

# OF DEACONS AND MINISTRY LEADERS: AN ATTEMPT TO CLARIFY

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Local churches are to be led by two or more qualified men who have been appointed to the office that is referred to variously in Scripture as elder (*presbuteros*), overseer or bishop (*episkopos*), and shepherd or pastor (*poimēn*) (Acts 14:23, 20:17; Phil. 1:1; Tit. 1:5; Jas. 5:14). These terms refer to the same office (Acts 20:17, 28; Tit. 1:5, 7; 1 Pet. 5:1-2), but each carries a different nuance.

The position of elders within Judaism (Num. 11:16-24; Deut. 21:19-20; 1 Ki. 21:8-11), from which the early church derived the name, involved deciding disputes, interpreting the law, administering discipline, preserving the traditions of the people (Deut. 32:7), and serving as examples. Overseer or bishop emphasizes the role of managing the group's affairs, guarding it, and directing its activities. The work of shepherds involves protecting the sheep, leading them to water and pasture, caring for their injuries, and seeking them when lost.<sup>1</sup>

All these elements are reflected in the duties of elders that are given in Scripture (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:5, 5:17; Tit. 1:9; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:2). In brief, elders are responsible for using their authority under Christ for the spiritual welfare of the congregation, and they will answer for how they discharge that responsibility (Heb. 13:17). Those who are under the oversight of elders are to obey the word of the Lord that is presented by them, respect them for their work, support them, and cooperate with them that they may serve with joy and not groaning (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:7, 17).

Scripture indicates that those with spiritual leadership responsibility may enlist others to assist them in the discharge of that responsibility. That is, they may ease the burden of leadership by assigning to other people tasks and duties (and the authority necessary for fulfilling them) that they otherwise would have needed to handle themselves. The leader maintains oversight of the assignments, ultimate responsibility for their fulfillment, and the authority to intervene if necessary, but the immediate responsibility is vested in another.

The classic case is the delegation by Moses in Ex. 18:13-26 of the responsibility for judging small matters. Equally well known is the delegation by the apostles in Acts 6:1-7 of the immediate responsibility for the daily distribution among the saints. Paul's use of a secretary (*amanuensis*) in writing some of his letters (e.g., Rom. 16:22) is another example. Jesus himself enlisted the apostles (Lk. 9:1-2) and the seventy (or seventy-two) (Lk. 10:1-20) to assist him in his work of preaching the good news of the kingdom of God (Lk. 4:43; see also, Mat. 4:23, 9:35; Lk. 8:1).

The fact elders "exercise oversight" (*episkopeō*) of the church (1 Pet. 5:2) and are to "manage" or "rule" (*proistēmi*) the church as part of caring for it (1 Tim. 3:4-5) confirms the

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<sup>1</sup> See Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 319-323. I will refer to the office as "elder."

propriety of their enlisting others to assist them in the discharge of their leadership responsibility. Overseeing and managing connote the directing of others in their work rather than the personal performance of all tasks. In addition, there are teachers in congregations (Acts 13:1; Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11; Jas. 3:1) who function in that capacity only with the permission of the elders because, as part of their duty to guard the flock, the elders are responsible for who addresses the community as a teacher.

The only other office in the church is that of deacon. The qualifications are given in 1 Tim. 3:8-12, but Scripture nowhere defines the tasks deacons are to perform or the duties they are to assume. The seven men appointed in Acts 6:1-7 to handle the daily distribution are not called deacons, and their qualifications are more general (good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom) than those given later in 1 Tim. 3:8-12, but by the late second century they were understood to be the first deacons.<sup>2</sup> That conclusion was no doubt based in part on the presence in the text of two cognates of *diakonos* (deacon): *diakonia* (serving) in v. 1 and *diakoneō* (serve) in v. 2. Benjamin Merkle concludes, "The seven men chosen in Acts 6, while not specifically called deacons, provide the closest parallel to the Christian office."<sup>3</sup>

Given the role of elders, the meaning of the word "deacon" (*diakonos*),<sup>4</sup> and the analogy of the Seven chosen to serve in Acts 6, it is generally understood that deacons assist the elders by accepting immediate responsibility (not ultimate oversight) for works that otherwise would need to be done by the elders, thereby freeing the elders to devote themselves to matters on which their time is better spent. For example, Merkle writes:

[I]t seems best to view the deacons as servants who do whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church. Just as the apostles delegated administrative responsibilities to the Seven, so the elders are to delegate responsibilities to the deacons so that the elders can focus their efforts elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Alexander Strauch writes:

By designating the officials of 1 Timothy 3:8-13 as assistants and not table servers, Paul allows them to do other demanding tasks that would assist the elders in the "care for God's church" (1 Tim. 3:5). The help of qualified, approved

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, ch. 12:10 ("Stephen, who was chosen the first deacon by the apostles"), Book IV, ch. 15:1 ("Luke also has recorded that Stephen, who was the first elected into the diaconate by the apostles"); Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against All Heresies* ("He was one of the seven deacons who were appointed in the Acts of the Apostles") [The work is thought to be related to the lost treatise of the early third-century theologian Hippolytus of Rome titled the *Syntagma* – see Reinhard Plummer, *Early Christian Authors on Samaritans and Samaritanism* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 32]; Cyprian, *Epistles of Cyprian*, Epistle LXIV:3 ("while apostles appointed for themselves deacons after the ascent of the Lord into heaven"). This understanding is reflected in Eusebius's early fourth-century work, *The History of the Church*, Bk. 2:1 ("By prayer and laying on of the apostles' hands they were appointed to the diaconate").

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 240.

<sup>4</sup> Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 230: "one who gets someth[ing] done, at the behest of a superior, *assistant*."

<sup>5</sup> Merkle, 232.

assistants who have the authority to carry out tasks delegated by the pastor elders relieves the elders of certain demanding tasks and helps them to keep their focus on the primary ministry of leading and feeding God's flock.<sup>6</sup>

Because deacons are assistants to the elders and their tasks and duties are not spelled out, it is recognized by many that elders have wide latitude in defining the role of deacons in a congregation. For example, Strauch states, "The specific tasks of the deacons are to be determined by the elders in accordance with the church's particular needs, size, and giftedness of its members."<sup>7</sup> According to Merkle, "each local church is free to define the tasks of deacons based on its particular needs."<sup>8</sup> James Bales writes: "The deacon is a servant, an official servant of the church, and thus his duties are to serve. However, the Bible does not spell out what these duties are. As L. R. Wilson suggested: 'We may say that there is hardly any service which may be needed that they may not perform.'"<sup>9</sup>

That no one is to serve as a deacon who has not first been found to meet the qualifications for that office (1 Tim. 3:10) has led some to conclude that elders are prohibited from assigning to members who are not deacons any tasks or duties they *could have* assigned to deacons. The thinking is that assuming tasks or duties that could be assigned to deacons constitutes "serving as a deacon" and therefore requires appointment to that office. Under this view, 1 Tim. 3:10 not only prohibits the appointment of unqualified persons to the office of deacon but, given the wide range of tasks and duties that may be assigned to deacons, also makes deacons the *only ones* elders can enlist to assist them in the discharge of their leadership responsibility. So, for example, if the elders wanted someone to take the immediate responsibility for running a ministry like Bible Bowl, they could assign that duty only to someone who was a deacon.

This view assumes that "serving as a deacon" is defined by *function*, by doing what a deacon could be assigned to do, but there is another possibility. Given the absence of any specified duties for deacons, I suggest "serving as a deacon" is better defined by the *status* of the one serving, by whether he has been appointed to the office of deacon. Under this view, only a deacon can "serve as a deacon" in that only a deacon can serve with the credibility and support of the community that comes with his testing, approval, and formal appointment. In that case, it is not what deacons do, which is not specified and varies between congregations, but who they are in doing it that makes their service distinctive. Two men could do the same thing but only the one who did it as an appointee to the office of deacon would be doing it "as a deacon" in the sense of 1 Tim. 3:10.

As an analogy, imagine a community was concerned about a police shooting and the mayor assigned review of the officer's conduct to his staff members and to a citizen review board (CRB) made up of people selected and vetted by the community for their integrity and fairness. There is a very real sense in which no person or group that was not the CRB could "serve as the CRB," regardless of how similarly they functioned, because only the CRB had been chosen and

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Paul's Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God's Church* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 2017), 74.

<sup>7</sup> Strauch, 74.

<sup>8</sup> Merkle, 240.

<sup>9</sup> James Bales, *The Deacon and His Work* (Shreveport, LA: Lambert Book House, 1967), 63.

certified by the community. Its service would be unique for that reason not because it did things the other reviewers did not.

Christians who do not belong to a special class of appointed servants are not necessarily excluded from being assigned the same tasks or duties as those special servants. That is, the appointment of special servants does not automatically preempt others from serving in the same ways. Jesus appointed the *twelve apostles* that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to cast out demons (Mk. 3:14-15). In Lk. 9:1-2 he does just that, giving them power over demons and diseases and sending them out (two by two – Mk. 6:7) to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. In Lk. 10:1-20 he sends out *the seventy-two*, two by two, to do the same thing, to heal the sick and proclaim the kingdom of God and to assert power over demons (10:1, 9, 17-20). The appointment of the apostles was not intended to exclude others from doing things the apostles were assigned to do. They all could engage in the same work, but only the apostles did so "as apostles," as members of that special class of servants.

Acts 6:1-7 shows that the daily distribution among the disciples was a ministry over which a special class of appointed servants (the Seven) could be, and in the specific circumstance needed to be, put in charge. And yet, before their competence was overwhelmed by the rapid growth of the church, unnamed "common servants" had conducted that very ministry. Since the apostles ultimately were in charge of the distribution of the community's assets (Acts 4:34-35), those pre-Seven, unnamed servants conducted the distribution ministry with the approval of, if not appointment by, the apostles. Therefore, they had divine approval for conducting that ministry even though it was a ministry that rightly could be assigned to a class of special servants to which they did not belong.

If it is true that those who are not deacons can be assigned tasks or duties that could be assigned to deacons, then what is the purpose or point of the office of deacon? Why have an office with qualifications if people without those qualifications can be assigned to engage in the same activities? I think deacons are a special class of assistants who are distinguished by the added credibility and support of the community that accompanies the public vetting and approval of their character and their official status. They are available for any tasks or duties the elders choose to assign to them and are desirable for virtually any role, but assignment of a task or duty to a deacon is mandatory only where it by nature requires delegation and a lack of confidence in the person(s) in charge of a ministry has led (or foreseeably will lead) to congregational disunity over the administration of that ministry, Acts 6:1-7 being paradigmatic.

That deacons are mandatory only in a specific circumstance fits with the fact Luke reports in Acts 14:23 that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in *every* church they had planted but says nothing about their appointing deacons in *any* of those churches. Similarly, Paul commanded Titus to appoint elders in *every* town in Crete but said nothing about appointing deacons in *any* town (Tit. 1:5). If congregations always have tasks or duties that must be assigned to a deacon, the failure to mention the need to appoint deacons is baffling, especially given that the number of men qualified to serve as deacons would exceed those qualified to serve as elders because the qualifications for deacons are less stringent than those of elders. But if deacons are mandatory only when circumstances dictate, it is understandable that only elders

would be appointed in the initial organization of a congregation. It would be up to them to have deacons appointed as desired or necessary.<sup>10</sup>

If those who are not deacons can be assigned tasks or duties that could be assigned to deacons, it does not follow that those who are not *elders* can be assigned the tasks or duties of elders. The difference is that there are no tasks or duties specified in Scripture for deacons. They are official assistants whose role is left undefined that the elders may utilize them in whatever capacity they deem beneficial. Because the office of deacon is not defined functionally, one does not serve as a deacon by assuming deacon-defining tasks or duties; there are no deacon-defining tasks or duties. The role of elders, on the other hand, is specified, so to assume the tasks and duties of an elder is to serve as an elder, which requires one to meet the qualifications of that office.

As I see it, elders should encourage all qualified men to serve as deacons and delegate to them whatever tasks and duties the elders think will be beneficial for them to assume. I suspect a congregation could never have too many deacons. But if others who do not meet the qualifications of deacons have been moved by the Spirit to devote themselves to a particular ministry or area of service and the elders believe that ministry would be beneficial to the cause of Christ and the spiritual welfare of the congregation (e.g., Bible Bowl), I think those members can be asked or allowed to lead that ministry, to take immediate responsibility for it, even if it is something that could be delegated to a deacon.

### A Word on Women

I am convinced women are prohibited from serving in the office of deacon (see [Women Are Not to Be Appointed to the Office of Deacon](#)), but if it is correct that serving as a ministry leader is not serving as a deacon, then women could be allowed to lead a church ministry. But since leadership of a ministry is a position of authority in that the leader is granted the right to direct and control those in the ministry toward the accomplishment of its goal, I do not think men can serve in those ministries, as women are prohibited from exercising authority over a man in the church.

In 1 Tim. 2:12 "[t]wo things are forbidden for a woman: teaching and exercising authority over a man."<sup>11</sup> As Douglas Moo observes, "That teaching and having authority are 'closely related' is, of course, true, as it is true that both ministries often are carried out by the same individuals, but here and elsewhere they are nonetheless distinct, and in 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul prohibits women from conducting either activity, whether jointly or in isolation, in relation to men."<sup>12</sup> Andreas Köstenberger similarly states:

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<sup>10</sup> This understanding also may explain why Paul, after giving qualifications for elders to both Timothy and Titus (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9), included qualifications for deacons only in his letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 3:8-12). Titus was appointing elders for new congregations in Crete who would have the responsibility of determining the future need for deacons. Timothy, on the other hand, was facing the prospect of replacing existing elders in Ephesus for impenitent sin. The turmoil of that situation may have made it foreseeable that deacons now would be needed or that some existing deacons would need to be replaced.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Tim. 2:9-15" in Andreas Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds., *Women in the Church*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 190.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas J. Moo, "What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men?" in John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Womanhood & Manhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 187.

Further, a proper understanding of the function of οὐδέ and of the meanings of the infinitives διδάσκειν and αὐθεντεῖν leads the interpreter to understand Paul to be prohibiting two activities that are related yet distinct. Women are prohibited from serving in church positions that would place them in authority over men, whether by teaching them in the ecclesial context or by ruling over them in an authoritative church position.<sup>13</sup>

Paul explains in 1 Tim. 2:13 that the reason ("For," *gar*)<sup>14</sup> women are not permitted to teach or to have authority over a man is that "Adam was formed first, then Eve."<sup>15</sup> It has nothing to do with women's intellect, character, devotion, knowledge, education, or skill; it is not because they are *incapable* of teaching or leading. It is rooted in the order of creation, which as Köstenberger notes "strongly suggests that vv. 11-12 are permanently applicable."<sup>16</sup> Both here and in 1 Cor. 11:7-9, the Spirit of God through Paul makes clear that Genesis 2 posits role differences between men and women.

It is possible for men to render aid to women's ministries without being participants in the ministry who are under the leader's authority. When, for example, an employer hires Federal Express to transport a package, the employer has no control over how Federal Express accomplishes that task. In allowing Federal Express to serve as a carrier, the employer accepts Federal Express's autonomy in the matter. That is the distinction between an employee and an independent contractor. So, though the line may not always be clear, I think men could perform independently specific ancillary tasks that facilitate the conduct of a woman's ministry (e.g., rendering technological assistance or lifting and carrying material) without running afoul of the prohibition of women exercising authority over men in church. In other words, one can do something that helps a ministry without being a participant or member in that ministry.

Note also that it is only the participants in the ministry and not the objects or beneficiaries of the ministry that are restricted to women. For example, a woman's ministry devoted to providing clothing to the poor or the gospel to the lost could provide it to all the poor and all the lost, respectively, regardless of gender. Therefore, the designation "Women's ministries" in a congregational listing would not mean the ministries served only women (though that may be true of some); it would mean they were under the non-deacon leadership of a woman and had only female participants.

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<sup>13</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, "A Complex Sentence" in Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds., *Women in the Church*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 160. For a broader and more detailed look at the role of women in the church, see [An Assessment of Hicks's Women Serving God](#).

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., William D. Mounce, *The Pastoral Epistles*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 131-132; Schreiner, 200.

<sup>15</sup> This is undoubtedly a reference to the creation account as the verb "form" (*plassō*) is used repeatedly in the LXX of God's formation of Adam at creation (Gen. 2:7, 8, 15). Paul does not explain how Adam's being created first constitutes a reason for him not permitting a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but the notion of the "firstborn" being the leader required no explanation in the first century. The leadership right of the firstborn is all over the OT and was taken for granted.

<sup>16</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *1-2 Timothy & Titus*, BTC (Nashville: Holman, 2017), 117.

Beyond this, there is room for personal ministries as distinct from congregational ministries. Not every ministry in which a member of a congregation engages is created by or operated under the church. Blogs, websites, and newsletters are common examples. These are avenues through which Christians live out their faith individually. As part of their responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the flock, elders would need to address any sinful conduct or heretical or divisively false teaching exhibited in these ministries, but since they are independent of the church in a formal or institutional sense, I do not think the prohibition of women exercising authority over men would apply.<sup>17</sup> Should specific personal ministries be acknowledged by the congregation for information purposes, their status as personal ministries should be noted.

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<sup>17</sup> God does not intend the male leadership that is rooted in creation to prohibit women from exercising authority over men in all ways in all spheres. 1 Timothy 2:12 addresses a church context, and there are God-approved examples of women having authority over men in society (e.g., Deborah). Rather, God intends Christian women to acknowledge and honor the creation-based leadership of men by not teaching in the assembly and not taking positions of leadership within the church, which is reflected in the requirements for church offices. Since they are distinct from the church, there is inadequate warrant for putting personal ministries under the same stricture.