

Discovering CHRIS-TI-AN-I-TY

[Deacons]

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The Greek

The Greek word for deacon is *diakonos* which comes from the word *dioko*. *Dioko* means to run eagerly, to follow earnestly, to endeavor to pursue. *Diakonos* means *to run on errands, to attend, to execute the command of another*. [John 2:5]

There are a number of Greek words used in the Bible which speak about serving, the difference between these other words and *diakonos* is that, where the other words speak of the position of the server in relation to a person, *diakonos* speaks of the server in his activity; that is 'to run' etc.

Christ the Deacon [Luke 22:26-27]

Christ, the Creator of the Universe, gladly humbled Himself to the place of a deacon. In Romans 15:8 Christ is described as the one who came to serve the Jews. He tells His followers in Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45 that He came to earth to *minister* rather than to be ministered to. In Luke 12:37 Christ tells His followers that He will serve them in the Kingdom to come.

Paul the Deacon [Acts 20:24]

Paul was a deacon in a number of ways. By sending *relief* from other churches to the believers in Judea during a famine [Acts 11:29-30, 12:25, Romans 15:25, 2Cor 8:4, 19-20, 9:1, 12-13]. He was a *minister* of the Gospel [Eph 2:7, Col 1:23-25, 2Cor 3:6, 5:18]. He was a *minister* to the churches [2Cor 4:5, 11:8] He was a *minister* to the Gentiles [Rom 11:13]. He was a *minister* of God [2Cor 6:4, Tim 1:12] Paul saw himself as nothing but a *minister* [1Cor 3:5].

Other Deacons

- Rulers of nations are the ministers of God [Rom 13:4]
- Phoebe ministered in the church at Cenchræa [Rom 16:1]
- Tychicus was a faithful minister [Acts 20:4, Eph 6:21, Col 4:7, 2 Tim 4:12, Titus 3:12]
- Epaphras was a faithful minister [Col 1:7, 4:12, Phm 1:23]
- Timothy was a minister whose scope developed over time [1Thess 3:2, 1Tim 4:6, 2Tim 4:5]
- The household of Stephanas was devoted to ministering to others [1 Cor 16:15]
- Erastus, Onesiphorus and Oneimus ministered to Paul [Acts 19:22, 2Tim 1:18, Phm 1:13]
- Archippus was to fulfil his God given ministry [Col 4:17]
- Angels ministered to Christ and continue to minister to Christ's people [Matt 4:11, Heb 1:14]
- The Old Testament prophets were ministering to us as they wrote and spoke [1Peter 1:12]
- Every member of the body is to be involved in ministering [Eph 4:12]

The Office of Deacon

All of the above references have spoken of deacons in a general sense. The New Testament also teaches that there is a position or office of a deacon [Phil 1:1, 1Tim 3:10, 13].

The heart of Christ is to serve others and the heart of the Christian must be the same. We are all to be deacons; men and women who eagerly run to serve others practically and spiritually. Only a believer with the heart of a deacon should ever be put into the office of a Deacon.

Study 2

Saved and Serving

Following Christ is Serving Christ

In John 12:26 Christ invites the audience around Him to follow Him. The word "follow" here means to go the same way or accompany. The surrounding verses speak of Christ laying down His life. [v23-27]. Those who are the true ministers of Christ are all those who follow Him in His life of self-sacrifice. It is costly, but the reward is glorious; we will be with Christ for all eternity and we will be honoured by the Father.

Serving Christ and His People

Immediately after Christ healed Peter's mother-in-law she began to serve Him and His disciples [Matt 8:14-15, Mar 1:30-31, Luke 4:38-39]. In her gratitude to Christ she was eager and earnest in making sure she did all she could to *minister* to His physical needs. But more than this, she also wanted to *minister* to Christ's followers.

Hebrews 6:10 tells us that "God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which you have showed toward his name, in that you have *ministered* to the saints, and do *minister*."

This verse is telling us that God sees our *ministering* to His fellow followers as a work and labour of love done for Him and will not forget that. In other words, when we are *ministering* to God's people, we are primarily *ministering* to God; we are serving Him by serving them.

This is similar to the warning of Christ in Matthew 25:42-45. Although the interpretation is not directly for us in this present period, there is still an application in principle; to not serve the people of God is to not serve Christ.

Gifted to Serve

Romans 4:7, Ephesians 4:12, 1 Corinthians 12:5 and 1 Peter 4:10 all use the word for *deacon* in a general sense and all of these passages teach the same principle; we are all *ministers* of God given the gifts of God to serve the people of God in the church of God

Peter tell us that we must all use the gifts God has given us to *minister* to one another. He tells us that this is how we become good stewards of God's grace in our lives [1 Peter 4:10-11]. Romans 12:4-8, Ephesians 4:7-16 and 1 Corinthians 12 [v5] speak of the same principle; what we have been given from God is to be invested and we invest that by using what God has given us to *minister* to others. We have all been given different gifts to use and responsibilities to fulfil in the local church, but each gift and responsibility is to be used to *minister* to the other members of the body and by doing this we are *ministering* to Christ.

When we become children of God by faith we are all also made deacons of God in the general sense and we fulfil that role by serving one another. Only those who are saved and already gladly serving their brothers and sisters in Christ should be considered for the office of a Deacon.

Study 3

How to be the Greatest

I'll Be Greater than You

In Mark 9:33-37 Christ deals with a misconception of His disciples. They had been arguing about who would be the greatest amongst them in the Kingdom. They had been performing miracles in Christ's name, and a few of them had been witnesses of the Transfiguration. It's easy to imagine the argument; *"I'm the favourite" "I've done more", "I've seen more"*.

Christ needed to deal with their arrogance and pride. He knew their hearts and He needed to expose them to their pride and teach them what His Kingdom was really about. They were too ashamed to admit to Christ what they had been arguing about on the road.

Christ explained to them that the way to be the greatest amongst them was to place themselves into the lowest position. Others also see here a stinging warning from Christ; those who exalt themselves will be brought to the lowest positions in the Kingdom of Christ.

James and John and their Mother

In Mark 10:35-45 and Matthew 20:20-28 it seems that the disciples have forgotten this principle. James and John want to be seated in the greatest positions in the Kingdom; beside the Messiah. The other disciples are angry at this request; likely because they wanted the positions for themselves.

Christ explains that in the kingdoms of earth those who are the greatest are the rulers and served ones. However, in His Kingdom it is the complete opposite; those who are the greatest and who want to be the greatest are actually those who minister to the rest.

He then sets Himself up as the example; He is the Greatest of all, the Creator of the Universe, the Lord of Hosts, the King of Kings, yet He stooped down to earth to be a minister and die for others. Those who want to be great must stoop, like Christ.

Woe Pharisees

In Matthew 23:2-36 Christ rebukes the religious leaders. They loved to be exalted [v6]. They loved being called "father", "rabbi" and "master" [v7-10]. They liked to look the part and the respect that earned from others [v5, 25-29]. But they were not servants. They "devoured" the widows house [v14], they neglected justice and mercy [v23], they were greedy and self-indulgent [v25].

Christ explained to them, and to the rest of the people listening that such self-exalting and self-serving would be met by God with judgement; He would humble them. Those, however, who humbled themselves and served others would be exalted by God.

If God exalts you, it is in order that you might be a better servant of others. Only a person with the humility and understanding of this Kingdom principle of greatness and service ought to be considered for the Office of a Deacon.

Study 4

Serving Tables

Different Services, Same Lord

Every believer is called, equipped and empowered to be a deacon of Christ by being a deacon to their brothers and sisters in Christ in the local church and beyond.

1 Corinthians 12:5 tells us that although we are all to be deacons, that doesn't mean we are all called to do exactly the same thing. *"there are differences of administrations [diakonia], but the same Lord"*. In Acts 6 the word for Deacon is used 3 times but there are 2 different *"administrations"*.

The Administration/Ministry of Tables

Acts 6:1 tells us that there was a daily ministrations [diakonia] where Christian widows in the church at Jerusalem were given food and other provisions. Some of the widows felt that they were being neglected and tension grew between them.

The apostles realized that this whole situation, though important, was coming dangerously close to being a distraction to their main work. They brought the need before the church explaining that they weren't called to *serve [diakoneō] tables* [v2] but that it was still important that this need was met. The apostles asked the church to choose men who would be able to attend to this work [v3].

The Administration/Ministry of the Word

The apostles were, by no means, saying that this work was beneath them, but rather, it wasn't their priority work, but it was starting to take over from what their priority work was. They weren't looking for an way out of responsibility. Rather, freeing them from this task would enable them to focus on their priority ministry; *"the ministry [diakonia] of the Word"* [v4]. With this important work being accomplished by other men, the apostles were able to fully devote themselves to praying and proclaiming the Word of God.

They were the under shepherds of the flock of God. They were praying for wisdom to guide this new entity in the world, praying for courage to stand against the enemies of the Gospel, praying for the needs of the church. They were studying the Old Testament anew, proclaiming the Gospel to the lost, debating the Jewish leaders, teaching the believers. The work was demanding and they needed a lot of time to do it.

Elders and Deacons

Many see in Acts 6 a principle for the local church today; the elders need to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and other men of God allow them to do that by devoting themselves to the other important tasks of the church. These tasks are still to *"the same Lord"* and are essential to the continual work and growth of a healthy church.

The essential role of a person in the position of a Deacon is to free the elders from important ministries within the local church, in order to allow these men the time needed to commit themselves to their priority ministries as Christ's under shepherds.

Study 5

Character 1

Character Description vs Work Specification

Some would contend that those in Acts 6 are not Deacons. However, since these men are fulfilling a role that frees the apostles to do a similar work that is required of elders today, we can argue that it is vital that Deacons have the same character as those in Acts 6. The New Testament never tells us what a Deacon should do, rather it focuses on who a Deacon should be. If a person has the right character, they will do the right thing.

Men of Honest Report

To be of honest report literally means *to witness, testify, report* and speaks, here, of the idea of having a good reputation. Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, before he encountered the Gospel, was a man of *good report among all the nation of the Jews* [Acts 10:22]. Of Enoch it is said that *he had this testimony, that he pleased God* [Hebrews 11:5]. These men, then, were to have a reputation, amongst those within the church and within society, that they were men of good character.

Full of the Holy Ghost

Although their responsibilities seemed to be a practical work, they needed to be men full of the Spirit. There are two other references to the Spirit filling people in the New Testament; Acts 2:4 and Ephesians 5:18, in the Old Testament Exodus 28:3, 31:3 and 35:31 speak of people filled with the Spirit. To be filled with the Spirit means to allow the Holy Spirit, who indwells you, to have full control.

In Acts 2:4 the result was that they were able to preach the Gospel boldly to the lost. In Exodus 31:3 the result was that they were able to make items for the Tabernacle.

In Ephesians 5:18 the result is threefold: 1. A person who praises God in their hearts which flows out to refreshing others spiritually 2. A person who has a humble and thankful attitude toward God in every situation 3. A person who gladly and readily submits to authority in their lives

And of Wisdom

Proverbs explains to us that wisdom has to do with a godly moral character. Proverbs invites us to be wise by being godly. Proverbs is written from the perspective that to be wise or to be a fool is a moral choice. Some are born with better mental capacity. However, no one is born with a greater capacity to be wise [Proverbs 1:20-33]. Proverbs tells us that *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* [9:10]. Men are fools because they say *"there is no God"* [Psalm 14:1].

When a church is looking for men to fulfil the office of a Deacon, they are not to focus on mental or physical ability, but rather on spiritual, godly character. The work they are involved in may be more practical and physical, but the position still demands that a man of God fills it.

Study 6

Character 2

In 1 Timothy 3:8-12 Paul explains the character requirements of a Deacon.

Grave

The work is serious and that must be reflected in the character of the men who do it. This does not mean that the men are stuffy, unapproachable, cold or dull. It means that they carry themselves with dignity, they treat the people of God with respect and they do the work with honour.

Not Double Tongued

A Deacons will have a lot of opportunities to communicate to the congregation. He must be honest in his speech, not saying one thing to one person and another thing to someone else. He must not be two-faced.

Not Given to Much Wine

Since Paul commands that believers should not allow alcohol to control them, but rather the Holy Spirit [Ephesians 5:18], the Deacon must be an example of this. He cannot have addictions, which are a form of idolatry, but rather, must be disciplined and self-controlled.

Not Greedy of Filthy Lucre

It is very likely that a Deacon will handle the church money at times; whether helping to collect or count it, giving it or sending it. He must be a man who will not be tempted by this responsibility. Money is an important part of running a church and a Deacon must have a biblical view of God's resources.

Holding the Mystery of Faith in a Pure Conscience...Blameless

The Deacon's life must be one of holiness that reflects the Gospel he has believed. We are all called into holiness, and the Deacon as man who has been given a role within the church, must be an example of this to such a degree that he cannot be accused of a sinful lifestyle.

Wives

If a Deacon is married he must be faithful and devoted to his wife. His wife, too, must be a godly example in her attitude [grave], words [not slanderers], care [sober] and diligence [faithful].

Children

If a Deacon has children he must be a family man. He must be seen to take his role of a father seriously, nurturing them, teaching them, serving them and disciplining them in the Lord. If a man's home life is not taken seriously and is not in order then he shows he cannot fulfil the role of taking care of the family of God.

When a person steps into any position within a church body they become examples to the rest of the body and to the world outside of how a Christian lives. A Deacon should be able to say, with Paul, "Be followers of me, even as I also am of Christ."

Study 7

The Result

The Word of God Increased

In Acts 6:7 the Gospel is seen to spread through Jerusalem. It is no accident that this verse immediately follows the account of these men stepping into the ministry of the “daily ministration”.

The Deacons helped to free the apostles from this important task and allowed the apostles to focus on their priority ministry, thus the Word of God grew. It had the potential to shrink back as the apostles busied themselves with other tasks, but it didn't, the message was heard across the city.

The Number of Disciples Multiplied

With the Word being preached by the apostles, the number of hearers increased and with that and God's blessing, the number of adherents to the message of the Gospel grew. Notice that the number of disciples multiplied *greatly*.

Perhaps many of those who had called for Christ to be crucified were now calling upon Him for salvation. In the face of persecution, oppression and pressure, the church was growing because the Word was spreading.

A Great Company of Priests were Obedient to the Faith

With the apostles able to study the Old Testament, obeying the command of Christ to “search the Scriptures...they are they which testify of me”, they were able to show the priests of Judaism how Jesus was the Christ they were waiting for. A *great company* of them, convinced by the Scriptures and the Spirit, believed and were saved.

Though v7 was not a direct result of these men taking over this ministry of serving tables, without these men stepping in, the apostles would have been limited in their ability to do the work.

The Tension was Healed

There was murmuring amongst the widows [v1]. The church which was of “one accord” was now at risk of division. Calling these men into this ministry of serving tables healed the tension and brought peace and harmony back into the body.

To serve a table means to oversee the distribution of provisions. These men were not being asked to literally put plates on a table and take them away when the people were done eating. They were being asked to divide out and give the food to those with needs within the body. This ministry was a very personal one, one in which a soft answer and kind word was needed, one in which patience and gentleness was to be exercised.

Being a Deacon is not, in itself, an end goal. Rather, the ministry of a Deacon is a means to an end; the end being the spread of the Gospel, the building up of the believers and the unity of the body. Only a man who desires this end has the right attitude for the office of a Deacon.

Study 8

Stephen and Phillip

Stephen

We already know that Stephen was a man of *honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom*. We know he was willing to serve others because of the nature of *this business* and we know he had a desire to free up the apostles to *prayer and to the ministry of the Word*.

We also learn from v5 that he was a man *full of faith*. He was convinced of the Gospel message, he fully trusted God in matters eternal and temporal. We learn from v8 that he was also a man *full of power*, that is, God's power in him to do great miracles and signs.

As we read the account of his life in Acts 6-7 we see a number of other things about this man. He preached the Gospel; serving tables was a ministry given to him in the church, however, that wasn't all Stephen did. He was a man of godly courage and he preached the Gospel. He cared for others; he went beyond his duty of serving others in the daily ministrations; he also served others through working miracles and healing people. He was a man who, like his Saviour, had compassion for people. He knew the Scriptures; he was able to use the Old Testament to point the Jewish leaders to the reality of Jesus being the Messiah and their need to repent and believe on Him. Though his ministry was a practical one, he studied and knew the Word. He forgave his persecutors; as the people stoned Stephen to death, his attitude was not one of bitterness, resentment or vengeance, but of forgiveness and love. Like his Saviour who cried out "*forgive them*" so Stephen cried out "*lay not this sin to their charge*".

Phillip

As well as what we know about him from Acts 6, there are some other passages of Scripture that tell us more about Phillip. In Acts 8:4-8 he is used of God to preach the Gospel in the region of Samaria. His ministry was to serve tables, however, like Stephen, he also saw the need to preach the Gospel. Relationships between the Jews and the Samaritans were tense, yet Phillip saw beyond all of this and brought the Word of God to them.

Later in Acts 8 [v26-38] he is used of God to bring a man to Christ using the Old Testament Scriptures. Like Stephen, he knew the Word of God and was able to share it with others. At the end of the chapter Phillip is preaching from city to city along the coast of Israel.

In Acts 21:8-10 he is now a church planter in Caesarea, he has godly daughters who had committed themselves to Christ and he welcomed Paul, the man who had once persecuted the church and gave approval to the death of Stephen, to stay with him in his house for *many days*.

These men, chosen to serve tables, were faithful to this ministry. However, they were also men of compassion, bible knowledge, courage and hospitality. They were exalted for their faithfulness and character; Stephen was promoted to glory and Phillip became a church planter.

Each believer can continue to grow in their love for Christ, for the Word, for the body and for the lost. Phillip and Stephen both understood that, though they were to serve tables, this was not all they were called to do as followers of Christ. Each Deacon must understand this.

Study 9

Practicalities

How are Deacons Chosen

Following the basic principles of Acts 6, each church is a little different on how Deacons are chosen for office. Whatever local church you are a part of will likely have a place in their constitution on how to place men into the office of a Deacon.

The basic principles are as follows from Acts 6;

- The Elders of the church explain that there is a need for a man or a number of men to take on the role of Deacon. Perhaps the church has expanded some ministries or grown numerically, or perhaps some Deacons have died or stepped down [v2-3]
- The members of the church prayerfully consider men who could fulfil the role. They are to consider, not the physical qualifications of a Deacon, such as age, intelligence, secular success, personality or wealth, but rather the spiritual characteristics of a man of God [V5]
- The members of the church then nominate certain men who they feel are spiritually mature and are biblically qualified for the role [v5]
- The nominations are then brought to the Elders and these men prayerfully consider each candidate. The Elders are tasked in seeking God's will for the church [v6]. The Elders will then choose from the list none, some or all of the men nominated for the role.
- The Elders will then take the chosen names to the church members for a vote. Each church will differ on the percentage needed for a man to be brought into the role. If a man receives the required percentage, he will become a Deacon of the church.

Again, there may be some differences in each church over how exactly this takes place, but the basic principles will be the same. If a man is not accepted by the Elders it is not because he is not liked by them, it is most likely because the Elders believe he is not yet ready for the position or because something has biblically disqualified him from the role [1 Timothy 3:13].

What does a Deacon Do?

Some churches may have a busy and thriving food ministry such as in Acts 6. However, many churches don't have such ministries in this period of time. Since the Bible doesn't actually explain what a Deacon should do specifically, we need to consider the general principles.

- The Deacons support the Elders in their work of preaching the Word of God. Anything that distracts the leadership of the church from their priority ministry is something that the Deacons should be willing to take responsibility over.
- The Deacons are not slaves of the Elders, they assist the Elders in their work. The Elders must continue to carefully and prayerfully seek God's will for the church in line with the Scriptures. The Deacons, then, submit to the Elders as the under-shepherds of Christ's flock.
- The Deacons role is not only physical. It is inaccurate to say that Elders deal with the spiritual work of the church while Deacons deal with the physical. The qualifications of a Deacon are not physical in nature, but spiritual. They may be asked to lead a ministry, visit the believers, disciple a new convert or preach a sermon.

Study 10

Warning and Reward

Warning 1 – Service without Fellowship

In Luke 10:38-42, Christ is teaching in Bethany. Martha has invited Him to her home and she is busy preparing a meal. She was busy with much serving [*diakonia*] and began to resent her sister, Mary, who was sitting at Christ's feet, hearing from Him. Martha, flustered, asks Christ to make Mary help her. Christ, instead, explained to her that listening to Him was actually better than serving Him. This is not to say that serving Him was bad, but that hearing from Him was better.

The warning here is simple; in any ministry, we cannot substitute our ongoing relationship with Christ with our service for Him. This will leave you discouraged, resentful and spiritually dry. In whatever ministry we are involved in, it is vital that it comes from a heart in good fellowship with Christ.

Warning 2 – Service without Pure Doctrine

In Revelation 2:18-29 Christ is speaking to the church at Thyatira. He knows their works, love, service [*diakonia*], faith and endurance. However, it was not enough; they had allowed false teaching to creep into the church. Good service is important and essential to the body, however, the church is the pillar and ground of truth in this world and we must maintain pure doctrine.

Warning 3 – Service without Humility

In Luke 17:7-10 Christ teaches us that we are not to think of ourselves highly because we are serving Him. There is always danger of allowing pride to creep in to our lives, especially when we are placed into an honoured position. We must be careful to have an accurate view of ourselves, whatever position we are placed into; we are servants of Christ, simply doing our duty.

Reward

Hebrews 6:10 and Luke 12:37, as we have already noted in previous studies, promises us that God sees our service and honours it as done unto Him. Christ will honour His followers at the Bema Seat and in the Kingdom Age to come.

1 Timothy 3:13 tells us "*they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus*".

A good degree carries the idea of an exalted position. In other words, just as the principle of humility taught throughout Scripture; God exalts the humble and makes the great those who make themselves servants of all. These men are not looking to be exalted and that is exactly why God exalts them as examples to the rest of the body of Christ. The church of God is commanded to esteem such people highly [1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Philippians 2:29]

Great boldness means he will have the reputation of being a man of God. He will earn respect and love from the people of God. His example will inspire others to service.

The reward, then, of humble service, is honour. Honour from God and His people. However, only if a man fulfils this role biblically, humbly and in right relationship with God in Christ will he ever receive such honour.