

# The Doctrine of Deacons

**As the Early Church grew, various functions were identified and given names. Those named functions were later re-defined to support a growing idea that Selected Saints were 'Ordained' into an Authoritarian Structure. We will consider how the word 'Deacon' was used to support such thinking.**

© Bill Hillebrenner & Rich Traver May, 2011 [ DD ] [www.goldensheaves.org](http://www.goldensheaves.org)

The New Testament was written in Greek. The word deacon used in the King James translation of the bible (KJV) is not a true translation of the Greek. It is a transliteration -- taking a word from one language into another as it sounds without translation. (Elohim is an example of Hebrew to English transliteration. The translation of Elohim (a Hebrew plural word) in the KJV is God or Gods.) The Greek word “**deakonos**” (Strong's Concordance #1249) in the KJV is transliterated deacon only five times \*. It is correctly translated “servant” three or more times. Servant is actually the most accurate translation. It is translated as “minister” over a dozen times.

But, the word ‘minister’ in our time conveys a different meaning than did ‘deacons’ in the first century.

## What Does ‘Deacon’ Mean?

Under a modern interpretation of what the word ‘minister’ indicates, it can leave the reader with a different impression of what is meant. To illustrate the deceptiveness of this transliteration more glaringly, the word deacon below is restored in a number of passages for effect in these texts where other words were translated:

“...Jesus Christ was a deacon of the circumcision for the truth of God...” (Rom. 15:8)

“...is Christ therefore the deacon of sin?” (Gal. 2:17)

Paul says “...I was made a deacon according to the gift of the grace of God...” (Eph. 3:7)

“...wherefore I Paul am made a deacon.” (Col. 1: 23 & 25)

“Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but deacons by whom ye believed...” (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 3:5)

“Who also hath made us able deacons of the new testament...” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 3:6)

“...approving ourselves as the deacons of God...” (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 6:4)

## 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy Chapter 3

\* Ironically, the Greek word “deakonos” is never translated deacon in the singular. Both places in which the KJV has singular deacon (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 3:10,12), it is rendered in the English as a five word phrase “the office of a deacon” which is in Greek “deakonea” (Strong's #1248 or 1249) correctly referring to a ministry or service. (The five words in this phrase are only the one word in Greek.)

“Deakonos” is what a person who serves is; “Deakonea” is the service he gives, not an “office” that he occupies. The plural word “deacons” is used three times in the KJV; Phil. 1:1; 1<sup>st</sup> Tim. 3:8 & 12. Note that Philippians 1:1 shows the group of leaders of the Philippian church as “bishops and deacons”. The correct translation for bishops should be “overseers” (correct translation is given in some KJV margins) and ministers (or servants) for “deacons”. The false translation “bishops” (Greek “episcopos”) is correctly translated overseers in Acts 20:28.

So in 1<sup>st</sup> Tim. 3:8 it should read “Likewise must the servants (or ministers) be grave...”

Then we see that 1<sup>st</sup> Tim. 3:10 should be translated “and let these first also be proved, then let them serve, being blameless”. The Hebrew/Greek Interlinear Bible by Jay P. Green reads “...let them minister, being blameless...”.

Also in verse 13: *“For they that have served well purchase to themselves a good degree...”* The Interlinear Bible reads *“...ministered well”... .*

It is clear that what is being described is men who were servants of Christ or ministers. There is no such thing as the “office of deacon” or “office of bishop” in true scripture. (For true biblical family-type government see the article “Sent People, Older People and Servants” which explains the truth about apostles, elders and deacons (words used in the King James Bible)).

### **The Echelons of Service**

In that God is consistently the same, we see in Num. 8:24-26 two groups serving in the temple; a younger set (25-50 years old) who serve the Temple and an older set (over 50) who were serving *“to keep the charge.”* Likewise in 1<sup>st</sup> Tim. 3 we have servants (deacons/ministers) and overseers (the elder brethren serving as ministers). John also speaks of these two groups in the converted church families. *“I write unto you fathers because you have known him from the beginning; I write unto young men because you have overcome the wicked one ...”* (1<sup>st</sup> John 2:13-14)

Peter writing, now 60-70 years old, having become elderly, also makes it plain: *“The elders among you I exhort, who am also an elder..., likewise ye younger, submit to the elder. Yea all be subject one to another...with humility...”* (1<sup>st</sup> Pet 5:1 & 5) Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. As the God of the Old Testament, He inspired the command *“you shall rise up before the hoary head (a true elder), and honor the face of the old man, and fear thy God.”* (Leviticus 19:32) Is it any less required of us in this age?

### **Is Deacon an “Office”?**

A tenacious tradition holds that there is an “office” of deacon in 1<sup>st</sup> Tim. 3:10. This scripture is almost always read at “ordinations”. The seven of Acts 6 are traditionally called the first deacons. In the original scripture (Greek) there is no word “office” in 1<sup>st</sup> Tim 3, not for deacon nor for “bishop” \*. In the Sabbatarian Church of God tradition there were

never ordained “Bishops”. Rather, a tradition of “elders” were “ordained” using 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 3. The term “elder” is not found in I Tim 3. \*\* This is because many of the converted older men, true elders (over 50 as per Num. 8), as a body were to be overseers (falsely translated bishops) of the congregation, thus insuring a family, non-dictatorial atmosphere. Not all elders wanted to be overseers, because it was “work”! (1<sup>st</sup> Tim 3:1)

### **The Seven of Acts 6**

This passage is interesting, in that it illustrates the gross error of tradition.

Regarding Acts 6, from Encyclopedia Britannica we find: *“It is urged that the traditional view which regards the seven as deacons is untenable because the term “deacon” is never used in the narrative, and there is no reference to the office in the Acts.”* <sup>1</sup>

The King James Bible (KJV) was translated under the eye of the king of England who was put forth as the head of the evident church instead of the pope. A hierarchal church authority pyramid was retained. Hence we have the terms bishops and deacons used in the KJV.

First of all we need to make clear what was the underlying catalyst of Acts 6. Notice Acts 6:1 *“... a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministry”* (same Greek word as ‘ministry’ of Acts 6:4). Notice carefully that it was all the Grecians, not just the widows that were murmuring. We also need to note that the Grecians at this early date were circumcised as Jews (either ethnic Jews or circumcised Gentiles who had become religious Jews), (Acts 2:5-10) *“Many people of the land became Jews”.* (Esther 8:17). Uncircumcised Gentiles were not yet in the Church nor had any yet received the Holy Spirit. That would come more than decade later. The last named of the seven is noted as a proselyte (a circumcised Gentile).

---

<sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, 11<sup>th</sup> edition (1911), Presbyterian, pg. 281, paragraph 2e. (or go to 1911encyclopedia.org)

## Neglected in What Manner?

What exactly was the problem? How were the Grecian widows neglected? What was the “daily ministry” in which they were neglected? With the non-scriptural chapter break, we miss the flow of what is happening. We see in Acts 5:42 that the apostles were teaching and preaching daily in the temple and in every house. This was the daily ministry. There were about 5,000 or more disciples (Acts 4:4). Then in Acts 6:1 we see disciples multiplying. The teaching from house to house would indicate a lot of houses to visit to accommodate 5,000 disciples. We don't have the details as to whether the apostles split up to go to different houses or not. But the daily teaching ministry to new disciples must have been totally time consuming for the apostles. Furthermore, from Jewish tradition, the men would have been taught more thoroughly. The women would often be cooking or doing domestic duties and would learn from the men later.

The meaning of 1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 14:35 is not totally clear, but we know that in Luke 10:39-40 this was the case. Also the Grecian widows may have only known scriptures through the Greek Septuagint translation and not Hebrew. Teaching would require men that knew the scriptures well to teach of Jesus and the gospel. It would also require men who had been with Jesus during his teaching.

One word in Acts 6, the word “tables” in verse 2 has led many to believe that here is shown that “the office of deacon” involves doing only physical duties. The denial of this was cited in Encyclopedia Britannica above. But what was meant by “serving tables”? And how does it relate to the neglecting of not all the Grecians, but just their widows. (That would be those who don't have husbands!) We are not told. Most widows are good at cooking up food and setting it on a table. What was going on there?

How many houses would be required to visit 5,000 people? With 100 people to a house, it would mean 50 houses. Remember the Grecian widows were neglected in the daily ministry; the daily teaching of these newly baptized, converted disciples. This daily teaching would obviously be done with people

sitting down at tables in houses. Even today, most bible teaching is done with at least the teacher sitting at a table to lay open the Bible. Tables would be needed as they would have to roll out scrolls and not codexes (books). Some of the disciples quite logically had scrolls also to roll out on tables. Most of these scrolls would undoubtedly have been in Hebrew rather than from the Greek OT Septuagint.

This caused the Greek widows to be left out in the teaching and preaching service. Notice Acts 6:1 “... *a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the “daily ministry”*”. But we see that the apostles saw the need to be freed from this daily teaching ministry so they could go abroad and do the “*ministry of the word (Logos)*”, verse 4. Here, in both cases the Greek word ministry/ministration is the exact same Greek; “*deakonea*”!! But, we have already seen the most accurate translation of this word is “*service or ministry*”! What was this “*ministry of the word*”?

This was different than teaching finer points to already baptized disciples. As we see in Acts 4:29-31 the prayers were for boldness to preach the word. “The Word” was to preach that Jesus was the Messiah and about His crucifixion and resurrection. This was evangelism to the world, which was often done in synagogues of foreign cities and in public forums. Boldness would not be needed to teach baptized disciples. Boldness was needed to preach to the world. The apostles were told to **go into the world** and preach the gospel and be witnesses beginning with tribes of Israel. The apostles called for men “*full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*” to teach and preach locally in Jerusalem to the new disciples. They would need men well educated in Hebrew and Greek scriptures so the Grecian widows could better understand.

Also note the seven were full of the Holy Spirit before they had hands laid on them!

## The Seven's Preaching Multiplies Converts

Due to the seven wise teachers chosen, the word of God increased and number of disciples “multiplied greatly” (Acts 6:7). Then, what do we see the first named of the seven doing? Stephen did great

wonders and miracles (vs 8). This got him hauled before a Jewish council (vs 12). The whole of chapter 7 then shows his evangelizing to the council until they stoned him. (This was a whole lot more than just 'waiting on tables serving food' as is the modern misconception.)<sup>2</sup>

Then the church was scattered. Where the last five of the seven went, we have no record. But what Philip, the second named of the seven, did is well-detailed in Acts 8:4, 5-7, 12, 26-40. He evangelized powerfully! Philip later went to Samaria preaching the gospel (evangelizing), doing mighty miracles and baptizing. Philip is then directed by God to the Ethiopian eunuch, whom he baptized. Philip is then spirited away.

There is only one term in the book of Acts applied for the seven, and it represents what the first two, Stephen and Philip, are recorded as doing soon after having hands laid on them. The only term applied to any of the seven in Acts is that of **evangelist**: "...Philip the evangelist which was one of the seven ..." (Acts 21:8) Clearly then, the King James Version of the Bible has given us a non-biblical tradition of false church offices. An evangelist was one traveling and preaching, it was not an office or rank. "*Do the work of an evangelist*" (2<sup>nd</sup> Tim 4:5)

### **Elders by Attainment of Age**

\*\* 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 5:1-2 clearly shows that elders (Greek; presbyteros, masculine – presbuteras, feminine) are what old (elderly) church men and women are. (compare 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 5:1,5 (Peter was by now in his 60's.)) Overseership (KJV "bishopruck) the correct translation is overseers as in Acts 20:28)) is what seasoned church elders (Christian uncles and grandfathers) are to do serving the church as a family group (Titus 1:5-7) "Ordain" should be translated "appoint", and these were to be selected

<sup>2</sup> In a letter from Ignatius to Polycarp, a direct disciple of the last living Apostle John, we find this quote: "*It is fitting also that the deacons, as being [the ministers] of the mysteries of Jesus Christ, should in every respect be pleasing to all. For they are not ministers of meat and drink, but servants of the Church of God.*" Ignatius, in the early second century, makes clear distinction between a servant as in the sense of a waiter at a banquet, and a servant (deacon) who proclaims God's Truth within the Church setting. This statement reflects the understanding of the early Church.


from among those who accepted Christ as Messiah). Elder women should be teachers of married women. Laying on of hands is a Biblical doctrine, done by people with God's Spirit. Thirteen different Greek words are incon-sistently translated 'ordain' or 'ordained' in attempt to show such a ceremony as a doctrine producing an ecclesiastical office.

A large portion of today's true Church of God hails from the ministry of Herbert Armstrong, 1892-1986. Per his autobiography, his first wife, Loma, was healed by laying on of hands by an older couple (a man and woman), elders (older people). Herbert had hands laid on him by the whole congregation, in sending him out to preach the gospel.

There is no office identified in 1<sup>st</sup> Tim.3 or Acts 6. Rather there are older converted men in a congregation overseeing the congregation. (Acts 20:17 & 28) In some useful manner, they and the younger men are all servants of Jesus Christ, the head of every man.

### **Concluding Considerations**

So, from this brief expose, we can see that our perceptions of what a deacon is, and what one does, has been dramatically altered from what the pure Word sets before us. This is understandable when we factor in the political establishment that was gradually introduced into the Churches of God over the centuries. That ecclesiastical structure existed in pagan religious organizations in the early years of the Church, but was resisted during its first era. (Rev, 2:2-6) As time went on, the method and its doctrinal component gained increasing acceptance among believers, to their shame. (Rev. 2:15)

The earliest years of the Church of God in the modern age imitated the approach and simplicity of the original disciples. With growth, a new necessity was seen as evident, but the gradual re-acceptance of those Nicolaitan characteristics in time precipitated the demise of the organization. In large part, that was due to the suppression of true and loving service in ways that Jesus wants to develop in each of us. 

2011, The Plainer Truth, Bill Hillebrenner.