



If we desire to establish congregational leadership based on the New Testament pattern, we must consider the role of the Deacon. This role is mentioned in two specific passages. The Apostle Paul greets the Philippian church by saying,

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” (Philippians 1:1)

When writing to the evangelist Timothy, Paul wrote instructions about the qualifications of church elders. Immediately after that passage, the Apostle gave a similar list of qualifications for deacons (cf. 1 Tim. 3:8ff). Based on these

passages, we understand that deacons are an official position in congregational organization. But what is a deacon?

As with other roles of church leadership, the title can help us understand the role. While the word “deacon” is only found a few times in most English translations (e.g. three times in the ESV), the Greek word it comes from is found frequently in the New Testament. So, to study the topic of deacons, we should look at the larger teaching of the New Testament concerning this word and its meaning. As we do, we will find that not only is there much to learn about “deacons,” but that all Christians have a role of service in the Lord’s church!

Where Does “Deacon” Come From?

The English word “deacon” is a transliteration, not a translation. That means the word “deacon” wasn’t originally an English word. It was created by translators who made an English word out of a Greek word. For example, the word “Baptize” is a transliteration. The Greek is *baptisma*, which means “to immerse.” But instead of translating *baptisma* as “immerse” early translators created a new English word—“baptism.” The same is true of “deacon.” The Greek word rendered “deacon” in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8, 12 is *diakonos*. While the word is transliterated in these three verses, it is actually found (along with related Greek words) several other times in the New Testament!

There are three words used in the New Testament that are relevant to this study:

- **Diakonos** (noun): 29 x’s in NT
- **Diakonia** (noun): 34 x’s in NT
- **Diakoneo** (verb): 37 x’s in NT

As you can see, these three words are closely related, and are used frequently. Combined, these words appear 100 times in the New Testament! The most common way of translating these words is as follows:

- **Diakonos:** “servant” or “minister”
- **Diakonia:** “ministry” or “service”
- **Diakoneo:** “serve” or “minister”

Some Definitions

While we might feel like “deacon” is an obscure word we don’t fully understand, surely we see the simple meaning of the words “servant” and “serve.” Still, let’s consider a few definitions of these Greek words.

Mounce’s Expository Dictionary provides these definitions:

Diakonos: *One who renders service to another; and attendant, servant...The idea of one who waits on tables is a part of the conceptual sphere of diakonos, but the word includes much more...*

Diakoneo: *To wait, attend upon, serve. It carries the basic idea of serving as exemplified in serving at a table or serving individuals.*

Another notable Greek lexicon (BDAG) provides similar definitions:

Generally one who is busy with something in a manner of assistance to someone. (1) One who serves as an intermediary in a transaction, agent, intermediary, courier. (2) One who gets something done, at the behest of a superior, assistant.

Generally to render service in a variety of ways either at someone’s behest or voluntarily and frequently with suggestion of movement.

Which Means...

Simply put, a deacon is a servant, or one who serves. A few things to note about this concept. A deacon is not necessarily a slave—in fact the word “deacon” denotes a willing service. Also, the core concept of a “deacon” is someone who expends their time and energy providing a service to another person or group of people. A “deacon” is a person who serves others to help them meet their needs.

“Deacons” in the New Testament

The office of a deacon may seem like a difficult subject, but the basic concept of service is not. In fact, it is at the very heart of Christianity. Remember when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment? He answered:

...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Mt. 22:37-40)

Jesus also told His disciples:

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (Jn. 13:35)

Our love for one another and our fellow man are to be hallmarks of our faith. But how do we love others? One key characteristic of Christ-like love is caring service. About this, the New Testament has much to offer.

Greatness through Service

The Greek's did not particularly esteem service. They felt it was much better to be served than to serve. And, truthfully, most civilizations, even ours, have agreed. But Jesus set a very different precedent for His followers. In Matthew 20:20-24, the mother of James and John came to Jesus and asked Him to give her sons the most prominent positions of His future kingdom. This didn't set well with the other disciples. But Jesus said to them all:

*...You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your **servant**, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be **served** but to **serve**, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

In Luke's account (Lk. 22:24-27) Jesus says, “For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who **serves**? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who **serves**.” In the Lord's church, greatness is not about what we receive from others, but how we serve others.

Even Jesus Himself is a “deacon” for He serves others! We see this in the way He interacted with and helped others who were sick, hungry, and especially in need of spiritual help. We see His attitude of service when He washed the disciples' feet (Jn. 13). And we especially see it at the cross, where Jesus serves by providing for our greatest need—the need of forgiveness—by sacrificing Himself for our sins. And Jesus expects us to follow His example.

You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. (Jn. 13:13-15)

In Matthew 25:34-46, Jesus says that on Judgment Day, some will be welcomed because they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned. Those who didn't do such things are turned away. In verse 44 they refer to such actions as “ministering” (Gk. *diakoneo*). Clearly, service is important to King Jesus.

The New Testament writers have much to say about serving. Just a few passages:

*Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if **service**, in our **servicing**; the one who teaches, in his teaching (Rom. 12:6-7)*

*Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the **service** of the saints— be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer (1 Cor. 16:15-16).*

*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of **ministry**, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:11-13)*

*Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in **serv**ing the saints, as you still do. (Heb. 6:9-10)*

*As each has received a gift, use it to **serve** one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who **serve**s by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 4:10-11)*

Summary

Although Christ's Kingdom outshines all other kingdoms in terms of glory and power, it is not a kingdom of tyranny or oppression. It is a kingdom of holiness, love, and service. And every kingdom citizen has a role to play in the service of the kingdom.

By the Lord's design, it is good for the church to recognize and appoint qualified men to serve officially as "deacons" or "servants" of the church. But also by the Lord's design, we all work together to serve one another.

You are a deacon, whether or not you ever can or will be officially appointed by the church. That is, you might not be chosen by the congregation and officially recognized and appointed by the elders as a servant of this congregation, appointed to a specific task or tasks. But you are a servant of Jesus, and thus you serve Him, His church, and His people.

Further Study

As mentioned, there are 100 occurrences of the various Greek words considered in this study. Here is a list of all those passages if you would like to use it for further study:

<i>Mt 4:11</i>	<i>Lk 17:8</i>	<i>Ro 16:1</i>	<i>Php 1:1</i>
<i>Mt 8:15</i>	<i>Lk 22:26 -27</i>	<i>1 Co 3:5</i>	<i>Col 1:7, 23, 25</i>
<i>Mt 20:26, 28</i>	<i>Jn 2:5, 9</i>	<i>1 Co 12:5</i>	<i>Col 4:7, 17</i>
<i>Mt 22:13</i>	<i>Jn 12:2, 26</i>	<i>1 Co 16:15</i>	<i>1 Ti 1:12</i>
<i>Mt 23:11</i>	<i>Ac 1:17, 25</i>	<i>2 Co 3:3, 6-9</i>	<i>1 Ti 3:8, 10, 12-13</i>
<i>Mt 25:44</i>	<i>Ac 6:1-2, 4</i>	<i>2 Co 4:1</i>	<i>2 Ti 1:18</i>
<i>Mt 27:55</i>	<i>Ac 11:29</i>	<i>2 Co 5:18</i>	<i>2 Ti 4:5-6, 11</i>
<i>Mk 1:13, 31</i>	<i>Ac 12:25</i>	<i>2 Co 6:3-4</i>	<i>Phm 13</i>
<i>Mk 9:35</i>	<i>Ac 19:22</i>	<i>2 Co 8:4, 19-20</i>	<i>Heb 1:14</i>
<i>Mk 10:43, 45</i>	<i>Ac 20:24</i>	<i>2 Co 9:1, 12-13</i>	<i>Heb 6:10</i>
<i>Mk 15:41</i>	<i>Ac 21:19</i>	<i>2 Co 11:8, 15, 23</i>	<i>1 Pe 1:12</i>
<i>Lk 4:39</i>	<i>Ro 11:13</i>	<i>Ga 2:17</i>	<i>1 Pe 4:10-11</i>
<i>Lk 8:3</i>	<i>Ro 12:7</i>	<i>Eph 3:7</i>	<i>Re 2:19</i>
<i>Lk 10:40</i>	<i>Ro 13:4</i>	<i>Eph 4:12</i>	
<i>Lk 12:37</i>	<i>Ro 15:8, 25, 31</i>	<i>Eph 6:21</i>	