

PAUL'S VISION FOR THE
DEACONS

ASSISTING THE
ELDERS WITH
THE CARE OF
GOD'S CHURCH

ALEXANDER STRAUCH



*Paul's Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care
of God's Church*

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WHAT DO DEACONS DO?

There seems to be no end to the opinions people have about the role of deacons in the church. Over the years, I have asked many people the question, “What do deacons do?” and have received a wide range of responses. It is quite confusing!

For example, when approaching a church I was visiting, I was greeted by a friendly man who was trimming bushes and mowing the grass. After a warm Christian greeting, he volunteered to tell me he was a deacon. I could see that he was a good man and proud to serve his church. So I asked, “What do deacons do?”

“Deacons,” he replied, “care for the church’s facilities. They make sure the building and grounds are presentable to the public.”

While having lunch with a long-time friend who had recently become a deacon, I asked, “What do deacons do?”

“They’re the governing board of the church,” he answered. “Nothing happens in the church without the deacons’ consent.”

On another occasion, I was introduced to a man who identified himself as a church deacon. I asked, “What do deacons do?”

“Deacons lead the church’s ministry teams,” he said. “I’m the coordinator of the church’s audio-visual team. Others coordinate the small-group ministry, the evangelism committee, or the building maintenance team.”

Then I asked a biblical scholar, “What do deacons do?”

“Deacons can teach, preach, counsel, evangelize, manage church programs, and help the needy. They are models of servant leadership.”

In addition to these answers, responses to my question about the responsibilities and activities of deacons have included everything from arranging flowers, leading political action groups, feeding the homeless, administering the Lord’s Supper, handing out church bulletins, and helping the poor, to sharing in the pastoral responsibilities of the church. And in a few churches, anyone serving the church in any capacity is considered to be a deacon because the word *deacon* (Greek, *diakonos*) means *servant*. I suppose this viewpoint justifies the most amusing answer to my question about what deacons do: “I’m the coffee-bar deacon.” In such cases, the title “deacon” is almost meaningless.

Among evangelical, Bible-believing Christians there exist widely divergent views on the role of deacons. Some churches do not even have deacons because they see no need for them. Of those that do have deacons, I have found that churches of the same denomination in the same city may have diametrically opposite views. In one church, for example, deacons are *the* governing board of the church. While across town in another church, deacons are the building maintenance crew.

My intention in writing this book is to encourage my dear deacon friends and fellow church leaders to think more critically

about what they are saying and doing in light of what Scripture actually teaches (or does not teach) about deacons. Sadly, most of the literature I have read on this subject claims biblical authority but provides little or no biblical evidence or exegesis for the assertions made.

Whatever your view may be, I urge you to use this study to examine in detail the biblical facts on deacons and allow those facts to guide your thinking. This approach offers the opportunity to build broader agreement among Bible-believing churches as to what deacons do.

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THE BEREAN CHALLENGE

When Paul, the great missionary of the gospel message to the Gentile world, arrived in a new city, his customary practice was to first attend the local Jewish synagogue and present to his Jewish compatriots the good news of Jesus as Messiah as demonstrated through the Old Testament Scriptures. On Paul's second missionary journey, he visited the city of Berea in Macedonia (modern-day northern Greece) where he encountered a unique group. When the Berean Jews first heard Paul preach that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, they *eagerly received* the good news. But they *confirmed* his message as well:

They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed. (Acts 17:11–12)

The Berean Jews believed the Old Testament Scriptures to be the Word of God and thus divinely authoritative. For that reason, they critically examined the message of the great apostle Paul to see if it agreed with God's message as revealed in Holy Scripture. They were careful so as not to be misled, even by someone as great as Paul.

The Bereans were serious-minded Bible students. They knew that the Scriptures were written in such a way that they must be searched and studied diligently, so they examined the Scriptures daily. Furthermore, they were not blind traditionalists who were closed to fresh biblical insights. They were willing to change their minds when persuaded by thoughtful examination of the Scriptures.

I am citing the attitudes and diligence of the Bereans because the nature of this biblical study of deacons requires that we do as they did. We must exert effort in order to understand and absorb the scriptural arguments presented. If we approach our study of deacons with the attitudes and diligence of the Bereans, this study will be enlightening even if we cannot agree on all the details.

I am citing the attitudes and diligence of the Bereans because the nature of this biblical study of deacons requires that we do as they did. We must exert effort in order to understand and absorb the scriptural arguments presented.

There is another reason we need to conduct ourselves like the Bereans. It is not enough to study Scripture and discover truth. We must, by God's grace, confront our own traditions and opinions and when necessary make appropriate changes. From personal experience I know that changing long-standing, cherished church tradition is difficult, and this study will challenge some deep-seated opinions. That is why we need to adopt the Bereans'

attitude. We need to be prepared to reevaluate our most treasured traditions in the light of God's Word and make appropriate changes wisely and courageously.

Deacons, prospective deacons, and the elders responsible for overseeing deacons will find the study guide to be a valuable complement to the book:

Paul's Vision for the Deacons: Study Guide
ISBN 978-093608335-3

I recommend that the church elders go through this guide before the deacons in order to supervise the deacons most effectively. The study guide is available from your local bookstore, many online retailers, or from Lewis & Roth Publishers.

Part One

WHAT ARE THE BIBLICAL
STARTING POINTS FOR DEACONS?

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the
overseers and deacons.

Philippians 1:1

Deacons [*diakonoî*] likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve [verb form, *diakoneō*] as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons [*diakonoî*] each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve [verb form, *diakoneō*] well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 3:8–13

Chapter 1

PAUL'S INSTRUCTIONS REGARDING DEACONS

A woman who was concerned about a friend of hers who had not attended church in a long time asked her pastor if he would call the man. She said, "If you ask him to be a deacon, maybe he would start coming to church again and get involved." Although the concerned lady meant well, her request shows a lack of understanding about the biblical requirements for deacons and the biblical significance of their office and role in the church.

Unfortunately, her lack of knowledge about deacons is not uncommon. Her request demonstrates the low view that many people have about deacons. But as we will soon see, there must be something very significant about the deacons' ministry that requires both specific, elder-like qualifications and verification of such qualifications by the church and its leaders. Not just anyone can be a deacon, and the diaconate (or deaconship) is not intended to be a means for involving people in the life of the church.

If we want to know what the responsibilities of deacons are and who qualifies to be a deacon, we must look at what Scripture says. But before we begin, we must consider who the apostle Paul is and why he wrote the letter of 1 Timothy. This background is necessary because Paul is the only New Testament writer who mentions deacons, and his instructions for deacons are found only in his first letter to Timothy.

PAUL, AN APOSTLE OF CHRIST JESUS

Paul was directly chosen by Jesus Christ to be an *apostle* (Greek, *apostolos*), which means he was a special authorized messenger, an emissary, or an envoy sent by Christ. He was not just a missionary, a church-growth advisor, or a brilliant scholar—although he was all of those. The apostle Paul was Christ's special ambassador to define, defend, and proclaim the gospel to the Gentile nations.¹ As such, he played a unique role in the foundation of the Christian faith.

In fact, one of the most momentous events at the dawn of Christianity was when Christ appeared to the young, zealous rabbi Saul on the Damascus road, which led to Saul's radical conversion to faith in Christ as Messiah. Shortly after that encounter, Jesus referred to Saul (who later took the name Paul) as "a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). As Christ's ambassador (2 Cor. 5:20), the apostle Paul lived out the cruciform lifestyle of Christ for others to imitate.

*Paul's gospel is Christ's
gospel. What Paul teaches
is what Christ teaches.*

*What Paul commands
is what Christ commands.*

Thus, Paul did not fabricate the gospel message. He received it by direct revelation from the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's gospel, then, is Christ's gospel. What Paul teaches is what Christ teaches. What Paul commands is what Christ commands. Paul's authority to give written instructions to the churches is Christ-given authority.

As "a Heaven-commissioned ambassador,"² Paul delivered authoritative teaching for conduct and life in the local church.³ In conjunction with his close associate Luke, Paul wrote slightly over fifty percent of the New Testament. He is the master architect

of much of the vocabulary and theological concepts regarding the gospel and the Church, which is evident in his two magisterial letters, Romans and Ephesians. He also has provided specific instructions regarding both elders and deacons. So let's begin our study by considering the urgent crisis in the church at Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) that compelled Paul to write the letter of 1 Timothy.

**PAUL AND THE LETTER OF I TIMOTHY:
A RESPONSE TO A CRISIS IN THE CHURCH
AND ITS LEADERSHIP**

Our study on deacons will focus primarily on Paul's first letter to Timothy, which begins with Paul's declaration that he is "an apostle of Christ Jesus." He also notes that he is an apostle "by command of God":

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, to Timothy, my true child in the faith. (1 Tim. 1:1–2)

One biblical commentator succinctly captures the commanding force of Paul's opening declaration in 1 Timothy:

It was right, therefore, [that Timothy] should feel that necessity was laid upon him; that the voice which speaks to him is that not merely of a revered instructor or a spiritual father, but of a Heaven-commissioned ambassador, who has a right to declare the divine will and rule with authority in the Christian church.⁴

This strong declaration was needed because five to seven years had passed since Paul's farewell meeting with the Ephesian elders

(Acts 20:17–38). Tragically, from around AD 57 to AD 64, the Ephesian elders had failed to protect the church from false teachers. This was a particularly dreadful failure because the local church is to be “a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), that truth being the glorious, good news message of salvation through Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 1:11). Instead, heretical teachings had become quite advanced in the church and had adversely affected every aspect of the life of the church.

The new teachings had caused fighting and arguing among the people, lack of prayer, improper behavior on the part of many toward one another, neglect of its destitute widows, and problems within the church’s leadership. Paul even had to excommunicate two of the ringleaders of the heresy, Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20). Given this background, it is no wonder a strong sense of urgency and emotion permeates Paul’s letter to Timothy. His beloved church was in the death grip of false teachers!

As one notable Bible expositor puts it:

The church that Paul addresses had been torn apart by the false teachers, and much of this letter is aimed at putting the pieces back together.⁵

One of the likely causes for the upset in Ephesus was that unqualified, unfit people had become elders and deacons during Paul’s absence.⁶ Prominent in Paul’s strategy for “putting the pieces back together,” then, was *insisting that the church’s elders and deacons be properly qualified and examined as to those qualifications before they served*. So in 1 Timothy 3:1–13, Paul sets down scriptural requirements for the church’s overseers (= elders) and deacons, insisting that both groups be examined by the congregation and its leaders for fitness for office.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION PROVIDED IN SCRIPTURE

To prepare for our study, we need to review the biblical information on deacons and clarify the problems we all face in identifying the New Testament deacon.

1. Deacons Are First Mentioned in Paul's Greeting to the Church in Philippi.

Deacons appeared early in the history of the Christian movement, no later than the mid 50s. The frame of reference for this early date is that Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension occurred either in AD 30 or 33. The earliest mention of deacons—in plural form alongside the church overseers—is found in Paul's letter to the church in Philippi (in modern-day Greece):

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons. (Phil. 1:1)

As was typical when Paul wrote to a local church, he addresses the entire church, not just the leaders. Here he uses one of his favorite designations for all Christians: "saints." By this all-important term he means, "God's holy people" (NIV), a people set apart for God's purposes and separate from the world's philosophy and immoral lifestyle.

But only in this letter does he add, "with the overseers and deacons." These officials are *together with the saints*. They are an integral part of the believing community. After this special mention of overseers and deacons, we hear nothing more about them in the letter, at least by these titles. It is the entire

church's responsibility, together with its overseers and deacons, to carry out Paul's instructions and to solve the growing problem of conflict within the church. As the terms themselves indicate, the overseers and deacons would have primary responsibility to provide the leadership needed for the congregation to carry out Paul's instructions.

2. Deacons Are Regulated by Paul's Instructions in 1 Timothy 3:8–13.

Both the churches in Ephesus and Philippi were founded, taught, and organized by Paul. Most New Testament information about deacons comes from one source: Paul's instructions to Timothy and the church in Ephesus, written sometime between the years AD 63 to 65. Therefore our study will center on 1 Timothy 3:8–13.

Prominent in Paul's strategy for "putting the pieces back together," then, was insisting that the church's elders and deacons be properly qualified and examined as to those qualifications before they served.

3. Deacons Are Always Mentioned After the Overseers.

In both Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:1–13, deacons are paired with the overseers. When referenced together, deacons always follow the overseers in order of mention, suggesting that deacons work under the supervision of the church overseers.

More important, the terms *overseers* (Greek, *episkopoi*) and *deacons* (Greek, *diakonoi*) indicate that the deacons are subject to the overseers. The Greek term *overseer* denotes a superintendent,

manager, or guardian. The Greek term *deacon* can mean servant, commissioned messenger, or agent of a superior.

Thus, the overseers do not need the deacons in order to function as overseers of the local church. The *episkopoi* can stand alone, however, the deacons must stand in relationship to some person or some body of people for direction: "From the nature of the terms, *episkopoi* could operate without *diakonoi*, but *diakonoi* could not operate without some such mandating functionary as an *episkopos*."⁷ The overseers are not subordinate to servants or assistants, but the deacons are subordinate to the overseers.

"From the nature of the terms, *episkopoi* could operate without *diakonoi*, but *diakonoi* could not operate without some such mandating functionary as an *episkopos*." — John Collins

4. Deacons Are Required to Meet Specific Qualifications.

In 1 Timothy 3:8–12 Paul dictates the specific qualifications of a deacon. Many of the requirements listed for the deacons are the same or similar to those listed for the elders:

- Known to hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience
- Tested first and proven blameless
- Dignified
- Not double-tongued
- Not greedy for dishonest gain
- Not addicted to much wine
- Husband of one wife
- Wife who is faithful in all things
- Children and household managed well

It is important for us to realize that Paul shows as much concern for the deacons' eligibility as he does for the overseers' qualifications. As to the nature of deacons' duties, however, Paul provides no specific list of responsibilities.

5. Deacons Are Not Required to Teach.

Unlike overseers who must be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2), and "able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9), Paul does not require that deacons be "able to teach." The fact that such abilities are not required of the deacons is very important to our investigation.

6. Deacons Are Required to Be Examined and Approved by the Church and Its Leaders.

Deacon candidates must be examined as to whether or not they possess the prescribed qualifications:

And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. (1 Tim. 3:10)

The process of selecting, examining, and approving potential deacons requires time and effort, just as it does with potential elders. Paul insists that the church and its leaders carefully evaluate those it appoints as deacons.

We cannot account for deacon qualifications and the necessity for public examination unless deacons hold some official position of public trust or exercise some specialized ministry for which only certain people qualify. Thus there must be something very significant about the deacons' ministry that requires both specific, elder-like qualifications and verification of such qualifications by the church and its leaders.

7. Deacons Are Church Officeholders Like the Overseers.

We know that deacons are official church officeholders because of the following facts: Mention of deacons appears in the context of instructions on local church officials, not where spiritual gifts are addressed.⁸ Deacons appear in context with the church overseers who are definitely church officeholders. Specific qualifications are stated as prerequisites for selection to be a deacon (1 Tim. 3:8–12). Deacons must be examined and found by others to be above reproach according to the biblical qualifications (1 Tim. 3:10). The term *diakonoi* is used in 1 Timothy 3 and Philippians 1 as a formal title, just as the title *overseer* is used of certain recognized church officials. Deacons have been recognized as a permanent office in the local church from the first century to the present time.

8. “Deacons” Is Plural.

Paul uses the plural form “deacons,” not the singular form “deacon,” in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8, 12. This suggests that more than one deacon was needed in these churches and certainly allows for more than one deacon per church. It may also indicate that at times deacons work as a corporate body like the elders.

9. Deacons’ Wives (or Women Deacons) Are Required to Meet Specific Qualifications.

As part of his instructions, Paul requires that deacons’ wives meet certain character qualifications:

Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. (1 Tim. 3:11)

Many scholars, however, believe that Paul is not referring to the

deacons' wives, but to women deacons (equal to male deacons), or deaconesses (a separate group from male deacons), or women helpers (to the deacons and women of the church). But one's particular view of the women of 1 Timothy 3:11 does not ultimately affect the outcome of our study on what deacons do. We will probe the question of women deacons or deaconesses in Chapter 7 and the Appendix.

10. Deacons Can Gain Much Respect in the Eyes of the Church and Have Their Faith in Christ Deepened.

Paul says that deacons who serve well will gain an honorable and influential standing in the eyes of the people. They will also see their faith in Christ greatly enlarged, deepened, and emboldened:

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 Tim. 3:13)

By promising such rewards, Paul gives his special endorsement to the role of deacons within the church.

We cannot account for deacon qualifications and the necessity for public examination unless deacons hold some official position of public trust or exercise some specialized ministry for which only certain people qualify.

11. Deacons Are Called *Diakonoï* in Greek.

The English word *deacon* is a transliteration of the Greek word *diakonos*. Of the twenty-one occurrences of *diakonos* in Paul's

letters, the *English Standard Version* translates only three of them as *deacons* (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12). In all other places in the Greek New Testament where *diakonos* appears, the ESV translates *diakonos* as either *servant* (eleven times)⁹ or *minister* (seven times).¹⁰

One of the most critical questions in our study of deacons is: How is Paul using the Greek term *diakonos* in the two key passages? Is *diakonos* a table-servant metaphor for church officials, a commissioned messenger, or an assistant? This question is addressed in Chapter 3.

The *Diakon-* Word Group

Diakonos is pronounced dee-AH-ko-nos.

The plural form of *diakonos* is *diakonoi*, pronounced dee-AH-ko-noi.

The verb form of *diakonos* is *diakoneō*, pronounced dee-ah-ko-NEH-o.

The abstract noun form is *diakonia*, pronounced dee-ah-ko-NEE-ah.

In this study, it is important to know how to pronounce these three Greek words and to be able to distinguish the verb form, *diakoneō*, from the two noun forms, *diakonia* and *diakonos*.

Greek is an inflected language that changes the form of a word depending on how it is used by an author. For simplicity and consistency, the dictionary form of each word is cited, unless otherwise noted.

PAUL DOES NOT TELL US EVERYTHING

Now that we have surveyed the New Testament information about deacons, we still need to know: Who were the deacons? Why and how did they originate? What did they do? The problem is, Paul does

not explicitly state who the deacons are or what they do. He states only what their qualifications are, the necessity for examination of their eligibility for office, and their promised rewards.

Admittedly, this lack of specific information is frustrating and has led to the widely diverse views held by Bible teachers and churches today. In fact, some scholars suggest that “there is insufficient evidence for determining” the role of deacons.¹¹ However, the fact that Paul does not further explain the deacons’ role does not make identifying their role a hopeless pursuit. It simply means we must begin with a clear understanding of the role of the church overseers with whom the deacons are closely associated. Then we will be prepared to consider the term *diakonos* and its key context, 1 Timothy 3:1–13.

Key Points to Remember:

1. The three Greek words that are foundational to this study are: *diakonos* (noun), *diakoneō* (verb), and *diakonia* (abstract noun).
 2. Deacons are qualified church officeholders, as are the overseers.
 3. Deacons must be examined and approved by the church and its leaders.
 4. The challenge for all of us is that Paul does not explicitly state who the deacons are, or what they do.
-

¹¹Acts 9:15–17; 20:24; 22:14–15; 26:15–18; Rom. 1:5; 11:13; 15:15–18; 16:25–26; 1 Cor. 9:1–2; 11:23; 15:3–11; 2 Cor. 12:12; Gal. 1:1, 11, 16; 2:7–8; Eph. 3:1–13; 6:19–20; Phil. 1:16; Col. 1:25–27; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6, 14; 1 Tim. 1:11; 2:7; 2 Tim.

PAUL'S INSTRUCTIONS REGARDING DEACONS

1:11, 13; 4:17; Titus 1:3.

²Patrick Fairbairn, *Pastoral Epistles* (1874; repr. Minneapolis: James & Klock, 1976), 70.

³1 Cor. 4:14–17; 7:17; 11:16, 23, 34; 14:36–38; 15:3; 16:1.

⁴Fairbairn, *Pastoral Epistles*, 70.

⁵Philip H. Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, IVPNTCS (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 123.

⁶1 Tim. 1:19–20; 5:19–25.

⁷John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2002), 92.

⁸Rom. 12:4–8; 1 Cor. 12:1–31; 14:1–40; Eph. 4:7–16; 1 Peter 4:10–11.

⁹Rom. 13:4 (twice); 15:8; 16:1; 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 6:4; 11:15 (twice), 23; Gal. 2:17; 1 Tim. 4:6.

¹⁰2 Cor. 3:6; Eph. 3:7; 6:21; Col. 1:7, 23, 25; 4:7.

¹¹C. F. D. Moule, “Deacons in the New Testament,” *Theology* 58 (1955), 405–07.