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STUDY 1

WHAT IS A DEACON?

THIS STUDY TAKES A BROAD LOOK AT THE MINISTRY OF 'DEACONS' IN THE BIBLE.

MANY CHURCHES have officers called deacons – others have the role without using the word. The name itself comes from the Bible, but it is used in a range of ways in the pages of Scripture. This first study is an overview of what God's Word says about deacons, so that our understanding may be shaped by the Bible's teaching.

This first chapter focuses on what the Bible says about deacons; the next chapter will put this teaching into the context of church history, and how different churches are organised today.

WHAT IS A DEACON?

It is significant that the Bible does not give a specific job description for deacons. We do however have three important clues:

CLUE 1: 'MINISTRY' = SERVICE

The English word *deacon* comes from a Greek word which is properly translated as the words ministry, minister, servant and service. The words related to 'deacon' appear about 100 times in the New Testament and cover a range of people serving within the church as well as outside it.

- The word for deacon/minister/servant may describe someone who washes feet (John 2 v 5, 9), or a government official (Romans 13 v 4), or the apostle Paul (Colossians 1 v 25; Philippians 1 v 1).
- The related words for ministry or service can describe the task of preaching the Word (Acts 6 v 4), or serving at tables (Luke 10 v 40) or the work of ministry in general (Ephesians 4 v 12, 1 Peter 4 v 10-11).

It is clear that the 'deacon' words of the New Testament are used to cover different activities, and most of the time the words are not used to describe someone who holds a particular office, or formal position in the church. But they *are* used to describe someone who serves, as this saying of Jesus makes clear (the 'deacon' words are highlighted in italics):

Whoever would be great among you must be your *servant*, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be *served* but to *serve*, and to give his life as a ransom for "many". (Matthew 20 v 26b-28)

● THINK SPOT:

1. *What surprises you about this word study?*

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2. *What do we learn from it about a deacon's work?*

CLUE 2: DIFFERENT QUALIFICATIONS

Two passages speak specifically about deacons who hold an office in the church. They are 1 Timothy 3 v 8-13 and Philippians 1 v 1. Acts 6 v 1-7 also mentions a form of ministry which is helpful in understanding the role of deacons. Deacons and elders have different ministries, and at this stage we want to note how the different ministries are indicated by the different qualifications required of them.

Read 1 Timothy 3 v 1-13

3. *How many qualities are listed for elders? List them here:*

4. *How many for deacons? List them too:*

5. *How might you summarise the differences between them?*

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6. *How would the additional qualities specific to elders help them in their work of spiritual leadership and pastoral care?*

7. *What do we note about elders and deacons from Philippians 1 v 1?*

The more extensive qualifications required of elders point to their role in teaching and pastoral care of the flock, a role not expected of deacons.

CLUE 3: PRACTICAL SERVICE NOT SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

The third main passage to consider is Acts 6 v 1-7. We will return to look at this passage in greater depth in Study 4, but for the moment we will take a brief look so as to grasp some general characteristics.

Read Acts 6 v 1-7

8. *What was the difference between the service of the Seven and the service of the apostles?*

9. *Read Acts 20 v 28 and 1 Timothy 5 v 17 to see what the 'elders' are to do. What do Hebrews 13 v 17 and 1 Thessalonians 5 v 12-13 add about the work of the leaders of the congregation?*

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The Seven served the church by practical care for the widows, so that the apostles could focus on the spiritual ministries of Word and prayer. In a similar way, the role of the deacon is to serve the church in practical ministries so that elders can focus on their calling to lead and care spiritually for the church.

● THINK SPOT

10. What sort of training will equip Christians for service as deacons? And what will support deacons as they serve the church in practical ways?

SUMMARY

While the Bible does not give a specific ‘job description’ for the office of deacon, we have seen that deacons support the work of the elders in the local church. Elders are called to serve the congregation (including the deacons) through prayer and the ministry of the Word. Deacons are also to serve the congregation (including the elders) in a different way. The work of deacons is generally understood to be mainly practical in nature: certainly it is service, and it complements the elders’ ministry of oversight, prayer and Word-ministry.

In the next study we will see the different ways the role of church officers has been understood in the course of church history, and how it is often organised in churches today.