

Series: Romans	Reference: Romans 16:1-2	Title: What's a Deacon?	Date: 3.05.17
Website Writeup:			
Phoebe was a deacon, what is a deacon? What are their qualifications? What do they do? And how do we support them? Are all questions we explore this week from Romans 16:1-2			

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A pastor tells the story of when he was a child growing up in church. He loved to see the procession of deacons carrying the elements of the Lord's Supper & dispersing it to the congregants. Deacons in his church were regarded highly. He looked up to them. In many churches, unlike ours, there's an official office of Deacon. And usually one of the tasks of the Deacon is to administer the elements of the Lord's Supper. I remember this as a child too, seeing them walk together up the aisle as the Pastor prayed, and taking the elements, then handing them down the rows of people - only one of their many tasks. But for this pastor, as a child he recalled one meek old deacon with very white hair & reverent face, who especially interested him.

He knew the man only in that context as a little boy. But one day he was walking on the road & passed an old man breaking stones. Which was a menial job reserved only for the very poor in the deep south at the time. We had rock breakers at a quarry near my house in Lampung, guys who swung a hammer all day breaking rocks in the hot sun. And on this day, that old man caught the boys attention. Particularly his white hair. As he took a second look, he recognized the deacon who had always carried the cup for the church on Sunday mornings.

Full of curiosity, he told his father about seeing the deacon breaking rocks. His father explained to him that the reason why the old man held so high a place in the church was that although he was one of the poorest men in town, he was also one of the godliest. He explained that although the man broke stones for a living, he knew more about God than any person he'd met.¹

That story reminds me of these paintings by Van Gogh. If you didn't know who this man was, you might think he was royalty. Someone really special. But he was a simple community servant. A postman. But Vincent paints him in such a way as to elevate him above the commonplace labels through which we see people. It's as if we can pull back the veil & see how really special & important this man is through the eyes of God. And that's kind of what we will be talking about today.

Our passage today speaks of a deacon, though not a man, rather a woman - someone Paul probably trusted to carry this letter to the Romans. And since this is our next set of verses, today we will simply look at what it means to be a deacon; common everyday people whom are much more special to us & the kingdom of God than we often times give credit. The New Testament writings indicate that to be chosen as a deacon or

¹ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), 1630.

deaconess is a high compliment & affirmation. A few who were named as “deacons” were Timothy (1 Thes 3:2; 1 Tm 4:6), Tychicus (Col 4:7), Epaphras (Col 1:7), Paul (1 Cor 3:5) - and even Christ (Rom 15:8, “servant”).² So, deacons are in good company. Romans 16:1-2 introduces us to a deacon by the name of Phoebe...

¹I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. ²I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

What’s a deacon? There are two other passages we can look to in order to understand the qualifications & ministry of deacons. Acts 6 & 1 Timothy 3:1-13. Let’s look quickly at Acts 6 first which is sometimes regarded as the first place we see the diaconate, or the office of deacons established - although it doesn’t specifically use the word deacon. Notice before we read this however, that the church in Jerusalem at this point had grown quite large, so the need for structure & delegation became apparent.

Remember we said a few weeks ago, Jesus isn’t against the organized church. He meant for us to solidify into a strong structure for the propagation of the gospel among all nations over time. A strong system governed by godly people is a blessing to society, communities & the world - which flies in the face of immature comments of many these days that they can have faith outside of the organized church - or that the organized church is somehow evil. It isn’t & faith is a communal thing, no person is an island unto themselves. Faith is lived in community & community has structure & roles to be filled. But let’s read...

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 of food. ² 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 tables.

Don’t take that statement as a slight, but just as a division of tasks

³ 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 ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

Stopping there we get a glimpse, although 1 Timothy will take us further, that the qualifications for the diaconate are much more about character & spiritual maturity than they are about skill in some area. Just because someone can wait tables well, or is an expert on organizational dynamics, or any other useful skill in the church, doesn’t mean they should be crowned deacon - the first qualification is always their character & spiritual maturity. Like the white haired deacon that young boy noticed in his church.

² Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 591.

He was nothing special out there in the world, but he was a godly man filled with the Spirit & wisdom.

Notice too that the ministry of the word is not necessarily regarded as more important, it's just a division of labor & tasks necessary when you get to a certain size. The ministry would've suffered if everything weighed on only a few. Six:Eight has experienced this over time as we've grown larger, and we will continue to do so. So, increasingly all our small roles are important here at church (explain - greeters/hospitality/teaching/etc).

5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

And here we see, that as arguments arise in a community, often times they're solved very simply with logistical changes to relieve pressure - this decision pleased everyone. Such as the weight my wife feels with Sunday School & when someone steps up and says, "I'll serve there!" It relieves pressure.

And now we see the end result of this division of labor...*7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.*

The message of the Gospel was freed & made more effective because these deacons were put in place to serve in ways which created an atmosphere for this to happen well. People came to faith & the church grew because people waited tables! The Gospel's going to go out because Lisa Woods, Lisa Jennings, and others have worked hard on Six:Eight's Women's Day. The Gospel goes forth because Stef organizes our community partnerships. The Gospel goes forth because Kim oversees the children's ministry. Jordan works on planning this service, scheduling greeters & others. Vinny & Mary work on the worship ministry. Rachel works on the prayer ministry. Etc... Basically what we see here is that logistical task oriented ministry & people do a lot to advance the kingdom of God. These are many times our introverts, our hard-working behind the scenes, take no credit quiet people who get things done!

So, if the qualifications of Deacon are more about character, what does that look like? Let's look at 1 Timothy & I want to begin in v1 where it begins speaking of the Elders qualifications since the two overlap such a great deal...

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. 2 Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. 5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become

conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. 7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

And then he turns his attention specifically to the qualifications of deacons - but notice there's not much difference, if any at all!

8 In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. 9 They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

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

Now, v11 is unique given that it has sparked much controversy in conservative churches where they claim that it only refers to the wives of deacons, and they surmise that deacons are only to be male...but, the wording in no way lends itself to that. As a matter of fact it specifically seems to address women in the role of deacon - not to mention that Paul refers to Phoebe as a deacon & she is clearly a woman.

12 A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. 13 Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

The word used for deacon had no feminine form at the time. The Greek Fathers regularly read 1 Tim. 3:11 as a reference to the qualities required for women deacons rather than deacons' wives.³

About 111ad Pliny, governor of Bithynia, reported that he had questioned under torture two maidservants, who were called deaconesses (*ministrae*), concerning Christian rites (*Epistolae*, 10:96). After that there seems no clear literary notice of deaconesses before the *Didascalia* - A Christian Treatise written in the 3rd century. It seems that before this men & women were identified with the same term. Women deacons had freedom to move within households, reaching women and children. They played an important role at the baptism of women and in continuing to teach converts. Around this time the feminine term *diakonissa* was coined.⁴

So we notice & know, ministry for both women & men in the NT was patterned after the example of Jesus, who "*came not to be served but to serve*" (Mk 10:45). Because of the large number of female converts (Acts 5:14; 17:4), women functioned in such areas of ministry as visitation, instruction in discipleship, and assistance in baptism, etc.

³ V. M. Sinton, "Deaconess," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 262.

⁴ V. M. Sinton, "Deaconess," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 262.

Deaconesses are mentioned in third-century documents as administering baptism to female converts.

Considering the rigid separation of the sexes in the Near East at that time, female participation in church ministry stands out in bold relief. Pliny, outside of mentioning the 2 martyred deaconesses, in his *Correspondence with Trajan* verified women officeholders in the church.⁵

So, because we have v11, early church history, Phoebe & other women in church history serving as deacons, we cannot argue from v12 that just because he addresses men directly that this means women can't be deacons. In actuality, it probably means he's addressing a more common negative tendency in the men not to be faithful to their wives, or manage their families well! What is true now was probably true then, if a parent is emotionally absent, or abdicating leadership, or parenthood, it's stereotypically the male, and not the female - though that's not always the case.

Paul's inclusion of references to women in ministry is striking when compared with the role of women in general in the first century. He commended Phoebe for her service in the church at Cenchreae, using the word "deacon" to describe her (Rom 16:1). He praised her as a "helper" (Rom 16:2), a word that denotes leadership qualities (cf. Rom 12:8; 1 Tm 3:4, 5).⁶

So, what is a deacon isn't a question we usually address here at Six:Eight. But, we clearly see in the Scriptures it simply refers to Christians designated to serve with the overseers or elders of the local church in a variety of ways. Logistical practical ways. In more liturgical circles like the Catholic church it's a clerical office ranking up there with the clergy. But in circles like the Vineyard, or the non-denominational church, it's usually a laity driven office. It may not even be acknowledged as an office. In other words we don't crown this person or that as a deacon.

But just because we don't use the word Deacon in our everyday vernacular, doesn't mean we don't have them, or appreciate their work... They're those who "serve" in a Christian community, assisting the elders or overseers. The Greek word which the NIV translates four times as "deacon" occurs a further 25 times in the NT, where it's translated as "servant". It seems that all Christians have a general servant role, whereas some (deacons) are called to a specific office of service within the church. Our equivalent here is probably more in line with the word 'leader'. People who lead & oversee certain ministries outside the Pastoral Council (who would be considered our Elders). Although I'd also say all of our Council members are also deacons in the sense that they serve the church in various capacities.

⁵ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 591.

⁶ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 591.

Vinny & Mary over the Worship Ministry. John Kulp over Stewardship. Stef over Kingdom Opportunities. Kim over the children's ministry. Myself over the Community Groups. Rachel over the prayer ministry. Jordan over the Impressions Ministry. Mark House over Missions. And I would even add some others which may not have 'official leadership roles' but have been acting in this capacity lately in overseeing some very needed things in this body. And we could say our Community Group Leaders act in the capacity of deacons.

Diakonos, the greek word, means to serve a task, not necessarily a master. It's literally translated - to raise dust by hastening. In other words deacons are doers. They're task oriented people. Deacons serve a task, but those tasks serve the whole of people & the greater kingdom ministry of the church. They deal with money, organizing, practical needs, etc.. As all Christians are to serve, deacons therefore, are servants in charge of servants. They have the ability to organize people, systems, and many times look to the needs of people physically.

As the office of deacon became more firmly established in time, many times its duties could be defined as those of pastoral care. Many of them are teachers, such as Stephen. Philip brought the word to the Ethiopian Eunuch, and to the Samaritan's, and Simon the Sorcerer. The poor & the sick received their service, not only physically, but also with instruction & consolation. The homes of church members became familiar territory to a deacon. A pattern of visitation was established to discover & then meet the needs of the church body at large. Although that included the administration of funds, it went far beyond it. Those who served as deacons undoubtedly became symbols of loving care for the church in general.⁷

In considering that, we realize the diaconate of a church is made up of people who minister to others in very practical ways. I think of Rachel called out some nights to do prayer ministry over a person & organizing others to join her in that. I think of the times when someone was in need & another person in the church rallied others to do a meal train, raise money, or just go over to their homes & encourage them. I think of the work we've done with the elderly or single moms & how certain people in this church have organized that. Or, how Stef has meetings outside of church to understand how we can help the poor, or refugees, as a Body. In Acts 6 the church was quite large & it took good organization to make the church effective. This goes back to the saying in the Vineyard that Everyone Gets To Play. And as Six:Eight grows, these offices, official or not, become ever more important for our kingdom ministry as a church.

At the end of the day, Deacons are servants with certain skills which overlap with other offices of the church. Sometimes they even dip into the area of teaching. They're task oriented men & women who serve others through logistical practical ways which enable the Kingdom of God to advance. People we're grateful for & need desperately. They're ministers of the Gospel in their own unique ways. Gifted people. Busy people, kicking dust up in their wake of service to others. They're caring people. Loving people.

⁷ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 591.

Supportive people. And often times quiet action oriented people. Usage of the term deacon may've narrowed & institutionalized the idea of deacon into an official church office, but it's such a vague concept that we don't really use it here at Six:Eight. We just simply appreciate them & rely upon them greatly! So, let's give thanks & pray for them!

Questions for Community Group Leaders

1. Look again through Acts 6:1-7
 1. notice there was a simple problem which could've become a large emotional divide in the church
 2. notice how they solved it, not by kowtowing to the 'hurt' feelings of some, but with a straight logistical change which relieved the pressure - have you ever experienced this before in community? A time when emotions ran high and a leader made a quick decision which no one really saw, and it solved the issues? Can you think of this happening anywhere else in Scripture?
 3. revisit v7 noticing how this division of labor, decisiveness and clear action enabled the Kingdom to expand in that area - stop here and pray this would happen through Six:Eight!
2. Look again at 1 Timothy 3:1-13
 1. Avoiding the 'gender' issues often brought up in these text, focus your thoughts on the character issues as blanket requirements for all...What stands out to you? Can you identify people in your life with some or many of these qualities?
 2. What do you specifically think of v4? Is any leader whose child goes off the deep end later in life disqualified? Is this a hard and fast rule, or something which we take situation to situation, and with grace?
 3. Why is hospitality important?
 4. Why is gentility important?
 5. Why is being 'not a lover of money' important?
 6. Why does he warn against giving new converts too much responsibility too soon? Have you ever seen this happen?
 7. What do temperance & not being a malicious talker mean in v11?
 8. How does the testing in v10 make you feel? What does it mean?
3. Take some time to pray for your 'deacons' and anyone else you see who has these qualities and uses them in our church - although maybe not in an official capacity.
 1. John Kulp - Stewardship
 2. Kim Guynes - Children's ministry
 3. Mark House - Missions
 4. Stef Austinat - Kingdom partnerships
 5. Rachel Ruggieri - Prayer ministry
 6. Jordan Llobrera - Impressions
 7. Mary & Vinny Nicoletti - Worship ministry
 8. Others???
 9. Discuss how can we support these people well?