

The Local Church Deacon: A Brief Summary

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I have just finished the course work for the *Grace Bible Institute* “Burst” on the New Testament Elder and realize that some will have questions regarding why I did not examine the nature and role of the local church deacon. This short paper is an attempt to augment that teaching to some degree. It is only a brief summary.

When one looks at the evidence in the New Testament regarding a local church deacon, one comes away a bit surprised at the paucity of teaching regarding the nature and role of this highly esteemed office within the local church.

Lexical Considerations

The English term *deacon* is basically a transliteration of the Greek term *diakonos* (διάκονος) and it appears 29 times in 27 verses in the New Testament. BDAG classifies the noun into two basic uses in Greek literature: (1) one who serves as an intermediary in a transaction, *agent, intermediary, courier*; and (2) one who gets something done, at the behest of a superior, *assistant* to someone (s.v. “διάκονος,” 230-231). Its translation into English, like many words, is dependent on context.

Contextual Considerations

Most English versions translate *diakonos* (διάκονος) in three major ways: *servant, minister, and deacon*. The first two are actually similar concepts and basically denote a servant in some capacity and often it is just translation style that accounts for either rendering. The latter term *deacon* is used more in a technical manner to denote an official representative of the church.

Servant/minister

The first eight uses of *diakonos* (διάκονος) in the New Testament are all in the gospels and all have the force of a *servant*, and in some cases are used synonymously with another Greek term, *doulos* (δοῦλος).

“It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant”
(Matt 20:26)

In the next two verses we find some terms of servanthood used of Jesus:

27 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave;
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”
(Matt 20:27-28)

The term “slave” in verse 27 is *doulos* (δοῦλος) and the two uses of the term “serve” in verse 28 are the verb form of *diakonos* (διάκονος) or *diakoneō* (διακονέω). The point here is that our word *diakonos* (διάκονος) which is translated *deacon* is used of Jesus who is the ultimate servant in that he gave his life. This ought to encourage all who do serve in that official capacity in the local church.

As Jesus is the quintessential servant, he teaches his disciples that they will need to be servants as well:

“But the greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt 23:11)

“Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35)

The other five uses in the gospels are uses of the term *diakonos* (διάκονος) that denote a servant (See Matt 22:13; Mark 10:43; John 2:5, 9; 12:26). In this light, we see the term *diakonos* (διάκονος) used of Christ directly in Romans 15:8 and in a negative connotation in Galatians 2:17.

In the New Testament epistles we see that the government is a *diakonos* (διάκονος) or minister of God (Rom 13:4 [2x]) and that the Apostles and their coworkers were described as *servants* (Rom 16:1; 2 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; Eph 3:7; 6:21; Col 1:7, 23, 25; 4:7; 1 Tim 4:6) while false servants are also noted (2 Cor 11:15 [2x], 23).

This only leaves three uses of *diakonos* (διάκονος) and each of them refer to the New Testament office/role of a deacon and they form the basis of this New Testament ministry within the local church.

Deacon

The first use of *diakonos* (διάκονος) in regard to an official local church office is 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: (Phil 1:1)

In his opening verse to the church in Philippi, Paul greets the elders or *overseers* of the church and also greets the *deacons*, who by now were an official office of the local church. Some believe that the office of New Testament *deacon* began in Acts 6 when men were selected to serve the need of Jewish widows. While the role these men took on likely resembles the kind of ministry deacons perform (related Greek terms *diakoneō* (διακονέω) and *diakonia* (διακονία), it must be noted that the term *deacon* or *diakonos* (διάκονος) is not used.

The only other two uses of *diakonos* (διάκονος) are found in 1 Timothy 3:8 and 12 regarding the qualifications of deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

Deacons likewise *must be* men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain (1 Tim 3:8)

Deacons must be husbands of *only* one wife, *and* good managers of *their* children and their own households (1 Tim 3:12)

Paul's teaching in verse 11 is seen by many to denote women deacons or deaconesses:

Women *must* likewise *be* dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things (1 Tim 3:11)

The reasons for this difficulty is that the Greek term *gynē* (γυνή) can either be translated *woman* or *wife*, depending on context. It would seem odd that Paul jumped from official deacons (v. 8) to women in general (v. 11) and then back to deacons (v. 12). The context supports that either they were the wives of deacons or deacons themselves. The latter is more likely. There is no prohibition against women serving as official deacons of the local church. Prohibitions found for *elders/overseer/pastors* would not apply. In addition, the New Testament does single out women using the Greek term for deacon or *diakonos* (διάκονος). In Romans 16:1 Paul writes,

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.

The first person in the long list of people he greets is Phoebe who he then describes as "a servant of the church of Cenchrea." She is singled out as a *diakonos* (διάκονος) of a particular local church. Some have tried to argue that this is not the technical use of *diakonos* (διάκονος) as a local church deacon but a general one.

This is subjective. Paul's use of *diakonos* (διάκονος) in Philippians 1:1 is clearly tied to a local church and so is this. Others have argued that Paul is using a masculine noun with *diakonos* (διάκονος). If one would actually examine the lexical data more closely, one would realize that the term *diakonos* (διάκονος) is actually a dual gender noun. It can be used with either masculine or feminine definite article. BDAG lists this rare phenomena as follows:

διάκονος, ου, ό, ή

So while the English translation of *deaconess* may be anachronistic, the idea is clearly inherent in the term. This is the Greek term one would use if you wanted to denote a woman as a deacon.

One practical note: if deacons are those who serve the physical needs of the sheep, there are reasons why only women should minister to women and why only men should minister to men. Undoubtedly, the early church had couples who served in this manner for this very reason.

So this is it in the New Testament! Three uses of *diakonos* (διάκονος) denoting an office and two uses denoting qualifications.

Significance

What is the significance of this brief lexical and contextual examination of *diakonos* (διάκονος)? There is not really much to go on, except the basic idea of an official servant, employing a term that lexically often refers to an assistant or helper who works under the direction of someone else to get things done. Deacons are tasked by the church leadership to serve the physical needs of the body, given that *elders/deacons/pastors* care for the spiritual needs and have authority to rule or manage the affairs of the church. However what is lacking in the New Testament is any specific job description whatsoever, and for good reason.

The New Testament includes very clear responsibilities for an *elder/overseer/pastor* (all of which are interchangeable terms in the Greek New Testament - see course notes for "Burst" on Eldership). The responsibilities of men who serve in the role of *elder/overseer/pastor* are those which are common to all churches, in all eras, in all cultures, and in all locations, namely, spiritual authority. They are responsible for preaching, teaching, doctrinal issues, discipline, church direction and authority.

However the role of a deacon is that of an official servant of the local church who ministers to the temporal or physical needs of the body under the authority of the elders. So a deacon ministry in the inner city may look quite a bit different than a deacon ministry in a suburban church. This is why there are no specific responsibilities for the New Testament deacon.

This is the genius of the New Testament. It allows the physical or temporal needs of the church to be met by those qualified servants, who the New Testament recognizes as official local church servants. Since deacons are expected to be spiritually mature given the qualifications of a deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, it seems clear that the New Testament trusts the wisdom of these men and women to make the right practical choices in how to care for the specific, temporal needs of the sheep.

So a New Testament deacon is who resembles Christ, the apostles, and others, and they serve in an official capacity within the local church. They possess the high calling of servant!!!