

What are deacons supposed to do?

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This has been an interesting Biblical journey for me...

Phil. 1:1-2 (Stay tuned.)

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi,
together with the overseers and deacons (deaconoi):

² Grace and peace to you

from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Is a deaconos a “thing?”

This is the first place where we see in Scripture
that it might be a thing.

Up until here, in this passage, Phil. 1:1,

Scripture just uses the word to refer to “people who serve.”

Last week,

we saw that the apostles were not to be like
the Gentile rulers who “lord it over” their subjects.

But whoever wants to be great

must become your servant... deaconos...

Jesus says that HE didn't come to BE served,

but to serve- verb form of the same Greek word.

(Matt. 20:26,28)

Paul, in Eph. 4:11-12, says that

the work of the apostles and prophets

and evangelists and the shepherd/teachers

is to equip the saints for works of servicing,

from deaconos, same root word in the Greek.

Jesus came to serve us,

and the apostles were to serve

those that followed their teaching,

and all those folks were to equip and train

all of us for servicing.

Are we seeing a pattern here?

Later in Philippians, you know, the book
 where deacons first became a thing,
 Paul will talk about us having the mind of Christ,
 where Jesus empties himself and took the form of a slave.

So serving is “part and parcel” of what it means
 to imitate Christ, to have the mind of Christ,
 to walk in the footsteps of Jesus,
however you want to say it.

It is what EVERY Christian is supposed to be doing,
 and growing into, even though according to Rom. 12,
some will be more spiritually gifted at it than others.

We read- Rom. 12:6-8

- ⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us,
 let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;
⁷ if service, in our serving (there’s our word diakonia again,);
 the one who teaches, in his teaching;
⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation;
 the one who contributes, in generosity;
 the one who leads, with zeal;
 the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

“One who serves.”

In some places,

it’s translated as “minister” or acts of ministry,
 but it’s the same Greek word, diakonos.

So it’s not supposed to be something
 reserved for the professionals, or for the elders only.

It’s supposed to be something we are all engaged in.

So what does the word mean- to serve?

The concept of serving is expressed in Gk.

by many words which are often hard to differentiate
even though each has its own basic emphasis.

Of all the words, “διακονέω (diakonew) has the special quality of indicating very personally the service rendered to another...” (With) “διακονέω, there is a stronger approximation to the concept of a service of love.”¹

So we find the word being used as-

1. “To wait on tables”- like a “server” at a restaurant.
Martha served. Peter’s mother-in-law served.
2. Expanding that definition a bit- to provide or care for.
3. It includes the collection for the saints in Jerusalem.

Rom. 15:25 (ESV)

“At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem
bringing aid to-(Serving-diakonon) the saints.”

4. It could include feeding spiritual bread-
Service or ministry of the logos, or Word.

... Jesus uses the term for lots of different things-

giving food and drink, extending shelter,
providing clothes and visiting the sick and prisoners.

¹ Kittel, G., Bromiley, G. W., & Friedrich, G. (Eds.). (1964–). *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., Vol. 2, p. 81). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

“The term thus comes to have the full sense of active Christian love for the neighbour and as such it is a mark of true discipleship of Jesus. For what the Christian does to even the least of his fellowmen he does to the Lord Himself.”

(But wait. There’s still more...)

“...Jesus does not stop at the picture of table service. διακονεῖν is now much more than a comprehensive term for any loving assistance rendered to the neighbour.

It is understood as full and perfect sacrifice, as the offering of life which is the very essence of service, of being for others, whether in life or in death...”

And what is true of Christ Himself is made a command for all His disciples in Jn. 12:24-26:

Truly, truly, I say to you,

unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it,

and whoever hates his life in this world

will keep it for eternal life.

²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me;

and where I am, there will my servant be also.

If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

So- if THIS is what it means to TRULY serve Jesus,

to be a diakonos,

any takers?

We are so quick to jump on a word
 that has meant something in our churches growing up,
 whether those be Roman Catholic,
 Protestant or churches of Christ,
 without really trying to find out what the word means.

WE say, to be Biblical, we need to have deacons.

And what Jesus says, and Paul says, through the Scriptures,
 is that instead of HAVING deacons,
 we ALL need to be deacons, “ones who serve,”
 and not just any kind of service,
 but the most personal, sacrificial kind of service.

You want to be Biblical, be a deacons.

Where do we see the word used in the New Testament?
 Lots of places, and in lots of ways,
 but always with this sense of personal sacrificial service-

Rom. 15:8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant
 of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises
 made to the patriarchs ⁹ so that the Gentiles may glorify God
 for his mercy... (NIV, 1984)

II Cor.11:23- servant of the gospel

I Thess. 3:1-3 Timothy, a servant of God

I Tim. 4:6 A true servant of Jesus Christ

Col. 1:7- Epaphras, a servant of Christ,

Eph. 6:21, Col. 4:7 Tychicus, a servant of the Lord

Rom. 13:1-4 Heathen authorities- Roman emperors, etc.

“...for he is God’s servant for your good.”

Col. 1:25 Paul a servant of the church, and of God (I Cor. 3:5)

We go now to Acts 6:1-7-

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution (diakonia).

² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve (diakonein- verb form) tables.

³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer

and to the ministry (diakonia) of the word.”

⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Historically, we have said, these are the first deacons.

Maybe so,

but nowhere are they called or labeled that in the passage.

1. The work that is being neglected,
and that they are called to do
is described as service or ministry (v. 1-2)
depending on your translation.

2. What the apostles are going to get back to
is the deaconia, the service or ministry- of the Word.
(v. 4)

But if a title is important, the men don't get one here.

(And not only that,
the qualifications don't match I Tim. 3:8-12)

Maybe the title of deaconos evolves later

in the development of the early church.

By the writing of Philippians,

maybe the position has formalized.

But to automatically assume that

what these guys do in Acts 6

is a template for what the folks in Philippians 1

who were called deaconoi were to do

is to go beyond the data we have in Scripture.

Nowhere are the deaconoi or the elders, for that matter,

mentioned again in the book of Philippians.

They are just mentioned in the greeting, period.

We have no indication of their job description,

whether they were granted authority, anything.

So what do we learn from I Timothy 3 about those who are identified as deacons and what they do?

Unlike I Timothy 3, Titus makes no mention of deacons, so there is no help for us there.

I Tim. 3:8-12

⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve (as deacons) if they prove themselves blameless.

(v. 12) A deacon must be the husband of but one wife (a one-woman man, or one-wife husband) and must manage his children and his household well. ¹³ Those having served well (aorist, active participle) gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus. (NIV, 1984)

“Those who have served well”- doing what? Doesn't say.

It says they served well, and that's all it says.

But what did they do? Don't know.

We automatically, reactively, jump back to Acts 6,

but what is happening there is that they are serving,

but not called “those who serve.”

And so I looked and I looked,

and what I saw was people serving,

but nowhere spelled out what that

specifically meant for deacons- “those who serve.”

Could it be that THAT was what Paul meant when he wrote to the church in Philippi-

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi,
together with the overseers and deacons (deaconoi):
=those who serve?

No mention of a formal office of deacon
as Paul instructs Titus about Crete, only “appoint elders,”
as he and Barnabas had done in Acts 14:28.

So- no deacons in Crete, but yes, deacons in Ephesus?
(Interesting thought there, right?)

No CEO, no CFO, no CIO, just “those who serve,”
as support for the overseers and shepherds,
since isn’t it interesting that
the two times deacons are mentioned in Scripture,
it is in conjunction with those who
HAVE been given authority to shepherd and oversee.

So what do deacons do? They “serve well.”
Elders identify needs, like the apostles do in Acts 6,
and “those who serve,” well, they step up and serve.

It might be

1. waiting on tables, or distributing food,
2. or working on the church building
so we all have a place to meet in,
3. or it might be to manage finances,
4. or coordinate children’s ministry,
5. or run the sound booth and take care of
our technical stuff, just like they did in the 1st Century.
6. It might be to coordinate Small Groups, or Missions.

It is to free the elders and evangelists up
so that elders can oversee and shepherd,

and the evangelists are free to devote themselves
to preaching and to teaching,

and both groups can

“equip the saints for works of deaconing”=

service or ministry.

(Yes, that IS the word used in Eph. 4:12.)

So what are the takeaways?

1. The work of the “deacon” is not spelled out in Scripture.

2. The word means- “One who serves.”

3. That word in a non-technical sense applies to ALL of us.

We are ALL to be- “One who serves.”

4. Where we see Paul giving Timothy guidelines

for deacons, there is no parallel instructions to Titus.

(Not real sure what to make of THAT one...)

5. Where there are special needs to be met,

to free leadership up to do what they are

uniquely called to do,

“special servants” may be appointed

to attend to those special needs,

whether temporary or ongoing.

Needs today may differ

from needs in 1st Century Ephesus or Jerusalem.

Every generation will uniquely need “ones who serve,”

As a technical designation,

and as a call to congregational commitment.

Let’s all aspire to be “those who serve”... AMEN?

1 Tim 3:8–12, after prescribing the qualifications and the method of appointment of a bishop or overseer, Paul continues: “Deacons in like manner must be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them serve as deacons, if they be blameless. Women in like manner must be grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.” Deacons and deaconesses are here provided for, and the character of their qualifications makes it clear that they were to be appointed as dispensers of alms, who should come into close personal relations with the poor.²

Hence the statesman rules as *διάκονος τῆς πόλεως*, not for the sake of ruling nor for the sake of his own desires, but for the sake of the service laid upon him, which consists supremely in the education of good citizens. Even this service, however, is determined by the self-understanding of the ego as a microcosm. Thus, even though it demands certain renunciations, it does not entail any true self-emptying for the sake of others. Service is not one of the powers which hold heaven and earth together, and it does not lead to sacrifice.

This view persists in Aristotle and Hellenism. The significance of the *πόλις*, however, gradually yields before a stronger cosmic awareness in which the wise man has the sense of being a servant of God, Epict. Diss., III, 22, 69; III, 24, 65. As such he is the instrument and witness of God, Diss., III, 26, 28; IV, 7, 20. On the other hand, “if expressions for service become more common in relation to God, they withdraw into the background in relation to one’s neighbour.”² To be sure, realisation of the service to be rendered to God carries with it a certain interrelationship with the totality of creation. But concrete obligations towards one’s neighbour almost completely disappear. For the Greek in his freedom and wisdom there can certainly be no question of existing to serve others.³

² Heidel, W. A. (1915). Deacon, Deaconess. In J. Orr, J. L. Nuelsen, E. Y. Mullins, & M. O. Evans (Eds.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Vol. 1–5, p. 800). Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company.

³ Kittel, G., Bromiley, G. W., & Friedrich, G. (Eds.). (1964–). *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., Vol. 2, pp. 82–83). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Jesus' view of service grows out of the OT command of love for one's neighbour, which He takes and links with the command of love for God to constitute the substance of the divinely willed ethical conduct of His followers. In so doing, He purifies the concept of service from the distortions which it had suffered in Judaism. Jesus' attitude to service is completely new as compared with the Greek understanding. The decisive point is that He sees in it the thing which makes a man His disciple.

1. In the NT διακονέω is first used in the original sense of "to wait at table": Lk. 17:8: ἐτοίμασον τί δειπήσω, καὶ περιζωσάμενος διακόνει μοι ἕως φάγω καὶ πίω; Jn. 12:2: ἐποίησαν οὖν αὐτῷ δεῖπνον ἐκεῖ, καὶ ἡ Μάρθα διηκόνει, ὁ δὲ Λάζαρος εἶς ἦν ἐκ τῶν ἀνακειμένων σὺν αὐτῷ. At table there is a palpable distinction between the worthy man reclining on the couch and the girded servant or the attentive woman. It is thus a high honour for the vigilant servants when their returning lord rewards them by girding himself, setting them at table and coming to serve them (Lk. 12:37). The astonishing act of Jesus in the appraisal of service is to reverse in ethical estimation the relation between serving and being served (Lk. 22:26 f.). Among the disciples ὁ ἡγούμενος must be ὡς ὁ διακονῶν. τίς γὰρ μείζων, ὁ ἀνακείμενος ἢ ὁ διακονῶν; οὐχὶ ὁ ἀνακείμενος; ἐγὼ δὲ ἐν μέσῳ ὑμῶν εἰμι ὡς ὁ διακονῶν.

The natural man—and especially the Greek—would see no difficulty in answering the question who is greater, the one who serves or the one who is served. It is obviously the latter. Jesus in His emphatic statement (ἐγὼ δὲ ...) does not oppose to this view the general thought that serving is greater than being served. Instead, He points to the actuality: I am among you as a servant. This is said by the uncontested leader of the disciples, by the Son of Man who knows that He is Lord of the kingdom of God (Lk. 22:29) and who summons the disciples to exercise final judgment on Israel with Him (v. 30). It is thus clear that Jesus is not merely bringing about a radical change in the academic estimation of human existence and action; He is instituting in fact a new pattern of human relationships. He makes this no less clear in terms of the specific process of waiting at table than by His own action in washing the feet of His disciples.⁴

⁴ Kittel, G., Bromiley, G. W., & Friedrich, G. (Eds.). (1964–). *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., Vol. 2, p. 84). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.