

## Message #20

## I Timothy 3:8

## “The Office of Deacon”

When Paul writes “deacons likewise,” it is evident that he had another “like” office in mind. In fact, the adverb “likewise” is one that means in the same like manner as I have talked about the office of elder. Now I want to discuss the office of deacon (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 491).

**IF THE CHURCH OF GOD IS TO BECOME A PILLAR AND SUPPORT OF THE TRUTH OF GOD, IT NEEDS ELDERS AND DEACONS WHO ARE CONTINUALLY MEETING THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR THEIR LEADERSHIP OFFICE.**

**QUESTION #1** – What is the office of deacon?

**Word #1 - Diakoneo**, which literally means to minister, to serve and to wait upon. Specifically, in this word is the idea of doing service and caring for one’s needs. A few N.T. examples are:

1. Matthew 20:28 – “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.”
2. I Peter 4:11 – “Whoever speaks let him speak as it were the utterances of God; whoever serves let him do so as by the strength which God supplies...”
3. I Timothy 3:10, 13 – “And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons... For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing...”

Clearly the idea of serving and caring for the needs of others is present in this word.

**Word #2 - Diakonia**, which literally refers to the office and work of a deacon in service ministry. Service ministry is clearly in view when it comes to this word. For example:

1. Acts 1:17 – “For he was counted among us, and received his portion in this ministry.”
2. Acts 1:25 – “To occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.
3. I Timothy 1:12 – “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service.”

These passages make clear the fact that this term was very serious in regard to God’s ministry.

**Word #3 - Diakonos**, which specifically refers to the person who is a servant, attendant-type of minister. This particular word has more the person in mind than the office:

1. Colossians 1:7 – “Just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf.”
2. I Timothy 4:6 – “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus...”

If we combine these three words, we may have a good Biblical perspective of a deacon—he is one who holds a high office in the church and is one who specifically ministers by serving and caring and attending to the needs of the church and the people in it.

**QUESTION #2** – When did the office of deacon begin?

Although there is some debate on this question, most acknowledge that it has been generally accepted that the initial beginning of the office of deacon is found in Acts 6:1-6.

Philip Schaff, the famed church historian, writes: “Deacons or helpers first appear in the church of Jerusalem, seven in number. The author of the Acts (ch. 6) gives us an account of the origin of this office, which is mentioned before that of the presbyters (elders). It had a precedent in the officers of the synagogue who had charge of the collection and distribution of alms. It was the first relief of the heavy burden that rested on the shoulders of the apostles, who wished to devote themselves exclusively to prayer and the ministry of the word” (*Church History*, Vol. 1, p. 230).

William Hendriksen writes: “From Acts 6 we learn that deacons were chosen because the elders did not have the time and energy to take upon themselves the care of the poor and needy in addition to performing all their other work: governing the church, preaching the Word, administering the sacraments, leading the congregation in prayer, etc.” (p. 130).

John Calvin writes: “It remains to be stated that we understand “the deacons” to be those who are mentioned by Luke (Acts 6:3), and who had the charge of the poor” (Calvin, p. 85).

J. Vernon McGee writes: “We think the account in Acts 6 is giving the occasion when the office of deacon began in the early church. However, the Greek word for deacon is not even used there. But I’m confident we have scriptural grounds to say that those men were being appointed as deacons in the church” (J. Vernon McGee, Vol. 5, p. 443).

We are certainly on safe interpretive ground when we believe that the office of deacon first began in Acts 6.

**QUESTION #3** – What does a deacon do?

Deacons are extremely important to the life and ministry of God’s local church:

**Responsibility #1** - A deacon has a responsibility to care for widows. Acts 6:1

Before the days of social security, pensions, and life insurance policies, widows were completely destitute. They were not taken care of by the government, but they were to be taken care of by the church. Literally, from Acts 6:1 the deacons were to see to it that the widows had enough to eat. It was the church’s responsibility to take good care of the widows. In fact, James says that if widows are not cared for, God cannot be worshipped in a pure and undefiled way (James 1:27).

**Responsibility #2** - A deacon has a responsibility to serve tables. Acts 6:2

We could say it this way—a deacon is to be involved in physically caring for the needs of God’s people. When we examine passages like Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-35, we realize that this idea of serving tables was much more than just serving a meal; it included an actual calculation and distribution of financial and physical need. Biblical deacons are to be involved in benevolent matters.

The idea of “serving tables” is not just the idea of caring for physical property of God’s church, but the physical needs of God’s people.

**Responsibility #3** - A deacon has a responsibility concerning finances.

In II Corinthians 8:3-4, the word “support” (v. 4) is the word diakonia, which immediately connects the deacon concept with money. In II Corinthians 9:1, the word “ministry” is the word diakonia, which again connects the deacon concept with finances.

We may observe from these passages and the Acts passages that the deacons were to be involved in financial matters.

**Responsibility #4** - A deacon has a responsibility concerning the welfare of the church.

It is clear from passages like I Timothy 3:8 and Philippians 1:1 that deacons are not only interested in the physical and financial status of the church, but they must also be interested in the spiritual welfare of the church as well. Deacons are to set forth, by their own example, a godly pattern for people to follow. In fact, a deacon who serves well is promised by God a very unique and special reward (I Tim. 3:13).

**QUESTION #4** – Who were some of the deacons in the Bible?

If Acts 6 is taken as the beginning of deacons, there are seven men named in verse 5 who were the first deacons. Of this list, we learn a little more about two of these men. We know from Acts 6:8-7:53 that Stephen was a great preacher, and we know according to Acts 21:8 that Philip was an evangelist. Again, this would coincide with the truth that there is a distinction between one’s spiritual gift and spiritual office.

In Ephesians 6:21, the word “minister” is diakonos and is used in reference to Tychicus, which may mean he was a faithful deacon of the church. From various passages we know he had a strong connection to Ephesus, so he may have been a deacon in that very church (II Tim. 4:12).

In Philippians 1:1, there is clearly a plurality of deacons in the Philippian church. Although Epaphroditus is not specifically said to be a deacon, some assume on the basis of Philippians 2:25, 30 that he functioned as a deacon-type minister and may have, in fact, been a deacon.

In Colossians 1:7, Paul identified Epaphras as a “faithful servant.” That word “servant” is the word diakonos, which may mean that Epaphras was a faithful deacon in the work of God.

**QUESTION #5** – How do we know that there is to be a specific office of deacon?

**Proof #1** - The office of deacon has a specific list of qualifications. **3:8-13**

We will touch base with the list next time; but we may certainly observe that if there is no such thing as an office of deacon, there certainly is no need for a list of qualifications. The list of qualifications proves the existence of the office.

**Proof #2** - The office of deacon is specifically named in the church of Philippi. Phil. 1:1

The office of deacon is named in a coordinate grammatical structure with the elders. What this means is in the church of Philippi, both offices were existing and functioning.

**Proof #3** - The office of deacon shows up in early accounts of church history.

Ignatius, pastor of the church of Antioch, who wrote a letter to the church of Magnesia, writes: “Damas, your godly bishop, you worthy presbyters Bassus and Appolonius, and my fellow servant, the deacon Zotion...” (*The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 93).

Ignatius, who also writes a letter to a church in Asia, writes: “It is essential, therefore, that you continue your current practice and do nothing without the bishop, but be subject to the presbytery as to the apostles of Jesus Christ... Furthermore, it is necessary that those who are deacons of the ‘mysteries’ of Jesus Christ please everyone in every respect. For they are not merely ‘deacons’ of food and drink, but ministers of God’s church. Similarly, let everyone respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, just as they should respect the bishop, who is a model of the Father, and the presbyters as God’s council and as the band of apostles. Without these, no group can be called a church” (*Ibid.*, p. 98).

It is clear from these writings that the early church featured a pastor, elders, and deacons. Ignatius went so far as to say that if these different authorities were not in the church, a church did not exist in the mind of God.

Deacons are important to church life. If a church is to become a pillar and support of the truth, it needs elders and deacons who are serious and qualified.

Desiring the office of elder or deacon is a high and holy desire. We need godly men who will rise up and take the lead. When you have such men, you have a church that is well on its way to become the pillar and support of God’s truth.