

“To the Servants:” A Paper on Deacons

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Abstract:

At e2, people often inquire about resources for “deacons.” We keep a strong, laser-sharp focus on helping elders through this ministry, not church leaders generally, but in answer to such frequent inquiries, we put some thoughts regarding “deacons” to paper here in this paper.

First Things First: The Word Itself

“Deacon” is a borrowed English word. To be very specific, it is a *transliteration* of the Greek word δεακον (and various other forms) that was common in the first century.

Translation is the action of conveying meaning from one language into another. Doing so requires one person to have proficiency in at least two languages. Typically, translation requires one to be familiar with multiple “pieces of a puzzle” in the two languages: alphabetical characters, different phonemes, competence in thinking with and using a different grammar structure, etc. Translating from English to Spanish is slightly easier than English to, say, Mandarin Chinese. English, Spanish, German, French, Italian, and other languages all generally use a Latin alphabet. Translating English to Russian, Mandarin, Hindi, Japanese, Cambodian, etc. requires a deeper skill set because the alphabets, syntax and even emphasis on inflection (that is, when pronunciation subtleties change a word’s meaning) differ between origin and target language so radically. Translation conveys *meaning* between languages.

Transliteration is the action of conveying the sounds of one language to another; the sound of a word in one language is, in effect, written in the characters of a new language. This is what happened with the adoption in English of the Greek word “δεακον.” The sounds uttered by a first-century Greek speaker when they read the Greek letters delta-epsilon-alpha-kappa-omicron-nu gave us our English “deacon;” the two are very similar audibly. *Meaning* was not conveyed. Only *sound* was conveyed.

When a Greek speaker said δεακον, they were conveying the *idea* of “service,” “servant,” etc. That’s really what this discussion comes down to: “deacons” *serve*.

There are approximately 100 occurrences of δεακον and its various forms (i.e. prefixes/suffixes, as a verb, as a noun) in the New Testament. We will not deal with each reference in-depth as

there are too many for such a paper. Find a list of most of the references along with a short explanatory note as an appendix at the end of this paper.

For a quick comparison, we here quote a few phrases in which this Greek word appears, but we have flipped our typical English expression. (If, in the published New Living Translation, "deacon" is rendered, we instead quote the phrase below with "servant" and vice-versa.)

Matt. 23.11 The greatest among you must be a deacon.

1 Cor. 3.5 ...who is Apollos? Who is Paul? ... only God's deacons through whom you believed...

Phil. 1.1 This letter is from Paul and Timothy, deacons of Christ Jesus.

Col. 1.7 ...from Epaphras, our beloved co-worker. He is Christ's faithful deacon ...

1 Tim. 3.8 In the same way, servants must be well-respected and have integrity.

We do not mis-quote these verses for the sake of muddying the water, dear reader, but to clarify. Remember, each of these five passages *use the very same Greek word*. The renditions above seem odd only because of our cultural, habitual use and abuse of the transliteration *deacon*. A "deacon" is merely a servant. *We* have wrongly made it into an office or title in the contemporary church.

Second: Qualifications

Just as Paul had underlying expectations of overseers/elders for the local congregation, he also had qualifying expectations of *servants*. Here we quote, as nearly as possible, a word-for-word translation of the original Greek from 1 Timothy 3.8-13. We have bracketed and grayed the four instances of δεακον (or a form of it) in this text.

vs 8 [Servants], likewise, must be dignified, not double-tongued, not to much wine being given, not greedy of dishonest gain,

vs 9 holding to the mystery of the faith with clear conscience.

vs 10 Also these, now let them be tested first; then [let them serve], being blameless.

vs 11 Women, likewise, must be dignified, not slanderers, clear-minded, faithful in all things.

vs 12 [Servants] let be of one woman husbands, their children well-managing and their own households.

vs 13 Those for well [having served] a standing for themselves good acquired and great confidence in faith that is in Anointed One Jesus.

In a strong reflection of Paul's expectations of elders laid out in 1 Tim. 3.1-7, servants need to be examples worth following to the congregation. Jesus Himself told us to "do as I have done to

you” just after He washed the feet of the twelve (John 13.15). He led by example and we should be doing likewise in His Church. First, we must say that someone *servicing* the church is, by definition, present with the church. It should go without saying, but in this 21st century as church attendance is averaging 1.7 times per month or less in the USA, it must be said. Whether wintering out-of-state, traveling for work/business often or with sports leagues, etc., those who are absent for a significant portion of the year are probably not *examples* to the congregation worth following. If a person is *overseeing* or *servicing* (i.e. elder or deacon), would we point a new believer to such a person and say “do what they’re doing” if they are absent ten, twenty, thirty Sundays per year?

As an *example*, servants are people of integrity, respected, not driven or controlled by external things like money or alcohol, and committed to the Christian faith without reservation. Verse 10’s “blameless” is a key theme in Paul’s estimation of church leaders, both for servants and for overseers. To be clear, the centrality of blamelessness in Paul’s evaluation of church leaders comes back to the litmus test of leading by example – is this person an example to our congregation who’s worth following?

We also would be remiss if we did not address gender as it relates to the role of *servants*. There is no limitation on *servants* being men only or women only. In the passage above, Paul uses masculine indicators in Greek. Paul, additionally, says that a *servant* must be “a one-woman husband,” as he stipulated for elders in 1 Timothy 3.2. On the one hand, this would preclude women from *servicing* as *servants*. On the other hand, in an often-cited phrase in the gender-roles-in-church debate, Paul referred to Phoebe in Romans 16.1 as “a [servant] of the church.” Yes, δεακον. Therefore, on the face of it, an elder is “a one-woman man,” and a deacon is “a one-woman man.” However, we have a countering statement from Paul in Romans 16.1 regarding *servants*. We never have such a countering statement from Paul regarding *overseers*. With Phoebe *servicing* the church well, we apply that to our churches also; *servants*, δεακονος, are men and women who fit the description of 1 Timothy 3: people of integrity, honest, an example, faithful in their marriage and family relationships, with households that evidence an orderly and godly life. What seems a bit awkward in English in verses 11 and 12 – “women” – is indeed responsibly translated as “wives.” Throughout the New Testament, the Greek word for “woman” is used when the context plainly means someone’s wife; there was no other word used.

A final word about those who should be considered for a *servant* role. Please notice what Paul did *not* write in verse 13: “Those who do well as [servants] will be rewarded with a promotion to elder.” Not what the text says, yet one would be forgiven for thinking it an unwritten rule in most churches. A deacon/servant is **not** an “elder-in-training” nor “junior elder” nor “elder lite.”

Viewing deacons as such inherently mis-identifies those who should be *servants*. When we start from the wrong so-called Square One, we're bound to miss the mark at every subsequent stage. In the contemporary church we too often default to thinking in organizational hierarchies and flow charts; that elders report to the preacher and deacons report to elders, or some such nonsense. Overseers, well ... they *oversee* the spiritual condition of the church and set the tone for her spiritual formation. *Servants* – we're not trying to be insulting here – they serve.

Third: Role

Let's look at the very first moment the Church instituted this somewhat special role of *servant* for insights about how it functions. If *deacon/servant* isn't an office or title, what then? The opening verses of Acts 6 get us on the right track. We again replace the rendered English words below; in this passage, we have used "deaconing" simply for grammatical fit though it isn't a word.

But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily [deaconing] of food.

So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not [deaconing] a food program. And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and [deaconing] the word."

Acts 6.1-4

From Acts 2 through 5, the roles in the Church were simply: *Apostles* and *everyone else*. In Acts 6, that changed. This was the first structural change that the Church underwent as she started becoming "one body with many parts" (Rom. 12.5, 1 Cor. 12.12). The first role in the Church filled by *deacons/servants* was, in effect, Benevolence Ministry Leader.

Not only were Lead Servants appointed to ensure adequate response to the needs of the benevolence ministry, but the Apostles, then, were freed to continue "deaconing" the Word to the people of the Church. Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas *served* food, and the Apostles *served* teaching. Both are service-oriented tasks, positions, roles.

In one sense, we are **all** deacons in the Body, serving each other. On the other hand, it is worth noting that in vetting and appointing these seven in the way that they did, the Apostles took some steps worth mimicking. By vetting, laying on hands and praying for these seven appointees, the Apostles were showing the Church these men had the authority and

responsibility to carry out the new benevolence ministry. People knew that if a new widow moved to town and became part of the growing Church, one of these seven would need to be told, not Peter, Bartholomew, etc. These seven were the designated leaders – hands laid-on and prayed-over – and leaders *lead* by setting the right example, doing what their role requires, unhesitant to roll up proverbial sleeves and be in the trenches, ministering.

The first deacons led a burgeoning benevolence ministry. A *servant* might lead any number of ministry types or needs today, depending on the congregation's ministry priorities and context. A deacon might lead and oversee a church's provision of a post-funeral meal and follow-up meal/food deliveries in the days following someone's passing. This is just one facet or sub-type of ministry that could fall under a church's benevolent outreach. A deacon/servant might be the key leader of kids' ministry in a congregation. One role often overlooked for leadership by a deacon is in offering collection, counting, and deposit. Congregations *cannot* put all the financial responsibility of a congregation on one set of shoulders. A volunteer, a *servant*, might be the best way for a congregation to introduce non-staff accountability into the process. If a staff person always delivers the deposit to the bank on Monday morning, a *deacon* might be the point person for the offering's counting on Sunday. Every stage of the collection, counting, and deposit should have multiple parties involved for transparency and accountability, but all or part of the Sunday morning logistics being primarily under the oversight of a volunteer might be a highly helpful step that can protect staff from "appearances of evil" and accusation, (if staff are currently doing too much in this realm). A servant might oversee a sports outreach to the congregation's neighborhood. The possibilities are myriad.

One last thought in this realm of the *role* filled by a deacon. It is the word of choice (δειακον) for Paul as he discussed spiritual gifts in both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12; that is, he is, in effect, saying "if your gift is serving others, deacon well" (Rom. 12.7).

Fourth: Adjustments

Finally, there are a number of adjustments we should make in ourselves and in our congregations regarding the concept of servants/deacons.

We need to, internally, adjust our thinking. Rather than officer of the church to whom we must defer, a *deacon* is simply the example that I, as a fellow volunteer in my church, should follow in a specific context. In my own home congregation, we have worship hours at 9:15, 11:00 and 4:30 on Sundays. When I volunteer in the nursery, Annette is the primary example for me to follow if I'm in the toddlers' room at 4:30 (which I, personally, typically am). If I volunteer in the

morning at 11 (which is infrequent but I have), Jeff is the primary example to follow. At those different times, they are the people who lead the room. They're typically the ones who start the songs and are willing to look goofy doing nursery-rhyme motions to simplistic music. But the toddlers love it. I have watched those kids engage with these servant-leaders in ways they simply do not when other faces are in front. Jeff and Annette are the first to get their fingers marked-up when it's time to do crayons or stamps for the craft/picture time. As often as not, if a kid needs a diaper, they're the first to notice and proactively just *do it*. They lead in those contexts with great moral authority. Because they lead their ministry contexts so proactively, Joanna (the paid staff nursery director) and Allison (the paid staff kids' director) can give their attention to other matters on Sundays. No vote was needed. No motions. No mourning among the kids when, after three years (or whatever other arbitrary number) they're required to abruptly move on. Over previous years, Jeff and Annette (and many others) have simply shown up, willing to help, and then proven themselves trustworthy in serving those ministry needs. Their names and faces don't appear anywhere on the church's site with accompanying title, but they are indeed "deaconing well" the ministry our congregation has for toddlers.

Once we adjust our thinking internally we can then adjust, as concurrently described just above, the understanding our congregation has toward servants and their function within the Body. Especially for a new ministry, a congregation's leadership – pastors, elders, etc. – can and should make much of a new outreach effort, setting aside time during corporate worship to pray, lay hands, and *commission* a new servant to a new work. What was described just above regarding nursery is the very, we might say, "lightest" description of a deacon's place and work. If someone would start a volunteer sports outreach, for example, welcoming informal gatherings for pickup basketball or soccer in the church's side yard, and numbers of additional people keep coming, the congregation may want to make that a resourced, formalized ministry under the church leadership's oversight. At that point, vetting as a *servant* is warranted, just as the seven were in Acts 6.3-6. Perhaps over an additional year or two, that volunteer position would become a part-time paid position, perhaps even full-time.

If we adjust our own thinking and adjust how servants serve in a congregation, it will require that we adjust how such people are noticed, vetted, and selected. This might even require that we adjust the bylaws of our congregation.

We should also adjust our expectations of how, whom, and for how long deacons fulfill their servants' role. Life circumstances change, and we can (and should) be very liberal in our understanding of the comings and goings of such servants. Acts 6.3: "So, brothers, select seven

men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility, for a period of up to but not exceeding three (3) years, notwithstanding concurrent overlapping terms of service coinciding with the chairmanship..." No! Not what the text says! In the past, a certain ministry colleague was frequently heard to say, "In God's economy, the resources are always available." That includes people. We should not beleaguer our congregation's servants with multiple pages of quasi-legal language stipulating some things about their volunteerism but prohibiting other things and so on.

Now a final word about adjusting the question "Do you have deacon training material?".

Every congregation is unique; that is to be expected in the living entity that is the Church. Focusing on elders, e2 would not put together materials for all *servants* in myriad congregations nationwide. Rather, pastors and elders can *serve* their *servants* by creating training venues and opportunities, in whatever ways that might be appropriate in each congregation. *Servants* need to be further equipped in their own areas of service. The servant-leaders of a church – pastors and elders – who are closest to the situation are in a great position to facilitate training. They don't need to be subject-matter experts, pastors/elders don't need to be the trainers, but rather craft an environment in which training is part of the regular rhythm among the church's teams.

The one item we would encourage is this: avoid requiring that *deacons* participate in all the church's business meetings. That's not their role – as expressed in Acts, at least. Nor would it preclude, of course, a *servant* or *servants* from meeting with the church's finance team, or meeting with the elders, etc., whenever appropriate.

Ultimately, when asked, "do you have deacon training material," we would reply:

In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, [deacon] them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

Romans 12.6-8

Just ... do it.

APPENDIX: Table of Δεακον References

The following are many of the references to the various forms of the Greek word δεακον and related forms. Same-verse references of the same type (i.e. multiple nouns in one verse) have been deleted but instances of one verse having both a noun and verb were retained. The references below correspond to the Strong's Concordance reference numbers 1247, 1248, and 1249. Primary source: <http://www.interlinearbible.org>

1. <i>Verb</i>	Matt. 4:11	32. Noun	Ac. 6:4	63. Noun	2 Cor. 11:8
2. <i>Verb</i>	Matt. 8:15	33. Noun	Ac. 11:29	64. Noun	2 Cor. 11:15
3. Noun	Matt. 20:26	34. Noun	Ac. 12:25	65. Noun	2 Cor. 11:23
4. <i>Verb</i>	Matt. 20:28	35. <i>Verb</i>	Ac. 19:22	66. Noun	Gal. 2:17
5. Noun	Matt. 22:13	36. Noun	Ac. 20:24	67. Noun	Eph. 3:7
6. Noun	Matt. 23:11	37. Noun	Ac. 21:19	68. Noun	Eph. 4:12
7. <i>Verb</i>	Matt. 25:44	38. Noun	Rom. 11:13	69. Noun	Eph. 6:21
8. <i>Verb</i>	Matt. 27:55	39. Noun	Rom. 12:7	70. Noun	Phil. 1:1
9. <i>Verb</i>	Mk. 1:13	40. Noun	Rom. 13:4	71. Noun	Col. 1:23
10. <i>Verb</i>	Mk. 1:31	41. <i>Verb</i>	Rom. 15:25	72. Noun	Col. 1:25
11. Noun	Mk. 9:35	42. Noun	Rom. 15:31	73. Noun	Col. 1:7
12. Noun	Mk. 10:43	43. Noun	Rom. 15:8	74. Noun	Col. 4:7
13. <i>Verb</i>	Mk. 10:45	44. Noun	Rom. 16:1	75. Noun	Col. 4:17
14. <i>Verb</i>	Mk. 15:41	45. Noun	1 Cor. 3:5	76. Noun	1 Tim. 1:12
15. <i>Verb</i>	Lk. 4:39	46. Noun	1 Cor. 12:5	77. <i>Verb</i>	1 Tim. 3:10
16. <i>Verb</i>	Lk. 8:3	47. Noun	1 Cor. 16:15	78. Noun	1 Tim. 3:8
17. <i>Verb</i>	Lk. 10:40	48. <i>Verb</i>	2 Cor. 3:3	79. Noun	1 Tim. 3:12
18. Noun	Lk. 10:40	49. Noun	2 Cor. 3:6	80. <i>Verb</i>	1 Tim. 3:13
19. <i>Verb</i>	Lk. 12:37	50. Noun	2 Cor. 3:7	81. Noun	1 Tim. 4:6
20. <i>Verb</i>	Lk. 17:8	51. Noun	2 Cor. 3:8	82. <i>Verb</i>	2 Tim. 1:18
21. <i>Verb</i>	Lk. 22:26	52. Noun	2 Cor. 3:9	83. Noun	2 Tim. 4:5
22. <i>Verb</i>	Lk. 22:27	53. Noun	2 Cor. 4:1	84. Noun	2 Tim. 4:11
23. Noun	Jn. 2:5	54. Noun	2 Cor. 5:18	85. <i>Verb</i>	Phlm. v13
24. Noun	Jn. 2:9	55. Noun	2 Cor. 6:3	86. Noun	Heb. 1:14
25. <i>Verb</i>	Jn. 12:2	56. Noun	2 Cor. 6:4	87. <i>Verb</i>	Heb. 6:10
26. Noun	Jn. 12:26	57. <i>Verb</i>	2 Cor. 8:19	88. <i>Verb</i>	1 Pet. 1:12
27. <i>Verb</i>	Jn. 12:26	58. <i>Verb</i>	2 Cor. 8:20	89. <i>Verb</i>	1 Pet. 4:10
28. Noun	Ac. 1:17	59. Noun	2 Cor. 8:4	90. <i>Verb</i>	1 Pet. 4:11
29. Noun	Ac. 1:25	60. Noun	2 Cor. 9:1	91. Noun	Rev. 2:19
30. Noun	Ac. 6:1	61. Noun	2 Cor. 9:12		
31. <i>Verb</i>	Ac. 6:2	62. Noun	2 Cor. 9:13		