Deacons, The Biblical System of Church Leadership?

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by

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ABSTRACT

DEACONS, THE BIBLICAL SYSTEM OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP?

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This project will examine the deacon-led model of church leadership that is employed in many churches today, in order to ascertain whether this model of leadership is consistent with both the New Testament and the witness of the early church. With more than 3,700 churches failing yearly, it is imperative that churches be organized and led in a biblical manner so that they might be positioned for ministry successes in their local contexts. Without a biblical framework and reference for polity, it is highly unlikely that the church will yield results of any lasting nature. This analysis will be done though a critical examination of ecclesiological passages, including analyses from various backgrounds, as well as an examination of the early church, apostolic period, and beyond. The researcher hopes to demonstrate that the office of Deacon is not an office of ecclesiastical oversight, and churches that utilize deacons in this manner employ them in a manner inconsistent with the intended nature of the office.

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INTRODUCTION

A church is “an indispensable gathering of professing believers in Christ who, under leadership, are gathered to pursue [the church’s] mission.”¹ This group of professing believers gathers together for the purpose of exalting the Lord (worship), edifying the saints (discipleship and ministry training), evangelizing the lost (personal evangelism, mission, church planting, etc.), extending hands to others (servanthood and mercy ministries), fellowshipping with one another to build community, and celebrating the Lord’s ordinances (believer’s baptism and the Lord’s Supper). Believers in Christ, collectively referred to as the “church,” usually assemble themselves and carry out ministry under the leadership of ordained men and women who serve in various functions and capacities to ensure that ministry is carried out and that the saints of God are cared for, attended to, protected, taught, and more.

Two specific leaders include those chosen of God and elected by men to serve in offices, namely the diakōnōs and the episkopos.² Under the leadership of those who serve in these two sacred offices, the church should be preserved, protected, nourished, and matured into a healthy expression of an “indispensable gathering of professing believers in Christ.”³ This project will examine those offices, with an emphasis on the office of diakōnōs, to determine if their usage in the church is proper and biblical in accordance with the biblio-historical information found through the research of this writer.


² Diakōnōs is the Greek term for “deacon;” episkopos is the Greek term for “overseer.” These terms, to include their definitions and biblical origins, will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.

³ Malphurs, A New Kind of Church, 116.
Statement of the Problem

In the United States, the church seems to be weakening, at least in part. According to the US Religious Census Report of 2010, there are approximately 344,894 churches in the United States. However, more than 3,700 churches die every year in the United States while the cults, such as the Mormons and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as false religions, such as Islam, enjoy strong growth. The Mormon Church, for example, almost tripled in membership between 1965 and 2001. Other statistics available today only further solidify the fact that the church in America is in a dark season – a season of decline that must be reversed: (1) as of 1988, approximately 170 million people in the United States are lost and headed to eternal damnation; (2) nearly 221 million people are unchurched; (3) the United States has become the single greatest mission field that exists within the Western hemisphere; (4) the United States is itself the fifth largest mission field on earth; (5) as of 2004, church attendance in the United States is at a dismal eighteen percent attendance rate on any given Sunday; (6) older, established churches achieved either no growth or extremely minimal growth in 2004; (7) the number of

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8 Ibid.

9 Ed Stetzer, Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2003), 10.


11 Ibid.
churches (per 10,000 Americans) declined from twenty-eight churches in 1900, to a dismal eleven in 2004;\(^\text{12}\) (8) of the churches still in existence in the United States, approximately eighty-five percent of them have either plateaued or are in decline. This means that of the estimated 344,894 churches in existence in the United States, 297,500 of them are in distress.\(^\text{13}\)

While a multiplicity of reasons exists for this deterioration, this researcher hypothesizes that a large contributor to such deterioration is the existence of an unbiblical polity within the church that is inconsistent with the biblical model, and more specifically, an incorrect understanding of the functions and scope of the office of diakŏnŏs. Church government is defined as “the system by which churches are organized to carry out their business.”\(^\text{14}\) The structure this system creates is its polity. Donald McKim defines church polity as “a form of church government adopted by an ecclesiastical body,”\(^\text{15}\) while Millard Erickson defines polity as “the organization or governmental structure of a local church or fellowship of churches.”\(^\text{16}\)

Rolland McCunes offers this simple definition for church government: “The regulation of the inner workings of a local New Testament assembly is known as church polity.”\(^\text{17}\) He further

\(^{12}\) Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 9. This decline in church-to-population helps to explain the [overall] decline of the North American church during the last century.

\(^{13}\) Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century*, 32-33. By “distress,” the writer is reflecting the opinion of Malphurs that the church is in rapid decline or plateau, and that even if the church has plateaued and is not in a rapid decline, such a plateau is dangerous because it means that the church is not keeping up with the population group, and thus is in a deficit population growth.

\(^{14}\) Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 36. Erickson goes on to describe some of the major categories of church government, namely Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational, and indicates that in each of these the differences lie in where the authority in the church rests.


\(^{16}\) Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 156.

\(^{17}\) Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things*, vol. 3 (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 228.
clarifies this when he writes that “[c]hurch polity is designed to be the orderly governance of Christ through the Holy Spirit’s indwelling in the hearts of members of the local church. It is not therefore a negligible or ultimately negotiable New Testament teaching.” The central ideas considered in church polity are organizing and governing. When a church is not organized or governed in accordance with biblical principles, and therefore does not reflect the model seen in the New Testament, failure is imminent.

This author has seen, through first-hand experience, the dangers of unbiblical polity. It is his personal experience that the root cause leading to church decline, and the staggering statistics listed above, is the expression of unbiblical polity within the local church, including, but not limited to, the Baptistic church polity model of emphasizing deacon oversight of the church. The American Christian church is in trouble. While many are sounding the alarm through which evangelism, discipleship, and other various ministries are spurred, very few seem to be sounding the alarm related to unbiblical polity and offering a clarion call for its about-face. In order for the church to regain its prominence in the community and be the incarnation of Christ in each one’s local contexts, the very structure of the church must change to the extent that leaders, to wit, the episkopos, can lead and servants, to wit, the diakōnōs, can serve. This occurs through a polity that can be gleaned from biblical evidence recurrently, and can be witnessed in the Apostolic and Catholic periods of church history; namely, a plurality of deacons as leading servants who emulate the servanthood nature of Christ and His earthly ministry, while also emulating humble submissiveness to the called leadership of the church, the pastors, just as Christ willingly submitted to the leadership of the Father.

18 Ibid.
This project, then, will examine the role of each of the two offices within the local church body, the *episkopos* and, most specifically, the *diakōnōs*, as well as their place in the body and their importance, and will then attempt to ascertain how the nature and functions of the *diakōnōs* as practiced in many of today’s local churches stand in opposition to the biblical evidence and early-church history. The primary focus of this project will be on the office of *diakōnōs*, but will, by virtue of the nature of the office of *diakōnōs*, non-coincidentally examine the office of *episkopos*. Attempts will be made to define those offices adequately, and to examine a preponderance of the New Testament evidence related to the *diakōnōs*, in order to both establish the biblical basis for the *diakōnōs* and to describe the biblical functions of the office, with the ultimate goal of determining if the role of the *diakōnōs* in today’s church is commensurate with the biblio-historical evidence. A cursory examination of the qualifications of both offices will be performed, and a comprehensive examination of the role of the *diakōnōs* in each era of church history will be presented.

**Statement of Limitations**

This project will focus specifically on the two God-ordained offices of the church as seen in the New Testament: the office of *episkopos* and the office of *diakōnōs*, with special emphasis on the *diakōnōs*. This project will not attempt to address the biblical warrant, or lack thereof, for the many other positions seen in the church today.\(^{19}\) While all of these can play a vital role in the health of the church, the offices of *episkopos* and *diakōnōs* play the primary roles in the leadership of a church as God’s established offices to guide and serve the church.

Furthermore, this project will not address in detail the specific areas where unbiblical polity can cause deterioration or problems, as such an examination could go on indefinitely. This

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\(^{19}\) These include youth pastor, children’s pastor, small group pastor, and the many other specialty pastors, as well as the associate pastor, ministry directors, and other ministry leaders within the local church body.
project will simply categorize certain core biblical functions of the *diakōnōs*, along with a diminutive set of core biblical functions of the *episkopos*, and then analyze those elements to determine their consistency with modern theological interpretation and ecclesiastical practice related to the office of *diakōnōs*.

Additionally, this project will not attempt to broadly define the various models of polity in existence today, or even to prescribe a definitive polity model by which the church should operate. The scope of this project will be to exclusively offer an examination of the various elements of the office of *diakōnōs*, and to determine if the manner in which the office of *diakōnōs* is employed in many churches today is commensurate with biblical descriptions and prescription, and, most importantly, divine intentions.

Finally, this project will not attempt to suggest methodologies for conversion from one polity model to another, as such an examination would require an entire project in and of itself, and thus would be beyond the scope of this thesis. This project simply attempts to draw conclusions related to the biblical polity that: 1) are most clearly reflective within the pages of the New Testament narrative, 2) can be substantiated well from the early church periods, and 3) are therefore naturally conducive to the health and vitality of the New Testament Church.

**Theoretical Basis**

It is important to again emphasize that, according to Aubrey Malphurs, the church is “an indispensable gathering of professing believers in Christ who, under leadership, are gathered to pursue [the church’s] mission.”²⁰ The church is a gathering of believers, wherever it is that they may happen to gather. The word “church” is the English translation of the Greek word *ekklēsia*. The first mention of this word is in Caesarea Philippi, as Jesus teaches His disciples about His

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nature as the Son of Man. It is here that Peter gives his great confession, one that would later be denied in a public setting as Jesus undergoes trials at the hands of the Jewish officials the night before His crucifixion.

In Matthew 16:13, Jesus asks the all-important question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” After several weak attempts by other disciples, Peter answers the question in typical Peter fashion, with passion, boldness, and zeal: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”21 It is at this point that Jesus introduces a new term, at least in relation to the newly-founded Christianity, to them.

“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”22

Jesus uses the English word “church” (ekklēsia) for the first time here, and it is the first usage of the term in the canon of the New Testament. Although it is the first mention of this word, “[the disciples] rather obviously did not find it a totally new or strange concept. This is surely to be traced to the fact that the concept had its roots in the Old Testament’s recurring depiction of Israel as God’s ‘congregation’ or ‘assembly.’” 23 Even more recently than that, the Jews would have gained familiarity with this term through its identification with town assemblies, held in theaters, in Greek communities. As Raymond Cox explains, “In ancient times theaters served not only for entertainment but also to host what the Greeks called the ekklēsia of

21 Matthew 16:16. All scripture references taken from the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), unless otherwise noted.

22 Matthew 16:17–19, emphasis added.

the community, the General Assembly of the town. The New Testament writers took that term *ekklēsia* and attached it to the body of believers in Jesus Christ. Translators render it ‘church.’”

So, under the context of a deep and lasting understanding of the *ekklēsia*, Jesus informs the disciples that He would build this assembly, the church. They would therefore have experienced no difficulty in comprehending exactly what Jesus meant concerning the *ekklēsia* in relation to the new Christ-followers who were expanding in number everywhere. Robert Reymond outlines several other facts related to this monumental proclamation of Jesus. First, “it is ultimately Jesus, not men, who ‘will build’ His church. Like a wise master-builder who builds a house, so Jesus will build His church.”

This means that as the church is built, it is ultimately the work of Christ, even though man might be used in the process. Second, “His ‘building,’ more specifically His ‘temple,’” will be unconquerable: The very gates of Hades (the power of death?) will not prevail against it.” This means that Christ will guard His church as a cherished possession, a sacred institution, and an avenue through which He will build His kingdom in Heaven and on earth.

Third, this passage indicates that Christ “would build [His church] upon the ‘bedrock’ of His own person as the Messiah and divine Son of God as this ‘bedrock’ comes to expression in both His and His apostles’ authoritative teaching.” The foundation of the church is none other than Christ and His teachings as recorded in Scripture, to include that which was written about

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26 Ephesians 2:20–21.


28 Ibid.
the ἐκκλησία in the New Testament. Fourth, “[Christ’s] ἐκκλησία, made up of those who, like Peter, confess His messianic role and divine Sonship, would be ‘the assembly [or ‘congregation’] of the Messiah.’”29 All of those who confess Christ as Lord and therefore have experienced an authentic faith conversion are joint members of this ἐκκλησία. This is recorded in frequent and simplistic fashion throughout the pages of Scripture.30

Reymond’s examination of this word indicates, therefore, that Jesus is building an indestructible gathering of followers whose very basis for assembly is faith in Christ as the Messiah and a profession of His messianic role and divine status as the Son of God, as seen clearly through the lens of the New Testament canon. This assembly gathers, as the name suggests, for a variety of reasons. As they do, they glorify God through worship, celebrate the authoritative Word through preaching, and often celebrate the ordinances as commanded by Christ.31

Any organized group – from a marriage to a municipality, from a religious organization to a corporate office – contains order and structure. This order and structure helps ensure that it successfully carries out its mission, its goals, and its objectives. The very same scriptures that are the basis for the assembly of faith, called the ἐκκλησία (the church), also give instructions for the operation, organization, and function of the church. These instructions include the embodiment of two sacred offices, as have already been mentioned – namely, the offices of διακόνος and ἐπίσκοπος. Throughout the pages of the New Testament, these offices are mentioned in various capacities and for a variety of reasons or situations. Though not obvious in some circumstances,

29 Ibid.

30 See Romans 10:9-14, for example.

31 Namely, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.
when diligently studied, the Scriptures give us a clear picture of what these offices are to accomplish inside the local body, as will be examined later in this project. Those who hold these two offices are gifted in special ways to serve and minister to the flock in the name of Christ, and are called to be servant leaders (the *episkopoi*) and leading servants (the *diakōnoi*). As the expression of these offices parallels the biblical prescriptions and descriptions, the church will be much more prepared to accomplish the mission which it has been charged to accomplish.

Biblical leadership, especially that of the *episkopos* and the *diakōnōs*, is vital to the health of the church. As J. Hampton Keathley has written, “Because leadership is always so determinative on the well-being and spiritual growth of the body of Christ, one of the first things the Apostle Paul saw to was the appointment of [episkopoi] in every church as under-shepherds of God’s people (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1).” Paul appointed elders in at least Jerusalem, Ephesus, and Crete. These men were to oversee the flock of God and provide instruction, oversight,

32 The terms “servant leader” and “leading servant” were introduced by Dr. David Platt, lead pastor of the Church at Brooks Hills.

33 The differences between the two offices, as well as its importance and relevance to the discussion at hand, will be examined later in the project.

34 Namely, the Great Commission, but other less obvious, locale-specific missions might apply.


36 Acts 14:23.


38 Titus 1:5.

39 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12.

40 1 Peter 5:2, 3.
correction and reproof, especially related to unsound doctrine,\footnote{Titus 1:9.} leadership,\footnote{Hebrews 13:7.} spiritual protection,\footnote{Ibid.} and spiritual direction (shepherding).\footnote{Acts 20:28.}

Each of these areas of giftedness helps the church carry out its mission and directives from Christ. Its mission includes producing disciples and teaching them through biblical discipleship,\footnote{Matthew 28:18-20} bringing about reconciliation through the blood of Christ,\footnote{Colossians 1:15-20.} demonstrating the love of Christ to a dying world,\footnote{John 17:20-23.} proclaiming the goodness and excellence of Christ,\footnote{1 Peter 2:9-11.} and reaching the lost,\footnote{Ephesians 4:11-13.} among other functions. Each church assembly (ekklēsia) is made up of episkopoi and diakōnōi, without which the church could not properly function and lead others to similarly develop and exercise those gifts leading to church health. The leadership of the ekklēsia is, therefore, a crucial matter, as is the corollary essence of each leader’s role and function in the ekklēsia.

**Statement of Methodology**

This research project will be divided into six chapters, each covering one aspect related to the role of the diakōnōs in the ekklēsia. The introduction has stated the purpose, rationale, and theoretical basis for the study of the diakōnōs, and will include a review of significant current
literature relevant to the topic. The first chapter will examine the *ekklēsia*, to include its nature, purpose, and New Testament origins. The chapter will also give attention to the qualifications set forth in the New Testament for both the *episkopos* and *diakōnōs*. The second chapter will examine the key New Testament terms related to the *diakōnōs*, and will also examine the servanthood model of Christ. The third will seek to determine the archetypal model of the *diakōnōs* from its germinal stage in the Apostolic Period, while the fourth chapter will survey the ebb and flow of the qualitative nature of the office from the Catholic Period to modernity, to include survey data from more than 100 deacons who expressed their thoughts on the nature and role of their office. The fifth chapter will then seek to establish principles for the reformation of the office of *diakōnōs* derived from practices and models of the *diakōnōs* throughout history. The final chapter, six, will present a model by which churches can implement a biblical expression of the *diakōnōs* in their local contexts.

**Review of Literature**

**Published Books**

*Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, originally published in 1975 and revised in 1984, is still widely read and utilized due to its approach to the doctrine of the church.\(^{50}\) What makes this a seminal work on the church and its structure is Getz’s tie between renewal and revival in the church and the church’s organization. Getz contends that churches can be uniquely positioned to reach the cultures around them if they would simply return to a New Testament model of doing church. This rather lengthy book (359 pp. in the revised version) addresses the need for the church to be focused on interpreting and teaching Scriptures, building relationships, and engaging in missional experiences. He demonstrates the biblical nature of all three through an

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exegetical study of various passages in Acts and the Pauline Epistles, and then ties this all to the structure and organization of the church in a chapter called “Leadership in the New Testament.” Getz argues that the church, according to the clear teaching of the New Testament, should be led not by deacons, but by a plurality of elders (bishops, elders, overseers, pastors, etc.). He argues for a return to biblical faithfulness in the area of church governance as the beginning of a healthy church.

The Church in God’s Program by Robert L. Saucy is another important work on the church.51 The book, still employed in seminaries today even though it was published more than forty years ago, is dedicated exclusively to ecclesiological doctrine. Saucy’s ecclesiology is developed through an analysis of the meaning of the word ‘church,’ the nature of the church, the inauguration (beginnings) of the church, the organization (polity) of the church, the worship practices of the church, and the ordinances of the church. Saucy addresses many critical issues within the church (worship, leadership, proper uses and practices of ordinances, etc.). He advocates for a return to a biblical model of church polity that involves servant leadership in order to restore the health of the church to its inaugural, post-apostolic form and character.

The New Testament Deacon: The Church’s Minister of Mercy addresses specifically the office of the diakŏnŏs in the work and ministry of the church.52 Strauch argues that without the office of the diakŏnŏs, the service Christ expects the church to provide to the poor, indigent, and suffering would be hindered or perhaps completely impeded. Care for those in need sits deeply within the heart of God, according to the author, and should be the primary duty of the diakŏnŏs.


The book offers a passionate plea to those serving in the office of deacon to “get out of the boardroom…mentality and into the people-serving mentality.” The majority of the book communicates both the qualifications of the diakŏnŏs and the importance of the office when functioning in accord with the role discerned from those qualifications. The book illustrates the honorable nature of servanthood by conveying the servanthood nature of the ministry of Christ.

Upon This Rock: A Baptist Understanding of the Church is a recent publication dedicated exclusively to Baptist ecclesiology. The book is a compilation of many lectures of various topics related to the church and was given at a Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary conference on the church. Before permitting each author to address their respective distinctives in Baptist ecclesiology, the editor provides a narrative on the importance of those distinctives as a collective whole and argues that each is soundly rooted in a pure exegesis of Scripture. Contributors such as Paige Patterson, Emir Caner, and James Leo Garrett, each known for the Baptist scholarship, offer insights on their respective viewpoints. Of particular interest for this research is chapter seven, “The Church and Its Officers: A Pastor’s Perspective,” in which Byron McWilliams communicates the biblical evidence related to the roles of both the episkopos and diakŏnŏs. McWilliams also offers a cursory examination of the roles of the episkopos and diakŏnŏs through the lens of Baptist history, from the germinal state of the Baptist church beginning in the early 17th century.

Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons is a book dedicated to the practical aspect of the offices of the episkopos and diakŏnŏs. Rather than merely addressing the theology of the

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53 Ibid., 11.


offices, supported by biblical evidence, this resource seeks to equip the church to train men organically from within the church to serve as overseers and deacons. The author then provides a practical, real-life model of what the roles of overseer and deacon look like as they are emulated in the local church. He also outlines key traits that aid the church in easily identifying qualified and called men to serve as overseers and deacons.

_Pastor and Deacons: Servants Working Together_ is dedicated to building the relationship between the office of the _episkopos_ and the office of _diakōnōs_. While dedicating pages to important topics such as the functions, qualifications, and biblical evidence of the two offices, all of this is presented with the intended purpose of facilitating an environment where the pastor and the deacon can do the work of ministry in a collaborative setting as fellow servants of the Servant of all servants. This book sets itself apart from other, similar, works by providing a summary review at the end of each chapter that can be used in a small group setting, along with a study guide and ideas for application. It also includes several appendices that provide resources such as a sample deacons’ meeting agenda and sample church by-laws.

_Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity_, edited by Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, is just one book in the Broadman & Holman Academic’s _Perspectives_ series. In this essential work on church polity, five authors come together to give both an explanation and an apologetic for their position on church polity. The five positions espoused by the collaborators are as follows: Single-Elder Led Church in conjunction with Congregationalism (Daniel Akin), Presbytery-Led Church or Presbyterianism (Robert L.

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Reymond), Pure Congregationalism (James Leo Garrett, Jr.), the Bishop-Led Church or Episcopalianism (Paul F.M. Zahl), and Plural-Elder with minimal, though some, Congregationalism (James R. White). The sheer beauty of this work is that each author is given the opportunity to offer a short rebuttal to the positions of the other contributors. Therefore, not only do the readers know why the author espouses the position for which he advocates, they can also know why, theologically, the author does not espouse the opposing views. While no space is specifically dedicated to the office of the *diakōnōs*, the book nonetheless offers valuable insight into the office, often addressing the ancillary nature of the office throughout the surveys of each polity model. Some of the contributors, such as Daniel Akin, portray as untenable the executive leadership model of the *diakōnōs*, considering the expressions of the *diakōnōs* found in many Baptist churches today to be aberrant.

*Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government*,58 one work in the Zondervan Counterpoints series, is structured much like the *Perspectives on Church Government* series, but it contains only four positions on church polity: Episcopalianism (Peter Toon), Presbyterianism (L. Roy Taylor), Single-Elder Congregationalism (Paige Patterson), and Plural-Elder Congregationalism (Samuel E. Waldron). Analogous to the previous book, this book allows each collaborator the opportunity to outline weaknesses of the other positions. Also analogous to the prior work, this work offers much important information concerning the biblical nature of the *diakōnōs*, but in an ancillary fashion. Throughout the book, it is seasoned with data concerning the office of deacon, to include historical information about the office, and evidence from the witness of the New Testament about the nature of this sacred office.

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Embracing Shared Ministry, written by New Testament scholar Joseph Hellerman, examines the communal, relational aspect of church leadership. While not exclusively written to advocate for the shared leadership roles of the church offices, the work does, nonetheless, by virtue of its subject matter, examine the shared aspect of the offices of deacon and pastor. The last portion of the book examines the abuses that are seen in certain church polity settings, and it argues pragmatically and biblically as to why a shared leadership role in the church is the healthiest alternative. Shared leadership protects against abuses of power, facilitates humility among the leaders, and promotes accountability. The CEO (pastor) and Board of Directors (deacons) model of church leadership stands at odds with the nature of both offices found in Scripture. The author addresses biblical ideas such as authority and servant hood in the local church, and gives evidence and practical advice related to how both the pastors and the deacons of a local church can find and fulfill their respective roles before God and the community of faith.

The most widely referenced work on church polity is likely Alexander Strauch’s Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership. This book was written to bring the church to a time of reformation in the area of church polity, and to bring attention to the issue that many churches have fallen away from the biblical description of church polity over the centuries. In doing so, the author hopes to help them function as the vital New Testament churches they were called to be. Strauch believes that this topic, deemed by many as irrelevant, must be understood correctly and applied properly in order to bring about reformation in the


church. He asserts that many of the problems and deficiencies in the local church stem from an unbiblical polity, models where elders (pastors, overseers) are not conferred the authority to lead and deacons refuse to pick up the mantle of servanthood leadership. The author asserts that a model of pastoral leadership and deacon servanthood alone was mandated by the Apostles. Somewhat dogmatic at times, this book is nonetheless the seminal work on church polity in this age.

Ted Bigelow’s *The Titus Mandate* (self-published) is likely one of the clearest cries for biblical polity among recently written works on the topic. While not widely known, the book directly and discriminately affirms plural eldership as the single manner by which a church should be led and defines deacon leadership as purely servant-like in nature. The author not only affirms this model, but also asserts that churches have a “mandate” to implement pastoral eldership and deacon servanthood, as the title suggests. Bigelow leverages Titus 1:5 to assert that the church has a mandate from Paul and the Lord to appoint a plurality of elders in the church, and to confer upon them, not deacons, the authority necessary to lead. Doing so will create a healthy church environment where unity is prevalent, unbiblical teaching is not tolerated, and Christ is glorified in the body as the needs of the saints are met with love and compassion.

Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* is an important contribution to the field of theology and Bible doctrine. Among the many important topics covered, Grudem spends considerable time on Ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. He addresses the nature of the

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church as the community of all believers throughout all time, the purity of the church, the distinguishing traits of the church, the purposes of the church, and the organization (government) of the church (chapter 47). In this chapter, Grudem outlines the officers of the church, namely the elder (pastor, overseer) and deacon, and gives ample evidence for the congruent nature of the terms elder, pastor, overseers, and bishop, seeing all of these as one and the same office.\footnote{Grudem first outlines the office of apostle, but then keenly demonstrates how this office dissolved after the death of the last first-century apostle and is, therefore, obsolete in today’s church.} He details the selection process for officers through the congregation, and then outlines the various forms of government seen in churches today. He specifically defines both offices of the church and gives biblical support for both. Regarding the office of deacon, Grudem suggests that while the biblical data regarding the function of the office of deacon may be limited, the qualifications for the office found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 clarify well what those functions are and are not. He particularly addresses the authority of the deacon, and summarily offers a rejection of the notion that the office of deacon carries the idea of general ecclesiastical authority.

James Bannerman’s \textit{The Church of Christ} is a Presbyterian-leaning work that addresses almost exhaustively the details of Reformed ecclesiology.\footnote{Ryan M. McGraw, \textit{James Bannerman’s Church of Christ: Outlined and Abridged with Study Questions}, Kindle ed. (1886; repr., n.p.: Amazon Digital Services, 2013).} This eighteenth-century work has been dubbed “the most extensive, standard, solid, Reformed treatment of the doctrine of the church that has ever been written. It is indisputably the classic in its field.”\footnote{Joel Beeke, quoted in “Reformed Classics,” Solid Ground Christian Books, accessed December 12, 2017, http://www.solid-ground-books.com/books_reformedclassics.asp.} Bannerman covers most issues relative to the church, including worship, the ordinances, and holy days. Volume two contains, among other things, a thorough examination of the church polity models in practice
during that time. The author gives a careful, biblical-based examination of each model. As a reformer, Bannerman argues, of course, for the Presbyterian model of polity quite unapologetically. Nonetheless, this is a vital work in the area of church government, and its data regarding the office of deacon is valuable to those holding any polity perspective.

*Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches* is a seminal work on church government inside the Baptist tradition. This work covers a broad spectrum of ecclesiological ideas, such as ministry, baptism, communion, the role of the church, the nature of the church, and the marks of the church. Several chapters cover the concept of church government from a Baptist tradition. The author suggests that Congregationalism is the purest form of biblical government (chapter six) and that elders are leaders within that framework, not rulers outside of it (chapter seven). The author devotes considerable time defending the idea of Congregationalism, yet also addresses the problems that churches face due to such a system. While holding strong to the Baptist tradition of church government, the author argues in favor of conferred elder authority and a servanthood model of deacon ministry.

*The Deaconship* is one of the most important works on the office of the *diakōnōs* written in modern times, in terms of its influence on the Baptist church. Howell includes the expected elements of a book on the topic of the deacon, including the nature, qualifications, and selection of the deacon. He also includes chapters that outline the expected duties of the deacon. Where this book breaks from traditional works on the deacon up until the time of its writings is Howell’s surprising perspective on the office of deacon. As a pastor, he views the office of

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67 For instance, he compares the Popish, Prelatic, Independent, Congregational, and Presbyterian systems, etc., that were widely practiced at the time of the writing.


deacon as that to whom the authority for leadership is delegated, and he describes the duties of the office from this perspective. This book was instrumental in solidifying the executive board mentality of deacon leadership in the Baptist church, and further with redefining the office of the *episkopos* as a “minister” who is subject to the authority of the deacons.

**Theses**

A more dated yet valuable work is a master of theology thesis entitled “A Theology on Plurality of Elders: Model for the Multiplication of Shepherds for an Expanding Church,” which argues for elder leadership and deacon servanthood in the local church. The author argues that “the pattern and principles of a local church are not optional, as evidenced in such texts as 1 Timothy 3:15.” While relatively short, the thesis covers a multiplicity of topics related to eldership including the plural nature of the office, the parallel relationship between the terms elder, overseer, and pastor, and the process of ordination for the elder. He argues that the model of elder rule and deacon servanthood was the model of church leadership until the middle of the second century AD, when other models began to pervade the church. He argues for a restoration of the biblical pattern of elder leadership along with deacon servanthood.

**Academic Journals**

“Elder Rule,” an article in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, focuses on one element of the elders’ role in the church: the level of their influence and authority as leaders. The controversy he addresses relates generally to the term “rule” (*proestotes*) in 1 Timothy 5:17, and more specifically to the scope and limits of leadership authority that an elder possesses within

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71 Ibid., 3.

the framework of his office. Through an examination of key passages related to church polity and through an analysis of key terms in those passages, Bixby argues that the elder’s simultaneous roles as a bishop and a pastor must influence an understanding of what it means to “rule” in 1 Timothy 5:17. When the authority of the pastor is understood biblically, a more temperate picture of authority emerges. He further argues that the “deacon board” model of church authority is unbiblical and will not produce lasting health and vitality in the church. When authority for leadership is vested in the pastors and they are positioned to lead scripturally, the church is best poised to leverage all the gifts, experiences, and skills that are available in each pastor individually. A plural elder team of ministry can produce a community of faith that is loving, caring and healthy, especially when each of them work in unity with the other ministry teams in the church, such as servant deacons.

“Hermeneutical and Exegetical Challenges in Interpreting the Pastoral Epistles” analyzes the qualifications of both the office of diakŏnŏs and the office of episkopos in order to determine what those qualifications might suggest about each office’s role in the church.73 Most interesting are Köstenberger’s observations regarding 1) the differences between the qualifications of each office and 2) specific omissions in the qualifications of the deacons. He posits that the absence of the requirement to possess an ability to teach in the deacon qualifications, along with the absence of the comparison between care for the family household and care for the church household, both of which are found in the qualifications of the episkopos, suggest that diakŏnŏi do not possess the levels of leadership authority conferred upon the episkopos.

“Behind the Word ‘Deacon’: A New Testament Study” offers an examination of the term through the lens of its usage in the New Testament. Hiebert classifies each usage of the word diakōnōs (and related terms) into three categories of use: 1) “Deacon” as an official and technical term, used to describe the office of deacon; 2) Doubtful usages of the word diakōnōs and its related terms, used to categorize occurrences where the context makes it difficult to determine whether an official position is intended; and 3) Nonofficial usages, used to categorize occurrences where it is clear an official office is not in mind. Through this examination, the author postulates that the office of diakōnōs is an office of voluntary service motivated by love and compassion for those within the church. The primary concern of the deacon, then, is the spiritual welfare of others.

“Exodus From Privilege: Reflections on the Diaconate in Acts” examines the institution of the office of the diakōnōs in Acts in order to discover the primary essence of the office. The author considers the office of the diakōnōs as a “structural remedy for the church’s addiction to privilege.” Through the Book of Acts, he paints a portrait of humble servanthood that “functions as an engine of internal resistance to [the dynamic of privilege.]” Examining many of the passages in Acts related to servanthood, to include Acts 6, he advances the position that ordination to the office of diakōnōs is not about an ascension to authority, but rather to a position

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76 Ibid., 277.

77 Ibid., 278.
of service. He argues, also, that the humility required of the *diakōnōs* is also required of anyone who desires to serve the church in Christian ministry.

In “The Diaconate,” the author seeks to convince the reader that the office of the *diakōnōs* is an official office in the church and should not be discarded based on the abuses that have been experienced within the church.⁷⁸ According to the author, those holding the office of *diakōnōs* have been fundamental to the church since its inception. Exegeting passages such as 1Timothy 3:8-13, the author suggests that the word *diakōnōs* expresses the idea of service, which gives a clear indication of the role that the *diakōnōs* entails. Analyzing a variety of other passages, along with the witness of the early church, the author demonstrates that care for the poor is the most prominent role both biblically and historically for the deacon. There are a multitude of other duties that deacons might fulfill; yet their primary concern should become and remain care for the poor, in order that the *episkopoi* might be free to preach the Gospel and pray.

Websites

Daniel Wallace, writing for Bible.org, authored an insightful article entitled “Who Should Run the Church? A Case for the Plurality of Elders.”⁷⁹ In this article, he sets forth biblical arguments for a plural-elder model of leadership in the church where deacons are called to meet the physical needs of the church, and supports his assertion well with historical, theological, and pragmatic insight. He argues against the single-elder model of leadership where deacons possess leadership authority in conjunction with the single-elder. A multiple-elder leadership model promotes accountability and more easily allows for the church to take on the personality of

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Christ by ensuring that it does not take on the personality of a single elder. He directly asserts that “the consistent pattern in the New Testament is that every church had several elders,” and that deacons are to be “primarily concerned with the physical welfare of the congregation.”\(^8^0\) He also demonstrates well how the oversight nature of the role of the elder is conferred exclusively upon the elder and not upon the deacon.

\(^{80}\) Ibid.
CHAPTER 1

THE NATURE OF THE EKKLESIA OF CHRIST

Any attempt to explore the nature of the church leads to the discovery that such an exploration is not as simple as might be expected. The nature of the church, along with other things, such as its ministries, functions, leadership, membership, etc., is far more complex in one regard than is first expected. This is why G. C. Berkouwer wrote that every attempt at a sound ecclesiology is important, because it leads to a discovery of the church’s divine nature – “her mystery, her divine origin, her relationship to Christ, her continuity, and her future. In light of such exalted language, the question of the Church’s relevance becomes even more challenging and serious.” Berkouwer writes that because of the seriousness of such an endeavor, a “great, unique significance of the Church” can be quite readily seen.

In order to understand the nature of the church, an examination of the key Greek term for “church” in the New Testament is necessary. Such an examination of the term in its original language can yield an understanding of its definition, usage, and purpose in the canon of the New Testament. The word rendered in English as “church” is the Greek term ekklēsia (ἐκκλησία). This term is used quite often in much of the New Testament, and at least occasionally in many others; thus, its usage has been described by Roloff as “unevenly distributed.”

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82 Ibid.

Ekklēsia is used 114 times in the New Testament, as can be witnessed by the following accounting: (1) there are but three usages in the Gospels, all in Matthew chapters 16 and 18; (2) there are sixty-four usages in the Pauline Epistles; (3) there are only four usages in the General Epistles, three in 3 John and one in James; and (4) there are nineteen usages in the Revelation of John.\(^84\) Regardless of its sporadic usage, the mere fact that the term is used some 114 times testifies to its importance within the pages of the New Testament canon.

**Defining the Term Ekklēsia**

The Greek word ekklēsia, which is translated “church” in the English New Testament, arises from the preposition ἐκ (ek), meaning “out of,” and the verb καλέω (kaleō), meaning “to call.” Yet this simplistic etymological rendering does not yield, intrinsically, a full understanding of the term within the context in which it is used. “The etymological meaning of the word is ‘a person, or persons called out of.’ However, the lexical meaning (the meaning in actual usage) of a word is frequently different from its etymological meaning.”\(^85\) Such is the case with ekklēsia. As D.A. Carson has so clearly said, “Usage is far more important than etymology in determining meaning.”\(^86\)

The term ekklēsia is defined by Abbott-Smith as “an assembly of citizens regularly convened.”\(^87\) It is used in both a religious and secular manner in the New Testament. In fact, the term is used in several senses throughout: (1) three times as an assembly of faithful believers;\(^88\)

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\(^{84}\) This list is derived from a list by Balz and Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 411.


\(^{88}\) See Hebrews 2:12.
(2) four times as a secular assembly of a community or town;\textsuperscript{89} (3) twenty times as the general, universal church;\textsuperscript{90} and (4) eighty-seven times as a local church assembly.\textsuperscript{91} Abbott-Smith similarly divides the term into three senses as it relates to the Christian community: (1) an assembly of local communities of a house-congregation; (2) an assembly gathering for worship; and (3) the whole body of Christians.\textsuperscript{92} Louw and Nida summarize \textit{ekklēsia} as simply “the totality of congregations of Christians—‘church.’”\textsuperscript{93}

In each sense, there is an expectation or realization of a group of people who are assembled together for a specific purpose, most often for the purpose of corporate Christian worship. Yet would someone in the first century, when they heard \textit{ekklēsia}, connect with such a definition? Would the word have had the same meaning to someone in the first century as it did once the word became synonymous with the Christian church?

\textbf{Ekklēsia as an Irreligious Word}

Classically the word was not, according to some, a religious word. Bloomfield notes that in the classical sense the word was merely “an assembly of the people, either lawfully called out by the civil magistrate…or of a tumultuary assembly, not legal.”\textsuperscript{94} O’Brien also acknowledges

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{89} See Acts 7:38; 19:32-41.
\item \textsuperscript{90} See Acts 5:11; Romans 16:11; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:2; Ephesians 3:10; Colossians 1:24.
\item \textsuperscript{91} See Matthew 16:18; Acts 8:3; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Galatians 1:13; Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:18. Logos Bible Software Sense database, Faithlife Corporation, Bellingham, Washington.
\item \textsuperscript{92} Abbott-Smith, \textit{A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament}, 138–139.
\item \textsuperscript{94} S. T. Bloomfield, \textit{A Greek and English Lexicon to the New Testament} (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1840), 112–113. Bloomfield also acknowledges the classical sense in which the word \textit{ekklēsia} would have also been associated with the Jewish congregation that assembled for worship.
\end{itemize}
the non-religious sense in which the word was used prior to the church age when he writes: “The term, then, in the Greek and Jewish world prior to Paul meant an assembly or gathering of people; it did not designate [a religious] ‘organization’ or ‘society,’” and thus had “no intrinsic religious meaning.”

Louw and Nida note, quite nicely, that the term was used hundreds of years before the church existed, and carried a socio-political connotation more than a religious one:

Though some persons have tried to see in the term ἐκκλησία a more or less literal meaning of ‘called-out ones,’ this type of etymologizing is not warranted either by the meaning of ἐκκλησία in NT times or even by its earlier usage. The term ἐκκλησία was in common usage for several hundred years before the Christian era and was used to refer to an assembly of persons constituted by well-defined membership. In general Greek usage it was normally a socio-political entity based upon citizenship in a city-state.

More precisely, others see the term almost singularly in a political sense, as does Vincent. He writes, “In classical Greek, the term ekklēsia was used almost exclusively for political gatherings.”

Davis would harmonize, as he writes that the Graeco-Roman culture would have also viewed ekklēsia as a political word, referring to a “political assembly.” To some, then, the term was more political or areligious, and had very little, if any, correlation to a spiritual or religious sense of use. Whether religious or political, the term easily applies to a variety of public gatherings or assemblies.

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96 Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 125. The authors do acknowledge the importance of understanding ekklēsia, as it is used in the NT, as “an assembly of God’s people.”


Ekklēsia as a Religious Word

The term, then, progressed into its more natural New Testament technical usage, as Thomas writes:

Ekklēsia (“church,” “assembly”) was the term applied to many types of public gatherings in the ancient Roman world, whether civil or religious. From this general sense, which is found also in LXX, there developed the technical meaning of an assembly of believers in Christ. The development of a technical meaning did not come at once, however.99

By the time the word was initially rendered in its 114 usages in the pages of the New Testament, the word came to have a “special religious idea,” as it had been “established in a special way” by the writers of the New Testament, as Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament indicates.100

One such example of ekklēsia being “established in a special way” which distinguishes it from its Greco-Roman social-political sense is found in 1 Thessalonians 1:1. Here Paul writes, “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.”101 O’Brien writes about this special phrase used to distinguish the New Testament usage of ekklēsia:

The term is employed in the same way as in Greek and Jewish circles, that is, like other assemblies in the city, it is described as “a gathering of the Thessalonians.” But it is distinguished from the regular political councils by the addition of the words “in God the Father,” and from the regular synagogue meetings by the use of the term ἐκκλησία and the additional phrase “in the Lord Jesus Christ.”102


101 1 Thessalonians 1:1.

102 O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon, 59.
The *ekklēsia* is “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” By this designation, Paul distinguishes the *ekklēsia* from any other assembly, whether social, political, or religious. The *ekklēsia* is distinct because it is in God the Father and in Christ. “It is not a pagan or nonreligious assembly (cf. ‘God the Father’). It is not a Jewish assembly (cf. ‘the Lord Jesus Christ’). It is distinctly ‘in Christ Jesus’ (2:14). Being in union with the Father and Christ meant a new sphere of life on an infinitely higher plane.”103 Associating the *ekklēsia* with the Father and the Son means that the church is infinitely special in the plan of God, is much more than a building, and is uniquely Christian in context. “The word ἐκκλησία can scarcely have been stamped with so definite a Christian meaning in the minds of these recent and early converts as to render the addition ‘in God the Father,’ etc., superfluous.”104 Therefore, the church is unique in both its purpose and its substance as a special, distinguished assembly.105

The Unique Nature of the *Ekklēsia*

The *Ekklēsia* Is Built Upon Christ as the Foundation

In what ways, then, is the *ekklēsia* distinguished from social, political, and other religious assemblies of the New Testament era? How exactly does the church “of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” show forth itself as distinguished from any other assembly? One way in which this separation from the ordinary occurs is found in the first usage of the term in the pages of the New Testament, Matthew 16:18. As the context has been discussed in the previous chapter above, the *ekklēsia* is built on nothing more or less than Christ Himself. “And I tell you, you are

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103 Thomas, “1 Thessalonians,” 238.


Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” According to Christ, the church is a special assembly because Christ Himself will build the church, not leaving this vital work to the final care or authority of anyone else other than Himself. As such, the church is first and foremost special and unique because it is a spiritual house made of Christ (as the Head), by Christ, for Christ, and through Christ. Peter, writing to the five Asian provinces of Rome, wrote that the church was “like living stones” which “are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” It has been suggested that Peter would have recalled the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:18 as he wrote these words about this spiritual house called the church:

It is difficult to resist the impression that Peter recalls the words of Jesus to him on this memorable occasion. Further on (2:9) he speaks of them as an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, showing beyond controversy that Peter’s use of building a spiritual house is general, not local. This is undoubtedly the picture in the mind of Christ here in 16:18. It is a great spiritual house, Christ’s Israel, not the Jewish nation, which he describes.

Jesus is building His church, which is a spiritual house, distinct from any other idea that might have been conjured up by the word *ekklēsia* in the first century. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, “No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” In other words, the church was built, and continues to be built, on Christ alone, for His purposes, for His glory, and for His ultimate benefit. Peter refers to Jesus as this foundation as a *zaō lithŏs*, a “living stone” in his epistle to the churches in the Diaspora. He

106 Matthew 16:18.

107 1 Peter 2:5.


109 1 Corinthians 3:11 (NKJV).
writes that Jesus is “a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious.”\textsuperscript{110} In 1 Peter 4:4-6, the Apostle writes about the same Cornerstone and Sure Foundation Isaiah wrote about in Isaiah 28:16. He also alludes to Jesus as the rejected cornerstone of Psalm 118:22, the same reference Jesus used to describe Himself in Mark 12:10. Therefore, “Jesus is both the foundation cornerstone on which his church is built, and the capstone up to which it grows (see 1 Cor 3:11; Eph. 2:19–22).”\textsuperscript{111} Jesus is the very basis of the establishment of the ekklēsia and the method by which it would grow.

The Ekklesia is the Family of God

Not only is the church separate and distinct from any other ekklēsia in the first century through its usage as an assembly that Christ is building, it is also unique in that the ekklēsia comprises the family of God, often referred to as the “household of God.” This is likely one of the most powerful metaphors of the church found in the New Testament, as Osborne writes concerning it: “There is a succession of metaphors in ecclesiology, each more intense than the other. We are first an assembly (ἐκκλησία), then a community, and finally, a family. Each level involves deeper intimacy, more sharing, and greater caring—indeed, more time spent together.”\textsuperscript{112}

From the beginning in the garden, the familial concept can be seen in both the Trinitarian God and in creation by His word. God said, “Let us make man [humankind] in our image, in our likeness.”\textsuperscript{113} Grenz adds,

\textsuperscript{110} 1 Peter 2:4.


\textsuperscript{112} Grant R. Osborne, \textit{Matthew}, vol. 1, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 495.

\textsuperscript{113}Genesis 1:26.
The God we know is the Triune One—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit united together in
perfect love. Because God is “community”—fellowship shared among the Father, Son
and Spirit—the creation of humankind in the divine image must be related to humans in
fellowship with each other.114

Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, and as such were created for
community and fellowship one with another. Their relationship with each other was possible
only because of the community and fellowship that existed in the Trinitarian God of creation.
Mankind would eventually fall into sin despite the existence of community between them.115
God, in His redemptive nature, would not leave mankind in their trespasses. He would work
through time to prepare humanity for a Redeemer, as can be readily seen throughout the pages of
the Old Testament canon. When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His one and only
Son to be the atoning sacrifice for sin.116 This Son would perform the pinnacle of all sacrificial
acts, laying down His own life on a tree for the trespasses of others,117 even though He Himself
had known no sin.118 Jesus conquered humanity’s sin by resurrecting Himself on the third day
following His crucifixion.119 After having accomplished the greatest of all violations of natural
law (miracles), Jesus expended a short time charging the disciples to be witnesses to the world
abroad, making disciples out of the people of the nations.120

114 Stanley J. Grenz, Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living, 2nd ed.
(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 80.


116 Galatians 4:4, John 3:16, and 1 John 4:10 respectively.

117 John 10:18.

118 2 Corinthians 5:21.


120 Matthew 28:18-20.
Before Jesus left, He released the Holy Spirit and inaugurated in the church the spiritual *ekklēsia* of Christian brothers and sisters in Christ. He inaugurated in the *ekklēsia* in order that He might bring His followers under one covering, “the household of God.” The church, a spiritual mystery that was recently unfolded, now comprised a group of men and women who were more than people in fellowship, more than just born-again co-believers – they were brothers and sisters in Christ. They formed one cohesive body regardless of their background, their ethnicity, their social status, or their financial wealth. Regardless of their present or past situations and because of the redemptive, sacrificial work of Christ, they were meant to be a family, a household under God, in God, and of God.

Ephesians 2:19 expresses this ideal well: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” The church is not comprised of members who are unfamiliar with each other or who live apart from each other in distant lands or areas. The church is comprised of “fellow citizens;” that is, joint members who are co-saints and members of God’s spiritual household. The church is not a political democracy, nor a business organization; it is a household. As McCartney writes, “The church was not a democratic institution but a patriarchal family consisting of people who are familially related to, dependent on, obedient to, and loyal to the head of that house, Jesus Christ.” As each family has a head, so the church, as the household of God, has a head, and He is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

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123 Cf. 1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 4:17.

While the related nature of the “household of God” is of importance, there remains an element of exponentially greater importance as this term pertains to the *ekklēsia*, the actual members of this household. It is to be presumed that the “household of God” is made up of brothers and sisters, just as a natural household might be. In the New Testament, Paul frequently used the term “brothers and sisters” to refer to members of the body of Christ or believers. For example, in Romans 1:13, the Apostle says, “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you.”

The Greek term *adelphos* refers to both male and female members of a community, in this case, a Christocentric community of professing believers. Friberg, Friberg, and Miller add further specificity to the definition of *adelphos* when they define the term as a “sibling with at least one parent in common … figuratively, members of the Christian community, and of associates in religious work (spiritual) brother, fellow Christian, fellow believer.”

Therefore, the term includes brothers and sisters (both men and women) who are associated via a religious work (the atoning work of Christ) and who have at least one parent in common among them (God the Father). It is here that the spiritual phenomenon of God’s presence in the “household of God” is uncovered.

The “household of God” is not merely a place where believers, spiritual brothers and sisters, are brought together under a common union, it is also the place where the presence of the living God dwells. The presence of God dwells in the “household of God,” in the midst of the people of God through the ministry of His Holy Spirit. Hawthorne poignantly writes,

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125 Cf. Rom 7:1; 1 Cor 1:10, 2:1.


127 Ephesians 2:21.
God’s household (= God’s people) and God’s Temple, which signifies above all the place in which God dwells, are brought together. The images are held together by Paul’s teaching about the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:14): the same Spirit which indwelt the Temple now indwells the new community of God.128

The *ekklēsia*, then, is an assembly that is separate and distinct from the ancient sense of the word, in which a political or secular assembly would have been in mind. This is demonstrated, thus far, by the fact that the *ekklēsia* of God, dissimilar to any other assembly, is erected upon no other foundation than the living stone, Jesus Christ. It is also dissimilar to any other assembly in that the *ekklēsia* of God is comprised of a spiritual family, brothers and sisters in the “household of God,” members who dwell in that household with a divine heavenly Father. Yet this *ekklēsia* is also unique in nature from a political or secular assembly in that only the *ekklēsia* of God has played and continues to play a role in redemptive history.

**The Ekklēsia Plays a Role in Redemptive History**

In *Black’s New Testament Commentary*, Kelly writes that the *ekklēsia*, as the household of God and the spiritual house where the presence of God the Father presides, is God’s chosen method by which He will reveal His redemptive plan with Christ at the epicenter of the work. “The gist of Paul’s message is that order, in the widest sense of the term, is necessary in the Christian congregation precisely because it is God’s household, his chosen instrument for proclaiming to men the saving truth of the revelation of the God-man, Jesus Christ.”129

Therefore, in discussing how the *ekklēsia* of God is unique from any other assembly in antiquity, one must readily acknowledge the integral place in redemptive history the church has

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had and will continue to have. The Apostle Paul articulated as much when he wrote about the importance of the church in the course of revelation and redemptive history. He wrote that he preached to the Gentiles about Christ to bring God’s mysterious plan to light “so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that [God the Father] has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Thielman’s *Theology of the New Testament* demonstrates how salvation history finds its fundamental fulfillment in the *ekklēsia* through the eyes of the Apostle Luke. According to Thielman, Luke understood salvation history as having its origins in creation. Mankind, among many other wonderful creations of the Father, was created by the very word of God. Mankind’s eternal purpose was to worship God; yet man worshiped idols rather than the Father. Mankind’s fall (Genesis 3) distorted the image of God in man and unseated worship from its primary purpose among mankind; yet God would not leave mankind alone in their sin. Genesis 3:15, the first prophecy and the first promise in the Bible, gives clear assurance that God would not give up on mankind despite their fall into sin. This passage is commonly referred to as the *protoevangelium*, “The first good news.” It is called such because God simultaneously pronounces a curse upon the serpent and his seed for their part in the fall, while also pronouncing

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130 Ephesians 3:10–11.


the ultimate climactic good news of victory over the serpent for Eve and her seed, ultimately and particularly fulfilled in Messiah.

Since the formation of the *ekklēsia* by Christ, the church has consistently regarded itself as the bearer of this redemptive message, ultimately found in Messiah. As Elwell writes, “Salvation history forms the connecting link, for the church viewed itself as carrying on God’s redemptive acts in history, manifested in the believing community and proclaimed to the unbelieving.” What at one time was not revealed fully is now brought to light by the church. The church is now the carrier of the manifold wisdom of God, the message of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, in order that God might reach the Jews in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant and the Gentiles in fulfillment of the New Covenant. Thus, it “is plain that the sense of the term [ekklēsia] is related to the realms of salvation history;” no other assembly from antiquity could have dared make such an assertion.

The *Ekklēsia* Has Called Leaders Who Conform to a High Standard of Character

It has thus far been demonstrated that the *ekklēsia* of God is separate and unique from any other idea of the first-century era *ekklēsia* for several reasons: 1) because Christ alone is the foundation of the *ekklēsia*; 2) because the *ekklēsia* is a family, the “household of God;” and 3) because the *ekklēsia* alone plays a part in God’s redemptive plan and purposes. Yet there is a less obvious, nonetheless vitally important, reason why the *ekklēsia* of God is unique from any other

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136 Genesis 12:1-3 and Jeremiah 31-31-33, respectively.

ekklēsia from antiquity. The ekklēsia of God includes leaders who must conform to a very clear standard of righteousness and religious ethics.

The view of morality in the Greco-Roman world was vastly antithetical to that of the Christian world in the first century. The Apostle Paul himself recognized how far the reach of immorality was in first-century Rome when he wrote that Christians would have to “go out of the world” to avoid its reach. The Roman author Cornelius Nepos, writing about a century before Paul, records that both Greeks and Romans held a favorable view of incest and other immoral acts. Sallust, a Roman historian and politician, wrote about a state of immorality that could be effortlessly witnessed about a century before Paul. “Instead of modesty, temperance, and integrity, there prevailed shamelessness, corruption, and rapacity.” Pliny the Younger, a Roman lawyer, author, and magistrate, who wrote within fifty years after the Apostle Paul, recorded that “while many people are afraid of what others will say, few are afraid of their own conscience.”

It seems, then, that the state of social or political assemblies of first-century Rome were filled with leaders and members who had no standards of morality or ethics by which to conduct their lives and social interactions. This is in direct juxtaposition to the ekklēsia of God, which

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139 1 Corinthians 5:9-10.
had “leaders who conform to a standard.” Briscoe and Ogilvie write about the standards to which leaders in the *Ekklēsia* are called, or more specifically, what they were called from:

If Christians were to live as citizens of the eternal age, their “walk” would have to be proper or consistent and that would mean no more involvement in much of contemporary Roman life—the excesses of drunkenness, sexual immorality, partying, and general ill-disciplined capitulation to the base instincts of the sinful nature.

The *ekklēsia* of God is comprised of men who, by the nature of their character and qualifications, differentiate the *ekklēsia* from any other assembly of the New Testament time. The Pauline epistles of 1 Timothy and Titus outline what qualifications a leader in the *ekklēsia* is to have, and also spells out the names for those offices. One finds but two offices named in the Pauline epistles, namely the ἐπίσκοπος (bishop, overseer) and the διάκονος (deacon, servant). These leaders were chosen not based on their knowledge or educational level, but rather based on the character and maturity that each one possessed. Kreider writes about their level of maturity: “Elders were found from within the local church and developed into leaders over time on the basis of their willingness to serve and their moral and spiritual maturity. They were spiritually growing individuals who were chosen because of their maturity and character.” Just as the Apostle Paul’s life was an example that others could emulate, the qualifications set forth

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146 See 1 Timothy 3:2 and 3:8 respectively. It will be demonstrated in a subsequent chapter that the offices of πρεσβύτερος (πρεσβύτερος; elder), ἐπίσκοπος (ἐπίσκοπος; bishop, overseer) and ποιμὴν (ποιμήν; shepherd, pastor) all refer to one and the same office in the *ekklēsia*, and that it is separate and distinct from the διάκονος (διάκονος; deacon, servant).

by Paul indicate that he expected nothing less from those who would be leaders in the ekklēsia of God. These qualifications assured a church that an elder candidate was mature and that he possessed leadership ability.

Qualifications for Leadership in the Ekklēsia

There are four categories under which the characteristics that should be found in leaders can be observed. The four categories are 1) character qualifications, 2) family qualifications, 3) background qualifications, and 4) ability qualifications. Most, if not all, of the qualifications set forth by the Apostle Paul stand in stark contrast to the character, or lack thereof, found in leaders in the first century. For example, an ἐπίσκοπος is to be “above reproach.” While this may, upon a cursory examination, seem to indicate perfection is required for leadership in the ekklēsia of God, this is not the case.

The Greek term for “above reproach” is the word anepilēmptos. In its most literal sense, according to William Mounce, the word means “not to be laid hold of,” or not able to be apprehended, or that which cannot be reprehended. The implication behind such a literal

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148 Some, though not all, of these qualifications will be treated in the following paragraphs. The purpose of doing so is not to provide an exhaustive list of the qualifications based on character, but rather to contrast the required character of the first century ekklēsia of God with the first century secular or political assembly.

149 For example, a leader must be the husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6), must manage his own household well (1 Timothy 3:4), must keep his children under submission (1 Timothy 3:4), and must raise believing children who are not open to charges of drunkenness or disobedience (Titus 1:6).

150 For example, a leader must be seasoned in the faith (1 Timothy 3:6) and well thought of by those outside the ekklēsia (1 Timothy 3:7).

151 For example, a leader (more specifically, an overseer) must be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2) in order that he can give instruction in sound doctrine (Titus 1:9) and rebuke those who contradict sound doctrine (Titus 1:9).

152 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6.


154 James Strong, Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon (Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1995), s.v. “anepilēmptos (ἀνεπιλήμπτος).”
interpretation is that one is to be free of personal accusations that would apprehend their reputation or one’s character, and that a claim of immorality cannot be laid upon them successfully. As such, some define the word in terms such as “blameless,” “above criticism,” or even “without fault.” Strong’s Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon applies the literal definition in such a way as to form the applied definition of “irreproachable.”

In other words, a leader in the ekklēsia is to be morally upright to the extent that he is not subject to the reproach of a community or the assembly to which he belongs, for how can he represent Christ and lead people to an upright life based on Christ’s righteousness if he is not producing solid advances to live the same type of life that Christ lived? Again, perfection is not the standard in view; it is simply the idea of a leader who is free from accusations that would hold true. The idea that perfection is not required, or even considered, can be seen in the definition rendered in Liddell’s Greek-English Lexicon. Here, he defines anepilēmptos as “not censured,” “less open to criticism,” “not subject to control,” and “unassailable.” In other words, perfection is not the standard; a consistent existence of integrity leading to a life free of charges of immorality from those in or outside the ekklēsia of God is in view. Kevin Smith affirms this position when he writes, “The word [anepilēmptos] is derived from a verb form that means ‘to seize’ or ‘to grasp’. The noun is the negative form, describing people whose life is such there is no glaring weakness or moral failing that opponents can seize or grasp to pull them down.”

156 Swanson, Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domain, s.v. “anepilēmptos (ἀνεπίλημπτος).”
It seems then, in light of the contrast between the broad nature of this qualification and the specific nature of other character qualifications, that this qualification serves as an umbrella that covers all of the other items related to character. Smith asserts as much when he writes, “In 1 Timothy 3:1–7, above reproach governs a list of specific examples. In other words, it is the umbrella term and it is applied to a number of particular characteristics in which the elder must be above reproach.” Therefore, a leader in the *ekklēsia* of God should be *anepilēmptos*, that is, “above reproach” or “less open to criticism” in all of the other character qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. He is free from the blemish of indignity and accusation that would come if he were not “above reproach” in any of the areas of qualifications for a leader of the *ekklēsia*.

For example, 1 Timothy 3:3 requires that a leader is “not a drunkard.” The Greek phrase rendered in English as “not a drunkard” is *mē parōinōs*, which is a negative statement (*mē* is a negation) and occurs only in 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7, both related to qualifications of leaders in the *ekklēsia*. The Greek *parōinōs* concerns a person who is addicted to intoxicating drinks or who drinks too much and subsequently becomes drunk. Louw and Nida define the term as “a person who habitually drinks too much and thus becomes a drunkard … [a] heavy drinker.” Strong defines the term as relating to one who has a habit of “staying near wine.” While leaders and members alike in a secular or political *ekklēsia* would not have considered drunkenness as a matter of personal integrity or a moral fault, members of the *ekklēsia* of God

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159 Ibid, 55.


see such a characteristic as a sin and a disqualifier for leadership roles, and are thus “above reproach” in this area.162

Another example of the character requirements that separate leaders of the ekklēsia of God from any other ekklēsia of the first century can also be found in 1 Timothy 3:3. Here, the Apostle Paul requires the ēpiskŏpŏs to be [mē] aphilargurŏs, that is, “not a lover of money.” According to Utley, the etymology of this word relates back to a term for “silver” and a term for “brotherly love.”163 Therefore, the term speaks of someone who is not a lover of silver, or a lover of money, which was common among leaders in other areas of life in first-century Rome and among false teachers.

Blight, in his An Exegetical Summary of 1 Timothy, defines aphilargurŏs as an “adjective [that] describes a person [who is] not being desirous or greedy for money.”164 According to Zodhiates, the term is found only in 1 Timothy 3:3 and Hebrews 13:5, making it extremely rare in the New Testament canon, and refers to one who is not “money-loving” or “fond of money,” and consequently is not “covetous.”165 While the term aphilargurŏs may be rare in the New Testament, the concept of being free from the love of money is not. As Black and McClung

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162 It should be noted that while church leaders, members, and theologians have been debating the issue of abstinence from alcohol for centuries, with some asserting that alcoholic consumption is a sin at any level, and others asserting that moderate consumption that does not lead to inebriation or incessant use is not a sin, this passage in 1 Timothy 3:3 cannot be used to support a position of abstinence, and thus seems to support the position that a responsible consumption of alcohol is permitted for leaders of the ekklēsia. As Zodhiates accurately observes, “The word does not include the responsible and temperate usage of alcohol, rather, it has in view the abuse or incessant use of it. The word–picture is that of an individual who always has a bottle (or wineskin) on the table and so signifies addiction (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7).” Spiros Zodhiates, The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), s.v. “3943, Πάροινος.”


write, “This issue is important enough to be mentioned six times in the Pastoral Epistles (see also 3:8, 6:9–10, 6:12–19, 2 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:7). Paul knew that even those on a small income can love money. This is an especially appropriate warning for overseers, who would manage the church’s funds.”

Leaders in the ekklēsia of God are not lovers of money. They see financial resources of all types as instruments that can be used to benefit others rather than themselves. A leader in the assembly of God is not one who is out for personal gain, but who rather seeks the gain of others, seeks what is best for others, and desires to see others prosper. He esteems others as more important than himself, and as such seeks to be an example of how one can look after the needs of others and seek honest gain. He is “above reproach” in the area of covetousness.

Summary

The ekklēsia of God is a sacred assembly. While the etymology of the word speaks to a group of “called out ones,” the term suggests much more than that. In the New Testament, the term is used to designate a group of faithful believers who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ as Messiah, whether that group be a local assembly or the collective assembly of all believers in all places. While the word first spoke of an irreligious assembly, either social, political, or a general assembly, by the end of the first century, the term ekklēsia came to be synonymous with the Christian church through its expansive usage (114 times) in the New Testament. It became synonymous with a spiritual assembly because of several factors: it is being built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ, it comprises the unique family of God, and it plays an important role in God’s redemptive plan.


167 Philippians 2:3.
Furthermore, the *ekklēsia* has leaders who are called to a high standard of morality – a calling that leaders and members in secular or political assemblies of the first century did not share. Leaders of the *ekklēsia* must meet the qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9. Among these qualifications is the requirement that leaders be “above reproach” (1 Timothy 3:2). This is not a requirement for perfection, but rather a call to serious integrity that reflects the transformative nature and power of the gospel under which those in the *ekklēsia* have been placed. The gospel, the ultimate expression of God’s compassion and grace, shapes the lives of leaders. As Kreider writes,

> Elders are qualified as elders because their character has been and is being molded and shaped by God’s compassion and grace. They realize with humility that without the development of God’s character in them, eldership and the qualifications for this leadership office are unattainable.\(^{168}\)

With this in view, the next chapter will examine the Greek word “*diakōnōs*” and related words, and how an understanding of these words will affect a greater understanding of the nature of the *diakōnōs*, as well as the role the office plays in the life and health of the church.

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CHAPTER 2

DEFINING DIAKONOS AND RELATED TERMS

Having already defined the term *ekklēsia* as an assembly of local communities of a house-congregation, an assembly gathering for worship, and the whole body of Christians, it is now possible to define and understand the meanings and functions of offices within the assembly of Christ-followers. In its religious connotation, the word *ekklēsia* communicates an assembly or body that is built upon Christ as its sole and lasting foundation. This separates the *ekklēsia* from any other assembly of the ancient or modern worlds. The *ekklēsia* is God’s family. This also makes the *ekklēsia* special and unique, as this is the only assembly where the sovereign Creator-God of eternity purports to be the father of those within. Additionally, the *ekklēsia* has a particular role to play in the end times, in God’s redemptive history, as God ushers in His kingdom on earth. The church serves, then, as the arms and feet of Christ, ushering people into God’s kingdom, and equipping them for an eternity in Heaven with the triune God. With such an important position in God’s redemptive plan, understanding the identity, characteristics, and functions of those in leadership within the *ekklēsia* becomes exigent.

The *ekklēsia* of God consists of two offices of leadership. Each office is to be comprised of men who are chosen based on specific, sacred criteria, and these men execute a broad array of duties and functions within the *ekklēsia*, all of which are designed by God to promote the health and vitality of the assembly and its members. The offices outlined in the New Testament, and thus ordained of God as leaders within the local *ekklēsia*, are the offices of the *episkopos* (overseer [also pastor, elder]) and the *diakōnōs* (deacon). This chapter will give treatment to the

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office of the *diakōnŏs* and will attempt to demonstrate through an analysis of the term *diakōnŏs*, including related terms used in the New Testament, that these terms convey, over and above any other direct or nuanced meanings, the concept of humble servanthood. It is the virtue of servanthood that can become a catalyst of church vitality and health in the local church.

**Defining and Understanding the Office of Deacon through Its Related Greek Terms**

*Diakōnŏs*

In the majority of English Bibles, the Greek noun *diakōnŏs* is translated as “deacon,” pertaining to the office of deacon as seen in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8,12. While the office of *diakōnŏs* is vitally important in the *ekklēsia*, it has been the subject of much misunderstanding and misapplication throughout the centuries. This is unfortunate, since the office of *diakōnŏs* is a God-ordained, and thus sacred, office that, when expressed and employed properly within the *ekklēsia*, will lead to health, vitality, and strength for the body, and glory to the Father of the Church and His Son, the Church’s appointed Bridegroom. As such, a proper understanding of the term *diakōnŏs*, as well as its associated terms, is fundamental to properly discerning the nature, functions, and responsibilities of the office.

In Greek, the word *diakōnŏs* simply means “servant.”\(^{170}\) The title, then, becomes its own job description in that those who hold this office, or even aspire to do so, must exhibit the nature of a servant. The word *diakōnŏs*, in its noun form, is found twenty-nine times within twenty-seven verses in the New Testament canon, and literally means “servant, “attendant,” or

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“official,” and can also mean, more exclusively, “one who serves at tables.” The twenty-nine occurrences in the ESV are translated in the following manner: “deacon” (3 times); minister” or “ministers” (7 times); “servant” or “servants” (18 times); and “attendant (1 time).

Diakŏneŏ

The definition of the Greek words related to diakŏnŏs support its definition. Diakŏneŏ, the verb form of the word diakŏnŏs, is found thirty-seven times within thirty-two verses in the New Testament and is used mainly to describe the act of personal support or service to others. Its most rudimentary definition is “to serve,” to help others, or to “render a service.”

171 Liddell, A Greek-English Lexicon, 398.
174 Perhaps four times, depending upon how diakŏnŏs is translated in Romans 16:1. The verse pertains to Phoebe, presumably a female deacon or deaconess. Some translations render diakŏnŏs here as deacon, such as in the NIV. Many others, however, render diakŏnŏs as servant, such as in the ESV, HCSB, LEB, and NASB95. From the context an exact translation is not possible. However, many translators consider servant to be the most fitting translation in light of the qualifications for deacons found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Verse twelve of that passage requires that a deacon be “the husband of one wife.” As such, many translators feel that Paul was addressing Phoebe, who could not be a “husband,” as a servant. The Romans 16 translation issue is ambiguous at best. Diakŏnŏs is translated as “deacon” at Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:12, and 1 Timothy 3:8.
176 Or seventeen times, if diakŏnŏs is translated as “deacon” in Romans 16:1. See footnote above. See Matthew 20:26; 23:11; Mark 9:35; 10:43; John 2:5, 9; 12:26; Romans 13:4 (2x); 15:8; 16:1; 1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 6:4; 11:15 (2x), 23; Galatians 2:17; 1 Timothy 4:6.
179 Liddell, A Greek-English Lexicon, 398.
is translated variously in the ESV as “[to] serve,” “serves,” or “served” (22 times),180 “ministering” (3 times),181 “ministered” or “minister” (3 times),182 “serving” (2 times),183 “[service] rendered” (1 time),184 “provided for” (1 time),185 “[sent] helpers” (1 time),186 “still do [serve]” (1 time),187 “delivered” (1 time),188 “bringing” (1 time),189 and “administered” (1 time).190 It is most often translated as “[to] serve” or “[to] minister,” as in Luke 4:39: “And [Jesus] stood over [Simon’s mother-in-law] and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.”191

The most significant usage for understanding the term diakōneō comes from the Gospels’ records of Jesus’ ministry. For example, Mark well defines the nature of Jesus’ ministry when he writes of the Lord, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”192 In this verse, Mark uses the term diakōneō to describe Christ’s

180 Matthew 8:15; 20:28 (2x); Mark 1:31; 10:45 (2x); Luke 4:39; 10:40; 12:37; 17:8; 22:26, 27 (2x); John 12:2; 12:26 (2x); Acts 6:2; 1 Timothy 3:10, 13; Phil 13; 1 Peter 4:10, 11.

181 Matthew 4:11; 27:55; Mark 1:13.

182 Matthew 25:44; Mark 15:41; 2 Corinthians 8:19.

183 Hebrews 6:10; 1 Peter 1:12.

184 2 Timothy 1:18.

185 Luke 8:3.


187 Hebrews 6:10.

188 2 Corinthians 3:3.

189 Romans 15:25.

190 2 Corinthians 8:20.

191 ESV.

192 Mark 10:45, emphasis added.
ultimate purpose: “to serve” many. As such, it becomes obvious how the New Testament understanding of diakŏneō would be derived from, and ultimately shaped by, the person and work of Christ. Used of Jesus, diakŏneō comes to denote “loving action for brother and neighbour, which in turn is derived from divine love, and also describes the outworking of koinōnia, fellowship.”193 When Christ served His disciples or those for whom He performed miracles, it was an intentional display of the divine love of God through diakonia, service195 to others. When Jesus spoke words such as, “I am among you as one who serves (diakŏneō),”196 and as He quietly performed acts of service such as washing the disciples’ feet,197 He became the diakŏnŏs (servant or deacon) par excellence. It is, therefore, His words and His actions that must shape a New Testament understanding of diakŏneō.

Diakonia

Another word closely related to diakŏnŏs is diakonia. Occurring thirty-four times within thirty-two verses in the New Testament, this noun describes the act of “loving service,” such as serving at a table.198 Diakonia is translated variously in the ESV as “ministry” (19 times),199

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194 A treatment of diakonia follows in the next paragraph.
195 Or “ministry.”
197 John 13:15.
199 Acts 1:17, 25; 6:4; 20:24; 21:19; Romans 11:13; 2 Corinthians 3:7, 8, 9 (2 x); 4:1; 5:18; 6:3; 9:1, 12; Ephesians 4:12; Colossians 4:17; 2 Timothy 4:5, 11.
“service” (8 times), “to serve” (as a noun; 2 times), “serving” (2 times), “relief” (2 times), and “distribution” (1 time). It is most often translated as “ministry,” as seen in Acts 6:4: “But we (the Apostles) will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

These three New Testament Greek terms that either identify or relate to the office of deacon (diakōnōs, diakōneō, and diakonia) have both an obvious meaning of service through humility and an implied nuance of serving one another as a demarcation line for the love of God. While the general usage of these three words relate to serving or ministering, the words were originally understood to refer to the service of waiting of tables or serving people food. This can be seen in Acts 6:2, where Luke recorded the Apostles as saying, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.” Yet as the word was used later in the New Testament, and subsequently later in the ancient world, the definition broadened so that it came to refer to any type of service one might offer on behalf of another. As MacArthur writes concerning this triad of terms:

It is important to understand at the outset that in a biblical context, the Greek words from which we get the word deacon [diakōnōs, diakōneō, and diakonia] have meanings 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 word serve to describe anything from the start of a volley in a tennis match to the

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201 2 Corinthians 11:8; Hebrews 1:14.


204 Acts 6:1.

205 Emphasis added.

activity of a convicted criminal, who “serves” a term in prison. We use it equally to describe a slave who serves his master, or a king who serves his people.207

_Diakōnōs, diakōneō, and diakonia_, then, carry a wide variety of meanings. The type of service these words refer to is both broad and wide-reaching. Yet there seems to be one element of specificity for these general terms – the idea that they refer to service rendered in order to meet the needs, desires, or requests of another person. These three others-centric terms are used approximately ninety-five times in the New Testament, and as can be witnessed by the variant English glosses used to translate these terms, they almost exclusively relate to serving, helping, aiding, or ministering to someone in need.

**Jesus as the Ultimate Model of a Servant or Deacon**

As has already been discussed, the words and actions of Jesus must shape a New Testament understanding of _diakōnōs, diakōneō_, and _diakonia_, since He was a deacon par excellence. Jesus redefined these terms and reshaped both the understanding and the application of them. These words, chiefly _diakōnōs_, originally were used in ancient Greek to portray men or women who were responsible for specific welfare duties within the city (presumably as a servant of the city government or magistrate), or who were attendants in religious organizations.208 Along with this thought, obviously, came the ideal of servitude out of humility, as serving another person was thought, among the Greeks, to be tasks left assigned to the lowliest of persons, such as slaves. Since slaves were thought of as “things” or “objects” that were owned,

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207 Ibid.

serving was the proper task for them. Yet the idea of common or affluent citizens serving one another was objectionable, even bellicose, to the Greeks. The Bible, however, turns this understanding of servanthood upside down – or, more correctly, right side up. This reversal ensues incrementally in the Old Testament, resulting in a climactically rich understanding of loving servanthood in the New Testament. For example, in Esther 2:2 in the Septuagint, the word diakŏnŏs is used to describe trusted servants and advisors to the king. These men served in the palace courts and gave the king trusted, regular service. Diakŏnŏs is also used in the intertestamental writings of the Septuagint. The book of Fourth Maccabees refers to the bodyguard of king Antiochus Epiphanes as a diakŏnŏs. In fact, of the six uses of diakŏnŏs in the Septuagint, only once is the term used in a less-than-honorable manner.

In the New Testament, the honorable nature of servanthood is brought to its apogee in Christ. The very first instance of this word is used in a climactic fashion when Jesus utters the words, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant (diakŏnŏs).” While the

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209 Ibid, 10–11.

210 There were notable exceptions to this understood cultural ideal. For example, political and military heroes were said to have achieved “honor” for their sacrifices as servants of the state, as recorded in Hawthorne, Philippians, 10–11.

211 “And the servants of the king said, “Let uncorrupt and beautiful maidens be sought for the king. Esther 2:2 (LES). Translators of English Bibles translate the Hebrew word na'ar used in this instance for persons who serve at a royal court as “the king’s personal attendants” (NIV), “courtiers” (ITCL), or “[the king’s] young men” (ESV). See also Esther 1:10 in the Septuagint, where diakŏnŏs (διάκονος) is also used.


213 Proverbs 10:4; Esther 1:10; 2:2; 6:3, 5; 4 Maccabees 9:17.


215 Matthew 20:2.
Greek world may have thought of servanthood as a demeaning act to be performed only by the lowest classes of society, Jesus taught that being a *diakônōs*, that is, a servant, is a sign of greatness. This is a complete reversal of the Greco-Roman value system, and Jesus is ultimately and solely responsible for it. Jesus frequently and determinedly “opposed the world’s idea of values and substituted his own: greatness lies not in the antithesis of serving but in the dignity in being the servant of all (Mark 10:45).”

This, undoubtedly, is what informed Paul’s understanding of the concept of *diakônōs*, and subsequently influenced his wide usage of this word and related terms in the Pauline corpus. For example, Paul describes governmental leaders, those who would be esteemed as great by those they lead, as “the servant of God” or “God’s servant.” He also uses the word *diakônōs* to refer to distinguished people that he personally celebrated and esteemed highly, such as Phoebe, Apollos, Tychicus, and Epaphras. Paul uses the term at least once to describe his own nature as a servant of the gospel when he writes: “If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister (*diakônōs*).”

Paul’s climactic usage of the term, however, would not be a description of himself, Phoebe, or any other earthly person. Paul’s *diakônōs* climax finds itself in the description of

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217 Paul used the term *diakônōs* more than any other New Testament writer. In fact, he used the term twenty-one times out of its twenty-nine occurrences. Moreover, he is responsible for more than half of the New Testament occurrences of *diakonia* (nineteen out of thirty-four) and eight of the thirty-seven occurrences of *diakōneō*.

218 Romans 13:4.

219 See Romans 16:1, 1 Corinthians 3:5, Ephesians 6:21, and Colossians 1:7, respectively.

220 Colossians 1:23.
Christ as “a servant (diakōnōs) to the circumcised.”

Paul leverages the term here to demonstrate the lowly and humble nature Jesus would attain in order to accomplish His special purpose, which was “to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.” Jesus had already defined greatness as servanthood; here, Paul builds on that philosophy by describing the specific type of service Jesus would perform – self-sacrificing service through humility – as well as the scope of that service – to the circumcised (the Jew) and to the Gentile, who both have a great need which can only be filled by a servant, namely, salvation. No one would be left out of God’s plan and no one would be outside of Jesus’ redemptive and vicarious work of servanthood.

Serving or ministering to others in their time of need is at the heart of the Greek term diakōnōs and its related terms, at least as it relates to the Judeo-Christian context of the Bible juxtaposed against the backdrop of the Greco-Roman world in which the biblical narrative occurs. It is with this backdrop that the Greek term ‘diakōnōs’ and its equivalent English term ‘deacon’ must be understood. Yet before examining a modern understanding of the term as an office within the ekklēsia, it would be advantageous to examine how those holding the title and office of diakōnōs functioned throughout the centuries leading up to the modern church period. The ensuing chapter will, consequently, examine how the church and its leaders have understood the term through the lens of historicity. The chapter will seek to answer how the early church

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221 Romans 15:8.
222 Romans 15:8, 9.
223 Matthew 20:2.
viewed the office of *diakōnōs* and how that view informed the application of the role and function of the office in church life, both in early and later church periods.

**Summary**

*Diakōnōs* and related terms *diakōneō* and *diakonia* each etymologically convey the idea of service through humility. The literal meaning of the term *diakōnōs* is servant, giving a clear and indisputable indication of what the office of *diakōnōs* entails. The related verb form, *diakōneō*, literally means “to serve,” again conveying indisputable evidence concerning the role that the office of *diakōnōs* is to play in the local church. The term *diakonia*, often translated “ministry” in the New Testament, carries the idea of servanthood motivated by love. Given the direct and nuanced meaning of these related terms, one need not consider the concept of servanthood as something to be offended by, or an attitude that demonstrates a character flaw. This is because the earthly life of Jesus was one of *diakonia* – a life He chose. The climactic expressions of servanthood and humility found in Jesus redefine the concept of *diakonia*, the actions of *diakōneō*, and the office of *diakōnōs*, removing any negative connotations the world may have wished to impose upon these terms, and, in return, conferring honor and virtue to both the office and the act of service. Serving one another, then, became a demarcation line for the love of God and not a demarcation line for the dishonorable and insignificant person.
CHAPTER 3

THE DIAKONOS IN THE APOSTOLIC ERA

The Nature of the Diakŏnŏs in the Apostolic Era (c. AD 32 - 100)\textsuperscript{225}

It can and has been easily demonstrated that the term diakŏnŏs refers to a humble servant who is sacrificially concerned with the needs of others over and above his or her own. While this description should guide and sustain a proper understanding of the term to the extent that those who fulfill the role of diakŏnŏs exemplify New Testament models of the term, history demonstrates that this has not always been the case. Over the last nineteen centuries, since the close of the New Testament, a variety of expressions of the functions and role of the office of diakŏnŏs have been implemented and leveraged in the church, some more and some less commensurate with the definition of the term and the expression of the office (and proto-office) discovered in Scripture. This section will examine the ebb and flow of first-century thought on the functions and role of the office of diakŏnŏs and will summarize the various expressions of diakŏnŏs through the Apostolic period in order to analyze them against the backdrop of the broader New Testament understanding of the term.

Evidence from the Book of Acts

Acts 1:6-11 records the departure of the Lord Jesus Christ from the earth. Upon His departure, He made an immeasurably significant promise to the disciples and His other

\textsuperscript{225} The dating of eras in this work is derived, in part, from Bruce L. Shelley, \textit{Church History in Plain Language}, Updated 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: Word Pub., 1995). However, the researcher in this thesis dates the Apostolic Period from AD 32 to AD 100, whereas Shelley dates this period from 6 BC to AD 70. The researcher’s dating assumes that the church period cannot be labeled as “Apostolic” during Christ’s lifetime, and that it should not fail to be labeled as such until such time as the Apostles have all died (around AD 100, according to most estimates).
followers, one that would come to fruition in the succeeding chapter of the book of Acts. This promise was that of a perpetual, powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit upon those who follow Him.226 This announcement of the soon-coming eschatological gift of the Spirit,227 and the powerful and permanent presence the Spirit’s indwelling would provide,228 would be the catalyst necessary for Christ’s followers to be servant-witnesses to the world regarding the ministry of God’s Messiah, Jesus Christ, to wit, his incarnation, death, burial, and resurrection. The Spirit’s empowerment would equip the disciples with boldness to spread the message of redemption and restoration that Christ came to deliver.229 “This empowerment [would] enable the disciples to engage in a worldwide mission, beginning in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”230 The promise of the Spirit of God, and the ensuing power that it guaranteed, would lead to the formation of Christ’s ekklēsia, as seen in Acts 2:1-41, and, subsequently, throughout the entire book of Acts.

This centrifugal mission of early Christians, necessitated by the commands of Christ, would be effectuated by the Spirit, who came to indwell people in a new way. No longer would the Spirit’s impartation upon people be a matter of temporal significance; now the Spirit would indwell people in a perpetual way, something never before seen in Scriptures among the persons

226 Acts 1:8.


228 Ibid, 110. Peterson writes, “In view of what follows, the power that is promised in 1:8 is essentially related to the task of being Christ’s witnesses, though this is not all that Acts teaches about the role of the Spirit in believers.”

229 See also John 15:26-27 for the Holy Spirit’s empowering of the disciples for the purpose of the missional witness.

of the Trinity. Just as spectacular and earthshaking as that silent, holy night in Bethlehem that saw God Incarnate enter human history, the Day of Pentecost would see the presence of another member of the Trinity come to earth in fullness and power.

[Pentecost is] in many ways just as significant and earthshaking as the events surrounding Christ’s birth at Bethlehem. Yes, God had come to dwell among men in the person of the Lord Jesus. But before His departure Christ promised that the Father would send another Encourager, the Holy Spirit (John 14:17). As the Third Person of the Trinity, the Spirit’s descent was as real an advent of God among men as the incarnation of Christ at Bethlehem.

This real advent of the third person of the Trinity led to the birth of the Church and its resultant explosive growth, as witnessed throughout the rest of the New Testament. “God began to do a number of radically new things on that day, and among them was the foundation of this age-long cross-cultural witness to all the peoples of the earth.” As more and more were obedient witnesses to the words of Christ and His Great Commission, spontaneous evangelism produced explosive growth in the church, which necessitated a more formalized structure to support the needs of those within. This structure and support was necessitated by sheer growth, growth that would bring innumerable peoples with various personalities and cultures under one ekklēsia (or assembly), and such a gathering of humans in a fallen world would eventually lead to disagreements and conflict. Such a conflict can be seen in this passage:

1Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.


232 Ibid.

233 See Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; John 20:23; Acts 1:8-9. These are the traditional “Great Commission” passages, though it can be argued that much of what Jesus said involved mission and commission.
Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. 234

Disciples, now a term for all followers of Christ, 235 were “increasing in number” according to Acts 6:1. This growth was rapid and continual, as evidenced by the sheer number of converts to Christianity reported in Acts, 236 and by the usage of the Greek word plēthunontōn, rendered “increasing [in number].” Some Greek scholars prefer to translate plēthunontōn as “kept growing [in number],” as this “accurately translates the continuous aspect of the Greek present tense” of the verb plēthýnō. 237

This substantial and continual growth led to a gongysmos, that is, a “complaint” – inevitable in any human gathering – which required immediate resolution in order to preserve the sacred unity of the ekklēsia and to ensure it plēthunontōn (“kept growing [in number]”). The Apostles acted without delay to offer just that. They called men [to] diakōneō, that is, “to serve,” 238 to help others, or to “render a service.” 239


239 Liddell, A Greek-English Lexicon, 398.
Lea and Black summarize the first recorded *gongysmos* in the new Christian community, and the ensuing solution the Apostles proffered, when they write:

Both Hebraists (Jews who spoke primarily a Semitic language) and Hellenists (Jews who spoke primarily Greek) were among those who responded to the message of the gospel. When the Hellenists complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food, the church acted quickly to avoid division. Seven men were selected... These men were responsible for distributing food, and thus the apostles were freed to devote their full attention to prayer and preaching. The result (6:7) was the continued spread of the gospel, even among Jews normally unresponsive to the message.²⁴⁰

While there is much debate regarding this assumption, many nonetheless assume that this situation and the ensuing resolution detail the installation of the first deacons in the New Testament. As such, the seven men, referred to by many as “the Seven,” represented in the Apostles’ resolution are often thought of as proto-deacons. While the text nowhere explicitly refers to these men as *diakōnōi*, the functions for which they were responsible, *diakōneō*, are the very same functions from which the office of the *diakōnōs* would later be implicitly developed, and the work for which they were called was summarized as *diakonia*, that is, a “distribution” or “service.”

What can be derived from this passage regarding the role of the *diakōnōs*? What did their *diakonia* look like? What characteristics of the *diakōnōs* can be gleaned from this “proto-deacon installation” text? It is first imperative to notice that those being served in this context were widows. Widows were especially vulnerable in this, a male-dominated society. “Within almost all ancient cultures, widows were particularly vulnerable. Occupational and financial power belonged to men.”²⁴¹ One can assume the situation in Acts 6 possesses no variance to this.


Diakōnoi were being called [to] diakōneō those in need, those who were especially vulnerable and those without any special influence in society.

They were also being called [to] diakōneō in the middle of cultural tension. A division was present – one between “Hellenists” and “Hebrews.” “The Hellēnistai [Hellenists] not only spoke Greek but thought and behaved like Greeks, while the Hebraioi [Hebrews] not only spoke Aramaic but were deeply immersed in Hebrew culture.”242 Conflict between the more traditional Jews (Hebrews) and the Jews in the Diaspora who possessed varying levels of Greek influence in life and thought (Hellenists) had existed for some time. However, the misfortune lies in the fact that this conflict persisted into the new Christian community.243 “There had always, of course, been rivalry between these groups in Jewish culture; the tragedy is that it was perpetuated within the new community of Jesus who by his death had abolished such distinctions.”244 The diakōnōi, then, were called to serve the vulnerable and conflicted in society in Acts 6:1-7, in such a way that resulted in a more impervious position for the vulnerable and a more peaceful communal experience for the conflicted.

The “Seven” required humility to be a diakōnōs of the lowly and socially unacceptable, and the work would require even more humility in that they would be called to menial tasks such as “[serving] tables” and handling the “daily distribution.” They required dignity, faithfulness, and peacefulness to serve those involved in conflict. While these are a few of the implied


243 See Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:14ff.; See also Colossians 3:11.

244 Stott, The Message of Acts, 121.
requirements for the *diakŏnŏi* discerned from this text, there are also explicit requirements set forth in the text.

Among them, the *diakŏnŏi* were required to be men (Acts 6:3) who were “full of the Spirit,” meaning they were to be men who were filled with and matured by God’s Spirit, as opposed to men who were filled with their own desires and ambitions. They were to be men who were full of “wisdom” (Acts 6:3, 10); that is, they would be “able to apply their knowledge of God’s Word to everyday situations and decision-making.” Additionally, they were to be men of good reputation, well thought of by those around them (Acts 6:3). To be of good reputation required an “unquestionable reputation with inner character, above reproach [because those] in charge of serving tables had considerable responsibility and would have to deal with large amounts of resources, material and financial.”

These were well-respected, godly men who were willing to answer the call to the local church to serve in order to meet the needs of the church, particularly those in need who had been marginalized, those vulnerable to abuse or neglect, and those who had been the victims of dissension and divisiveness in the community of faith. By virtue of that task, they also met the needs of the overseers of the church; in the case of Acts 6:1-7, those overseers were the apostles; in the case of the church not very long afterwards, the *prĕsbutĕrŏi* (elders) or *episkopoi* (bishops). These men “serve[d] tables,” which “suggests that the major focus of the Church’s

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246 Ibid.

247 As has been noted previously, the office of pastor, overseer, elder, and bishop all refer to one same office.
daily ministry to the widows was in providing their daily necessities, such as food."\(^{248}\) As such, the primary focus of the diakŏnŏi was to aid the overseers by providing for the needs of others.

Yet what is to be said of the kind of diakonia they provided? And what kind of “tables” were they serving? Perhaps they were serving in a financial capacity, as seen in the infamous money tables of John 2:15. Noted Greek scholar A.T. Robertson would disagree. He writes,

> “Tables” here hardly means money-tables as in John 2:15, but rather the tables used in the common daily distribution of the food (possibly including the love-feasts, Acts 2:43–47). This word is the same root as διακονία [diakonia] (ministration) in verse 1 and διακονος [diakonos] (deacon) in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8–13. It is more frequently used in the N. T. of ministers (preachers) than of deacons, but it is quite possible, even probable, that the office of deacon as separate from bishop or elder grew out of this incident in Acts 6:1–7.\(^{249}\)

These men seem, then, to be humble servants who care for and watch over the poor, needy, and conflicted. They are spiritually mature, are of sound faith, have a preponderance of wisdom, and have solid reputations in the presence of those to whom they are called to serve. Their call to service is given within the larger framework of those who, in their oversight capacity, are in need of assistance to ensure the Lord’s work is performed and God’s flock is ministered to. By the very nature of these proto-deacons’ willingness to serve, those in oversight were freed to give attention to other, equally important matters,\(^{250}\) such as prayer and the administration of God’s Word (Acts 6:4). Their willingness to serve allowed the apostles, and successors, the elders, to pray for God’s flock and to feed them spiritually, knowing that they


\(^{250}\) Mikeal C. Parsons notes that “‘serving tables’” [is not] in not any sense inferior to the ‘service of the word,’ particularly in light of Jesus’ saying, ‘For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table, but I am among you as one who serves’ (Luke 22:27). The issue for Luke is that of spiritual authority, and for that reason, Luke is not interested in delineating the division of labor between serving tables and serving the word in the subsequent narrative.” Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, 84.
were served well physically by the *diakōnōi*. As Bruce writes, “If such men could be found, to take charge of the distribution and see that no further cause for justified complaint arose, the apostles would be free to devote their undistracted attention to directing the church’s regular worship and to preaching the gospel.”

It is vital to note that nearly all the requirements for the original “Seven” were spiritual requirements, except the requirements that those who serve be “men” and that they be from within the fellowship, that is, “from among you.” The further requirements are all spiritual in nature, demonstrating God’s ultimate prescription for leadership in the church. God was not concerned with calling educated men, successful businessmen, wealthy entrepreneurs, or land owners – He wanted, and still desires, men who walk with Him. As Boice writes,

> When this church [in Acts 6:1-7] was choosing leaders it was not concerned about how much money the men had or how much management experience they had acquired, but whether they were wise and Spirit-filled. The reason was that their main problem was not money or the lack of it, nor even food or the lack of it. The problem was essentially spiritual. Therefore, it needed persons who were Spirit-filled to deal with them.

In summary, then, these men were not necessarily wealthy, nor were they businessmen, nor were they educated at any required level – they were simply spiritually-desirable men. They were humble enough to do menial tasks like serving food to strangers, Spirit-filled enough to recognize a need and fill that need wherever it may be in the body, and wise enough to serve in a way that brought unity rather than division to the body. They were not apostles, nor were they elders – nor even officially recognized deacons – they were simply ministering servants, whether

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252 Acts 6:3.

that service was in an official capacity or an organic one. There was no authority inherent to this position, implicit nor explicit, and those serving here were not seeking authority or recognition, only to fill a void in the body of God in order that the work of God, namely proclaiming and teaching the doctrine of the Apostles, along with prayer, could be continued efficaciously by those in leadership. Due to the cooperative and helpful nature of their work, “it is reasonable to assume that [the diakōnōi] were assistants to the bishops.”

As has already been stated, some argue against an association of Acts 6 and the office of deacon. Shaw warns that realizing a formalized church polity structure, or assuming the origination of the office of deacon out of the Acts 6 narrative is analogous to an “eisegetical reading of [text] that describe[s] the developing life of the early church.” To him, and others, it seems that the missional objectives and vision the author of Acts was attempting to convey is lost when a strong correlation to any aspect of church polity is extracted from this passage. Perry argues that this passage should not be understood as the inauguration of the office of deacon, nor should it substantially foster one’s ecclesiastical understanding of church polity, because, first, no early church writer is said to have categorized “the Seven” collectively as deacons until Irenaeus did so late in the second century, when he wrote of the “protomartyr” Stephen as “the first deacon chosen by the apostles” in a somewhat anachronistic identification.


256 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.12.10; cf. 4.15.1; For other early church writers in the patristic age who associated these men, albeit anachronistically, with this title, see Cyprian, *Epistles*. 54.3; 57.4; Ps.-Tertullian *Adversus omnes haereses* 1; Council of Neocaesarea (314), *Canon* 15; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*. vi.43; Jerome, *Epistles*. 146.1.2; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*. vii.19; *Canons of Hippolytus* 5; John Chrysostom, *1 Corinthians Homilies*. 3.6; See also Paul Gavrilyuk, “The Participation of the Deacons in the Distribution of Communion in the Early Church,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 51, no. 2-3 (2007): 254.
Second, the expression “deacon” does not appear in the Acts 6 passage. If these men were, in fact, deacons, why were they not identified as such, Perry and others argue. Third, none of “the Seven” can be found to have later been individually designated as official “deacons” by the early church. Even MacArthur agrees when he writes, “There is no strong reason from those epistles to believe that the office of deacon was instituted in Acts 6…If Acts 6 is indeed the institution of the deacon’s office, it seems strange that deacons are never referred to again in Acts.”

Shaw subsequently argues that Acts 6 should be viewed in its original missional context, and not as a “prescribed model for church governance and decision making.” However, the argument that no ecclesio-historical value can be extracted from this passage on the basis that its primary application as missio-historical is an unnecessary distinction to be inferred. While the primary application may in fact be the missional-servanthood nature that was needed in the early church, it seems naïve to assume that secondarily important elements, such as proto-church polity ideals, cannot or should not be deduced from this passage. In fact, one can argue quite the opposite, that the very nature and mission of the office of deacon seems to suggest that it was, in fact, born out of a missional culture where the need for humble service was at the forefront of Christian missionary thought.

Furthermore, that these men were thought of as holding an official office of diakōnōs should not be discounted so easily merely based upon the absence of the term, posit some. For example, Williams argues that, given the historical record, a solid case can be made that these


\(^{258}\) MacArthur, “Answering the Key Questions About Deacons.”

men were, in fact, the first official *diakŏnŏi*. He writes that “the transaction recorded in Acts vi. furnished the model according to which those technically called deacons were appointed, seems evinced by the fact that the post-apostolic churches for two or three centuries observed the number *seven* in the selection of their deacons.” To him, and others, such an identification provides validation that these seven in Acts 6 were the original *diakŏnŏi*.

It seems reasonable, then, to suggest that, even if the identity of “the Seven” is not explicitly tied to the office of deacon in the earliest years of the church, their origin and development could very easily have been necessitated and shaped by the needs outlined in Acts 6. Whether an ecclesiological expression of polity was intended, and likely it was not, and whether the birth of the office of the *diakŏnŏs* was intended, and likely it too was not, the clear indication of the passage was that care and ministry for those in need was at view. Given that these men were chosen to perform work which freed other leaders to take care of more pressing spiritual issues, such as prayer and the administration of the word, the original functions of these men seems commensurate with what the long-held ecclesiastical purposes of the deacon office are. Furthermore, the presence and humble service of these men advanced the cause of missions and evangelism in the assembly.

While the debate continues as to the official capacity of the chosen men in Acts, many are settled on the assumption that the situation seen in the Acts 6 pericope, along with its ensuing resolution, detail the installation of the first *diakŏnŏ* in the New Testament. As such, “the

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Seven” represented in the Apostles’ resolution may be rightly thought of as proto-deacons, whether the same original intent is present or not. While, admittedly, the text nowhere explicitly refers to these men as *diakōnōi*, the functions for which they were responsible, *diakōneō*, are the exact functions from which the office of *diakōnōs* would later be implicitly developed, and the work for which they were called was summarized as *diakonia*, that is, a “distribution” or “service.” Whether these men were officially called *diakōnōi* or not, it seems clear that they filled the role that would later become known as “deacons.”

Evidence from the Pauline Epistle to the Philippians

Further first-century evidence related to the nature and function of the *diakōnōs* is narrow. The Pauline epistle of Philippians, believed by most scholars to have been written c. AD 61-63, during or near the end of Paul’s first Roman imprisonment, is addressed to the “*episkopoi kai diakōnōi* (overseers and deacons).” At some point during the first century AD, this term *diakōnōs* became more than a common term for a servant; it appears to have taken on a more formal, authoritative meaning. Paul associates *diakōnōs* with *episkopos*, both here and in First Timothy (discussed below). The office of *episkopos* was clearly an organized and official leadership office well before the writing of Philippians, as can be seen in Acts 11:30. Yet by linking these two ecclesiastical terms, *diakōnōs* with *episkopos*, both in Philippians and First Timothy, Paul affirms the official, organized status of the office of *diakōnōs* at least by c. AD 65.

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266 Philippians 1:1.

267 See J. D. O’Donnell, *Handbook for Deacons* (Nashville, TN: Randall House Publications, 1973), 12. O’Donnell argues that by the time Philippians was written, the term *diakōnōs* was a well-established and understood
Charles Ryrie particularizes the role of the *diakōnōs* in the first-century church. He observes that Paul’s use of the term *diakōnōs* along with *episkopos* in Philippians confirms that the office of the “diaconate was a well-established and distinct body,” that was “developing into a distinctly recognized group in the *ekklēsia*.”

Ryrie further discusses the dualistic nature that surrounded the word *diakōnōs* during this time. In addition to its more formal, official use as an office in the *ekklēsia*, the term was also used in a more generalized sense to describe anyone who served in a ministry capacity. Grant Osborn expounds upon the dualistic nature of the office of *diakōnōs* as it had developed at the time the Pauline epistle to the *ekklēsia* at Philippi was written. Osborn argues that the image of the *diakōnōs* was derived, in its generalized sense, from the concept of the household servant in first-century life, “and likely describes those who served the church in practical ministry.”

While the term referred, then, generally to those who took on the role of a household servant by meeting the practical needs of those within their sphere of influence, the term also referred, more formally, to those who served in an official capacity in the local *ekklēsia*.

Evidence from the Pauline Epistle to Timothy in Ephesus

After Paul’s release from his first Roman imprisonment, c. AD 63, he wrote two of the three latest works of his thirteen-volume corpus, First Timothy and Titus, both of which would

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269 Ibid.


271 Osborne contends that it was likely the official *diakōnōs* of Philippi who delivered the gifts collected for Paul. He also argues that the same *diakōnōs* could have been the very people Paul trusted to implement his instructions to resolve some pressing issues at Philippi. Osborne, *Philippians*, 21.
necessitate a date of c. AD 65-66, according to most New Testament scholars. In First Timothy, written from Macedonia to Timothy, who was in Ephesus, Paul conveys his most particular reference of the term *diakōnōs* as he mentions the office on four occasions in a span of six verses. Similarly to Paul’s Philippian salutation, he connects *diakōnōs* with *episkopos* in First Timothy. In connecting these two terms, Paul again affirms, just a few years later, that the office of *diakōnōs* is to be considered an official office of the *ekklēsia*, just like the office of *episkopos*.

In this epistle, Paul gives specific details regarding the spiritual qualifications of both offices, demonstrating that the installation of both into the *ekklēsia* was expected. The fact that Paul does not address the responsibilities of the *diakōnōs* is evidence that the church at Ephesus was already familiar with the office, and that officers serving in this capacity would have been aware of what was expected of them. Merkle argues that the omission of the duties of the *diakōnōs* gives evidence to the possibility that the later first-century church would have been familiar with the roles and functions of the office of *diakōnōs* because the passage in Acts 6 was, in fact, a proto-*diakōnōs* narrative. He also argues that understanding Acts 6 as the establishment of the *diakōnōs* aids in clarifying what those officers were responsible for, viz., the physical needs of the *ekklēsia*.

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273 See 1 Timothy 3:8, 10, 12, 13.


275 1 Timothy 3:1-14.
Because Paul does not list any of the duties deacons should perform, it is likely that the early church understood the Seven chosen in Acts 6 to be a model for their own ministry. That is, as deacons they were responsible for caring for the physical needs of the congregation and doing whatever was needed so that the elders could focus on their work of teaching and shepherding.276

Evidence from the Didache

Written nearly three decades later than the Pauline works above, c. AD 90-100,277 the anonymous “Teaching of the Twelve,” commonly referred to as the Didache, seems to allude to a more authoritative office of deacon than that described in the proto-deacon pericope of Acts chapter six. In the Didache, the authors278 write:

Appoint, therefore, for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, and truthful and proved; for they also render to you the service of prophets and teachers. 2Despise [bishops and deacons] not therefore, for they are your honoured ones, together with the prophets and teachers. 3And reprove one another, not in anger, but in peace, as ye have it in the Gospel; but to every one that acts amiss against another, let no one speak, nor let him hear aught from you until he repent. 4But your prayers and alms and all your deeds so do, as ye have it in the Gospel of our Lord.279

276 Benjamin L. Merkle, 40 Questions about Elders and Deacons, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Ministry, 2008), 231–232.

277 For support as a first-century document, see F. L. Cross, ed., The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. “Didache,” and also Michelle Slee, The Church in Antioch in the First Century CE: Communion and Conflict (London, England: T & T Clark International, 2003), 5. For support as a later, second-century document, see Thomas O'Loughlin, The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians (London, England: SPCK, 2011). M.W. Holmes argues that, since the Didache is a composite document, both a first-century date and a second-century date may be accurate. He contends that the first sections, such as those that reference the office of diakônōs with episkopos (Did. 15.1) were written perhaps as early as AD 70, as can be evidenced by the simplistic wording of prayers and the earlier forms of church polity seen in the New Testament documents (cf. Phil 1:1). He contends that other portions were as late as AD 150, when the document reached its final form. See Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 301.

278 The plural, “authors,” is used here because many scholars believe the Didache to be a “composite” document. That is, they believe the document to be a collection of writings from several authors over the first, second, and possibly third centuries.

It seems, then, that the *Didache* saw the office of *diakōnōs* as an “honored” and sanctioned office of the *ekklēsia*. While this ancient work yields many questions connected to the office of *diakōnōs*, to many historians this document nonetheless provides clear evidence that by the end of the Apostolic period, if not before, a “definite order” of the *diakōnōs* and the *episkopos* existed in the *ekklēsia*, and that the evidence from the Apostolic period demonstrates a “deliberate distinction” of these offices in the “spiritual fabric” of the church.” This organization ensured the spiritual needs of the church family were met while the ministry of the word and prayer were carried forth. In other words, a clear dichotomy existed, one that saw the *diakōnōi* as trusted servants who willingly met the needs of the *episkopoi*, which subsequently met the needs of the church family, in order that the *episkopoi* could attend to the ministries of the Word and prayer, their chief duties before God and the Church.

**Summary**

While little definitive first-century evidence on the nature of the *diakōnōs* ministry exists, the Acts 6 passage seems to offer a glimpse into what this ministry might have looked like during or near the end of the first century AD. Moreover, scholars such as Douglas Moo argue that the succeeding centuries demonstrated that, for the most part, the *diakōnōi* “focused especially on the care for poorer and weaker members of the church,” and as such, there is no

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280 For example, what do the authors mean when they ask that the *diakōnōs* be “honored”? And what do they intend to convey when they classify “bishops and deacons” together alongside the “prophets and teachers”? And who, exactly are the “prophets and teachers” of the first-century apostolic period?


282 Ibid.

reason to assume this was not also the nature as found in the first century. As Symonds observes, “The deacon was a thoroughly well-known figure in all the churches of the first centuries,” principally responsible for “the church’s care of the poor and of the sick.”

The fact that the *diakônōi* are linked with the *episkopoi* in both New Testament-exclusive usages of these terms in an official capacity as offices of the *ekklēsia* seems to give evidence that 1) the *diakônōi* were considered official officers of the *ekklēsia* at least by c. AD 65, and likely well before; 2) there is a close connection between these two sacred offices, both being necessary for the operation of ministry in the *ekklēsia*; and 3) the office of *diakônōs*, though varying in function and role from the *episkopos*, is no less necessitous to the *ekklēsia* than is the *episkopos*. Without both present and active in the first-century church, the mission given to the church by Christ could not have been accomplished.

Evidence suggests that those holding the office of the *diakônōs* were, in the life of the first-century church, 1) important men who sacrificed their time and talents to serve others, 2) humble men whose services were vital to the health and well-being of the local church, and 3) honorable and godly men whose primary capacity was serving the practical and physical needs of those in need in the *ekklēsia*, especially the weak, vulnerable, and disparaged. Yet did the functions of the office of the *diakônōs* remain uncontaminated beyond the first century as subsequent centuries of the *ekklēsia* opened and closed? What follows is an examination of the functions of the *diakônōs* through the lens of post-Apostolic church history.

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CHAPTER 4

THE DIAKONOS FROM THE CATHOLIC ERA TO MODERNITY

The first-century office of the diakónós embodied important men – important because of their willingness to use their time and talents to serve the needs of others. From the first servants seen in Acts 6, likely the proto-diakónoi, to the end of the first-century, the office of diakónós was characterized by one simple, yet important word – servanthood. The service these men provided was vital to the New Testament ekklesiа, for without such men and their humble service, many of the physical needs of those within the community would have gone unmet. Yet what occurred after the close of the first-century Apostolic period? This thesis will now examine the ebb and flow of the nature of the office of diakónós through the post-Apostolic church periods.

The Nature of the Diakónos in the Catholic Era (c. AD 100 - 312)

Ignatius of Antioch was a disciple of John the Apostle, as well as a writer and pastor in the latter first-century and early second-century. In his Epistle to the Ephesians, which was written between AD 105 and AD 107, Ignatius discusses the servant-like manner of the diakónós, yet also seems to indicate a level of authority held by the diakónós that is not known to the first-century diakónoi. While this authority was still subject to that of the episkopoi (bishops), the diakónós nonetheless exhibited influence in the local church, as those in the church who were “disobedient to [the diakónoi are] disobedient to Christ Jesus.”286 In his Epistle to the Trallians, Ignatius also wrote urging respect for the diakónós, as without such an office, “a group is not

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recognized as a church.”

In the view of Ignatius, the office of *diakōnōs* is an officially established office of service, service accompanied with a level of authority not realized in the first-century setting.

Polycarp was another disciple of John the Apostle and a second-century church leader. In his epistle to the Philippians, c. AD 110-140, he similarly urged respect for the *diakōnōs*, and reinforces the idea that there was, by the opening of the second century, an established office of the *diakōnōs*. Bradshaw clarifies the function and scope of this newly developing authority of the *diakōnōs* in the early years of the second century when he writes, “The deacon’s office is here defined in terms that suggest that it was primarily an administrative role exercised under the close supervision of the bishop.”

The role of the *diakōnōs* during the mid-second century was predominantly, if not precisely, servant-like in nature, caring for the physical needs of those in the *ekklēsia*. Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*, written c. AD 155, provides the clearest evidence to date regarding the nature of the deacons’ duties in the second-century church. According to the *First Apology*, these early *diakōnōi* aided in the administration of the Lord’s Supper and, specifically, traveled to homes to help distribute the elements to those who were absent from the worship service. These early deacons were “real agents of the charity provided through the church,” whose

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288 Polycarp of Smyrna, “The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, 34 [chapter V].


primary duties involved “providing for widows and orphans. They visited the sick and, as early as the third century, had deacon family ministry plans.” They ministered to church martyrs awaiting execution, and were actively involved in discipleship of newly-converted Christians. They assisted the *episkopos* by overseeing the spiritual condition of the Christian community, especially in reporting to the *episkopos* concerning those whose spiritual walk with Christ was in question. They also continued the work of reconciliation as seen in the book of Acts (6:1-7) by reconciling those under church discipline back to the church. Deacons during this time, just as seen in the first-century church, aided the elders where needed in order that the elders could focus on matters more pressing to them. Interestingly, deacons assisted with baptisms and with the Lord’s Supper, yet did so under the supervision of the *episkopos*.

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage and early Christian writer, in his *Treaties on the Lapsed*, written in the mid-third century, indicated that the *diakônōi* “offered the [Lord’s Supper] cup to those present [in the worship service].” Near the same time, he also instructed them in *The Epistles of Cyprian* that they should “admonish and instruct [imprisoned martyrs] more fully concerning the law of the Gospel.” He also specifies that the *diakônōi* were charged with regularly visiting the martyrs in prison, counseling them, and attending to their wishes. Later

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292 Ibid., 14, 15.
293 Ibid.
294 Ibid.
296 Ibid., 291.
297 Ibid.
in the third century, Alexander, a Christian leader in Alexandria, Egypt, included the names of *diakônōi* in his condemnation of Arius and the Arian Heresy, indicating that the *diakônōi* of his church were charged with providing aid to the *episkopos* in defending the faith and ensuring sound doctrine in the church.\(^{298}\)

**The Nature of the Diakônōs in the Roman Era (c. AD 312 - 590)**

With the rise and subsequent conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine,\(^{299}\) the Christian church came to take an even greater role in the care of the poor and deprived within and around each local *ekklēsia*. With no systematic or governmental welfare programs or provisions in place, the *ekklēsia* held a unique place in that it was able to dispense not only spiritual aid to those in need, but material aid as well. In this capacity, the *diakônōi* would play a vital role. As Lang records, “Because the churches came to fill this need, the budget of the ancient bishop was large.” This budget would be used by the *diakônōi*, under the supervision of the bishops (or elders), to “[administer] widespread relief work, [and care] for the sick, prisoners, travelers, captives who needed redeeming, and the unemployed.”\(^{300}\) Thus, the role of the deacon during this period was mostly material and wholly important, yet now partially financial.

During this same period, the first official, Christendom-wide council of Christianity was held in AD 325, The Council of Nicaea. One of the matters this council met to consider was the role and function of the deacon in relationship to the *episkopos*. The Church, as recorded in


\(^{299}\) Ruled AD 312-337.

Canon 28 of this historic council, classified those holding the office of *diakōnōs* as “servants,” using the Greek word *hypēretēs*. This word translates similarly to that of *diakōnōs*,\(^{301}\) as both words literally mean “servant.”

However, where *diakōnōs* can refer to one who holds the official office of servant (i.e., “deacon”), the Greek word *hypēretēs* speaks to the position of the servant relative to those they serve. In as much, the term *hypēretēs* carries the idea of an attending servant, an assistant, a guard serving under magistrates or other court officials, or simply a helper.

It originally meant a rower (*erassō*, to row), one who was on a lower deck of a trireme and hence in an inferior position; then a member of the crew, a sailor under the orders of a skipper; finally, a subordinate, a subaltern, often associated with *doulos* (John 18:18; Philo, *Worse Attacks Better* 56) and *diakonos*.\(^{302}\)

This same term used by the council, *hypēretēs*, is used in Luke 4:16 to refer to an attendant (servant, helper) who handled scrolls for those assigned to read the Torah in the synagogues. Though various uses exist for this word throughout the New Testament, in each case the term refers to a subordinate in rank, classification, or role. In using *hypēretēs* to denote the *diakōnōs*, the council communicated the subordinate, though valued and significant, role of the *diakōnōs*, in the organization of the local church.\(^{303}\) In doing so, they communicated that the *diakōnōs* was to be a humble servant who was not an authority figure, nor an administrator, nor an overseer, but one who was charged with the care of those in need.

\(^{301}\) See Philo, *On the Contemplative Life* 75; and *On Joseph* 241.


By the mid-fourth century, *diakŏnŏi* were leveraged in the *ekklēsia* as the “eyes to the bishop, carefully inquiring into the doings of each member of the church, in order to keep members out of sinful activity.”304 Those in sin, called the “disorderly,” were to be compelled into church by the *diakŏnŏsto* hear the “word of truth” so that they might not “become fuel for [the Enemy’s] fire.”305 Likewise, the *diakŏnŏi* were charged with not only attending to those who were physically ailing in the church, but also with discovering who those persons were and meeting both their needs and wants, in accordance with the instructions of the *episkopos.*306 Another writer from the same period admonishes the *diakŏnŏi* to “look after the bodies and the souls of the brethren,” and to “report [their findings] to the bishop (*episkopos*).”307

In this same period, Athanasius of Alexandria, Bishop of Alexandria Egypt (c. AD 328-372) wrote a “Defense,” or “*Apolo gia, *against the Arians. In his famous *Apolo gia Contra Arianos*, Athanasius wrote that the *diakŏnŏi* were used as “guards” of the *ekklēsia*, and were tasked with seizing people that were to be brought before bishops, the Pope, or the Emperor.308 He records in a later work that the *diakŏnŏi* were used to read Psalms during times of distress.309


305 Ibid.

306 Ibid.

307 Ibid., 250.


Later in the fourth century, the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostle* record valuable insight into the role of the *diakōnōs*, and it demonstrates that the function of the *diakōnōs* had been well-developed into an official church office by that time.\(^{310}\) The *Constitutions* speak often of the *episkopos* and the *diakōnōs*, many times in the same context. For example, in 2.3.10, it charges the church to not “despise” the “authority” of the “bishop and deacons [who are found] innocent and unblameable (sic).”\(^{311}\) As with earlier writings from this period, this seems to indicate that the *diakōnōi* had some level of authority in their role as a servant (*hypēretēs*) in church by the end of the fourth century.

This authority, though limited by the nature of their role, helped facilitate many functions the *diakōnōi* are known to have performed during this period. For example, the *diakōnōi* were charged with reconciling back to the church those who had broken fellowship due to unrepentant sin. The *diakōnōi* were to “treat [the unrepentant person] with severity” in order that the sinner might become penitent through such a stern rebuke.\(^{312}\) That they might be qualified to reprove others, the *diakōnōi* were instructed to remain above reproach, not accept bribes, and maintain a clear conscience.\(^{313}\)

The *diakōnōi* played important roles in the formal worship service of the *ekklēsia* each week, acting as guards or attendants to ensure the service was performed without disruption.\(^{314}\)

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\(^{310}\) “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” part of a greater collection referred to as the *Ante-Nicene Church Fathers*, is attributed to an unknown author and includes eight discourses on order in the early church. The discourses cover such topics as discipline, worship, doctrine, and, indirectly, church organization.

\(^{311}\) “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” 2.3.10, in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, 399.

\(^{312}\) Ibid., 402.


\(^{314}\) The worship service was likened to that of a large ship, with the *diakōnōs* acting as “mariners and managers of the ship.” “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” 2.7.57.
They aided in the collection of tithes and offerings, as those in the church were encouraged to present “sacrifices and oblations” to the episkopos with the assistance of the diakōnōi.\(^{315}\) They read Scriptures aloud during the service.\(^{316}\) They played various roles in the administration of the Lord’s Supper. For example, the diakōnōi helped distribute the elements, helped watch over the multitudes to ensure silence during the service, and helped maintain general order.\(^{317}\) In their role as servants in the Lord’s Supper, interestingly, they were even charged with ensuring that flies did not contaminate the elements.\(^{318}\)

The diakōnōi also visited the sick, the widowed, and the orphans on behalf of the episkopoi (bishops) and prēsbutērōi (elders),\(^{319}\) as this was considered their “duty.”\(^{320}\) They assisted in funeral services for the departed, reciting blessings to those in attendance.\(^{321}\) They were to be particularly focused on those whom they “knew to be in distress.”\(^{322}\) For example, they served as advocates of those who stood accused of wrong-doing in the church, and were to serve without partiality in judicatures.\(^{323}\) They were to act as advocates for the poor, ensuring

\(^{315}\) “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” 2.4.27, in Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries, 410.

\(^{316}\) “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” 2.7.57, in Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries, 421.

\(^{317}\) Ibid., 421–422.

\(^{318}\) “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” 8.2.12, in Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries, 486.

\(^{319}\) By this time, leadership in the ekklēsia was tripartite in nature, i.e. episkopoi (bishops), and prēsbutērōi (elders), and diakōnōi (deacons), whereas the earliest expression of church leadership was dualistic, i.e. episkopoi (bishops) and diakōnōi (deacons). This stems from the faulty assumption that the office of episkopos (bishop), and prēsbutērōs (elder) were different offices, an interpretation not seen until the second century or beyond. This author contends that the Greek terms episkopos (bishop), prēsbutērōs (elder), and poimen (pastor) refer to varying natures and roles of the New Testament church office, most commonly referred to as “pastor” in the American church.

\(^{320}\) “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” 3.2.19, in Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries, 432.


\(^{322}\) “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” 2.4.28, in Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries, 411.

\(^{323}\) “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” 2.6.47, in Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries, 417.
that they were treated fairly within the Christian community and that they were not excluded from the assembly. They were also intermediaries between the laity and the *episkopos*, charged with communicating the desires of the laity to the *episkopos*.

The *diakônôi* of this period were servants, but spiritual servants. The *Constitutions* refer to them as “Levites,” who were to be dedicated to serving their “high priests” (*episkopi*) and their “priests” (*prêsbutěrôi*). In their spiritual capacitates, the *diakônôi* were expected to perform a number of spiritual functions. For example, they were to pray “for the whole Church, for the whole world, and the several parts of it, and the fruits of it.” They were to be peacemakers in the church, being charged to “let no one have any quarrel against another.” At times the *diakônôi* were even called upon to “teach the word of piety, and rightly [divide] the doctrines of the Lord.”

Regarding the positional component of church offices, the *Constitutions* refer to the *diakônôi* as “his deacons,” that is, the *diakônôi* of the *episkopos*, and refers to them also as “those who are under the bishop.” Regarding the role of the deacon in relationship to the *episkopos*, the *Constitutions* elaborate, “But let the deacon minister to [the *episkopos*], as Christ does to His Father; and let [the *diakônôs*] serve [the *episkopos*] unblameably (sic) in all things,

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328 Ibid.

329 Ibid., in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, 471.

as Christ does nothing of Himself, but does always those things that please His Father.” They also record that the “office of the ministering deacon” involves “minister[ing] to the episkopos, and to the prēsbutērōs,” indicating that by the fourth century, if not well before, the office of the diakōnōs was understood as a ministering agent not only to the flock (the parishioners), but also to the undershepherds (the episkopi [bishops or lead pastors], and the prēsbutērōi [elders or under-pastors]).

As in Acts six, their role involved assisting the leadership of the church in order that they might be freed to tend to other duties (such as teaching and prayer in Acts 6:4). The diakōnōi were to be “the bishop’s ear, and eye, and mouth, and heart, and soul;” that is, a dedicated servant to him, in order that “the bishop may not be distracted with many cares.” Their functions were limited to that which was permitted by the episkopos in their particular congregation. For example, the diakōnōi were not permitted to distribute aid to one in distress without the consent of the episkopos, or do “anything at all without his bishop,” to include baptizing new converts, in order that “ecclesiastical order and harmony” might be preserved.

Saint Jerome, best known for translating the Bible into the Latin language for the first time (the Latin Vulgate), wrote about the same time, c. AD 374. In Letter VI, he described his sister’s fall into sin and mentions that she had been “restored to a life of virtue by the deacon,

331 “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” 2.4.26, in Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries, 410.
332 “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” 3.2.20, in Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries, 432.
334 “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” 2.4.31, in Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries, 412.
335 Ibid., 411.
Julian.”337 Just two decades later, in c. AD 394, Jerome provides further insight into the role of the diakŏnŏs in late fourth-century church life. Here, just as Athanasius recorded a few decades earlier, the diakŏnŏi were charged with acting as guards or security forces, seizing unsuspecting persons on behalf of the bishops.338

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan c 374–397,339 wrote that the diakŏnŏi were to be “hearers and doers of the Word of God,” and from his observation of the first deacons (the proto-diakŏnŏi) in Acts 6:1-7, it appeared the office of diakŏnŏs contained generalized duties which could be referred to as “doing” the Word of God.340 It seems, then, that there was no limit to the types of duties the diakŏnŏi were willing to do on behalf of the ekklēsia and the episkopos. Ambrose also writes of diakŏnŏi being leveraged in much the same way as Jerome recorded in c. AD 397. He writes that the diakŏnŏi were used to rescue a man who had been unjustly accused of heresy and subsequently seized by the people of the church, presumably to do him harm.341 In another letter,


338 Ibid., 83.


Ambrose remarks that the *diakônî* were also messengers used by the church to send honorariums and letters to various leaders of the *ekklêsia*.

Chromatius, whose ministry flourished c. AD 400, was bishop of Aquileia, and a friend of Jerome. He wrote that the *diakônî* and priests (*prêsbûtêrôî* or elders) were “the hands or feet of the church.” By this, Chromatius understood that elders are “like a hand, their work in every area is necessary to the body of the church,” and that the *diakônî* are like the “feet” of the church in that “in busying themselves with the sacred mysteries of the church they serve the body, [keeping busy as feet would].”

Augustine, who was Bishop of Hippo from c. AD 396-410, recorded that the “voice” of the *diakônî* led the “united prayer of the congregation.” He recorded in a later work, c. AD 412, that the *diakônî* served the church by delivering letters and notes for the *prêsbûtêrôî* (elders).

Writing in the early fifth century, John Chrysostom (c. 349-407) was a very well-respected bishop in Constantinople who became widely acclaimed for his stand on biblical conservatism and his public criticism of Christian laxity among those in influential leadership

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343 Oden, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 489.


345 Ibid., 72.


roles in the church. He taught that the church should not view the office of *diakônōs* as equal in rank with that of the *episkopos*, although they were equally significant in terms of their necessity in the church.348 Near the same time, Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428), known by many as one of the fathers of biblical exegesis, records that the *diakônōi* were to perform “duties” as “assigned to them by the presbyters (*prēsbutērōi* or elders).”349

Sulpicius Severus, who lived c. 363-425, was a Christian writer and church historian. He writes about a *diakônōs* by the name of Cato. From Severus’ *Dialogues*, it appears Cato was charged with maintaining the grounds of the monastery, and with providing meals for the *episkopoi* (bishops) and *prēsbutērōi* (elders). Sulpicius records that “the outward management of the monastery belonged” to Cato, “who was himself a skillful fisher.” Thus, Cato, as a *diakōnoi*, was concerned with the physical needs of the local *ekklēsia*.350

Leo the Great, who lived from c. 400–461, was pope from AD 440 until his death in AD 461. He writes that a *diakônōs* delivered a message to him concerning “the nature of the disease which has burst forth in your district from the remnants of an ancient plague.”351 Caesarius (c.

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470–543), Bishop of Arles, indicates that among the expected duties of the diakōnōs was that of prayer for those who are ill. Caesarius writes that when the diakōnōi, along with the prēšbutērōi (elders), prayed over the ill, that person would “receive not only bodily health but also the forgiveness of his sins.” Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–547), was the founder of the Benedictine order of Monks and the founder of many monasteries. He wrote in the beginning of the sixth century that the diakōnōi were to “show a particular concern for the sick, children, strangers and the poor,” because they would be “accountable for them at the day of judgment.”

The Nature of the Diakōnōs in the Christian Middle Ages (c. AD 590 - 1517)

Historian Christopher Cocksworth records that during this period (much of which is also known as the Byzantine period), the diakōnōi participated in the worship services of the ekklēsia by exhorting the congregations with recitations. “Repeatedly the deacon exhorts the congregation—‘Attend!’ During the reading of Scripture, the singing of the eucharistic prayer and at various other moments when concentration may be lagging, the deacon calls the people to attend to the grace of the gospel.”

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352 Caesarius was renowned for his intentional dedication to his pastoral duties above all else in life. Caesarius demonstrated well his ability to preach and teach the foundational truths of Christian doctrine in a collection of 238 sermons that survived him. See Thomas Oden, ed., Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Introduction and Biographic Information, 489.

353 Caesarius of Arles, Sermon 19.5; Gerald Bray, ed., James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 60.


355 The Byzantine period follows closely with the Byzantine Empire (or the Eastern Roman Empire), which began in c. AD 330 and ended c. 1450.

Gregory the Great (c. AD 540-604) was Pope of the Catholic church from AD 590 until his death. Writing at the end of the sixth century AD, he records that *diakŏnŏi* were responsible for distributing funds to those who had incurred expenses on behalf of the church. It seems these funds were somewhat significant, as Gregory directs people who are unable to obtain sufficient reimbursement from one fund to seek the *diakŏnŏi* who will be able to reimburse them sufficiently. “Should his revenues be clearly insufficient for the repayment, thou must needs receive what is due to thee here from the deacon,”357 writes Gregory. Given Gregory’s instruction, it seems great trust was placed in the *diakŏnŏs* to carry out the instructions of the *episkopos*.

The Council of Trullo,358 convened c. AD 692, records in its Canons the continued role of the *diakŏnŏs* in the distribution of the elements in the Lord’s Supper. 359 The Second Council of Nicaea met c. AD 787.360 In the Council’s *Extracts from Acts*, a *diakŏnŏs* by the name of John is mentioned. This *diakŏnŏs* played a role in the Council, reading the “*the orthodox refutation,*” or the defense against propagated heresies, thus indicating the prominent role the *diakŏnŏs* played in the life of the Church.361

In AD 987, a report commissioned by Prince Vladimir of Kiev offers a glimpse into the life of the tenth-century Eastern Orthodox church. This report describes vivid details of the


358 Also known as the The Quinisext Council or the Penthekte Synod.


360 The First Council of Nicaea, mentioned previously, was held AD 325.

orthodox worship service. From the smell of incense to the entrance and attire of the priests, the report offers today’s reader the opportunity to journey back in time. In the report, the diakōnōi are reported to have led the church responsive prayer readings. “The deacon chants the opening litany, and the choir and people respond, Kyrie eleison (“Lord, have mercy”). Nearly the entire service is chanted or sung.”362 This provides further evidence that the diakōnōs played an important role in aiding the episkopos, this time in the varied aspects of the congregational worship service.

Between the sixth and twelfth centuries, the office of diakōnōs began to decline spiritually.363 Unfortunately, the office became a stepping stone to something much more important, from the perspective of many, than the office of diakōnōs.364 As Addis and Arnold write, “Whereas in the ancient and even medieval Church a man often remained a simple deacon for the rest of his life, the diaconate is now regarded as a step towards the priesthood.”365 As Webb similarly writes,

The primary reason the servant function of the deacon diminished during this period was that the role of deacon became the first stage toward the priesthood. Instead of the church roles being only distinctive in function, they became different levels or grades of ministry. This led to the sharp distinction between clergy and laity.366


These varying “levels or grades” of the *diakŏnōs* can be traced as far back as the dawn of the Middle Ages. St. Jerome, at the close of the fourth century, wrote of the “archdeacon,”\(^\text{367}\) signifying the newly found authority seen in the office of the *diakŏnōs*, an authority that would progressively broaden throughout the Middle Ages, climaxing in a powerful and authoritative office that essentially superseded that of the office of the *prĕsbutĕrŏi* (elders). Hatch argues that this increasing influential culture of the *diakŏnōi* stemmed from the close connection they enjoyed with the *episkopoi*, essentially guaranteeing them a more influential place in the leadership of the *ekklēsia*.\(^\text{368}\)

Webb reports that a further decline of the office of the *diakŏnōs* during this period occurred as the one of the chief responsibilities of the *diakŏnōs* began to be filled through the rise of monastic orders.\(^\text{369}\) As those of the monastic orders assumed the function of caring for the practical and physical needs of the community, the *diakŏnōi* were then free to pursue more authoritative roles. Schaff confirms this, and adds that the “function of assisting the priest in the subordinate parts of public worship and the administration of the sacraments” became their primary duty rather than that of care for the poor.\(^\text{370}\) This role in the worship service only reinforced the authority office of the *diakŏnōs*, and together with the varying levels or grades of

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\(^{368}\) As Hatch demonstrates, arch-presbyters were assistants to the *episkopos* in matters of spiritual concern, while archdeacons were assistants in physical or secular matters. As such, the archdeacon enjoyed at least equivalent authority of the arch-presbyters (*prĕsbutĕrŏs* or elders). Some have demonstrated that the influence of the *diakŏnōs* by this time superseded that of the *prĕsbutĕrŏs* because the duties they were responsible for included matters of finance, enforcement of church order, etc. See Edwin Hatch, “Archdeacon,” 137.


ministry, made the office less sacred and more secular in nature. By the close of the Middle Ages, the office of the *diakōnōs* had reached a low point in the history of the *ekklēsia*.

**The Nature of the Diakōnōs in the Reformation Period (c. AD 1517 - 1648)**

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries sought to restore the ancient faith of the first several centuries.371 God raised up bold men who were discontented with the institutionalization of the church, and even more so with the corruption of doctrine. While the primary areas of concern for the Reformers centered on salvific ideals, such as the sale of indulgences, the Reformers also sought to “reform” the corrupt institutions of heretical church polity. Reformers such Zwingli and Calvin immediately sought to restore the office of the *diakōnōs* to its sacred and biblical foundations where the service to those with physical needs was at the forefront.

In the early sixteenth century, Huldreich Zwingli’s pastorate did not include the office of the *diakōnōs*. Zwingli considered it the ministry of his newly-formed theocratic state of Zurich to care for those in need, such as the poor or vulnerable. As such, no *diakōnōs* ministry existed in Zurich, neither in a biblical expression nor in a Middles Ages expression. It is posited that Zwingli did not leverage the office of the *diakōnōs* because there were “no contemporary models on which to base the reformation of the diaconate.”372

Outside of Zurich, other Christian communities sought to reestablish the apostolic and early church expression of the *diakōnōs*, even if no presiding biblical model was present in their

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371 The primary areas where the Reformation first ignited were Germany (under Martin Luther), Switzerland (under John Calvin, Huldreich Zwingli), and Scotland (under John Knox). See Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald Barclay Allen, and H. Wayne House, *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999), 1792.

culture from which an example could be gleaned. In the city of Munster, Germany, the Anabaptists were gaining considerable influence and proved to be an integral component of the early Reformation, principally because of their insistence that Roman Catholic infant baptism was distinct from the biblical ordinance of baptism. They insisted that believers be baptized by immersion after their own personal salvific experience. They also considered the hierarchical system of church government practiced in the Roman Catholic church to be a corruption of apostolic and early church’s expressions of polity. For example, they recognized that the purpose of the diakŏnŏs was to serve and aid those in need, not to lord over the church community or involve themselves in matters of authority and influence. As such, the Anabaptists of Munster appointed deacons to collect goods and property from the Catholics who had abandoned their homes and possessions during the Anabaptist transition of the city, and to “distribute it gradually to the faithful, according to their several necessities.”

Martin Luther, a seminal character in the reformation of the Christian church, also desired a return to the biblical nature of the diakŏnŏs. Luther wrote passionately on the subject, urging a restoration which removed institutionalism and hierarchy, and returned the office to its rich heritage of service to those in need.

[The work of the deacon is] the distribution of the goods of the church to the poor; for we read in Acts 6 that deacons were instituted for this object…that the goods of the church be justly and honestly distributed, in order that the poor Christians who are unable to support themselves may be helped so as not to suffer want.

Not many decades later, in the mid-sixteenth century, Martin Bucer led further reforms in Strasbourg, Germany. He envisioned an office of the diakŏnŏs that administered relief to the

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373 J. M. Cramp, Baptist History: From the Foundation of the Christian Church to the Close of the Eighteenth Century (Roger Williams Heritage Archives, 1871), 224.

poor and met “the needs of those who were genuinely in need—not those who were simply too lazy to work.” He leveraged the deacons of Strasbourg to do more than simply provide for the poor; he also leveraged them to provide vocational and educational mentorship, in an effort to proactively combat the need for welfare systems in his community.

Anabaptists in Moravia at the same time shared the diakônōs ministry philosophy of Bucer. These Anabaptists insisted on humble service from both church offices, which they appositely labeled “‘ministers of the word’ (generally, not necessarily, a plural eldership) and ‘ministers of necessities,’ or deacons.” One of the ministers of the word was usually the “householder.” The episkopoi were charged with leading the ekklēsia, and instructing the diakônōs as to the various aspects of ministry that were needed in the community of faith.

Not many years later, in AD 1559, John Calvin of Geneva, Switzerland ensured that the Reformation-era diakônōs functioned differently from the Roman Catholic diakônōs by specifically assigning the social welfare work of Geneva to the diakônōs. These Swiss deacons were responsible for a broad array of duties related to the care of the poor, ailing, and vulnerable. For example, deacons managed hospitals, social security plans, and charity centers. Because of


376 The current eastern Czech Republic.

377 Bucer was strongly influential in the early Reformation and is credited as being the primary catalyst for the ministries of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others. He is one of the first recorded in history to encourage the denunciation of the Catholic monastic vows, as a line of clear demarcation from the Catholic Church and its institutions.


379 The reformers considered the terms prēšbutērōs (elder) and episkopos (bishop), along with poimen (pastor) as synonymous terms, all representing one New Testament office, the chief leadership office. The common term used by the reformers was “elder” (prēšbutērōs). For consistency, this author will primarily use the term for the office as used in the Pauline corpus, i.e. episkopos.
the diakŏnŏi of Geneva, one could boast, “There were no beggars in Geneva.” Calvin’s vision for the diakŏnŏi was executed so richly and beautifully that fellow reformer John Knox boasted that, because of the Geneva diakŏnŏi, the city was “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the apostles.”

At the same time, a reformation of the diakŏnŏs ministry was occurring in France. Influenced deeply by Calvin and his reforms, the French Huguenots sought to capture the biblical and Apostolic nature of the diakŏnŏs when they penned the French Church Order that was adopted at the Synod of Paris in 1559. In this document, they precisely describe the office of diakŏnŏs as they understand it when they write, “With respect to the deacons, their task is to receive and distribute, with advice of the consistory, the monies for the poor, those in jail, and the sick; to visit them, and also to catechize in the homes.”

As the seventeenth century dawned, the reforms of the diakŏnŏs initiated by the early reformers began to reap bountiful harvests. McBeth records that the seventeenth-century deacons focused their ministerial attention on visiting the sick, procuring money for the poor,

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381 Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Introduction,” 131 Christians Everyone Should Know (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 39–40. It should be noted that Calvin’s diakŏnŏs model was influenced at least in part by Catholic practices. For example, Calvin permitted and installed varying grades of deacons (i.e. sub-deacons). The primary difference, however, is evident in the fact that the diakŏnŏi functioned as servants with little, if any, ecclesiastical authority, and were clearly and definitively inferior in influence to that of the episkopos. See William Cunningham, Historical Theology: A Review of the Principal Doctrinal Discussions in the Christian Church since the Apostolic Age., vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1864), 522.

encouraging those who had fallen into sin, and even teaching when called upon to do so.\footnote{H. Leon McBeth, \textit{The Baptist Heritage} (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1987), 77. McBeth notes, also, that women deacons were normative in this period. They provided much the same types of ministry as did their male counterparts, but with an emphasis on ministering to women (i.e. assisting women who were baptized). Most of them were older widows, and at least some of these women deacons were even supported by the church.} The Helwys Confession, composed in 1611,\footnote{This work is one of the most important confessions of faith in post-Reformation history, and an even more important confession for Baptists. In this work, containing twenty-seven articles, Helwys conveyed one of the clearest expressions of Baptist faith known today. He sought to clarify what Baptists really espoused doctrinally, to dichotomize Baptist faith from Calvinistic, Reformation doctrine, and to bring grater specificity to certain aspects of the doctrine of believer’s baptism, among other things. Article 20 addresses church officers and their duties.} confirms what McBeth posits: that deacons “who by their office releave the necessities off the poore and impotent brethren concerning their bodies.”\footnote{William L. Lumpkin, ed., \textit{Baptist Confessions of Faith} (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959), 121–122.}

Likewise, John Smith wrote in his Propositions and Conclusions of 1612 that the ministry of the office of deacon was specifically “to serve tables and wash the saints’ feet.”\footnote{Ibid., 138.} In doing so, he communicated the simplistic, humble, non-authoritative nature of the \textit{diakônōs} ministry in his community at the time. John Owens, in \textit{The True Nature of a Gospel Church}, published posthumously in 1689, echoed the positions of Bucer, Calvin, Helwys and others when he wrote that the office of \textit{diakônōs} was not a leadership role, i.e. a role of authority, but rather a role in which mercy, sympathy and service could be demonstrated to the Christian community.\footnote{John Owen, \textit{The True Nature of a Gospel Church}, abr. and ed. John Huxtable (London: Camelot, 1947), 51.} He includes such ministry functions as providing care for the poor, taking care of the place of assembly, assisting in the ordinances of the church, and other duties of a servanthood nature as
directed by the elders. Owen wrote that the *diakōnōi* were “obliged to attend the elders on all occasions, to perform the duty of the church towards them, and receive directions from them.”

While the *diakōnōs* of the first few centuries portrayed the ideals of biblical servanthood well, the same cannot be said for the Middle Ages. In this period, the office of the *diakōnōs* was tarnished under the ambitions of men whose primary motivation to enjoin themselves to this office was to gain influence and control in the *ekklēsia*. While the sacred nature of the *diakōnōs* was lost to institutionalism, power, and ambition during this period, the Reformation period saw a restoration of the sacredness of the office. In fact, it has been written that, “The restoration of the Diaconate [was] an integral part of the Protestant Reformation.” During this period, the reformers separated themselves from the Catholic Church and its exploitation of this sacred office, and in doing so established fresh expression of *diakōnōs* ministry, demonstrating its apostolic simplicity throughout Europe and beyond.

**The Nature of the *Diakōnōs* in the Age of Reasoning and Revival (c. AD 1648 - 1789)**

In the mid-seventeenth century, Welsh Baptists desired to continue in the tradition of the reformers. They issued a formalized doctrinal position outlining the leaders and primary functions of the church. In this doctrinal statement, they list the office of the *diakōnōs*, and

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391 It is not within the scope of this work to trace the office of the *diakōnōs* throughout every vein of Christendom, nor every region. While the reformation of the *diakōnōs* occurred in specific regions of Europe originally, these reforms spread through the newly-formed Protestant Church. These reforms were less successful in certain ecclesiastical settings, such as the new Church of England, as well as other more orthodox churches, and nonexistent in churches (i.e. particular Reformed churches) where the office of the *diakōnōs* was not implemented. The scope of this work from this point will primarily, though not exclusively, cover the office the *diakōnōs* through the lens of the baptistic faith and its Anabaptist roots.
described their work as that which “serve[s] the physical and financial needs of the church,” and correspondingly indicate that widows could serve as “assistance of the deacons in looking after the poor and sick.” 392 To them, the scope of the function of the diakŏnŏs was limited to care for the poor and sick, nothing further.

During this same time, the diakŏnŏs in America carried a broader role, to include spiritual leadership. While this role was commensurate with the vision of the reformers, as it carried no inherent authority over the church or its leaders, the deacons of this period in America aided the pastors especially in rural areas where pastoral staff was limited or unavailable, in providing spiritual direction to those in need of such ecclesiastical services. 393

Not much later in the same century, Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan theologian and revivalist, wrote lucidly about the role of the diakŏnŏs. He wrote that the church should make every effort to collect and store aid in order that they “might be ready for the poor and necessitous members of that church,” and that the primary responsibility of the diakŏnŏs was to “take care of the poor in the faithful and judicious distribution and improvement of the church’s temporals, lodged in their hands.” 394

The Nature of the Diakŏnŏs in the Age of Progress (c. AD 1789 - 1914)

While vital, significant reforms in the office of the diakŏnŏs were accomplished in the Reformation era, not the same can be said of the Age of Progress. Unfortunately, the Age of Progress was anything but ‘progress’ for the office of diakŏnŏs. Thousands of new churches


were planted in the United States, and many (perhaps the majority) were planted in rural areas. In many of these churches, when pastors were unavailable or when churches were without a permanent pastor, deacons were called upon to perform many administrative tasks in the church, such as managing the finances and properties of the church. During this time, as deacons began a similar regress as was seen in the Middle Ages, care for the poor and the ministry of mercy the diakοnοs had readopted in the Reformation era became a secondary, though still active, concern of the diakοnοs. It is out of this unfortunate turn of events that the concept of a “Board of Deacons” developed and became popular.395

Henry Webb details the tragic regress of the diakοnοs from a ministry of mercy to a ministry of managers during this period of history. The diakοnοι began a tragic descent from humble servanthood to business managers and controllers of the church, especially in baptistic circles. As the trend progressed, deacons, functioning as the board of directors for the church, began to seize authority over almost every aspect of the church, and to screen any matters that required congregational authority. This, in turn, permitted them to amass greater and greater influence in the church, to include nearly unquestioned control over finances, facilities, administration, and human resources. As was also experienced in the Middle Ages, the diakοnοι managed to gain influence and control over the pastor and expected that the pastor report to the “board.”396

Webb also records some of the language found in church records, including minutes and doctrinal statements. For example: “Deacons, along with other church officers, are the chief managers of the church.” “The duty of deacon is to take care of the secular concerns of a

church." “The office of deacon is to relieve the minister from the secular concerns of the church.” Each of these statements, although seemingly demonstrating a level of cooperation and desire to aid other officers in ministry, actually drew proverbial lines in the sand for areas of influence and control. These statements communicated that the pastors were to act as the official chaplains of the church, that is, visiting shut-ins, teaching, building relationships, counseling and consoling, etc., while the deacons managed any nonspiritual affairs within the church. This amounted to a church system where every area of decision-making was subject to the direction of the “board of deacons,” i.e. employment, staff evaluations, finances, acquisition of property, salaries, etc.

It is important to note that while a clear regression in the character of the office of diakŏnŏs occurred during this period, not all churches experienced this regression. For example, during the mid-nineteenth century, many churches “established ‘deaconess houses,’ where Baptist women devoted their lives to witness and ministry, largely among the sick and needy.” Their work included ministry to or the establishment of orphanages, schools, and hospitals. These deaconesses also visited women in their homes.

In 1843, B. H. Carroll, a Baptist pastor and first president of Southwestern Baptist Seminary, rallied the church to sustain the biblical nature of the diakŏnŏs. He wrote that the office of diakŏnŏs was not to be thought of as a ministerial order, a committee, or a board of

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397 Ibid.
398 McBeth, The Baptist Heritage, 469.
399 Ibid.
directors. The sole purpose of the *diakōnōś* was to be a servant who assisted the pastors of the church, in order that those pastors might lead more effectively.\(^{400}\)

Unfortunately, however, more and more churches began to adopt the practice of leveraging the office of the *diakōnōś* in the manner seen in the Middle Ages – as an office of authority, influence, and administration, rather than an office of humble service. Ironically, it was not always the members of the *diakōnōś* who were struggling for authority and influence in the local church. For example, Robert B. C. Howell, a Baptist pastor and editor of *The Baptist*, eagerly surrendered leadership authority to the *diakōnōī*, as recorded in his seminal works on the office of *diakōnōś*, written in 1846. In this work, *The Deaconship*, he described the church’s deacons as the “financial officers of the church.”\(^{401}\) He later described them as the church’s “board of officers,” and the “executive board of the church.”\(^ {402}\) He perceived a dichotomy between the offices of *episkopos* and the office of *diakōnōś*, one where the *episkopos* was responsible for the spiritual aspects of the church and the *diakōnōī* were responsible for all other aspects of the church (the temporal aspects). He justified this dichotomy based on the duties of the proto-*diakōnōś* in Acts 6.\(^{403}\)

**The Nature of the *Diakōnōś* in the Modern Church Age (c. AD 1914 - Present)**

The Modern Church era has experienced continued tension between the original, biblical pattern of *diakōnōś* ministry and the executive *diakōnōś* boards that had come to power in Baptist churches and beyond. Writing in 1929, noted Baptist pastor and theologian Prince


\(^{401}\) Howell, *The Deaconship*, 12.

\(^{402}\) Ibid., 122-123.

\(^{403}\) Ibid., 18.
Burroughs wrote that the *diakōnōi* were to stand beside the pastor in ministry, seemingly indicating that both offices entailed equal amounts of biblical influence. He outlined the duties of the *diakōnōs* to include “care for the properties of the church, its building, its pastor's home, and its other material holdings,” and further wrote that the *diakōnōi* should “direct and safeguard the financial side of its ministry.”⁴⁰⁴ While Burroughs did not refer to the *diakōnōi* as an executive board, his failure to recognize the oversight responsibilities of the *episkopos* (English: “overseer”), as well as his failure to recognize the humble nature of *diakōnōi* as ministers of mercy by assigning to them full responsibility for the financial decisions of the church, both give evidence to at least a level of regress in the original nature of the *diakōnōs*.

So prevalent was the board of directors’ approach in 1955 that Robert Naylor wrote in the *Baptist Deacon* about his concerns with “bossism” and a “‘board’ complex,” that was emanating from many of the *diakōnōi* in many churches. He argued that the perception of many *diakōnōi* who viewed themselves as the “directors” of the church was alarming, as “nothing could be farther from the Baptist genius or the New Testament plan.”⁴⁰⁵ However, Naylor seemed to contradict his own thoughts, as he himself referred to the *diakōnōi* as the managers of the church.⁴⁰⁶

In 1960, popular Baptist pastor James Hobbs wrote *The Pastor’s Manual* as a guide for pastors. In the book, Hobbs becomes yet another example of an *episkopos* willfully relinquishing pastoral (or perhaps congregational oversight) to the *diakōnōi*. In the book, he refers to the

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⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 20.
diakōnōi as the “Board of Deacons” on several occasions. He also recommends that the Chairman of the “Board of Deacons” preside over “all the business sessions of the church.”

In 1973, popular Freewill Baptist pastor and theologian J. D. O’Donnell similarly conceded pastoral oversight to the diakōnōs when he wrote his then-popular book on the diakōnōs ministry, Handbook for Deacons. In this work, O’Donnell communicates that the diakōnōi “should have an intense concern for all that is going on in the church,” and should “make it his business to know what is going on,” seemingly indicating that the scope of diakōnōs ministry is as broad as the church itself. He then indicates the reason why the diakōnōi should enjoy such a broad scope of awareness concerning the matters of the church: that they might “make wise decisions with the other leaders as they plan the overall program of the church and administer it.” Not only does O’Donnell assign broad decision-making authority to the diakōnōi, he also charges them with vision casting “in expansion of the total church program,” a ministry function almost exclusively reserved for the episkopos ministry. He writes clearly and succinctly that, “The board of deacons with the pastor makes up the official administrative board of the church,” thus assigning oversight authority equally to the episkopos and the diakōnōs. He also refers to the diakōnōi as a “Deacon Board” throughout his book, employing the term more than forty times.

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408 Ibid.
410 Ibid.
411 Ibid.
412 Ibid., 56.
During the 1980s and 1990s, the authority of the *diakōnōi* continued to increase as their ministries of mercy suffered. “Boards” of Deacons commonly considered the church’s pastoral personnel as subordinate to their office. Such was the case at New Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Church, in Florida. In the early 1990s, the “Board of Deacons” exerted its authority when it terminated the employment of lead pastor Charles Dinkins.\(^{413}\) While the majority of the membership voted, in church conference, to retain the employment of the pastor, the Florida Court of Appeals ruled the termination valid, since the church’s articles of incorporation expressly conveyed employment authority solely to the deacons: “With respect to the hiring of a … pastor … the sole responsibility for both hiring and firing said individuals shall rest with the deacons, as more fully set out in the bylaws of this not for profit corporation.”\(^{414}\) In this case, the authority of the *diakōnōi* was unlimited and surpassed that of the congregation – surprising in a Baptist, democratic setting where congregational rule is often final authority.

In 2005, Michael J. Anthony, a visiting professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary specializing in Christian Education, wrote concerning the proto-*diakōnōs* of Acts 6. He examines the Acts 6 passage and determines that the seven men chosen as servants in that passage were, in fact, a leadership board comprised of executive leaders. He writes, “This body became known as the first deacon board or committee in the church (Acts 6:1–7) …It would be safe to say that committees and boards have played a vital role in the life of the church ever since.”\(^{415}\) Rather than viewing these men as humble servants who assisted with the work of

\(^{413}\) Cf. New Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Church, Inc. v. Dinkins, 708 So.2d 972 (Fla. App. 1998) for case documents and ruling.


ministry, Anthony chooses rather to posit a view of these men as directors, as a board, thus
elevating them to a position not seen in the New Testament, and especially not seen in the
passage about which he writes.

During the same time, a noted Baptist theologian and author of a seminal work on Baptist
doctrine, The Baptist Way, seemed to also elevate the office of diakônōs to a position of
authority. Norman wrote of congregational polity that it operates “under the delegated authority
of pastors and deacons.” In doing so, he seemingly places the leadership and oversight
authority of the diakônōi on equal footing with that of the episkopos, without offering any
justification for the elevated authority of the diakônōi.

Ben Merkle, a professor of Greek New Testament at Southwestern Baptist Theological
Seminary, furthers the concept of a deacon board in his popular work 40 Questions about Elders
and Deacons, published in 2008. He refers to the diakônōi as a “board” no less than seven times.
Additionally, Merkle specifically outlines the functions that the diakônōi should carry out, all of
which are commensurate with the secularized diakônōs model seen in the Middle Ages and
rebirthed in the Age of Progress. Merkle’s model of diakônōs service includes a “Board of
Deacons,” whose organizational responsibilities include church administration, which
subsequently would require that the church’s business decisions flow through the board,
including development, grounds, benevolence, finances, human resources, and others. In this
model, any functional areas where decisions are to be made are placed under the direction of the
diakônōi, essentially granting them full authority in the church, to include authority over the
pastoral personnel.

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416 R. Stanton Norman, The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church (Nashville, TN: Broadman &

417 Merkle, 40 Questions about Elders and Deacons, 242.
In 2009, Richard Dresselhaus, an author and counselor to pastors, also furthered the concept of the diakōnōi as an executive board for the church. In his widely-read book, Deacon Ministry, Dresselhaus most often referred to the ministry of the diakōnōi as a “Deacon Board,” employing the term no less than sixty times. In this book, Dresselhaus advises that the episkopoi and the diakōnōi should mutually submit to one another and equally share the authority necessary to administer the affairs of the church, which diminishes the role of under shepherd of the flock that the episkopos is required to fulfil. He again furthers the concept of an executive board of deacons when he advises that the Board of Deacons should perform the annual performance review of the pastor to determine appropriate salary increase, directly placing the deacons in a seat of authority over the pastor. Taking this situation to its logical next step, Dresselhaus goes so far as to suggest that the deacons are to approve leave requested by the pastor, and should permit the pastor to have time away from the office for prayer and study. These and other scenarios outlined in Dresselhaus’ book make the pastors of the church nothing but mere employees of the board, working at the pleasure of the diakōnōi.

In 2010, Carl Herbster, a Baptist pastor for more than three decades, published an important work on the relationship between the pastorate and the diakōnōi. In this book, Herbster, along with his co-author Ken Howerton, articulates on many occasions that his church “[does] not have a ‘board’ of deacons. You will not find that term in our church constitution; it is something churches have copied from corporate America rather than from the Bible.” He later


419 Ibid.

420 Ibid.

421 Herbster, Pastor & Deacons, 17.
adds more clarity to what is apparently a definitive position held by both authors. “The deacons do not rule as a corporate board.”422 He also gives explicit commentary related to the authority the diakŏnŏs holds when he writes, “Deacons are not a board. A board has executive power; it has the right and power to rule. The New Testament saints never seemed to have anyone over them except the chosen man of God [episkopos].”423 In fact, on at least four occasions, the authors clearly articulate their position that the diakŏnŏi are not a “board.”

However, the influence of the “board” philosophy nevertheless infiltrates this otherwise valuable treatise on the humble nature of the diakŏnŏs. Chapter eight suggests a situation where the diakŏnŏi can act as a Constitutional Delegation, whereby the congregation confers its authority to the diakŏnŏi to act as their democratically-elected representatives. This empowers the diakŏnŏi with almost unlimited authority, facilities an intrinsic “board” or “executive” philosophy of ministry, and elevates the diakŏnŏs to a position of authority that exceeds that of the episkopos.424 In the appendices, a sample Deacons Meeting Agenda outlines both the “Old Business” and the “New Business” the diakŏnŏi should address.425 This “business” includes a “Personnel Report,” a function that would almost exclusively be reserved for a managerial or executive group of directors. Later, Sample Church Bylaws employ the term “Deacon Board” or “Board of Deacons” nearly forty times. In those bylaws, the authors advocate that church trustees be comprised solely of the diakŏnŏi, conferring upon them the executive functions of capital finance, approval and execution of financial obligations, and the transfer of real property

422 Ibid., 89.
423 Ibid., 68.
424 Ibid., 134.
425 See p. 179 ff.
into and out of the church’s name. The bylaws confer authority to the *diakônōi* to oversee the “Minister of Finance,” thus conferring full oversight over the financial functions of the *ekklēsia* to the *diakônōi*.

2016 Survey Results Regarding the Nature of the Diakônōs

The Term “Deacon” and Alternate Names for the *Diakonos*

A 2016 survey of 126 deacons also gives evidence of the current state of the *diakônōs*. Those surveyed described their understanding of what the term “deacon” means as follows: 14 percent understood the term as a managing board; 14 percent understood the term referring to democratically-elected officials who represent the will of the people and who carry their authority; 14 percent described the term as that of an overseer; 17 percent described the term as that of an administrator; 2 percent described the term as that of a supervisor to the pastor. While 95 percent of these respondents also described the office of deacon as that of a servant or minister, the data suggests that many deacons have a faulty understanding of the essence of servanthood. Many of them perceive their membership on an administrative or supervisory board as the type of service required of them through their role as a deacon. Most alarming is that 14 percent understand that their role is expressly that of an overseer.

Similarly, those surveyed described how their respective churches officially refer to the office of deacon: 26 percent of respondents indicated that the collective group of deacons in their church were a “Deacon Board” or “Board of Deacons,” and 7.5 percent of respondents indicated that the collective group of deacons in their church were an “Elder Board” or “Executive

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426 Ibid., 210.

427 Ibid., 213.
Leadership Team.” This data illustrates well the emphasis many churches place on decision making and managerial tasks over raw servanthood.

The Authority of the Deacon

When asked specifically about their role in the church, 86 percent responded that their primary purpose was to provide care, serve, and demonstrate mercy in the church and community, exclusively as it relates to physical needs of the poor, widows, and orphans, and as it relates to the spiritual needs of the poor in spirit. Yet among these same respondents, 62 percent indicated that their role was also primarily that of a church “overseer,” with 25 percent further indicating that they understood that their primary role involved supervising or overseeing the pastor of the church and to hold him accountable to perform his duties responsibly or acting as a series of checks and balances against an overexertion of pastoral authority.

When asked to further define their role in relation to the authority an individual deacon or collective deacon body possesses, the responses indicate that: 17 percent of deacons believe that pastors “partially report” to them individually; however, 52 percent of deacons believe, collectively as a deacon body, that the pastor partially or fully reports to them. Similarly, they also indicated that where they may lack specific, expressed authority to oversee the pastor officially, 50 percent of respondents believe they nonetheless have the influence necessary to remove the pastor.

However, when surveyed specifically about the authority pastors have, 67 percent of deacons indicate that the office of pastor has biblical authority over the office of deacon, and 45 percent indicated that the pastor (or pastors) have the “final say in most matters.” The data seems to suggest that a large portion of deacons have assumed authority not otherwise conferred upon
them biblically, even when they recognize they do not biblically possess, or are not entitled to, such authority.

The Deacons’ Meeting

Deacons were also surveyed pertaining to the organizational meetings they conduct in the church, in order to determine what the activities of the meeting might suggest about the deacons’ understanding of their role in the church, and several things were indicated: prayer for those in need (86 percent); discussion about how the deacon body might meet specific needs in the church (67 percent); and discussion related to spiritual needs, such as counseling and mentoring (67 percent). Deacons also indicated that their meetings contain several administrative or managerial functions: reviewing spending and the church budget (60 percent); general administrative business concerns (60 percent); problem resolution regarding staff, to include the pastor (38 percent); and review of the pastor’s job performance (17 percent). Interestingly, only 2 percent of respondents indicated that their regular deacon meetings included discussion about how they might serve widows, and only 2 percent indicated that they discuss benevolence ministry. This seems to indicate that many deacons have a flawed understanding of what their actual day-to-day duties as a deacon are. Deacons have chosen administrative functions, which would grant them decision-making authority in the church, over that of physical servanthood that meets the needs of the local church.

The Church’s Finances

Regarding the finances of the church, to include the general operating account, deacon respondents indicated the following: 60 percent of deacons indicated that the deacons in their church either expressly set the overall church budget, or their endorsement is required for the budget to be approved; 48 percent of deacons indicated that review of a monthly church financial
report is conducted during regularly scheduled deacon meeting; 24 percent indicated that it was
the responsibility of the deacons to hold various departments accountable in financial matters,
and that they were charged by the church with ensuring that spending was compliant with the
church budget; 55 percent acknowledge that no major financial expenditures could occur without
prior approval by the deacons. Likewise, 62 percent of deacons indicated that even the pastor
could not affect a major financial expenditure without the expressed permission of the deacons.
Similarly, when asked if deacons played a major role in setting and revising the salary of the lead
pastor, 7 percent indicated they approved the pastor’s salary after a recommendation from a
finance committee, 14 percent indicate they make recommendations regarding the pastor’s salary
to other committees which then approve the recommendation, and 32 percent indicated that they,
exclusively, decide the pastor’s salary.

Personnel and Human Resource Matters

Related to human resource matters, 33 percent of deacons indicated that their church
requires that any HR problems, concerns, policy violations, etc., be reported to them
immediately, indicating their authority to oversee human resources concerns on behalf of the
church, to include staff disciplinary actions and termination. This demonstrates, again, that many
dacons have asserted authority not biblically conferred upon them.

Strategic Leadership and Vision

When surveyed regarding the vision and mission of the church, deacons responded as
follows: 72 percent of those surveyed indicated that both the vision and mission of the church are
set by the deacons. While 10 percent of those who indicated as much also indicated that they
collaborate with others in the church, such as elders, staff, or members, 62 percent indicated that
they were the primary vehicle for setting the vision and mission of the church.
General Administrative and Business Decision-Making

When surveyed regarding who was the actual primary administrator and decision-maker in the church, and the overseer of administrative matters, survey results indicate the following: 26 percent of deacons view their office as the primary overseer of administrative affairs in the church, and thus as the primary decision-makers; 5 percent of those surveyed further specified that the chairman of the deacons held the position as chief overseer of administrative and business matters. Interestingly, however, when asked specifically whether the Bible granted pastors authority as chief overseers in and over the church, 79 percent responded in the affirmative and 14 percent responded that they were unsure; only 7 percent believed that pastors were not granted oversight authority in and over the church. Inversely, regarding whether the Bible grants deacons oversight authority in the church, the majority, 64 percent, indicated that it did not. This data indicates that while the respondent deacons readily admitted that the Bible conferred overall leadership authority upon an office other than their own, their current practices are not commensurate with that belief.

The Role of the Deacon in the Church

Deacons were asked several questions related to their role and functions in the local church. When asked if their role included acting as democratically elected representatives for the members of the church and advocating for them in the decision-making process, 26 percent of deacons indicated that they understood that their role including acting “much like an elected, congressional representative.” These deacons, then, understand that part of their role includes authority in the decision-making processes of the church, since they represent the will of the people.
Deacons were also asked whether their role included the responsibility to hold the senior pastor accountable. Among those who responded, 45 percent indicated that it was their responsibility as a deacon to act as an accountability mechanism for the pastor.

When asked whether their role included approving matters brought before the congregation prior to regularly scheduled business meetings, 48 percent of deacons indicated that they were responsible to approve business matters prior to church business meetings.

Summary

The limited but consistent data of the Apostolic Era points to an office of diakōnōs that embodied the virtues of humility and servanthood. From the proto-diakōnōs in Acts 6 to the descriptions of the diakōnōs in the Didache, the first-century diakōnōs was a position of willing submission and servanthood. As the first century closed and the second century opened, the tide would soon change. The Catholic Era brought about a more ordered and structured diakōnōs office, one that was elevated to a place of honor, though strictly tied to the needs and direction of those holding the office of episkopos. Throughout the third century, the office of diakōnōs began to experience more involvement in the oversight of the ekklēsia and participation in its worship programs.

During the Roman Era, as the Roman Empire began to establish its own brand of Christianity due to the influence of Constantine, the office of diakōnōs was quickly affected. Deacons gained more influence and authority as their office became used by the overseers to perform more and more functions in the church, and to police the spiritual behavior of the community. As their authority increased, so did their desire for a greater amount of the same. Though they still performed many servanthood functions, like visiting the sick, the office of the diakōnōs progressively evolved into an office of influence and prominence.
It was during the Christian Middle Ages that the office of *diakônōs* experienced its most climactic departure from its original nature as ministers of mercy and humble servants. As deacons became increasingly involved in the worship services of the *ekklēsia*, and subsequently were publicly placed before the community more and more, their authority and influence quickly grew. As assistants to the overseers, the *diakônōs* office deteriorated from an office thought of as an end and came to be a means to an end – a means to the office of *episkopos*. This was so much so the case that it would become necessary to enter into ministry first as a *diakônōs* if one desired to attain to the office of *prēsbutērōs* or, eventually, the office of *episkopos*. As these varying grades of influence and authority became more clearly defined, the work originally assigned to and completed by the office of *diakônōs* would either be abandoned or performed by others in the community of faith.

The Reformation Period brought hope to the office of the *diakônōs*. Reformers such as Calvin, Zwingli and Luther desired to reform the office of *diakônōs* by returning it to a place of service. Each of them contributed greatly to the transition experienced during this period whereby the office began, as in the first century, to exclusively focus on meeting the needs of those in the community, to include the widows and elderly, those who were ill, or who had been victimized. The Protestant movement became not just a protestation of the salvation doctrines of the Catholic Church, but also a protestation of the deteriorated state of the office of *diakônōs* at the hands of the Catholic Church’s exploitation of this sacred office.

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428 Well before this time, a dichotomy had developed between the concepts of the *prēsbutērōs* and the *episkopos*. Though originally one office, the office of *episkopos* was elevated to a status of influence and authority over the *prēsbutērōs*, effectively creating an ecclesiastical hierarchy not found in Scripture. This hierarchy, naturally, would attack those desiring position and influence, and would consequently cause the office of *diakônōs* to be viewed as a step towards the office of *prēsbutērōs*, and, likewise, cause the office of *prēsbutērōs* to be viewed as a step towards the office of *episkopos*. 
During the Age of Reasoning, the office of diakōnōs continued to embody the virtues restored to the office during the Reformation, namely humble servanthood that met the physical needs of the community. However, just as in the Middle Ages with the Catholic Church, newly formed Baptist churches in America began to slowly leverage the office of the diakōnōs in ways that would lead to its second fall from grace. During this time, deacons were tasked with handling many of the pastoral functions in the church in the absence of pastors. This fueled the tragic descent of the office that is evident in the Age of Reasoning. It is during this period that the concept of a “Deacon Board” came to fruition, a cancerous practice that permitted deacons to seize authority and influence not otherwise intended for their office. During this period, they increasingly became the managing executive leadership team of the church, so much so that in many churches the office of the episkopos would become a subordinate office to theirs.

The concept of the “Deacon Board” carried forward into the Modern Church Age as more and more Baptist (or Baptist-leaning) churches were planted. The concept of the deacon as an administrator became culturally normative, and it continues today as an unhealthy church practice. Evidence of the levels of authority the diakōnōs office has attained can be witnessed in the functions deacons perform in the church today, including oversight of the episkopos office and often-times complete control over the decision-making processes of the church. What follows, then, is an examination of three key elements that have led to history’s second deterioration of the sacred office, along with the key principles necessary to invoke history’s second reformation of the office.
CHAPTER 5

REFORMATION OF THE DIAKONOS

Evidence seems to demonstrate quite well that the state of the nature of the diakōnōs during the past two centuries has declined qualitatively. While the reformers insisted on a return to biblical, humble servanthood in the diakōnōs, their successors in church leadership did not espouse a similar philosophy. One author poignantly articulated the decline of the diakōnōs when he wrote that “the fact that many modern ‘deacons’ are little more than committee men administering church finances and property only serves to highlight how far the diaconate has fallen from the New Testament pattern.”429

The Call for a Second Reformation

While the office of the diakōnōs experienced a deterioration in its nature as many churches transitioned to a leadership philosophy where the diakōnōi were elevated to positions of authority and executive leadership, not all theologians, pastors, and churches welcomed such a digression within their communities. Many rallied against such an understanding of the office of diakōnōs and sought to maintain the humble, servanthood nature of the office that the reformers worked tirelessly to reinstall in the ekklēsia.

In the mid-nineteenth century, as many Baptist churches were planted across America, a pastor and historian issued a warning to the churches of his day regarding the model of diakōnōs ministry found in many churches. His concern was that deacons had become officers with such a level of ecclesiastical authority that “all the membership, and all the affairs in the Church, and

the Pastor, must be dictated, and ruled and governed by [the diakōnōi]."430 This pastor and church historian saw the inherent dangers in such a setting and urged caution along with a return to the biblio-historical understanding of the diakōnōs ministry.

Just a few decades later, Edwin C. Dargan, Baptist pastor, theologian, and ecclesiology scholar at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, issued a similar clarion call to the church. He cautioned the church against leveraging the office of diakōnōs as a “sort of ruling presbytery.”431 Dargan realized the inherent dangers which can manifest in the church when diakōnōi function as prēsbutērōi.

In the mid-twentieth century, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary president and Baptist theologian Robert Naylor wrote, “There are churches where deacons have appropriated to themselves authority which is contrary to New Testament teaching.”432 While, as mentioned above, Naylor’s assessment on the nature of the diakōnōs at times contradicted itself, he also issued a clear charge to the church that leverages the diakōnōs as an executive board when he wrote, “Anywhere this condition exists, there inevitably are those who say that deacons are not needed. The truth is that such deacons as this... are not needed in churches.”433

In the late twentieth century, prominent Baptist theologian Howard Foshee also wrote in hopes of correcting the trend of leveraging the diakōnōi as managers and directors of church business. He called “Board of Deacons” an “unfortunate term,” and advised that such a term was

430 Author unknown, cited in Deweese, The Emerging Role of Deacons, 47-48.


432 Naylor, The Baptist Deacon, 3-4.

433 Ibid.
foreign to the way Baptists should work together under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{434} He urged unity and a cooperative spirit within the leadership of the church.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, the desire to restore the \textit{diakŏnŏs} to its original fashion flourished in many churches, so much so that some would declare the executive board philosophy of ministry null and void. For example, Jerry Songer, Baptist pastor and theologian, wrote that, “The board of deacons and business manager concept is no longer a viable model.”\textsuperscript{435} He recognized that the executive board philosophy of ecclesiastical leadership was not only unbiblical, it was unhealthy as well. Likewise, near the same time, Jim Henry, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, released a series of training videos to encourage deacons to appreciate and employ the biblical nature of the office. He urged Baptists to leverage deacons as servants of “three tables,” namely, the Lord’s table (Communion), the Pastor’s table (as his assistant in ministry), and the table of the impoverished (as an aide to those in need).\textsuperscript{436} How, then, might the \textit{diakŏnŏs} experience a second reformation, one as radical, if not more so, as that which Zwingli, Calvin, Luther, Bucer, and others envisioned and inaugurated in their churches?

Reformation Through a Proper Understanding and Application of the \textit{Diakŏnŏs’} Authority

As has already been discovered, there exists a strong correlation between the decline of the \textit{diakŏnŏs} and the “growing trend toward hierarchy in the early Church.”\textsuperscript{437} As the

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\textsuperscript{434} Foshee, \textit{Now That You're a Deacon}, n.p. See also Foshee’s \textit{The Ministry of the Deacon} (Nashville: Convention, 1968), n.p., where he outlines a healthy model of \textit{diakŏnŏs} ministry. This publication was influential in Baptist circles and beyond, and it aided in the return to servanthood seen in many churches during the 1980s, and was also a precursor to the ‘Deacon Family Ministry Plan’ model of ministry that was prevalent in the 1980s and beyond.


\textsuperscript{437} “Office of Deacons in the Churches,” United Reformed Churches in North America,
examination of the historicity of the *diakōnōs* reflects, the office quickly transitioned from a ministry of mercy to “the first of the three orders of the ministry and a stepping stone to the priesthood.”438 Less than two centuries after the close of the Apostolic era, men sought the office for political gain. This led to a rapid deterioration of the office which lasted until the Reformation. In similar pattern, less than two centuries from the Reformation era, the office of the *diakōnōs* would, yet again, become an office of influence and authority, rather than an office of biblical servanthood. Yet these deacons did not seek the priesthood as a means of authority as seen during the Middle Ages; they sought status as executives, decision makers, and authority figures, under the construct of a Board of Directors setting.

Daniel Akin, President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Baptist theologian, described the condition of the *diakōnōs* as they attempt to leverage executive authority in the church. He wrote that the entire Baptist church setting under which most deacons function (i.e. Single-pastor/elder Congregationalism) is “often a sight to behold,” and is not “necessarily a pretty one.”439 At the helm of this unsettling situation is a “deacon board that functions like a carnal corporate board.”440 As the ebb and flow of *diakōnōs* history demonstrates, the further the *diakōnōi* stray from the role of humble servants and ministers of mercy, the more they tarnish an otherwise honorable and noble office.

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439 Akin, “The Single-Elder-Led Church,” in Perspectives on Church Government, 25. It is to be noted that Akin advocates for a Single-pastor/elder Congregationalism polity model. In this statement, he merely describes the state of the model when Christ does not hold the primary leadership role as Shepherd of the flock. Akin holds to a traditional Baptist Congregationalism where the membership holds ultimate authority through democratic processes, where the Pastor / Elder is subject to the will of the membership, and the deacons, though servants, represent the will of the people as their elected representatives.

440 Ibid.
The late Ken Gangel, biblical scholar and professor of Christian education, poignantly expands on the conditions that can effortlessly arise when church leaders, including deacons, function as a board rather than as servants. According to Gangel, “an aura of cultic authority” can develop, one that looks more like “hooded Klansmen gathered deep in the woods for a secret meeting” than humble servants.441 Tragically, this type of leadership can “place the entire congregation in danger,” as it can easily “destroy the universal priesthood so central to a properly functioning church.”442 To Gangel, the ‘board’ mentality of leadership is about authority and control, not about mutual servanthood, which can easily and rapidly destroy the health and vitality of the ekklēsia.

When the diakŏnŏi become officers of the ekklēsia who lead under an administrative philosophy, the primary catalyst for leadership can be control rather than humble servanthood. While administration and decision making are integral components of ecclesiastical operations, when the diakŏnŏi seek to be the primary decision makers and influencers, they cease to fulfill the roles designed for them and begin to fill self-serving roles. As Guy Greenfield wrote, “When deacons and other lay leaders see themselves primarily as administrators, then control is likely to be more important than ministry.” When deacons emphasize that they are a “board” (not a biblical concept) … watch out. Control will become the primary issue.”443

The original diakŏnŏi of the first century were servants of the ekklēsia, both to the community of believers and to the leaders in charge (ie: episkopoi). No authority, beyond that which was intrinsically necessary to serve the community and the episkopoi, was granted to the


442 Ibid.

diakōnōi, or even requested from them. Yet the reality in many churches today is that of a
diakōnōs ‘board’ that “think[s] of themselves as rulers rather than servants,” wrote Herbster.444
He straightforwardly challenged the notion of an openly authoritative ‘Board of Deacons’ when
he wrote that “they seek to control the church, when they ought to recognize the authority of the
pastor and congregation instead.”445 Herbster labels such an expression of the diakōnōi as
“Bombastic Boards” and asserts that they have both “frustrated many churches and chased off
many pastors” and are “never helpful in a local church.”446

In some church settings, the concept of the office of deacon is synonymous with authority
and power. Those desirous of influence and authority in the church often seek the office of
deacon in order to attain to a particular authoritative status as a leader. This is so much the case
that two authors have written that “the office of deacon has become a seat of power and even
abuse. In some traditions, it is even pursued as a political office.” 447 After connecting the office
of the diakōnōs with political influence and power, they lament: “How far this is from the spirit
of Christ! How far from the heart of his followers, and how far from the profile of
servants/deacons in 1 Timothy!”448 They argue, convincingly, that the term diakōnōs is defined
as a servant, minister, or attendant, as one who serves and cares for the needs of others through
menial tasks, citing as an example the service Martha rendered unto Jesus. In this text, Mary,
Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany host a dinner for Christ. The text records simply that “Martha

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445 Ibid.
446 Ibid.
447 R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit, Preaching the
448 Ibid.
served [those present at the dinner].” The Greek word that John used to describe Martha’s service is diakōneō, the verb form of diakōnōs, which, in this passage, refers to the service of waiting on tables. No authority was sought, implied, or needed by Martha for her service to be carried out beyond that which was inherently necessary to complete the task presently at hand.

Reformed theologian Wayne Grudem elaborates on the authority of the diakōnōs: “It is significant that nowhere in the New Testament do deacons have ruling authority over the church as the elders do, nor are deacons ever required to be able to teach Scripture or sound doctrine.” Grudem recognizes the administrative nature of the Acts 6 proto-diakōnōs, yet he limits the administrative function of the office to that which is necessary to “serve the church in various ways,” provided that service was subject to those to whom ruling or oversight authority has been granted, i.e. the episkopi. The many and varied functions of the diakōnōs, such as caring for orphans and widows, serving the poor, and assisting with other physical needs in the local community of the ekklesia together, help fulfill God’s vision for each particular congregation. Notably, all of these functions are important components which each contribute to the overall health and vitality of the local church, yet “none [of these functions or duties] grant undue authority to the office of deacon that should allow him to preclude himself to be anything other than a servant within the church.”

The Concept of Authority Through Service

While the quest for authority and power by the diakōnōs is a primary catalyst for the digression of the sacred office, that is not to say that there is no authority associated with the

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449 John 12:2.

450 Grudem, Systematic Theology, 920.

451 Duesing, et al., Upon This Rock, n.p.
office. In fact, there is, and must be, an implied, inherent amount of the authority and influence associated with the office of the diakŏnŏs. The diakŏnŏs is an office in the ekklēsia, and with any official position there must be some level of authority and influence, for how might one successfully carry out assigned duties without the empowerment to do so? Yet when servanthood and authority are placed in juxtaposition to one another, a certain extent of incongruity can be realized. At the forefront of ministry (service) is humility and meekness; at the forefront of authority, there exists a certain level of dignity, superiority, and superciliousness.

While the essences of servanthood and authority are often incongruent, especially when expressed through fallen men, ministry and authority became perfectly congruent ideals in the person of Christ. While fully God, and thus possessing the full authority of the Godhead, Christ was the exemplary model of a servant. Jesus clearly claimed and asserted His authority, such as when He said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”452 The Apostles reiterated the authority of Jesus on many occasions. The Apostle Paul wrote, “You have been filled in Him, who is the head of all rule and authority.”453 The Apostle Peter also wrote that Jesus “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.”454

The Gospel according to Matthew records a struggle for a portion of this authority, along with a response that demonstrated Jesus’ philosophy of ministry perfectly.455 The mother of two of the disciples came to Jesus and requested that they be granted positions at His left and right

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452 Matthew 28:18.
453 Colossians 2:10.
454 1 Peter 3:22.
side, an inherent request for honor, influence, and authority. Jesus’ answer not only demonstrated His own desire to be a servant through His response, but also gave the formula by which one can gain Christ-honoring authority. He said to their mother, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” In asking this pointed question, Jesus inextricably linked authority with sacrifice and suffering (i.e. “the cup” of suffering). This one piercing and thought-provoking question would forever connect servanthood and suffering with biblical authority. Jesus has full authority, as the New Testament teaches, yet His authority is demonstrated in His humble servanthood and the compassion that would lead Him to “the cup” of suffering.

Jesus continues to leverage the mother’s question to teach the disciples about the connection between servanthood and authority. He contrasts the world’s perspective and practice of authority with that of His own. In saying, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them,” He taught them what authority in God’s kingdom is not – it is not about ruling or lording over God’s people, and it is not about exercising authority over people as a great and mighty leader. He conclusively declares of the disciples, “It shall not be so among you.” After teaching them that this model of authority must not be their own, He offers a more kingdom-minded model of authority: “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant (diakōnōs, i.e. deacon), and whoever would be first among you must be your slave (doulos, i.e. a willing slave).” Pronouncing this, Jesus taught

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457 Matthew 20:22.
458 Matthew 20:25.
459 Matthew 20:26a.
460 Matthew 20:26b-27.
that real kingdom authority is found in submission to those the *diakōnōs* serves, not in seeking influence and control over those to whom they are called to serve. This formula (submission plus humble servanthood equals kingdom authority) would be emulated extraordinarily well in His own journey to the cross. “Even as the Son of Man came not to be served (*diakōneō*) but to serve (*diakōneō*), and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Remarkably, even as the sovereign Lord of Heaven and Earth, possessing all the power and authority Heaven can commend, Jesus ruled over no one politically or organizationally. He never leveraged His position as the Suffering Servant to influence people politically, organizationally, or in any way other than to influence them into an intimate relationship with the Father, by virtue of Christ’s *diakonia* (service, ministry) on the cross, and the Holy Spirit’s abiding presence, who, furthermore, was also a submissive, humble Servant.

One of the most important passages proving insight into Christ’s authority relative to His servanthood nature is found in Philippians chapter 2. In this passage, the Apostle Paul charges readers to have the same attitude and philosophy about authority and servanthood that Christ emulated on earth. “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,” Paul wrote. What attitude was that? Paul particularizes Christ as one who “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant (*doulos*, i.e. a willing slave), being born in the likeness of men. … He humbled himself by becoming

461 Matthew 20:28.
462 Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is often referred to as the ‘Suffering Servant’ passage, as it vividly describes the nature of Christ’s service – that of suffering and agony expressly for the benefit of others.
464 Philippians 2:5.
obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”  

New Testament scholar Gordon Fee captures well the mindset of Christ concerning authority and servanthood Paul’s paraenesis sought to invoke in the community of faith:

The main thrust … is simple enough: Christ’s being God was not for him a matter of “selfish ambition,” of grasping or seizing; rather it expressed itself in the very opposite. Thus in a single sentence Paul goes from Christ’s “being equal with God” to his having taken the role of “a slave,” defined in terms of incarnation. All of this to call the Philippians to similar self-sacrifice for the sake of one another.

Once Christ demonstrated His willingness to lay down His life as a sacrifice and a ministry of mercy for others – not as a political or organizational ruler – God then lifts Him up. “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

There seems to be a logical and natural flow of thought related to authority and servanthood in both the Matthean and the Pauline pericopes above. Authority and influence are not the primary motivations of a godly servant, but rather a desire to offer one’s self for the benefit of others, regardless of the level of sacrifice that may be required. Christ left an environment of privilege, status and influence, and did so willingly. He voluntarily stripped Himself of all the rights and privileges that a sovereign God would have inside the divine kingdom. Laying this aside, He picked up a life of mere human (i.e. lowly) status, limitations, and servitude. While He did not cease being God, He ceased using all the privileges associated

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467 Philippians 2:9-11.
with being God, in order, profoundly, that He might be a completely satisfying and sufficient sacrifice for those He came to serve.

Christ becomes the ultimate example of one who did not pursue his own interests or selfishly take advantage of rights, privileges, or status that were by rights his, but rather “emptied himself.” …The Son goes beyond not asserting [His deity] to not taking advantage of what he had by rights…Paul is trying to change not the Philippians’ views of [the nature of Christ’s being] but their views about status, standing, and honor seeking.468

After Christ had humbled Himself, even to the point of death, it is then that He was exalted. It is, then, through Christ’s diakonia (service, ministry) as the Diakônōs of all diakônōs, that His status was acknowledged by the Father. The Father, pleased with the manner of diakonia carried out by the life of servanthood Christ typified, honored the Son with glory, status, and vindication.

God rewards [the righteous life of servanthood], or at least always responds graciously to it…The Philippians are being urged to pursue a life like the Son’s and so leave the exalting and glorifying in the hands of God, rather than engaging in a life of self-glorification and taking on honor challenges…[Because of His diakonia], he is exalted and given a better name by God…One can say that God vindicates the Son’s obedience, in fact that his exaltation comes about because of his obedient self-abnegation.469

Paul syllogistically illustrated that the life which comports with biblical authority is the life of humble servanthood and obedience. The life of servanthood is not a life of influence or authority, but a life of obedience to God through sacrificial diakonia in the humblest and lowly of ways. Glory and exaltation, along with authority and influence, may come to the one practicing genuine, Christocentric diakonia, as seen when Jesus told the disciples that “whoever would [desire to] be first (i.e. influence, position, authority, honor) among you must be your


469 Ibid., 151.
doulos (voluntary, willing slave for the purpose of diakonia).”\textsuperscript{470} Schweizer correctly assessed the connection between servanthood and authority when he wrote that “the deacon’s authority does not rest on the ground of position or dignity, but on obedience that is given because a person is overcome by the ministry that is performed.”\textsuperscript{471} Simply stated, “[the diakōnōs’] authority comes through service.”\textsuperscript{472} The scope of his authority is not a broad, untamed ruling or political authority. Rather, it is the empowerment to humble, menial, lowly service, as exemplified in the paradigmatic nature of Christ’s own service to humanity during his passion and crucifixion.

It is, then, humility, not authority and influence, that is the very essence of both the nature and functions of the diakōnōs. The humility shown in Christ, who never ceased being the providential Messiah God of the universe, laid down claim to the rights of divinity that He might pick up the most menial of vocations in the thoughts of Greco-Roman culture. The real humiliation of the incarnation and the cross is that one who was Himself God, and who never during the whole process stopped being God, could embrace such a vocation.\textsuperscript{473} Following the example of Christ, the ministry of the diakōnōs is not an ecclesiastical position which vies for power or seizes influence, but a humble and meek vocation of “self-giving for the sake of others.”\textsuperscript{474}

\textsuperscript{470} Matthew 20:27.


\textsuperscript{472} Cowen, \textit{Who Rules the Church?}, 103–104.

\textsuperscript{473} N.T. Wright, cited in Fee, \textit{Paul’s Letter to the Philippians}, 211.

\textsuperscript{474} Fee, \textit{Paul’s Letter to the Philippians}, 211.
As previously disclosed, there does exist a level of authority in the office of *diakōnōs*, for inherent in servanthood is the idea of influencing others. Yet the life of Christ demonstrates well that the authority that Christ displayed was not an authority by which He would rule people; rather, it was an authority through which He could serve people. Likewise, the office of *diakōnōs*, while an official office of the *ekklēsia*, is not an office afforded a level of authority by which the *diakōnōs* might rule over the congregation or the *episkopos*. As Owen wrote, the office of *diakōnōs* possesses a manner of authority “with respect unto the special work of it, under a general notion of authority; that is, a right to attend unto it in a peculiar manner, and to perform the things that belong thereunto.” Thus, the authority a *diakōnōs* possesses, and therefore may assert, is exclusively limited to the authority granted to him by the church to carry out those functions associated directly with his capacity as a *diakōnōs*, and nothing more.

There remains, unfortunately, a culture of *diakōnōs* authority that exists in many churches today, one where unwarranted authority is presupposed, even expected, among the *diakōnōi*. For example, noted Baptist theologian Duesing, writing about the congregational polity model, presupposes a level of *diakōnōs* authority consistent with that of the *episkopos*. This is evident when he labels as “misuse or abuse” the attempts of a pastor to usurp the “authority that belongs to or at least should be shared with the deacons.” To Duesing, then, it seems as if the *diakōnōi* share authority and influence that is separate from, and not accountable to, that of the *episkopos*. Herbster confirms Duesing’s position, conferring upon the *diakōnōi* authority that is duly theirs to exercise as delegates of the congregation.

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It is, therefore, imperative for the church that the congregation and the leadership of the church endeavor to understand the Christocentric nature of servanthood in order to bring reformation to the ministry of the diakōnōs. Through the lens of the life and ministry of Christ, the humility intrinsic to diakōnōs ministry comes into view. Through the obedience and service, God brings glory to those who serve the Kingdom, according to His good will. Authority, then, is not to be an ideal sought by those who are, or who aspire to be, diakōnōi. It is to be understood as an influence and enablement necessary to serve the church in aiding the poor, ailing, discontent, discarded, and otherwise vulnerable or marginalized members of the community. In a divine paradox, the diakōnōs ministry is one through which glory, honor, and influence should not be sought; yet God sovereignly grants the same to those who faithfully carry out this diakōnōs ministry of mercy.

**Reformation Through a Proper Understanding and Application of the Diakōnōs’ Organization**

Much has already been written above about the “Board of Directors” model of diakōnōs ministry prevalent in many churches. In this setting, the diakōnōi function like executive officers of an organization. They hold “business” meetings, record minutes, assign officers, and make decisions in accordance with *Roberts Rules of Order*. They often review reports from other ministries or committees, review and approve church financial records, and prepare recommendations for their stakeholders, the congregation.

Within this context, the church becomes more of an organization than an organism. The church, then, emulates what its members have seen and experienced from the business environment. The diakōnōi function as the corporate board, providing oversight to the church’s CEO, the episkopos, both of whom are accountable to the stakeholder, i.e. the congregation of
faith. In this model, the church functions primarily as an organization, and secondarily, if at all, as an organism.

Much has been written about the nature of the church as an organism and not an organization. One author wrote that the church should be viewed as “a movement, rather than as an institution; as an organism, not just an organization.”478 Another wrote that the church should be thought of “not as an organization but as an organism” – an organism because the church is comprised of “the body of regenerated people who once again acknowledge the sovereign law of God.”479 Yet another echoes the same sentiment in saying, “The church is not an organization but a functioning organism, a body (see Eph. 2:20–22).”480

The primary impetus for excluding the label of organization from the church is the desire to dichotomize the business environment from the church environment. When these authors, and many others, insist the church is not an organization, they simply mean to say that the church is not a business, and thus should not operate like a business. A business requires an executive leadership team; a church does not require such. A business has shareholders, each of whom are looking to enjoy a return on their investment; a church does not. The church works so that God might enjoy the return of kingdom growth on the investment of His Son He made in each believer. Yet the church does leverage business functions to operate (i.e. financial reports, corporate registrations, etc.).


480 Paul Tautges, Counsel Your Flock: Fulfilling Your Role as a Teaching Shepherd, Ministering the Master’s Way (Leominster, England: Day One, 2009), 70.
As such, the *ekklēsia* is to be thought of primarily as an organism, the body of Christ.

Watchman Nee articulated well what it means that the church is an organism:

> Life makes our body an organism. The church is the Body of Christ, and as an organism it depends upon life. The church is an entity of life. It is produced by life and formed with life and in life. We have to see that the church is a life entity. It is not something formed by teaching or by organization. We cannot form, organize, or establish a church by our teachings, regardless of how spiritual they are. The church is born of life and formed of life. It is altogether an entity of life.⁴⁸¹

The church is, then, about life—spiritual life—and not about institutions, profits, or balance sheets. The church is a sacred collection of those who are alive because of Christ and stand under His redemptive work of atonement. The *ekklēsia* is alive because Christ is alive. The *ekklēsia* is best thought of as an organism that leverages minimal organization in order to fulfill its purpose.

It is an organism, but utilizes organization minimally as needed. Several theologians affirm this view of the church. Tidwell wrote, “A church is a very special and unique creation. It is a fellowship. It is an organism, a unit of life… But it does have needs for organization.”⁴⁸² Likewise, Iorg has written that “[a] church is first an organism that expresses itself as an organization.”⁴⁸³ Ryrie wrote that the concept of the church as an organization that expresses itself organizationally is not inaccurate, “for the organism properly functioning will express itself in local organizations.”⁴⁸⁴ Lawson echoed the same: “The church is more than a mere organization, but a *living organism* through which the life of God flows.”⁴⁸⁵

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It is simply to be noted that the church may use organizational functions, such as financial record keeping, property management, age-appropriate ministries, etc., yet the church should never be thought of in terms of an organization, and thus should not operate as an organization. The concept of a ‘Deacon Board’ stands in glaring contrast to the virtues of humility, servitude, and selflessness found in the diakŏnŏi of the Apostolic period. “These early deacons and deaconesses were servants, not executive boards.”486 As one author declared so distinctly, the ‘Board of Deacons’ or ‘Deacon Board’ organizational structure of many of today’s modern churches “is something [they] have copied from corporate America rather than from the Bible.”487 He then explains:

Deacons are not equivalent to business executives who call the shots; they are servants of the pastor and the people. They serve the pastor by giving counsel, encouragement, and assistance in meeting the needs of the congregation. They serve the people by attending to details…which would be too time consuming for the entire congregation to oversee.488

“This Business” (ho houtos chreia) as a Basis for the Deacon Board

The corporate culture and organizational structure of businesses are quite evident in many diakŏnŏs meetings. Writing about how this came to be, Bixby reported, “As American churches adapted to the governmental and corporate culture of the USA, a legislative or board system developed.”489 This board system led, in turn, to a system whereby the diakŏnŏi were granted governing authority to “run the church.”490 This is nowhere more prevalent than in Baptist and


487 Herbster, “Local Church Organization,” in Pastor & Deacons: Servants Working Together, 17. It is to be noted that Herbster argues for pure Baptist congregationalism.

488 Ibid.


490 Ibid.
Bible churches,\textsuperscript{491} where both boards and committees are normative. These churches place great evidentiary value on Acts 6:3 as a basis for a Deacon “Board” which handles the “business” of the church. “Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.”\textsuperscript{492}

Leveraging this term, many churches assume that the church’s “business” should be performed by, or at least overseen by, the \textit{diakōnōi}. As such, \textit{diakōnōi} in many churches today possess a broad array of administrative and managerial authority in the \textit{ekklēsia}, from hiring and terminating staff, or at the very least highly influencing the same, approving financial expenditures, setting programs for the church, providing oversight to various departments and ministries, providing accountability to, and often managerial oversight over, the pastor, etc. So much has this concept of \textit{diakōnōi} as business administrators who handle “this business” permeated the culture of many churches that many pastors have themselves resolved to accept this practice as normative. For example, Hobbs, in a popular manual for pastors, suggests that the \textit{diakōnōi} “meet at least once a month at stated time for the purpose of discussing the business affairs of the church.”\textsuperscript{493}

However, understanding the term “this business” as that administrative or managerial business, especially as it relates to influence, authority or control, is a misexegesis of Acts 6:3. “The term \textit{business} in the Greek text actually refers to the ministry of caring for widows,”\textsuperscript{494} i.e.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{491} Ibid.
    \item \textsuperscript{492} NKJV, author’s emphasis.
    \item \textsuperscript{493} James Randolph Hobbs, \textit{The Pastor’s Manual} (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1962), 197–198. Hobbs does clarify by adding: “They may also discuss any matters which concern the welfare of the church, but deacons should remember that they have no authority over the church and that they cannot take any action that is final.”
    \item \textsuperscript{494} Bixby, “Elder Rule,” 8.
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“to serve tables.”⁴⁹⁵ As Utley suggests, the Greek word employed by Luke, *chreia*, actually refers to a task related to a need, not an office. As such, “This passage cannot be used to assert that deacons handle the business matters (KJV, “this business”) of the church.”⁴⁹⁶ The context of Acts 6:3 and “this business” is a particular need and an intended, specific solution to that need. The Apostles, acting as the *episkopoi* of the *ekklēsia*, act authoritatively to find a solution to the disputes over a deficiency in the distribution of aid to widows. Their solution is to appoint men, full of the Spirit, who will “serve tables” (6:2). “The meaning of the word *tables* relates [back to] the phrase *daily distribution*, which points to either sharing food or doling out money designated for buying food.”⁴⁹⁷ In other words, the “business” of Acts 6 is that of meeting physical, not administrative, needs. While there might, debatably, be some administration and organization intrinsic to what they will do (organizing the manner and methods needed to distribute food: recruiting and deploying volunteers, and administering a volunteer program), the primary assignment, and thus that which is most important to determining the intended function of the *diakŏnōs*, is that of sharing food or distributing aid.

The fact that the leaders of the *ekklēsia*, the Twelve at the present time, quickly recognized this need and assigned men to meet that need indicate how important a ministry of practical care is in the life of the *ekklēsia*. It also highlights the importance of quality candidates to fulfill this work. Quite literally, the Apostles understood that the propagation of the Gospel and the ministry of prayer could easily be restrained (6:4) if godly, humble servants were not

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⁴⁹⁵ Acts 6:2.


appointed to this task. Acting with the authority granted to them as the leaders of the *ekklēsia*,

“The role of the apostles in the process was to ‘turn this responsibility over to them’ (*hous katastēsomen epi tēs chreias tautēs*, ‘whom we will appoint over this business’).”

Notably, while the selection of the particular men to fill the role of servants was left, by the Apostles, to the Christian community, the appointment of these men, along with the determination of qualifications necessary for this service, was ultimately the responsibility of the leaders of the *ekklēsia* as overseers and shepherds.

However, understating that the leaders of the *ekklēsia* were the ones vested with the oversight authority to commission these men does not suggest, necessarily, that the task of serving the tables of the widows was less significant or less noble of a ministry than the proclamation of the Gospel and the ministry of prayer. Both were significant; both were needed to fulfill the Great Commission of Christ. As Parsons observed, “‘Serving tables’ [is not] in any sense inferior to the ‘service of the word,’ particularly in light of Jesus’ saying, “For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table, but I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27).” Servanthood carried out in humility, with no

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499 Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 179. See also John H. Fish III, “Brethren Tradition or New Testament Church Truth,” *Emmaus Journal* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 138, and Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary on the Book of Acts*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 160–161. Pervo describes the process of “the conventions of civic life,” whereby the leaders (called the “constitution”) of the community, after recognizing a need, determine the number of volunteers needed to fulfill a need as well as the characteristics those people should possess. The leaders then permit the community (called the “commons”) to select a select number of qualified candidates, which are then accepted, approved, and inducted into their official positions by the constitution. He writes, “The scene depicts the church taking action as a totality and exhibits an ecclesial orientation. Rather than ask what Jesus might do in such a situation, for example, the leaders make rules for community life confident in their guidance by the Spirit.”


expectation of authority, influence, and honor, carries with it the divine guarantee of a transition from a position that is last, for a season, to one that is eternally first, yet only in His timing. 

It can be said, then, that the essence of the church is that of an organism exponentially over that of an organization. This is not, however, to say that the church does not organize, and that it does not perform administrative functions as those expected of an organization. Yet it is primarily a vehicle of life in its local context – an avenue whereby people might experience eternal life through the proclamation of the good news found in the Suffering Servant, Christ Jesus, and whereby those who have experienced life may grow in that life through the living well springing forth in each believer, the Spirit of God.

Within this setting, God has ordained and called forth servants to meet the physical needs of the ekklēsia. These diakōnōi are nominated by the community of faith, and are tested, approved, and installed by the leaders of the ekklēsia, then the Apostles, today the episkopoi. These diakōnōi are installed for the expressed purpose of meeting the physical needs of the ekklēsia, not for forming political or executive structure, and not for vehicles of influence or authority. The diakōnōi, to the extent that they resemble an organization, or use organizational principles, do so for meeting the needs of those who are hurting, oppressed, victimized, marginalized, etc. In other words, their organization and influence are for the sole benefit of others, not for themselves. As Howerton has written, “The work of deacons is a spiritual ministry, not … a work of corporate business or finances. The key thing is to maintain the attitude of a servant, not of an overlord, whatever [their] specific duties are.”

502 See Matthew 20:20-28, discussed above.

503 Kenneth Howerton, “The Office and Qualifications of a Deacon,” in Pastor & Deacons: Servants Working Together (Greenville, SC; Belfast, Northern Ireland: Ambassador International, 2010), 68.
Reformation Through a Proper Understanding and Application of the Diakōnōs’ Position

The Diakōnōs is Not a Position of Authoritative Teaching

Reform of the sacred office of diakōnōs begins with the realization that theirs is not an office of authority or influence, but one of service and humility. It further comes as the diakōnōi begin to view themselves not as a ‘board’ or executive leadership team, but as a contingent of servanthood and humility. Yet reform also comes as the diakōnōi begin to clearly comprehend their own role and that of the episkopoi, and, more importantly, the differences between the two. In many churches, diakōnōi have taken on the role of episkopoi and have thus seized authority not conferred unto them, while simultaneously suppressing or altering the original role of the episkopos.

It is to be again noted that the Bible sets out qualification for but two offices,504 the episkopos and the diakōnōs, and these are separate and distinct from one another.505 While the Bible offers little specificity regarding the exact role of the diakōnōs, the same is not true regarding the role of the episkopos. The New Testament, in particular, offers much information that can inform a solid biblical hermeneutic regarding the functions of the office of episkopos. It is to also be noted that none of these tasks are charged to the duty of the diakōnōs, offering invaluable insight on the far-reaching differences between these two equally important offices.

Among the absolute most significant tasks of the episkopos is that of teaching the sacred Word of God. Writing to Timothy, the Ephesian episkopos, Paul charges Timothy to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience

505 See Philippians 1:1.
and teaching.” In this passage, Paul uses the Greek aorist tense and imperative mood five times indicating that 1) these are serious responsibilities which should not be taken lightly, and that 2) these are not optional tasks of the *episkopos*, but rather requirements. This is a command to authoritatively proclaim the Word of God, a command not given expressly to any other group other than the *episkopoi*. The context of this passage is that of the worship service, and thus, the preaching Paul charges Timothy to practice here is that of the Gospel-preaching which occurs during the worship service, yet it may apply broadly to any proclamation of the Gospel in any setting.

While anyone may proclaim the Word of God, many New Testament passages such as this make clear that the primary responsibility for teaching, and thus the authority conferred to do so, are reserved for the *episkopoi*. In Titus 1:9, Paul instructs the Cretan pastor Titus: “[The *episkopos*] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” This duty to teach involves a serious, life-long commitment to (i.e. “hold fast”) not only teaching the sacred Scripture (i.e. “the trustworthy word as taught”), but living it as well. In teaching and living the

506 2 Timothy 4:2, ESV.

507 “preach,” “be ready,” “reprove,” “rebuke,” and “exhort” are all in the aorist tense and imperative mood. See William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2000), 572–573, and George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 453–454. In fact, Paul might have employed the aorist here because the importance in proclaiming the Gospel was extreme, due to false teachers who were hostile towards the truth of God’s Word. “Thus the situation is so extreme that Timothy cannot speak only to those who are well disposed to Christian teaching, though he will do that. He must also tackle persons hostile to sound teaching.” Pheme Perkins, “Pastoral Epistles,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 1442.


509 I.E. the *diakônós*, as in Acts 7, or the evangelist, as another example.

Scripture, the solid foundation of the *episkopos* equips him to be an encouragement or exhortation, and enables him, with love and compassion, to challenge those who stand in contradiction to the Scripture.

The commitment required [of the *episkopos*] is that “he must hold firmly to the trustworthy message” (v. 9; 2 Tim. 2:22). Since the message is a result of the direct teaching of the apostles, the qualification *as it has been taught* reminds the elder of that truth. This appropriation of biblical truth enables him to do his job; “encourage others” (better, “exhort”) means a personal and direct application of the truth in a loving manner. “Refute those who oppose it” (the sound doctrine) indicates that elders/bishops are called invariably to a confrontational ministry when necessary. To fail here is to fail where and when one is needed.511

Nowhere in Scripture is such a responsibility laid upon the feet of the *diakônōi*, nor does Paul require of them qualifications necessary to fulfill such a duty.512

Again in 1 Timothy 5:17, a charge to Timothy regarding responsibility to preach and teach can be found. “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”513 Here Paul gives indication of several important aspects of the office of *episkopos*: 1) there is usually more than one pastor in a given *ekklēsia* (i.e. “elders” vs. elder); 2) some, not all, of these leaders will preach and teach (i.e. “especially those who”); 3) those who do preach or teach can be compensated for their efforts in preaching and teaching; and 4) these leaders are qualified by their ability to “rule well” (*proistēmi kalōs*). This, again, stands in distinction to the office of *diakônōs*, where no authority to rule is conferred, no charge to preach or teach is conveyed, and no instruction regarding

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512 Compare 1 Timothy 3:2, where Paul requires the *episkopos* be “able to teach” (ESV) with 1 Timothy 3:8-13, where the same qualification is absent from those required of the *diakônōs*.

513 1 Timothy 5:17.
compensation is commanded or even suggested. As Grudem explains, “It is significant that
nowhere in the New Testament do deacons have ruling authority over the church as the elders
do, nor are deacons ever required to be able to teach Scripture or sound doctrine.”

It is to be even further noted that the Acts 6 proto-\textit{diakŏnŏs} passage provides possibly the
starkest distinction between the \textit{diakŏnŏs} and the \textit{episkopos}. The Apostles, as the recognized
leaders of the newly-formed \textit{ekklēsia}, presupposed a separation of duties between their work and
that of the \textit{diakŏnŏs}, “a fundamental division of labour within the church.” In this sacred
dichotomy of duties, the Apostles desired spiritual men who could “serve tables” (6:2) in order
that they themselves could continue with “preaching the word” (6:2,4) and with prayer (6:4).
These two significant and sacred duties, that of prayer and the authoritative administration of the
word, are not required of the \textit{diakŏnŏs}, though either or both may be performed by him.
“Deacons do not hold teaching or ruling authority in the church but exercise responsibility for
the physical needs of the congregation. The complementary service of overseers and deacons is
analogous to that of the apostles and the Seven in Acts 6:1–6.”

The \textit{Diakŏnŏs} is Not a Position of Oversight

In addition to the responsibility for preaching and teaching in the \textit{ekklēsia} which sets the
\textit{episkopos} apart from the \textit{diakŏnŏs}, the \textit{episkopos} is also charged with the general oversight of
the household of God, a duty not expected of, or mentioned in conjunction with, the office of
\textit{diakŏnŏs}. In Acts 20, Paul orates a farewell to the “elders” (\textit{prĕsbutērŏi}) of Miletus. As he

\hspace{1em} 514 Grudem, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 920.
\hspace{1em} 516 Brian J. Tabb, \textit{The Lexham Bible Dictionary}, ed. John D. Barry, et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press,
prepares for another missionary journey, and expects to encounter trouble along the way, he charges the Miletus elders to “pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” The Pauline charge here is for the prĕsbutĕrŏs (20:17) to work tirelessly for the flock (i.e. the spiritual sheep) as an overseer (episkopos) and caring (poimaino, i.e. shepherding) for them, because the flock represents Christ’s prized possession, purchased with a special price – “His own blood.” As Straunch observes,

Under the direction of the Holy Spirit of God, Paul and Peter charged the elders to shepherd and oversee the local church (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1, 2). To no other group or single person do these two giant apostles give the mandate to shepherd and oversee the local church. Thus it is the biblically mandated duty of the overseer-elders to (1) protect the church, (2) teach the church, and (3) lead the church.

Likewise, the Apostle Peter offers a very similar charge to the leaders of the ekklēsia in the Dispersion.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly.

Peter declares himself to be a sym-prĕsbutĕrŏs (“a fellow elder”). As such, Peter admonishes the leaders of the ekklēsia (who are also sym-prĕsbutĕrŏi [fellow elders] with him) to be responsible for two sacred duties in particular. First, they are to “shepherd the flock.” Using

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518 Strauch, Minister of Mercy, 63–64.
519 1 Peter 5:1-2.
520 Interestingly, this passage confirms the assertion of many that the Apostles of Acts 6 were acting as the first prĕsbutĕrŏi or episkopoi of the church. Here Peter ascribes this very title (prĕsbutĕrŏs) to himself, leaving little doubt that Peter saw himself, along with other Apostles, as the original leaders of the church who would, subsequently, hand off their leadership roles to newly appointed episkopoi.
language similar to the previous Pauline passage (Acts 20:17, 28), Peter employs the shepherd motif of the Old Testament to illustrate the idea of nurturing and tending to the flock. This work of God is not performed in a haphazard manner; it should be performed while “exercising oversight” (that is, while performing the oversight duties of the episkopos). “Elders need to exercise oversight, which is a Greek word from which the word ‘episcopalian’ is derived; the word means...’to be an overseer’ ... It refers to a pastoral function of overseeing and caretaking and emphasizes the duty of an elder, which is to exercise oversight.”521 This oversight duty is, again, a duty charged only to episkopoi, never to the diakônōs.

Another text becomes increasingly important in the discussion of the oversight duties of the episkopos, that of 1 Timothy 3:1-13. In outlining the qualifications of the episkopos (3:1-7) and of the diakônōs (3:8-13), it is what Paul does not write that becomes important to the discussion. To the episkopos, this qualification is conveyed:

He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?522

And to the diakônōs, this similar qualification is conveyed:

Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.523

The qualification of both the diakônōs and the episkopos is for that of a patriarchal leader or overseer who watches over their own household of faith. The ekklēsia is likened to a


522 1 Timothy 3:4-5.

523 1 Timothy 3:12.
household of households, one that, just like a home, requires a household manager.\textsuperscript{524} Both officers are required to demonstrate leadership responsibility in the home to demonstrate their overall level of responsibility to the church and to their respective families. However, a distinction is found in Paul’s rhetorical question in verse 5, intended to provide greater clarification on the purpose of this particular episkopos qualification. Paul uses the rhetorical question of verse 5 (“for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church”) to draw a comparison between the duties required of an episkopos and that of a patriarch in the home. Some scholars posit that the reason this same clarifying detail is absent from the similar qualification of the diakōnōs is that the diakōnōi are nowhere charged with ruling or oversight responsibilities in the ekklēsia.\textsuperscript{525} Therefore, such a comparison would be unwarranted for the diakōnōs. Had Paul carried an understanding that the diakōnōs did, in fact, possess oversight authority, it seems likely that Paul would have paralleled this qualification as he did the majority of the other qualifications seen in this pericope.\textsuperscript{526}

The Diakōnōs as an Assistant to the Episkopos

Reformation of the diakōnōs comes as the diakōnōi lay hold of the sacred work God has called them to undertake. Yet, to do so requires a proper and biblio-centric understanding of


\textsuperscript{525} See, for example, Terry L. Wilder and Andreas Kostenberger, \textit{Entrusted with the Gospel} (Nashville: B&H, 2010), n.p.

\textsuperscript{526} Not only is the absence of the analogy between care for the pastor’s personal household and the household of faith in the qualifications of the diakonos important for understanding the differences between the episkopos and the diakōnōs, the absence of another qualification is mutually important. While the episkopos is required to possess some level of teaching ability (1 Timothy 3:2), the diakōnōs is not required to possess such an ability. This illustrates the authoritative nature of the episkopos over that of the diakōnōs, and it demonstrates that “deacons are not part of that group that bears ultimate responsibility for the church.” Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Hermeneutical and Exegetical Challenges in Interpreting the Pastoral Epistles,” 12. See also George W. Knight, \textit{The Pastoral Epistles}, 167.
what is and is not the primary essence of their role. As those who serve as diakōnōi reject the role expected of them as administrators, executives, managers, or board members, they can fully embrace their roles as servants and helpers in the community of faith.

As helpers and servants in the church, one of the primary roles of servanthood the diakōnōi can embrace in order to have an expedient and lasting impact on the health and vitality of the ekklēsia is the role of diakōnōs to the episkopos as opposed to diakōnōs over the episkopos. Deacons are naturally and biblically called to be partners in ministry with the episkopos, as is evident by the fact that when the diakōnōi are mentioned in Scripture, they are mentioned alongside, and never apart from, the episkopoi.527 The diakōnōs are not pastors, elders, or overseers, nor do they direct or lead the church in an official capacity. Yet, they nonetheless hold important roles as leading servants in the ekklēsia, roles that, if embraced, would set the church on course for spiritual success.528

As discussed above, Jesus willingly became a servant, and was in fact the Diakōnōs of all diakōnōi, the quintessential diakōnōs.529 His was a life of service, service ordained of, and ultimately offered to, the Father. In humble submission, Christ “in humility count[ed] others more significant than [Himself].”530 He willingly submitted to the will of the Father, demonstrating that servanthood could be paradoxically lofty (giving high glory to the Father) and humble (submitting to the needs and desires of others over His own). In Acts 6, the proto-diakōnōi demonstrated this same level of humble servanthood. They willingly served under the

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528 Köstenberger, “Hermeneutical and Exegetical Challenges in Interpreting the Pastoral Epistles,” 12.
529 Cf. Matthew 20:28; Philippians 2:5-11.
530 Philippians 2:4.
supervision of the elder-Apostles, choosing not to vie for authority or decision-making influence, but rather to be available to meet the physical needs that had caused interruptions to the peaceful fellowship of the *ekklēsia*. Their service enabled the elders to teach and pray; without such humble service, both crucially important ministries would have likely ceased.

Likewise, the *diakōnōi* of today, “under the supervision and authority of the elders/overseers, are to discharge their duties pertaining especially but not exclusively to the material needs of the congregation.” Acting as assistants or servants to the elders/overseers, they meet the physical needs of the *ekklēsia*, both the community of faith and its leaders. Ryrie asserts that the distinction between the *diakōnōi* and the *episkopoi* is not one of physical versus spiritual service, since there exists a spiritual component to all ministry. “Rather the distinction was that the deacons were the subordinates functioning under the general oversight of the elders.” The type of service they performed (i.e. waiting on tables, caring for the poor and for widows), though honorable and vital to the church, reinforces the idea that *diakōnōi* were not overseers, but were assistants to the overseers, gladly performing duties delegated by the *episkopoi*. Kelly echoes as much when he writes,

The Ephesian deacons are clearly subordinate officials; they collaborate with their superiors in administrative and pastoral work, without, it seems, having any responsibility for teaching or hospitality. The overseers and elders are represented as presiding over the community.

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532 Ibid.


An important practical application of the subordinate yet collaborate ministry of the *diakōnōi* can be seen in their ability to act as peace-making servants in the *ekklēsia*. The proto-*diakōnōi* were peacemakers. Their humility, willingness to serve, and love for the people of God compelled them to acts of service without which disaster would have soon ensued. The Hellenists and the Hebrews, existing in two different cultural vacuums and speaking two distinct languages, would not have been easily reconciled in their conflict without the desire to serve seen in the first *diakōnōi* of the church. Likewise, contemporary *diakōnōi* are responsible to bring peace to otherwise volatile situations, not by providing oversight to the *episkopos* as a managing board, but rather by devoting themselves to the type of ministry whereby they become “a peacemaker, an instrument of unity, a healer of broken relationships, and one who is a protector of the fellowship within the body of Christ.” If ever there was a noble and Christ-honoring aspect to the service the *diakōnōi* provide, this is it. These servanthood qualities represent pure *diakōnōs* ministry and offer the soundest evidence that the “primary role of deacon is not to ‘rule’ the church or pastor but to aid the pastor by standing in the gap as a servant,” a peace-yielding servant.

A church which employs *diakōnōi* as a governing board of directors or as executive decision-makers will find it much more difficult to enjoy biblical peace and harmony, for they fail to leverage one of their most helpful assets in the quest for the same. When deacons function outside of the biblical scope of the office, the natural result is often a lack of peace, not peace itself. Conflicts arise as men vie for a political office of influence, and then used seized, not biblically conferred, authority to fulfill their own desired functions within the role. Rather than

536 Duesing, et. al., *Upon This Rock*, n.p.
537 Ibid.
assisting the pastor, deacons vie for the position as captain. This is unfortunate, as “there can only be one captain on a ship. And there can only be one [office of] overseer in a congregation.”538 Just as husbands are called to manage their homes, pastors are called to oversee the ekklēsia. They do this best when they have godly, Spirit-filled men serving as diakōnōi who are willing to be their attendants and ministers, rather than their supervisory board. Biblical diakōnōi are spiritual and honorable men who understand that their position is a position of service, service that begins with the episkopoi as God’s ordained leaders of the ekklēsia. Biblical diakōnōi stand willing and prepared to serve the pastors of the ekklēsia, and to relieve them of burdens that might hinder the work of the ministry of the Word.539 “Many issues threaten the spiritual priorities of pastors and elders,” and through the work of the diakōnōi, these priorities can be preserved and protected.540

As the diakōnōi lay hold of their role as servants of physical and spiritual, rather than administrative, needs of the ekklēsia, they empower the episkopos to serve the ekklēsia through devotion to prayer and the ministry of the Word. As assistants to the episkopos, rather than supervisory or accountability boards, deacons become a light of ministry and servanthood not only to their own local assembly, but to the entire Church universal.541 Through centuries of service, the diakōnōi willingly assumed the role as “the chief administrative assistants of the

538 Donald S. Fortner, Grace for Today: Daily Devotional Readings (Danville, KY: Grace Baptist Church of Danville, 1986), 199.

539 Ibid. See also Cowen, Who Rules the Church?, 113–114.


541 Norman, The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church, 120.
bishops,”\textsuperscript{542} proudly “aiding and easing the weight of the \textit{episkopos}, in order that [they] might focus on those tasks they deemed more ‘weighty.’”\textsuperscript{543} This Christo-centric manner of servanthood could set the church ablaze with the humble and compassionate culture that permeated the New Testament era.

**Conclusion**

Little is more honorable and helpful to today’s church than the service of the \textit{diakōnōs}. As each \textit{diakōnōs} faithfully attends to the duties to which Christ has called him, the kingdom of God is enhanced as other members of God’s household are placed at liberty to serve God and the church inside of their specific call from God. Sadly, “there are few men so spiritually minded that they are willing to serve as faithful deacons for the gospel’s sake.”\textsuperscript{544} Rather than serving for the sake of the church, the Lord, and the \textit{episkopos}, some desire to serve as \textit{diakōnōs} for the sake of authority and influence, or simply for the sake of a seat at the decision-making table.

Seventeenth-century Baptist pastor and polemicist Thomas Collier envisioned more honorable and noble tables at which men who desired to be \textit{diakōnōi} should sit – “the table of the Lord, the table of the minister, and the table of the poor.”\textsuperscript{545} At these tables, the \textit{diakōnōi} are not lords or masters, but rather ministers of mercy, seeking to affect lasting impact to the kingdom of God through their faithful service to the Lord and His community of faith. Biblical

\textsuperscript{542} Harry R. Boer, \textit{A Short History of the Early Church} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 136; As Boer points out, “The higher clergy were the deacons and presbyters. The care of the poor, originally entrusted to the deacons, was now discharged by the lower clergy.” Deacons, though continuing to be the chief administrative assistants of the bishops, became a “higher” class of clergy as they developed. He points to Athanasius as an example, as he was a deacon when he served Bishop Alexander as secretary at the council of Nicaea.


\textsuperscript{544} Fortner, \textit{Grace for Today: Daily Devotional Readings}, 199.

\textsuperscript{545} Deweese, \textit{The Emerging Role of Deacons}, 20.
diakōnōi desire not to be administrators, board members, or managers directing – or perhaps controlling – the business affairs of a religious organization. Rather, biblico-centric diakōnōi have a burning desire to concern themselves with the “missional-ecclesial vision of [spreading] the word of God, [and to see] the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the church.”546 They understand well the “holiness and integrity of character expected in Christian leaders,” and seek to demonstrate such not through authoritative influence, but rather through humble servanthood that brings life and vitality to the local church as each ministry flourishes and each leader fulfills his or her expected role before the Father.

As a ministry marked by holiness and integrity of character, biblical “deaconing” is not a role of prominence or authority, but one of serving. Plato wrote, “How can man be happy when he has to serve someone?”547 The biblical deacon asks the contrasting question: “How can I be happy unless I can serve someone?” Biblical deacons seek to emulate and carry forward the ministry of mercy envisaged by the Apostles in Acts 6. They find honor for themselves and give glory to God as they embrace “a roll-up-your-sleeves, hands-on ministry” as they demonstrate themselves to be, through their service, men with “a reputation for spiritual maturity and an enthusiasm for helping people.”548

There are many and varied ways in which the diakōnōi may serve the community of faith. Yet whatever their tasks, they should each be elements of the diakōnōs ministry of mercy. These

servants of God “should be careful not to neglect their primary ministry of service to the needy.” Stokes summarizes well the essence of this ministry of mercy:

We require for the work of the Church deacons like the primitive men who devoted their whole lives to this one object; made it the subject of their thoughts, their cares, their studies, how they might instruct the ignorant, relieve the poor and widows, comfort the prisoners, sustain the martyrs in their last supreme hour; and who, thus using well the office of a deacon, found in it a sufficient scope for their efforts and a sufficient reward for their exertions, because they thereby purchased for themselves a good degree and great boldness in the faith of Jesus Christ.

Reformation will come not only to the sacred office of diakŏnŏs, but to the entire local ekklēsia as men avail themselves of their sacred apostolic duty and choose to “fall back upon primitive precedents.” As godly, Spirit-filled men embrace God’s vision for their office rather than man’s, “Christian life would flourish more abundantly, and many a rent and schism, the simple result of energies repressed and unemployed, would be destroyed in their very commencement.”

As both the diakŏnŏi and the episkopoi fall back upon their primitive models, Scripture provides an encouraging description of what the results will look like: 1) “The word of God continued to increase.” God’s Word will flourish, resulting in salvation and spiritual growth (i.e. life and vitality). The Word of God will gain opportunities to reach more people and to reach people more, both through the willingness of the diakŏnŏs to take burdens upon their shoulders. 2) “The number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.” The promulgation of the word will have the specific result of new converts, as was evident in the birth of the Church seen

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551 Ibid.

552 Ibid.
throughout Acts. Spirit-filled men who refuse to serve on a ‘board’ and instead insist on taking on the form of a servant can induce eternal results for God’s kingdom as pastors, evangelists, teachers, etc., are freed to work in the ripe fields for God’s harvest. 3) “A great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” The work of the diakōnōs as a minister of mercy over a lord of administration can yield another intriguing result: it can break the chains of religion and introduce religious people to Christ. As Faw suggests, perhaps the beauty of the newly called deacons’ work and organization to care for the needs of the community impressed the religious priests so much that they were immediately drawn to the Christ, and recognized Him as the long-expected Messiah.

The diakōnoi of the Apostolic period and early church were men who humbled themselves unto the meek and lowly duty of serving tables. They were chosen, as Spirit-filled men, to do common things, but the results that sprang up from within and out of their servanthood were anything but common. The word of God supernaturally flourished, resulting in a harvest of new members of God’s kingdom, along with a supernatural revelation of Christ’s role as Messiah to many Jews – all because godly men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, chose servanthood as a way of life. Without a doubt, these men did, and today’s deacons can, “obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith” when they embrace their role as servants of the Most High Servant.


555 1 Tim. 3:13.
CHAPTER 6
A BLUEPRINT FOR TRANSITIONING FROM A DEACON BOARD
TO A MINISTRY OF MERCY

As has been included previously, Gordon J. Keddie has poignantly written, “The fact that
many modern ‘deacons’ are little more than committee men administering church finances and
property only serves to highlight how far the diaconate has fallen from the New Testament
pattern.” Diakonoi serving as executives, business men, board members, and chief decision
makers in the ekklēsia miss the mark concerning the biblical nature and function of their office.
They also miss opportunities to discover their true, biblical calling before Christ, and to
experience the joy and satisfaction found only when one stands clearly under the divine umbrella
of His biblical mission.

As such, this blueprint for a Ministry of Mercy will explore how the office of the
diakōnōs can experience reform in the local church. The blueprint will explore the following
areas, all with the desired end result of a diakōnōs reformation:

Lesson 1: The Office of the Diakōnōs Is. This section will seek to answer the following
questions:

- What is the office of the diakōnōs?
- What does the word diakōnōs mean, and what does the word convey concerning the
  nature and role of the office?
- What is the essence of the office, and where is the term diakōnōs found in Scripture?

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Lesson 2: The Office of the Diakŏnŏs Is Not. This section will seek to answer the following questions:

- Is the diakŏnŏs a pastor / overseer?
- Is the diakŏnŏs a business manager? Or a board member?
- What is the extent of the authority of the diakŏnŏs?

Lesson 3: Towards a Ministry of Mercy. This section will seek to answer the following questions:

- What functions might a biblical diakŏnŏs perform in the ekklēsia?
- What areas of service should a biblical diakŏnŏs desire to avoid?

Lesson 4: A Blueprint for Transition.

- How might a transition from a “Deacon Board” philosophy of ministry to a Ministry of Mercy philosophy take place?

Lesson 1: The Office of the Diakŏnŏs is…

The office of diakŏnŏs is one of two official positions (i.e. “offices”) instituted in Scripture. The epískopos (literally, “overseer”) is the office of the pastor, elder, or overseer. The epískopos is tasked with, as the meaning of the word suggests, overseeing the church and exercising careful watch over those entrusted to him (i.e. the flock of God). That an epískopos is also an elder indicates the “dignity of the office,” whereas his role as pastor indicates the nurturing nature of what he does.\textsuperscript{557} His role as epískopos (a bishop or overseer) gives indication

\textsuperscript{557} Zodhiates, The Complete Word Study Dictionary, s.v. “epískopos.”
of his authority and his responsibility to keep watch over the church and to provide leadership oversight.

The term diakŏnŏs contrasts that of epískopos and indicates that those fulfilling the role of diakŏnŏs are primarily, above and beyond any other role, servants. The idea of a diakŏnŏs from antiquity carried the idea of a household bondservant who provided any service required of him, to include waiting on the household tables (serving meals). The Bible elevated the role of the diakŏnŏs to a place of honor as Christ clothed Himself in servanthood.\textsuperscript{558} Because of Christ’s example, the New Testament concept of the diakŏnŏs came to be a ministry of compassion, and one that supported the role of others.\textsuperscript{559}

Many believe the office of the diakŏnŏs originated in the book of Acts. In chapter six, the church is flourishing and enjoying spiritual prosperity at its greatest. The number of new disciples was increasing daily. Still, the threat of division quickly ensued as a dispute broke out between the Hebrews and the Greeks, as the Greeks felt they were being treated differently in the distribution of aid. The Apostles, quickly following the lead of the Spirit, offered a solution. In order that they could continue to fulfill their roles as pastors and overseers, they advised the church to select men who could be actively involved in the servanthood work of distributing aid to all of those in need within the community. The church was pleased with the solution, and the work of these men led to further growth within the church. Because men were willing to “wait on tables” (6:1) and become humble servants of the community’s physical needs, the church enjoyed the further blessing of growth and vitality.

\textsuperscript{558} See Matthew 20:20-28.

From inception, the office of the *diakōnōs* has been one of “sympathy and service,” as emulated in the life and passion of Christ. The first *diakonoi* were deeply committed Christ-followers who placed the needs of the church above their own. They were willing to serve in any way necessary to ensure that other ministries went forward unimpeded. Through their supportive role as the first ministers of mercy, many are enjoying an eternity at the throne of grace today. This gives clear indication regarding the level of importance the office of the *diakōnōs* possesses in the local church and in the Kingdom of God.

Lesson 1 Teaching Outline

- *Epískopos* (literally, “overseer”) is the office of the pastor, elder, or overseer
- *Diakōnōs* is primarily a role of servanthood
  - *Diakōnōs* (noun) means “waiter” (Luke 12:37), “minister” (Matthew 25:44), or “servant” (Romans 13:4)
    - As an official position in the church, referenced in Philippians 1:1, I Timothy 3:8, 12
    - Related *diakoneo* (verbal form) means “to serve”
    - Related *diakonia* (noun form) refers to the concept of “ministry” or “service”
      - Originally a household servant was one who waited on tables
      - Christ elevated the role by taking on the role of a servant (Matthew 20:20-28)
      - A ministry of compassion that meets the needs of others, and supports the role of the *epískopos* (i.e. the pastor / elder / overseer)
- Scriptures provide insight into the servanthood nature of the office of *diakōnōs*

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• Angels were servants: “Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.” (Matthew 4:11, emphasis added)

• Peter’s mother-in-law was a servant: “He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him.” (Matthew 8:15, emphasis added)

• Jesus was the ultimate expression of servanthood: “Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28, emphasis added)

• Acts 6:1-7 describes the situation under which the concept of a biblical diakônōs originated

  o An opportunity for greater growth under a season of spiritual prosperity (6:1a)
  o A threat of division and strife over unmet physical needs within the community (6:1b)
  o A solution offered as men were called upon to “serve tables” (6:2-6)  
    o The rewards of these “table servers” and their willingness to be humble servants (6:7)
      ▪ The word of God flourished
      ▪ The number of disciples further increased
      ▪ Some Jewish religious leaders received the Gospel and were saved
      ▪ The work of the Apostles (i.e. prayer and the administration of the Word) went forward unhindered because Spirit-filled men were willing to take on the role of servants and meet the immediate needs of the fellowship

• The office of the diakônōs is a role of sympathy and service

  o The early diakonoi served as needs arose

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561 See Anyabwile, Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons, 20.

562 Bobby Jamieson, Leading One Another: Church Leadership, ed. Mark Dever, 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 53.
• They supported the work of the Apostles, who acted as the first episkopoi

• Because of their work, many of those new disciples in Acts are enjoying an eternity in Heaven today

• Reflection and assessment

  • Do you enjoy serving, or making decisions? What did Christ say He came to do? Make decisions?
  
  • What actions can you recall from the last month that give clear evidence that you are a biblical diakōnōs and a humble servant?
  
  • Given the example of Christ’s diakonia in Mark 10:45, is the idea of servanthood demeaning?
  
  • According to Philippians 2:3-8, what did Christ do to emulate biblical servanthood? For each of these three elements, can you name a time in the last month when you emulated these ideals? In the last year?
    
      ▪ What does it mean to “of no reputation”?
      
      ▪ What does it mean to “humble one’s self”?
      
      ▪ What does it mean to take on the “form of a servant”?

Lesson 2: The Office of the Diakōnōs is Not…

The office of diakōnōs is one of servanthood. As Christ brought honor and dignity to an otherwise dishonorable position, the concept of diakonia became a matter of great importance for the church as faithful men, filled with the Spirit, began to attend to the needs of the sick, poor, and disenfranchised within the community of faith. As men performing diakonia, the office

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of the deacon began as a way in which God could be honored as the propagation of the Gospel was facilitated through their service.

Throughout history, the sacred office of the *diakŏnŏs* has digressed and has taken on less honorable forms than those which was emulated in the life of Christ and the first deacons in Acts chapter 6. When they assume any role other than that which they have been biblically called to fulfill, they diminish their importance and usefulness in the *ekklēsia*, and fail to serve Christ in the manner He desires.

Deacons are Not Overseers

For example, many *diakonoi* function today more as *episkopoi* than as *diakonoi*. Yet *diakonoi* are not *episkopoi*, but rather assistants to the *episkopoi* and to the people of the *ekklēsia*. This is evident in the New Testament occurrences of both offices. The office of the *episkopos* is mentioned far more frequently than is the office of the *diakŏnŏs*. The office of the *episkopos* is also mentioned when the office of *diakŏnŏs* is not (i.e. Titus 1:7), indicating that the office of the *episkopos* was instituted first, and that some churches had *episkopoi* yet no *diakonoi*. “If deacons were as important to the life of the church, it would seem that he also would have included instructions to appoint deacons and included the needed qualifications as he did in 1 Timothy.”

Furthermore, the *episkopoi* are required to be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:9), because they possess teaching authority conferred upon them as overseers and elders. This is not required of the *diakŏnŏi*, giving clear indication that, while they may be teachers (such as Stephen), they do not possess teaching authority in the church.

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564 Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 244–245.

565 Ibid., 238–239.
Also, Scripture supports the idea that the *diakōnŏi* play a supportive and submissive role to the *episkopos*. In Acts 6:1-6, it is the Apostles, acting as the *episkopoi* of the community, that recognize a need, commission men for the task, and assign them to a specific duty. In meeting the needs of the community, the *diakonoi* acted in a supportive role to the *episkopoi*, meeting the specific needs of the *episkopoi* that would further their own ministry of prayer and the Word. Additionally, in the rare instance where the office of the *diakōnŏs* is mentioned, it is done so alongside of, and subsequent to, the office of the *episkopos*, indicating the place of primacy of the *episkopos*.566

Deacons are Not Business Managers or Board Members

Many *diakonoi* function like business managers or board members, thus abandoning their role as servants, perhaps unknowingly. The frequent occurrence of the term “Deacon Board” in many churches illustrates this point well. Many deacons understand their role as that of managing the business affairs of the church, to include finances, personnel, oversight, and any other business-related matters. In this *diakōnŏs* model, the deacons administer the affairs of the church just as a board would in a corporate environment.567 This stands, however, in direct opposition to the servanthood nature emulated by Christ, and to the very nature of the office.

When *diakonoai* function as managers or an executive board, they seize authority never granted to them, authority they have no biblical basis to receive and leverage in the church. Many deacons would argue that their participation on a board, as well as their roles as administrators who direct business affairs such as finance, asset management, human resource management, etc., are all acts of service. By exercising decision-making authority in business

566 Ibid., 244–245.
matters, they may believe they are acting as servants to the assembly. However, authority is not servanthood, and servanthood is not authority. “Deacons functioning as a board are not really serving their congregation despite their good intention [because] controlling is never real servant leadership.” The kind of servanthood emulated by Christ was one of humility, lowliness, and sacrifice, not one of authority. Assuredly, Jesus possessed all the authority Heaven and earth had to offer, yet His role as a Suffering Servant was not a role in which He exercised or leveraged His authority for His own benefit. Today’s *diakonoi* should seek ways in which they can serve their church without desiring conferred authority or decision-making control.

It is to also be noted that Christ did not choose the type of service He would perform, but rather yielded to the explicit needs of the Father to fulfill His promised-plan of redemption. As such, today’s *diakonoi* should seek to discover what the specific needs the overseers of the church identify, and then determine to meet those needs. In doing so, they become genuine servants who seek to fulfill the mission of the church and not their own self-serving agendas to gain influence and control in the *ekklēsia*. As God’s overseers, the *episkopoi* have the expressed responsibility of discovering and casting God’s vision for the church. Implementing that vision requires authority and influence. When that is seized by the *diakonoi*, the *episkopoi* become impotent to fulfill their divinely designed purpose as visioneers.

*Diakonoi* who genuinely wish to clothe themselves with the type of humility and servanthood read about in Philippians 2, and witnessed in the life of Christ, will seek to serve in

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570 Philippians 2:6-8.
571 John 6:38.
ways the church’s leadership has determined best meets the needs of the community, just as can be seen in the first deacon service of Acts 6. These men did not organize as a board and begin making decisions; they listened to the needs of the church as expressed through the overseers, and then determined to meet those needs. They also did not make attempts to determine how or where they would serve, nor did they attempt to dictate the type of service they would perform; to do so would not have been service, but control disguised as service. The results of the type of servanthood exemplified by the Acts 6 deacons – service that yields to the needs of others and the vision of the church – yields bountiful and eternal results for God’s Kingdom.

When *diakonoi* become yielding servants who are determined to meet the needs of the community as defined by the leadership of the church, they *diakōneō* (serve) well and obtain a “good standing” and “great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”572 This is because through their *diakonia* (service, ministry) they experience God working through their lives to produce great physical and spiritual impact in the lives of those in the *ekklēsia*. As God gets the glory through this newfound healthy expression of the office of *diakōnōs*, the individual Christ-servant-like *diakōnōs* gains a healthy boldness in the faith and a “good standing” in the Kingdom of God and among God’s people – a standing that confers upon him a measure of influence authority.

The Authority of the *Diakōnōs*

As already observed, when *diakonoi* serve the community, they obtain a “good standing” and “great confidence in the faith.”573 This “good standing” is realized by the respect and honor the people of God develop for *diakonoi* as they observe them sacrificially place the needs of the

572 1 Timothy 3:13.

573 Ibid.
community above and beyond their own. When this occurs, the people of God naturally desire to follow their example, thus conveying influence and some level of authority upon the diakonoi. This type of authority is called “influence authority.” Influence authority is the influence one gains as he or she faithfully serves God and becomes an example before the community of humble servanthood.

“Command authority” is leadership authority vested in someone by virtue of the office he holds. It is the authority to affect change through decision making. Though it is an authority expressed through love and in conjunction with an attitude of humility, it is nonetheless an influence necessary to fulfill the vision and mission given to a leader (i.e. an overseer). It is an authority granted by Christ to fulfill His ultimate mission in the church and is limited by virtue of Christ’s own self-limitation of authority.

When the diakonoi of a church attempt to exercise command authority through their role as a board of managers or administrators, they usurp the leadership of those to whom genuine command authority has been conferred. The more honorable way – the way of Christ, in fact – is to determine to be servants who are willing to forgo their own thoughts and attitudes about service to meet the specific needs of the church as realized by the various leaders of the church, to include the episkopoi. Those with this attitude of servanthood are “capable of influencing others for the good of the church and its mission.”

As Henry Webb has so eloquently written:

My heartfelt burden is to help deacons get out of the boardroom or the building-maintenance mentality and into the people-serving mentality. Deacons, as the New

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574 See Matt Ford, That Deacon Book: Hopefully, the Least Boring Book You’ll Ever Read about Deacons (Brenham, TX: Lucid Books, 2017), n.p., for a more thorough examination of influence authority and command authority, to include how each is conferred and how each differs from the other.

575 Ibid.
Testament teaches and as some of the sixteenth-century reformers discovered, are to be involved in a compassionate ministry of caring for the poor and needy. The deacons’ ministry, therefore, is one that no Christ-centered, New Testament church can ever afford to neglect.\(^\text{576}\)

As 1 Timothy 5:17 teaches, the *episkopoi* (called “elders” in this passage) are called by God to direct the affairs of the church. God has granted them the influence and authority necessary to do so. The *diakonoi* are called to support them in that task. As the *episkopoi* make directional decisions, the *diakonoi* are called to partner with them as servants, not as fellow-*episkopoi*, to make God’s vision a reality in the *ekklēsia*.

Lesson 2 Teaching Outline

- The *diakŏnŏs* is not an overseer
  - *Episkopoi* are mentioned more frequently than *diakŏnŏs*
  - *Episkopoi* are mentioned without *diakŏnŏi*, indicating some churches had *episkopoi* but no *diakŏnŏi*
  - *Episkopoi* are required to be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:9); *diakonoi* are not. This indicates *diakonoi* do not possess teaching (pastoral) authority
  - Paul does not compare managing the *diakŏnŏs*’ household to managing the church (1 Timothy 3:12), as he does concerning the *episkopos*’ household (3:4). Paul likely understood that *diakonoi* do not manage the affairs of the household of God – the *episkopoi* do.\(^\text{577}\)
  - *Diakonoi* play a supportive and submissive role to the *episkopoi*

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\(^{577}\) Jamieson, *Leading One Another: Church Leadership*, 54.
In Acts 6:1-6 the Apostles, as the *episkopoi*, commission men for service and assign them to a specific duty.

The office of *diakōnōs* mentioned alongside of, and subsequent to, the office of the *episkopos* (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 12)

- The *diakōnōs* is not a business manager or a board member
  - “Deacon Board” is a common label for the *diakonoi* in many churches based on
    - Their self-designated role as administrators, managers
    - The improper functions they perform: finances, personnel, managers over staff, accountability arm to the pastors, key decision-makers
  - Many *diakonoi* function just as a corporate board of directors would
    - They seize authority not biblically conferred upon them
    - Their roles as decision-makers or chief administrators are not acts of service
      - Acts 6 proto-*diakonoi* received their charge to service from the *episkopoi*; they did not decide for themselves how they would serve
  - Jesus’ role as a servant was a role of submission (John 6:38)
    - Though He had all of Heaven and earth’s authority at His disposal (Matthew 28:18-20), He chose not to seize that authority, but to serve through meekness and humility (Philippians 2:6-8)
  - *Diakonoi* who choose to serve others by yielding their service to the vision and mission of the church obtain a “good standing” in God’s economy

- The authority of the *diakōnōs*
- Influence authority comes through others’ observation of a *diakōnos*’ faithful servanthood. As he serves, the “good standing” he earns produces respect from the community.

- Command authority is conferred by virtue of one’s positions. The *episkopoi* possess a level of command influence necessary to accomplish the vision and mission God has given them for the *ekklēsia*

- *Diakonoi* seize command authority when they assume the role of the *episkopoi* and perform oversight functions not specifically requested of them by the *episkopoi*

- *Episkopoi* have the task of directing the affairs of the *ekklēsia*; *Diakonoi* support that work by partnering with, and submitting to, the *episkopoi*

**Reflection and Assessment**

- Why might the *episkopoi* be mentioned in Scripture more frequently than the *diakonoi*?

- What elements of the overseer’s role does the deacon not share?

- Is your *diakōnōs* team improperly functioning as a “board”?
  - Are all “major recommendations” from staff, leaders, and committees “screened by the deacons to determine whether they should go to the congregation?”
  - Are the “pastor and staff members…directly responsible to the deacons rather than to the church?”
- Is the “expenditure of major church resources, such as facilities and finances, first approved by the deacons?” If not, do deacons insist on being informed about these expenditures?578

- Is there discussion about personnel matters in your deacons’ meetings?

- Is Robert’s Rules of Order more prevalent in your meeting than the Scripture?

- How would you respond if you were asked to serve in another area other than in an administrative setting?

- Do you spend more time serving God inside of a deacons’ meeting than you do outside? Do you actively find ways to serve the church wherever a need exists rather than where you wish to serve?

- What percentage of time is devoted to intercessory prayer in your deacons’ meetings?

- Do you explore ways to serve more of God’s people in your deacons’ meeting?

  - Do you place these stipulations on your service, either willingly or unknowingly?

    - “I am willing to serve, but I want to reserve the right to determine when it is convenient for me to serve.”

    - “I am willing to serve, but I want to retain the right to determine how I will serve because some things would not be appropriate for a person like me.”

    - “I am willing to serve, but surely you would understand that I would want to reserve the right to determine whom I will serve because there are some people that don't deserve to be served.” 579

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Lesson 3: Towards a Ministry of Mercy

The office of *diakōnōs* is not that of an overseer. The primary task of the *diakōnōs* is to serve the church by meeting the needs of the poor, sick, widows, and disparaged, all under the direction of the *episkopoi*. The office of the *diakōnōs* is also not a position of a board member tasked with executive decision-making authority. Rather, it consists of men who are called to meet the physical needs of the fellowship as they assist the *episkopoi* in fulfilling the vision and mission God has given them. Also, the office of *diakōnōs* is not a position of authority, although influence authority is realized through the service the *diakonoi* perform. As the *diakonoi* serve in a manner consistent with the prescription and description found in Scripture, those around them naturally will desire to follow their lead, thus conferring influence authority upon the *diakonoi*. This influence authority is to then be used to influence others to serve God according to their specific calling.\(^{580}\)

As the *diakonoi* reject the concept of the “Deacon Board,” and as they come to the realization that they are not overseers of the *ekklēsia*, what might a refreshed and reformed ministry of the *diakonoi* look like? What kinds of service might they perform? How might the *diakonoi* be selected, trained, and deployed for servanthood in the *ekklēsia*?

A Gifts-Based Deacon Ministry Model

A more natural, though less traditional, way of organizing the ministry of the *diakonoi* would be around their particular areas of spiritual giftedness. The Apostle Peter commanded, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied

\(^{580}\) See 1 Peter 4:8-11.
grace.”\textsuperscript{581} As such, the \textit{diakonoi} would be more suited for success as they “use [their] gift to serve one another,” and in doing so, would then be “good stewards” of their gifts for the glory of Christ. Since “the only proper use of gifts is to glorify Jesus Christ by serving Him,”\textsuperscript{582} deacons who discover their giftedness and use it to serve Christ in the local \textit{ekklēsia} gain a good standing in the faith for themselves.\textsuperscript{583}

\textbf{Deacons of Leadership (Romans 12:8)}

Deacons of Leadership are excellent managers. They have a keen sense for how things should operate, and they can direct people to the right areas of service to ensure success. These deacons would be well-suited to oversee volunteer staffing and resource provision to the other areas of deacon ministry. They are visionaries, and can play an important role in assuring each area of ministry sets achievable goals and that those goals are met.

They would likely also provide accountability for other areas of deacon ministry, and they may assist in reporting the outcomes of deacon service to the congregation. These deacons seek new ministry opportunities from the \textit{episkopoi}, and then work to communicate those opportunities to the respective deacon ministry team.

\textbf{Deacons of Administration (1 Corinthians 12:28)}

Deacons of Administration have a keen sense of organizing and shaping effective and efficient ministry. They may help organize and plan each of the various areas of deacon ministry, or they may assist in organizing ministry outside of the purview of deacon ministry. Within the deacon ministry, they may organize church workdays, or organize deacons into smaller ministry

\textsuperscript{581} 1 Peter 4:10.


\textsuperscript{583} 1 Timothy 3:13.
teams within each area of ministry.

They will likely play an important role in assessing the giftedness of new deacons, and deploying them for service based on their gifts, and may also help with other church administrative functions, as requested by the *episkopoi* or staff of the church. They may also play a role in planning and organizing the celebration of the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and may also keep ministry records of ministry, and report this information to the *episkopoi* or their designee.

**Deacons of Teaching (1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:7; Ephesians 4:11)**

Deacons of Teaching use the gift of teaching to disciple the membership and build up the church. These deacons might teach Bible studies, children’s ministry classes, or new member classes. They may also develop teaching curriculum for the various ministries of the church or oversee the purchasing of the same to ensure the curriculum adheres to the church’s doctrinal positions. If the church has an Education Department, one of these deacons may be best suited to lead that ministry.

**Deacons of Knowledge (1 Corinthians 12:28)**

Deacons of Knowledge may also provide teaching ministry to the various other areas of deacon service. They may work in conjunction with the Deacons of Teaching at times, especially in developing training programs for the church. They may lead and organize discipleship ministries in the church, or perhaps lead a library ministry.

**Deacons of Wisdom (1 Corinthians 12:28)**

Deacons of Wisdom work to apply the Word of God to the membership’s particular life circumstances. For example, they may provide biblically-based counseling to families or to those
looking to enter into full-time ministry. They may also teach, and may be involved in conflict resolution, to include church discipline matters.

**Deacons of Prophecy (1 Corinthians 12:10; Romans 12:6)**

Deacons of Prophecy use their gifts to boldly, yet lovingly speak forth truth into the lives of those within the church. They may provide a mechanism of accountability to those who have fallen into sin, and they may assist the *episkopoi* in executing church discipline. They may also provide accountability for staff and ministry leaders who are not meeting expectations. They may fill speaking roles, and they may be especially helpful in special evangelistic settings.

**Deacons of Discernment (1 Corinthians 12:10)**

Deacons of Discernment may be helpful in testing new deacons for ministry service, in order to ensure they are properly suited for deacon ministry and that they have been properly deployed into the correct ministry setting. They may also play a role in hiring and deploying new church staff, under the leadership of the *episkopoi*.

**Deacons of Exhortation (Romans 12:8)**

Deacons of Exhortation use their gift to uplift and encourage those to whom they minister. These men offer a kind word when needed, and they play an important role in ministering to those who are hurting or discouraged. These men have a natural ability to lift the souls of those who are hurting. They would function well providing crisis or shut-in care in conjunction with the Deacons of Mercy (described below), especially when a Deacon of Mercy may not be ideally suited to provide encouragement (i.e. introversion).

These men will cry with those who cry, hurt with those who hurt, and thus make excellent counselors to these people. They may also provide recognition encouragement by
celebrating the accomplishments and achievements of those in the church, such as new births, anniversaries, vocational promotions, and graduations.

**Deacons of Shepherding (Ephesians 4:11)**

Deacons of Shepherding provide nurturing pastoral care to the flock. They are ready to respond to any situation in the lives of their watch care families where they are needed, such as loss of life, family crises, and sickness. They extend the hand of Christian compassion to those in need, and serve as watchmen for the *episkopoi*, notifying them of any weightier matters where they should be involved.

**Deacons of Faith (1 Corinthians 12:9)**

Deacons of Faith are especially useful in the ministry of intercessory prayer. Their boldness and ability to see through the lens of faith make them ideally suited for prayer ministry, and for advising other ministries as they set and cast vision. These deacons can act as a mechanism to ensure newly developed visions or ministry plans are developed in conjunction with an attitude of faith. They also pray fervently for the *episkopoi* and the *ekklēsia*, and they encourage others to do the same.

**Deacons of Evangelism (Ephesians 4:11)**

Deacons of Evangelism are most fulfilled when they are given opportunities to share the Gospel with the lost. They enjoy learning new methods of evangelism, and they would function well as evangelism coaches in the church. They may organize and lead church revivals. They may also lead the church’s outreach efforts in the community.

**Deacons of Apostleship (1 Corinthians 12:28; Eph. 4:11)**

Deacons of Apostleship take the Great Commission seriously. They challenge the church
to go into all the world to preach the Gospel and make Christ known. They may be involved in church planting efforts, and may also lead mission trips, both domestic and international.

**Deacons of Giving (Romans 12:8)**

Deacons of Giving use their gifts of generosity to help finance the various ministries of the church, to include the various deacon ministries. They are examples to the rest of the church in regards to faithful stewardship of the resources entrusted to the membership. They may act as an encouragement to others to give more faithfully, and they may provide financial health training in order to facilitate that faithfulness. They may oversee counting teams and may assist with setting ministry budgets.

**Deacons of Hospitality (1 Peter 4:9)**

Deacons of Hospitality serve in order to make a first-time visitor feel like a welcomed guest. They may organize and lead the church’s First Experience ministry, and they may provide hosting services for the church’s various events. As ushers, they are the face of the church as the first people that guests see as they enter the church building. They guide visitors around the building, helping them find their way to the nursery, restrooms, worship service, etc.

**Deacons of Service/Helps (1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:7)**

Deacons of Service/Helps are the hands and feet of the church, and they provide much of the behind-the-scenes service necessary to keep the church operational. The opportunities for service in this area are nearly limitless, making this one of the most prominent areas of service in the deacon ministry. These deacons may assist the church in cleaning, providing general building maintenance, ensuring lawns and grounds are well cared for and presentable for guests, or organizing and implementing elderly home-repair ministry.

They may also provide valuable service during special events, such as setting up and
tearing down, serving meals, or volunteering to help in any other way that event organizers might need. They also serve the widows of the church with miscellaneous tasks such as home repairs. These deacons are very creative in discovering new and exciting ways they can leverage their giftedness to further the church’s overall vision and mission. They also understand that the work they perform is valuable and that the church could not properly function without their work of servanthood.

**Deacons of Mercy (Romans 12:8)**

Deacons of Mercy are, along with the Deacons of Service, the hands and feet of the church. Their “acts of mercy…are a display of God’s grace and love to those watching us (John 13:34-35).”¹⁵⁸⁴ They provide invaluable care and support to the members. Also, as with the Deacons of Service, the opportunities for service in this area are nearly limitless. Among the most important opportunities to serve in this area is the Crisis Ministry Team. This team serves those who are experiencing personal crises or difficulties. They demonstrate love and compassion to those who need them most.

They also provide benevolence ministry to shut-ins and elderly persons. Sometimes their service is simply to listen to those who are hurting and need a friend to share in their grief. They may also plan and lead mercy mission trips. Their ultimate goal is to provide care and kindness to those who are most vulnerable, fragile and weak. “They pour out God’s mercy on his lost, sick sheep because they share Jesus’ broken heartedness for his ‘little ones.’ A deacon who serves with acts of mercy is like a refreshing drink of cold water in the middle of the desert.”¹⁵⁸⁵

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Lesson 3 Teaching Outline

• The *diakŏnŏs* is not an overseer
• The *diakŏnŏs* is primarily a servant
• A Gifts-Based Approach to Deacon Ministry (1 Peter 4:8-11)
  o Deacons of Leadership (Romans 12:8)
    ▪ Manage ministries
    ▪ Oversee ministry staffing and resourcing
    ▪ Aid in vision-casting as visionaries
    ▪ Provide deacon accountability
    ▪ Seek new ministry opportunities from the *episkopoi*, then communicate those opportunities to the respective deacon ministry team
  o Deacons of Administration (1 Corinthians 12:28)
    ▪ Organize ministries within the deacon body
    ▪ Aid in organizing and planning other deacon ministries
    ▪ Assist in administrative functions of the church, as requested by the *episkopoi*
    or other church staff
    ▪ Plan and organize the administration of the ordinances
  o Deacons of Teaching (1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:7; Ephesians 4:11)
    ▪ Teach Bible studies, home fellowships, new member classes
    ▪ Develop curriculum for the various discipleship ministries of the church
    ▪ Lead Education departments
  o Deacons of Knowledge (1 Corinthians 12:28)
    ▪ Teach with special gift of biblical application
- Develop discipleship training programs for the church
- Lead and organize discipleship ministries

○ Deacons of Wisdom (1 Corinthians 12:28)
  - Provide counseling to families
  - Aid in conflict resolution
  - Support the *episkopoi* in carrying out church discipline

○ Deacons of Prophecy (1 Corinthians 12:10; Romans 12:6)
  - Provide accountability for the deacons
  - Support the *episkopoi* in carrying out church discipline
  - Fill speaking roles in evangelistic settings

○ Deacons of Discernment (1 Corinthians 12:10)
  - Test new deacon candidates
  - Provide advice and feedback for staff candidates

○ Deacons of Exhortation (Romans 12:8)
  - Provide encouragement to the membership
  - Provide crisis and shut in care
  - Serve as counselors to those who are discouraged or need emotional or spiritual support
  - Provide recognition and encouragement

○ Deacons of Shepherding (Ephesians 4:11)
  - Provide nurturing pastoral care to the flock
  - Extend the hand of Christian compassion to those in need
  - Serve as watchmen for the *episkopoi*
Deacons of Faith (1 Corinthians 12:9)
- Provid intercessory prayer on behalf of the fellowship
- Encourage other ministry leaders to develop vision and ministry objectives through the lens of faith
- Pray fervently for the episkopoi and the ekklēsia

Deacons of Evangelism (Ephesians 4:11)
- Share the Gospel with the lost
- Train the congregation to witness
- Act as evangelism coaches, to encourage and motivate others to actively evangelize the lost
- Lead the church’s outreach efforts

Deacons of Apostleship (1 Corinthians 12:28; Eph. 4:11)
- Challenge the church to go into all the world to preach the Gospel and make Christ known
- Lead church planting efforts
- Lead the church’s missional efforts

Deacons of Giving (Romans 12:8)
- Give generously to support the work of ministry
- Encourage others to give faithfully to the work of God
- Provide financial health training

Deacons of Hospitality (1 Peter 4:9)
- Turn first-time visitors into guests, and then into members
- Organize and lead the church’s First Experience ministry
- Provide hosting services for the church’s various events
- **Deacons of Service/Helps (1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:7)**
  - Assist the church in varied ways, including cleaning, general building maintenance, lawn care, etc.
  - Provide support for special events
  - Assist the widows in miscellaneous tasks
  - Actively seek new ways to help fulfill the church’s vision and mission
- **Deacons of Mercy (Romans 12:8)**
  - Display God’s grace and love to a watching world
  - Organize and lead the Crisis Ministry Team, providing loving care to those in the midst of personal, family, spiritual, or career crises
  - Provide benevolence ministry to shut ins and elderly persons
  - Plan and lead mercy mission trips

• **Reflection and Assessment**
- Do you actively and faithfully attend all church worship services, and strongly encourage your family to do the same?
- Does your service as a *diakōnōs* more closely reflect the “Deacon Board” model of ministry or the gifts-based approach? What evidence supports your conclusion?
- What is your primary spiritual gift? What is your secondary spiritual gift?
- How do you currently use your gifts “to serve one another” (1 Peter 4:10)?
Lesson 4: A Blueprint for Reformation

As some or many of the *episkopoi* catch the vision to transition from a “Deacon Board” philosophy of ministry to that of a Ministry of Mercy, how might such a reformation be implemented? Below is a proposed plan:

**Determine the Team**

- Determine those to whom God has given this vision.
- Under the leadership of the Spirit, those persons should begin to discuss a preliminary vision for a new Ministry of Mercy, and then begin to share that vision with the church’s primary influencers. By enlisting champions of change, the deacon visionaries who desire change can enlist their prayer support, wise counsel, and encouragement along the way.

**Pray for a Season**

- As with any ministry endeavor, the work of reformation begins and ends with prayer. Prayer is the fuel that drives transformation and reformation. Those in favor of such a reformation within the *diakonoi* should immediately begin praying both privately and corporately.
- Pray for the unity of the church fervently and boldly, for the entire *diakonoi* body, for softened hearts and receptivity to the vision, and a spirit of boldness coupled with compassion by which to cast the vision for *diakonoi* reformation.

**Provide Training on the Office of the *Diakōnôs***

- Key *diakonoi* desirous of reformation (“change *diakonoi*”) should provide opportunities for the rest of the *diakonoi* to be introduced to the biblio-historical data regarding the nature and function of the office of the *diakōnôs*. 
• Thoroughly demonstrate a comparison of the current model of deacon ministry (the corporate “Deacon Board” model) to the biblical nature of deacon ministry as witnessed through the biblical and historical evidence.

• Lovingly and occasionally demonstrate the ways in which the current model of ministry fails to glorify Christ, honor the Scripture, and edify the church.

• Cast the current vision to the diakonoi in the form of “what if” thought-provoking questions:
  o “What if” those with the gift of faith became our leading prayer servants? What might God do in our fellowship as we begin to pray more frequently and fervently?
  o “What if” those with the gift of mercy became our leading agents of compassion? How might the church respond to that? The community?
  o “What if” those with the gift of evangelism became our leading outreach servants? How might that affect the growth of our church?

• Give ample opportunities for questions, feedback, complaints.

• Exhibit patience and compassion. Allow for resistance coupled with raw emotion, and also understand that some do not deal well with change, and that others will be reluctant to relinquish their leadership authority. Love them. Pray for them. Give them time, yet do not waiver in the vision God has given the diakonoi of change.

  Be Patient

• Consider that the change will require some of the diakonoi to alter long-held positions. This takes time, and then more time.

• Use this time to polish the vision and pray about an Implementation Plan for reformation.

  Clarify the Vision
• When ready to move forward, the change *diakonoi* should organize a meeting with key influencers where they clearly define:
  - Why are we desirous of a *diakonoi* reformation?
  - What will this reformation look like?
  - What do we hope to accomplish though this reformation? What are the benefits?
  - Who will be impacted by this reformation?
  - What obstacles to reformation might we need to pray about?
  - How might we best implement this reformation?

**Plan the Work to Work the Plan**

• Carefully and prayerfully develop a plan of action. This might involve all of the change *diakonoi*, or an assigned subgroup.

• Determine where or to whom administrative duties previously controlled by the *diakonoi* will be assigned (*Episkopi*? Committees? Other ministry teams? Staff?). Ensure those groups or persons are prepared for the new responsibilities.

• Demonstrate the processes that will be followed to affect reformation, as well as a timeline for implementation.

• Review Bylaws for necessary revisions in wording and concepts.

**Make the Decision**

• The time will come, through prayer and planning, where the official decision must be made. Those who sense a calling from the Lord to cast this vision should call for a decision using thedeaons’ current method of decision-making approval, in order to receive the maximum amount of ownership from the *diakonoi*. 
• Should this approach not be effective, consultation with the episkopoi will be required to pursue other avenues for implementing the plan (i.e. official vote from the episkopoi; collaborative meetings with episkopoi, diakonoi, and key influencers, etc.).

**Prepare the Ekklēsia**

• Once the episkopoi and the change diakonoi feel they are ready to move forward, the transition should be made known to the ekklēsia.

• Clearly define the problem, and communicate how the current diakonoi model of ministry
  - o Is inconsistent with the biblical evidence,
  - o Fails to meet the physical needs of the membership,
  - o Prohibits growth and service in the church,
  - o Causes the diakonoi to effectively serve as episkopoi although they may not be qualified for such, and
  - o Falls short of the glory Christ deserves.

• Include information on the theology of change.

• *Episkopoi* should provide teaching on the biblical nature of the offices of the *episkopos* and the *diakŏnŏs*.

• Describe key details of the implementation plan and give notice of the elements of change they can expect, along with the benefits of that change.

• Outline the various ministries that will be launched as a result of the transformation to a Ministry of Mercy and describe how each of those ministries will serve the church.
Develop Assessments for Giftedness

- As the transition officially launches, members of the *diakonoi* should agree upon the appropriate spiritual giftedness assessments that will drive ministry assignments among the *diakonoi*.

- The *diakonoi* should also consider temperament or personality profiles to ensure *diakonoi* are deployed to the correct area of ministry (i.e. has an introvert been deployed to the hospitality frontlines?)

- The *diakonoi* should solidify what traits are not to be considered in testing candidates for service (i.e. *Diakonoi* need not be popular, wealthy businessmen from elite families within the church, etc.).

Develop Organization Plan and Launch Ministry of Mercy

- *Diakonoi* should be deployed into predetermined ministry teams based on gifting, personality profiles, and passions (which will usually align with giftedness).

- Once *diakonoi* begin to function as ministers of mercy, consideration should be given to the “Deacons Meeting” and a commitment to cultural and terminology change should be encouraged.

  - Are traditional deacons’ meetings still necessary in a Ministry of Mercy model? If so, how might that look, and what might be the subject of the meetings?
    - Administrative and business-related discussion should be strictly limited to the various ministries of the *diakonoi* to prevent a regression back to an administrative culture.
    - If held, meeting should include reports from the various areas of ministry, to include challenges and obstacles to success, accomplishments, needs,
and other updates, as well as discussions concerning opportunities where the *diakonoi* can provide service in church ministries.

- *Robert’s Rules of Order* should be abandoned in favor of a cooperative and loving spirit that yields to the needs of others. Christian character and conduct should be the rules of order for Spirit-filled men desiring to meet the needs of the *ekklēsia* as Christ’s humble servants.

  o Familiar terminology among the *diakonoi* harmful to reformation should be abandoned. The *diakonoi* should agree and understand that since they are no longer operating as a “Board” or as managers, the idea of a “Deacon Board” should no longer be a part of the ministry equation or landscape. Terms such as “Deacon Ministers,” “Mercy Ministers,” and “Deacon Teams” should be employed, in an effort to communicate and facilitate a new culture of biblical servanthood.

**Change By-Laws and Covenants**

- If applicable, necessary modifications should be made to church by-laws to adequately reflect the new model of leadership, and to prevent a digression into the corporate board model.

- Amendments should define what persons or teams will now assume the decision-making duties previously entrusted to the *diakonoi*.

**Evaluate God’s Movement in the *Ekklēsia***

- Expect God to honor efforts to reflect a biblical polity in the church. Understand that times of transition may be filled with turbulence. The church should nonetheless move forward with
anticipation of what God will do in and through the new opportunities of servanthood filled by the Ministry of Mercy.

- When God blesses the reformation, publicly give Him the glory for the change.

**Conclusion**

_Diakonoi_ who serve for the opportunity to be executives, board members, or chief decision makers in the _ekklēsia_ miss the mark of biblical _diakonoi_ ministry. They fail to discover their true biblical calling before Christ, and to experience the joy found in humble servanthood. The essence of the biblical office of _diakŏnōs_ is that of “providing for the material necessities of those in need: the poor, the oppressed, the dispossessed, the thirsty, the hungry, widows, orphans, children, prisoners, [and] strangers.”586 It is an internal attitude of humility, expressed as external acts of servanthood. This is nowhere more evident than in the incarnation, life, and passion of Christ.

_Diakonoi_ who enlist in the sacred office usually understand the nature of the office in one of two ways, each diametrically opposed to the other. Some understand the office in terms of secular leadership. They see attaining to the office of _diakōnōs_ as attaining to an office of influence, status, and prestige. They desire to be decision makers, and to have a say (i.e. control) in the affairs of the church. Others, however, enlist to emulate the type of character seen in the life of Christ. They have no desire for influence or prestige, and only wish to serve others to affect positive change in their lives. These people, paradoxically, do gain influence. Their influence comes through the respect and admiration they garner as they emulate biblical

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586 Sharon E. Heaney, _Contextual Theology for Latin America: Liberation Themes in Evangelical Perspective_ (Milton Keynes; Colorado Springs, CO; Hyderabad: Paternoster, 2008), 205.
servanthood in the community of faith. As they serve and emulate Christ, others willingly convey command influence upon them, and will desire to follow them as they follow Christ.

The *ekklēsia*, as Christ’s cherished and sacred bride, needs servants who will exhibit an attitude of humility and lowliness in order to promote the growth of the church and propagate the Gospel in their community. These Spirit-filled men, through their servanthood natures, become co-laborers with Christ for the sake of the Gospel. These faithful and godly men “gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”587 There can be no greater status on the face of the planet than that of a good standing before Christ Jesus.

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587 1 Timothy 3:13.


Burroughs, P. E. *Honoring the Deaconship.* Nashville, TN: Sunday School Board of Southern Baptist Convention, 1929.


Cramp, J. M. *Baptist History: From the Foundation of the Christian Church to the Close of the Eighteenth Century*. Roger Williams Heritage Archives, 1871.


APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL FORM

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 29, 2016

Michael Harbuck
IRB Exemption 2498.032916: Plural Deacons? The Biblical System of Church Government

Dear Michael,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46.101(b):

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior, unless:
(i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.
APPENDIX B

IRB CONSENT FORM

ONLINE SURVEY PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM
Multiple Deacons? The Biblical System of Church Leadership
Liberty University School of Divinity

You are invited to be in a research study of Michael Harbuck. You were selected as a possible participant because of your role as a church pastor or deacon. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Michael Harbuck, a doctoral candidate in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to determine your understanding of the church office you hold, and to examine how that office functions in your local church context. The study ultimately seeks to compare various understandings of the church offices against the historical and biblical data related to the same.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

Complete an anonymous survey online, via Google Forms. This survey web form will not ask or collect your identity, and will not collect your location data either.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:
The risks involved in this study are no more than would be expected in everyday life as one operates a computer and navigates to a web page.

The benefits of participation are none directly. Indirectly your participation may lead to a better understanding of church leadership, this allowing for the implementation of a leadership model that more closely resembles the New Testament model.

Compensation:
You will receive no compensation for taking part in this study. Your participation is strictly voluntary.

Confidentiality:
You name will not be collected during this study and there will be no method by which you can disclose to me your name or your location. The survey web page will not collect your identity or your location.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject, their location, or the church they represent. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. They will be stored on a secure server, and will be password protected.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is Michael Harbuck. You may ask any questions you have now by emailing him at maharbuck@liberty.edu or by calling him at (478) 973-5631 before you complete this online survey. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him via the email address and/or phone number listed above. You may also contact the research’s faculty advisor, Michael Whittington, at mcwhittington@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records. A copy can be emailed to you. Simply email the researcher at maharbuck@liberty.edu and he will be glad to forward you a complete copy of this consent form.

Statement of Consent:
I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(Note: Do not agree to participate unless IRB approval information with current dates has been added to this document.)

Signature: __________________________ Date: ________________

Signature of Investigator: __________________________ Date: ________________
APPENDIX C

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

ONLINE SURVEY FOR DEACONS

Multiple Deacons? The Biblical System of Church Leadership?

Researcher: Michael Harbuck, DMin. candidate, Liberty University School of Divinity

1. I would personally define the term “deacon” as: (Mark all that apply)
   A. A board member
   B. An official in the church elected to represent the voice of those by whom he is elected
   C. A servant or minister
   D. A church supervisor or overseer
   E. A church administrator

2. The most common description for the group of deacons in my church is:
   A. Deacon Board
   B. Board of Deacons
   C. Deacon Body
   D. Deacon Fellowship
   E. Deacon Ministry
   F. Other ________________

3. As I understand it, the primary purpose(s) of the deacon in the local church is: (Mark all that apply)
   A. To oversee the affairs of the church, excluding finances
   B. To oversee the affairs of the church, including finances
   C. To care, serve, and demonstrate mercy in the church and community, exclusively as it relates to physical needs of the poor, widows, and orphans, and as it relates to the spiritual needs of the poor in spirit.
   D. To act as a check and balance against an unbalanced amount of pastoral authority
   E. To oversee the functions of the pastor, and to ensure he is accountable to the church body

4. My church has a written job description which outlines my duties / functions as a deacon.
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. I am not sure

5. If applicable, I am very familiar with what this job description requires of me.
   A. This is not applicable; we do not have a job description for deacons
   B. Yes, I am very familiar with the job description
   C. I am somewhat familiar with the job description
D. No, I am not familiar with the job description, but I know we have one
E. I am not sure

6. Without referring to a Bible, my level of familiarity with the biblical texts that provide a description of role and functions of the deacon is:
   A. Virtually nonexistent
   B. Fair
   C. Moderate
   D. Good
   E. Excellent

7. Without referring to a Bible, the office (or functions) of the deacon is discussed in the following books of the Bible: (Mark all that apply)
   A. Mark
   B. Acts
   C. Ephesians
   D. Philippians
   E. Colossians
   F. 1 Timothy
   G. Revelation

8. Individually, as a deacon, the pastor reports to me.
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. I am not sure

9. Collectively, as a deacon body or board, the pastor reports to us.
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. I am not sure

10. The deacon body can terminate the pastor’s employment if needed.
    A. Yes
    B. No
    C. I am not sure

11. The deacon body can make a recommendation to the church that a pastor be terminated, and that recommendation will very likely be followed.
    A. Yes
    B. No
    C. I am not sure

12. The following elements can be found in a meeting of the deacons at our church: (Mark all that apply)
    A. Prayer for those in need
B. Discussion about physical service to those in need (repairing homes, changing oil in a car, etc.)
C. Discussion about spiritual service to those in need (counseling, praying with church members about troubles in their lives, church discipline)
D. The budget and other financial matters of the church
E. Problems and concerns with staff, to include the senior pastor in needed
F. Review of pastor’s performance
G. Reports from various church committees
H. Reading of the minutes from previous meetings
I. Complaints, concerns, problems from members brought to individual deacons

13. Assuming a two-hour deacon meeting, estimate what percentage of the total meeting time would be spent on the following elements: (write 0% if that element is not a part of your meeting)

A. ________ % Prayer for those in need
B. ________ % Discussion about physical service to those in need (repairing homes, changing oil in a car, etc.)
C. ________ % Discussion about spiritual service to those in need (counseling, praying with church members about troubles in their lives, church discipline)
D. ________ % The budget and other financial matters of the church
E. ________ % Problems and concerns with staff, to include the senior pastor in needed
F. ________ % Review of pastor’s performance
G. ________ % Reports from various church committees
H. ________ % Reading of the minutes from previous meetings
I. ________ % Complaints, concerns, problems from members brought to individual deacons

14. Representatives from various committees appear before the deacons during normal deacon meetings to provide updates from their various committee(s).
    A. Yes
    B. No
    C. I am not sure

15. The senior pastor is expected to be present in our regularly scheduled deacon meeting.
    A. Yes
    B. No
    C. I am not sure

16. A monthly financial report is presented and reviewed in our regularly scheduled deacon meeting.
    A. Yes
    B. No
    C. I am not sure
17. The deacons are responsible to the membership to ensure that the finances of the church are in order and that various departments are not spending more than that what has been budgeted for that department.
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. I am not sure

18. No major financial decision would be made, either by committees or by the congregation, without the deacons first discussing the matter, either in a called meeting or in a regularly scheduled meeting.
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. I am not sure

19. The personnel committee (or other persons responsible for the oversight of church employees) is required to inform the deacon body of any problems, concerns, policy violations, etc.
   A. Yes
   D. No
   E. I am not sure

20. Changes to by-laws or the church constitution would first be addressed in a deacons’ meeting before being brought before the church.
   B. Yes
   F. No
   G. I am not sure

21. The vision and mission of the church are set either by the deacons, or in collaboration with the deacon.
   C. Yes
   H. No
   I. I am not sure

22. As things are at present, the primary overseer of spiritual matters in my church is:
   A. The Deacons
   B. The Deacon Chairman
   C. The Senior Pastor
   D. The collective group of Pastors
   E. The collective group of all committees
   F. The Church Council
   G. Other ____________

23. As things are at present, the primary overseer of business/administrative matters in my church is:
   A. The Deacons
B. The Deacon Chairman  
C. The Senior Pastor  
D. The collective group of Pastors  
E. The collective group of all committees  
F. The Church Council  
G. Other __________

24. To my understanding, the Bible indicates that **pastors** are given oversight authority in and over the church?  
   A. Yes  
   B. No  
   C. I am not sure

25. To my understanding, the Bible indicates that **deacons** are given oversight authority in and over the church?  
   A. Yes  
   B. No  
   C. I am not sure

26. I believe that ultimately the responsibility for leading and guiding the church in **spiritual** matters belongs to:  
   A. The Deacons  
   B. The Deacon Chairman  
   C. The Senior Pastor  
   D. The collective group of Pastors  
   E. The collective group of all committees  
   F. The Church Council  
   G. Other __________

27. I believe that ultimately the responsibility for leading and guiding the church in **business/administrative** matters belongs to:  
   A. The Deacons  
   B. The Deacon Chairman  
   C. The Senior Pastor  
   D. The collective group of Pastors  
   E. The collective group of all committees  
   F. The Church Council  
   G. Other __________

28. As a deacon, I feel as though I am elected by the people of my church to represent their interests in business affairs or other important matters. As such, in church-wide business meetings I am an advocate for the people I represent.  
   A. Yes  
   B. No
29. I believe that one important aspect of the deacon’s responsibilities is to hold the senior pastor accountable.
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. I am not sure

30. The deacons primarily serve whom? (Mark all that apply)
   A. The Deacons
   B. The Pastor(s)
   C. The church body
   D. Other ____________________

31. The deacons are ultimately accountable to whom? (Mark all that apply)
   A. The Deacon body
   B. The Deacon chairman
   C. The Senior Pastor
   D. All the pastors of our church
   E. The church body
   F. Other ____________________

32. In our church the deacons play a major role in determining / setting the lead pastor’s salary. (Select only one)
   A. No, this is not true at all. We play no part in setting the pastor’s salary.
   B. Yes, in part. The appropriate committee recommends the pastor’s salary or annual increase to the congregation after making us aware of their decision.
   C. Yes, in part. We recommend the pastor’s salary or annual increase amount to a committee or the congregation who then votes on the issue.
   D. Yes, we play the major role in setting the pastor’s salary or annual increase by discussing the matter internally among the deacons and voting on it. While we will likely inform the congregation of our decision, the final authority rests with us to set his salary or annual increase.
   E. We play a major role in setting the pastor’s salary or increase, but in ways other than described in this survey.

33. At least one deacon serves on each committee in my church in order to ensure the deacon body remains informed regarding the affairs of the church.
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. I am not sure

34. Matters discussed in church business meetings are either 1) approved by the deacons before they are brought before the congregation, or 2) the congregation expects a recommendation from the deacons regarding the matter during the business meeting.
   A. Yes
   B. No
C. I am not sure

35. The deacons present recommendations to the church on business matters during church-wide business meetings.
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. I am not sure

36. The moderator for business meetings in our church is:
   A. The Deacon Chairman
   B. A specified deacon
   C. The Lead/Senior Pastor
   D. A Moderator is elected by the church each year

37. Pastors have authority over deacons:
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. I am not sure

38. The day-to-day affairs of the church are governed by:
   A. The Deacon body
   B. The Senior Pastor
   C. The collective group of Pastors
   D. Committees, such as the Church Council
   E. The congregation

39. In our church, final say in matters belongs to:
   A. The Deacon body
   B. The Senior Pastor
   C. The collective group of Pastors
   D. The Church Council
   E. The congregation

40. Recognizing that all are ultimately responsible, who is more responsible to minister to the sick, elderly/shut-ins, hospitalized, and those within the church who have experienced a recent personal tragedy?
   A. Deacons
   B. Pastors
   C. Committee members, such as bereavement committee

41. In the last year, I have visited the sick in the hospital.
   A. None
   B. 1 time
   C. 2-3 times
   D. 4-10 times
E. more than 10 times

42. In the last year, I have visited a shut-in person.
   A. None
   B. 1 time
   C. 2-3 times
   D. 4-10 times
   E. more than 10 times

43. In the last year, I have provided aide to someone who is distressed in our church.
   A. None
   B. 1 time
   C. 2-3 times
   D. 4-10 times
   E. more than 10 times

44. In the last year, I have shared my faith in Christ with a lost person.
   A. None
   B. 1 time
   C. 2-3 times
   D. 4-10 times
   E. more than 10 times

45. In the last year, I have led someone to Christ.
   A. None
   B. 1 time
   C. 2-3 times
   D. 4-10 times
   E. more than 10 times

46. I would describe the overall population growth of my church as:
   A. Rapid growth
   B. Some growth
   C. Stabilized, but no growth
   D. Some decline
   E. Rapid decline

47. In the past year, our church has baptized
   A. 0 people
   B. 1-5 people
   C. 6-10 people
   D. 11-25 people
   E. 26-50 people
   F. 51-100 people
   G. 101-500 people
48. In the past five years, our church has planted a church:
   A. No, we have not planted a church
   B. Yes, we have planted 1 church
   C. Yes, we have planted more than 1 church
   D. No, we have not planted a church; but we have an official, active plan to plant a church within the next 12 months

49. I am proud of the work the deacon team is doing in our church and wouldn’t change a thing.
   A. Yes
   B. No

50. I wish our deacon body would change in the following way:

51. The size of our church is:
   A. 1-25 people
   B. 26-50 people
   C. 51-75 people
   D. 75-100 people
   E. 101-200 people
   F. 201-300 people
   G. 301-400 people
   H. 401-500 people
   I. 501-750 people
   J. 751-1000 people
   K. more than 1000 people

52. Our church age is:
   A. 0-2 years
   B. 3-5 years
   C. 6-10 years
   D. 11-20 year
   E. 21-50 years
   F. 51-100 years

53. My age is
   A. 18-25
   B. 26-39
   C. 40-49
   D. 50-59
   E. 60-69
   F. 70-79
54. I have served as a deacon for
   A. 0-2 years
   B. 3-5 years
   C. 5-10 years
   D. > 10 years

55. Our church is affiliated with or identifies as:
   A. Baptist - Southern Baptist Convention
   B. Baptist – Independent / Fundamental
   C. Freewill Baptist
   D. Methodist – UMC
   E. Methodist - Other
   F. Lutheran
   G. Presbyterian – PCA
   H. Presbyterian – PCUSA
   I. Presbyterian - Other
   J. Pentecostal – Assemblies of God
   K. Pentecostal – Church of God
   L. Church of God in Christ
   M. Calvary Chapel
   N. Non-denominational
   O. Other
APPENDIX D
DEFENSE PRESENTATION

Deacons, The Biblical System of Church Leadership?

Thesis Presentation
Michael Harbuck

Introduction

• A church is “an indispensable gathering of professing believers in Christ who, under leadership, are gathered to pursue [the church’s] mission.” (Malphurs)
• The diakonos (deacon) and the episkopos (overseer) are charged with edifying the church.
• More than 3,700 churches die every year in the United States, often due to unbiblical polity.
Introduction

- This project will categorize certain core biblical functions of the *diakonos*, and compare those to the modern expression of the office seen in many churches.
- The scope of this project is to examine the functions and duties of the *diakonos* to determine how closely modern expressions of the office align with biblical and early church expressions.

Introduction

- This project attempts to draw conclusions related to biblical polity that
  - are most clearly reflective within the pages of the New Testament narrative,
  - can be substantiated well from the early church periods,
  - are naturally conducive to the health and vitality of the New Testament Church.
The Nature of the *Ekklēsia*

- Discovering the nature of the *ekklesia* is a complex task:
  - “her mystery, her divine origin, her relationship to Christ, her continuity, and her future. In light of such exalted language, the question of the Church’s relevance becomes even more challenging and serious.” (Berkouwer)

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The Nature of the *Ekklēsia*

- *Ekklēsia* is used 114 times in the New Testament
  - Gospels: 3 times
  - Acts: 23 times
  - Pauline epistles: 64 times
  - General epistles: 4 times
  - Revelation: 20
The Nature of the *Ekklēsia*

- *Ekklēsia* is used in the New Testament to refer to
  - an assembly of faithful believers,
  - a secular assembly of a community or town,
  - the general, universal Church,
  - a local church assembly.

  (Faithlife Corp)

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The Nature of the *Ekklēsia*

- The *ekklesia* is built upon Christ as the foundation.
- The *ekklesia* is the family of God.
- The *ekklesia* is used of God in redemptive history
- The *ekklesia* has leaders who are called to a high standard of morality.
  - The qualifications for leadership in the *ekklesia* are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9.
Defining *Diakonos* and Related Terms

- *Diakonos*, a noun found 29 times in the NT.
- *Diakonos* is translated as:
  - deacon
  - minister
  - servant
  - attendant
- *Diakonos* literally means “servant.” (Liddell)

Defining *Diakonos* and Related Terms

- *Diakoneo* is the verb form of *diakonos*, found 37 times in the NT.
- *Diakoneo* is translated as:
  - to serve
  - to minister
  - serving
- *Diakoneo* literally means “to serve” or “to help others” or “to render a service.” (Liddle)
Defining *Diakonos* and Related Terms

- *Diakonia* is the infinitive form of *diakonos*, found 34 times in the NT.
- *Diakonia* is translated as:
  - ministry
  - service
  - serving
- *Diakonia* literally means “service through humility.” (Liddle)

Defining *Diakonos* and Related Terms

- Jesus is the ultimate model of a *diakonos*.
- *Diakonos* was originally an offensive term reserved for the lowliest, such as slaves.
- Jesus turned this understanding of servanthood upside down – or, more correctly, right side up.
- Jesus made servanthood an honorable virtue (cf. Matthew 2:20; Mark 10:45).
The *Diakonos* in the Apostolic Era

- c. AD 32 – 100
- Acts 6:1-7, occurring c. AD 35, serves as the prototype of the *diakōnōs*.
- These godly, Spirit-filled men served as humble servants to meet the physical needs of the church.
- These humble servants cared for and watch over the poor, needy, and conflicted.
- Their service freed the acting overseers to spend more time in prayer and teaching.

The *Diakonos* in the Apostolic Era

- Philippians 1:1 (c. AD 62) confirms the “diaconate was a well-established and distinct body,” that was “developing into a distinctly recognized group in the *ekklēsia*.” (Ryrie)
- *Diakonos* likely derived from the first-century household servant concept, but came to describe those who served the church in practical ministry. (Osborn)
The Diakonos in the Apostolic Era

- 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (c. AD 65) confirms that the church was already familiar with the term diakonos by this time, since no responsibilities are listed.
- 1 Timothy 3:8-13 confirms that the church is to consider the office of diakonos an official office, and should leverage it for its wellbeing.

The Diakonos in the Apostolic Era

- The Didache (c. AD 90) seems to allude to a more established and authoritative office of diakonos.
- It shows that a “definite order” of the diakonos and the episkopos existed in the ekklesia. (H.S. Holland)
- It demonstrates the diakonoi were trusted servants who willingly met the needs of the episkopoi.
The *Diakonos* in the Catholic Era

- c. AD 100 – 312
- Ignatius (c. 105 AD) discussed the servant-like manner of the *diakonos*, yet indicated a level of authority held by the *diakonos* not known to the first-century.
- Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* (c. AD 155) indicates the *diakonos* aided in the Lord’s Supper and traveled to homes to help distribute the elements to those who were absent from the worship.

The *Diakonos* in the Catholic Era

- c. AD 100 – 312
- Cyprian (c. AD 250) charged deacons to visits the martyrs in prison.
- These early deacons were “real agents of the charity provided through the church” whose primary duties involved “providing for widows and orphans,” and visiting the sick and elderly. (Deweese)
The *Diakonos* in the Roman Era

- c. AD 312 – 590
- Rise of Roman empire meant greater roles and greater influence for the *ekklēsia*.
- The *ekklesia* administered community welfare.
- Large budgets to care for the poor led to corruption in the *ekklēsia*.
- The role of the deacon was now partially financial in nature.

The *Diakonos* in the Roman Era

- The Council of Nicaea (AD 325) confirmed the subordinate nature of the office of *diakonos*.
- By c. AD 350 *diakonoi* were the “eyes to the bishop, carefully inquiring into the doings of each member of the church.” (Pseudo-Clement of Rome)
- Athanasius of Alexandria (c AD 350) wrote that *diakonoi* were the guards of the church, tasked with seizing people for the bishops.
The *Diakonos* in the Roman Era

- Deterioration of the *diakonos* office is found in *Constitutions of the Holy Apostle* (late fourth century), where the office is now closely connected with authority and privilege. They:
  - Approved reconciliations of banished persons back to the church,
  - Were charged with discipline of the unrepentant,
  - Guarded the worship services.

The *Diakonos* in the Roman Era

- Deterioration of the *diakonos* is found in *Constitutions of the Holy Apostle* (continued)
  - They were the intermediaries between the laity and the *episkopos*, charged with communicating the desires of the laity to the *episkopos*.
  - They were servants of the elders and bishops, leading to the future desires of the *diakonos* to climb the ecclesiastical hierarchical ladder.
The *Diakonos* in the Roman Era

- Saint Jerome (c. AD 394) indicates that *diakonoi* were charged with acting as guards or security forces, seizing unsuspecting persons on behalf of the bishops.
- Chromatius (c. AD 400) expanded the role of the *diakonos* to nearly every area of the church.
- Sulpicius Severus (c. AD 400) wrote that deacons had full authority to manage monasteries.

The *Diakonos* in the Christian Middle Ages

- c. AD 590 – 1517
- Deacons led recitations in worship service. (Cocksworth)
- Gregory the Great (c. AD 590) indicates that deacons were given great financial authority.
- The Council of Trullo (c. AD 692) confirmed the deacon’s role as an apologist and bible teacher.
The *Diakonos* in the Christian Middle Ages

- Between sixth and twelfth centuries, the office of the *diakonos* became a stepping stone to the office of elder and bishop (the priesthood).
- Varying grades of the office (which began during the time of Jerome) were now more common and more well-defined (deacon, archdeacon, etc.).
- The office was tightly was connected with the office of *episkopos*, giving deacons much influence.

The *Diakonos* in the Christian Middle Ages

- The “function of assisting the priest in the subordinate parts of public worship and the administration of the sacraments” became their primary duty rather than that of care for the poor. (Schaff)
- By the close of the Middle Ages, the office of the *diakonos* reached a low point in the history of the *ekklesia*. 
The *Diakonos* in the Reformation Era

- c. AD 1517 – 1648
- The Protestant Reformation sought to restore the ancient faith of the first several centuries, including the office of the *diakonos*.
- Anabaptists in Munster, Germany (c. AD 1525), were among the first to restore the office of *diakonos* to its servanthood roots, i.e. aid to those in need.

The *Diakonos* in the Reformation Era

- Martin Luther (c. AD 1525) wrote passionately about removing hierarchy and returning the office to its rich heritage of servanthood.
- Martin Bucer (c. AD 1550) installed deacons in Strasbourg, Germany, who administered relief to the poor and met “the needs of those who were genuinely in need.” (Tony Lane)
The *Diakonos* in the Reformation Era

- John Calvin (c. AD 1560) of Geneva, Switzerland, assigned the social welfare work of Geneva to the *diakonoi*. They managed hospitals, social security plans, and charity centers.
- The Helwys Confession (AD 1611) designated deacons as those “who by their office releave the necessities off the poore and impotent brethren concerning their bodies.” (Lumpkin)

The *Diakonos* in the Age of Reasoning

- c. AD 1648 – 1789
- Welsh Baptists (c. 1650) desired to continue in the tradition of the reformers by ensuring the function of the *diakonoi* was limited to care for the poor and sick, nothing further.
- In America, deacons began to aid pastors in rural areas where pastoral staff was limited or unavailable.
The *Diakonos* in the Age of Reasoning

- Jonathan Edwards wrote that the primary responsibility of the *diakonoi* was to “take care of the poor in the faithful and judicious distribution and improvement of the church’s temporals, lodged in their hands.” (Hopkins)

The *Diakonos* in the Age of Progress

- c. AD 1789 - 1914
- The Age of Progress was anything but ‘progress’ for the office of *diakonos*.
- As thousands of Baptist churches were planted in rural areas in the US, deacons took on increasing roles of leadership as pastors were unavailable or unable to meet all of the pastoral demands.
  - “Board of Deacons” term arises out of this.
The *Diakonos* in the Age of Progress

- The office began a tragic descent from humble servanthood to business managers and controllers of the church, especially in baptistic circles. (Webb)
- Deacons, functioning as the board of directors for the church, began to seize authority over almost every aspect of the church, and to screen any matters that required congregational authority.

The *Diakonos* in the Age of Progress

- B. H. Carroll (AD 1843) rallied the church to sustain the biblical nature of the *diakonos*, to no avail.
- Robert B. C. Howell (AD 1846), in *The Deaconship*, described the church’s deacons as the “financial officers of the church” and the “executive board of the church.”
The Diakonos in the Modern Church Age

- c. AD 1914 – Present
- Prince Burroughs (AD 1929) wrote that deacons were to stand beside the pastor in ministry, seemingly indicating that both offices entailed equal amounts of biblical influence.
- Robert Naylor (AD 1955) wrote about his concerns with “bossism” and a “board’ complex” emanating from many Baptist deacons.

The Diakonos in the Modern Church Age

- James Hobbs (AD 1960) wrote, is his widely read *The Pastor’s Manual*, that the Chairman of the “Board of Deacons” should preside over “all the business sessions of the church.”
The *Diakonos* in the Modern Church Age

- J. D. O'Donnell (AD 1973), in his *Handbook for Deacons*, wrote that deacons “should have an intense concern for all that is going on in the church,” and should “make it [their] business to know what is going on.”
- He also charges them with vision casting “in expansion of the total church program,” a function almost exclusively reserved for pastors.

The *Diakonos* in the Modern Church Age

- In the early 1990s, one “Board of Deacons” terminated the employment of a pastor against the will of the majority of the congregation.
- Courts upheld the termination since the church’s articles of incorporation invested such powers to the “Board of Deacons.”
The *Diakonos* in the Modern Church Age

- Michael J. Anthony (AD 2005) interpreted the Acts 6 deacon prototype as an executive board. “This body became known as the first deacon board or committee in the church.”
- Stanton Norman (AD 2005) wrote that congregational polity operates “under the delegated authority of pastors and deacons,” conferring pastoral authority upon deacons.

The *Diakonos* in the Modern Church Age

- Carl Herbster (AD 2010), in *Pastor & Deacons*, wrote that the *diakonoi* can act as a Constitutional Delegation, whereby the congregation confers its authority to them to act as their democratically-elected representatives.
- This empowered the *diakonoi* with almost unlimited authority in the church.
Diakonos Survey Results

• A 2016 survey of 126 deacons indicates an unhealthy understanding of the functions of the deacon by holders of the office:


Diakonos Survey Results

• How deacons define the term “deacon”:
  – 14 percent: a managing board
  – 14 percent: a democratically-elected official who represents the will of the people and who carries their authority
  – 14 percent: an overseer
  – 7 percent: an administrator
  – 2 percent: a supervisor to the pastor
Diakonos Survey Results

• How deacons understand their role:
  – 62 percent: primarily that of a church “overseer”
  – 25 percent: a supervisor or overseer to the pastor of the church to hold him accountable to perform his duties responsibly; a series of checks and balances against an overexertion of pastoral authority

Diakonos Survey Results

• How deacons understand their authority:
  – 17 percent believe that pastors “partially report” to them individually.
  – 52 percent believe, collectively as a deacon body, that the pastor partially or fully reports to them.
  – 50 percent believe they have the authority necessary to remove a pastor.
Diakonos Survey Results

• How deacons understand the church’s finances:
  – 60 percent believe the deacons either expressly set the overall church budget, or their endorsement is required for the budget to be approved.
  – 48 percent indicated that a review of a monthly church financial report is conducted during regularly scheduled deacon meetings.

Diakonos Survey Results

• How deacons understand the church’s finances:
  – 24 percent believe it is the responsibility of the deacons to hold various departments accountable in financial matters, and to ensure that spending is compliant with the church budget.
  – 55 percent acknowledge that no major financial expenditures could occur without their prior approval.
**Diakonos Survey Results**

- How deacons understand the church’s finances:
  - 62 percent indicated that even the pastor could not affect a major financial expenditure without the expressed permission of the deacons.

**Diakonos Survey Results**

- How deacons understand Human Resource matters:
  - 33 percent indicated their church requires that any HR problems, concerns, policy violations, etc., be reported to them immediately.
  - 45 percent indicated it was their responsibility as a deacon to act as an accountability mechanism for the pastor.
Diakonos Survey Results

• How deacons understand strategic leadership:
  – 72 percent indicated that both the vision and mission of the church are set by the deacons.
  – 10 percent indicated that they collaborate with others in the church, such as elders, staff, or members, to set the vision of the church.
  – 62 percent indicated that they were the primary vehicle for setting the vision and mission of the church.

Diakonos Survey Results

• How deacons understand church administration:
  – 26 percent view their office as the primary overseer of administrative affairs in the church, and thus as the primary decision-makers.
**Diakonos Survey Results**

- How deacons understand their role:
  - 26 percent indicated that they understood that their role including acting “much like an elected, congressional representative” for the membership.
  - 48 percent indicated that they were responsible to approve business matters prior to church business meetings.

**Reforming the Diakonos**

- In the mid-twentieth century, Robert Naylor wrote, “The truth is that such deacons as this [that act as a Deacon Board]... are not needed in churches.”
- In the late twentieth century, Howard Foshee wrote that “Board of Deacons” was an “unfortunate term,” and advised that such a term was foreign to the way Baptists should work together under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.
Reforming the *Diakonos*

- Jerry Songer (AD 1999) wrote that, “The board of deacons and business manager concept is no longer a viable model,” and labeled it as unbiblical.
- Jim Henry (AD 1999) encourage deacons to appreciate and employ the biblical nature of the office.

Reforming the *Diakonos*

- Reformation comes through a proper understanding and application of the *Diakonos*’ authority:
  - Authority through service
  - Influence authority vs. command authority
Reforming the *Diakonos*

- Reformation comes through a proper understanding and application of the *Diakonos’* organization:
  - The deacons organize only for the purpose of meeting the physical needs of the people.
  - Their organization and influence are for the sole benefit of others, not for themselves.
  - The work of deacons is a spiritual ministry, not ... a work of corporate business or finances.

Reforming the *Diakonos*

- Reformation comes through a proper understanding and application of the *Diakonos’* position:
  - The *office of diakonos* is not a position of authoritative teaching.
  - The *office of diakonos* is not a position of oversight.
  - The *diakonos* is an assistant to the *episkopos*.
Transitioning to a Ministry of Mercy

• Lesson 1: The Office of the *Diakonos* is:
  – primarily a role of servanthood
  – a role of sympathy and service
• The early *diakonoi* served as needs arose.
• They supported the work of the Apostles, who acted as the first *epískopoi*.
• Because of their work, many of those new disciples in Acts are enjoying an eternity in Heaven today.

Transitioning to a Ministry of Mercy

• Lesson 2: The Office of the *Diakonos* is not:
  – an overseer
  – a business manager or a board member
• The authority of the *diakōnōs*:
  – Influence authority comes through others’ observation of a *diakōnos*” faithful servanthood.
  – Command authority is conferred by virtue of one’s positions.
Transitioning to a Ministry of Mercy

- Lesson 3: Towards a Ministry of Mercy
- A gifts-based approach to deacon ministry (1 Pet 4:8-11):
  - Deacons of Leadership (Rom 12:8)
  - Deacons of Administration (1 Cor 12:28)
  - Deacons of Teaching (1 Cor 12:28; Rom 12:7)
  - Deacons of Knowledge (1 Cor 12:28)
  - Deacons of Wisdom (1 Cor 12:28)

Transitioning to a Ministry of Mercy

- A gifts-based approach to deacon ministry (1 Pet 4:8-11):
  - Deacons of Prophecy (1 Cor 12:10; Rom 12:6)
  - Deacons of Discernment (1 Cor 12:10)
  - Deacons of Exhortation (Rom 12:8)
  - Deacons of Shepherding (Eph 4:11)
  - Deacons of Faith (1 Cor 12:9)
  - Deacons of Evangelism (Eph 4:11)
Transitioning to a Ministry of Mercy

• A gifts-based approach to deacon ministry (1 Pet 4:8-11):
  – Deacons of Apostleship (1 Cor 12:28; Eph. 4:11)
  – Deacons of Giving (Roms 12:8)
  – Deacons of Hospitality (1 Pet 4:9)
  – Deacons of Helps (1 Cor 12:28; Rom 12:7)
  – Deacons of Mercy (Rom 12:8)

Transitioning to a Ministry of Mercy

• Lesson 4: A Blueprint for Reformation
  – Determine the team
  – Pray for a season
  – Provide training on the office of the *diakonos*
  – Be patient
  – Clarify the vision
  – Plan the work to work the plan
Transitioning to a Ministry of Mercy

• Lesson 4: A Blueprint for Reformation
  – Make the decision
  – Prepare the *ekklesia*
  – Develop assessments for giftedness
  – Develop organization plan and launch Ministry of Mercy
  – Change by-laws and covenants
  – Evaluate God’s movement in the *ekklesia*

Conclusion

• The *ekklesia*, as Christ’s sacred bride, needs servants (deacons) who will exhibit an attitude of humility and lowliness in order to promote the growth of the church and propagate the Gospel in their community

• Faithful and godly deacons “gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 3:13)