

Deacon, Deaconess.

Terms designating an officer in a local church, derived from a Greek word meaning “servant” or “minister.” The term “diaconate” is used for the office itself or for the collective body of deacons and deaconesses. As with many other biblical words used today in a technical sense, the words “deacon” and “deaconess” began as popular, nontechnical terms. Both in secular first-century Greek culture and in the NT, they described a variety of services.

Origins of the Concept.

Greek Usage. References have been found in extrabiblical writings where the Greek word “deacon” meant “waiter,” “servant,” “steward,” or “messenger.” In at least two instances it indicated a baker and a cook. In religious usage the word described various attendants in pagan temples. Ancient documents show “deacons” presiding at the dedication of a statue to the Greek god Hermes. Serapis and Isis, Egyptian deities, were served by a college of “deacons” presided over by a priest.

General NT Usage. The same word was used by biblical writers in a general sense to describe various ministries or services. Not until later in the development of the apostolic church was the term applied to a distinct body of church officers. Among its general usages “deacon” refers to a waiter at meals (Jn 2:5, 9); a king’s attendant (Mt 22:13); a servant of Satan (2 Cor 11:15); a servant of God (2 Cor 6:4); a servant of Christ (2 Cor 11:23); a servant of the church (Col 1:24, 25); and a political ruler (Rom 13:4).

The NT presents servanthood in the sense of ministry or service as a mark of the whole church—that is, as normative for all disciples (Mt 20:26–28; Lk 22:26, 27). Jesus’ teaching on the final judgment equates ministry with feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned (Mt 25:31–46). The entire NT emphasizes compassionate care for individuals’ physical and spiritual needs as well as the giving of one’s self to meeting those needs. Such service is ultimately a ministry to Christ himself (Mt 25:45).

Ministry in church life is based on spiritual gifts distributed to “members of the body” (1 Cor 12:12). The apostles Paul and Peter in their treatment of spiritual gifts made reference to “service” as a form of the Holy Spirit’s ministry (Rom 12:7; 1 Pt 4:11).

Origin of the Office. There is little question that before the end of the first century the general term for service or ministry became a kind of title for a position or office in the church. That development evidently went through several stages.

Some biblical scholars emphasize a relationship between the *hazzan* of the Jewish synagogue and the Christian office of deacon. The *hazzan* opened and closed the synagogue doors, kept it clean, and handed out the books for reading. It was to such a person that Jesus handed the scroll of Isaiah after finishing his reading (Lk 4:20).

Other NT scholars give considerable attention to the choosing of the seven (Acts 6:1–6); they see that action as a historical forerunner of a more developed structure (Phil 1:1; 1 Tm 3:8–13; the two specific references to an “office” of deacon). Luke devoted considerable attention in Acts to the selection of a new set of church leaders. Overworked with a variety of responsibilities, the 12 apostles proposed a division of labor to ensure care for the Hellenist (Greek-speaking) widows in the church’s daily distribution of food and alms. “Seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3)

subsequently became prominent in the Jerusalem congregation, doing works of charity and caring for physical needs.

Some scholars caution that the diaconate should not be exclusively linked with charitable works, since the Greek word used in Acts 6:2 is related to the word translated “ministry of the word” in verse 4. Those chosen to oversee the care for physical needs were people of spiritual stature. Stephen, for instance, “full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs” (Acts 6:8). Philip, appointed as one of the seven in Acts 6, “preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 8:12). Philip also baptized (Acts 8:38) and is referred to as an evangelist (Acts 21:8).

Deacons in the Early Church.

Preliminary Stage. Those who cite Acts 6 as a preliminary stage of the office of deacon refer to the spread of the practice from the church in Jerusalem to the gentile congregations sprouting elsewhere. Many churches probably took the appointing of “the Jerusalem seven” as a pattern to follow, some even adopting the number seven. In a letter of the third-century pope Cornelius, for example, the church of Rome was said to have maintained seven for the number of deacons.

By the time the church of Philippi received its instructions from the apostle Paul (c. A.D. 62), and Timothy had Paul’s first letter in hand, “deacon” had become a technical term referring to a specific office in the churches. In Philippians 1:1 Paul addressed the church in general and then added “with bishops and deacons.” Some interpreters consider that to be a clear establishment of two distinct groups within the larger church body, though no further description is given. Possibly the deacons of that congregation were responsible for collecting and then dispatching the offerings referred to (Phil 4:14–18).

In 1 Timothy 3:8–13 instructions are given about qualifications for the office of deacon. Although that is the most detailed treatment of the subject in the NT, it is actually quite sketchy. Most of the qualifications, dealing with personal character and behavior, are similar to those for a bishop. For instance, a deacon is to be truthful, monogamous, “not addicted to much wine,” and a responsible parent. Verse 11, requiring that “the women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things,” may refer not to deacons’ wives but to deaconesses, as several translations note (NIV, NEB). In any event, it is clear that women participated in the work of the diaconate.

In contrast to the office of bishop (1 Tm 3:2), deacons are not described as providing teaching or hospitality. In fact, no mention is made of any functional qualifications to clarify deacons’ or deaconesses’ roles in the early church. The character qualifications listed are appropriate for those with monetary and administrative responsibilities (as Acts 6:1–6 suggests). Timothy is told that good deacons will not go unrewarded; not only will their faith increase, but also their good standing among those whom they serve (1 Tm 3:13).

The NT writings indicate that to be chosen as a deacon or deaconess is a high compliment and affirmation. Named as “deacons” were Timothy (1 Thes 3:2; 1 Tm 4:6), Tychicus (Col 4:7), Epaphras (Col 1:7), Paul (1 Cor 3:5)—and even Christ (Rom 15:8, “servant”). Biblical “deaconing” is not characterized by power and prominence but by service to others. In imitation of Jesus’ life, the deacon or deaconess followed the servant pattern. The Christian diaconate thus contrasted sharply with the prevailing Greek thought of service, which was considered unworthy of the dignity of free men. (The

Greek philosopher Plato wrote, “How can man be happy when he has to serve someone?”)

The office of deacon differed from the office of elder, which was adapted from a definite Jewish pattern in the OT (see Nm 11:16, 17; Dt 29:10). The diaconate, on the other hand, developed from the strong, personal, historical example of Jesus, the servant who compassionately met concrete human needs.

Later Developments. As the office of deacon became more firmly established, its duties could be defined as those of pastoral care. The poor and the sick received their service, not only physically but also with instruction and consolation. The homes of church members became familiar territory to a deacon or deaconess. A pattern of visitation was established to discover and then meet the needs of the church body at large. Although that included the administration of funds, it went far beyond it. Those who served as deacons and deaconesses undoubtedly became symbols of loving care for the church in general.

Where the office of deacon fits into the larger pattern of church order within the NT is difficult to determine because of the obvious variety present during the formative years. Some church historians conclude that as ecclesiastical structure developed, elders provided congregational leadership. Deacons assisted them, especially in social services and pastoral care. The late first and early second centuries witnessed a distinctive threefold ministry, of deacons, elders (presbyters), and bishops. Bishops or “overseers” began to exercise authority over areas or groups of churches.

Deaconess.

Where did women fit into the ministry of the early church? Paul’s inclusion of references to women in ministry is striking when compared with the role of women in general in the first century. He commended Phoebe for her service in the church at Cenchreae, using the word “deacon” to describe her (Rom 16:1). He praised her as a “helper” (Rom 16:2), a word that denotes leadership qualities (cf. Rom 12:8; 1 Tm 3:4, 5). Some scholars have used that reference as an example of early development of the office of deaconess. Others have interpreted it in a nontechnical sense, meaning that Phoebe functioned in a generally serving role and thus was worthy of recognition at Rome. Whether “deacon” was used technically or descriptively, ministry for both women and men in the NT was patterned after the example of Jesus, who “came not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10:45). Because of the large number of female converts (Acts 5:14; 17:4), women functioned in such areas of ministry as visitation, instruction in discipleship, and assistance in baptism. Deaconesses are mentioned in third-century documents as administering baptism to female converts.

Considering the rigid separation of the sexes in the Near East at that time, female participation in church ministry stands out in bold relief. A governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger (d. 113?), in his *Correspondence with Trajan* verified women officeholders in the church. Pliny also mentioned two deaconesses who were martyred for the cause of Christ.¹

¹ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (589–591). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.