WHAT IS A DEACON IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Acts 6:3&4 “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

Various Ideas of What Deacons Are

In Catholic churches Deacons are ordained ministers in an order ranking below that of a priest. They can preside over everything but baptism and communion (Mass). Currently they are always men, but up until about the seventh century the Catholic church had female Deacons and is considering having them again.

In Methodist churches deacons are ordained ministers who can preside over everything but baptism and communion. They can be either men or women.

Baptist churches typically have one ordained Elder, whom they call the pastor, and a Board of Deacons who are in charge of the overall ministry of the church. They are almost always men.

New Testament Church Offices

All believers are priests: I Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Revelation 1:5b&6 To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

I Peter 2:4&5 As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

All believers are priests. Hebrews teaches us that Jesus is our High Priest. The concept of clergy and laity is not found in the New Testament nor is the concept of ordination as it is practiced in most denominations.

The Elders (Overseers) are in charge of the overall ministry of the church. There is no hierarchy above them. (Paul had associates who worked under his leadership.)

I Peter 5:1 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and witness of Christ’s sufferings who will also share in the glory to be revealed.

John 1:42 And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter.)

Galatians 2:9a James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars,

Galatians 2:11&12 When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.

The First Deacons

The Greek word translated as “deacon” is *“diakonos.” “Diakonia”* (service-ministry)is what a *“diakonos”* does. The verb is *“diakoneo”* which means to serve or to minister.

Although Acts 6:1&2 does not use *“diakonos”* it uses both *“diakonia”* and *“diakoneo”* which I have added in parentheses. “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution *(“diakonia”)* of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on *(“diakoneo”)* tables.’ “

Acts 6:3&4 “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry *(“diakonia”)* of the word.” (parenthesis added)

The Seven were chosen when there was important work that needed to be done that the Apostles had been doing, but that was now interfering with their primary responsibilities, prayer and the ministry of the word.

Ephesians 4:11&12 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service *(“diakonia”)*, so that the body of Christ may be built up (parenthesis added)

I Peter 4:10&11a Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve *(“diakoneo”)* others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves *(“diakoneo”),* they should do so with the strength God provides,

(parentheses added)

First Elders, then Deacons

Acts 13:23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Titus 1:5 The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.

Should There Be Women Deacons?

Romans 16:1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon *(“diakonos”)* of the church in Cenchreae. (Parenthesis added)

*“Diakonos”* can also be translated “servant” or “minister” and is in other translations.

I Timothy 3:11 In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

Wuest, in his *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament,* in his commentary on I Timothy 3:11,lists several reasons that this verse refers to women deacons and not deacon’s wives. First, the word translated “In the same way” is “used in introducing the second or third in a series.” Second, “there is no possessive pronoun in the Greek, which would be needed if the women were the wives of the deacons.”

To that I would add that it would seem illogical to have qualifications for Deacon’s wives and not for Elder’s wives and the fact that the existence of women Deacons is well attested in ancient church history and even in secular history. The most widely quoted reference is in a letter from Pliny the Younger to Trajan in 112 AD. “I believed it was necessary to find out from two female slaves who were called deacons what was true – and to find it out through torture.”

Jesus’ Example

Mark 10:42-45 Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. No so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant *(“diakonos”),* and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of man did not come to be served *(“diakoneo”)*, but to serve *(“diakoneo”)*, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (parentheses added)

Things to Remember

Every believer is a priest.

We are all called to serve, following Jesus’ example.

Deacons are men or women appointed to serve the church in an official capacity.

Jesus is our example of what a servant attitude looks like.