

Ecclesiastical Government (16th)

(The study for today continues looking at the officers in the congregation that the Lord Jesus Christ appointed and their particular function. This session continues to study the office of deacon.)

We closed our last broadcast while looking at the use of the Greek word *διάκονος* which is translated for deacon. After a summary of how the word is translated and used overall within the New Testament, we discussed its use with reference to Phebe and concluded that there is no office of deaconess found in the congregation of the Lord. Now we will consider the office of deacon as it is function within the assembly of the saints.

That there is an office of deacon operating in the congregation of God is clear from Philippians 1:1. It says, “Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” While the Greek word for deacon is used in various ways prior to this verse, this is the first time that the English word deacon is found in the New Testament. Not only did the King James translators translate this as deacon, essentially all English translations use the word deacon as well. The general consensus of Christianity is that this is a separate office that resides within the congregation of Christ. And while the word is not found in the book of Acts, it is generally agreed that the seven men that were selected by the congregation at Jerusalem, as recorded in chapter six, were deacons, or that the office of deacon grew out of this event. Let us examine the passage. It reads as follows:

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples *unto them*, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid *their* hands on them.

From this passage we learn several things regarding deacons. The *first* thing to consider is that the congregation was to select the men to appoint to this position. The brethren; that is, the congregation, were to “look ye out among you,” Acts 6:3. It was not a synod or a ruling body of elders that made the selection.

Second, it was the presbytery within the congregation that set aside the men for the work. Though they were apostles, we saw from previous studies, especially from chapter five of I Peter, apostles worked as elders within the house of God. Equally, we previously, noted that the word for deacon was applied to apostles. Therefore, the apostles did not function as some ecclesiastical body separate from or over the congregation.

Third, there were seven men selected. This is not to teach that each congregation should have at least seven deacons. The congregation at Jerusalem was composed of several thousands. We know that on the day of Pentecost that about three thousands were added to the congregation, and others were added on a daily basis, cf. Acts 2:47. Later, in Acts 4:4 it is stated that about five thousand men were later added. Therefore, when considering both men and women, it could easily have been upward of ten thousand believers in Jerusalem at that time. It appears until the time of Acts chapter six that the apostles were

doing what would be considered “deacon work.” Acts 4:35, 37, and 5:2, state that the money for the possessions sold and given to the congregation was laid “at the apostles’ feet.” Though there were twelve of them, they were trying to “serve tables” and minister “the word of God” at the same time. This was not only too much for them to accomplish since some of the “widows were neglected in the daily ministrations,” but it was causing them to “leave” or forsake “the word of God.” Therefore, seven men were to be selected. In other words, only enough men necessary to administer the business at hand for the assembly were selected. In some congregations, one or two deacons may only be needed while there may be more men that have the qualifications.

The *fourth* thing we note is that men were selected and not women. From our previous studies, we noted that the Scriptures clearly established that only men are to hold this office and it should not be necessary to repeat this again.

The *fifth* thing to consider is that according to the names of the men selected it appears they were all Grecians, or Hellenist Jews since they had Greek names. The Hellenist Jews or Grecians were Jews who spoke the Greek language and adopted some of the Greek culture. Therefore, since Grecian widows were the ones being neglected, we see the wisdom of the congregation to choose such men to help remove any idea of prejudice and establish peace among the brethren.

The *sixth* consideration is that deacons were for the purpose of serving tables. The Greek word for serve is διακονέω and is from the Greek word διάκονος that is translated deacon, and it is the same root for the Greek word διακονία in verse one and translated ministrations. This gives further support that this incident is the beginning of the office of deacon in the New Testament congregation. Prior to this time, it is apparent that this work was being done by the apostles, but discretion required that an office be established for this work. The meaning of serving tables immediately referred to seeing that the Grecian widows were provided for from the money and other supplies that were being collected on a daily basis. However, as the assembly continued to mature, no doubt the meaning of serving tables included many other things. Allow me to quote from the Baptist John Gill regarding this:

[T]he tables of the poor, collect for them, inspect into their several cases, and circumstances, and distribute accordingly to them; which required a good deal of time, care, thought, and circumspection, especially in such a church, where the numbers were so large. From hence we learn what is the business of deacons, who were afterwards appointed to take this part of the apostles’ work off of their hands, and attend to it; which is to serve tables: the table of the Lord, by providing the bread and wine for it; receiving both from the minister, when blessed, and distributing them to the members; and collecting from them for the poor, and the defraying the charge; and observing what members are missing at the ordinance, whom they are to admonish; and if their admonitions are not regarded, to report it to the church: and they are likewise to serve the minister’s table, by taking care that he has a sufficient competency for his support; and it belongs to them to stir up the members of the church to their duty in communicating to him; and what they receive of them, they are to apply to his use: and also, they are to serve the poor’s table; to whom they are to distribute of the church’s stock, with all impartiality, simplicity, cheerfulness, and sympathy.

Regardless if you agree with everything Gill outlined or not, I believe it can be agreed that the work of the deacon was to be a support and an aid to the ministry for the benefit of the congregation. It is sad, that too often there have been tension and sometimes open opposition between the elders and the deacon within the assembly of the saints. This ought not to be! However, on a positive note I have witnessed and currently know of several occasions where the fellowship and joint labors of the pastors and deacons are harmonious and a delight to behold as they labor together for the good and well being of the congregation and thereby honor the Lord and the offices He established in the house of God. While there is no direct

scriptural support for deacons to be supported financially by the congregation as are the elders, I can believe it might be beneficial for large congregations to do so as the need and work might demand. I know this may be a radical idea, but when a congregation is large and there are many widows and other poor members who may need a lot of attention, it would be extremely difficult for a deacon to devote the time for his daily occupation and have the proper time to dedicate to the needs of widows and other duties. Obviously, much wisdom and care would need to be exercised for this to be done, but if the congregations were caring for such people accordingly it may well be that fewer, if any, Christians would be dependent on government for their livelihood.

Our time is up for today, but hopefully, I leave you with something for your consideration and prayer. The Lord willing we will continue our study of the deaconship in our next broadcast.