



## *Foundation*

The word deacon, from the Greek **diakonos**, means “servant” or “minister.”<sup>1</sup> The term is used twenty-- nine times in the New Testament. Of those twenty--nine instances, the reader concludes from the context that three or four refer to an official title:<sup>2</sup> Paul opens his letter to the Philippians addressing the saints with the overseers and deacons (Philippians 1:1). In 1 Timothy 3:8 and 12, Paul lists several requirements for deacons, separating them from elders in that they do not necessarily need to be able to teach.<sup>3</sup> The possible fourth occurrence is found in Romans 16:1. Phoebe is referred to as **diakonos** of the church at Cenchreae. Some translators use the more general term “servant,” while others prefer the more official “deacon.” Because other individuals—Apollos (1 Corinthians 3:5), Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21), Timothy (1 Timothy 4:6), and even Paul (2 Corinthians 11:23, Ephesians 3:7)—are also called servants (diakonos) the dispute remains unsettled. Phoebe may simply have had general leadership responsibilities rather than holding an office. It is evident that Scripture regularly focuses on functions rather than titles; the term “office” doesn’t even appear in the New Testament. What is clear from the Bible is that the church’s servant--leaders (the Apostles according to Acts 6:4, and subsequent church leaders according to 1 Timothy 3) need deacons to help with the work and—because qualifications are required—to hold an office.

Even though Paul, while speaking of deacons in his letters, offers no explanation as to the position’s origin, many scholars point to the Seven selected servants in Acts 6 as the model for the selection for deacons. As early as the second century, Irenaeus (possibly mentored by John) believed this to be the case.<sup>4</sup> While the word “deacon” is not used in the passage, **diakonia** (Acts 6:1b) and **diakoneo** (to serve, Acts 6:2) are used, and Alexander Strauch believes, “It is quite likely that the official title **diakonos** corresponds to the specialized use of its related noun: **diakonia** and **diakoneo**.”<sup>5</sup> Gene Getz finds a similar connection, “As the seven men in Jerusalem assisted the Apostles in meeting a unique cultural need at that time, just so ‘deacons’ were later commissioned in the churches to assist elders/overseers in carrying out their shepherding responsibilities, which included helping them to meet unique cultural needs.”<sup>6</sup> The personal ministries of two of the Seven, Stephen and Phillip, being teachers and evangelists should not dissuade this conclusion, as many deacons have additional spiritual gifts.<sup>7</sup> Regardless, the remaining assumption is that a new organizational structure emerged in Jerusalem, and by A.D. 62, Paul, who was in Jerusalem when the Seven were chosen, officially recognized the office of deacon in at least two churches he planted.

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley J. Perschbacher, *Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 92.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 227.

<sup>3</sup> This is the only significant distinction regarding the lists of characteristic requirements of elders and deacons.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1992), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Gene Getz, *Elders and Leaders* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2003), 102.

<sup>6</sup> Paul also admonished Timothy to do the work of an evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5).

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### ***Function***

Questions immediately arise as to how the deacon position functions. Getz believes, “these servants should assist elders in all aspects of their managing and shepherding functions: teaching, modeling, praying, etc.”<sup>8</sup> Strauch prefers to narrow the scope: “Such unlimited spheres of service completely blur the distinctive purpose and duties of the New Testament diaconate and can only frustrate deacons.”<sup>9</sup> Regardless, deacons must have a broad understanding of the role of the elders they are assisting in order to effectively help them shepherd the flock.

Elders/overseers keep watch over souls (Hebrews 13:17), manage the church of God (1 Timothy 3:4-5), teach the Word (1 Timothy 3:2), preach the gospel (2 Timothy 4:1--2), rule the body (1 Timothy 5:17), protect from wolves (Acts 20:28--29), pray for healing (James 5:14), contend for the faith (Jude 3), rebuke false doctrine (Titus 1:9), equip the saints (Ephesians 4:12), and set an example to the believers (1 Peter 5:3)—for which they are held to account by God (Hebrews 13:17). While these functions are primarily the responsibility of the elder, the deacon’s close connection to the elder makes the deacon’s role complementary (while maintaining an official, distinct office for the deacon as well). The deacon is not merely a helper but a servant--officer. What is certain is that the position requires substantial contact with church members and attendees. Wayne Grudem even includes, “some house--to--house visitation and counseling” as necessary services.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Form***

Getz writes, “Elders/overseers are free to develop approaches that will enable them to function effectively as managers/shepherds in their own cultures.”<sup>11</sup> It appears that each local context has some liberty in the outworking of the deacon. Paul lists several character requirements including:

- **Being dignified** (1 Timothy 3:8)
- **Not double-tongued** (1 Timothy 3:8)
- **Not greedy** (1 Timothy 3:8)
- **Not addicted to alcohol** (1 Timothy 3:8)
- **Sound in doctrine and in the faith** (1 Timothy 3:9)
- **Proved blameless** (1 Timothy 3:10)
- **Having a respectable family** (1 Timothy 3:11-12)

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<sup>8</sup> Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, 282.

<sup>9</sup> Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1994), 919.

<sup>11</sup> Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, 215.

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## 1 Timothy 3:8-13

<sup>8</sup> Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. <sup>9</sup> They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. <sup>10</sup> And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. <sup>11</sup> Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. <sup>12</sup> Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. <sup>13</sup> For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Included in these qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 are requirements for *gunaikas*—‘women’ or ‘wives’ depending upon the context.<sup>12</sup>

It stands that as early as St. Clement of Alexandria (150---215) and Origen (185---254)—both of whom write of women deacons,<sup>13</sup> church history recognized women’s unique gifts to be integral to church health, and many women assumed the role. It seems permissible, according to the few positive assertions from Scripture along with church tradition, for women to serve in a variety of ministry positions—even leadership positions, including deacons—in a way that does not usurp the male headship inherent in biblical eldership, and thereby dominating the very men whom they are assisting.

### ***Practice***

Deacons will assist elders contextually according to the specific physical and spiritual needs. Specific examples include but are not limited to:

- Assisting the elders and pastors in shepherding the covenant members of the church through biblical counseling in their homes or at the church.
- Committed to discipling others.
- Helping the elders and pastors lead, organize, and strengthen specific ministries in the church.
- Overseeing and helping with the food ministry.
- Helping the elders lead in prayer and being available for further prayer at church.
- Being available up front at the stage or near the back at the end of Sunday services to pray with people.
- Assisting in the preparation of the communion. If asked to do so by the elders, you can administer the bread and wine to the church.

While the deacons at Reborn will serve the body by assisting the elders in the ways outlined above, all covenant members of The Reborn Church of Phoenix are encouraged and expected to serve the body

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<sup>12</sup> Perschbacher, Analytical Greek Lexicon, 200.

<sup>13</sup> Both mentioned women deacons in commentaries of the letters to Timothy. Stromata 3, 6, 53; *Patrologia graeca*, vol. 14, col. 1278.

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in accordance with their abilities and gifting as taught in the scriptures and set forth in The Reborn Church of Phoenix New Covenant Membership class.

***Frequently Asked Questions:***

**1. What is the difference between a deacon and an elder at Reborn?**

The deacons are distinguished from the elders in that they are not charged with the duty of authoritative teaching. However, male deacons are permitted to hold a position that contains authoritative teaching if they desire to teach and the elders permit it. It is important to note that if one holds the office of deacon they do not have to teach authoritatively in the church, but should seek opportunities to teach others in personal counseling and discipleship. The deacons' ministry is under the oversight and authority of the elders. Additionally, there is one unified body of elders.

**2. Are there any aspects of shepherding, care, or equipping, that the deacons will not carry out and will instead leave to the elders?**

Yes, the deacons will not carry out the authoritative teaching or the final step of formal church discipline. The deacons also will not set the direction of the shepherding, care and equipping at the church. Although their input is valuable, it will ultimately fall on the elders to decide the direction for shepherding, care and equipping at the church. The deacons' role is really that of a humble servant to the elders and the members of the church. The deacons will seek to serve the people in counseling, discipleship, and care

**3. Is the office of deacon considered a stepping stone to the office of elder?**

No, there are distinct qualifications for deacons that do not include the "ability to teach" or being a male. Although a male deacon may eventually be appointed to the elder body, the office of deacon should not be considered a stepping stone to the office of elder. Yet if a deacon is feeling called to be an elder they should meet with the elders and go through the elder candidate process.

**4. Do the deacons focus only on ministry within the church?**

We are inclined to believe that the office of deacon is focused on serving within the church. In Acts 6 (assuming the Seven are prototypical deacons), the office was created to solve a problem that arose within the church.

**5. Will women deacons be called deaconesses?**

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Formally anyone who holds the office of a deacon will be called a “deacon.” At times we may use the term deaconess informally to clarify when a women is a deacon.

**6. Are there any aspects of ministry female deacons are limited from?**

Yes, there are certain ministry activities that the Scriptures would reserve only for men, specifically referring to the office of Elder/ Pastor and possessing teaching authority over men in the church gathering. See complementarianism distinction in the Statement of Faith. Female deacons are encouraged to teach authoritatively in the lives of women.

**7. Can a married woman be a deacon if her husband does not hold the office of deacon as well?**

The elders will answer this question on a case by case basis. If the elders believe there is a calling on a married woman’s life to fulfill the office of deacon then the elders will establish the women as a deacon as long as she is submitted to the leadership of her believing husband.

**8. Does divorce and remarriage disqualify a person from the office of deacon?**

Since the qualifications for elders and deacons regarding marriage are identical, Reborn Church practices the same policy for each office. In short, we do not believe that divorce and remarriage automatically disqualifies an individual from serving in either office.

The qualification given for both elders and deacons regarding their marriages is that the candidate be “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2, 12, Titus 1:6). Directly rendered, the Greek phrase reads “a one-woman man.” The text is teaching that if one is married, the elder or deacon must be absolutely committed to their spouse. These texts speak to the subject of fidelity in marriage, not marital status. This phrase addresses the issues of polygamy or fidelity in marriage, not divorce.

However, this does not mean divorce is minor or of no consequence when considering someone for the office of elder or deacon. Marriage was created by God for the display of His glory and for the joy of His creatures. Through this gift, we are called to consider not only God’s covenantal love, but also His incredible patience and unconditional mercy toward His beloved. Because marriage was designed to portray God’s goodness and fidelity, marital discord, division, and divorce obscures and corrupts the image of God painted within the world.

When appointing an elder or deacon a past divorce in that person’s life should always be taken into account and investigated thoroughly. A divorce in one’s past could leave one reproachable in some way and thus disqualified for the office of elder or deacon. However, this is not always

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the case and divorce is not the unpardonable sin. If a person who is being considered for the office of elder or deacon has been divorced, the elders will investigate the candidate's past divorce and determine whether the person is qualified to serve in the office they are being considered for.

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