

# **THE POSITION OF DEACON**

## **A STUDY MANUAL**

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## THE POSITION OF A DEACON

(modified 3/2012)

The New Testament and Historical Church recognize only three positions:

1. The position of the Bishop (overseer of churches)
2. The position of an Elder (overseer)
3. The position of a Deacon (servant).

See Philippians 1:1

*“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.”*

In this teaching, we will look at the foundational ministry upon which all ministry is built, the ministry of the Deacon.

### ***I. THE MEANING OF DEACON***

Four primary Greek words shed light on the ministry of deacon in the scriptures. They are “diakoneo,” “diakonos,” and “diako.” The best way to study any concept in the Bible is to examine the root words that are used in connection with the concept. Our English word “deacon” is not a translation of the Greek words, but it is a transliteration. That is, the translators used English letters for the Greek word.

Whenever we find a word in the New Testament that is transliterated rather than translated, we can be sure that when the translating was done there was a theological question connected with that particular word.

Some good examples of this are “baptism,” “bishop,” “apostle,” “evangelist” and “deacon.” The Greek word “baptism” literally means “immerse, dip or plunge.” However, in the 1600’s, when the Bible was brought into the English language, baptism was not practiced in Christian circles by dipping, plunging or immersing.

To avoid raising theological problems over the validity of other modes of baptism, the translators chose a neutral term that could be given any meaning desired by the interpretation.

This is also true of the word “deacon.” The Greek word for deacon occurs many times in the New Testament and in most cases is properly translated. Occasionally, however, when this same word is used in connection with a position in the Church, the word is not translated but transliterated. Evidently the position of the deacon is also an area of wide interpretation. To overcome some of these misunderstandings it is necessary to look at the Biblical words and see how they are used throughout the New Testament. Following is a summary of the definition and usage of each of these words in the New Testament.

A “DIAKONEO” literally means, “to be an attendant, to wait upon.”

In the New Testament it refers to waiting on someone at a table as a waiter (Luke 22:24-27); serving someone in any way (Matthew 4:11; 27:55; Acts 19:22; II Corinthians 8:19); taking care of (II Corinthians 3:3; Acts 6:2); helping or supporting someone (Matthew 25:24; Luke 8:3; Romans 15:25); the ministry of a church official. “They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.” (I Timothy 3:10) This particular word is translated several ways in the King James Version: minister, serve, administer and as the office of a deacon.

B. “DIAKONIA” literally means “service or attendance as a servant.”

In the New Testament it is used to refer to all manner of service (Hebrews 1:14; Ephesians 4:12; Acts 6:4); the service necessary for the preparation of a meal (Luke 10:40); the service or function of all New Testament ministries (I Timothy 1:12; Acts 20:24; I Corinthians 12:5; Colossians 4:17); aid, support or distribution especially of alms and giving to the poor (Acts 11:29; Romans 15:31; II Corinthians 8:4); a specific ministry in the Body of Christ (Romans 12:7). This word is translated “minister, servant, deacon.” The apostles and other prominent Christians are seen in this capacity (Colossians 1:23; Ephesians 3:7; Corinthians 3:6)

C. “DIAKONOS” literally means “a waiter, attendant, servant or minister.”

In the New Testament it refers to a personal event (Matthew 20:26; 23:11; John 12:26); a helper or an encourager (I Thessalonians 3:2; I Timothy 4:6); an official of the Church (Philippians 1:1; I Timothy 3:8). This word is translated “minister, servant, deacon.”

The apostles and the other prominent Christians are seen in this capacity (Colossians 1:23; Ephesians 3:7; II Corinthians 3:6).

D. “DIAKO” – Although this word is not found in the New Testament, it is significant in this study because it is generally regarded as the root word from which the other three are derived. It literally means “to run or hasten on errands.”

When viewed all together, it becomes evident that these words are closely related and that they are used in primarily two ways, an unofficial way and an official way. In the unofficial sense, they refer to any kind of serving – ministry in the home, ministry of civil rulers, ministry of angels, ministry of various servants and ministry of all believers regardless of their calling in the Body of Christ. It is in this sense that every born-again believer is to have a “servant’s heart.”

These four words are also used in an official way. It is very clear from certain passages that these words are referring to a special class of people who have proven themselves and were thus designated “deacons” or literally “servants.” These would obviously be people who had distinguished themselves in this capacity by their excellence and were utilized by the churches in certain designated areas of responsibility. This, then, became a specific office for which qualifications were set down. “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.” Phil. 1:1

## **II. THE BIRTH OF THE POSITION**

*Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit 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 the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.*

Acts 6:1-6

This passage in Acts tells us the origin of the position of the deacon. Although this fact is not specifically stated in the passage, the use of the Greek words, the prominent position of the passage, the spiritual qualities for these men, and tradition all seem to suggest that this is the case. If this is not the beginning of the new position, then we have no other

scriptural reference where the beginning is recorded. From this foundational passage we can gather many insights and guidelines for the establishment of deacons in the Church.

A. Deacons were a matter of practical consideration. The apostles chose deacons to meet a particular need they could not meet themselves due to the growth of the Church. The early church developed in response to need. As long as the Church was small there was no need for deacons. As the Church grew and the responsibilities grew, the apostles realized that they could no longer meet certain needs of the people and still be faithful to fulfill their commission of feeding the flock of God. The apostles were not being proud when they looked for someone else with whom to share their responsibility. They were merely recognizing that their main ministry was handling the Word of God. They would have to delegate “serving of tables” to others. In doing so, they did not neglect their responsibility. They merely used men of proven character to assist them in meeting the needs of the people. This did not elevate these seven men to equal status with the apostle or in any way establish a new realm of authority. The deacons were given to the leadership to assist them, just as the Levites were given to assist Aaron in the priestly office.

B. Deacons were initiated by the leadership with the consensus of the people. They were set into position by an action of the leadership. The idea for deacons did not come from the people. God directed the leadership in solving a very real problem. Those in leadership saw a need and the best way to meet that need. They communicated their desires to the people, asked the people to participate in the selection of suitable helpers, prayed over those selected and set them in their place of service. Although the people were given a voice in the matter, the leadership had the final and directing voices. The apostles approved those who had been selected by the people because they met the qualifications, which the apostles themselves had laid down.

C. Many later churches seem to have realized the divine order in the selection of deacons for they also set them in their churches. The Church at Philippi had deacons (Philippians 1:1). The Church at Ephesus seems to have followed this pattern because of Paul’s letter written to Timothy while he was in Ephesus (I Timothy 3:8-13). Early Church history also tells us that this became a universal principle among the Churches.

### ***III. QUALIFICATIONS OF DEACONS***

It is interesting that God does not want just anyone to care for and serve His people. He does not want just anyone to “wait on tables.” He does not take just anyone who volunteers for the job. God is very particular about every person who has responsibility in His house. When the apostles looked for helpers they asked for men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3). As the function of deacons developed in the

New Testament, Paul gave more concrete definitions to their required qualifications. These qualifications are not put forth as ideals to be aspired to, nor is the office to be given to someone so that these qualities can be cultivated. Everyone who is set in, as a deacon should already possess these qualities.

*“Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.”*

1 Timothy 3:8-13

All these qualifications can be summed up in terms of moral, domestic and spiritual.

### **A. Moral Requirements**

#### 1. Not Double-Tongued (I Timothy 3:8)

One who is double-tongued says one thing to one person and gives a different view of it to another. This would imply that a deacon must not be a gossip.

#### 2. Not Given To Wine (I Timothy 3:8)

This individual must be above reproach in his personal habits. Whatever he does will have great influence upon others.

#### 3. Not Greedy Of Money (I Timothy 3:8)

This is put in stronger terms than even in the qualifications for elders. Perhaps because when the deacons are in a place of assisting and helping others. They may be tempted to accept monetary gifts from those to whom they minister.

#### 4. Blameless (I Timothy 3:8)

In every area of life he must be above reproach. This would include all business dealings. He must be an example of a godly lifestyle.

#### 5. Proven (I Timothy 3:8)

The word used here means “to test, scrutinize to see whether a thing is genuine or not.” The office is not given to promote maturity. Those given this position should already be living the life of a servant before they are entrusted with the title of the position.

### **B. Domestic Requirements**

#### 1. Husband Of One Wife (I Timothy 3:12)

God’s laws are priority for this man who has undivided affections.

#### 2. Ruling His Own House Well (I Timothy 3:12) This qualification is probably not to

determine rulership ability, but to determine the nature of the deacon's Christian walk. The deacon must first be a good parent in the home.

### **C. Spiritual Requirements**

#### **1. Full Of The Holy Ghost (Acts 6:3)**

Natural ability is important, but secondary to the motivation and empowering of the Holy Spirit. It is far better to use someone who is sensitive to God and lacking natural ability, than to use someone who relies on natural ability alone.

#### **2. Full Of Wisdom (Acts 6:3)**

Individuals working in the name of the leadership will need wisdom because they will find themselves in emotional situations where they know facts that they could use in a wrong way. They must know how to behave wisely.

#### **3. Grave (I Timothy 3:8)**

This item denotes a seriousness of mind and character, which will inspire the awe, and respect of others.

#### **4. Holding The Mystery Of The Faith In A Pure Conscience (I Timothy 3:9)**

This person must be right with God, so that along with material relief, he may also bring spiritual encouragement.

These qualifications indicate to us the importance that God places on all manner of service in the Church. They closely resemble the qualifications that God has set down for elders. One main difference is that there is no mention of deacons having an ability to teach or rule in the house of God (I Timothy 3:2,5,12). It is clear that deacons are not those in authority, nor are they the teachers who handle the Word. They are, as their name indicates, the servant order in the Church.

### ***IV. WORK OF THE DEACON***

The references in the New Testament make it clear that the general function of the deacons are to perform various services of a practical nature in the Church, thus relieving the elders of burdens, which might interfere with their ministry of spiritual oversight. The passage in Acts 6 reveals that the duties are mainly to aid in the distribution of relief to the poor, a practical service designed to free the apostles for the ministry of the Word and prayer. This passage seems to imply that these seven men did not necessarily do all the work themselves but were given the oversight in these areas to make sure that the job was carried out in a systematic and impartial manner. Acts 6:3 mentions that the apostles were looking for men they could "appoint over this business."

In Philippians 1:1, Paul mentions this class of people in his greeting. This is unique because it is the only letter where Paul includes the deacons in his address to the Church.

Paul had received a love offering from the Church at Philippi while he was in military custody at Rome. Paul responded with a letter of encouragement and thanksgiving. In addressing this letter to both the elders and the deacons he seems to be acknowledging that each had an important role in the gift he had received. If indeed Acts 6 serves as a pattern for us, it is likely that the idea to send an offering came from the eldership while the deacons were the ones who organized it, collected it, and saw to it that the offering was delivered properly.

The only other portion of scripture where the position of deacon is mentioned, I Timothy 3:8-13, lists the qualifications for the office. All of the qualifications listed very much suited to practical ministry, The most striking thing to note here is that teaching ability and ruling ability are not necessarily required of a deacon.

There are many practical ministries within the house of God that could be done by others to relieve the leaders of a tremendous burden. Often when a church is small, the pastor or pastors do it all. When a church grows, however, it becomes impossible for the pastor to handle every matter personally. There comes a time when help in natural areas becomes necessary so that those in spiritual oversight can truly give themselves to the Word of God and prayer.

There comes a time when someone else will do the bulletins, keep the books, type letters, answer the phone, arrange the weddings, supervise cleanup, organize the ushers, operate the nursery and distribute to the needy. God has provided the ministry of deacons as a mean through which all of these things can be done properly and excellently.

#### ***V. APPOINTMENT AND TERM OF SERVICE***

A distinguishing factor in the ministry of the deacons is the means whereby they are set into their places of service. The only example of the setting-in of deacons is in Acts 6 where they are set apart by the laying on of hands of the leadership with the approval and in the presence of the assembly. This must serve as the pattern for us.

The Bible is silent concerning the term of office for a deacon. The silence seems to indicate that there is no specific term. This would imply that a deacon remains a deacon as long as he does the work of a deacon and as long as he qualifies under the original requirements for that office. All those who began as deacons did not necessarily serve in that capacity all their life. Philip became an evangelist.

#### ***VI. HONOR AND REWARDS OF DEACONS***

*“For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 3:13*

For those who serve well there is honor and reward. Serving well requires diligence, faithfulness, responsiveness, sensitivity, thoroughness and sacrifice. Stephen and Philip were such men.

Those who serve well purchase for themselves a good degree. Not a BA or a PhD. This is a God-given degree. It may mean that they gain a good reputation and are held in high esteem by others. It may also mean that in serving well, this office becomes a stepping stone to greater levels of ministry. The Greek word here means, “step” and may imply that the office is preparatory for eldership. Many New Testament ministers began as servants. Timothy served Paul (Acts 19:22). John Mark served Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:5). The best example is that of Philip who began waiting on tables and ended up as great evangelist (Acts 8:5-6; 21:8). The Old Testament suggests a similar pattern in the Moses/Joshua (Exodus 24:13; Joshua 1:1) and Elijah/Elisha relationship (I Kings 19:19-21).

Those who serve well inherit great boldness in the faith. Stephen is a striking example of this. As he faithful in the small things, God promoted him to greater things. Soon Stephen appeared as bold as a lion, doing signs and wonders (Acts 6:8). This was not part of his original job description, but sprang from a life of service and devotion to God. Stephen had so much boldness of faith that he preached the boldest message in the book of Acts. He went from faith to faith as a faithful servant in the Church.