

SNOHOMISH COMMUNITY CHURCH
THE MINISTRY OF DEACONS
A STUDY PAPER AND PROPOSAL
MARCH 14, 1996

I Timothy 3 describes the qualifications of two categories of church leaders: Elders and Deacons. While there has been much emphasis in recent years in our church circles about the role of the Elder, there has been little said about Deacons. In Baptist polity, it is believed that the Pastor is the Elder (i.e., they do not believe in a plurality of Elders) and the two bodies of lay leaders in the church are called Deacons (who function somewhat as a Board of Elders, but are restrained to “spiritual” matters) and Trustees (who manage the temporal resources of the church). The Baptist polity shortchanges the church by restricting the number of Elders to the Pastor(s) and limits the role of the Deacons to only “spiritual” matters. It also has tended to create tension between the Deacons and Trustees when the Deacons need finances for a ministry advance which the Trustees are unwilling to fund.

Many non-Baptist Bible churches have enthusiastically adopted the practice of a plurality of Elders but have either neglected the office of Deacon or have arbitrarily confined the Deacon role to matters of benevolence, setting up for communion and putting on social events for the church family. It is our contention that most Boards of Elders are overworked because they are trying to do the work of the ministry that God intended to be shared by Elders and Deacons. In addition of overwork, many Boards of Elders have also been sidetracked from more strategic activities as they struggle to handle Deacon-level ministries. This is akin to the choice the dilemma the Apostles faced in Acts 6 concerning the time contest between the ministries of prayer and the Word and the serving of tables.¹

WHAT IS A DEACON?

The term, “deacon” (“diakonos”), means simply “servant.” Paul used it of himself (II Corinthians 6:4; 11:23). It is the term for the servants at the wedding in Cana (John 2:5, 9). All Christians are servants of Christ (John 12:26) and of fellow believers (Mark 10:43). Even heathen public officials are servants of God in Romans 13:1-4).

However, the Bible uses the term, deacon, in a specialized sense to denote an office in the church. This office first appears in Philippians 1:1, “Paul and Timothy, servants [“douloi” (lit., “slaves”), not “diakonois”] of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons [“diakonois”].” The term is used in the New Testament only three more times with a clear reference to the office of Deacon, all in I Timothy 3.

In both Philippians 1:1 and I Timothy 3, the Deacons are associated with the Elders and in each case the Elders are listed first. As an indication that the office of Elder has

primacy in the church, note that it was only the Elders from the Ephesian church who were summoned by Paul to Miletus for an important conference (Acts 20:17-38) and that Deacons are not addressed at all in the Epistle to Titus although there is a major passage describing the qualifications for Elders (Titus 1:5-9).

Therefore we conclude that Elders are the primary officials in the church and that Deacons serve in a secondary capacity. No other officials are described in the New Testament for the church.

WHAT DO DEACONS DO?

There is no clear indication in Scripture concerning the work of Deacons aside from the meaning of the term, “diakonos”: “servant.” This absence is in contrast to a number of passages that describe the activities of the Elders (Acts 20:28 and I Peter 5:2, “be shepherds”; Acts 15, doctrinal decisions and moral directives; Acts 11:30, representatives of the church; Acts 21:18-25, counsel concerning church harmony; I Timothy 5:17, “direct the affairs of the church,” “preaching and teaching”; James 5:14, prayer for the sick). It would seem best to conclude that the ministries of Deacons would not duplicate those of Elders but would rather supplement them. Elders function in the role of authoritative teaching and preaching of the Scriptures, overall direction of the spiritual life, priorities and activities of the church, discernment and direction in issues of doctrine and Christian behavior, official spokesmen and representatives of the church, and prayer for the seriously ill. These are therefore not the ministry functions of Deacons.

Deacons are not simply people who do acts of service and mercy for the church. They function as leaders in coordinating the ministries of others who are gifted in such areas. In a sense, they are “middle managers” who ensure the implementation and smooth execution of the plans and priorities established by the Elders. This is evidenced by the high spiritual qualifications of I Timothy 3 as well as the provision that Deacon candidates successfully pass a period of testing and that they demonstrate effective management at home. Deacons are servants, but they are “super-servants” who exercise management skills in the life of the church. It is because they are such high-level emissaries of the Elders that they must be men of high respect in the eyes of the church (I Timothy 3:8) and must be men of doctrinal purity and discernment (I Timothy 3:9).

CAN WOMEN SERVE AS DEACONS?

Answering this question requires the student to interact with two New Testament passages: Romans 16:1 and I Timothy 3:11.

In the Romans text Phoebe is commended as a “diakonon” of the church in Cencrea. There is no indication that the term is here used in the official sense of Deacon, and the NIV, NASB and KJV all reflect that opinion by translating the word as “servant.” The NIV and NASB both list “deaconess” in the margin as an alternative translation. It should be noted that although we do not believe that Phoebe was technically a Deacon,

she did function in a highly trusted capacity and received Paul's unqualified recommendation with his urging that she be given a "blank check" to draw on the resources of the Christians in Rome in the accomplishment of her mission.

In I Timothy 3:11, debate centers on whether the verse speaks of Deaconesses, the wives of Deacons, or ministering women who served in auxiliary ministries in association with the Deacons.. The Greek word is "gunaikas," the most frequent New Testament word for "woman." This Greek word is used of both married and unmarried women and in some contexts is correctly translated, "wife," e.g., Matthew 1:20, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your *wife*..." The NIV has "their wives" with a marginal note, "or...deaconesses." The KJV also has "their wives." The NASB has "women" with a marginal note, "I.e., either deacon's wives or deaconesses." In assessing the context, note that verse 8 says "Deacons... are to be *men* worthy of respect..." and that verse 12 says "A deacon must be the *husband* of but one wife..." This seems to point to the maleness of Deacons, especially when it is noticed that the flow of language from male Elders in verses 1-7 is preserved with the word, "likewise" in verse 8, "Deacons, *likewise*, are to be men worthy of respect..." The brief insertion concerning women in verse 11 is more understandable in reference to Deacons' wives than it is in reference to Deaconesses. If verse 11 did refer to Deaconesses, then why does the passage not treat the ministry of Deacon in gender non-specific terms from the beginning and why is so little said about the Deaconesses? Why is the word "Deacon" not used of these women in verse 11? Why would they not be included in comments regarding the process of testing, household management , etc.?

On the other hand, the same transitional word, is used of these women in verse 11 as is used of male Deacons in verse 8, "hosautos," ("likewise," rendered "in the same way" in verse 11. This would tend to argue for the introduction of another class of officers in the church.

A sampling of commentaries reveals a divided vote on whether or not there is a biblical office of Deaconess. We agree with the opinion of Duane Litfin, "A case can be made for either of these two options, with a slim advantage falling to the first. [i.e., that these are wives of the Deacons] But being dogmatic about either view is unwarranted by the exegetical data."²

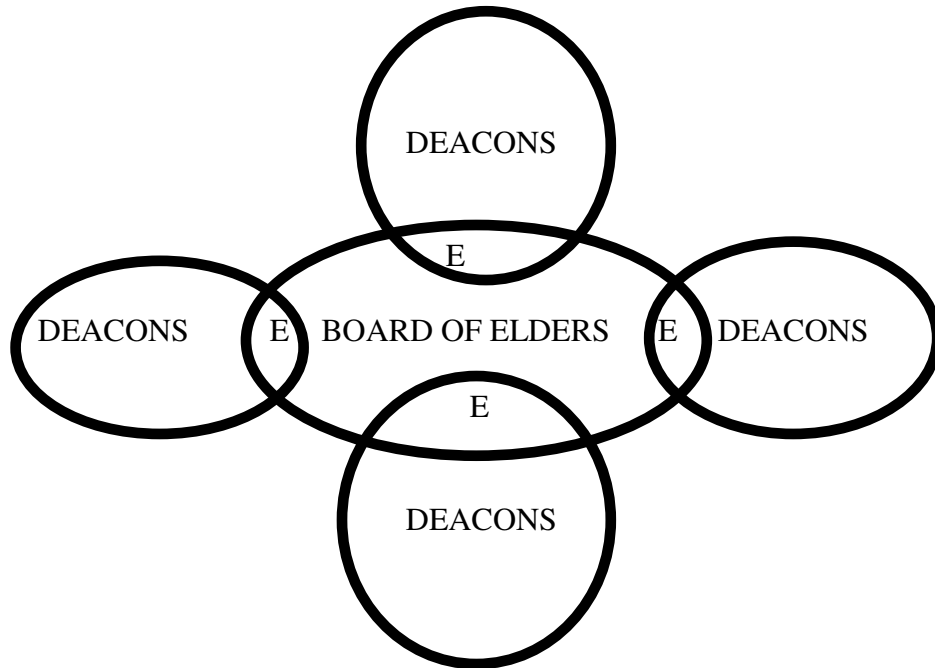
Therefore, we conclude that the office of Deacon, unlike the office of Elder, is a position that may be filled by men and women.

HOW DO DEACONS FIT IN THE ORGANIZATION CHART?

There is no need to create a Board of Deacons and there is reason to exclude it. A Board of Deacons could easily create a rival faction in the church leadership structure. The nature of the ministries of Deacons calls for clusters of Deacons or individual Deacons assigned to specific ministry areas of the church, functioning in direct communication with, and under the oversight of, the Board of Elders. Each Deacon should be connected

to an Elder chairing a ministry area or, at minimum, to an Elder liaison to the Board of Elders. The Deacons, in turn, are responsible for the management of the ministries of other people in the church serving in established programs and special ministries.

DIAGRAM



APPENDIX: COMPARISON OF ELDER AND DEACON QUALIFICATIONS
I TIMOTHY 3

ELDERS

Above reproach

The husband of but one wife

Temperate

Self-controlled

Respectable

Hospitable

Able to teach

DEACONS

Nothing against them

The husband of but one wife

Worthy of respect

Hold of the deep truths of the faith

Not given to much wine

Not indulging in much wine

Not violent but gentle

Not quarrelsome

Not a lover of money

Not pursuing dishonest gain

He must manage his own family well...

Must manage his children & household well

He must not be a recent convert

Must first be tested

Have a good reputation with outsiders

Sincere (lit., “not double-tongued”)

Wives are to be women of respect...

Timothy G. Walton
Snohomish Community Church
031496

ENDNOTES

¹ “Appeal is frequently made to Ac. 6 in explanation of the rise of the diaconate, though the term *διακονος* is not actually used. On this view, the deacons undertake practical service as distinct from the ministry of the Word. It is to be noted, however, that the Seven are set alongside the Twelve as representatives of the Hellenists, and that they take their place with the evangelists and apostles in disputing, preaching and baptizing. This fact shows...that the origin of the diaconate is not to be found in Ac. 6.” (Kittel, TDNT, Vol. II, p.90)

² Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition, p.738