

# The Harvester



## Preparing Souls

## To Serve The Lord



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## A Better Understanding of Deacons

By Brian R. Kenyon

The work of deacons seems to be one of the most misunderstood works in the local church. It has been observed by many that in some local churches the preacher is doing the work of the elders, the elders are doing the work of the deacons, and the deacons are not doing any work. While this may be an overstatement, there is truth in the fact that some, perhaps even many, in the church do not know the Scriptural roles of the elders and deacons. This article intends to help readers become better familiar with deacons by understanding the word “deacon,” by examining the work of deacons, and by considering a common misconception about female “deacons.”

### What Is A Deacon?

The word “deacon” comes from a Greek word (*diakonos*, δῆκονος) that appears thirty times in the New Testament and is usually translated by a form of the word “servant” or “minister.” The basic meaning of *diakonos* is “whoever renders service of whatever kind” (Ferguson 83). Thayer defines it as “one who executes the commands of another; esp. of a master; a servant, attendant, minister” (138). *Diakonos* is used of a king’s servants (Mt. 22:13), servants at a wedding feast (Jn. 2:5), civil government (Rom. 13:4), Jesus Christ (Rom. 15:8), Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), Apollos (1 Cor. 3:5), the apostles (2 Cor. 3:6), servants of Satan (2 Cor. 11:15), Paul (Col. 1:23), Tychicus (Eph. 6:21), and Timothy (1 Thes. 3:2). In fact, according to the general meaning of the word, *all Christians* are to fulfil the idea of *diakonos*!

In the local church, however, there is also a “special” kind of servant, appropriately translated “deacon.” *Diakonos* is translated “deacon” in only three New Testament verses. The first occurrence of the English word “deacon”

is found in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, wherein he writes, “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Phil. 1:1, NKJ). In this context, “saints” (which refers to all Christians) are distinct from “bishops [overseers, ESV]” and “deacons.” While it is true that all bishops and deacons are saints, all saints are not bishops or deacons. This verse also shows that deacons work in conjunction with bishops, who are also referred to as elders (Acts 20:17, 28). The other two verses, where the English word “deacon” is translated from *diakonos*, are First Timothy 3:8, 12. A verb form of the word (*diakoneo*, διακονέω) is behind the translation, “have served ... as deacons” (1 Tim. 3:13).

### The Work of Deacons

Deacons are special servants who must meet special, God-given qualifications (1 Tim. 3:8-12), most of which are also required for any faithful Christian. Like any other member of the local church, deacons must submit to the will of God and to the elders of the congregation. A deacon has no authority except what is delegated to him by his overseers. Deacons are not elders, “junior elders,” or mere figureheads, whose names appear on the church stationery. The function of a deacon (cf. “office of a deacon,” KJV) is a work (1 Tim. 3:10, 13). No work in the church should be filled just to be filling a “vacancy.”

The nearest thing to a statement of a deacon’s work is found in First Timothy 3:13, “For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.” It is the work of deacons to serve well in whatever responsibility they are given. Any work that is Scriptural, and

within a particular deacon's ability, should be willingly and diligently performed. The fact that "they are servants disposed to be in readiness for whatever they may be asked to do may give a reason for no more specific mention being made of this task" (Cox 23).

Although the men of Acts 6:1-6 were not deacons as per First Timothy 3:8-13, the kind of work they did in assisting the apostles, in principle, is the kind of work done by deacons. The "seven men" chosen in Acts 6:1-6 were to be appointed over the business of serving tables (Acts 6:2-3). The word translated "serve" (Acts 6:2) is from the same Greek word (*diakoneo*, διακονέω) that is translated "serve as deacons [office of a deacon, KJV]" (1 Tim. 3:10, 13). This is not teaching, as some have supposed, that deacons are merely to take care of the "physical" work of the church, while elders take care of the "spiritual" work of the church. The key to understanding the nature of a deacon's work is found in the fact that they, like the seven chosen in Acts 6, may do whatever will assist in the "ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). In the case of the seven in Acts 6, it was taking care of the Grecian widows so that the apostles did not have to spend their time on that work and be slowed in spreading the Gospel. In the case of deacons, they may do what ever work the elders assign them that will assist in the "ministry of the word." This may include taking care of the church building, serving as treasurer, leading personal evangelism, being the contact person with the missionaries supported by the local church, and/or a host of other tasks.

## What About "Deaconesses"?

Another question often arises from the reference to Phoebe in Romans 16:1. Because a form of the word *diakonos* is used in conjunction with a feminine participle (of *eimi*, εἶμι), some have assumed the early church had an "official office of deaconess." Thus, they ask, "Since the early church had deaconesses, should we not have deaconesses in the church today?" In answering this ("loaded") question, one must first define what he or she means by "deaconess." If the one asking the question means, by the word "deaconess," a general female servant of the church, then, of course, the answer is, "Yes, all female Christians should be general servants of the church!" However, that is not what most people who ask this kind of question mean by "deaconess."

By calling for "deaconesses" in today's church, some are attempting to expand the Biblical role of women by making "official" women ministers. However, as noted above, the word *diakonos* is used thirty times in the New Testament, and in each instance, with the exception of Philippians 1:1 and

First Timothy 3:8, 12, it is translated by a form of the English word "servant" or "minister." If the church today is to have "official" deaconesses, then where are the qualifications and/or the New Testament pattern? The verse about "wives [women, ASV]" mentions nothing about deaconesses, but seems, as most translations indicate, connected to the wives of deacons and/or elders (1 Tim. 3:11). Yes, God's people have had, and continue to need, faithful women serving in the church, but they must serve within the sphere of God's authorization.

Because Phoebe is referred to as a female *diakonos* does not mean that she was an "official" deaconess comparable to the special servant deacons of Philip-

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9:00 "First Century Times" or "End Times"? Brian R. Kenyon  
9:40 "End Times" Preaching in Acts Daniel Stearsman  
10:20 BREAK  
10:50 Intertestamental Expectations David Dixon  
11:30 LUNCH

#### Forum: Living for the "Then," Not the "Now"

1:30 Your Life Matters Now and Forever Ty Rhymes  
2:00 Esau: Living for "Now" (Heb. 12:16) Forest Antemesaris  
2:30 Moses: Living for "Then" (Heb. 11:26) Hiram Kemp  
3:00 BREAK  
3:30 Questions And Answers On Forum Topic  
4:30 DINNER  
6:30 Congregational Singing  
7:00 Parable of the Virgins Thomas Wise  
7:45 Jesus' Authority to Judge Sam Jones

### TUESDAY

9:00 "End Times" Teaching in Mt. 24 T. Brownlow-Dindy, Sr.  
9:40 Daniel's "Seventy Weeks" Emmanuel B. Daugherty  
10:20 BREAK  
10:50 "End Times" in the Book of Hebrews Stephen Atnip  
11:30 LUNCH

#### Forum: Which "End" Is What?

1:30 Is the "Shortened Time" (1 Cor. 7:29) the End? E. Edwards  
2:00 When Does the OT End and the NT Begin? George Beals  
2:30 Knowing the "AD 70 Doctrine" David Hester  
3:00 BREAK  
3:30 Questions And Answers On Forum Topic  
4:30 DINNER  
6:30 Congregational Singing  
7:00 Parable of the Talents Bryon R. Schulz  
7:45 Judgment Scene in Revelation 20:11-15 Jimmy Clark

### WEDNESDAY

9:00 "End Times" Teaching in Luke 21:5-36 Bruce Daugherty  
9:40 Daniel's Final Revelations Emmanuel B. Daugherty  
10:20 BREAK  
10:50 "End Times" in Second Thessalonians Jimmy Clark  
11:30 LUNCH

#### Forum: "End Times" Fables of False Religion

1:30 Islam Trent Wheeler  
2:00 Mormonism Nathan Franson  
2:30 Jehovah's Witness Charles Broyles  
3:00 BREAK  
3:30 Questions And Answers On Forum Topic  
4:30 DINNER  
6:30 Congregational Singing  
7:00 Parable of the Dragnet David Stearsman  
7:45 In View of What Is to Come Bill Davis

### THURSDAY

9:00 "End Times" Teaching in First Corinthians Earl Edwards  
9:40 Premillennialism and Its Variations Walt Person  
10:20 BREAK  
10:50 The Living and the Dead at His Coming Melvin Otey  
11:30 LUNCH

#### Forum: End Times and the Book of Revelation

1:30 Political Leaders, "Mark of the Beast," Etc. Bob Bauer  
2:00 The 1,000 Year Reign and Premillennialism Daniel Cates  
2:30 The Holy City John Saw Coming Down Sam Hester  
3:00 BREAK  
3:30 Questions And Answers On Forum Topic  
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pians 1:1 and First Timothy 3:8-12. By way of illustration, an employee may work full-time with a company, and in her work, she greatly assists the CEO, but that does not mean she is the “Assistant CEO” of the corporation. Phoebe was a godly “servant of the church in Cenchrea” (Rom. 16:1), and she is worthy of imitation by Christian women today, but to say that she was an “official” deaconess is to say more than the Bible teaches.

### Conclusion

Deacons are an important part of God’s permanent plan for the local church, yet their work is often misunderstood. As with the case of elders, much of deacons’ qualifications are character traits that all Christians are to possess. These special servants help the elders of a local church in whatever work the elders deem appropriate in

assisting the local church in its God-given mission (Mt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15-16; Col. 3:17). May the Lord raise up men with the desire to serve the Lord with their entire being and who develop the character necessary to meet the qualifications to serve as deacons. May deacons who now faithfully serve keep up the good work, and “be not weary in well doing” (2 Thes. 3:13). 

### Works Cited

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- Thayer, Joseph Henry. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. 1889. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977.

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