

# The Biblical Foundation of the Diaconate

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Extracted from [\*Ordained Servant\*](#) vol. 5, no. 3 (July 1996).

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The word Deacon, which designates a specific office in the church, translates the Greek word *diakonoV*. *DiakonoV* has been rendered in English by deacon in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:6 and 12 where the translators thought that the context indicated that this special office was in view. In doing so they were using one of the specialized senses of the Greek word *diakonoV* which means in its most basic sense “servant” (cf. for example Mt. 22:11; John 2:5, 9). Thus the word is used of all Christians of their relationship to the Lord and to one another (cf. Mt. 20:25-28, Mk. 10:42-45; John 12:26). And it is also used of those serving the church as leaders, and in those cases the English translation is often that of “minister,” indicating a slightly more restricted sense of the Greek word *diakonoV* (cf. Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7; 1 Tim. 4:6). These church officers, or leaders, are designated by other terms, such as elders, overseers, pastors, and teachers. But those officers whose role is so characteristic of service are always in the New Testament designated only by the term deacon (servant), using *diakonoV* in this specialized sense of a particular church officer.

That designation of servant links these officers with their great example and model, Jesus Christ the Servant of the Lord. He points to his own life of service as the model for Christians when he says in Mark 10:43-45: “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...” One of the ways that Jesus served was in feeding the multitudes and in caring for the needy. He showed particular compassion for widows and welcomed little ones to himself and blessed them. In this activity he fulfilled that which James summarizes as the essence of pure religion: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress...” (James 1:27). He is the model for all Christians and particularly for Deacons.

Deacons are mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Philippians and in his first letter to Timothy as recognized officers in the church. But where and how does the office of the deacon first manifest itself in the New Testament? The answer to that question is to be found in the Apostolic action of instituting a separate group of men to assist them and have special responsibilities. We read about that decision and its outcome in Acts 6 where the Apostles indicate to the disciples that they should choose seven men from among themselves for a particular responsibility.

The warrant for seeing those seven men in Acts 6 as the first deacons is evidenced by the following considerations. First, even though the word “deacon” (*diakonoV*) is not used in the passage to designate these seven men, their task, “to serve [wait on] tables” (Acts 6:2), is related in the Greek text by *diakonein*, the verb cognate to the noun “deacon” (*diakonoV*). And this relationship is not only one of language but also of task. The task of serving tables is certainly appropriate for those who will be later called servants or deacons. Second, the particular responsibilities of apostles and the seven men indicated in Acts 6 is virtually identical to the particular responsibilities of elders (or overseers) and deacons stated in other passages in the New Testament. And just as apostles have alongside of them the seven men so also the elders (or overseers) have alongside of them the deacons (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-13). The apostles speak of their own labors as that of the word and prayer (Acts 6:5), not to mention ruling, and the same function is that given to elders or bishops (overseers) (cf., e.g., Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:2, 3; Titus 1:9). The seven men are called to serve in Acts 6:2 and 3 (*diakonein*) and the same is said of the deacons in I Tim. 3:10 and 13 (*diakonein*). Third, the seven men are to be chosen from those who manifest certain spiritual qualifications (Acts

6:3). The Deacons are to be chosen from men who manifest similar spiritual qualifications (I Tim. 3:8-10 and 12). Although the two sets of qualifications are not identical, the more specific list in I Timothy 3 could easily be seen as the specifications of the more general outline of Acts 6. There is no obstacle to equating the seven men and the Deacons and much to commend it.

The diaconal work in view in Acts 6 is initially carried on by the Apostles. They do so because of two reasons. First, the work committed to the people of God is often best, but not exclusively, carried on by the church through its officers or representatives. Second, it would appear that the Apostles include within their function and office the regular functions and offices of the church, namely that of elder and deacon. By analogy, it may be correctly presumed that the office of elder also includes the functions and office of deacon. This may be the reason why only elders are elected in the new churches mentioned in Acts 14:23 and in Titus 1:5ff.

The Apostles, however, in Acts 6 determine that they can no longer adequately handle the diaconal function and particularly that they cannot do so without forsaking that function which is their prime responsibility, i.e., the Word of God (Acts 6:2). Thus the office of the first deacons, the seven men, comes into existence to continue to meet the specific physical needs of the widows, especially their need for food (Acts 6:1 and 2), and also at the same time to help the apostles and relieve them of “this task” (Acts 6:3 NASB, “this responsibility” NIV). These seven men in their ministry of serving tables do so as men “of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3 NASB). This account serves as a model for determining the ministry of deacons since nowhere else in the Scriptures are their tasks specified. This model shows them performing a spiritual ministry to those within the church who need the basic necessities of life provided for them. This is the first and main principle with which this account provides us. The second and related principle is that of providing assistance to those who rule and teach in the church and carrying out those “tasks” or “responsibilities” which must be accomplished by the officers of the church and which the elders cannot do without detriment to their main function as the spiritual pastors of the people of God. But these other tasks which they may appropriately be assigned must not cause the deacons themselves to forsake the specific task of deacons, namely, the ministry of mercy to those in need.

That the deacons work in subjection to the elders and their rule, even in the area of finances and, specifically, the funds for the needy, is not only evident from the fact that the elders are required to rule over the entire church and all its organizations and officers, including the deacons, but also is demonstrated by the particular passage of Acts 11:27-30. The famine relief funds sent to Jerusalem are given over to the elders (verse 30). The elders, like the apostles, are to be concerned for the victims of the famine and oversee and provide for them. Thus the funds come to the elders. But like the apostles, even though it is not stated in the text and does not need to be stated in the light of Acts 6, we may presume that the elders committed this business to the deacons to accomplish the actual distribution.

It might be argued from the further activity of Stephen and Philip (Acts 8:5ff.), who are listed among the seven men of Acts 6 (verse 5), that their activity indicates that deacons should also be evangelists, i.e., preachers. Certainly Philip in Acts 8 is an evangelist and is engaged in preaching in a very full sense of the word. However, it is not as one of the seven men whose job it is to serve tables for the widows in Jerusalem that he is engaged in these activities away from Jerusalem. This distinction and evaluation is borne out by the text of Acts 21:8 where Philip’s ministry as an evangelist is distinguished from his being, or having been, one of the seven men: “...Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven.” This is also borne out by the description of the activities specifically given to the seven men in Acts 6. They were to “serve tables” and assist the widows and engage in similar activities in order to relieve the Apostles so that they could preach and minister the Word. The description of the task of the seven men in Acts 6—especially when seen in the light of what the Apostles were to do in contrast with them—defines the diaconal work of the seven men and the deacons and does not

include what Philip later does. His activity later is his work as an evangelist not as one of the seven men, and these two activities in which Philip was engaged one after the other must not be confused with one another.

This distinction is also borne out by a comparison of the lists of qualifications for overseers and deacons in 1 Tim. 3:1-13. It is said of overseers (elders) that they must be “able to teach” (verse 2, cf. Titus 1:9 and also the further distinction among elders in 1 Tim. 5:17) and that they must take care of God’s church (verse 5), neither of these two things is said of deacons in 1 Tim. 3:8-13, even though the deacons and elders have other qualifications that are common or similar.

Certain distinctive qualifications of deacons indicated in 1 Tim. 3:8-13 may well help to underscore the sensitive and important interpersonal relationships which deacons will be involved in while ministering to the needy. They would not of themselves establish the area of labor, as Acts 6 does explicitly, but on the background of that passage their meaning and significance are more readily recognized.

The reference to women or wives in 1 Tim. 3:11 is set in the midst of a passage which describes those to whom the designation deacon (*diakonoV*) is applied as men (cf. verses 8 and 12, the latter in which the deacon is said to be the husband). Who are these females referred to in verse 11? Several answers have been given, but because of the brevity of the paper I will restrict these comments to the answer I consider most in harmony with the biblical context here and elsewhere.<sup>[1]</sup> The Greek word *gunh* (in the plural) which is rendered “wives” by the NIV, and which is rendered by other translations as “women”, can mean either depending upon the context. Its use in the very close context of both verses 2 and 12 with the meaning wife favors the meaning wife here. This rendering also explains other aspects of verse 11. If indeed the wife is in view, as I believe she is, this would explain the location of the verse in the middle of the discussion of the deacon and right before the statement about his marital and family qualifications. This statement about his wife is then the first of those familial statements and therefore it is not an intrusion. Furthermore, reference to his wife can best explain the absence of reference to marital fidelity for the wife which is otherwise always present (cf. 1 Tim. 3:2,12 and 5:9). The Greek transitional word *wsautwV*—rendered in the NIV with the phrase “in the same way”—both distinguishes and correlates this verse and the one in it from and with the deacon. The distinguishing aspect shows that she is not a deacon or deaconess, and the correlating aspect shows that she is one who has similar qualifications and thus is qualified to assist her husband. The church today should give heed to both aspects of this verse and act accordingly. In the light of this passage and in the light of the fact that the Apostles specifically required the church to elect “men” in Acts 6:3 (as they did, Acts 6:5; the Greek word *anhr* used in Acts 6:3 designates a “male” and is different from the Greek word *anqropoV* that means a human being), it is best to understand the usage of *diakonoV* with reference to Phoebe in Romans 16:1 to be used in the same general sense of servant as it is used in the only other reference in Romans (13:4ff.) and not as a designation of her as a deacon or deaconess (this general sense of servant is found in a number of modern translations). 1 Timothy 3 applies the title deacon to a male officer (verses 2 and 12). The consistency between Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3 provides the biblical basis for deacons being men.

What consolation and encouragement is there for deacons in performing such tasks of service to the needy and such assistance to the elders? Many could be mentioned but let one suffice, that of the Apostle Paul himself in 1 Tim. 3:13: “Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.”

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[1] For a fuller discussion see Dr. Knight’s, *The Pastoral Epistles* [NIGTC] on this verse.

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