

Ministry of Deacons

Key Biblical and Theological Convictions of Village



Village Bible Church
DISTINCTIVES

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The Ministry of Deacons

Whether in the home or in the workplace, leadership is a necessary component if any group of people is to prosper. The church also needs godly leaders who lovingly care for the flock. Down through the ages, churches have been led in many different ways. Through prayer and the diligent study of God's Word, we have become increasingly convinced that the New Testament model of leadership is that of a team of godly elders who serve as overseers of the flock. Indeed, one of the core convictions of Village Bible Church is the need for a plurality of elders.

In addition to elders, the New Testament also refers to two another "offices" of the church – that of deacon and deaconess. At Village Bible Church those who serve in these roles are referred to also as **ministry directors**. In the original Greek of the New Testament, the word translated "deacon" means "servant," and ministry directors lead by serving.

The Word "Deacon"

The word *deacon* seems to have as many connotations as there are churches that utilize this title. In some churches, the deacons comprise the official board – the legally-recognized managing body of the congregation. Other churches designate almost every regular attender as a deacon. Still other churches bestow the title as a badge of honor, similar to "reverend," but for lay people. The ministry of deacons is so different from church to church that when people say they are deacons, one usually has to ask several questions to find out what, if anything, they actually do. The Scriptures themselves are rather vague about the specifics of *what* deacons are supposed to do. We read a lot about what qualifies people to be deacons, but very little about exactly how deacons are to minister in a local church. This fact in itself teaches us a great deal about God's view of church leadership: What a person *is*, is the issue, more than what that person *does*.

Unfortunately, this point is often overlooked in debates about church government. Our conviction is that when a church becomes as concerned about maintaining high standards of purity and integrity in leadership as it is about upholding a specific form of government, it will begin to fall more in line with Scripture in every other area, as well.

How is the word *deacon* used in the New Testament?

In the original Greek New Testament, three primary words are used to refer to deacons and their work: *diakonos*, which means "servant"; *diakonia*, which means "service"; and *diakoneo*, which means "to serve." Initially, these three related words seem to have been used in secular Greek society primarily with reference to waiting on tables or serving food to people. Eventually, however, their usage broadened to include any kind of service.

It's important to understand at the outset that, in the Biblical context, the meanings of this group of Greek words from which we get the word *deacon* are no more specific than the meanings of their English equivalents. In Biblical usage, *diakonia* suggests all kinds of service, just as the English word *service* does. We might use the English word *serve* to describe anything from the start of a volley in a tennis match to a convicted criminal "serving" a term in prison. We use the word equally to describe a slave who serves his master or a king who serves his people.

The Greek words *diakonos*, *diakoneo* and *diakonia* have just as wide a variety of meanings. They refer to any kind of service that supplies the need of another person. These three words are found at least 100 times in the New Testament and are usually translated with variants of the English words *serve* or *minister*. In a few places, some versions of the Bible translate them differently. In the New King James Version, for example, *diakonia* is translated as "administration" in 2 Corinthians 9:12 and as "relief" in Acts 11:29. But in these verses, as is the case with every usage of the words throughout the New Testament, the primary connotation is that of service and ministry.

What kind of service is implied by the Greek word for "deacon"?

Serving Food

As indicated earlier, the original and most limited meaning of the word *diakoneo* is "to serve food." The Biblical account of the wedding at Cana is a good illustration of this: "[Jesus] mother said to the servants [*diakonoī*], 'Do whatever He tells you'.... They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants [*diakonoī*] who had drawn the water knew" (John 2:5, 8b-9). This is clearly a reference to people who actually served tables. And this is the original sense of the word *deacon*.

Luke 4:39 tells us that after Christ healed Peter's mother-in-law, she "got up at once and began to wait on them." The verb *diakoneo* appears there. Peter's mother-in-law waited on both Christ and Peter, which probably means she served them a meal. Three other texts in the Gospels where one of these three Greek words is used with reference to serving a meal are Luke 10:40 and 17:8 and John 12:2.

General Service

On some occasions, *diakoneo* or one of the related words is used without specifying the kind of service involved. In John 12:26 Christ says, "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me." The meaning of the word here is general and could refer to a number of different forms of service.

Biblically, the word *diakonos* is not used only to describe believers. Romans 13:3-4 says, "Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment to the wrongdoer." Here *diakonos* is used twice of a policeman or soldier who isn't necessarily a Christian.

A verse where the word is used both in its original sense and in its general sense is Luke 22:27, where Christ said: "[W]ho is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." In this verse *diakoneo* is used twice. The first usage clearly refers to the serving of a meal, while the second refers to service in a general sense.

Spiritual Service

The New Testament frequently uses these words with reference to the believer's role as a servant. In Romans 15:25 Paul writes, "I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there." He identifies himself as a servant (*diakonos*). From Acts 20:19 we learn that he "served [*diakoneo*] the Lord with great humility."

In 2 Corinthians 8:3-4 Paul says of the churches in Macedonia: "I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service [*diakonia*] to the saints." The ministry of providing resources for meeting basic physical needs is a form of spiritual service.

In this spiritual sense of *diakonos* and the related words, any act of obedience done by a Christian should qualify to be called service to Christ. In the way these words are often used in Acts and the Epistles, a believer engaging in any form of ministry could be called the servant, or deacon, of Christ.

First Corinthians 12:5 tells us that "there are different kinds of service [*diakonia*], but the same Lord." All Christians should be involved in some form of service. All who serve the Lord are deacons, or ministers – if not in an official sense, then at least in the sense of the general usage of the word.

Other verses using a form of the word *deacon* when speaking of spiritual service are 2 Corinthians 4:1 and 9:1 and Revelation 2:19. In these and all the verses that we've looked at so far, we've not yet seen the word used with reference to the actual office of deacon in the church.

Does the New Testament speak about the office of deacon?

Because of the variety of meanings attached to *diakonos* and the related words, it's difficult, with one or two possible exceptions, to pin down any clear reference in the New Testament to the *office* of deacon in the governmental structure of the early church. Most occurrences of *diakonos* and the related words reflect their general meanings and clearly have nothing to do with a church office. Certain passages could be taken one way or the other, but usually the clearest, most natural interpretation points to the general meaning, rather than indicating a special title belonging to members of a select group in the church.

For example, some suggest that Romans 12 includes a reference to the office of deacon: "We have different gifts according to the grace given us...If it is serving, let him serve" (vv. 6-7). But is the gift of serving equivalent to the function or office of a deacon? There's nothing in the text to support this. None of the other gifts listed in Romans 12 involve offices. Furthermore, offices are not necessarily related to gifts. Those who have the gift of teaching, for example, do not have to be pastors or elders in order to exercise their gift. The gifts are related not just to offices, but also to callings and assignments.

In 1 Corinthians Paul says, "You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service [*diakonia*] of the saints" (16:15). Now is Paul saying that every member of the household of Stephanas held the office of deacon? There's no way to affirm this on the basis either of the terms used or the context. In fact, the most natural interpretation is to take it the way it's translated.

Some suggest that Ephesians 4:12 refers to deacons in the church. Beginning with verse 11, we read, "[The Lord] gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up." But these "works of service" (*diakonia*) are not the efforts of deacons only, but of all God's people in their role as servers. Paul was writing, not about the office of deacon, but about Christians in general being equipped for spiritual service.

Is anyone explicitly identified as a deacon in the New Testament?

Paul probably wasn't.

Some believe that Paul was a deacon. They point, for example, to Acts 20:24, where he says, "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race, and complete the task [*diakonia*] the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." But Paul was simply saying that he had a specific task or ministry that had been given to him by Christ; he was by no means calling himself a

deacon or minister in any official sense. Then the King James Version translates Paul's words in Romans 11:13 as follows: "I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office [*diakonia*]." The New International Version, however, uses the word *ministry* in this verse, rather than "office." The use of "office" in the King James Version is arbitrary; it seems highly unlikely that Paul was using the word with reference to any official position. His office was, in fact, that of apostle, which he called "my ministry," or "my service."

In 1 Timothy 1:12 the Apostle Paul writes, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service [*diakonia*]." This translation is accurate; Paul is not saying that he was put into the office of deacon. Other passages that refer to Paul as a minister or servant are 1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 3:6 and 6:4; and Ephesians 3:7. In each of these instances, there's no evidence that Paul was assigned the office of deacon. He was only calling himself a servant of God in a general sense.

Paul was an apostle – he spent much of 2 Corinthians 10-12 emphasizing this point. The office of apostle was the highest of all offices in the local church, superseding those of elder and deacon. In an official capacity, Paul would never have claimed to be a deacon; he was an apostle.

Tychicus probably wasn't.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant [*diakonos*] in the Lord, will tell you everything, so you also may know how I am and what I am doing" (Ephesians 6:21). Now although it's possible that Paul was calling Tychicus a faithful deacon, Paul also used *diakonos* in Ephesians 3:7 and *diakonia* in 4:12 with reference to general service, and there's really no reason to assume he meant differently here.

Epaphras probably wasn't.

In Colossians 1:7 Paul calls Epaphras "our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister [*diakonos*] of Christ on our behalf." Then in verses 23 and 25 he writes: "[C]ontinue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant [*diakonos*].... I have become [the church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness." Here Paul uses *diakonos* to describe both himself and Epaphras. Since we're quite confident that the Apostle Paul was not calling himself a deacon, it seems highly unlikely that he was referring to Epaphras as one. Principles of interpretation suggest that a word finds its meaning within the context of a book, and in the context of Colossians, there's no indication that *diakonos* refers to the office of deacon.

Those mentioned in Philippians 1:1 probably weren't.

Another place that the word *deacon* appears is Philippians 1:1. The letter to the Philippians begins, "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons."

Up to now we've not seen the Greek word *diakonos* translated as "deacon." Why did Bible translators suddenly introduce the word *deacon* here in an official sense, when in virtually every other passage the word is translated as "minister" or "servant"? Granted, the word here *could* refer to officers in the church, but again, the context doesn't seem to warrant such an interpretation.

Also, the word in this verse translated "overseers" (*episkopos*) is not the word typically used to refer to elders (*presbuteros*). This being the case, the most natural interpretation of this verse is that Paul is actually addressing his letter to the whole church. He seems to be saying, "I'm writing to the whole church, including both the leadership and those who follow or serve." To say that Philippians 1:1 refers to the office of deacon might be correct, but it is an arbitrary choice. There's simply not enough evidence to be dogmatic about what Paul is saying.

We've already seen many uses of the Greek words *diakonos*, *diakoneo* and *diakonia*, but none with a clear reference to a specific church office.

Doesn't Acts 6 refer to deacons?

Many see in Acts 6 the initiation of the office of deacon. Verses 1 and 2 say that "in those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.'" When food was being given out to care for the widows, the Grecian widows were not getting their fair share. Apparently the local Jews were concentrating more on the needs of their own people.

It's important to realize the extent of the problem facing the church in trying to provide food for everyone. The church could well have exceeded 20,000 people at that time. There was simply no way that the twelve apostles could have had time to carry food all over the city to meet the needs of hundreds of widows. And not only did food need to be distributed, but people were needed to administer the whole distribution process. That included collecting and safeguarding the needed finances, purchasing the food and dispensing it fairly.

While recognizing the scope of the problem, the apostles realized that they needed to solve it without sacrificing their own valuable time and priorities. They said to the congregation therefore, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables" (v. 2).

The apostles' advice to the congregation is found in verse 3: "Brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task (NASB)" It was important that men be selected who had a reputation for honesty, because they were going to be entrusted with money. There were no checks or accounting procedures as we have today. The men also had to be "full of the Spirit and of wisdom." It's very difficult to work out

an equitable system of distribution to people who have varying needs. They would have to determine whether or not someone's need was legitimate.

Seven men were to be chosen, so that the apostles could be free to do what God had called them to do. In Acts 6:4 the apostles say, "We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." Then verses 5 and 6 tell us that the apostles' "proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them."

Were the seven men listed in Acts 6:5 given the office of deacon? The traditional interpretation of Acts 6 is that these men were indeed the first deacons. Notice that verses 1 and 2 say: "[The Grecian] widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution [*diakoneo*] of food....It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on [*diakonia*] tables." Some say that the use of these words implies that these men were chosen to fill the office of deacon.

Another argument for viewing these men as deacons is that early church history confirms that in the post-apostolic period, deacons were regularly assigned responsibility for administrative affairs – including the distribution of goods to the poor. In addition, for many years the post-apostolic church in Rome limited the number of deacons to seven. They seem to have taken that number from the seven chosen in Acts 6.

Still, there are a number of reasons for rejecting the notion that these seven men were chosen to fill the office of deacon. The use of *diakonia* and *diakoneo* in verses 1 and 2 is inconclusive, because *diakonia* is used in verse 4 with reference to the work of the apostles themselves. There's no reason to conclude therefore that the office of deacon is meant in verse 5. Furthermore, the New Testament never refers to any of the men listed in Acts 6:5 as deacons. Only two of them, Stephen and Philip, are mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, and they are nowhere called deacons.

Keep in mind that Acts was written in the earliest years of the church. We've already seen that, with the possible exception of Philippians, none of the epistles written to specific churches mention the office of deacon. There's no strong reason from these epistles to believe that the office of deacon was instituted in Acts 6. Later in the book of Acts and in several of the epistles to the churches, elders are mentioned, but not deacons. If Acts 6 does indeed describe the institution of the office of deacon, it seems strange that deacons are never referred to again in Acts.

Also, notice the word *task* found in Acts 6:3 (NASB). This word suggests that the seven men were called to help take care of a one-time crisis, rather than being installed into a permanent office. Their ongoing ministries seem to have been distinct from the immediate task, inasmuch as none of the seven is ever mentioned again in association with any food distribution ministry.

Note also that all seven who were chosen had Greek names. If these men were being appointed for an ongoing ministry in the Jerusalem church, it seems strange that only Greeks would have been chosen. A permanent order of deacons in

Jerusalem would not likely have been made up solely of Greeks. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to conclude that seven Greeks would have been chosen to take care of a short-term ministry to the Grecian widows who had been neglected. These men knew both the situation and their own people.

It's best therefore to see the events described in Acts 6 as an effort by the Jerusalem church to take care of a temporary crisis, and the calling of the seven men as a non-permanent ministry.

If the men mentioned in Acts 6:5 weren't deacons, what were they?

If the deaconate had been maintained as an official office, we would expect it to have been mentioned in Acts 11. About six or seven years after the events of Acts 6, a famine struck Judea, and in response to the needs of the believers in Jerusalem, the church at Antioch sent some food to help them: "The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:29-30).

A comparison of Acts 6:1-6 and 11:29-30 suggests that the *ongoing* ministry of distributing goods in the Jerusalem church was entrusted to elders, not deacons. If an officially-constituted deaconate had been created in Acts 6, with a continuing responsibility to distribute goods to the needy, the church at Antioch would surely have directed their contribution to that group.

Now let's take a further look at the men selected in Acts 6. Verse 8 says that Stephen, "a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people." His function certainly doesn't seem to have been typical of the office of deacon, at least as indicated later in 1 Timothy 3. Stephen was articulate in the Word and almost apostolic in his gifts. He performed great wonders and signs.

In Acts 21:8 Philip is described as an evangelist. Inasmuch as Acts 7 depicts Stephen as preaching and Acts 8 describes Philip as evangelizing, it appears that the seven men in Acts 6:5 were closer to elders in function than they were to carrying out the role deacons. The seven had administrative responsibilities, they had oversight of a very broad task, some articulated the Word of God and some evangelized the lost. They were full of the Spirit, faith and wisdom, and some even performed signs and wonders (cf. Acts 6:8; 8:6-7).

It's noteworthy that only seven men were selected. How could just seven men possibly have met the broad needs that the Jerusalem church was faced with? It would've taken more than seven people to do the job of distribution alone! It's more likely that the seven constituted a group of highly qualified spiritual leaders, teachers and honorable men who had been chosen to administer the distribution. By doing what they did, they freed the apostles to devote themselves to the priorities of prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Although we can't say definitively that Acts 6 makes specific reference to the church offices of either elder or deacon, we can clearly see that a need exists for two broad areas of ministry: 1) teaching and praying (v. 4), which involves spiritual care; and 2) administration and oversight of needs (vv. 1-3), which involves both spiritual and physical care.

The seven men in Acts 6:5 did more than just hand people food. We know that Stephen and Philip were dynamic preachers. Some might assume that the other men listed in Acts 6:5 were not. But immediately after they were chosen, the church "presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly" (Acts 6:6-7). This suggests all seven played a part in the early church's growth. It also suggests that they were more like elders in function than deacons.

Nothing indicates the seven continued to serve indefinitely in their original capacity. Stephen was killed shortly thereafter, while Philip went to Samaria. The persecution of Christians in Jerusalem that soon began may have scattered the entire group. And as was noted earlier, there's no mention whatever of this group in connection with the events of Acts 11:29-30, which took place several years later. Rather, reference is made to a group of elders. If any of the original seven did remain in Jerusalem, they would probably have been elders or secondary apostles of the churches – not deacons.

Does any Scripture passage refer to deacons in an official sense?

Having explored numerous passages that speak of service only in a general way, and a handful of others that might possibly refer to the office of deacon, but probably don't, we need to turn now to the one passage in the New Testament that can definitely be said to refer to this office, and that is 1 Timothy 3. Verse 8 says, "Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain." An interpretive key to this verse is the word "likewise," which takes the readers back to what Paul had written in verse 1: "If anyone sets his heart of being an overseer...." The use of the word "likewise" implies that just as elders, or overseers, occupy a recognized office, deacons do, as well.

So in the church there is to be a plurality of godly men – elders – who oversee the Lord's work in the church, and these men are to be assisted in this work by deacons. The basic offices of a church do not need to be any more sophisticated than this.

By A.D. 64, when this epistle was probably written, the church had developed to the point where the spiritual qualifications for church leaders were quite specific, yet instructions regarding church organization were still quite limited. This was by divine design. Because God knew that situations and needs would differ over time and in different cultures, the New Testament provides for great flexibility in

individual church organization. The biblical emphasis is less on organizational details than on the purity and spiritual depth of church leaders.

What qualifies someone to be a deacon or deaconess?

The qualifications for deacons can be divided into two categories: personal character and spiritual character.

Personal Character

Paul lists four personal qualifications. First, deacons must be worthy of respect (1 Timothy 3:8). *Semnos*, the word used in the original Greek, implies that they must be serious-minded, not treating serious things lightly. The word means "venerable, honorable, reputable, grave, serious and stately." The same Greek word appears in Titus 2:2, which says that older men "are to be temperate, *worthy of respect*, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance" (emphasis added).

First Timothy 3:8 also says that deacons must be sincere. This means that they must not be double-tongued, saying one thing to one person and something else to another person. They're not to be malicious gossips, but always consistent and righteous in what they say. Next, deacons are not to indulge in much wine, but should rather be noted for their clear thinking and self-control. Then finally, Paul says that deacons should not pursue dishonest gain. This is important since deacons are sometimes responsible for handling funds. Their goals in life must therefore not be monetary. As we read in 1 Timothy 6:9, a pervasive desire for financial gain corrupts a person.

Spiritual Character

Paul also lists four spiritual qualifications.

First, deacons must "keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience" (1 Timothy 3:9). In other words, they must have convictions based on knowledge of true biblical doctrine. And their clear conscience implies that they live out their convictions. They must both hold to the faith and apply the truths of scripture in their lives.

A second spiritual qualification for deacons is given in verse 10: "They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons." Before people are officially appointed as deacons, they must have proved themselves faithful in serving the Lord. If they've proven themselves to be beyond reproach, then let them serve.

Third, just as with elders, deacons must be morally pure in every way. Verse 10 literally says, "Let them serve as deacons if they are in the process of being irreproachable." Those who are not above reproach are disqualified from serving as deacons. Verse 12, which says that "a deacon must be the husband of but one wife," also implies that deacons are to be morally pure. But this doesn't necessarily mean that a deacon must be someone who has never been divorced – although this

would be a disqualification if his sin had contributed to the divorce, or if the circumstances of the divorce have brought reproach on him. The main point is that a deacon must be totally consecrated and devoted to his wife. The Greek text literally reads, "Let deacons be one-woman men." Having only one wife doesn't necessarily reflect one's character, but being single-mindedly devoted to one's wife does.

The fourth characteristic of deacons' spiritual lives is that they lead their families well. Deacons are to be good managers of their children and their own households (v. 12). They must demonstrate some kind of managerial ability, and the proving ground for leadership is how people manage their own children and household.

Although specific personal and spiritual qualifications must be met by those holding the offices of elder and deacon, this doesn't mean that the standard is lower for everyone else in the congregation. Everyone should seek to fulfill the role of deacon – whether as a recognized, office-holding deacon, or simply as a servant to the Body. The qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3 should be a goal and a guideline for every believer.

What does the Bible say about deaconesses?

As translated in the New American Standard Bible, 1 Timothy 3:11 begins, "Women must likewise be dignified." Again, the word "likewise" implies that Paul is referring, as he did in verses 1 and 8, to an office of the church. But contrary to the way the New International Version translates this verse, Paul was not referring to the wives of deacons. We know this, because he didn't use a possessive pronoun when referring to the women about which he was writing. That is, in the original Greek, he didn't say *their* wives. And, in fact, he didn't use the word *wives* at all, but rather the more general word for *women*. Also, since Paul included no comments about the wives of elders, why would he have commented about the wives of deacons?

In Romans 16:1 Paul wrote, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [*diakonos*] of the church in Cenchrea." Phoebe was recognized by the church for her service. And it's possible that she served in an official capacity as a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea.

The Greek word translated "women" in 1 Timothy 3:11 (NASB) is *gunaikas*. Apparently Paul used this term, rather than *diakonos* (*deacon*, or *deaconess*), in order to be gender-specific, since in first-century Greek there was no distinctively feminine form of the word *diakonos*. The same word *diakonos* was regularly used of both men and women. It would therefore have been ambiguous if Paul had used the term *diakonos* to refer to specifically female servers, as distinguished from male servers. It was necessary that he identify them specifically as women.

We've see, then, that three distinct church offices are delineated in 1 Timothy 3 – the offices of elder, deacon and deaconess. And concerning deaconesses, Paul said that they must be "worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything" (v. 11).

What is the difference between elders and deacons?

It's essential to recognize that deacons are equally qualified with elders in terms of character and spiritual life. The one difference in their qualifications is that elders must be able to teach, while deacons aren't required to be. In many churches today, some who are called elders are really closer to being deacons, and vice versa. Both elders and deacons should be proven servants of Christ who have the capability to manage their households and lead the members of their congregation. Elders should be given the primary responsibility of teaching the Word, and this can be accomplished as deacons share the work of the ministry with them.

Deacons are to administer, shepherd and care for the flock. Although their primary function is not teaching, they're no less spiritually qualified, honored or respected. They relieve those who are more skilled in teaching, so that those leaders can be freer to pray and study the Word.

In a special sense, the task of the deacon sums up the essence of spiritual greatness. As Jesus said, "[W]hoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wants to be first shall be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:26-28).

The Lord Jesus Himself, then, is the model for those who would step into the role of deacon. It's a role of service, of sacrifice and of commitment to the needs of others. The reward of the deacon's office is not the temporal glory that comes from human adulation, but rather the eternal blessing that comes from living a life of spiritual service to the glory of God.

The Role of Deacons and Deaconesses (Ministry Directors) at Village

Once we've identified what the Bible says about a certain area of ministry, we need to apply that teaching to our own specific setting. This is where Acts 6 helps us. Within the context of the situation described there, the church was growing, but it needed help to insure that the entire body was being adequately served. The apostles appointed seven people to address a specific need, which enabled the church to continue to grow and prosper. This is very much the way deacons and deaconesses serve here at Village Bible Church. As ministry directors, they serve the body by using their gifts, under the oversight of the elders, to coordinate various ministries of the church.

This approach to leadership helps insure that the needs of all who are part of the body will be met effectively. It frees the elders to focus on their specific areas of oversight, as well as on the ministry of the Word and on prayer, and it gives opportunities to others in the congregation to serve in their areas of greatest strength.

Drawn largely from *Answering the Key Questions About Deacons*, by John MacArthur.