



Getting Back to Church

Lesson 4: Understanding the Office of Deacon

Introduction

If you were to travel to different churches in America and ask this question, “What are the responsibilities of the deacons at your church?” you would get various answers such as:

- “The deacons care for the church’s facilities.”
- “The deacons are the board that governs the church.”
- “The deacons serve on the church’s ministry teams.”
- “The deacons teach different classes in the church.”
- “The deacons take care of the sick and needy in the church.”
- “The deacons handle the practical needs of the church.”

Among evangelical churches there are a wide variety of views about the role of the deacon. So, what is a deacon and what do deacons do? In this lesson we will seek to understand biblically what a deacon is and the role of the deacon in the church.

The Definition of Deacon

How does the Bible define a deacon? In order to understand the function and responsibility of a deacon, we must understand the definition of deacon. Definitions bring clarity. The noun *diakonos* means “one who serves as an intermediary in a transaction; one who gets something done, at the behest of a superior; an assistant.”¹ This word is used as a noun in three different ways in the New Testament.

First, as a noun, it is used to refer to a literal servant. The following verses refer to literal servants:

- John 2:5, 9: “⁵ His mother said to the **servants**, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ . . . ⁹ When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the **servants** who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. . .”
- Matthew 22:13: “Then the king said to the **attendants**, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

Second, the noun *diakonos* is most often used in a figurative sense to refer to servants of God, Satan, the gospel, or the church. When Paul used the word, he often referred to Christian workers. These are people who serve in a general sense. Paul also uses the word to refer to specific men who are “servants” or “ministers” of Christ in the church. However, the word “minister” can be misleading as it does not mean

¹ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Third Edition*, ed. Fredrick William Danker (Chicago Press: Chicago, 2000), pg. 230.

pastor or elder like it is used today in some modern churches. A “minister” is simply a servant. The figurative sense of *diakonos* is seen in the following verses:

- Matthew 20:26: “It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your **servant**.”
- Romans 16:1 “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a **servant** of the church at Cenchreae.”
- 2 Corinthians 11:14–15: “¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his **servants**, also, disguise themselves as **servants** of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.”
- Ephesians 6:21: “So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful **minister** in the Lord will tell you everything.”

Finally, there are three verses where Paul uses this noun to refer to an office. Those three verses are:

- Philippians 1:1: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and **deacons**.”
- 1 Timothy 3:8: “**Deacons** likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.”
- 1 Timothy 3:12: “Let **deacons** each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.”

As seen above, the word deacon is used as a noun in reference to a literal servant, in reference to a general servant who is a servant in a figurative sense, and in reference to the office of deacon.

The word “deacon” is also used as a verb in the Bible. The verb form, *diakoneō* means “to function as an intermediary, act as go-between/agent, be at one’s service, perform duties, render assistance, or to serve.”² The following verses show how *diakoneō* has been translated in the ESV.

- Matthew 20:28: “even as the Son of Man came not to be served but **to serve**, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
- Matthew 4:11: “Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were **ministering** to him.”
- Romans 15:25: “At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem **bringing aid** to the saints.”
- 2 Corinthians 8:19: “And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is **being ministered** by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will.”

² Ibid, 229.

The Office of Deacon in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8–13

Regarding the office of deacon, we can see that *diakonos* is used both in Philippians 1:1 and in 1 Timothy 3:8–13 as a title to refer specifically to those who hold the office. It should also be noted that in both instances the title is not given to various people in the church who serve generally in the church. For example, the “parking lot servant” is not the “parking lot deacon.” The person serving in audio/visual is not the “audio/visual deacon.” The title ‘deacon’ is not specifically attached to one ministry, but rather is a title given to those who serve in a specific office as assistants to elders (as will be shown later). As Alexander Strauch states, “A better understanding of *diakonos* is derived from its close association with the elders/overseers (1 Tim. 3:1–7), and its subordinate position to them.”³

The Deacon’s Role

Clarifying the definition of a deacon not only helps us understand what a deacon is, but it also helps us to understand the role of the deacon. While the word for deacon is mostly used in the Bible in a figurative sense to refer generally to anyone who serves in the body of Christ, we also see from Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8–13 that it also refers to a specific office in the body. So, what do those in this office do?

Well, in Acts 6 we see a prototype of the office of deacon. In Acts 6, the church was young and was still in its growing stages. The apostles were still around ministering and laying the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20) in which they would establish the office of elder and deacon in the church. Acts 6:1–6 says:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve 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 the word.” And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

In this passage, the apostles are the leaders of the church and there is no official office of deacon. However, in order for the apostles to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word, there were seven men chosen to serve the widows in the daily distribution of food. While those seven men did not serve in the office of deacon, the parallels of what Paul later writes in 1 Timothy 3:1–13 can be seen.

³ Alexander Strauch, *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God’s Church*, (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 2017), 54-56.

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul establishes two offices that are to function in the church. The first is the office of elder (vv. 1–7) and the second is the office of deacon (vv. 8–13). Just as the seven men chosen in Acts 6 were to serve the needs of the body so the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word, the office of deacon is established to serve the body so the elders can devote themselves to leading, feeding, and protecting the flock of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). Thus, the office of deacon is subordinate to the office of elder, providing assistance to the elders of the church. Alexander Strauch defines the office of deacon as “formal assistants to the elders.”⁴ As formal assistants, the deacon’s role is to work directly with the elders in order to fulfill assigned tasks so the elders can keep their focus on their primary ministry of leading and feeding God’s flock.

Serving As Assistants to the Elders

The key to understanding deacons is to understand the elders whom they serve. The elders have been called by God to lead, feed, and protect the local church body. They are overseers, shepherds, teachers, and leaders whom God has placed over the church to care for God’s people. Because this position in the church is critical to the life of the church, God has established a subordinate office of deacons to help serve the church under the leadership of the elders.

While the office of elder can stand alone in a church, the office of deacon cannot. Let me explain. The office of elder is the highest office and of greatest prominence in the church because of the responsibilities that are given to the elders. They must be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2) and they must be able to take care of God’s church (1 Tim. 3:5). However, these responsibilities are not given to the deacon. Why is that? Because the deacons serve as assistants to the elders so that the elders can fulfill their duties as overseers, teachers, and caretakers of God’s church.

It must also be noted that in all three verses where the office of deacon is referred to (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12), it is always linked to the office of elder. This shows that the office of deacon is not an autonomous body of officials who are disconnected from the elders of the church. The deacons are to serve under the leadership of the elders and assist them in whatever capacity the elders see fit.

To clarify, this does not mean the elders and deacons serve in a master-servant relationship. The elders are not the masters of the deacons who serve at every personal whim, want, or need of an elder. The deacons willingly serve the elders, and the elders are to care for the deacons and help them succeed in whatever capacity they are serving in. Strauch states:

“The deacons represent the overseers/elders and act on their behalf in service to God’s church. It follows, then, that they, like the elders, need to be properly qualified, examined, and approved. . . . And, as assistants of the elders and church officeholders, the deacons will exercise a measure of formal authority in the congregation, but always under the authority of elders.”⁵

As official servants of the local church, the deacons assist the elders and serve under the authority of the elders.

⁴ Alexander Strauch, *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God’s Church* (Lewis and Roth Publishers: Littleton, CO, 2017), 52.

⁵ Ibid, 58.

The Qualifications of a Deacon

Every church needs qualified deacons. How do the elders know whether a potential deacon is qualified? Paul lists the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. Many of the qualifications listed for deacons are similar to those listed for elders. The following are the biblical qualifications that every deacon must meet in order to be appointed by the elders for this office.⁶

1. **“Dignified” (v. 8):** This is a man who is worthy of respect/honor, noble, dignified, or serious. It describes a person whose attitudes and conduct win the admiration of others. It refers to a respectable, well-thought-of person.
2. **“Not double-tongued” (v. 8):** This is a man who is not full of insincere speech, not double-talking, and not two-faced (NET). This expresses the idea of saying one thing to one person and another thing to someone else. It emphasizes integrity of speech.
3. **“Not addicted to much wine” (v. 8):** This deals with the deacon’s relationship to alcohol. The principle given is that the deacon is not marked by a “thirst” for alcohol. He does not cross the line into “excess.”
4. **“Not greedy for dishonest gain” (v. 8):** God does not want His servants to be greedy-minded pilferers. God’s standard is that the church’s elders and deacons be concerned with giving, rather than getting, money. As assistants to the elders, deacons often help in collecting and/or counting the church’s offering and donations. This qualification is given to protect the church and its people.
5. **“Hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (v. 9):** A deacon must know the beliefs of the Christian faith, hold firmly to the faith, and live a life consistent with the Christian faith. His conduct must match the faith he professes.
6. **“Let them also be tested first” (v.10):** The Greek word *dokimazō* (tested) means “to make a critical examination of something to determine genuineness, to put to the test, or to examine.”⁷ The deacon must first be examined in order to determine if they meet the requirements in verses 8–12.
7. **“Prove themselves blameless” (v. 10):** The synonym for “blameless” is “above reproach.” “Blameless” is the goal of Christian sanctification. This does not mean a deacon is perfect, but he is to be growing in Christlikeness and already serves as an effective model of the Christian life.
8. **“The husband of one wife” (v.12):** This is also a qualification of an elder. The characteristic of this man is that he is devoted exclusively to his own wife. This is a moral quality and emphasizes his character as demonstrated by being faithful and true to his wife.

⁶ The information in this section is taken from Alexander Strauch’s book *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God’s Church*.

⁷ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Third Edition*, 255.

9. **“Managing their children” (v.12):** The deacon must not be passive, disinterested, or neglectful of his children’s needs. He is one who provides for his children financially, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. He seizes every opportunity to instruct his children in the gospel and the Christian way of life.
10. **“Managing their own households well” (v.12):** The deacon must be a godly model of a Christian husband, father, and household manager who is competent in managing the entire household. In ancient times, this not only included the wife and children, but also extended family such as widowed mothers, elderly parents, and household servants. His household must be stable and not on the verge of collapse because of mismanagement.

The Reward of Being a Deacon

Paul knew that hardworking servants in the church need to be encouraged. Serving in an office in the church is a weighty responsibility and those who serve need to be motivated and encouraged as they serve. In 1 Timothy 3:13, Paul gives the rewards for those who serve faithfully as deacons in the church.

“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

For those who serve well as deacons, there are two rewards that Paul lays out. These rewards are not received the moment a deacon is put into the office of deacon, but throughout their service as a deacon in the church. These are the rewards:

1. A high standing

This doesn’t automatically imply that the deacon will get “promoted” to an elder as a deacon may never qualify to be an elder (as he must be able to teach). This has to do with the deacon’s reputation. It is “a good standing” or “honorable standing” that he holds before the congregation he serves. To be honored in a church is a high regard and reward for any believer.

2. Great confidence in the faith

This is a far more remarkable reward than “a high standing.” The first reward relates to the deacon’s relationship to man. This reward relates to the deacon’s relationship with Christ. Paul promises that those who serve well in the church will grow in their relationship with Christ and boldness for Him. Maturity (sanctification) and boldness in our faith in Christ is the goal of every believer. This is a great reward for every deacon who faithfully serves their church as a deacon.

Resources on Deacons

- *Minister of Mercy: The New Testament Deacon* by Alexander Strauch
- *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons* by Alexander Strauch