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Answering the Key Questions About Deacons
Scripture: 1 Timothy 3:8-13
Code: P12

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The title *deacon* seems to have as many different connotations as there are churches to bestow it. In some churches, the deacons are the official board, the legally recognized managing body. Other churches appoint almost everyone who is a regular attender as a deacon. Still other churches bestow the title as a badge of honor, like "reverend," but for laymen. The ministry of a deacon is so different from church to church that when a person says he is a deacon, you usually have to ask several questions to find out what, if anything, he actually does. Scripture itself is vague about the specifics of *what* deacons are to do. We read a lot about what qualifies a man to be a deacon, but little about how deacons are to minister in the local church. That fact in itself teaches us much about God's view of church leadership: What a man *is* is the issue, more than what he *does*.

Unfortunately that point is often overlooked in debates about church government. My conviction is that when a church becomes as concerned about maintaining high standards of purity and integrity in leadership as it is about upholding a specific form of government, it will begin to fall more in line with Scripture in every other area as well.

How is the word *deacon* used in the New Testament?

The New Testament text uses three primary words to refer to deacons: *diakonos*, which means "servant"; *diakonia*, which means "service"; and *diakoneo*, which means "to serve." The original use of this group of words seems to have been specific, meaning the service of waiting on tables or serving people food. But it broadened beyond that and came to mean any kind of service.

It is important to understand at the outset that, in a biblical context, the group of Greek words from which we get the word *deacon* has meanings no more specific than the meanings of their English equivalents. In biblical usage, *diakonia* suggests all kinds of service, just as the English word *service* does. We might use the word *serve* to describe anything from the start of a volley in a tennis match to a convicted criminal who "serves" a term in prison. We use it equally to describe a slave who serves his master or a king who serves his people.

The Greek words *diakonos*, *diakoneo*, and *diakonia* have just as wide a variety of meanings, but in general they refer to any kind of service that supplies the need of another person. The words are

used at least a hundred times in the New Testament, and they are usually translated with variants of the English words *serve* or *minister*. In a few places in the King James Version they are translated differently—*diakonia* is "administration" in 1 Corinthians 12:5 and 2 Corinthians 9:12, and "relief" in Acts 11:29. But in those verses, and in every usage of the words throughout the New Testament, the primary meaning has to do with service and ministry.

What kind of service is implied by the Greek word for "deacon"?

Serving food. The original and most limited meaning of the word *diakoneo* has to do with serving food. The account of the wedding at Cana is a good illustration of that: "His mother said to the servants [*diakonoi*], 'Whatever He says to you, do it'.... When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants [*diakonoi*] who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom" (John 2:5, 9). That is clearly a reference to people who actually served tables. And that is the traditional and original sense of the word *deacon*.

Luke 4:39 tells us that after Christ healed Peter's mother-in-law, she "immediately got up and waited on them." The verb form of *diakoneo* appears there. Peter's mother-in-law waited on both Christ and Peter, which probably means she served them a meal. Three other texts in the gospels where the word *deacon* refers to serving a meal are John 12:2; Luke 10:40; and 17:8.

General service. On some occasions, *diakoneo* or one of the related words is used without specifying what kind of service is involved. In John 12:26 Christ says, "If any one serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if any one serves Me, the Father will honor him." The meaning of the word is general there and could refer to a number of forms of service.

Biblically, the use of the word *diakonos* is not limited to describing believers. Romans 13:3-4 says, "Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil." There *diakonos*, translated "minister," is used twice of a policeman or soldier who isn't necessarily a Christian.

A passage where both the original and the general usage of the word appears is Luke 22:27. There Christ said, "Who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves." In that verse *diakoneo* is used twice. The first usage clearly refers to the serving of a meal. The second speaks of service in a general sense.

Spiritual service. Looking more directly at the term, we find it used of the believer's role as a servant. In Romans 15:25 Paul writes, "I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints." He identified himself as a

servant (*diakonos*). From Acts 20:19 we learn that he kept busy "serving [*diakoneo*] the Lord with all humility."

In 2 Corinthians 8:3-4 Paul says of the churches in Macedonia, "I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support [*diakonia*] of the saints." The ministry of providing resources for meeting basic physical needs is a form of spiritual service.

In this spiritual sense of *diakonos* and the related words, any act of obedience done by a Christian should qualify to be called service to Christ. In the way the words are often used in Acts and the epistles, a believer in any form of ministry could be called the servant, or deacon, of Christ.

First Corinthians 12:5 tells us that "there are varieties of ministries [*diakonia*], and the same Lord." All Christians are involved in some form of service. All who serve the Lord are deacons, or ministers, if not in an official sense, at least in the sense of this general usage of the word.

Other verses that use a form of the word *deacon* to speak of spiritual service are 2 Corinthians 4:1; 9:1; and Revelation 2:19. In those and all the verses that we have looked at so far, we have not yet found the word used in reference to the office of deacon in the church.

Does the New Testament speak about the office of a deacon?

Because of the variety of meanings attached to *diakonos* and the related words, with one or two possible exceptions it is difficult to pin down any clear reference in the New Testament to an office of deacon in the early ecclesiastical government. Most occurrences of *diakonos* and the related words use their general meanings and clearly have nothing to do with a church office. Other passages could be taken one way or the other, but usually the clearest, most natural interpretation calls for the general meanings, not a reference to a special title belonging to a select group in the church.

For example, some say that Romans 12 contains a reference to the office of deacon: "Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly...if service, in his serving" (vv. 6-7). But is the gift of serving equivalent to the function or office of a deacon? There is nothing in the text to support that. The other gifts listed in Romans 12 do not involve offices. Also, offices are not necessarily related to gifts. A person who has the gift of teaching, for example, does not have to be a pastor-teacher to exercise his gift. The gifts are related to callings and assignments, not just offices.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul says, "You know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry [*diakonia*] to the saints" (16:15). Was Paul saying that the household of Stephanas was a family of officially titled deacons? There is no way

to affirm that on the basis of the terms used or the context—in fact, the most natural interpretation is to take it the way it is translated.

Some suggest that Ephesians 4:12 talks about deacons in the church. Starting with verse 11, we read, "[The Lord] gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." The "work of service" (*diakonia*) is not the work of the deacons, but rather the work of all saints in being servers. Paul was talking about Christians in general being equipped for spiritual service, not about the office of a deacon.

Is anyone specified as a deacon in the New Testament?

Paul probably wasn't. Some believe that Paul was a deacon. They point to Acts 20:24, where he says, "I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course, and the ministry [*diakonia*] which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God." But Paul was saying that he had a specific ministry given to him by Christ; he was not calling himself a deacon or minister in any official sense. In Romans 11:13 he writes, "I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office [*diakonia*]" (KJV). The New American Standard uses the word *ministry* in that verse instead of "office." The use of "office" in the King James Version was arbitrary; it seems unlikely that Paul was using the word in reference to an official position there. His office was that of apostle, which he called "my ministry," or "my service."

In 1 Timothy 1:12 the apostle Paul writes, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service." That translation is accurate; Paul is not saying that he was put into the office of a deacon. Other passages that talk about Paul as a minister or servant are 1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 3:6 and 6:4; and Ephesians 3:7. In each of those instances, there is no evidence that Paul was assigned the office of deacon. He was calling himself a servant of God in a general sense.

Paul was an apostle—he spent much of 2 Corinthians 10-12 emphasizing that point. The apostles' office was the highest of all in the local church, superseding that of the elders and deacons. In an official capacity, Paul would never have claimed to be a deacon; he was an apostle.

Tychicus probably wasn't. Paul said to the Ephesians, "[So] that you also may know about my circumstances, how I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister [*diakonos*] in the Lord, will make everything known to you" (Ephesians 6:21). It could be that Paul was calling Tychicus a faithful deacon. But Paul also used *diakonos* in Ephesians 3:7 and *diakonia* in Ephesians 4:12 as references to general service, and there is no reason to assume he meant differently here.

Epaphras probably wasn't. In Colossians 1:7 Paul calls Epaphras "our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant [*diakonos*] of Christ on our behalf." Then in verses 23 and 25 he writes, "Continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister [*diakonos*].... Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit." Paul used *diakonos* to describe both himself and Epaphras. Since we feel certain that the apostle Paul was not calling himself a deacon, it seems highly unlikely that he was referring to Epaphras as one. Principles of interpretation suggest that a word finds its meaning within the context of a book, and in the context of Colossians, there is no indication that *diakonos* refers to an office of deacons.

Those mentioned in Philippians 1:1 probably weren't. Another place that the word *deacon* appears is Philippians 1:1. The letter to the Philippians begins, "Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons."

Up to now we have not seen the Greek word *diakonos* translated as "deacons." Why did the Bible translators suddenly introduce the word *deacon* here in an official sense when in virtually every other usage the word is translated "minister" or "servant"? Granted, the word here *could* refer to officers in the church, but again, the context does not seem to warrant such an interpretation.

The word in this verse translated "overseers" (*episkopos*) is not the word normally used to identify elders (*presbuteros*). The most natural interpretation of this verse is that Paul was addressing his letter to the whole church. He seems to be saying, "I write to the whole church, including the leadership and those who follow or serve." To say that Philippians 1:1 refers to the office of deacon might be correct, but it is an arbitrary choice. There is not enough evidence to be dogmatic about what Paul is saying.

We have already seen many uses of the Greek words *diakonos*, *diakoneo*, and *diakonia*, but none with a clear reference to a specific church office.

Doesn't Acts 6 talk about deacons?

Many see the passage in Acts 6 as the initiation of the deacon's office. Verses 1-2 say that "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. And 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.'" When food was being given out to care for the widows, the Hellenistic widows were not getting their fair share. Apparently the native Jews were concentrating more on the needs of their own people.

It is important to realize the extent of the problem facing the church in trying to provide food for everyone. The church could well have exceeded 20,000 people at that time. There was no way that the twelve apostles would have the time to carry food all over town to meet the needs of hundreds of widows. Not only did food need to be distributed, but people were needed to administer the whole distribution process. That included collecting and safeguarding the necessary finances, purchasing the food, and dispensing it fairly.

The apostles recognized the scope of the problem, yet realized they needed to solve it without sacrificing their own valuable time and priorities. They said to the congregation, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables" (v. 2).

The apostles' advice to the congregation is found in verse 3: "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." It was important to select men who had a reputation for honesty because they were going to be entrusted with money. There were no checks or accounting procedures like we have today. The men also had to be "full of the Spirit and of wisdom." It is very difficult to work out an equitable system of distribution to people who have varying needs. They would have to determine whether or not someone's need was legitimate.

Seven men were to be chosen so that the apostles could be free to do what God had called them to do. In Acts 6:4 the apostles say, "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Verses 5-6 tell us, that their "statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them."

Were the seven men listed in Acts 6:5 fulfilling an office of deacon? The traditional interpretation of Acts 6 is that those men were the first deacons. Notice that verses 1-2 say, "[The Hellenistic] widows were being over looked in the daily serving [*diakoneo*] of food...It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve [*diakonia*] tables." Some say that the use of those words in their original sense implies that these men were chosen to fill the office of deacon.

Another argument for viewing these men as deacons is that early church history confirms that in the post-apostolic period deacons were assigned charge of administrative affairs—including the distribution of goods to the poor. In addition, the post-apostolic church in Rome limited the number of deacons to seven for many years. They seem to have taken that number from the seven chosen in Acts 6.

Still, there are a number of reasons for rejecting the notion that these seven men were chosen to fill the office of deacon. The use of *diakonia* and *diakoneo* is inconclusive, because *diakonia* is used in Acts 6:4 in reference to the work of the apostles themselves. So there is no reason to conclude that the office of a deacon is meant in verse 5. The New Testament never refers to the men listed in Acts 6:5 as deacons. Only two of the men are mentioned elsewhere in Scripture (Stephen and Philip), but they are nowhere called deacons.

Keep in mind that Acts was written in the earliest years of the church. We have already seen that none of the epistles written to specific churches recognized the office of deacon except for the possible indication in Philippians. There is no strong reason from those epistles to believe that the office of deacon was instituted in Acts 6. Elders are mentioned later in the book of Acts and in several of the epistles to the churches, but not deacons. If Acts 6 is indeed the institution of the deacon's office, it seems strange that deacons are never referred to again in Acts.

Notice the word *task* used in Acts 6:3. That suggests the seven men were called to help take care of a one-time crisis, not necessarily installed into a permanent office. Their ongoing ministries seem to have been distinct from the immediate task. None of the seven is ever mentioned again in association with any food distribution ministry.

Note that all seven who were chosen had Greek names. If those men were being appointed to the Jerusalem church for an ongoing ministry, it would seem strange that only Greeks would be chosen. A permanent order of deacons in Jerusalem would not likely be made up of Greeks. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to conclude that seven Greeks would be chosen to take care of a short-term ministry to the Hellenistic widows who had been neglected. Those men knew the situation and their people.

It is best to see the events described in Acts 6 as an effort by the Jerusalem church to take care of a temporary crisis, and the calling of the seven men as a nonpermanent ministry.

If the men in Acts 6:5 weren't deacons, what were they?

If the deaconate had been maintained as an official function, we would expect it to be mentioned in Acts 11. There was a famine in Judea about six or seven years after the events of Acts 6. The church at Antioch, responding to the needs of the Jerusalem believers, sent relief food to help them: "In the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders" (Acts 11:29-30).

The comparison of Acts 6:1-6 and 11:29-30 suggests that the ongoing ministry of distributing goods in the Jerusalem church was entrusted to elders, not deacons. If there had been an officially constituted

deaconate in Acts 6 with a continuing responsibility to distribute goods to the needy, the church at Antioch would have sent their contribution to that group.

Now let's look at the men selected in Acts 6. Verse 8 says that Stephen, "full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people." His function was not typical of the office of deacon as indicated later in 1 Timothy 3. He was articulate in the Word and almost apostolic in his gifts. He performed great wonders and signs.

In Acts 21:8 we read about Philip, who is described as an evangelist. Since Acts 7 shows Stephen preaching and Acts 8 shows Philip evangelizing, it appears that the seven men in Acts 6:5 were closer to being elders in function than they were to being deacons. The seven men had administrative responsibilities, they had oversight over a very broad task, some articulated the Word of God, and some evangelized the lost. They were full of the Spirit, faith, and wisdom, and some even performed signs and wonders (cf. Acts 6:8; 8:6-7).

It is noteworthy that only seven men were selected. How could seven men possibly meet the broad need that the Jerusalem church was faced with? It would take more than seven people to do the job of distribution alone! It is more likely that the seven were a group of highly qualified spiritual leaders, teachers, and honorable men chosen to administrate the situation. By doing what they did, they freed the apostles to devote themselves to the priorities of prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Although we cannot say definitively that Acts 6 talks about the church offices of elder or deacon, we can clearly see there is a need for two areas of ministry: one is teaching and praying (v. 4), which involves spiritual care; the other is administration and oversight of needs (vv. 1-3), which involves both spiritual and physical care.

The seven men in Acts 6:5 did more than just hand people food. We know that Stephen and Philip were dynamic preachers. Some might assume that the other men listed in Acts 6:5 were not. But immediately after the men were chosen, the church "brought [them] before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly" (Acts 6:6-7). That indicates the seven were a part of the early church's growth. It also suggests that they were more like elders in function than deacons.

Nothing indicates the seven continued to serve in their original capacity. Stephen was killed shortly thereafter, and Philip went to Samaria. The persecution of Christians in Jerusalem that soon began may have scattered the whole group. As was noted, by the time of Acts 11:29-30 there is no mention of the group. Rather we read of a group of elders. If any of the original seven did remain, they would probably have been elders or secondary apostles of the churches—not deacons.

Is there any Scripture passage that refers to deacons in the official sense?

Having explored several passages that are general or questionable in reference to the office of deacon, it is necessary to turn to the one passage in the New Testament that can definitely be said to refer to that office: 1 Timothy 3. Verse 8 says, "Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain." An interpretive key to that verse is "likewise." It refers back to verse 1, in which we find the statement, "If any man aspires to the office of overseer..." That indicates deacons occupy a recognized office just as elders do.

So in the church there is to be a plurality of godly men—elders—who oversee the Lord's work in the church. They are assisted in their work by deacons. The basic offices of a church do not need to be more sophisticated than that.

By A.D. 64, when this epistle was probably written, the church had developed to the point where the spiritual qualifications for church leaders are specific, yet the instructions for organization are still quite limited. That is by divine design. There is great flexibility in individual church organization because God knew that situations and needs would differ over time and in different cultures. The biblical emphasis is not on the organization, but on the leaders' purity and spiritual depth.

What qualifies a man to be a deacon?

The qualifications for deacons can be divided into two categories: personal character and spiritual character.

Personal character. Paul listed four personal qualifications. First, deacons must be men of dignity (1 Timothy 3:8). This means that they must be worthy of respect and serious minded, not treating serious things lightly. The Greek word for "dignity" is *semnos*, which means "venerable, honorable, reputable, grave, serious, and stately." The same Greek word appears in Titus 2:2, which says that older men "are to be temperate, *dignified*, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance" (emphasis added).

First Timothy 3:8 also says a deacon must not be double-tongued, or one who says one thing to one person and something else to another—a malicious gossip. They are always consistent and righteous in what they say. Next, deacons are not addicted to much wine. Rather they are noted for their clear thinking and self-control. Finally, Paul said that deacons should not be fond of gain. That would be important because deacons are sometimes responsible for handling funds. Therefore their goals in life must not be monetary. First Timothy 6:9 says that a pervasive desire for financial gain corrupts a man.

Spiritual character. Paul also listed four spiritual qualifications. First, a deacon must hold "to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience" (1 Timothy 3:9). In other words, he must have convictions based on the knowledge of true biblical doctrine. His clear conscience implies that he lives out his convictions. He must hold to the faith and apply the truth in his life.

A second spiritual qualification for deacons is given in verse 10: "These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach." Before a man is officially appointed as a deacon, he must have proved himself faithful in serving the Lord. If he has proved himself to be beyond reproach, then let him serve.

Third, a deacon must be morally pure in every way, just as an elder is to be. Literally verse 10 says, "Let them serve as deacons if they are in the process of being irreproachable." Those who are not above reproach are disqualified from serving as deacons. Verse 12, which says, "Let deacons be husbands of only one wife," also implies that deacons are to be morally pure. But that does not necessarily mean a deacon is to be someone who has never been divorced, although that would be a disqualification if his sin contributed to the divorce, or if the circumstances of the divorce bring reproach on him. The main point is that a deacon must be totally consecrated and devoted to his wife. The Greek text actually reads, "Let deacons be one-woman men." Having one wife does not necessarily reflect one's character, but being single-mindedly devoted to one's wife does.

The fourth characteristic of a deacon's spiritual life is that he leads his family well. Deacons are to be "good managers of their children and their own households" (v. 12). A deacon must demonstrate some kind of management ability. The proving ground for leadership is how a man manages his children and household.

Although specific personal and spiritual qualifications must be met by those in the offices of elder and deacon, that does not mean that the standard is lower for anyone else in the congregation. Everyone should seek to be in the role of a deacon—whether he is a recognized, office-holding deacon, or simply a servant to the Body. The qualifications specified in 1 Timothy 3 should be a goal and a guideline for every believer.

What does the Bible say about deaconesses?

First Timothy 3:11 begins, "Women must likewise be dignified." Again, "likewise" relates back to an office of the church. Contrary to the King James Version's translation of that verse, we know Paul was not talking about the wives of deacons because he used no pronoun to refer to them. He didn't say *their* wives, or *their* women. Also, since there are no comments about the wives of elders, why would there be any comments about the wives of deacons?

In Romans 16:1 we read, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant [*diakonos*] of the church which is at Cenchrea." Phoebe was recognized by the church for her service. It is possible that she served in an official capacity as a deaconess at the church in Cenchrea.

The Greek word for "women" in 1 Timothy 3:11 is *gunaikas*. Apparently Paul used that term to be specific since there is no feminine form of *diakonos*. The same form of the word *diakonos* is both masculine and feminine; it would have been unclear for Paul to use just the term *diakonos* if he wanted to refer to women servers. He had to identify them as women.

We see, then, three distinct church offices described in 1 Timothy 3—elders, deacons, and deaconesses. This is what Paul had to say about deaconesses: they must be "dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things" (v. 11).

What is the difference between elders and deacons?

It is essential to recognize that deacons are equally qualified with elders in terms of character and spiritual life. The one difference between their qualifications is that the elder must be able to teach, but the deacon doesn't have to be. In churches today, some who are called elders are really closer to being deacons and vice versa. They both should be proven servants of Christ who have the capability to manage their households and lead the members of their congregation. Elders should be given the primary responsibility of teaching the Word, and that can be accomplished as deacons share the work of the ministry with them.

Deacons are to administrate, shepherd, and care for the flock. Although their primary function is not teaching, they are no less spiritually qualified, honored, or respected. They relieve those who are more skilled in teaching so those men may be free to pray and study the Word.

In a special sense, the deacon's task sums up the essence of spiritual greatness. Our Lord said, "Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matt. 20:26-28).

The Lord Jesus Himself, then, is the model for those who would step into the deacon's role. It is a role of service, of sacrifice, and of commitment to others' needs. The reward of the deacon's office is not the temporal glory that comes from human adulation, but rather the eternal blessing that comes from living a life of spiritual service to the glory of God.

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