



# Church on Mill

Deacons

*A Theological Position Paper*

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### Introduction

Deacons have a storied legacy at Church on Mill. They have served as servant ministers for the good of the church body throughout our history. This position paper seeks to build on this legacy by encouraging even greater effectiveness of and utilization of deacons.

On the pages that follow, readers will discover the importance of deacons, the etymology of the word ‘deacon,’ the origin of deacons in the biblical story, the ministry of deacons today, who shall serve as deacons, and a conclusion.

### Importance Of

The office of deacon is of vital importance both to the treatment of the scriptures with integrity and the ongoing health of the local church. Nevertheless, it is in many circles a neglected office. When churches lose the biblical picture and utilization of deacons, they invariably end up creating positions of leadership with no biblical authority. This is not a freedom we have nor a mistake we wish to make. Being one of two offices God gave the church, we must not neglect to devote vigilant consideration to the biblical portrayal of the ministry-enhancing role of deacons. It is our contention that healthy churches have vibrant, well-equipped, and godly men and women serving as deacons. We long to be a healthy church!

### Etymology

Greek was the original language of the New Testament; therefore, to understand what a deacon is we should consider the etymology of the Greek word for deacon. *διάκονος* is the Greek word for deacon: it

means ‘servant.’<sup>1</sup> To be a deacon is to be a compassionate, loving servant for the good of the church family and the spread of God’s fame among the world. Simply put, deacon = servant. Furthermore, to be a deacon is to be like Jesus, *For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).*

It is important to note that *διάκονος*, like many words in the Bible and in our daily use of English, has different meanings based upon context. To say a meal is hot in a Mexican food restaurant means something different than we would intend when we say the popcorn is hot at a good movie theater. Context is everything. The same is true for *διάκονος* in Scripture. Most of the time, *διάκονος* simply refers to someone or something as a servant or a ministry. *διάκονος*, when translated as ‘deacon,’ is actually rare in the New Testament, but it undoubtedly refers to a permanent office in the local church (see Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:8ff, and “the servant office of the feminine *διάκονος*, *deaconess*, is found at an initial stage in the Pauline churches”<sup>2</sup> in Romans 16:1). The office of deacon is in contrast and support to that of pastor or elder. Both are named in the introductory verse to the book of Philippians. *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).*

<sup>1</sup> James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek New Testament*. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990; 303.

## The Origin of Deacons in the Biblical Story

Honest interpreters of Scripture and faithful Church historians will note there is some ambiguity regarding the origin of deacon as an office of the church. What we know with certainty is that Paul names them in the church he started in Philippi (Philippians 1:1) and he treats their qualifications for the church in Ephesus (1 Timothy 3:8ff). Some church leaders in the generations after the apostles died, known as church fathers, referred to the seven chosen in Acts 6 as deacons.<sup>3</sup> Although the noun ‘deacon’ does not occur in the passage, verbal and adjectival forms do. Of greater importance is the ministry designated to the seven and that retained by the apostles. It is to this we now turn.

Acts 6 describes the first major challenge to the unity of the local church in Jerusalem. Apparently, Hebrew-speaking widows were given priority over Greek-speaking Jewish widows in the distribution of food. One sure way to pick a fight is to not feed people! Something had to be done. Fascinatingly, the deeper problem was not that people were not being fed but that the situation provided a temptation for the apostles to neglect their primary ministries of preaching the Bible and devotion to prayer. With supernatural wisdom, they gathered the church together to seek help in meeting the very practical need of equal food distribution so that unity would prevail and they could stay focused on their God-given tasks. Here is the full account:

*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. <sup>2</sup> 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 tables. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.*

*<sup>7</sup> 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 (Acts 6:1-7).*

The reader will note the apostles asked the church to choose seven qualified people for the important task of ensuring fairness in the distribution of food and they then approved the chosen individuals and commissioned them. This resolved the problem of distraction from the ministry of preaching and prayer, and it met the need of the widows. The result of this wise plan was that the church continued to grow. This certainly seems like a healthy model to emulate!

Since the text does not specifically name these men as deacons, caution is prudent to not require this as the only viable interpretation of Acts 6; however, the most common interpretation of these verses is that if these were not the first deacon office holders, they were at least a form of church servant leadership. The pattern of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 for elders and deacons encourages an Acts 6 division of responsibilities by the elders and deacons.

It is our belief that Acts 6 provides a worthy model of the division of responsibilities between the two offices given

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Bede, quoted in Francis Martin and Evan Smith, eds., *Acts*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006; 70.

by God for his church.<sup>4</sup> It seems likely that the event of Acts 6 gradually led to the existence of deacons throughout the early churches scattered about the Roman Empire. By the time Philippians and 1 Timothy were written, there is no doubt deacons had emerged as appointed servant-ministers in the churches.

### The Ministry of Deacons Today

So important is the work of deacons, one scholar states, “If the office of elder is dedicated to the work of teaching, leading, praying, and shepherding, then the diaconate is devoted to serving *in all other areas of the church*” [emphasis mine].<sup>5</sup> The main tasks of the elders/pastors of the church include preaching, prayer, shepherding, and leadership. Endless needs present the problem of pulling elders away from their God-given tasks. Preaching and prayer rarely feel like dire needs, but they are God’s chosen methods for keeping the church on track. Therefore, deacons are every bit as important today as they were in the first century. If Church on Mill is to see more and more people coming to faith and repentance in Jesus Christ, it will be, in part, because qualified, godly deacons devote themselves to servant ministry in the church family.

The Bible wisely does not pigeon-hole deacons into particular roles. It is up to the elders and the congregation to determine what needs the deacons should focus upon. Our church is moving towards a model in which every deacon will serve primarily in an area of specialization. It is our hope that one day in the future, most ministries will have a point leader(s) who equips people for ministry through various specific teams. These servant team leaders are our deacons.

### Who Should Serve as Deacons?

<sup>4</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Baker Reference Library; Logos Library Systems. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012; 241

All Christians are called to serve: some Christians are to be set apart for the responsibility of being deacons. God gave us the following instruction regarding who may serve in the office of deacon:

*Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. <sup>9</sup> They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. <sup>10</sup> And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. <sup>11</sup> Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. <sup>12</sup> Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. <sup>13</sup> 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 Timothy 3:8-13).*

In general, deacons are to possess the type of mature Christian character their service to the church will require. They are to not have besetting sins and must know and understand the essentials of the faith.

Historically only men have been designated as deacons at Church on Mill. We believe it is time for this to change. The reason to have female deacons must not be historical or even practical in nature; rather, the ultimate reason to add qualified female deacons is simply because it is biblical. Below are three biblical reasons qualified women should be welcomed and celebrated as deacons at Church on Mill.

First, women are given required qualifications just like their male counterparts in 1 Timothy 3. The key word in 1 Timothy 3 is *γυναῖκας*. Depending on the context, this word may mean women, wives, or deaconesses. As stated earlier, context is everything. Interpretations vary on how the word is best translated in this particular usage, which is why some translations designate these women as the wives of the deacons, others designate them as

deaconesses, and many simply refer to them as women. It is best to translate the word as deaconesses because no mention of qualifications for elders' wives are given. Why would Paul speak to the wives of deacons but not elders? Also, contrary to the role of elder, there is no biblical reason to restrict the role of deacon to qualified men. The ministry of the diaconate is open to all who are qualified. Finally, the adverb "likewise" is used in verse 8 as a transition from the qualifications of elders and again occurs as a transition into verse 11, stating the qualifications for women deacons. Therefore, structurally the passage best supports this view.

Second, recognizing qualified women as deacons in no way undermines any of the teachings of the Bible about the roles of men and women, husbands and wives, or brothers and sisters in Christ. In other words, it is fully consistent with the complementarian teaching of the Bible as a whole to recognize qualified Christian women as key servants in the local church. In our experience, the church is full of them and we ought to recognize and equip these good gifts to the body of Christ.

Women deacons are consistent not just with the entire biblical treatment of women in general, they are consistent within Paul's theology of men and women in particular in 1 Timothy. Phoenix Seminary professor Wayne Grudem rightly states, "The office of deacon in the New Testament does not include the governing and teaching authority that is reserved for elders."<sup>6</sup> Grudem is aptly pointing out that the two things that women are prohibited from doing in 1 Timothy 2 are the very two things that distinguish elders from deacons. Kathy Keller's perspective is also helpful, "So what is being forbidden to women in 1 Timothy 2 (and by extension in 1 Corinthians 14) is authoritative teaching—some kind of teaching that carried with it an authority not found in other, allowable forms

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<sup>6</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004; 263.

of oral discourse."<sup>7</sup> There is no theological reason for discouraging or prohibiting qualified women from the diaconate.

A third biblical argument for the inclusion of women deacons is that Phoebe is mentioned as a deacon in an early church. Paul writes, *I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae (Romans 16:1 NIV)*.

In addition to the biblical reasons for embracing women as deacons, there is very early extra-biblical attestation to deaconesses. For example, Pliny was a Roman governor. In a fascinating letter to Emperor Trajan (ca. 112 AD), Pliny asks for council regarding appropriate punishment for Christians. In this correspondence he refers to an incident when he tortured 'ministrae' (Latin for deaconesses.)<sup>8</sup> Ancient verification is also present within the Christian community. For example, Origen states of Phoebe in Romans 16:1, "This passage teaches that there were women ordained in the church's ministry by the apostle's authority... Not only that—they ought to be ordained into the ministry, because they helped in many ways and by their good services deserved the praise even of the apostle."<sup>9</sup>

It is also helpful to note that modern scholarship also affirms the biblical freedom to have women deacons. Many modern conservative evangelicals such as Mark Dever, John Piper, Thomas Schreiner, and Wayne Grudem support the view that women may be deacons. This understanding of the complementarian teaching of the Bible, namely that men and women are created equal before God yet retain different roles in different settings, affirms that only the office of elder is set aside for qualified men: the

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<sup>7</sup> Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry*. Zondervan: Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 207-208.

<sup>8</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Letters (Latin)*. Medford, MA: Perseus Digital Library, n.d.

<sup>9</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Romans*, quoted in Gerald Bray, ed., *Romans (Revised): Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998; 355.

diaconate is open to both qualified men and women. Schreiner states, “The office of deacon and elder are distinct. And appointing women as deacons does not affect the validity of the complementarian view at all.”<sup>10</sup>

In summary of this section, qualified men and women are desperately needed in the local church to minister in a vast array of important ways. It is our conviction that qualified men and women alike, who are recognized by the elders and the church membership and willing to devote themselves to the ministry of service, should be trained, ordained, and released for fruitful deacon ministry. Please do watch for members who are already joyfully and humbly serving in the life of the church: these may be our future deacons.

## Conclusion

To summarize this brief study on the ministry of deacons, we can simply state that the Bible denotes deacons as qualified men and women who serve. Deacons bless the church body by caring for needs such that the needs are met and the elders continue to devote themselves to their God-given tasks of preaching and prayer. Precisely what needs the deacons are to meet is not prescribed in Scripture; therefore, local churches are free to exercise wisdom and organize the work of deacons as seems best to them.

At Church on Mill, deacons are trained for both general service and specific service. All deacons are expected to be disciple-makers, not unlike all Christians in general and members of Church on Mill in particular. They are called to maintain the biblical qualifications for their office through reliance on the indwelling presence of God and the practices of repentance and confession of sin in community. Deacons are to serve wherever and whenever a need presents itself. In addition to these general notions of

servanthood, deacons also choose a specific service area where the majority of their time is devoted. Ministry areas where deacons serve as point leaders include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Hospital and Homebound Visitation
- Property and Facility Care
- Sunday Gathering
- Ordinances
- Financial Stewardship
- I-help
- Re:Group



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<sup>10</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Women in Ministry: Another Complementarian Perspective,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, Counterpoints Series, ed. James R. Beck. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001; 282.