



Truth

On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 21 (April 2007)

What About the Deacon and Deaconess?

Acts 6:1-6 and I Timothy 3:11

If THERE IS ONE AREA IN WHICH THE CHURCH HAS departed from biblical authority and sufficiency, it is in the area of church government. Today we have created an entire hierarchy of church government. We seem to think that we must organize and structure everything we do so that nothing gets left out.

As pure as that motive is, however, Scripture is not ambiguous here. In very clear words it declares that there are only *two* recognized offices that cover everything. This is nowhere more clearly stated than in Philippians 1:1: “Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” As the trusted commentator Albert Barnes writes on this verse:

The apostle here mentions but two orders of ministers in the church at Philippi; and this account is of great importance in its bearing on the question about the way in which Christian churches were at first organized, and about the officers which existed in them.¹

Having briefly examined the “pastor,” along with the related terms “bishop” and “elder,” we turn to the office of **deacon** (and another supposed one called “deaconess”).

The Office of Deacon

During the writing of this article, I had the joy of teaching a deacon training course in our church, which outlined the *reality, requirements, responsibilities*, and

rewards of the office of deacon. To summarize, as I shared with our men, this office is absolutely crucial to the church. So important is it that the standards for it are no less than those for the elder (pastor and bishop). The only difference between the two is *function*, the latter being required to be a good teacher.

Diakonos (**deacon**) and the related terms *diakoneō* (“to serve”), and *diakonia* (“service”) appear approximately 100 times in the New Testament. Only in I Timothy 3:11 and Philippians 1:1 are they transliterated “deacon” or “deacons.” The rest of the time they are translated by various English words. In other words, only in those two passages is the deacon elevated to official status. The rest of the time the terms are used in a general, nonspecific sense.

So how did the translators know to transliterate the word as the name of an office? The context makes this clear. *First*, Paul has already dealt with the known office of bishop (elder, pastor) and then another is mentioned immediately after that. *Second*, a list of qualifications follows the first office, and then another list appears after that. The list must be referring to an office.

Diakonos itself is found twenty-nine times in the New Testament. Let us note three things about this term.

First, its primary meaning was “one who serves at table,” but probably included other menial tasks. That definition gradually broadened until it came to include any kind of service in the church. The word group’s versatility can be seen in its divergent usage in the New Testament. *Diakonos diakoneō*, and *diakonia* are vari-

ously translated “administration,” “cared for,” “minister,” “servant,” “serve,” “service,” “preparations,” “relief,” “support,” and “deacon,” among others. The root idea of serving food comes across in John 2:5, where *diakonos* is used of the waiters at a wedding. *Diakoneō* is used in the same sense in Luke 4:39, where Peter’s mother-in-law served a meal. Luke 10:40, 17:8, and John 12:2 also use this word group to refer to serving food.

Diakonos is used to refer to soldiers and policemen who enforce justice (Rom. 13:4). In John 12:26, Jesus equated *following* Him with *servicing* Him; anything done in obedience to Him is spiritual service. In the general sense of the term, all Christians are deacons, for all are to be actively serving Christ and His church. That is Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 12:5, where he writes that “there are varieties of ministries” (*diakoniōn*). Every Christian is to be involved in some form of spiritual service. Leaders, through both teaching and practice, are to equip believers to perform that service (Eph. 4:12).

Second, however, *diakonos diakoneō*, and *diakoniā* are also used in a more specific sense. The list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6–8 includes a gift for service. Those with that gift are specially equipped for service, though they may not hold the office of deacon. Stephanas and his family were so gifted. Paul wrote of them, “they have addicted [devoted] themselves to the ministry (*diakonia*) of the saints” (1 Cor. 16:15). These are people that God has especially gifted and seem to just materialize from nowhere when a need for service arises.

Third, this word group refers to the officially recognized responsibility of the office of **deacon**. Yes, first everyone is a deacon in the general sense, and second the Holy Spirit specially gifts for service, but there are still others who are appointed to the office of deacon. They are the models of spiritual service for everyone else to follow. What is their function? *They work alongside the elders, implementing their preaching, teaching, and oversight in the practical life of the church.*

This brings us to a key text, Acts 6:1-6:

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Ni-

canor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

In spite of what seems to be an obvious reference to deacons here, there are some who, for some inexplicable reason, make it an issue and argue against it. In fact, the basic meaning of “serving tables” is right in the passage, which sets the perfect precedent of what the deacon does—he takes care of temporal matters. Going against older expositors (such as Calvin and many others), however, one contemporary expositor, who I greatly respect and admire, writes:

Many hold that the seven men chosen to oversee the distribution of food in Acts 6 were the first official deacons. The text, however, nowhere calls them deacons.

But I must respectfully disagree. While the English *noun* “deacon” is not used for the seven men appointed to serve, the Greek *verb diakoneō* is used twice in verse 1 and the infinitive *diakonia* is used once in verse 2, which as we’ve seen come from the same root. So why doesn’t Luke use the noun here? Undoubtedly because the church is still in its infancy and the office has not yet been defined. The same expositor takes his argument farther and comments:

The book of Acts nowhere uses the term *diakonos* (**deacon**), which seems strange if an order of deacons was initiated in Acts 6. Elders are mentioned several times in Acts (cf. 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4; 20:17), making the omission of any reference to deacons even more significant.

But what is bothersome here is that this is an argument from silence, which is always weak and often even dangerous. Just because the office is not *named* doesn’t mean that it didn’t *exist*. The Epistles build on the Book of Acts, and the office of deacon that is *named* in the Epistles seems clearly *rooted* in that early situation of Acts 6. This is the consistent position of almost all commentators and expositors and is simply the natural conclusion. We’ll come back to this in a moment.

First, let us understand the historical situation. By this time, the Church had already filled Jerusalem and was on the threshold of world evangelism, as stated in 1:8: “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” There was now simply too much for the Apostles to handle alone.

Specifically, there were two kinds of Jews in the early Church: Native-born Palestinian (Hebrews) and Grecian-born (Hellenistic). There was, therefore, a natural strain between them. Not only were their languages

different, but also the Hebrews looked down on the Hellenists because they assumed the Hellenists had been polluted by heathen culture. Culturally, however, it was actually the Hellenists who were more concerned about widows. They said (and rightly so), “It’s wrong to neglect widows.” Since the Apostles did not deny this observation, it was obviously a legitimate problem that needed to be addressed.

Verse 2, however, tells us that the Apostles could not take care of this work. In essence, they were saying: “We certainly recognize the problem, but we can’t handle it. It’s too big and would demand too much of our time. If we spend all our time on temporal matters, we will have to neglect the ministry of the Word of God and prayer, and that we simply cannot do for any reason.”

Therefore, seven men were appointed to do this work. But who appointed them? This passage has been used, among other things, to “prove” congregational government—people voting on issues and officers. But the language doesn’t support that idea. While it’s true that they “set before the apostles” these seven men, it was the *Apostles* who appointed them. In other words, if these men had not been qualified, they would not have been appointed. Congregational rule often elects people who are not qualified and is also quite often not much more than a popularity contest.

Second, we would, therefore, submit four indications that this *is* the first instance of deacons.

1. As noted earlier, the Greek term is present—once in verse 1—“Widows were neglected in the daily ministration [verb *diakoneo*]”—and once in verse 2—“Not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve [infinitive *diakonia*] tables.” Again, some insist, “This is not referring to an *office* because the words are verbs.” No, but it is referring to the *function* of the office, which is most certainly named in the Epistles.

2. Early Church History confirms this. We find that the early Church assigned not only the distribution of food to deacons, but also many other administrative affairs. In fact, the Church at Rome for many years limited the number to seven.

3. Strict qualifications are given even here in Acts 6, not just I Timothy 3 and there are obvious similarities. While the office is in its primitive state, strict requirements were still laid down. The tie between the men here and those referred to in I Timothy seems so obvious that, frankly, I find arguments against it not only pointless, but just downright silly.

4. Viewing this as the beginning of deacons *sets a precedent* for both the *existence* and *duties* of this office. As to their existence, while the office of pastor (bishop and elder) has a clear precedent in Acts, without Acts 6, we have the office of deacon mentioned in the Epistles but have no precedent in Acts. As to their duties, the expositor I mentioned earlier makes this statement about

deacons in I Timothy 3 that appears to us to be contradictory:

No specifics are given in Scripture as to the duties of deacons. They were to carry out whatever tasks were assigned to them by the elders or needed by the congregation.

But a question comes to mind: “If there aren’t any specifics as to their duties, then how do we know that they were to carry out whatever tasks that the elders assigned them or that were needed by the congregation?” Acts 6, however, clearly speaks of their duties involving temporal matters. Without Acts 6, therefore, there is no precedent for either the *duties* of the deacon or even the *existence* of deacons. Acts 6 is needed to show both.

What About the Deaconess?

Before leaving this subject, it is essential that we deal with the issue of what is commonly called in our day “the deaconess.” The basic reason for the controversy is that the word **wives** (I Tim. 3:11) is the Greek *gunaikas* (plural of *gune*), which can also be translated “women.” There are some, therefore, who believe that the reference to these women in verse 11 supports the idea of “the female deacon,” that is, a specific office called “deaconess.”

Frankly, I was shocked to read this view even by one very respected contemporary expositor. By doing so, however, he takes the same position as every liberal does. I believe this to be an important issue, so I want to take a few moments to share ten reasons why I can’t even imagine that this refers to an office. The first four reasons directly answer the major arguments that are offered that this is another distinct group.

First, it is argued, the use of **likewise** argues strongly for a third and distinct group here in addition to elders and deacons. But frankly this argument is just plain ridiculous. **Likewise** does not necessarily do any such thing. Paul could have phrased this, “Deacons must have the following qualifications, and their wives likewise.” Besides, if these women are deaconesses, why do they need additional qualifications? Paul has already given the qualifications for being a deacon. Should not every person in an office have the same qualifications? As one commentator illustrates, “One does not state the qualifications of a US Senator and then add something additional for red-haired senators, western senators, or women senators.”²

Second, it is argued, there is no possessive pronoun or definite article connecting these women with deacons. In other words, if Paul were talking about wives, he would have said “their wives.” But it’s really not unusual for the Greek to omit an article or a demonstrative pronoun. There is, in fact, a possible reason that Paul omitted the pronoun “their.” Had Paul inserted “their,” a

reader would have immediately assumed that he was referring only to the deacon's wives. But instead, before going on with other qualifications for deacons in verse 12 (qualifications that women cannot meet, I might add), he inserts a note regarding the wives of *both* bishops and deacons. As noted earlier, Calvin and many others maintain that this as the natural meaning.

Third, it is further argued, Paul used the word "women" because there was no Greek word for "deaconess," and therefore the word "women" was the only way to differentiate the male office from the female. But that statement is more accurately only *half true*. While it is true that there is no word for deaconess in the *New Testament*, there *is* a word in extrabiblical Greek—*diokonissa*—although, to be honest, it is uncertain as to whether this word existed during New Testament times or after. If it did, Paul would surely have used it if he meant "deaconess."

Fourth, one other argument is that Phebe in Romans 16:1-2 is an example of a deaconess:

I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also.

The word servant is *diakonos*, and some view this as an instance of a deaconess. But this is weak to say the least. The context speaks of service in general and there is no implication whatsoever that this is an office. Phebe was a wealthy and generous woman who simply ministered to the needs around her. And, oh, how we need to understand that this is what service is all about! People today make such an issue of organizing this ministry and that outreach, when that isn't the New Testament standard. As we each see needs, we do what we can to meet them. It is as simple as that.

In addition to answering those four arguments, I would further submit six other points.

Fifth, if this is supposed to be an office, why is it never mentioned again? Why is it not clearly defined instead of ambiguously referred to in this one single verse? If it's so important, why not make it unquestionably clear?

Sixth, if deaconess is supposed to be a separate office, why didn't Paul finish listing the qualifications for deacon and then go to deaconess? Why does he deal with deacons in verses 10 and 12 but insert a new office, which he doesn't name, in verse 11? This would be confusing to readers, and some today seem to want to be confused.

Seventh, in the final analysis, why is the office of deaconess even necessary? Any temporal or physical needs are to be met by the deacons. Their wives, as God

designed it in the Garden of Eden, are their helpmeets and will aid them as needed. When we keep in mind this original design, this is the most natural and biblical way to view this passage. As John Gill wrote some 200 years ago:

Some instead of "wives" read "women", and understand them of deaconesses, such as were in the primitive churches; whose business it was to visit the poor and sick sisters of the church, and take care of things belonging to them; but it is better to interpret the words of the wives of the deacons, who must be as their husbands.

Eighth, Scripture does not allow women in place of leadership or authority. The whole concept of deaconess in our day, for the most part, is a way of putting women in such places.

I know this is a very unpopular position in our day of Egalitarianism, but Scripture is clear. Now I want to weigh my next words carefully so as not to be misunderstood—and I certainly do not want to offend—but try as I might, I do not understand how a principle that is so clear, so unambiguous, so beyond any doubt, can be so ignored. Paul could not have been clearer when he wrote these three separate clauses to Timothy: "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (I Tim. 2:2). In the meeting and ministry of the Church, a woman is *neither* to teach *nor* have a position of leadership. Men are to lead, and women are to follow. In short, women are to be *learners*, not *leaders*. While many in the Church today don't like this teaching, *that is what the text says*. Even Acts 6 clearly indicates that only men filled the office of deacon. Despite these facts of the text, however, fewer principles are violated more today than this one. While it is argued that women can lead and teach *women* in public meetings, *not one Bible text says that*. Such interpreters are clearly reading their own views into the text.

Does all this mean that women are inferior to men? NO, NO, a thousand times NO. God simply commands this as being in line with His design for the weaker vessel. The issue is not *superiority*, rather *authority*, which in turn results in *responsibility* and *accountability*. That is why God said through James, "Be not many [teachers], knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation" (Jas. 3:1). Countless Christians today, both men and women, have no idea how foolish they are being to take on the responsibility of teaching, which they are not *called to*, *qualified for*, or *trained in*. It is a sad commentary on the Church that a principle so crystal clear, an issue so beyond doubt that it can still be totally ignored or readjusted for the express purpose of conforming to modern thought.

We would humbly submit, therefore, that to read "deaconess" into I Timothy 3:11, which appears in the

context of exclusively *male* leadership of the Church, is to pry open the context with a crowbar and hammer the idea into place.

Ninth, I just cannot get past the simplicity of a deacon having to be the “husband of one wife,” but a deaconess doesn’t have to be the “wife of one husband.” If deaconess is an office, then Paul first says that the office of deacon demands that the officer is devoted to his wife, but then says that that there can be female deacons. Huh? It simply does not make sense.

Tenth, and finally, as theologian Charles Ryrie points out:

No deaconesses are mentioned in any literature until the third-century writing called the *Didascalia*. Here deaconesses appear as a well-recognized and established order of helpers who were either to be virgins or once-married widows.”³

That statement truly sheds a lot of light. The 3rd Century *Didascalia* (“Teaching of the Apostles”) was a revision of the 2nd Century writings called the *Didache* (“Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”). These had much biblical Truth in them dealing with morals, ethics, church practice, and the hope of Jesus’ return, but they were not Scripture and added things that were not in Scripture. This clearly demonstrates, therefore, that at the very

least, unbiblical *qualifications* were added to a so-called office of deaconess—“virgins or once-married widows” are not listed by Paul but added by men. Is it not very possible, therefore, that even the *office* had been created by men? Indeed, the absence of the office in literature until the 3rd Century *Didascalia* strongly implies that it was a totally man-made position.

I would like to close on a positive note. Whichever position we take on the “tough texts” of this study, what is important is our service to God. No matter who we are, we are to serve and glorify God according to His prescribed methods.

Soli deo gloria (to God alone be the glory).

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher
Grace Bible Church

NOTES

¹ *Barnes Notes on the New Testament*.

² Gordon Clark, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Trinity Foundation), p. 61.

³ Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Victor Books, 1986), pp. 419-421.

In The Next Issue: *Who are the "Angels" of the Seven Churches? (Rev. 1:20)*

For God, requiring the first born for His offering and the first-fruits for His service, requireth the first labours of His servants.

Puritan Henry Smith

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A Ministry of
Grace Bible Church
P.O. Box 235
Meeker, CO 81641
www.TheScriptureAlone.com
docwatson3222@qwest.net

This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God’s people to carefully examine and discern Truth. Periodically, we will also include book reviews of popular books, for much that is published today demands discerning reading. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our “Q & A” section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed.

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