



# **DEACONS**

A sketch of the  
New Testament's teaching

John Benton

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## CONTENTS

	Page number
Introduction:	3
1. Christians as deacons	5
2. The purpose of deacons	9
3. The qualifications required of deacons	13
4. The relationship between elders and deacons	17
5. Why women deacons?	20

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## Introduction

Some Christians tend to the idea that the structure and government of a local church is left to us to decide and that though the gospel is made very clear in Scripture, much concerning the details of how a church should operate is not. We must make up our own minds what to do.

But while there is certainly some flexibility given, nevertheless when we look at God's word, we find that the Lord is quite definite about how his churches are to be managed. The church is loved by God. It is Christ's body, his bride. It would be remarkable if he simply left his precious church to get along as best it could without any guidelines.

Following the instructions of Christ's apostles, in the New Testament we find that, generally speaking, each local church appointed elders and deacons to lead and care for the church to the glory of God.

- So, for example, we find these two leadership positions (and no others) referred to when the apostle Paul addresses his letter to the church in Philippi: 'To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers<sup>1</sup> and deacons', Philippians 1.1.
- Again as Paul instructs Timothy concerning the appointment of leaders in the church at Ephesus, he mentions only two positions. He sets out the qualifications required for elders in 1 Timothy 3.1-7, and follows this with those required of deacons in 1 Timothy 3.8-13.

The man we call 'the pastor' or 'the minister' is simply one of the elders who has a particular responsibility for preaching and teaching. His is not a third office, 1 Timothy 5.17. But as we shall see, a mature and growing church will need not only elders but also deacons. This booklet seeks to briefly sketch out the New Testament's teaching concerning deacons.

### **Service**

The word 'deacon' means to serve or to be a servant of someone and is especially connected with the idea of waiters at a table. We can think of those who bring the food or clear away the plates.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Overseer' is a term which is interchangeable with 'elder'. Compare Acts 20.17 and Acts 20.28 .

The Lord Jesus uses this word of himself and his great service to us in redemption in Mark 10.45. We could legitimately render that famous verse as follows: 'For even the Son of Man came not to be deaconed to, but to deacon, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

So the work of deacons can be seen as following very closely in the footsteps of Christ. At the last supper Jesus said to his disciples: 'For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves (or 'deacons')', Luke 22.27.

## 1: Christians as deacons

The key word with respect to deacons is 'service,' 1 Timothy 3.10. As we shall see, the deacons have a very special job to do. But we must begin by reminding ourselves that all Christians are called to service. If we are able-bodied, we need to be up and doing what we can to help others. The appointment of deacons in a church is not meant to imply that the rest of the congregation are simply to lounge around, relax and do nothing.

Mark 10.41-45 explores the theme of service (or 'deaconing') generally in the Christian life.

The background is that the brothers, James and John, had asked Jesus for special positions of prestige and authority in Christ's kingdom. They were probably spurred on to do this by their mother – who had ambitions for them. Now when the other disciples hear about this they are angry. It seems as if division and conflict could break out between Christ's followers. But Jesus intervenes, not only to stop the quarrel, but to teach concerning the nature of his kingdom and service in his kingdom.

*When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Here we find four principles that are to govern the attitudes and actions of all Christians.

### **Excellence not recognition**

Notice that Jesus does not say that no one should ever want to be great as a Christian. His words are not 'whoever wants to be great is sinful whatever his motives.' That would imply that no one should ever aspire to office in the church and that all leaders must be dragged protesting to their post. Not only does Jesus not say that but Paul doesn't either. It is perfectly legitimate to want to help lead in the church, 1 Timothy 3.1.

There is a sense in which we should all want to be great as Christians of course, to do our best for Christ who loves us. But we should aspire to this not to feed our ego or pride or to be famous in some way, Matthew 23.8-12, but simply to be excellent as Christians for the glory of God and to be as useful as we possibly can be for the kingdom of God's sake.

Jesus does oppose all un-crucified ambition for self, but he does not want to crush all ambition for excellence in the Christian life. Matthew Henry, the Puritan Bible Commentator, has a saying something like this: The true Christian's ambition is not for promotion itself, but to be worthy of promotion.

### **Service not power**

Superficially it seems that James and John are asking for positions of power which they had not yet earned. That is true. But Jesus has a more radical critique of what is going on. The brothers are thinking in worldly ways concerning power. Such thinking has no place in Christ's kingdom. The world's understanding of power is about prestige, control and position.

But that concept of power must not operate in Christ's church. The power pyramid with executives on high sending orders down the chain of command for others to execute is not what leadership in the church is to be about. It is not about controlling people or pushing them around, but about serving them and setting them free. Church leadership should enable others in the church to enjoy their Christianity and to grow spiritually. And we should all have an eye to build others up, Ephesians 4.29.

Sometimes the job can take precedence over the people we are supposed to be helping. An administrator, for example, can be so concerned that everything is done perfectly that people are afraid of him and his system to which everyone must conform. It must not be like that. A good servant puts himself out for others. He and his system are there to serve other people rather than to be served.

### **Activity not passivity**

As Christians we should gather in church to be active not passive. We should actively engage in the worship of God. We should actively engage with the preaching of God's word, thinking about how what is said applies to us. And God's word should bear fruit in loving service in our lives. James sternly warns

us, 'Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says,' James 1.22.

Jesus did not come from heaven to recline on a throne and have all his needs pandered to. He came to be active – to give his life a ransom for many, Mark 10.45.

A Christian doesn't come to church to simply decorate a pew. He or she doesn't attend a prayer meeting in order to be the centre of attention and fussed over. This needs stressing in the climate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with its habits of entitlement and concern for 'me'. We are set free as Christians, not to indulge ourselves, but to use our freedom to serve others, Galatians 5.13.

There can be an enormous temptation just to be a spectator at church – to sit back and to assess and to pass judgment on other people and what they do without lifting a finger to help. Often you hear the question concerning a church service, 'did you enjoy the worship?' If all you did was to sing the hymns and then went home you have actually had a bad day spiritually speaking. We gather for fellowship as well as worship. You may be asked after church, 'Did you enjoy the sermon?' But if all you did was to passively sit and listen and appreciate the craftsmanship of the message, and then went home, you have had a bad Sunday. Christians are to be activists.

We are all called to be in the 'deacon' mode of doing whatever we can to serve others in the church – to give a word of encouragement, to offer to help with a problem, to shift chairs, to pray with individuals. These are not matters to be left to 'the deacons'. They are for everyone.

### **Sacrifice not comfort**

Christian discipleship is not about doing what is convenient. It wasn't convenient for the Son of God to come from heaven and go to Calvary. Christian faith is not to be restricted to those things with which we feel comfortable. The cross did not fit comfortably on Jesus' shoulders – as his prayer in Gethsemane concerning his death makes plain: 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done,' Luke 22.42.

Jesus said, 'If *anyone* would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me,' Mark 8.34. All Christians are called to imitate Christ. Among other things, his service in giving his life as a ransom for many is meant



to act as an example of service which we are to follow. James and John wanted greatness in the kingdom of God, but there is no path to such greatness without sacrifice. They must drink the cup that Jesus was to drink and be baptized with the baptism with which he was baptized, Mark 10.38.

So true Christian service may cause us pain. We may be called out to help others at the most inconvenient of times. We may have to go the extra mile in order to truly do good to someone. We may put ourselves out for people only to find no thanks. True service is seldom easy.

And yet, if we know the Lord Jesus Christ we can find a great joy in it. It is a joy to be a source of blessing to others. It is a privilege to find ourselves walking the same 'Calvary Road' that our Lord took and know the fellowship of his sufferings.

### **Setting the scene**

So we have set the scene for the work of deacons against the background of all Christians being called to serve in some way. And what we have seen helps candidates to think things through about becoming a deacon. It will mean doing your best in serving the church. It will mean taking on extra activity and making sacrifices. Are you ready for that? But it is done for Christ who served us by laying down his life because he loves us.

## **2: The purpose of deacons**

The appointment of seven men to do the work of sharing out fairly the daily distribution of food among the poor of the church at Jerusalem resulted in great blessing, happiness and success for the church. We read of this in Acts 6.1-7.

*In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."*

*This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.*

*So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.*

It is true that the seven mentioned here are not specifically called 'deacons.' However, the job to which they are assigned – namely waiting on tables – is the root from which we get the word 'deacon'. It would be a case of being ridiculously obtuse to insist that the Holy Spirit does not have anything for us here to learn about the church and its deacons. This passage is meant to give us a general introduction to thinking about deacons.

### **A Job Description**

We see immediately that the job of these deacons was to help the existing leadership (in this case the apostles) in the church.

A problem had arisen which the leaders did not have time to properly address given their other responsibilities. It wasn't that the apostles felt themselves so high and mighty that waiting on tables was beneath them. It was simply that they could not do everything. To take on this work would require neglecting other essential duties, v2. Hence deacons were appointed.

- The work of the deacons is to assist the existing leadership.

There are no apostles today like those we find in the New Testament – witnesses to the resurrection of Christ, 1 Corinthians 9.1. But there are elders who, under Christ and his word, the Scriptures, are the primary leaders of a church. Deacons are to help and support the elders in their work for the good of the church.

- We can fill this out from Acts 6 under four sub-headings.  
The deacon's job is:

#### To help the elders maintain the priority of the word of God and prayer

These deacons were appointed in a church that recognised the centrality of preaching and prayer.

No doubt the widows would have loved apostles like Peter and John to visit them every day to give them their food. But good though that is, the church saw that these men had other priorities. They must spend time understanding and teaching God's word. They must spend time in preaching and evangelism. And they must spend time in prayer together and personally so that their preaching and teaching ministry might be attended with Holy Spirit power. It is significant that at the end of this passage in Acts 6 we are told that 'the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith,' v7. This is surely meant to be a comment on the effect of the deacons liberating the church's preachers from having too much to do. In a sense, they set God's word free.

In the modern ethos of evangelical activism and public profile, the deacons stand as an emphatic indication of the need for leaders, especially elders, to spend time with God.

#### To help the elders nurture the unity of the church

Because of the failings in distributing the food, friction had begun to rear its ugly head. There were complaints, v1. There was a danger that there might be a rupture in the church between the Hellenistic (Greek) Jews and the Hebraic Jews.

The early church knew that unity and a good team spirit in the church was vital. Unity is one of the greatest keys to God's blessing on a church. Ephesians 3.14-19 uses the picture of something like a barrel bound together by love in order to be able to contain the fullness of what God gives. But if there is a split the blessing leaks away. So when murmuring and grumbling began in the Jerusalem

Church, the apostles knew something had to be done. The seven who were appointed got to work and brought the church members back into harmony. As deacons function properly they greatly aid the leadership by making sure that practical things run smoothly and so guard and nurture the oneness of the church, which is so important.

#### To help the elders care for the needy people of the church

The church is God's people. Therefore the activities of the church are meant to benefit people. Therefore deacons need to be 'people persons'.

The appointment of the seven came about because widows in the church were being overlooked, v1. Sometimes as a church grows the organisation takes over and the value of individuals as precious human beings and children of God is lost. The Bible often indicts false teachers and leaders with caring more about their ministry than about God's people, Ezekiel 34.2, 6; Matthew 23.4f. The deacons are put in place to help guard against the church and its leaders falling into that trap. They look out for people. They guard against the neglect of individuals in need – whether those needs be practical or spiritual.

#### To help the elders facilitate needful change in the church

The root of the difficulties in the Jerusalem church was that 'the number of the disciples was increasing.' That was a good problem to have. But it meant that things couldn't stay the same, or be done in the same way that they had been before. Something had to change. The deacons, with the affirmation of the church, facilitated that change. They therefore need to be men open to change themselves, not stuck in the mud.

If a church is to know God's blessing it has got to be flexible and ready for things to be different. Here are some symptoms of fossilization and unhelpful rigidity in a church

- Where activities run on rails – always have and always will
- Not being willing to face uncomfortable questions
- Losing sight of the objectives which an activity was meant to fulfil

#### **What were the leading characteristics of these men?**

Of the seven appointed it becomes clear as we read further on into Acts 6, 7 and 8 that at least two of them were hugely gifted men. It would be unfair to expect every person appointed as a deacon to be of the calibre of Stephen or Philip.

However, as the apostles advise the church about who they should appoint as deacons, we should take note of the two general characteristics highlighted by v3.

- Full of the Holy Spirit: This implies first, the fruit of the Holy Spirit to be evident in their lives, Galatians 5.22,23 and second, the fullness of the Spirit always goes hand in hand with a large measure of buoyant faith (see v5).
- Full of wisdom: Wisdom is different from knowledge. Wisdom is the ability to apply our knowledge practically to the best effect. Deacons need to be down to earth men who can get things done efficiently and yet lovingly.

It was as such men as these were appointed to help the leadership in serving the church that the church overcame its troubles and led to the word of God spreading and the number of disciples not only continuing to grow, but to grow more rapidly, v7.

### 3: The qualifications required of deacons

What is a church to look for in those it appoints as deacons?

This question is addressed by Paul as he writes to Timothy encouraging the church in Ephesus as it thinks through the need for new leadership.

*In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus. 1 Timothy 3.8 -13.*

In the middle of this section there is a reference to women or wives. We will leave that aside for the moment and take it up later in the booklet when we address the question of women deacons.

But concentrating on what is said here about the general characteristics a church is to look for in deciding those who should be deacons, we find seven explanatory ideas followed by a word of encouragement. (It is to be noted that basically the only difference in requirements between elders and deacons is that the elder has to be 'able to teach', 1 Timothy 3.2. This is implicit in the words 'in the same way' at the beginning of the section. The logic is partly that elders and deacons are to work closely together.)

#### **Blameless**

This requirement acts as something of a headline for the rest. Just as elders are to be 'blameless' or 'above reproach', v2, this is to be true of deacons 'in the same way' or 'likewise'. No one is perfect. But there should be no obvious or outstanding problem with them. (Neither are they to be 'blameless' because they are always good at shifting the blame on to other people!) In this way these men should be generally acceptable to the congregation of God's people. This is now unpacked more specifically.

## **Conduct**

These people are to be those 'worthy of respect' or 'serious'. We might use the word 'venerable'. They are not 'fly-by-nights'. Sometimes people can be light-hearted and likeable but at the same time rather irresponsible. But deacons must be those who take things seriously because they are aware that they conduct themselves in the presence of God. They therefore command honour by the things they do and the way they go about things.

## **Speech**

The word is translated here as 'sincere', but literally it means 'not double-tongued'. We might say 'not two-faced', saying one thing to one person and something different to another. Such insincerity can lead to all kinds of problems in a church as one group says 'you said this' and another group knows this man, in a responsible position, told them something completely different. Ananias and Sapphira told one thing to each other about their money and something different to the apostle Peter, Acts 5.1-11. The word of a deacon is to be truthful and reliable.

## **Appetites**

A deacon is to be a Christian who has himself under control. Two things are mentioned here – drink and money. There is nothing wrong with either of these things as long as they are under proper control. The church cannot give responsibility to drunkards (or those under the influence of any substance). Later in the letter Paul tells us that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil – including dishonesty, 1 Timothy 5.10. Deacons must be people whose appetites do not control them, but are under godly control. Otherwise the church will be damaged and Christ brought into disrepute.

## **Theology**

Although teaching is not a part of the deacons' brief, nevertheless they are to have a firm grasp on theology. And Paul emphasizes not just an understanding of ABC of Christianity but of 'the deep truths of the faith.' Problems had arisen in the church at Ephesus, where Timothy was at this time, through false teachers, 1 Timothy 1.3. It is highly likely that the former leadership of the church (perhaps both elders and deacons) had fallen into heresy of some kind, and this is why Timothy is charged with bringing together a new leadership team. This team must be theologically on the ball, to protect the church from error and to lead

the church into truth that will set them free, John 8.32. Often heresy arises from trying to conform everything to our reason. But because in Christ, we are dealing with God whose ways are far above our ways, Isaiah 55.8,9; Psalm 145.3, some truths are beyond mere human reason. We might call these deep truths. How can God be sovereign and yet we held responsible for our actions. How could God become a man? How can a holy God love sinners? Such things are ultimately beyond us yet are foundational and crucial to Christian faith. The deacon must be someone who can embrace such things with a clear conscience, knowing that although he may not understand them fully, nevertheless they are true. So he supports the elders as they teach.

### **Consistency**

According to the criteria laid down in v8,9 and later in v12, the candidate's fitness to serve must be 'tested.' He is to be shown to be a 'good apple' not a 'bad apple' looking good on the outside but full of maggots within. It may well be that Paul has this in mind because of the failure of the previous leadership team. The commentator Philip H. Towner writes: 'both the term 'nothing against them' and the notion of testing imply the public dimension of the candidate's life. The deacon's reputation among believers and unbelievers must be demonstrably acceptable.'<sup>2</sup>

### **Family**

Having addressed 'the women' or 'wives' in v11, Paul now is concentrating on male deacons as he reflects on a deacon's family life. In the New Testament's view, the husband is to be the Christ-like head of his wife and family, Ephesians 5.22-33. The idea here is that if a man does a good job in serving his family, then that is a positive indication that he will make a good job of serving God's family which is the church (cf. 1 Timothy 3.4,5). Thus 'a deacon must be the husband of one wife and must manage his children and his household well.' A man who is faithful to his wife and helpful to his children's development is likely to make a fine deacon. But the church does not want lackadaisical men or heavy-handed tyrants given positions of responsibility. To be a deacon requires people skills and a look at a man's family will provide evidence one way or another.

So there are the seven basic character qualifications.

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<sup>2</sup> 1-2 Timothy & Titus, by Philip H Towner, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, 1994, page91.



## **An encouragement**

Seeing this list of requirements can be quite daunting. So Paul wants to encourage good men to nevertheless step up to the plate and be ready to serve as deacons. There are two rewards mentioned here in v13 for those who do a thorough job in this way for the church.

- In the church they will become much loved

This is always true. Churches flourish under reliable and caring leaders. They relish having people with a safe pair of hands at the helm. It sets them free to get on with their Christian lives and be undistracted in the worship of God. To be a good deacon will mean a good reputation with your Christian brothers and sisters. In the context of Ephesus where the previous leadership had let the church down this has a special edge to it.

- They will grow closer to Christ

The word used here could be translated 'assurance', 'boldness' or even 'joyousness'. The idea is that as we serve God's people well we will grow in confidence. We will know the Holy Spirit's 'accompanying' us, giving us assurance of our acceptance with God through Christ. We will grow in confidence in prayer. We will feel we can speak freely with God. The zealous deacon is someone who can look forward to a new found joy in Christ.

## 4: The relationship between elders and deacons

How are the elders and deacons in a local church meant to relate and work together? Traditional structures often don't seem to work well and can be the cause of tension in a leadership team.

Though all leadership in a church is ultimately service, Matthew 20.24-28, the key word for elders is 'rule' (or 'direct the affairs of the church'), 1 Timothy 5.17, whereas for the deacons it is 'serve', 1 Timothy 3.10, 13. The elders' rule must be a serving rule, which promotes not themselves, but the honour of Christ and the welfare of God's people, 1 Peter 5.2,3.

**The thesis here is that the work of the deacons and the work of the elders are not separate entities, but the work of the deacons is a subsection of the elders' work which has been deputed to the deacons who are accountable to the elders as they carry it out.**

### Relationship between elders and deacons

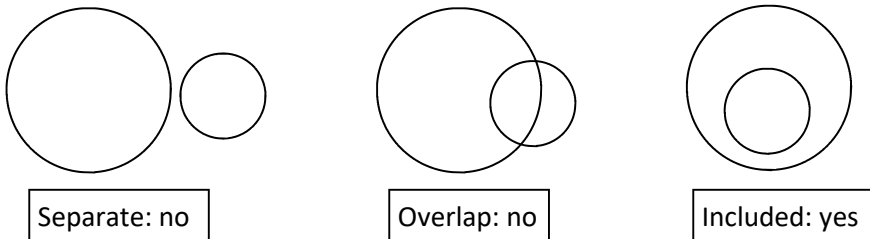


Figure 1

### **Biblical Principle**

The general principle is that elders are responsible before God for the whole flock. The elders must guard and give an account for the whole flock (this must include deacons).

- Acts 20.28 tells elders to *keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of God of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*. If the deacons are part of God's flock, which they surely are, then the elders must 'oversee' them and their work for the church.

- In Hebrews 13.17 we find the whole congregation being encouraged to *obey your elders and submit to their authority*. The leaders are not a law unto themselves, they are to speak in line with the word of God, the Scriptures, Hebrews 13.7. But again this text points to the elders being in overall charge, under Christ, of the church.

The elders cannot say, for example, ‘we look after their souls but not their physical welfare, that’s the deacons’ responsibility.’ Though that responsibility for practical provision may have been deputed to the deacons by the elders, nevertheless the buck must ultimately stop with the elders because they are to *direct the affairs of the church*, 1 Timothy 5:17.

### **Biblical example**

We find this worked out throughout the New Testament.

When churches are planted by Paul – after having been given a time to settle – we find that just elders are appointed, Acts 14.23 – not elders and deacons. Titus was directed by Paul, *The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you*, Titus 1.5. Deacons seem to be a later addition. That would chime in with Acts 6, where we find the 7 put in place when problems began to arise because the Jerusalem church had grown in size. Traditionally evangelical churches do this completely the other way around. But in Scripture it is elders who come first.

The traditional division of work, deacons = practical tasks, elders = spiritual tasks is not found in Scripture. In Acts we often find elders doing what is traditionally seen as ‘deacons’ work.’

- Barnabas and Saul take the monetary gift from Antioch and give it to the Jerusalem elders, Acts 11.30.
- Warning the Ephesian elders, Paul tells them to work hard, as he had done, to support the weak (with gifts) Acts 20.34,35.
- When folk are sick, they are to call for the elders, James 5.14.

If, as we have indicated, the 7 men appointed in Acts 6 may be looked on as ‘proto-deacons’, it was partly to take the pressure off the apostles. Thus it does seem that deacons are appointed to help the elders as responsibilities increase.

It also seems significant that the office of deacon in Scripture is only ever found in conjunction with that of the elders, 1 Timothy 3.1-12; Philippians 1.1 (except perhaps Romans 16.1).

Also, as we noted in the previous chapter, qualities required for a deacon parallel those for an elder with the exception of being ‘apt to teach.’ This would make sense if they are the general helpers or arm of the eldership working with them and under them.

In the New Testament, deacons are not restricted to a particular kind of work. Their designation is related especially to serving tables but indicates service generally.

Putting all this together seems to prove our general thesis concerning how the deacons relate to the elders in a church.

### **Practical Implications**

We must not look upon the elders and deacons as operating separately. If we take that view, we are in danger of making two ‘power bases’ in the church. This can cause tensions and even result in splitting churches. The elders must have overall responsibility.

That being the case, what does this mean in practice?

- Harmonious working of elders and deacons should not depend on a strict division of labour, but on good relationships. Building warm social relations is helpful here.
- Good communication between elders and deacons is necessary. Though separate meetings are essential, (e.g., elders must keep confidences about their pastoral involvements) joint meetings are necessary too.
- Though the traditional ‘practical’ work for the deacons and ‘spiritual’ work for the elders may be helpful at times, it is not to be a rigid rule. We can afford to be more flexible and deacons entrusted with spiritual matters at times – maybe interviewing people for membership while the elders are having to address some crisis in the church.
- It requires a proper trust. Deacons need to be men whom the elders can trust with projects and who will get things done. Otherwise the temptation will be for the elders to try to do everything themselves and this will move their focus from the word, prayer and shepherding the flock to ‘projects’ of various kinds.

## **5: Why women deacons?**

If the relationship between elders and deacons which was sketched out in the previous chapter is a true Biblical understanding then the idea of women deacons under a male eldership would seem to make sense.

We will cover the ground by asking 5 questions.

### **1. What are the main NT references concerning women deacons?**

There seem to be 3 principal texts from which we can glean some light.

#### **Romans 16.1,2**

Here Paul writes of Phoebe, describing her as a servant or deacon (same word), of the church at Cenchrea near Corinth. Was she just a hard-working ordinary church member – or did she hold an official position of woman deacon or deaconess? The great teachers of church history line up on both sides – Spurgeon and others say just an ordinary Christian, whereas Calvin, Chrysostom and Charles Hodge, say she was a deacon. It is possible either way. But the way her service seems to be officially attached to the local church at Cenchrea and the fact that she is obviously here entrusted with an official work, (v2 ‘see you give her any help she needs,’) pushes the balance in favour of her being a recognized as a woman deacon.

#### **1 Timothy 3.11**

The Greek word in 1 Timothy 3.11 can either mean ‘women’ in general (1 Timothy 2:9,10,11,12), or it can equally mean ‘wife.’ (1 Timothy 3:2, 12). But there are three reasons why taking the meaning as ‘women’ in v11 makes more sense.

*First*, the possessive pronoun ‘their’ is not in the original text. This would be strange if Paul is talking of deacons’ wives.

*Second*, if Paul is specifying qualifications for deacons’ wives, why does he make no similar specification for elders’ wives? Given the greater responsibility of the elders, that would be extremely odd.

*Third*, in fact you can translate the Greek word as ‘women’ all through 1 Timothy 2 and 3 and it would still make sense – and as a rule it is best to stick with a word having one meaning, rather than keep chopping and changing within the same passage.

Here then we see more solid proof. And so it shouldn't surprise us that the Roman Governor of Bythinia, Pliny, writing to the Emperor Trajan in 112AD mentions that in his investigations of what went on at Christian meetings he did so 'by applying torture to two maidservants who were called deaconesses.' A man who wasn't even a Christian was officially writing of deaconesses within 20 years or so of New Testament being completed.

### 1 Timothy 5:9

This text occurs as Paul is telling Timothy how the church is to be sensible in providing for widows. What is the list on which widows may be included? Some say it was a list of widows entitled to material support by the church. This has echoes of Acts 6. But that cannot be, because it would imply that Paul is telling the church that if a young widow in desperate straits with small children asks for help, the church is to refuse. That is surely impossible.

But there is a better explanation. The commentator, William Hendriksen writes, 'These are widows who possessed the necessary qualifications for the performance of certain spiritual and charitable functions in the church – the qualifications for inclusion in the list point in the direction of *work* to be done, just as did the qualifications for 'women helpers' (or deaconesses) in 3.11 and the lists for elders and deacons in chapter 3.'<sup>3</sup>

These duties seem to have included giving counsel to younger women, prayer and fasting, visiting the sick, preparing women for baptism, giving guidance to widows and orphans etc. The list Paul therefore refers to in 1 Timothy 5:9 seems to be a list of recognized women helpers for the church, who the church may even have supported financially. It would not be wrong to call such women deaconesses.

In the context of considering the idea of women deacons, it is also surely significant that the Lord Jesus himself, and his disciples were helped by a named group of women, Luke 8.1-3. In the original, the verb used for the 'helping' these women gave is the same word as that from which we get the term 'deacon.' If the early churches did have women deacons, it would appear that they were following in the footsteps of Jesus and the disciples.

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<sup>3</sup>*First and Second Timothy and Titus*, By William Hendriksen, Banner of Truth

## 2. What about the question of women not being in authority in the church?

It needs to be said, gently and carefully, but nevertheless firmly from Scripture, that the New Testament does not allow women to have a position of official authority or to teach the church. Men and women are equal before God, but we are given different roles. There are no women elders.

This is not a relic of first century culture, but is based on things which go back to creation, predate all the world's cultures and in that sense are above culture, 1 Timothy 2.12-14. Do we still believe that Adam was formed first? Do we still believe that Adam was the head of the human race including Eve and therefore is responsible for the Fall of mankind, even though Eve was deceived first? We do. Then we must take it from Paul that in the church a woman is not to take a position of authority over the men.

But the New Testament idea of the work of a deacon or a woman deacon does not violate this rule, for two reasons.

*First*, the deaconess's area of activity was in the area of personal help rather than public ministry. So Professor Henry Chadwick in the Pelican History of the Early Church writes, 'the charitable (but not the liturgical) side of the diaconate was shared with deaconesses who had special responsibilities for women.'

*Second*, because the deacons (or servants) of the early church were not in a position of authority. The New Testament wording is that elders rule, 1 Timothy 5.17, while deacons serve, 1 Timothy 3.13, the church. All the authority and responsibility for the church before God rests with the elders (as they stick to God's word) – not deacons.

As we have seen previously, the early church did not function by splitting authority between elders and deacons (that's your territory, this is ours), nor by sharing authority with the deacons (overlap). Instead, it functioned by the delegation of work to the deacons for which the elders still had overall responsibility.

Once you see that the deacons are the general helpers of the elders, under the elders' authority, simply servants, you see there is no reason why a woman should not serve as a deacon. And there are many areas and situations in which it is extremely helpful for the elders to have reliable, godly, dedicated Christian women involved in certain situations – especially in helping other women.

## What are the New Testament qualifications for such deaconesses?

We are told in 1 Timothy 3.11: *In the same way, the women, are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.*

Beginning with the phrase 'In the same way' or 'likewise' in the middle of a section speaking about qualifications for male deacons, it is implied that the women need to be of a similar calibre to the men.

Then we find three qualities which are to characterize all those on a leadership team.

*Inner selves* – worthy of respect, a Holy Spirit wrought seriousness of character and dignity which commands respect – not lightweight or flighty, in their inner thoughts.

*Public selves* – self-controlled, temperate. Generally speaking for men the lack of self control comes in areas of anger or misuse of sex or alcohol. But with women the greatest temptation is often to let the tongue off the leash, with malicious talk or gossip. How difficult it is to put right gossip or slander. An old pastor said the effects of an evil tongue are like going up a church tower and tearing open a pillow – feathers everywhere – now put it right – pick up all the feathers – its almost an impossible task. Women deacons must keep confidences. There must be no malicious gossip.

*Working selves* – trustworthy, reliable. They must be the kind of women who are thorough and do not cut corners. They must be trustworthy and not give up on a tough job. If the elders entrust them with a task they must see it through.

If we read 1 Timothy 5:9,10 we see similar qualities. Here with widows in mind, Paul focuses on age, and urges that this job is a job for an older woman (even 60+). Once you see that Paul is talking about recognized women workers for the church, then, as we have indicated already, v11-15 become much clearer to understand. A young widow might be tempted to apply for such work within the church. But we are not to take ministry in God's church lightly. If a young woman's mind is divided, if she is going about her work in fact preoccupied with finding a new husband, things are going to go wrong. Paul has no problems with younger widows getting remarried. He encourages it, v14. But he does have problems with people taking on serious work for the church as a temporary stop-gap until 'something better' comes along.



#### **4. What are the particular areas where deaconesses would have valuable ministry?**

Women deacons can do many jobs which the male deacons cover – finance, transporting folk etc. But there are obviously some areas in which women deacons are particularly helpful.

We see that even today, in order for there not even to be a whiff of sexual scandal, it is far better, wherever possible for women to give individual counsel and encouragement to other women.

More specifically, there are areas where it is simply more practical and sensitive for women to minister to women. For example we could think of single girls struggling with singleness, teenaged girls with problems, or the trials and worries of a newly married wife in need of wisdom.

This also makes sense in the area of practical help for women. Statistically more women survive to old age than men. For older women in need to be visited and comforted and cared for by a woman from the church is obviously more appropriate. Perhaps not all women who do that kind of work need to be deaconesses, but perhaps such work should be coordinated by a deaconess.

#### **5. What is the general principle which is behind this teaching?**

It is simply that the Lord does intend us to use all the gifts in a congregation. God gives the churches many gifted women. Those gifts need to be used.

When we do that it is best for the women themselves. Knowing that you have abilities, and knowing that the church has needs, but you cannot do anything is a source of frustration.

When we do use everyone's gifts the church as a whole prospers, needs are met, God is glorified.

Why women deacons? Scripture and common sense give us a clear answer.