

RESTORATION OF BIBLICAL DEACONS

Through the two thousand years of church history, movements have taken Biblical terms like “elder” and “deacon” and applied them to positions and people. Unfortunately, the definitions that go along with the Biblical terms are varied. This is especially true for deacons. In much of recent history (the past 150 years) the role of deacons has been greatly reduced and limited when compared to what we see in Scripture. Contrary to tradition, deacons are much more than simple serving tasks like counting money or practical needs in the church. We want to recapture the idea of Biblical Deacons.

A. BACKGROUND

1. Background of the New Testament Church through the Intertestament Period

It is usually referred to as the “four hundred silent years” because there was no oral or written revelation communicated directly by God that we consider the Bible. There was, however, a written history of the people of God during that time. This is the period between the prediction of Elijah’s coming (Malachi 4:5) and the angelic announcement of the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:11-20). In the history we can see God preparing His people, and the world, for the advent of His Son and the birth of the church.

2. Divine Preparation for the coming of Christ and the Birth of the Church

a. Preparation through the Greek language - God was at work preparing the world for a common language that became the vehicle of communication for clarity and preciseness to proclaim the Savior's message. As a result, the New Testament books were written in the common language of the day, *Koine* Greek. It was not written in Hebrew or Aramaic, even though all the New Testament writers were Jews except for Luke, who was a Gentile. Koine Greek had become the second language of nearly everyone.

b. Roman Peace and stability – Rome brought stability often called “Pax Romana” in the civilized world.

c. Roman Roads - The Romans built a system of roads, which, with the protection provided by her army that often patrolled them, contributed greatly to the measure of ease and safety by which travelers could make their way back and forth across the Empire.

d. The rise of the Synagogue System – It was the cradle of the early church

B. THE RISE OF THE SYNAGOGUE SYSTEM

1. The seventy years of exile and the intertestament period gave rise to the synagogue system. The temple and sacrificial system had been destroyed. The exiles congregated into assemblies (synagogues) to facilitate their identity and life as the people of God. Even after

the return and restoration of the Temple and Jerusalem, seen in Ezra and Nehemiah, God's people were still scattered across the empire. Through the Intertestament period, the Synagogue system continued to develop as local gatherings of God's people.

2. Through the synagogues, God's people became a nation within a foreign nation and a city within a foreign city (Matthew 5:14). Wherever the Jews emigrated, synagogues sprouted up.

3. The Synagogue became a cradle for the early local churches. It had a structure similar to local churches regarding leadership, discipline, education, and instruction. After Jesus' announcement that He was going to build His church (called out assembly) in Matthew 16, He made a further statement in Matthew 18 that pointed to the Synagogue pattern. The Synagogue had prescribed ways to administer discipline among the gathered people of God. As Jesus touched on how discipline was to work among God's people, He used an important phrase "where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am in their midst."

- *Matthew 18:15-20 "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. (16) "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you... (17) "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (18) "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven....(20) "For where two or three have **gathered together** in My name, **I am there in their midst.**"*

The Greek word translated with the phrase "gathered together" is "sunagō." – to gather together is the root of Synagogue. The Grk. verb sunagō is the basis for the noun sunagōgê, or synagogue. The verb sunagō occurs frequently in the LXX to describe the gathering of the Israelite people for worship or learning. In the Jewish Synagogue, it took ten members to compose a congregation, now Jesus was saying it was just 2 or 3. Local churches become the local gatherings (synagogues) of God's people.

Local churches are gathering places for the continued life and identity of God's people in every city, but they are the place of His presence as the Temple. After Jesus's death, the temple's veil was torn, and God's presence (Holy Spirit) left. A short time later God's presence descended on the day of Pentecost among a gathered people in the upper room in Jerusalem. Now, as Jesus promised, His presence will come among His new temple, the church, wherever two or three are gathered in His name.

- *1Corinthians 3:16 Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*
- *Ephesians 2:20-22...(22) in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.*
- *1Peter 2:4-5...(5) you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

This is probably why Paul felt directed to go to the Synagogues first. He wanted to announce to them the fulfillment of what they were hoping for was fulfilled in Christ.

4. The synagogue system provided a backdrop of understanding for the early church.

When the first church in Jerusalem faced the challenges in Acts 6 about taking care of the widows, they instinctively drew from the Spirit and their background of the synagogue system to find their way forward.

The Pattern for the Acts 6 ministers/deacons - In the Synagogues, some were appointed to serve on behalf of the people for such things as collecting and distributing relief, etc. They were chosen from among the people and brought before the governing body of the synagogue for ratification. This was probably the pattern they had in mind for selecting the seven to oversee food distribution for the people. Most see these as the first deacons of the church.

- *Acts 6:2-6 NASB So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve (Gk 1247 Diakonos) tables. (3) "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task...(5) The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. (6) And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.*

C. EVOLVING OF THE IDEA OF DEACONS IN LOCAL CHURCHES

1. The use of the Greek words

There are three Greek words translated as the English words deacon, minister, or servant.

a. Diakoneo (G1247) --"To be an attendant, to wait upon."

It is used of someone as waiting on a table (Luke 22:24-27) or in a general way of serving someone in any way as in (Matthew 4:11; 27:55; Acts 19:22) or in the sense of helping or supporting someone (Matthew 25:23; Romans 15:25) or in the ministry of a church official (1 Timothy 3:10). so it can be used to serve and minister as in the office of a deacon.

b. Diakonia (G1248) --"Service or attendant as a servant."

It is used generally of all manner of service (Hebrews 1:4; Ephesians 4:12; Acts 6:4); it is used specifically for the preparation of a meal (Luke 10:40); it is used for the service or function of all new testament ministries (I Timothy 1: 12; Acts 20:24; I Corinthians 12:5; Colossians 4:17); it is used in the sense of aid, support or distribution especially of alms and giving to the poor (Acts 11:29; Romans 15:31; II Corinthians 8:4); and it is used of specific ministry in the body of Christ (Romans 12:7). This word is translated several ways. It is translated serving, ministry, ministrations, relief, office, service, administrations, ministry.

c. Diakonos (G1249) --"A waiter, attendant, servant or minister."

In the New Testament it refers to the servant of someone (Matthew 20:26; 23:11; John 12:26); it refers to a helper or encourager (I Thessalonians 3:2; I Timothy 4:6); and it refers to an official of the church (Philippines 1: 1; I Timothy 3: 8) . This word is translated minister, servant, and deacon. Interestingly, the apostles and other prominent Christians were seen in this capacity (Colossians 1:23; Ephesians 3:7; II Corinthians 3:6).

The words used in Scripture (in the NASV) from the Greek word "Diakonos" are "Deacon" used 3 times (1Tim 3:8, Phil 1:1), "Minister" used 20 times (Mk 10:43-45), "Servant" used 7 times (Mk 9:35)

2. Two ways the word is used - When we put all of these words together with their references in the New Testament, it is clear that they are mainly used in two ways, **an unofficial way** and **an official way**.

a. Unofficial way - In the general or unofficial sense, they refer to any servant ministries. At times they refer to the ministry in the home, of civil rulers, of angels, of various servants and of all believers regardless of their calling in the body of Christ. In this sense, every born-again believer is to have the heart attitude and characteristics of a servant. Every believer, to be great in the kingdom, must learn to be skillful in service.

b. Official way - These words are also used in an official way. It is very clear from certain passages that when these words are employed they are referring to a certain group of people who have proven themselves as having a specific grace to do the job and were thus designated "deacons" or literally "servants" Romans 16:2, Phil 1:1, 1 Tim 3:8.

3. In the official way Deacons were closely associated with Elders

The main two verses where the Greek word is translated into English word Deacon in KJV NIV and NASV.

- *Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons:*
- *1Timothy 3:8 Deacons likewise (like the Elders) must be...*

4. The great error in the church of minimizing a Deacon's role.

Over the last 2000 years of church history various movements have taken Biblical terms like "elder" and "deacon," and applied them to different positions and people. Unfortunately, the applications of the terms are varied. This is especially true for deacons. In recent history (the past 200 years) the role of deacons has been dramatically minimized compared to what we see in Scripture. In many Charismatic and Evangelical circles, the term "deacon" has been applied to people who took care of serving the practical needs of the church (give them a title and they will feel better about serving). Others saw them as groups who provide leadership in the practical business areas of the church. In the worst-case scenarios some saw them as groups who help keep the spiritual leaders in check.

Five New Testament facts reveal that deacons' have been minimized, and Biblical patterns need to be restored.

1. Deacons sometimes led extensive administrations of the church.

Most orthodox theologians see the Acts 6 group that the apostles appointed as the first deacons.

- *Acts 6:2-3... "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve (Gk diakoneō) tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.*

They were “put in charge” of feeding over 5000 people each day. It was no small task. For several years we took part in a Christmas event in Mexico in which we fed about 5000 people one meal. It took several days of preparation. Can you imagine doing it daily with no grocery stores? It was nothing short of an administrative miracle. They had to have exercised tremendous gifts of leadership and administration (Romans 12:7-8).

Not every church or task is that large; nevertheless, deacons provide the same types of function, leading to the administration of important sections of the church.

2. Deacons participated in significant breakthroughs both in preaching and moving in signs and wonders. Stephen, who was part of the Acts 6 group, did these things.

- *Acts 6:8 NASB And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.*

3. Philip, part of the Acts 6 group, lead significant spiritual breakthroughs and is the only person in the New Testament identified as an Ephesian’s 4 evangelist.

- *Acts 8:5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.*
- *Acts 21:8 On the next day we...entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him.*

4. Phoebe was identified as a deacon of such importance that churches were encouraged to give her financial support.

- *Romans 16:1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant (Diakonos) of the church which is at Cenchrea...that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.*

5. The qualifications for deacons reveal a very high standard, similar to elders.

Of the twenty-five qualifications listed for elders and deacons seen in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 Titus 1:5-9, Acts 6, seven of them applied to both (Not addicted to wine, not fond of sordid gain, tested, above reproach, husband of one wife, good managers of children and household, and a good reputation).

D. MALE AND FEMALE DEACONS

1. Two Strong reasons to include female Deacons

a. It's Biblical – seen clearly in two passages

1) I Timothy 3:8-11 *Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, 9 but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. 11 Women (some see this as deaconess) must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. 12 Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.*

The previous verses of I Timothy 3 cover requirements for elders. Verse 8 begins the requirements for the office of Deacon. Verse 11 literally reads “the women.” Some translations say “their wives.” This is a possible interpretation, but a strained one. First, it requires adding the possessive pronoun “their,” which is not in the text. Also, another important question for that interpretation is “Why are Deacons’ wives being scrutinized and not Elders’ wives?” This is a glaring inconsistency. Finally, if this text means “Deacons’ wives”, what church screens Deacons in this way? The character of Deacon’s wives surely isn’t more important than that of Elder’s wives? A more natural and less strained understanding of this text is that these women were Deacons. This is consistent with Romans 16:1-2 where Paul refers to Phoebe as a Deacon.

Clark Commentary *1 Timothy 3:11...I believe the apostle does not mean here the wives either of the bishops or deacons in particular, but the Christian women in general. The original is simply: Γυναικας ὡσαυτως σεμνας: Let the women likewise be grave. Whatever is spoken here becomes women in general; but if the apostle had those termed deaconesses in his eye, which is quite possible, the words are peculiarly suitable to them. That there was such an order in the apostolic and primitive Church, and that they were appointed to their office by the imposition of hands, has already been noticed on Romans 16:1 (note). Possibly, therefore, the apostle may have had this order of deaconesses in view, to whom it was as necessary to give counsels and cautions as to the deacons themselves; and to prescribe their qualifications, lest improper persons should insinuate themselves into that office.*

Gill Commentary - *Some instead of "wives" read "women", and understand them of deaconesses, such as were in the primitive churches; whose business it was to visit the poor and sick sisters of the church, and take care of things belonging to them; but it is better to interpret the words of the wives of the deacons, who must be as their husbands, "grave" in*

speech, gesture, and dress, of an honest report, a good behavior, and chaste conversation; which will reflect honor and credit to their husbands:

2) Romans 16:1-2 *I commend to you our sister **Phoebe, who is a servant (1249 diakonos) of the church** which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.*

a. Jesus had women who came and ministered to and with Him *Mark 15:40-41 NASB There were also some women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. (41) When He was in Galilee, they used to follow Him and minister (1247 diakoneō) to Him; and there were many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem.*

Proper interpretation of Scripture is important in the subject of Deacons. There are two great dangers in Biblical interpretation. The first danger is to say “Yes” where God has said “No.” The other great danger, however, is to say “No” where God has said “Yes”. This is as grave a danger as the slippery slope of liberalism. If God has said “Yes” to women Deacons, then so should we.

b. It was the historic practice of the church.

Church history demonstrates that the practice of having women Deacons is seen by many of our forefathers to be exceedingly biblical.

It is well documented that women served as deacons for the first 1000 years of the church. Though the practice waned around the time of the Great Schism between East and West, John Calvin reinstated Deaconesses as part of his reforms of medieval church polity. Informed by the example of the Early Church and by Scripture, Calvin was a proponent of the office of Deaconess throughout his life.

E. DEACON AS AN OFFICE OR A FUNCTION

A common belief is that Acts 6:1-7, Philippians 1:1, and 1 Timothy 3:8-13 show that the apostles established the offices of deacon and deaconess as an office of authority and rulership within the early church. A careful study of the New Testament scriptures containing the Greek word *diakoneo* and its derivatives *diakonia*, and *diakonos*, clearly shows that these words are tied to individuals' functions, not a title or office. There obviously was authority that went along with certain functions like the Acts 6 group but no indication that it was some sort of permanent office that had inherent authority.

- *Acts 6:3 NASB "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.*

F. The results of Deacons taking their place alongside of Elders

When we see deacons released into their roles and responsibilities, they enable the elders to be released into the fullest of their function. We see it in the early church in Acts 6. The leaders gave themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. The result was that the “word kept spreading, disciples increased, and many other priest/leaders became obedient”

as the apostles had a chance to bring the word to them. As the deacons were released we also see two of them, Stephen and Philip, begin to move in great power and outreach.

- *Acts 6:2-8...It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. (3) "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. (4) "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (5) The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. (6) And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. (7) The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. (8) And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.*

G. Qualifications for elders and deacons

1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 and Acts 6 show the moral, domestic, and spiritual qualifications of those who are elders and deacons in the church.

One of the major qualifications has to do with the way they rule in their home. Paul said if they didn't know how to manage their own home well that they wouldn't be able to manage God's home, the church. You might say it like this, "***The way they treat their bride is how they will treat His bride, and how they run their home is how they will run His home.***"

Comparisons of Qualifications for Elders and Deacons

There are 12 qualifications of deacons (If you take the position that those set aside in Acts 6 were Deacons) and 25 for elders and 7 qualifications apply to both (1. Not addicted to wine, 2. not fond of sordid gain, 3. tested, 4. above reproach, 5. husband of one wife, 6. managers of children and household, 7. good reputation).

H. THE INTERACTION YET DISTINCTION BETWEEN ELDERS AND DEACONS

While we still are in the process of learning how to see New Testament Deaconhood restored, one way to show the relationship between elders and deacons is to see the relationship between a husband and wife in a home. Paul says local churches operate like a natural household 1 Timothy 3:15. The husband is the head (leader) but the wife has a co-leader who carries great responsibility and administration in leading the home. The husband carries the final responsibility for the decisions (headship), yet the wife is full involved and leads with him.

I. How the church responds to the leadership

1. *Submitting to the leadership of the elders Hebrews 13:17.*
2. *Following their example Hebrews 13:17.*

3. *Expressing love and appreciation, praying for them, and helping them* 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13.

4. *Being generous towards them, so that they don't have to live under unnecessary financial pressure* Galatians 6:6, 1 Corinthians 9:9, 1 Timothy 5:17-18.

J. Ordination Of Elders Deacons

1. A simple way to sum up the NT examples of ordination is three elements.

a. *There is a grace and calling of God.* The person him or herself feels a sense of call from God.

b. *It is recognized by a church body* (Hard to say you are a doctor if you can't get patients). The church recognizes the gifting and character qualities in the person.

c. *It is confirmed by proven leadership both local (if they are set in place) and extra local and/or Apostolic ministry.* (Acts 6:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9).

It is recognized by proven leadership, both local and extra-local, and the church body of what they have the calling, grace, and character to do. They should have already been doing elder-type things without the title. Recognition is recognizing what is already being done.

2. The number of Elders and Deacons in a local church considers both who has the calling, and the need of the local church. It is local church based and doesn't transfer from one body to another.

3. Setting in or ordination. This is a special time of recognition and setting apart the qualified leaders to do the work at hand. It is a time of impartation and recognition 1 Timothy 4:4.