

What is a Deacon?

Scripture: 1 Timothy 3:8-13

Sermon Series: *Leadership*

Topic: Leadership, Deacons



Earlier this morning, we introduced to you 11 candidates for the office of deacon. Thus, it seems right that, before you offer your opinion next Sunday as to whether or not these are qualified to serve as deacons, we should first be reminded of what a deacon is and what the qualifications are.

The Meaning of the Word

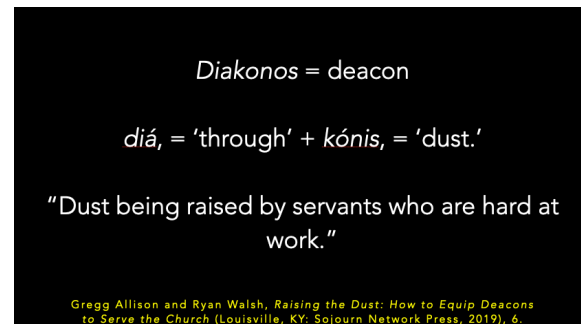
Our English word 'deacon' is a transliteration of the Greek word, *diakonos*. The word, in all of its earliest uses, primarily meant "to serve"¹ and referred to a servant who serves. In secular

¹ Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, "Διακονέω, Διακονία, Διάκονος," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 82.

Greek, the word first appears in the writings of Aristophanes, of Athens, who lived c. 446–385 B.C. and used the word to refer to a servant “who waits on a table.”² A second meaning of the word is ‘messenger’ or ‘one who performs a service for his master.’³ Again, we see the notion of service embedded even in that secondary meaning.

The Etymology of the Word

The etymology of the word appears to be the result of compounding the Greek preposition *diá*, which means ‘through,’ and the word *kónis*, which means ‘dust.’ Thus, the original idea was to “thoroughly raise up dust by moving in a hurry,”⁴ or “to kick up dust by running an errand.”⁵ In other words, the root word draws to mind the image of “dust being raised by servants who are hard at work.”⁶



The word appears 29 times in the New Testament and is in all but 3 occasions, translated as ‘servant’ or ‘minister’ when the noun form is used or ‘service’ when the verb form is used. Here are some examples of where the word is used. I’ll replace the word ‘servant’ or ‘serve’ with ‘deacon.’

“But whoever would be great among you must be your ~~servant~~ **deacon**, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be ~~served~~ **deaconed** but to ~~serve~~ **deacon**, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
Matthew 20:26-28 (ESV)

And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and ~~servant~~ **deacon** of all.”
Mark 9:35 (ESV)

“If anyone ~~serves~~ **deacons** me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my ~~servant~~ **deacon** be also. If anyone ~~serves~~ **deacons** me, the Father will honor him.”
John 12:26 (ESV)

² Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 82.

³ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴ Source: <https://biblehub.com/greek/1249.htm>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Gregg Allison and Ryan Walsh, *Raising the Dust: How to Equip Deacons to Serve the Church* (Louisville, KY: Sojourn Network Press, 2019), 6.

In these instances we see that word 'deacon' refers to the servant who serves, or the service a servant renders for his master. However, as the church grew, the term was formalized and came to refer to those who had been set apart for the service of the church. We see the origins of the formalization of the office of deacon rooted in Acts 6.

The Origins of the Office of Deacon?

In Acts 6, as we noted several weeks ago, Luke relates the story of a division which sprang up within the early church between the Hellenist believers and Judean believers. The Hellenist believers complained to the apostles that their widows were not being fairly treated in the daily distribution of the food by the Judean believers. The question was what was the best way to resolve the problem? Should the apostles themselves take on this task or should they appoint someone else to this task? After some praying the apostles responded,

"It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to ~~serve~~ **deacon** tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to ~~the ministry of~~ **deaconing** the word."
Acts 6:2-4 (ESV)

Essentially they were saying to the church, "You find some guys to serve tables and we will remain focused on serving the word." While it is true that the noun form of the word 'deacon' is not present here in these verses, it is true that the verb form of the word and a cognate noun is. The "the cognate noun 'service' or 'ministry' (**διακονία**; *diakonia*) and the cognate verb 'to minister' or 'to serve' (**διακονεῖν**; *diakonein*) do occur."⁷ Biblical scholar and church historian Cornelius Van Dam wrote,

When all factors have been considered, it seems best to understand the ordination in Acts 6 as to an office that would later be called deacon. Although they are not called deacons here, the first readers of Acts may have seen the seven as deacons. This identification of the seven as the first ordained deacons has been the mainline position of the Christian church since the second century."⁸

If these seven are the forerunners of what later became a formalized office of deacon, then what can we learn from this instance?

1. **Deacons serve to support the church by allowing the elders to focus on prayer and preaching.** Deacons met physical needs of the church so that the elders can focus on the

⁷ Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), Apple Books, chapter 7.

⁸ Cornelius Van Dam, *The Deacon: Biblical Foundations for Today's Ministry of Mercy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2016), 51.

spiritual needs of the church. This does not mean that deacons are not concerned for the spiritual needs of people. Most certainly they were and must be. Stephen, first of the seven, was a powerful preacher as also was Philip, second of seven. Philip's preaching led to the first great awakening in Samaria. Deacons must be "*full of the Holy Spirit*," and "full of wisdom." The ministry of the deacon is not to be undertaken in the strength of the flesh, but rather out of the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Thus, of course they will be concerned with the spiritual wellbeing of the church.

Nonetheless, the service to which they were ordained was taking care of the widows' need for a fair portion of food. The deacons served in such a way that they supported the elders were able to prioritize prayer (discerning God's will and direction) and preaching. The deacons took care of time consuming, important tasks so that the elders had time to prioritize the ministry of prayer and the ministry of the word.

There may be any number of needs and tasks that might require serving in order to allow the elders to prioritize prayer and preaching. Thus, deacons must be **humble** enough to be content serving in this kind of way. Deacons are not those who looking for a high profile, front stage ministry. They must be humble enough to be willing to do whatever the needs of the day may require in order to serve the mission of the church.

This is a humble ministry, but it is not unimportant. Notice the connection between the service of the deacons and the flourishing of the word (see Acts 6:7). After the servants were installed the word "*continued to increase*" and the "*disciples multiplied greatly*." Because the deacons were humble enough to do what the elders and the church most needed, the gospel flourished and people were blessed.

- **Deacons are not junior elders.** Some deacons may go on to become elders one day, but this is not a requirement or an expectation. The elders are the clear leaders and spiritual fathers of the church. Deacons are never charged with teaching or setting the direction of the church, but rather executing the vision of the elders. In this sense, deacons are models or examples, and they servant leaders. They lead by example, but they are not called to be leaders. Deacons are servants, who are called to serve in ways that the elders determine are best for the direction of the church. They are **servant leaders**, but they are not appointed to lead. Their position of visibility will cause them to have influence, but they are not called to lead *per se*. However, the elders may delegate to them significant levels of responsibility. For example, through church history, deacons have been the ones who have been charged with administering financial assistance to those in need. This may be one of the many ways that the elders could benefit by having this responsibility designated to the deacons. This is among the ways that we as elders are prayerfully considering adding to and augmenting the role of deacon among us.

2. **Deacons served to stem potential sources of division in the church.** Deacons are to be uniters, not dividers. These seven stepped in to solve a problem that could have ripped the church apart. The problem was the Hellenists against the Hebrews. It was us and them. "They are not serving us." The divide was beginning, but the deacons were appointed to salve that wound. Notice that all seven deacons had Greek names. Greek speaking deacons were chosen "*by the full number of disciples*" (Acts 6:2). This was an all-church problem, and the church chose Greek-speaking believers to take care of the Greek-speaking widows and the problem was resolved. That's what deacons do. They serve the church by laboring for the unity of the church. Deacons must be able to fully support the work, the vision, and mission that the elders have determined. The church will not flourish if the deacons are divided over against the elders. There can't be any divisive deacons. If you can't fully support the elders of the church, then you ought not be a deacon of the church. Evaluate these candidates in light of their ability to support the elders. Ask them if they do. If they don't or if the answer is no, then don't vote for them.

The Qualifications for Deacon

So then what are the qualifications of a deacon. Who qualifies to be a deacon? What does a deacon look like? The apostle Paul explains it very clearly.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 ESV)

⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. ¹³ For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Not Required to Teach

You'll notice that what is missing from this list of requirements is being "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). This qualification is unique to the office of elder. It is the office of elder/overseer that is responsible for the overseeing and teaching the doctrine of the church. It is the elders/overseers/pastors (these words are used synonymously in Scripture) who are required to be able to teach, because the teaching and preaching ministry is reserved for the office of elders. This is the primary difference between the qualifications of elder and deacon. Certainly some deacons will be able to teach/preach, i.e. Stephen and Philip. But not all are required to have that ability or gifting.

1. **Dignified.** Some of you translations may have “worthy of respect.” The word carries the meaning of “gravity; weightiness;” it means one who is serious and not a crazy clown. A deacon knows how to be well mannered and not unnecessarily offensive or silly when the situation calls for sobriety.
2. **Not double-tongued.** This means the tongue is under control. The deacon is not a gossip, a slanderer, a talebearer, a flatterer. A deacon must be sincere and does not say one thing to one person and another thing to someone else. A deacon never says anything untrue about someone with the intention of harming that person’s character or reputation. He’s not dishonest or hypocritical. The deacon must rule the tongue, rather than being ruled by the tongue.
3. **Not addicted to much wine.** A deacon must not be given to much drinking. A person who has a tendency to drink too much, ought not to be a deacon. The godly deacon must be able to control the appetites and desires and say no when it is appropriate. The qualified deacon cannot be a habitual drinker.
4. **Not greedy for dishonest gain.** A deacon must have his financial desires under control. Since deacons may take care of the material needs of people, he or she must not be greedy and must be trustworthy in financial dealings. The love of money must be under control. Greed has no place in the life of a deacon (or any Christian).
5. **Hold mystery of faith with a clear conscience.** In the NT the mystery of the faith referred to salvation being centered upon Jesus who is the savior of both Jews and Gentiles. In general this probably means not having any doubts about truth of the gospel and the ability of Jesus to save all who come to him. Thus, assumes that a deacon knows the Bible well. A deacon must a diligent student of the Bible and understand and explain the gospel of Jesus.
6. **Tested and found blameless.** The conduct of deacons should be observed and there should be nothing in their conduct that would bring shame upon the name of Christ. All deacons should serve the church in some smaller, observable ministry so that the church can see if they are found faithful. He who is faithful in small areas of responsibility, will also be faithful in larger areas of responsibility.
7. **Wives or women (v.11)?** The Greek text of this sentence begins a word (*gyne*) which can be translated as either ‘wives’ or ‘women.’ The ESV translates this word as ‘wives,’ but if you look, you’ll see a footnote which indicates that this word can also be translated as “women.” It is our opinion that this is probably the better translation, which means that women can serve as deacon. Why?
 1. We conclude this because if Paul is here listing specific qualifications for the wives of deacons, then why did he not list any qualifications for the wives of elders? It seems that elders wives would be in a place of much greater influence in the church than deacon wives and yet Paul offers no qualifications for them. Why would he do that?

Certainly a position of greater responsibility would entail a higher degree of qualifications than a lesser, but Paul says nothing about elders' wives, thus this points us to conclude that he is actually speaking about female deacons.

2. There is no possessive pronoun '*their*' in the Greek text even though it is supplied in most translations that opt for 'wives.' The pronoun 'their' has been supplied in context, but it is not present in the original. The text simply reads, "likewise, wives or likewise women..." If Paul were, therefore, talking about women who belong as spouses to deacons, then we would expect him to say, "their wives," but he does not. Thus, we conclude that he is actually speaking about female deacons.
3. The word *likewise* also clues us in to thinking about those who have significant roles in church structure of governance. Paul began (3:1-7) talking about the qualifications of elder, then moved to considering deacons with the word '*likewise*' (v.8), and then, similarly, here in v.11, he uses *likewise*, again to denote another group in the church structure, namely women who serve as deacon.
4. Paul uses this word, *gyne*, five⁹ other times in 1 Timothy outside the context of this passage and in all those instances the word is translated 'women' rather than 'wives.' Thus, it makes most sense to be consistent and translate it the same way here in v.11.
5. Paul uses the word translated 'deacon' in his letter to the Romans regarding a lady named Phoebe. "*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant (diakonos) of the church at Cenchreae...*" (Rom. 16:1-2). It is debated whether Paul is talking about her "service" of the church or that she held the official office, but it is possible that is speaking of her one who held the office of deacon.
6. There is very early information that tell us that women did serve the early church as deacons, even dating back to the end of the first century.
 1. Pliny the Younger, Governor of Bithynia, Letter to the Emperor Trajan (AD 111–113): "Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses."¹⁰
 2. Clement of Alexandria (AD 150–215), one of the early church fathers wrote, "We are also aware of all the things that the noble Paul prescribed on the subject of female deacons in one of the two Epistles to Timothy."¹¹

⁹ 1 Tim. 2:9, 10, 11, 12, 14.

¹⁰ Matt Smethurst. *Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), Apple Books, Appendix 1.

¹¹ Ibid.

3. John Chrysostom (AD 349–407): “Some have thought that [1 Tim. 3:11] is said of women generally, but it is not so, for... He is speaking of those who hold the rank of deaconesses.”¹²
4. John Calvin (1509-1564): wrote in *The Institutes*, “Deaconesses were appointed... to perform a public ministry of the church toward the poor, and to labor with all zeal, assiduity, and diligence, in offices of charity.”¹³
5. More examples could be offered¹⁴, but perhaps this will suffice.
7. Thus, from these fact, we conclude that women are allowed to serve as deacon.
8. **Sober-minded.** The deacon is to be serious minded and thoughtful, not flippant and unable to give due consideration to the weighty matters that such an office will most certainly have to confront. It also “denotes self-control, balanced judgment, and freedom from debilitating excesses or rash behavior.”¹⁵
9. **Faithful.** A deacon is one marked by a consistent, faithful lifestyle, both in word and deed. A deacons must be faithful and trustworthy. He must keep his word and not make promises he can’t keep. When he commits to anything he must fulfill his commitment and see it through to the end.
10. **Husband of one wife.** The faithfulness extends to the married life. At minimum this phrase prohibits a polygamist from being a deacon. The construction of the grammar places the word ‘wife/woman’ in the place of emphasis. Thus, this phrase could be translated a “one woman man.”

Must a deacon be married? Some assume this. However, if this were true neither Paul, Timothy, nor even Jesus would qualify to be a deacon (or an elder). This cannot be the case, for how can it make sense that Paul whom Christ Jesus qualified to expound the qualifications of elder and deacon would himself not be qualified to hold the very office about which he speaks so authoritatively and over which he exercises apostolic authority?

Furthermore, Paul would be contradicting himself since elsewhere extolls the value of singleness in being able to pour one’s life whole-heartedly into ministry, even going so far as to say,

“I wish all were as I myself am. It is good to remain single as I am” (1 Cor. 7:7-8). “The unmarried man concerns himself with the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. While the married man concerns himself about worldly things, how to please his wife and his

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See <https://jamedders.com/why-have-women-deacons/#fnref-15>.

¹⁵ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1995), Apple Books, chapter 9.

interests are divided.” But he who remains single has... “undivided devotion to the Lord.” (1 Cor. 7:32-35).

If Paul had intended to communicate that a deacon must be a married,” then he could have easily said that in the Greek. However, he does not use the Greek word for marriage.¹⁶ He simply says, that a deacon must be a “one woman man.” The simplest meaning is if a deacon, if married, must be faithfully devoted to his spouse alone and not be flirtations or given to lust. A deacon must be relationally and sexually pure and faithful, being guilty of neither polygamy nor adultery.

11. **Manages household well.** Finally, a deacon must be one who has a well managed household. How the household operates needs to be taken into consideration when deliberation the qualifications for deacon.

The final promise of blessing.

For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 3:13)

Having a team of qualified deacons is a great blessing to the church of God. May the Lord guide us as we think, pray, and seek his will for whom the next group of deacons will be. Dedicated yourselves this week to earnestly praying about this. If the Lord blesses us with the those whom He has chosen, then I’m sure it will be a glorious day.

¹⁶ For the construction of such a sentence in Greek, see Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 917.