

THE AUTHORITY OF DEACONS IN PAULINE CHURCHES

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Abstract: *The New Testament office of deacon is disputed primarily because of the paucity of information. Consequently, many look to the following in order to determine the role of deacons in the church: (1) the lexical meaning of διάκονος and its cognates (διακονέω and διακονία); (2) the function of the Seven in Acts 6:1–6; and (3) the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. Additionally, one’s view of the role of women in ministry can influence how one perceives the function and authority of deacons. This essay argues that deacons held an official and authoritative, yet nonessential and subordinate, position in the Pauline churches. I support this thesis by considering: (1) the official title of deacons; (2) the official function of deacons; (3) the official qualifications of deacons; and (4) the official period of testing and honorable standing of deacons.*

Key words: *authority, church, deacon, elders, office, qualifications, the Seven*

If there is debate and disagreement over the office of elder or overseer, the office of deacon is, if possible, even more disputed. The main reason for different positions relates to the paucity of information on deacons. Although the term διάκονος occurs 29 times in the NT (with 21 occurrences in Paul’s writings), the use of the term in reference to a church office is found in only two or three passages (Rom 16:1; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8, 12).¹ Consequently, many look to the following in order to determine the role of deacons in the church: (1) the lexical meaning of διάκονος and its cognates (i.e., διακονέω and διακονία); (2) the function of the Seven in Acts 6:1–6; and (3) the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. Additionally, one’s view of the role of women in ministry can influence how one perceives the function and authority of deacons. At risk of oversimplifying the various stances on the diaconate, I will categorize the various positions into two main camps: (1) deacons as lowly, benevolent servants and (2) deacons as authoritative servants.

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¹ The debated passage is Romans 16:1 and in what sense Phoebe is called a διάκονος. Although this essay will not interact with this passage, the basic thesis put forth here is not affected by how one interprets the use of the term in relation to Phoebe. Unfortunately, a binary choice usually is offered for how to interpret διάκονος—a technical use in which Phoebe is a “deacon” of the church (i.e., an office-holder) and a generic use in which she is a mere “servant.” But, as Clarence Agan has demonstrated, the word can be used in at least four ways (see below), describing someone who is an “emissary,” “envoy,” “spokesperson,” or “representative.” Clarence DeWitt “Jimmy” Agan, “Deacons, Deaconesses, and Denominational Discussions: Romans 16:1 as a Test Case,” *Presb* 34.2 (2008): 105–8. According to Agan, Phoebe was sent on an official task but did not necessarily possess an official church office.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF DEACONS?

1. *Deacons as lowly, benevolent servants.* This view sees deacons first and foremost as servants who perform menial tasks in the church. They do not possess authority but work behind the scenes to ensure that the life of the church runs smoothly. They handle logistics and details that, though important, relate to the physical realm and not so much the spiritual realm. A church may have a few deacons or dozens of deacons, but this group will typically not meet together as a board, since they do not have any collective authority in the church. What support is there for this version of the diaconate?

First, many appeal to the term *διάκονος*. Commentators, for example, often note that the lexical meaning of the term is to serve in a menial capacity, such as serving tables.² For example, Mounce writes, “It is not clear what the duties of a deacon were. As their title implies, they were probably responsible for the serving duties.”³ Likewise, Hawthorne comments, “In the New Testament, *διάκονος* is elevated to the ultimate of titles to describe those involved in beneficent activity.... They would quite likely be ... primarily responsible for the more menial tasks such as taking care of the needs of the poor and the sick in the community, and those in prison.”⁴

Such commentators often relied on the influential writings of Beyer and Schweizer. Hermann Beyer wrote the entry for *διακονέω*, *διακονία*, and *διάκονος* in Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Beyer maintains, “In the NT *διακονέω* is first used in the original sense of ‘to wait at table’.... In the NT *διακονία* means 1. ‘waiting at table,’” and the first meaning he lists for *διάκονος* is “the waiter at a meal.”⁵ He later adds that the secular sense of *διάκονος* denotes “one who waits at table.”⁶ Thus, he summarizes, “The primary task of deacons was one of administration and practical service.”⁷

Another major influence on this understanding of *διάκονος* comes from Schweizer’s *Church Order in the New Testament*. He asserts that the NT authors chose the term *diakonia*, which is “a word that is entirely unbiblical and non-religious and never includes association with a particular dignity or position.”⁸ He continues, “In the development of Greek the basic meaning, ‘to serve at table’, was extended to include the more comprehensive idea of ‘serving.’ It nearly always denotes something of inferior value.”⁹ He notes that the when the authors of the NT choose the

² Kelly states, “The primary meaning in the N.T. of *diakonein*, from which ‘deacon’ is derived, is to serve in a menial capacity, such as waiting at table.” J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, BNTC (London: A. & C. Black, 1963), 80.

³ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Nashville: Word, 2000), 195.

⁴ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC 43 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 9.

⁵ Hermann W. Beyer, “*διακονέω*, *διακονία*, *διάκονος*,” *TDNT* 2:84, 87, 88.

⁶ Beyer, 2:91.

⁷ Beyer, 2:90.

⁸ Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, trans. Frank Clark (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1961), 174.

⁹ Schweizer, 174–75.

word *διάκονος*, “the basic meaning ‘to serve at table’ is still current throughout.”¹⁰ Finally, he argues, “The very choice of the word, which still clearly involves the idea of humble activity, proves that the Church wishes to denote the attitude of one who is at the service of God and his fellow-men, not a position carrying with it rights and powers.”¹¹ Thus, many modern commentators, following the work of Beyer and Schweizer, still maintain the term *διάκονος* has the basic meaning of “to wait at table” and that those who carried that title had little to no authority in the church but performed menial service-oriented tasks.

Second, many appeal to Acts 6:1–6 and the service-oriented function of the Seven who were chosen to handle the crisis of Hellenistic widows being neglected in the daily distribution of food. Although they were not explicitly called “deacons,” many maintain that they can rightly be referred to as the first deacons.¹² As such, deacons today are servants who help those in need and take care of logistical concerns so that those who are gifted to preach and teach can concentrate their efforts where God has called them.

Third, the list of qualifications in 1 Timothy reveal that, unlike the overseers or elders, the deacons do not teach (cf. 1 Tim 3:2) or lead (cf. 1 Tim 3:5) as part of their official duties. Instead, they are qualified individuals who serve the community.

Finally, many are influenced by their position regarding women and deacons. For example, complementarians who affirm that women can be deacons will also often be persuaded that deacons hold no authority in the church. The reason for this is apparent. If someone affirms that women cannot hold authoritative roles in the church (cf. 1 Tim 2:12, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man”),¹³ but also affirms that women can be deacons, then it must be argued the diaconate is a nonauthoritative office.¹⁴ Because of these reasons (and perhaps others as well), many view deacons as a servant-oriented office with little to no authority in the church.

2. *Deacons as authoritative servants.* Others consider deacons to be authoritative servants who rule over the business affairs of the church and thus are fully in charge of the physical or temporal aspect of church life. They are the ones who make the important decisions related to finances, property, and sometimes even staff. Churches that embrace this view will often have only a handful of deacons

¹⁰ Schweizer, 175.

¹¹ Schweizer, 177.

¹² For the position that the Seven of Acts 6 were deacons, see John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2019), 222; George W. Knight III, “Two Offices (Elders/Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching/Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders): A New Testament Study,” *Presb* 11 (1985): 5.

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

¹⁴ For example, Köstenberger comments, “Paul’s reference to deaconesses coheres well with his earlier prohibition of women serving in teaching or ruling functions over men (1 Tim 2:12) and reference to male overseers in vv. 1–7. Since serving as a deacon doesn’t involve teaching or ruling, both men and women are eligible to function in this capacity.” Andreas J. Köstenberger, *1–2 Timothy and Titus*, *Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2017), 134.

that often meet as a group (a board of deacons). This view is common among traditional churches, especially those with a congregational church polity.

For example, in his influential book, *The Deaconship*, R. B. C. Howell maintains that deacons “are a board of directors, and have charge of all the secular affairs in the kingdom of Christ” and that they have “full control” over the temporal or non-spiritual aspects of church life.¹⁵ Their duties include anything related to the property and finances. The deacons often function as a balance of power to the pastor(s). Similar to the three branches of the American government, the deacons constitute one branch of the church, together with the congregation and the pastor(s). As such, they are an essential component of church government and provide needed accountability to the pastor and church staff.

A variation of this category are those who affirm that deacons represent an authoritative office, not just as servants in the physical realm, but as leaders and teachers in the spiritual realm. That is, some insist that there is not much difference between the function of deacons and the function of overseers or elders, except that overseers may perhaps have a greater amount of authority. For example, based on his understanding of 1 Timothy 3:9 (“They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience”), Marshall states, “The deacons also had some share in the teaching and instruction of the congregation.”¹⁶ He later adds that this verse “strongly implies some responsibility within the gospel ministry.”¹⁷ He further notes that verse 12 and the requirement that deacons “manage their children and their household well” (NRSV) “implies that like the overseers they exercised responsibility in the church.”¹⁸

It is also no surprise that Towner affirms this same position, since Marshall collaborated with Towner in writing his (Marshall’s) commentary. Towner asserts that it is

unwise to assume that tasks of teaching and preaching were excluded from the diaconate, or that the ministry of deacons consisted mainly of practical duties in the church. Almost certainly the insistence that candidates for the diaconate be deeply committed to ‘the mystery of the faith’ (3:9) presumes participation in the ministry of teaching and preaching. And the requirement of proficiency in household management in 3:12, parallel to 3:4–5, suggests leadership responsibility in the church. As pointed out above, we should probably understand the deacon’s task as being that of assisting the overseer/supervisor in administration, leadership, and teaching within the church.¹⁹

According to Marshall and Towner, the deacons were servants who had authoritative ministries that included preaching and teaching. Others view the authority of

¹⁵ R. B. C. Howell, *The Deaconship* (1846; repr., Rochester, NY: Backus, 1984), 11, 12; see also 69, 81.

¹⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 485.

¹⁷ Marshall, 487–88.

¹⁸ Marshall, 488.

¹⁹ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 262; cf. also 267. See also R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 200.

deacons as limited to the material affairs of the church. Regardless, these two positions have been considered together because they both see deacons as authoritative office-holders.

Having discussed various views of the role of deacons today, this essay will argue that deacons held an official and authoritative, yet nonessential and subordinate, position in the Pauline churches. I will support this thesis by considering: (1) the official title of deacons; (2) the official function of deacons; (3) the official qualifications of deacons; and (4) the official period of testing and honorable standing of deacons.

THE OFFICIAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ROLE OF DEACONS

1. *An official title.* First, deacons are given an official title. In Philippians 1:1, Paul addresses the congregation in Philippi along with the “overseers and deacons.” Additionally, in 1 Timothy 3, after Paul provides the qualifications for overseers (vv. 2–7), he offers the qualifications for deacons (vv. 8–13). It is also possible, many would say likely, that Phoebe is given this title (Rom 16:1).²⁰ One reason for recognizing that those called “deacons” held an official title is that in both Philippians 1 and 1 Timothy 3, the term is paired with “overseers,” another formal office in the church.²¹

An official title is viewed as one of the key characteristics associated with an office. Indeed, the elements considered constitutive for an office include: (1) permanency; (2) authority; (3) title; (4) payment; and (5) appointment.²² The first three elements (permanence, authority, and title) may be regarded as representing the essential qualities of “office” and are naturally bound together with the other components. For example, if a leader is given a permanent position in the church, this position assumes recognition by the congregation and carries with it some type of authority. Likewise, when leaders are publicly recognized for their work, this recognition often entails an element of permanence. Also, along with this recognition comes authority, especially when a title is given. Holmberg comments, “The mere

²⁰ Collins, for example, argues that Phoebe held the title and was therefore “under an obligation to her community at Cenchræa to carry out a particular task when she reached Rome. We note, however, that she would have been called *diakonos* only for the duration of her particular mandate.” John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2002), 90.

²¹ See Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, StBibLit 57 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003). Barnett writes, “That [bishops and deacons] were singled out is in itself a strong indication that they were recognized officials of the Church at Philippi.” James Monroe Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order* (New York: Seabury, 1981), 31.

²² See Ulrich Brockhaus, *Charisma und Amt: Die paulinische Charismenlehre auf dem Hintergrund der frühchristlichen Gemeindefunktionen*, Wissenschaftliche Taschenbücher 8 (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1972), 24–25n106, 123; Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 109–12. Brockhaus lists the following elements: (1) permanence (*Dauer*), (2) authority (*Autorität*), (3) title (*Titel*), (4) legitimization by letters of recommendation (*Legitimierung Empfehlungsbriefe*), (5) special position (*Sonderstellung*), and (6) payment (*Bezahlung*) (Brockhaus, *Charisma und Amt*, 123). Earlier he mentions a legal element (*rechtliche Element*), which involved a legal securing of the function in question (25n106). See also Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer*, 91–94.

existence of titles is in itself an indication of the permanency and general acknowledgement of a function, and its position apart in relation to the church.”²³ So, the fact that those who serve as deacons are given a title indicates a certain amount of authority that would be granted with such a title.

But what about the lexical meaning of the word *διάκονος*? Does not the term itself convey the opposite idea of authority? Does it not instead describe one who is a lowly servant in the church? Both Collins and Agan have convincingly demonstrated that *διάκονος* does not necessarily describe one who is a lowly servant and that the root meaning of the term does not mean “to wait tables,” though such thinking is still commonly repeated so that it remains the majority view in many circles.

John Collins, in his work *Diakonia*, has demonstrated that the word group of *διάκονος* does not necessarily (or even primarily) refer to table attendance. Rather, after examining over 450 occurrences of the *διακον-* word group from approximately 90 different authors ranging from the 6th century BC to the 5th century AD, he concludes that the words occur in three main contexts: (1) message (go-between, spokesperson, courier); (2) agency (agent, instrument, medium); and (3) attendance (attendant).²⁴ He states, “The meaning ‘to wait at table’ is not basic ... but is merely one expression of the general notion of ‘go-between.’”²⁵ Furthermore, this word group speaks “of a mode of activity rather than of the status of the person performing the activity. Thus they are not expressions of lowliness or servitude, nor in Christian usage did the idea of doing benevolent action accrue to the idea of ministering.”²⁶ Rather, the underlying notion is “activity of an in-between kind.”²⁷

The basic meaning relates not to one who performs menial or servile tasks but one who serves as a go-between or representative. As Collins explains, “Because the root idea expressed by the words is that of the go-between, the words do not necessarily involve the idea of ‘humble activity’ at all, and never express the idea of being ‘at the service of’ one’s fellow man with what that phrase implies of benevolence.”²⁸ Thus, although the terms can be used in a servile context, the

²³ Holmberg, *Paul and Power*, 110.

²⁴ John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 335. The words above given in parentheses represent the noun *διάκονος*. Glosses given for *διακονία* include (1) errand; (2) commission, execution of a task, mediation; and (3) act of attendance, performance of a task, task. Glosses given for the verb *διακονέω* include (1) to be a go-between, to perform an errand, to deliver; (2) to effect, to officiate, to mediate; and (3) to attend, to fetch, to go away to do something.

²⁵ Collins, *Diakonia*, 335.

²⁶ Collins, *Diakonia*, 335. Elsewhere he writes, “In none of all this usage, was there any suggestion that the services were being provided out of love or benevolence.” Collins, *Deacons and the Church*, 87.

²⁷ Collins, *Diakonia*, 335.

²⁸ Collins, *Diakonia*, 194. He also states, “The sense ‘to serve at table’ cannot be called ‘the basic meaning’ [Schweizer’s phrase] ... and the more comprehensive idea of ‘serving’ is vague and inadequate. If the words denote actions or positions or ‘inferior value,’ there is at the same time often the connotation of something special, even dignified, about the circumstance” (194; cf. also 93–95).

διακον- word group carries no necessary sense of servitude, lowliness, or an inferior status.²⁹ Instead, the root sense is that of representation or agency.³⁰

More recently, Clarence D. Agan has investigated the use of διάκονος and its cognates.³¹ His study focuses on texts from the 3rd century BC to the 2nd century AD. By using *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG), he was able to include more than 150 additional instances of the word group. His findings basically affirm the work of Collins, though he (and others, like Clarke) finds the servant motif to be more prominent in the NT usage. He includes four main categories of meaning:

1. *Table attendance*: A waiter, server, or attendant with the duties of “the handling, preparation, and/or distribution of food or drink” (Matt 22:13; Luke 22:27; Acts 6:1–6).³²
2. *Domestic attendance*: A domestic servant or slave who performs “household duties ... ranging from personal attendance on a master to the routine performance of various chores” (Matt 20:26–28; 25:44; Mark 10:43–45).³³
3. *Communication or delivery*: an officially commissioned ambassador, messenger, envoy, or courier who delivers “a message or object by one party to another, on behalf of a third” (1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:3).³⁴
4. *Agency or instrumentality*: a subordinate with delegated authority who carries out an appointed task on behalf of a superior (Rom 13:4; 2 Cor 11:15; Gal 2:17; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8, 12; 1 Pet 4:10).³⁵

Notice that Agan includes Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8–13 with the fourth category of agency or instrumentality. The four categories all “share the semantic component of ‘mediation.’”³⁶ Thus, he agrees with Collins except that “Collins may have moved further away from the concept of ‘lowliness’ than the data will allow.”³⁷ He concludes, “The διάκονος may have been an ‘agent’ or ‘assistant’

²⁹ Collins, *Diakonia*, 75.

³⁰ However, he notes, “so far as the common noun is concerned, the notion of agency is not widely represented in the Christian usage of the period.” Collins, *Diakonia*, 243.

³¹ Clarence DeWitt Agan, “Like the One Who Serves: Jesus, Servant-Likeness, and Self-Humiliation in the Gospel of Luke” (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 1999); Agan, “Deacons, Deaconesses, and Denominational Discussions,” 93–108.

³² Agan, “Deacons, Deaconesses, and Denominational Discussions,” 104; cf. 99. See also Agan, “Like the One Who Serves,” 105–19. Instances associated with this usage demonstrate that the “terms do not denote, and need not connote, menial status, as non-slaves can be said to render table service without any implication of lowliness” (112). And yet, the terminology “can indeed bear associations of social subordination, due to the fact that table-service is often considered a task proper to slaves” (112).

³³ Agan, “Deacons, Deaconesses, and Denominational Discussions,” 103; cf. 99–100. See also Agan, “Like the One Who Serves,” 92–105. Regarding domestic attendance, he concludes that “none of these instances of the verb involves any notion of beneficence” (94).

³⁴ Agan, “Deacons, Deaconesses, and Denominational Discussions,” 103; cf. 100–101. See also Agan, “Like the One Who Serves,” 76–84.

³⁵ Agan, “Deacons, Deaconesses, and Denominational Discussions,” 101–3. See also Agan, “Like the One Who Serves,” 84–92.

³⁶ Agan, “Like the One Who Serves,” 76.

³⁷ Agan, “Like the One Who Serves,” 74.

of the *ἐπίσκοπος*, having full authority to carry out tasks which were necessary yet subordinate to the latter's duties of spiritual oversight.³⁸

The meaning of *διάκονος* as a subordinate who carries out the task of a superior is also reflected in the third edition of Bauer's lexicon (BDAG) which describes a *διάκονος* as "one who gets someth[ing] done, at the behest of a superior, *assistant* to someone."³⁹ BDAG lists possible glosses as *attendant*, *assistant*, *aide*, specifically citing Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8, 12. Furthermore, other scholars have translated or glossed *διάκονος* as "assistant" (or something similar).⁴⁰

Thus, because those who serve as deacons are given an official title—which is not given to every member in the church—they are set aside as those with some sort of authority.⁴¹ Based on the lexical meaning of the term, it is best to view deacons as those who perform tasks given to them by a superior. As such, deacons are not simply lowly servants who take care of menial tasks or those who are leaders over the physical or material affairs of the church. Rather, as Strauch insists, "deacons clearly occupy a position of recognized authority and lead in certain official duties."⁴² Yet, as we will see next, deacons have a delegated authority under the overseers or elders.

2. *An official function.* Because *διάκονος* is used as an official title in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8 and 12 (and possibly Romans 16:1), it then follows that those with such a designation would have an official function. The problem is that we have little information in regard to the tasks that deacons should perform. In contrast, the qualification that overseers must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2; cf. 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:9) suggests they have a teaching ministry. Additionally, the requirement that only those who manage their own households well should be given responsibility of caring for the church (1 Tim 3:4–5) suggests that overseers have a leadership ministry. With deacons, however, this analogy is omitted. And yet, there are certain clues that provide us with helpful information regarding the role or function of deacons.

³⁸ Agan, "Like the One Who Serves," 92.

³⁹ BDAG 230–31. Definition (1) "one who serves as an intermediary in a transaction." Glosses: agent, intermediary, courier (230).

⁴⁰ Collins, *Diakonia*, 236, 243 ("attendant"); Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 81; E. F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), 34; Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 262, 267; Joseph H. Hellerman, *Philippians*, EGGNT (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 12. Edgar Goodspeed translated the terms as "assistants" in Philippians 1:1 and in 1 Timothy 3 in *The New Testament: An American Translation*: "Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the devoted adherents of Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the superintendents and assistants" (Phil 1:1); "Assistants, in turn, must be.... The assistants must be only once married, and manage their children and their households well. For those who do good service as assistants gain a good standing for themselves and great confidence in their faith in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 3:8, 12–13).

⁴¹ Collins is convinced that the presence of deacons in Philippi, along with overseers, suggests that they are agents of the overseers. He continues, "It also suggests that the term is an honorific, if not a technical, title." Collins, *Diakonia*, 236. See also Robert J. Cara, "Justification of Ordained Office of Deacons Restricted to Qualified Males," *Reformed Faith and Practice* 5.3 (2020): 36.

⁴² Alexander Strauch, *Paul's Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God's Church* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 2017), 51.

First, when the term *διάκονος* is used as a title of an office, it is often associated with, and mentioned after, overseers. This coupling and subsequent placement suggests that deacons have an official role that is connected *and* subordinate to the overseers. Collins writes, “The most instructive fact would be that the passage about deacons follows one about the ‘overseer’; even if this indicates little more than that the two offices are in some way coordinated, it would at least suggest that the deacon is the assistant of the other.”⁴³ According to Marshall, “The deacon’s relation to the overseer is unclear, but the order of mention in both passages and the comparative brevity of the description may well suggest a subordinate appointment.”⁴⁴ Thus, the position of the term after “overseer” suggests that the deacons are subordinate to the overseers.⁴⁵

Following the work of Collins and Agan, many scholars affirm that the deacons functioned as the assistants to the overseers. Although Andrew Clarke does not completely endorse the position of Collins, since he (like Agan) maintains that the emphasis on the servile nature of the term is found in the Gospels and Pauline texts,⁴⁶ he states, “Those interpreters who assume *διακονία* always carries menial or servile connotations are incorrect.”⁴⁷ Because deacons are mentioned in the plural and because they do not have a teaching role, “it may reasonably be deduced that the overseer had greater responsibility than the deacon, but that there is a measure of overlap in their spheres of duty.”⁴⁸

Likewise, Ferguson maintains, “The name ‘deacon’ suggests that these are assistants who serve under the supervision of the bishops/elders.”⁴⁹ He later adds, “Deacons are agents of the bishops and intermediaries between them and the members of the congregation, and in this work they represent and mediate the servanthood of Jesus.”⁵⁰ In addition, Towner agrees that the term “deacon” not only indicates one who is commissioned by a superior, operating with delegated authority, but, specifically in the NT, includes “the sense of service as an assistant

⁴³ Collins, *Diakonia*, 237.

⁴⁴ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 488. Strauch similarly notes, “When referenced together, deacons always follow the overseers in order of mention, suggesting that deacons work under the supervision of the church overseers.” Strauch, *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons*, 24; see also 52–65. He also states, “The *diakonoi* assist the *episkopoi* by officially representing the overseers and standing ready to carry out tasks delegated by the overseers” (57). Yet, the deacons are not the personal servants of the overseers/elders (58).

⁴⁵ See also D. Edmond Hiebert, “Behind the Word ‘Deacon’: A New Testament Study,” *B Sac* 140.558 (1983): 154. Agan states, “Viewing deacons as agents who carry out duties on behalf of overseers explains i) the consistent association of *διάκονοι* with *ἐπίσκοποι*; ii) the subordination of the former to the latter; and iii) the respect due the former despite their subordinate position.” Agan, “Like the One Who Serves,” 148.

⁴⁶ Andrew D. Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 66–67; Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 245.

⁴⁷ Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership*, 67.

⁴⁸ Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership*, 70.

⁴⁹ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 335–36.

⁵⁰ Ferguson, 337.

to a supervisor.”⁵¹ He reasons that “the order of treatment and the greater attention given to the overseer suggests that the role of deacons should be regarded as a subordinate position and an assistantship in some sense.”⁵² In contrast, Mounce denies any sign of subordination in the text. He states, “There is no suggestion in the text that the deacon is subordinate to the overseer.”⁵³ But his understanding ignores the possibility of interpreting *διάκονος* as assistant, attendant, or aide and ignores the position of the term in conjunction with and after the overseer.

a. *An obvious and needed function.* Because no duties or specific responsibilities are stated in the list of qualifications, this suggests that the tasks or type of service would have been known. This lack of specification makes more sense if the understood task of deacons is to assist the overseers, which is perhaps why there are no specific tasks assigned to the deacons. The deacons are needed to help the overseers or elders do what is needed so that they are not over-burdened in their teaching and shepherding the church.

We should also emphasize that deacons are needed in most churches. The work of overseeing (teaching, shepherding, mentoring, etc.) a church is difficult and time-consuming. Thus, the strenuous labor of leaders lends itself to needing assistants. Paul reminds the church at Ephesus that those elders who rule well should “be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim 5:17). Leading (especially via preaching and teaching) the church is hard work. Deacons function to help ease the burden on the leaders by giving them needed assistance to carry out important tasks.

b. *A nonessential function.* While we recognize that the function of deacons is to assist the overseers, we must also note that deacons have a nonessential role in the church. That is, a church need not have deacons to function properly as a church. A church, especially in its earliest stages, can be constituted as a church without deacons. On the other hand, overseers or elders are essential leaders who teach and shepherd the congregation. The rationale for such a view is based on the terms themselves and also the lack of any reference to deacons in several places where Paul planted churches.

On Paul’s first missionary journey, Luke informs his readers that Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23). Deacons are never mentioned at this early stage of church-planting. Later, after Paul visited Crete but then apparently left prematurely, he instructs Titus to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). Again, there is no mention of deacons. Although these two examples are arguments from silence, the silence is noticeable, since it comes through multiple witnesses. These young churches did not initially have deacons because they did not need them.⁵⁴ As the churches—and the accompanying prob-

⁵¹ Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 261.

⁵² Towner, 261. Others who affirm a similar position include Scott, *Pastoral Epistles*, 34, 37; Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 80–81; Köstenberger, *1–2 Timothy and Titus*, 132.

⁵³ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 196; see also 206–7.

⁵⁴ Knight states, “Tit. 1:5 suggests that the church in Crete had been established only a short time and was still virtually unorganized. In such a situation, only the initial rank of officers is prescribed, i.e.,

lems—grew, the need for deacons also grew.⁵⁵ Collins, for example, states, “From the nature of the terms, *episkopoi* could operate without *diakonoi* but *diakonoi* could not operate without some such mandating functionary as an *episkopos*.”⁵⁶ So, although overseers do not need the deacons to function properly in the local church, “the deacons must stand in relationship to some person or some body of people for direction.”⁵⁷

3. *An official list of qualifications.* A third way that we can better understand the role of deacons in Pauline churches is to consider the significance of the list of qualifications. The list is generally similar to that for overseers, suggesting that it is an official list for an authoritative office.⁵⁸ That is, just as overseers must meet certain requirements in order to be given the responsibility of their office, so also deacons must meet specific qualifications in order to be selected for their office. The similarity of these lists suggests the official nature of the diaconate.

First Timothy 3:8 begins with the words, “Deacons, likewise.” The term “likewise” (*ὡσαύτως*) demonstrates both continuity and discontinuity with what follows. It demonstrates continuity in that the term signals that Paul is about to supply qualifications for another office (“An overseer must be . . . Deacons, likewise, must be”). The connection between these two sections is also demonstrated by the lack of a verb in verse 8. The verb must be supplied from verse 2 (*δεῖ εἶναι*, “must be”).⁵⁹ Just as overseers must meet certain qualifications, so also deacons must meet certain (similar) qualifications.

The similarity of the qualifications for deacons to those of overseers suggests that, like the office of overseer, the office of deacon carries some authority. First, both lists include the requirement that the officeholder be “blameless.” Although two different terms are used (*ἀνεπίλημπτος*, 1 Tim 3:2; *ἀνέγκλητος*, v. 10), they are near synonyms.⁶⁰ Their synonymity is demonstrated by the use of *ἀνέγκλητος* in the list for elders/overseers in Titus 1:6–7. Second, both overseers and deacons must each be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim 3:2, 12),⁶¹ and they must manage their own household and children well (vv. 4, 12). Finally, both lists include similar characteristics of being “respectable” (*κόσμιον*, v. 2) or “dignified” (*σεμνός*, v. 8),

the bishops/presbyters.” George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 175.

⁵⁵ Marshall reasons, “There is no mention of deacons in Titus, which might mean that the emergence (and/or necessity) of the office was related to the size and complexity of the church, larger and older churches perhaps requiring delegation of duties (cf. Acts 6.1–6).” Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 488. See also Köstenberger, *1–2 Timothy and Titus*, 479.

⁵⁶ Collins, *Deacons and the Church*, 92.

⁵⁷ Strauch, *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons*, 25; see also 56–57.

⁵⁸ Ferguson comments, “A clear indication of a special class of functionaries in the church is the presence of a list of qualifications by which they are distinguished from others.” Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 335.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 168. Titus 1:7 is similar to 1 Timothy 3:2: *δεῖ γὰρ τὸν ἐπίσκοπον . . . εἶναι*.

⁶⁰ See also 1 Timothy 5:7, where *ἀνεπίλημπτος* is also used as a qualification for widows seeking support from the church.

⁶¹ See also Titus 1:6; cf. 1 Timothy 5:9, where widows must be *ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνή*.

“not a drunkard” (μὴ πάροιον μὴ πλήκτην, v. 3) or “not addicted to much wine” (μὴ οἶνω πολλῷ προσέχοντας, v. 8), “not a lover of money” (ἀφιλάργυρον, v. 3) or “not greedy for dishonest gain” (μὴ αἰσχροκερδεῖς, v. 8), and “must not be a recent convert” (v. 6) or “must first be tested” (v. 10 NIV).

But the term “likewise” not only compares the two offices, it also distinguishes them. That is, by having two different titles with two unique lists of qualifications, the two terms signify that deacons are noticeably distinct from the overseers. They do not have the same function or authority in the church. The deacons are assistants to the overseers and do what is necessary to help the overseers flourish in their ministry.

Thus, while many of the qualifications are similar for both offices, the differences should not be ignored. As mentioned above, noticeably missing is the one skill-based requirement for deacons to be able to teach (cf. 1 Tim 3:2). Although verse 9 indicates that deacons must “hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience,” they are not required to formally teach the faith.⁶² Rather, Paul is indicating that deacons must know well the basics of the Christian faith (“hold the mystery of the faith”) and must also live according to those beliefs with a life of integrity (“with a clear conscience”). Unfortunately, both Marshall and Towner read into the text more than it can bear. They maintain that Paul is suggesting indirectly that deacons are involved in the ministry of preaching and teaching (see comments made in the introduction above).⁶³ For example, based on verse 9, Marshall reasons that “the deacons also had some share in the teaching and instruction of the congregation.”⁶⁴ But the needed qualification is given to highlight the candidate’s knowledge of the faith and character, not his teaching ability. That is, his conduct must be commensurate with his profession.

Another difference between the overseers and deacons is that deacons do not lead the church. Although both groups must “manage their children and their own households well” (1 Tim 3:12; cf. v. 4), the additional parallel of verse 5 sets it distinctly apart. To the requirement of managing one’s household and children well, Paul adds, “For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (v. 5). The analogy between leading/managing one’s household and caring for the church suggests that overseers are leaders of the church just as they are leaders over their families. With deacons, however, this comparison is lacking. Consequently, it presses the evidence to claim, as does Towner, that the verse “suggests leadership responsibility in the church.”⁶⁵ He later adds, “The concern for this management ability suggests that deacons carried out significant leadership duties in service to the overseers, or perhaps (if overseers supervised a cluster of house churches in a locality) on a par with overseers but in a

⁶² A “mystery” is a secret that is now revealed in the new covenant era in which Christ is the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel and the nations (cf. Rom 16:24–25).

⁶³ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 487–88; Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 262.

⁶⁴ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 485.

⁶⁵ Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 262.

more limited sphere (the house church).⁶⁶ Although Marshall and Towner are correct in viewing deacons as more than just lowly servants who perform menial tasks, they attempt to endow these officers with more authority than is warranted. And yet, the fact that certain qualifications must be met adds weight to the authority of the office.

4. *An official period of testing and an honorable standing.*

a. *An official period of testing.* Finally, the official testing period and the honorable standing of deacons who serve well suggest an official office with a certain amount of authority. In 1 Timothy 3:10, Paul indicates that diaconal candidates “must also be tested first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons” (CSB). If deacons are merely servants without authority, then why would a testing period be needed?

We are not provided details concerning this testing period. How long should it last? What does it involve? Who should do the testing? Mounce comments, “At a minimum the testing entailed some sort of formal examination: the candidate’s background, reputation, and adherence to the mystery of the gospel would be checked.”⁶⁷ The purpose of the test is to determine the candidate’s viability. In other words, does the candidate meet the stated requirements in 1 Timothy 3:8–13? This is not an additional requirement but a way to ensure that the requirements are taken seriously. Towner notes, “This is not some new additional, unspecified test, but rather (as the desired outcome, ‘if they are blameless,’ shows) it is the assessment of the candidate’s life and testimony on the basis of the qualifications set out in the code that is in mind.”⁶⁸ The imperative with the adverb, *δοκιμαζέσθωσαν πρῶτον* (“let them first be tested”), signals that this test is not optional. The conditional component, *ἀνέγκλητοι ὄντες* (“if they are blameless”),⁶⁹ signals that only if they pass the test, then (and only then) are they allowed to serve as deacons. Once a candidate successfully passes the test, that person can be installed as a deacon. This period of testing thus adds to the weight of the office, demonstrating that it is a position which possesses some authority in the church.⁷⁰

b. *An honorable standing.* At the end of the list of qualifications, Paul states that deacons who perform their tasks well “gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 3:13). Although

⁶⁶ Towner, 267.

⁶⁷ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 201.

⁶⁸ Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 265. Marshall similarly states, “The test covers the whole record of the candidate’s conduct and faith. This can be examined by the congregation by applying the code, vv. 8–12.” Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 492.

⁶⁹ The participle *ὄντες* is taken as conditional. See, e.g., Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 633; Andreas Köstenberger, Benjamin L. Merkle, and Robert L. Plummer, *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek: An Intermediate Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H, 2020), 334.

⁷⁰ Strauch comments, “We cannot account for deacon qualifications and the necessity for public examination unless deacons hold some official position of public trust or exercise some specialized ministry for which only certain people qualify. Thus there must be something very significant about the deacons’ ministry that requires both specific, elder-like qualifications and verification of such qualifications by the church and its leaders.” Strauch, *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons*, 26.

Paul lists two positive outcomes (i.e., “good standing,” and “great confidence”), we will focus solely on the first. What does it mean that deacons “gain a good standing for themselves”? More precisely, before whom does one gain a good standing? Before God or before the community? Although the former is possible, the latter is the better option.⁷¹ That is, Paul is declaring that deacons who exercise their duties rightly are to be commended by the community of believers. Towner comments that a “good/excellent standing” means “to be esteemed, or held in high regard” in the church.⁷² Thus, those who serve well as deacons are to be held in high esteem by the church community. Such a standing will naturally result in greater influence and authority, even if not officially.

CONCLUSION

I have sought to argue that deacons neither have little to no authority as those who merely perform menial tasks, nor do they have nearly absolute power over the physical affairs of the church or have almost equal authority to the overseers or elders. By considering their (1) official title, (2) official function, (3) official qualifications, and (4) official period of testing and honorable standing, I have argued that deacons in the Pauline churches possessed an official and authoritative position that was at the same time subordinate and nonessential. That is, deacons had limited authority as the assistants of the overseers or elders.

What does it mean that the office of deacon is a position of authority? First, the authority of deacons is related to their responsibility. Typically, we know individuals have authority over something or someone is because they are the ones responsible for that thing or person. Thus, we could say that deacons have various responsibilities authoritatively given to them by the overseers. Second, the authority of deacons is a different kind of authority than that of the overseers. That is, it is not simply a subordinate authority of the same type but a qualitatively different kind of authority. The office does not include authority in teaching and preaching or shepherding and leading. Third, the authority of deacons could be summarized as follows: (1) It is a God-given authority (they are called by God and affirmed by the church). (2) It is an official authority (they are given an office with a title and therefore possess an official position). (3) It is not a teaching or shepherding au-

⁷¹ So Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 495–96; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 205–6; Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 84–85; Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 89; Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 288; Strauch, *Paul's Vision for the Deacons*, 147. Reasons for the view that Paul is referring to a good standing before the community include: (1) the relationship to the second half of the verse, which speaks of the deacons' boldness in the faith (Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 496; Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 89); (2) the parallel with Jesus's teaching of greatness or recognition and service in the community (Mark 10:43–44; Luke 22:26–27; Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 496); (3) the correlation with the false teachers who had a reprehensible reputation in the community and whose heretical behavior led to shipwrecked faith instead of confidence (Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 205); and (4) “In this closing summary about deacons, their *fine standing* corresponds to the *fine work* of a bishop as the verb *gain* corresponds to *aspires/sets his heart on*” (Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 288).

⁷² Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 268.

thority (their authority is limited). (4) It is a delegated authority (they are under the authority of the overseers and are responsible to them and to the congregation). (5) It is a nonessential authority (churches can function properly, though perhaps not efficiently or effectively, without deacons).

If that is the case, then why do so many not affirm this position? The following three reasons contribute to an insufficient view of deacons. The first factor that can influence one's view regarding the diaconate is an improper view of the lexical range of *διάκονος*. Although the work of Collins has been available for more than thirty years, and although subsequent work has confirmed his basic conclusions, the view that *διάκονος* is best understood as "assistant" or "aide" still appears to be unknown in most churches and is still not acknowledged in many commentaries.

The second factor that can affect one's position regarding the diaconate relates to one's view of the role of women in the church. Complementarians who do not affirm that women can hold authoritative positions in the church, but who believe that women can be deacons, tend to downplay of the authority of deacons. Other complementarians who reject that women can be deacons usually have a higher view of the authority of deacons. But it seems to me that this is a case of the tail wagging the dog. Our view of deacons should not be governed by our view of women in ministry.⁷³

The third factor that can impact one's view of the diaconate is interpreting Paul's vision for deacons through the grid of Acts 6:1–6. In other words, many believe that the Seven in Acts 6 are the first deacons. Because Paul does not indicate specific tasks or responsibilities of deacons, such details are often taken from Acts 6. Hammett lists several arguments in favor of this traditional view, which affirms that Acts 6 reveals the first deacons:⁷⁴ (1) Although the term *διάκονος* is not used, the cognate noun *διακονία* ("service, ministry, waiting at table") and cognate verb *διακονέω* ("serve, wait upon at table") are both used (vv. 1–2). (2) The qualifications for the Seven to be "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (v. 3) and that Stephen was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (v. 5) are generally commensurate with character-focused requirements in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. (3) If the Seven in Acts 6 do not provide the origin of the diaconate, then there is no precedent in Scripture or Jewish society of an office that became widely and readily accepted. (4) There is solid historical support for the diaconate being linked to Acts 6.

The evidence offered by the traditional approach, however, is not convincing. Although cognates of *διάκονος* do appear in Acts 6 (*διακονία* and *διακονέω*), the Seven are never labeled with that specific term.⁷⁵ It is too far a leap to link use of a

⁷³ I am not suggesting that there is not a proper relationship between the authority of deacons and the role of women in ministry but only that such a relationship should not be determinative of the authority of deacons. Collins has also noticed this tendency: "Many of those who support women's inclusion in official ministry have insistently appealed to a theology of ministry as service, arguing that the serving role is characteristically feminine and that early Christian women were in fact preeminent in this role. The appeal collapses, of course, in the light of the present study." Collins, *Diakonia*, 261.

⁷⁴ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 222.

⁷⁵ Mounce comments, "It is tempting to compare deacons to the seven Hellenists... However, these Hellenists are never called *διάκονοι*, 'deacons.'" Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 196. Fee likewise states,

cognate term (e.g., *διακονία*) with the more technical use of *διάκονος*. Otherwise, we could make an argument that the apostles might have been the first deacons since *διακονία* is also used in Acts 6 in connection with their duties as those who devoted themselves “to prayer and to the ministry (*διακονία*) of the word” (v. 4). Furthermore, there is nothing in Paul’s writings to suggest that deacons were involved in benevolence (waiting on tables or distributing food). Therefore, there is a near consensus among scholars that it is inappropriate to label the Seven in Acts 6 as the first deacons. For example, Clarke asserts, “The popular association with the temporary difficulties associated with the Jerusalem church in Acts 6:1–6 is an unhelpful background that has led many to hold that the duties of deacons were practical and administrative. There is nothing in the Pauline corpus to suggest this.”⁷⁶

Although a direct link of the diaconate to the Seven of Acts 6 is difficult to establish, a looser connection seems appropriate. That is, the reason the apostles deemed it necessary to appoint the Seven to deal with the neglected Hellenistic widows was so that they could focus on “preaching the word of God” (v. 2) and devote themselves “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (v. 4). In the end, the Seven were appointed to help the apostles so that they could remain true to their primary calling. The key element here is not that the Seven were focused on benevolence or helping the poor, but rather that they were coming alongside the apostles to assist them in leading and ministering to the church. Thus, Acts 6 becomes relevant to the discussion of deacons not because the Seven were the first deacons, nor because deacons, like the Seven, should focus primarily on benevolence. Rather, the connection between the two involves how one group was needed (the Seven) to assist another group who were the primary leaders (apostles). Similarly, in some Pauline churches, the deacons were needed to assist the overseers in the duties of leading the church.⁷⁷ Thus, the specific tasks of the deacons would be

“An appeal to Acts 6:1–6 is of no value, since those men are not called deacons.” Fee, *1–2 Timothy and Titus*, 86. See also I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, TNIC 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 126; David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 228; Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 249n221; John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC 26 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 182; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 259; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 330; Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 241–42.

⁷⁶ Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership*, 76. Towner similarly states, “The roots of the formal position of the deacons are not easily linked to the table-waiting server in Acts 6:1–6.” Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 261. Along the same lines, Strauch writes, “The problem with trying to connect the Seven of Acts 6 with the latter deacons is that neither Luke nor Paul state such a connection.” Strauch, *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons*, 70.

⁷⁷ Tom Thatcher notes, “Persons exhibiting gifts which were particularly valuable to the life of the Pauline churches apparently received an official position of responsibility and authority after being subjected to ethical scrutiny. The association of the deacon with the overseer in both contexts suggests a secondary, technical role, parallel to the relationship between the Twelve and the Seven in Acts 6. Like the apostles, Paul’s overseers were responsible for the spiritual and pastoral care of the Christian community; Paul’s deacons, like the Seven, presumably possessed the technical skills necessary to the accomplishment of the spiritual vision provided by the overseers. The specific functions and duties of each deacon would vary, depending on the particular service gifts which that individual possessed.” Tom

determined by the overseers or elders based on the church's need at that particular time and place.⁷⁸

This basic understanding is similar to what others have suggested. For example, although Ferguson maintains that the use of *διακονέω* in Acts 6:2 "lends little support to the idea that these men were the first deacons," he adds that the passage does support "the principle of a differentiation of function in the ministry of the church."⁷⁹ He rightly warns, however, that "the division between the temporal and spiritual can be overdrawn."⁸⁰ Similarly, although Marshall insists that in Acts 6:1–6 "there is no evidence of the continuance of this practice/office; and the use of *διακονέω* in reference to practical service (v. 2) cannot be understood in a technical sense," he continues by stating that it may be "that the division of labour which Luke describes in Acts 6 corresponds to a distinction between the work of two groups of church leaders in his own day."⁸¹ It is not accurate to claim that Acts 6 reveals to us the first deacons in the early church. What is more likely is that the Pauline churches found a helpful pattern of the division of labor with the creation of one group to come alongside and assist an existing group so that the latter could continue to lead unimpeded by difficulties and distractions.

Because of the lack of information regarding the status and function of deacons, many have looked to Acts 6 for answers, claiming either that deacons perform menial tasks (such as waiting at table) and thus have little or no authority, or that they are fully in charge of the physical concerns of the church and endowed with much authority. This study has demonstrated that NT deacons were probably somewhere in the middle of those two extremes: they were subordinate to the overseers or elders and served as their assistants. But as such, they possessed a certain authority as titled, qualified, tested, and honored members of the body of Christ.

Thatcher, "The Deacon in the Pauline Church," in *Christ's Victorious Church: Essays on Biblical Ecclesiology and Eschatology in Honor of Tom Friskney*, ed. Jon A. Weatherly (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 57–58. I would add to the last statement the words "and the particular needs of the congregation."

⁷⁸ As Strauch notes, "The help of qualified, approved assistants who have the authority to carry out tasks delegated by the pastor elders relieves the elders of certain demanding tasks and helps them to keep their focus on their primary ministry of leading and feeding God's flock." Strauch, *Paul's Vision for the Deacons*, 74. He also writes, "The deacons do what the elders assign them to do so as to allow the elders to focus more on feeding, leading, and protecting God's flock" (70).

⁷⁹ Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 336.

⁸⁰ Ferguson, 336.

⁸¹ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 487.