to serve, which they were to do by waiting on tables.

The people presented the men to the Apostles, who then laid their hands upon the seven nominees. This action symbolized the blessing and conferring of authority to the seven in order to

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<sup>18</sup>Ladd, 1134-5.

<sup>19</sup>T. C. Smith, *Acts*, in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen, vol. 10, *Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), 47-8.

<sup>20</sup>Walls, 298.

<sup>21</sup>Henry, 72.

<sup>22</sup>Vine, 275.

execute their duties.<sup>23</sup> Some may view this as ordination, or perhaps as the symbolic impartation of gifts and graces needed to qualify one for office.<sup>24</sup> Others argue that this is not formal ordination but merely a symbol for appointment,<sup>25</sup> and that the laying on of the hands is simply too common in the Book of Acts to be regarded as especially significant here.<sup>26</sup> Still others regard this appointment of the seven as a temporary measure in order to meet an existing emergency, claiming that these seven men had no successors who served in a permanent capacity.<sup>27</sup> If not ordination, this ceremony certainly was its precursor.

#### C. Post-New Testament Era

Some view the seven men of Acts 6:1-6 as the prototypes for the modern deacon and his ministry.<sup>28</sup> Others simply refuse to recognize these seven as the first deacons, nor do those holding this opinion regard Acts 6:1-6 as a record of the institution of

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<sup>23</sup>Henry, 73.

<sup>24</sup>Archibald T. Robertson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, in *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Nashville, TN: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 73-4.

<sup>25</sup>Smith, 47-8.

<sup>26</sup>Walls, 298.

<sup>27</sup>Franklin M. Segler, *The Broadman Minister's Manual* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1969), 95.

<sup>28</sup>Howard B. Foshee, *Broadman Church Manual* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1973), 101.

the office of the deacon, which office is mentioned in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8, 12.<sup>29</sup> Most congregations, however, recognize the need for such an office due to similar circumstances which make such a position quite necessary in modern churches. Many churches ordain their deacons, although some choose simply to acknowledge them as leaders by way of a service of dedication or commitment.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the original seven appear to have been quite successful insofar as they were appointed to resolve the potential problem of broken fellowship, which even threatened the early church.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Acts 6:1-6 does not appear to be a record of the institution of an order of ministerial hierarchy, but rather, it seems to exemplify the delegation of administrative and social responsibilities to those possessing the appropriate character and gifts necessary in order to rectify the crisis at hand.<sup>32</sup> To have appointed lesser individuals would have done nothing more than exacerbate the problem. The same holds true today.

Whether purposely intended or not, the noun diakonia (ministry or service) came to be used to designate the office of the deacon, which office this writer calls the diakonate,

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<sup>29</sup>Smith, 48.

<sup>30</sup>Segler, 95.

<sup>31</sup>Foshee, 101.

<sup>32</sup>Walls, 298.

although the word diakonia was originally used to denote a function which eventually became an ecclesiastical post patterned after the seven men of Acts 6:1-6. These seven men were utilized in an effort to facilitate growth and orderly operation in the early church.<sup>33</sup> As the Christian church developed, the presbuteros (elder) or episkopos (bishop) was, apparently, appointed for the purpose of exercising pastoral oversight with regard to the church.<sup>34</sup> At a later date, deacons were "ordained" as the associates of this ecclesiastical office and entrusted with such tasks as oversight, preaching, pastoral care, conducting of worship, and with administering the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>C. W. Brister, *Pastoral Care in the Church* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1964), 18.

<sup>34</sup>Although it is not within the scope of this study to explore the subject of elders and bishops indepthly, it is needful to explain that the English word presbyter is nearly an exact transliteration of the Greek word presbuteros. The term is frequently translated "elder." The English word episcopal, and its variant forms, is derived from the Greek word episkopos, which is often translated "bishop." These two words may have been used interchangeably in the New Testament to designate the same office. If this is the case, elder and bishop each designate one and the same office; however, it is also possible that the word for elder/presbyter was originally used to describe a man advanced in years, and later the word came to be used as the official designation for an officer in the church who provided pastoral care and leadership over the congregation. Therefore, the word episkopos (bishop) may be better understood as describing the functions of the presbuteros (elder/presbyter) or office holder rather than the office itself.

<sup>35</sup>Brister, 90.

By A.D. 250, the office of the deacon was considered a formal part of the clergy. Foshee says that Calvin, however, spoke of the deacons again as laymen or lay-ministers who preached and rendered services to the sick and needy.<sup>36</sup>

During the 1700s in America, deacons often provided spiritual leadership in the event that the part-time pastor, or circuit rider, was unable to reach the meeting place for one reason or another. Gradually, deacons were called upon to handle more and more of the administrative work in the church and, unfortunately, in some cases came to be a legislative, governing board in churches; such activity is absolutely contrary to both the New Testament and to the congregational form of church polity.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Foshee, 102.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 102-3.

#### IV. SIGNIFICANT USAGES

##### A. Romans 16:1

Based upon their sequential arrangement, Romans is the first of the New Testament books in which the technical use of the word deacon is alleged to be found. Robertson argues that the word is to be taken in its technical sense, as opposed to its generic sense, along with Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8-13, because of the presence of *tes ekklesias* (of the church).<sup>38</sup> Dale Moody takes the same position as Robertson,<sup>39</sup> as does C. K. Barrett.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, this passage proves to be controversial in that it makes a reference to Phoebe, a female deacon (deaconess). But the word deaconess is associated with females who simply served functions analogous to those of deacons with regard to those of

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<sup>38</sup>Archibald T. Robertson, *The Epistle to the Romans*, in *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 4, *The Epistles of Paul* (Nashville, TN: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 425.

<sup>39</sup>Dale Moody, *Romans*, in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen, vol. 10, *Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), 279.

<sup>40</sup>C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1957), 282.

their own gender.<sup>41</sup> Phoebe is said here to be a minister, or servant, in the church at Cenchrae. Henry thinks that Phoebe was a servant by office but not so as to preach the word, since such was forbidden to women; she was to serve through acts of charity and hospitality.<sup>42</sup> Vincent believes the office was confined primarily to widows and virgins whose duties consisted of caring for the sick and the poor, ministering to martyrs and confessors who were being held in prison, instructing female catechumens, assisting in the baptism of female converts, and exercising general supervision over female members.<sup>43</sup> Vincent says that the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a collection of ecclesiastical precepts in eight books containing doctrinal, liturgical, and moral instructions, which dates back to the early third century or the late second century, distinguishes deaconesses from widows and virgins, and even prescribes their duties and a format for ordination.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the *Apostolic Constitutions* are not authoritative for Christians. Robertson suggests that the strict

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<sup>41</sup>Smith, 141.

<sup>42</sup>Matthew Henry, *An Exposition with Practical Observations of the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, in *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 6, *Acts-Revelation* (McLean, VA: McDonald Publishing Company, n.d.), 497.

<sup>43</sup>Marvin R. Vincent, *The Epistle to the Romans*, in *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 3, *The Epistles of Paul* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 177.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 176-7.

separation of the sexes made deaconesses necessary for baptism, visiting women, and so forth; whether or not deaconesses were a separate organization on a par with deacons is not known for sure.<sup>45</sup>

In a letter to Trajan dating back to approximately A.D. 112, Pliny the Younger (ca. 62-113) wrote concerning the activities of Christians in Bithynia:

I thought it the more necessary, therefore, to find out what truth there was in this by applying torture to two maidservants, who were called deaconesses. But I found nothing but a depraved and extravagant superstition, and I therefore postponed my examination and had recourse to you for consultation.<sup>46</sup>

Bettenson thinks that the word used for deaconesses in the letter of Pliny is representative of the Greek diakonos. If this is the case, he concludes that it is the last reference to deaconesses, as such, until the fourth century, when they attained relative importance in the East; however, Bettenson reports that deaconesses seem to have been unknown in the West until the recent establishment of the office of deaconess in the Anglican Church.<sup>47</sup>

Moody says that the office of deaconess became less and less emphasized as its functions were abandoned due to the rise of

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<sup>45</sup>Robertson, 425.

<sup>46</sup>Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1967), 4.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

anti-feminism, which he alleges was promoted in both Catholicism and Calvinism.<sup>48</sup> Before one makes up her or his mind on this subject, the following insight of C. K. Barrett ought to be given weighty consideration:

In the New Testament period the line between the "part-time helper" and the minister set apart to the service of the Church was not as sharply drawn as it is today, and it may therefore be that the question whether Phoebe was a "deaconess" or valued church worker is wrongly put.<sup>49</sup>

In conclusion of this section, it appears safe to assert that Rom. 16:1 is viewed by some as one of at least three places in the New Testament wherein the word diakonos may be used in a technical sense, that is to say for an office rather than a mere function; these scholars argue that the women indeed served in this capacity also. Nevertheless, whatever activities of service Phoebe engaged in, Paul was in approval of them; thus, her activities did not violate Scripture, which suggests she ministered only as a servantess and not a senatoress. She nursed the sick, taught the women and children, sang in the choir, baked bread, fed the hungry, washed the dishes, and more. The only thing she could not do was teach men or exercise authority over men (1 Tim. 2:11-12). That her activities included exercising authority over men is neither stated nor implied in the New

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<sup>48</sup>Moody, 279.

<sup>49</sup>Barrett, 282.

Testament; the same holds true for males who served as deacons. The idea of hierarchical authority being associated with the office of the deacon, or deaconess, seems to have been a much later development, since the New Testament documents and extra-biblical sources emphasize serving rather than mastering in connection with the diakonate. That such a function became an office indicates the value attached to serving by the early church. Serving, then, knows no gender or age restrictions. In other words, the role of the female servants was restricted to serving, waiting tables, and the like, the same functions deacons of today should be performing; but, once again, there is no hint of a setting aside and appointing of a female for this service. Any church that has females ministering to the needs of others has servantesses, which is what this writer believes Phoebe was. Functionally, Phoebe served, but the obvious technical use of the word deacon is best found in two other passages: Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8-13.

#### B. Philippians 1:1

Philippians 1:1 also makes a reference to the office of the deacon. Again, Robertson argues that the usage here is technical and not generic.<sup>50</sup> Stagg, however, disagrees, opting instead to

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<sup>50</sup>Archibald T. Robertson, *Epistle to the Philippians*, in *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 4, *Epistles of Paul* (Nashville, TN: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 435.

see this usage and its context as describing functions or responsibilities and not as designating an office.<sup>51</sup> Vincent posits that the word "deacons" refers to a distinct class of officers in the apostolic church whose origin sprang from the incident recorded in Acts 6:1-6. He further proposes that the work of the deacons was primarily the relief of the poor, but concedes that spiritual duties naturally developed in connection with the office.<sup>52</sup> Martin sees the use of episkopos and diakonos as being borrowed from contemporary society, wherein he surmises they were used primarily to describe functions of social, political, and religious life in the first century. He further believes that these words then began to describe not so much the holders of an ecclesiastical office, but rather, the responsibilities of Christians in the church.<sup>53</sup> The eighteenth century commentator Matthew Henry shows how much the diakonate had evolved by his time in that deacons not only were to be overseers of the poor, but also were to be those who took care of the outward business of the church house, furniture, and the

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<sup>51</sup>Frank Stagg, *Philippians*, in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen, vol. 11, *2 Corinthians-Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1971), 185.

<sup>52</sup>Marvin R. Vincent, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, in *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 3, *The Epistles of Paul* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 415.

<sup>53</sup>Martin, 59.

maintenance of ministers, and, furthermore, the office of the deacon was given by divine appointment.<sup>54</sup> The diakonate apparently had undergone some cultural adaptations, brushing dangerously close to a legislative budget and finance committee vested with the authority, perhaps, to hire, fire, and pay the pastor. Henry considered the deacons to be selected by God himself. Henry's eighteenth century description of their functions appears to be a radical departure from the norm set forth in Acts 6:1-6, Rom. 16:1, Phil. 1:1, and past history. No wonder there is so much confusion and disagreement over the duties and responsibilities of the contemporary deacon. Perhaps this is why, in many churches, the deacons are considered more as masters instead of slaves, more as senators instead of servants. Lastly, the terms elders and deacons in Phil. 1:1 are both masculine in gender, with no hint of any female office holders.

#### C. 1 Timothy 3:8-13

Qualifications for bishops are clearly described in 1 Tim. 3:1-7. On the heels of this description, readers find the qualifications for deacons recorded in verses 8-13. Perhaps the diaconal list overlaps the episcopal list due to their close interrelationship. Moreover, precious little about their duties

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<sup>54</sup>Matthew Henry, *An Exposition with Practical Observations of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Philippians*, in *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 6, *Acts-Revelation* (McLean, VA: McDonald Publishing Company, n.d.), 723.

is recorded. Instead, Paul chose to emphasize the type of character becoming of a candidate for each office.<sup>55</sup> Once again, Robertson believes that the use of diakonos here is technical in as much as it is speaking of church officers.<sup>56</sup> Vincent comments here that Acts 6:1-6 does not record the instituting of the office of the deacon, arguing that in the Pauline writings both diakonos and diakonia are common terms used to describe servants and service respectively.<sup>57</sup>

The "likewise" found in verse eight gathers up everything said concerning the bishops (pastors) in verses two through seven as also applying to the deacons.<sup>58</sup> Deacons, like bishops (pastors), are supposed to be men. The word for man is not generic (anthropos) but aner. When Paul came to discussing offices in his Epistle to Timothy, he designated men as the office holders, as is evidenced by the masculine gender of the

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<sup>55</sup>Hinson, 319.

<sup>56</sup>Archibald T. Robertson, *First Timothy*, in *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 4, *Epistles of Paul* (Nashville, TN: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 574.

<sup>57</sup>Marvin R. Vincent, *The First Epistle to Timothy*, in *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 4, *The Thessalonian Epistles, The Epistle to the Galatians, The Pastoral Epistles, The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 233.

<sup>58</sup>C. A. Trentham, *Studies in Timothy* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1959), 43.

words he chose. Never did he use the word deaconess in his conspicuous deliberations to Timothy about the offices. They are to be men of dignity, not saying one thing to one person and something different to another.<sup>59</sup> Such talk has ruined more than one church and more than one ministerial career. Apparently, wine was served much like coffee or tea are today. Too much wine while on a visit could accelerate conversation and promote slippage into gossip or into saying one thing to one person and something akin to the opposite to someone else.<sup>60</sup> One wonders if this is an admonition against over-indulgence, or a warning enjoining total abstinence? Additionally, candidates are not to pursue the diakonate for economic motives.<sup>61</sup> In fact, men should not pursue the office of deacon, but rather, be pursued by the congregation.

Verse nine demands that nominees for the diakonate already hold firmly to the inner secret of the faith, which is the revelation given in Christ.<sup>62</sup> This divine mystery is to be housed in a pure conscience, the expression of purity and sincerity, which is to mark the Christian deacon as over against the false

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<sup>59</sup>Robertson, *First Timothy*, 574.

<sup>60</sup>Trentham, 43.

<sup>61</sup>Wilbur B. Wallis, *The First Epistle to Timothy*, in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Nashville, TN: The Southwestern Company, 1962), 1374.

<sup>62</sup>Robertson, *First Timothy*, 574.

teachers spoken of in 1 Tim. 4:2, who are described as having consciences which have been seared.<sup>63</sup>

Verse ten requires that each candidate be tested first, before being put into office, though the passage does not say how to test him.<sup>64</sup> Hinson argues that this is not a formal test as such, but, because Paul expected all Christians to perform as servants, that he may be implying that those of good reputation who have already been caring for the sick and poor be formally enrolled as deacons.<sup>65</sup> Wallis agrees that each nominee must be approved before taking office and that none should be placed in office first on a trial basis, further proposing that the "approving" is not necessarily by way of a formal test, but is, rather, by the approval of the church body itself.<sup>66</sup>

Verse eleven has proven to be quite a headache for exegetes as they have sought to decipher the meaning of Paul with regard to women. Wallis thinks the context makes this passage refer most naturally to deaconesses.<sup>67</sup> Walls agrees, arguing that the Greek fathers understood this as describing the qualities of women

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<sup>63</sup>Vincent, *Timothy*, 235.

<sup>64</sup>Robertson, *First Timothy*, 574.

<sup>65</sup>Hinson, 319.

<sup>66</sup>Wallis, 1374.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 1375.

deacons rather than as the wives of deacons.<sup>68</sup> Robertson concurs, commenting that the women are here warned not to be slanderers, because they are more prone to be such, while men are more apt to be double-tongued.<sup>69</sup> Hinson, too, feels that the weight of the evidence favors the deaconess interpretation due to early second century extra-biblical testimony, further reasoning that both wives of deacons and deaconesses would need the qualifications alluded to in this passage.<sup>70</sup> Contrastingly, Vincent strongly disagrees with the idea that the passage refers to deaconesses. He argues that Paul would have used the definite article in the Greek had he intended his readers to view this text as a reference to deaconesses. He thinks, therefore, the reference is to the wives of deacons, teaching that they must also possess the qualities required in their husbands, or else they would disqualify their husbands from candidacy.<sup>71</sup> Since "deaconess" is never used here, and because of the following verse, the present writer believes the reference in verse eleven is to wives of deacons and not deaconesses as such.

Verse twelve is not any less controversial than verse eleven. The problem seems to revolve around whether or not Paul

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<sup>68</sup>Walls, 298.

<sup>69</sup>Robertson, *First Timothy*, 575.

<sup>70</sup>Hinson, 320.

<sup>71</sup>Vincent, *Timothy*, 236.

was requiring that candidates be (1) married at all, (2) married to one wife at a time, (3) married having never been divorced, or (4) remarried, following a divorce, after conversion to Christ; and these are only four of the possible interpretations posited by scholars. Responsible interpreters see no way that Paul could be requiring marriage in order to hold an ecclesiastical post in light of his writings in 1 Cor. 7, and his own, likely, unmarried status. Ultra-conservative hermeneuts interpret this to mean such as had never been divorced, believing that the family-life of both pastors (elders) and deacons ought to be exemplary.<sup>72</sup> This position notwithstanding, equally studious scholars argue that Paul meant that the candidate must have only one wife at a time.<sup>73</sup> The Greek for, "Let them have one," seems to favor this view, stressing the present marriage situation by verb tense rather than the past situation. Had Paul intended to include every marriage in a man's past, he would have used the perfect tense, which he did not do. The absence of the perfect tense and the use of the present tense is a strong argument against forbidding qualified divorced men to serve as deacons. This writer is convinced that Paul did not intend to exclude godly men

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<sup>72</sup>Matthew Henry, *An Exposition with Practical Observations of the First Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy*, in *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 6, *Acts-Revelation* (McLean, VA: McDonald Publishing Company, n.d.), 816.

<sup>73</sup>Robertson, *First Timothy*, 575.

who had experienced divorce in their pasts. Furthermore, that those holding the technical office of deacon were to be men is argued strongly by virtue of the fact that Paul said the deacon must be the husband of one wife, just as he stated about the elders. Those denying the exclusive "maleness" of elders and deacons have an impossible task explaining how any woman aspiring to be an elder or deacon can be the *husband* of one wife; and, if Paul did intend for churches to have deaconesses, since he stated that a deacon must be the husband of one wife, why did he not say that the deaconess must be the wife of one husband? Verse twelve rules out women serving in the technical office of deacon but does not rule out women serving in the functional capacity as a deaconess (female servant). This verse also demands that the deacon candidate be a good household manager, meaning the spiritual leader in his home. His wife and children are to respect him. Again, it is clear that Paul intended to express the exclusive "maleness" of those holding the office of a deacon.

Verse thirteen concludes the passage under consideration by proclaiming that those who serve well as deacons will earn a position of trust and influence within the church.<sup>74</sup> Gender and marital status are not elaborated upon, but there is here the presence of a plurality of deacons; every church needs more than one deacon.

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<sup>74</sup>Vincent, *Timothy*, 237.

To summarize the 1 Tim. 3:8-13 passage in brief, the deacons must meet the same moral requirements as the prerequisites of the bishops (pastors) listed in 3:1-7. Those holding the office of deacon must be male, grave, serious, respectable individuals of dignity. They must not be double-tongued, saying one thing and meaning another, or saying one thing to one person and something different to another. They must avoid drinking to excess. They must not be greedy of gain, like treacherous pilferers under the guise of some hospitable Christian servant. They must be holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience, being practical lovers of truth who maintain a conscience characterized by sincerity, honesty, and purity. Additionally, wives of deacons are also exhorted to be dignified, to avoid slander, to be temperate, calm, and faithful to the trust vested in them by virtue of the setting aside of their husbands for service.

## V. CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS

### A. Election of Deacons

Some recommend that the church elect the deacons from its membership by ballot without formal suggestion from anyone.<sup>75</sup> Others propose that a representative committee be selected by the pastor, the nominating committee, or perhaps by the committee on committees for the nomination of individuals to the office of deacon. The congregation itself will then recommend names to the committee by way of a secret ballot. The committee will then conduct personal interviews with each nominee wherein the qualifications set forth by the church, based on its interpretation of the Bible, are delineated and discussed. Each man will then be asked if he would be willing to serve if elected. The committee will then present the list of qualified nominees to the church and report the number of deacons currently needed to serve. After a season of prayer, the congregation should vote by secret ballot. Those nominees receiving the most

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<sup>75</sup>J. R. Hobbs, *The Pastor's Manual* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1962), 190.

votes will then be declared to be elected and the time for ordination set.<sup>76</sup>

#### B. Number of Deacons

While the Acts 6:1-6 incident only records the appointment of seven individuals to serve tables, it is not improbable that more were added at a later date. Needs vary from church to church. Therefore, no number or ratio should be inflexible. In larger churches Hobbs recommends a ratio of one deacon for every twenty-five church members,<sup>77</sup> while in smaller churches Segler suggests a ratio of one to five or one to seven.<sup>78</sup> Since the Bible is silent on this issue, one would be well advised to dialogue with church members, pastors, and deacons before making any hasty decisions.

#### C. Length of Service of Deacons

Once again, the New Testament does not set forth any guidelines regarding the length of service for a deacon. Following ordination or appointment, in most cases anyway, tenure is like that of a judge: life on good behavior, and sometimes longer! Some churches have implemented a deacon rotation system in which each deacon is elected to either a one, two, or three year term, and then rotated off the active list accordingly. Some

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<sup>76</sup>Segler, 97.

<sup>77</sup>Hobbs, 190.

<sup>78</sup>Segler, 95-6.

are eligible to succeed themselves, while others must wait a year before being elected again.<sup>79</sup>

#### D. Ordination of Deacons

In most baptist churches it is customary for them to ordain the deacons whom they have elected after examining them along the same lines as a ministerial candidate would be examined;<sup>80</sup> however, as mentioned above, some may question the validity, meaning, and purpose of ordination, opting instead simply to elect, foregoing a formal service of installation. Furthermore, Baptists neither believe the diakonate to be an hierarchical office, nor do they believe that any special grace or authority is imparted at ordination.<sup>81</sup>

#### E. Responsibilities of Deacons

That the first helpers waited on tables and probably made decisions regarding the distribution of food in an effort to assist the Apostles has already been established. Today, these servants are chosen to help the pastor by shouldering some of his burdens for him, thus allowing him more time for the ministry of the word. They are not to be rulers in the church. Their primary responsibility is the welfare of the church members and others in

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<sup>79</sup>Hobbs, 190-1.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 191.

<sup>81</sup>Segler, 95-6.

the community.<sup>82</sup> They are responsible for being available in times of crisis. The servant should be a good listener too, for, he may be called upon to counsel.<sup>83</sup> The deacon should be a regular proclaimer of the gospel. This involves personal witnessing in particular and, perhaps, even some lay preaching in general.<sup>84</sup> Further, the responsible church servant will want to help build a strong Christian fellowship at his local church. This is, perhaps, the most significant responsibility of all: to build up rather than to tear down the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. He will be depended upon to share information about the life and work of the church with others. Still further, he may be called upon to assist in administering the ordinances observed by the church.<sup>85</sup> Finally, all church officers are expected to be exemplary Christian leaders. This is seen in and through their family lives, work habits, hobbies, personal support of church activities, and more. Ideally speaking, this official servant stands alongside the pastor as a co-laborer in the work of the Lord.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>W. L. Howse and W. O. Thomason, *A Church Organized and Functioning* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1963), 32-3.

<sup>83</sup>Foshee, 103.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 104.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

#### F. Meetings for Deacons

Foshee believes that the meeting together of the deacons with the pastor can provide a time of meaningful worship and comradery as each reports his experiences during the past month or so.<sup>87</sup> Hobbs suggests that the deacons meet once each month in order to discuss the business affairs of the church, remembering that they have no authority over the church and can take no final action;<sup>88</sup> however, let the reader beware that window shopping can quickly lead to purchasing. Is this what the men of Acts 6:1-6 did? Were they meeting to discuss the actions they wanted to recommend to the church regarding budgets, finances, and personnel? The observation of Foshee seems more compatible with the biblical texts and servanthood than the suggestion of Hobbs, which smacks of senatorship more than it expresses servanthship. Moreover, beginning each meeting with a short devotional, having a time of prayer, and allowing for a time of sharing reports should help keep things in perspective.

#### G. The Deacon Family Ministry Program

The deacon family ministry program is a method by which the deacon-body seeks to minister to every family in the church by way of a planned visitation program.<sup>89</sup> Since there are several

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>88</sup>Hobbs, 199.

<sup>89</sup>Foshee, 106.

categories of church members (active, marginally active, inactive), each deacon should be assigned some members from each category. The basic method of assignment may be done alphabetically, relationally, geographically, or, perhaps, eclectically (a little from all these categories). Foshee recommends that each deacon maintain regular contact with twelve to fifteen families.<sup>90</sup> He also suggests that the deacon chairman be responsible for assignments and organization.

#### H. Deacon Training

In order to be more effective as a deacon, each man should receive some sort of basic training in at least five categories: (1) how to discern the needs of others, (2) how to share the gospel, (3) how to follow up on decisions, (4) how to visit the sick, and (5) how to minister to the grieving. Ten thirty minute training sessions, devoting two sessions to each category, would work wonders in the church. Some of the monthly deacons' meetings could also be used for training; however, it may be better to do a series of sessions one day each week for ten weeks or two sessions each week for five weeks. The important thing is not so much how or when this is done, but that it is done.

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Effective deacons are those who are committed to Jesus Christ and to the church of the Lord Jesus. They are men who understand their role as a pastoral supporter and are committed to building up the church through prayer, leadership, and humble servanthship. They are men who see needs and raise dust by making haste to meet those needs. They see themselves as servants, not senators. They seek to eradicate conflict, not escalate conflict. In a word, they are the unsung heroes of Christendom. Without them, the work of the pastor becomes over-burdensome and nearly unbearable. Long may the deacons of the Lord Jesus Christ serve.

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