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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

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# Patterns of New Testament Ministry

## II Deacons

B. W. POWERS

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### (a) *The Origins of the Diaconate*

THE SECOND TYPE or mode of ministry referred to in the New Testament is that of the deacon. After having set out for Timothy the qualities and attributes he is to seek in an elder, Paul immediately goes on to give a similar list for a deacon (1 Tim. 3:8-13). In these circumstances we must conclude that the deacon was recognised as a separate and formally distinct order of ministry by the time of the writing of the Pastoral Epistles. Thus there is to be found a precise, technical use in Scripture of the term *diakonos*, 'deacon': but, in fact, only in three verses—verses 8 and 12 in the setting out of the qualifications of a deacon in 1 Timothy 3, and apart from this only in Philip-  
pian 1:1.

On the other hand, the word *diakonos* occurs in the New Testament on many other occasions in contexts where it seems to have its original, more general sense of 'servant' or 'helper' or possibly 'minister', and in a few places where it is difficult to be sure if it has its general or its technical meaning.

Examples of the former usage: 'Whoever would be great among you must be your *diakonos*' (Matt. 20:26 and 23:11). The servants of the king in Matthew 22:13 and the servants at the wedding feast in Cana in John 2:5 and 9, were *diakonoï*.

In Colossians 12:24-25 Paul speaks of '. . . the church, of which I became a *diakonos* according to the divine office which was given to me for you'. He also refers to himself as a *diakonos* in Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:23 (and with others, in the plural 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; 11:23); and to Epaphras (Col. 1:7), to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:6), and to Tychicus (Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7). It is possible, though not very likely, that some of these (e.g. Col. 4:7) could be the technical use of the term to refer to the office of deacon.

Why do we have such a situation? The explanation would seem to

be along these lines. As the early church developed and expanded, there grew a volume of work which had to be done. Much of it was of a routine mundane character, but it had to be someone's responsibility. And, as we have already seen, responsibility in the early church lay with the elders (or, originally, the apostles).

The particular form in which the issue arose was the question of organising a fair distribution to the widows (Acts 6:1). Earlier the apostles had been quite willing to be involved in the issues of pastoral welfare and the handling of the distributions (see Acts 4:35), but now the point had been reached where to become involved in such matters was seriously encroaching upon their ministry of the Word (Acts 6:2).

In consequence the Twelve laid the matter before the whole body of disciples, and asked them to select seven men to undertake this service (to serve tables—*diakoneō*, v. 2) while the apostles devoted themselves to prayer and to the ministry (*diakonia*) of the Word (v. 4). The proposal met with the approval of the whole multitude (v. 5), who then chose suitable men.

These men are not actually referred to in the passage (or anywhere else) as 'deacons', but they were appointed to 'serve tables' (*diakoneō*, the corresponding verb which is used in 1 Timothy 3:10 and 13 with the meaning 'to serve as a deacon' and the usual word in current use for a person engaged in such a task was *diakonos* (see John 2:5,9). It is thus easy to see how this word, which has been anglicised as 'deacon', came to be applied to people who undertook specialised service in the church, becoming in due course a technical term, while at the same time it continued in general use as 'servant' and in particular in a Christian context as 'servant' or 'minister' of God (or Christ, or the church, etc.).

### (b) *The Functions of the Deacons*

ACTS 6:1-6 is the only place in the New Testament which gives any specific information concerning the role and work of deacons. Their work here may be restated in general terms as to take over and accept responsibility for certain specific duties in the church which have been allocated to them. The duties took one particular form in Acts 6:1-6; as the range of other duties in the church developed and expanded, so the role of the diaconate as a supplementary ministry became more firmly established.

Thus Paul can write (Phil. 1:1) 'to all the saints . . . at Philippi, with the bishops (elders) and deacons'. We are not told, and so have absolutely no information concerning, what the deacons at Philippi actually *did*, but they were *there*, which showed that a need for some kind of special ministry and service was recognised as existing, and was being met by the deacons. And Paul, in writing to Timothy concerning his work in Ephesus, gives directions for the selection of appropriate

people as deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13); an indication, once again, of the continuing need for this auxiliary ministry.

It is significant to note the spiritual qualifications for a deacon which are mentioned in Acts 6:3,4 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13—qualifications which show that although it was frequently a mundane task in which a deacon may be engaged, it was a *spiritual ministry* to which he was called. Of the seven deacons appointed in Acts 6:5, the last five are not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture. On the other hand, the first two, Stephen and Philip, play quite a significant role in the events which follow in Acts. Stephen was a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and of grace, power and wisdom (Acts 6:5,8,10) and was an active worker and preacher among the people, and an effective debater and Christian apologist (vv. 8-10; cf. 7:2ff.). His sermon in Acts 7 shows a developed grasp of the scope of God's purposes which was well ahead of the general Christian understanding of his day.

Philip was the man who proclaimed Christ to the Samaritans (Acts 7:5ff.), which was the beginning of a very effective preaching, teaching and healing ministry among them (vv. 6,7,12). And it was Philip whom the Lord chose to interpret the meaning of the Scripture and open the way of faith for the Ethiopian treasurer (vv. 26-40). His ministry continued for some time—in Acts 21:8, describing an event many years later, he is referred to as 'Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven'. (This reference indicates not merely the continuance of the ministry of Philip, but also that of the whole of the seven.)

Was this ministry of evangelism, healing, preaching and teaching the work for which a person was made a deacon? With the example of Stephen and Philip before us it would be possible to hold this. Personally, however, I very much doubt it. In the light of the discussion of the qualifications for a deacon (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:8-13), the matter, it seems to me, is the other way round. Men were not appointed as deacons *in order to* engage in these ministries, but rather the case would be that it was men who demonstrated the work of the Spirit in them through effective preaching etc. who would be considered most suitable as candidates for appointment as deacons. I would think this supported by Acts 6:5, where it is clear that Stephen (and the others) were chosen as deacons because of the working of the Spirit which was already evident in their lives and ministry.

Thus the fact that God has given a man the gift of evangelism etc. is something that is taken into account in choosing and appointing him as a deacon: and as a deacon, with special and specific responsibilities allocated to him to fulfil (as was the case with Stephen and Philip), he still was to be able to fulfil his ministry in the exercise of all the gifts which God had given him.

We also note that Philip performed a baptism (Acts 8:38). Was this something that he did as a deacon? That is, was baptising one of the functions of deacons? We have no way of knowing how or to what

extent the administration of baptism was regularised in the early church: whether it could be performed by any Christian or only by those whose role of ministry in the church had been recognised by the congregation. (What, for example, was the formal standing of Ananias, Paul's baptiser, in the Antioch church?) But as a minimum we can recognise that a deacon is able to administer this sacrament.

What then would be the position regarding a deacon officiating at Holy Communion? I have already mentioned elsewhere, when discussing the position of elders in this regard, that the participation in the Holy Communion seems to have been a corporate affair rather than a matter of one individual person 'celebrating the sacrament'. Could a deacon preside in the observance of the Lord's Supper, or would it require (for example) an elder? The New Testament nowhere answers this kind of question directly, so we are left with indirect evidence. These seem to me to be the relevant factors.

First, the New Testament nowhere either says or implies that only an elder could preside at the Lord's Supper, and I am unable to see any reason, theological, liturgical, or other, why this would have been the case. In the absence of any New Testament ground for refusing to allow a deacon to preside, it would seem presumptuous for the church itself in later times to prescribe a rule that would restrict a deacon from officiating in this way.

Secondly, presiding at the Lord's Supper is in fact serving the brethren with the bread and the cup in a rite which reminds them of the meaning behind the sacrament. As the primary specialised role of the first deacons of Acts 6 was 'serving tables' it would seem wholly in accord with this role that they should serve at the Lord's Table in presiding at the Holy Communion.

Thirdly, the fundamental difference (as we shall shortly consider in detail) between the role of elder and deacon is that the former rules in the congregation, while the latter serves. Is the presiding at the observance of the sacrament something that would come under the heading of ruling in the congregation (in which case it would come exclusively within the province of elders) or is it serving (in which case it would be equally appropriate for elder or deacon)? Now, as I read the story of the Last Supper in the four Gospels, and note Christ's attitude and what He said, I do not see that presiding at the Lord's Supper would be an act of ruling, but rather of serving. In such a case it would be appropriate for a deacon.

Fourthly, it is clearly appropriate for a deacon to administer the sacrament of baptism (for Philip did); and in the absence of any specific grounds (and I know of none) I cannot see why a deacon could be regarded as able to administer one sacrament but not the other.

I would therefore conclude that there is no valid reason derived from the New Testament why a deacon could not preside at Holy Communion, and that to decline to permit this is to multiply restrictions in

a way for which the New Testament gives no warrant. So the functions of a deacon could be summarised as: (1) to act under the general rule and direction of the elders of the congregation, in the matters that they delegate to him; (2) to serve the church in the carrying out of whatever specific and specialised tasks may be assigned to him; (3) to engage in whatever forms of spiritual ministry the Lord has equipped him for; (4) to administer the sacraments.

### *(c) Qualifications of Deacons*

TO qualify as a deacon, a person must have a sound knowledge of the faith, which he himself personally accepts: 'they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience' (1 Tim. 3:8; cf. v. 13). A 'mystery' in Paul's writings (where it occurs 21 times) means 'a secret too profound for human ingenuity . . . hidden ages ago . . . but now gloriously revealed . . .' (cf. Arndt and Gingrich, p. 532). In the present context it would mean the knowledge of the faith, which God has revealed and which a man has learnt and has come to hold personally. This implies that he is himself a believer, that he has been instructed in the faith, and that he has learnt from this instruction.

'The faith' in this verse seems to have the meaning 'what is believed' (a meaning found in numbers of passages in the New Testament, e.g. Acts 6:7; Jude 3). The personal faith of the man chosen as deacon is also emphasised regarding Stephen in Acts 6:5, where it would refer to the strength and certainty of his own trust in Christ and in the Christian gospel.

The congregation were asked (Acts 6:3) to select from their number, as deacons, men who were 'full of the Spirit and wisdom', and this then was the basis on which the first deacons were chosen. Being filled with (or by) the Spirit is a recurring theme in Acts. God is portrayed as filling men with his Spirit to empower them to be his witnesses (see for example Acts 1:8; 2:4; 4:8,31; 7:55,56; etc.). This Spirit-infilling was for all (cf. Acts 4:31), but in particular was to be a recognisable characteristic of those chosen for special work in the congregation.

The deacons were also to be men of wisdom. The expression 'full of the Spirit and of wisdom' does not mean to have two separate and distinct kinds of fillings; using two nouns together is a quite common Hebrew and Greek way of saying something that we would say with a possessive, an adjective, or a subordinate clause. Thus in this case it means 'the Spirit's wisdom' or 'the wisdom which the Spirit imparts'. It is thus akin in idea to what James is saying in 1:5 and 3:13-17. The outworking of this wisdom of the Spirit is particularly mentioned in Stephen's case in Acts 6:10.

Acts 6:3 mentions that those chosen were to be 'men of good repute'. 1 Timothy 3:8ff. has more to say on this point: 'Deacons likewise must

be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain . . . the husband of one wife'—(the same point is mentioned in the qualifications for an elder/bishop: 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6). A deacon is also a person who manages his children and his household well. This ability is also mentioned as a qualification for an elder/bishop (1 Tim. 3:4; Titus 1:6), though in the case of the bishop this is evidence of his suitability to exercise oversight in the church of God (1 Tim. 3:5) whereas in the case of the deacon it is for the sake of his 'good standing' (1 Tim. 3:13). An extra comment is added concerning the women: They 'likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things'. (Who these women are, we shall examine shortly.)

It does not always happen that when people are to be selected for some appointment, all the candidates are equally well qualified. In any congregation it may be expected that there will be some people who stand out as clearly possessing the gifts that equip them for Christian service. Their choice will be obvious. In other cases the matter is not so clearcut. This was apparently the situation facing the congregation when it came to make the choice of their seven deacons (Acts 6:3). The selection of Stephen was obvious: he stood out as 'a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit' (v. 5). But it is significant that this comment is restricted to Stephen—it is not extended to the other six. This does not mean the others were lacking in faith and the Holy Spirit; but it certainly suggests that the evidence was not so clearly discernable in their cases. Not all men are equal in the empowerments which the Spirit gives, nor in the ways in which they may evidence the filling of the Spirit and faith, nor in their own individual characters. But because some men do not possess all the attributes of the best qualified does not mean that they are thereby totally disqualified!

Stephen justified his choice for official recognition in the church; but then so did Philip, of whom nothing special is said in Acts 6:5. But what of the other five deacons? Nothing is heard of them again (except for a corporate reference in Acts 21:8). Yet when the appointment was being made, they were thought suitable, and the apostles endorsed the congregation's choice. In actual fact, they may have worked well at serving tables and supervising the church's welfare distributions—which after all was the primary task for which they were chosen. It is worth remembering that most of the apostles chosen by our Lord Himself rate only a passing reference or two in Scripture and are almost completely unknown to us.

So, qualifications may be possessed in differing degrees by different men, and some may have richer endowment of gifts than others; but this does not mean that appointment to office in the church should be restricted to those with the more obvious endowments, nor that a man has failed to fulfil his ministry if he has not made a deep or lasting impression on history.

*(d) Appointment of Deacons*

WE have seen the qualifications which are set out for a person who is to be appointed a deacon; but in 1 Timothy 3:10 Paul adds a comment which is relevant concerning the question of their appointment—they are to be tested first. The word used is *dokimazō*, which means ‘to put to the test, examine, test’, including to examine or test as to suitability. Arndt and Gingrich (p. 201) give classical references to its use in Attic for the examination of a candidate. This can be its meaning here: to use some kind of assessment to see whether in fact the candidate is qualified. The word is also used with reference to the result of an examination: to establish by testing that a person is qualified, and to accept as approved on the basis of testing (i.e. tested and accepted).

The reference here is to some kind of testing, for the verse goes on, ‘then if they prove themselves . . .’. Simpson (*Pastoral Epistles*, p. 56) takes the meaning: ‘A term of probation will give the membership an opportunity of gauging their merits or demerits, and confirming or rescinding their appointment accordingly.’ But I cannot agree that the appointment as deacon is made first, though on probation, and then subsequently confirmed or rescinded. The verse says that the testing is to be *first*, i.e. before the appointment as deacon.

In this period of testing or examination, the candidates are given an opportunity to ‘prove themselves blameless’, after which ‘let them serve as deacons’. This involves an opportunity to show the development of Christian character (‘blameless’), but I take it also to mean blameless in relation to their candidature as a deacon. That is, they genuinely are qualified for the office, and are not applying on the basis of qualifications they do not have. So the testing or examination is an opportunity for a potential deacon to test his own vocation and to give evidence of it to the congregation. *Then* let him be appointed and serve as a deacon. The deacons of Acts 6:1-6 were selected by the whole multitude (v. 5), and then brought to the apostles for their acceptance and endorsement of this choice; on the other hand it would appear that the selection of deacons which is envisaged in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 would be made by Timothy.

Much of the comment about the consequences of appointment as elders is equally applicable to deacons. We may merely note here that there is no suggestion of the role of deacon being a temporary or transitional one: the appointment of deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 is parallel to that of elder in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, and if the latter is envisaged as the commencement of a permanent role of ministry, there is no reason why this is not equally so of the former. The seven deacons of Acts 6:1-6 are still recognised as such in Acts 21:8.

As for elders, so for deacons we are unsure what the position was concerning a full time or part time ministry. It is likely that, as we have noted for elders, the line between the two was not sharply drawn



in New Testament times, and a person could change from full to part-time as the exigencies of the situation required from time to time, including the extent to which financial support from the congregation was available. There is no word at all in Scripture concerning a person ceasing to be a deacon or being removed from office: presumably similar considerations would apply as we have discussed in relation to elders.

*(e) Elder and Deacon: the Difference*

THERE are numerous similarities between what is said concerning the qualifications, appointment and ministry of elders and deacons, so that the question arises: what in fact is the difference? Why two types or levels of ministry within the one congregation (as is envisaged in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:1-13)?

Now it is plain to us from Scripture (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:4-30) and from our own knowledge of life that God gives different gifts and endowments to different people, and calls upon them to fulfil different kinds of ministries. We have seen that both elder and deacon can engage in preaching and teaching, evangelism and pastoral work: there are many tasks and duties in the church which could equally well fall within the ministry of either. But in Scripture there is between them one very clear and significant difference. The elders exercise oversight, or rule, in the church of God, having the responsibility for the organising of the work of God, for the discipline in the congregation, the overall worship of the church, the ordination of other elders and of deacons, and so on. The deacon on the other hand fulfils a task that is delegated to him, and therefore is responsible to the elders for the fulfilment of this task. Certainly this is the case in the situation of Acts 6:1-6, and there are no grounds for thinking that this fundamental factor changed in any way subsequently. The office of deacon continued and became widespread because of a need for just this kind of supporting ministry. As we have seen, there are many references to the role and function of elders as ruling in the congregation, but there is never a mention of 'ruling' in the case of deacons. This is a perfectly reasonable situation to arise. The office of elder was taken over from the Jewish synagogue, but that of deacon was newly created to meet a particular need, and became established in the church precisely because it met that need.

Without pressing the analogy too far, there is a parallel between the relationship of elder and deacon, and that of management and labour in business. There are those who have to decide what is to be done, and those to whom is delegated the doing of it. It is possible of course for a person who is 'labour' to become a member of 'management', but if he does it is quite clear to all concerned that his status and function

have changed. Similarly there would seem to be no reason in Scripture why a deacon could not be appointed an elder, but this would be to pass from one kind of role to another, for which he had shown himself qualified.

On the other hand, most members of 'labour' do not in fact become 'management', and it seems to be clear that in the New Testament church most members of the diaconate would remain as such and not become elders. There is not the slightest hint of the diaconate as an inferior or 'trial' or 'apprentice' ministry, from which one graduates. Insofar as there is any trial or apprentice ministry, it is before one becomes a deacon (cf. 1 Tim. 3:10). It is a supporting ministry, which is quite a different thing. And there is not the faintest suggestion that elders would be chosen from the diaconate—they were chosen from the congregation. Clearly the fact that a man was a deacon would not preclude him from consideration for appointment as an elder, if he was recognised as qualified for the eldership; but his being a deacon would not be of primary relevance in considering whether or not he were qualified to be an elder.

Now, in view of this difference of function between deacon and elder, there must in the nature of the case be instances where a person is ideally suited and equipped to become a deacon, but does not have the gifts of God to be an overseer, an elder. To think that in such a case the lack can be made up by further training or in some other way is to misunderstand the teaching of the Scripture concerning diversities of gifts and of ministries (1 Cor. 12:4-30) and the purpose of God in equipping a man for one kind of ministry but not for another.

There are some men who would make excellent deacons, either with a full-time or a part-time ministry—men who can be given a particular task in the work of God, and who will conscientiously and efficiently carry it out—but who do not have the ability or the nature (nor, therefore, the call of God) to exercise rulership or oversight in a congregation. They prefer to work under another man. They do not like, or are not temperamentally suited, to working alone or on their own initiative. An ecclesiastical system which semi-automatically 'advances' each deacon to become an elder is at variance with the New Testament picture of the deacon as having a ministry in his own right, to which he is specifically called through being equipped of God with the appropriate qualifications. On the other hand the elder is appointed because he is recognised as having the qualifications for that office and not because he has simply 'progressed' through a 'deacon stage'. Moreover such a system discourages the candidature of a person to be a deacon only; that is, not to 'progress' to become an elder. Thus the church loses the contribution which would have been made by that person in an auxiliary, supporting ministry, while the person loses the church's recognition and acceptance of his qualifications for and call to become a deacon on the New Testament pattern.

*(f) Women as Deacons*

WE have seen that the eldership is restricted to men. It is now therefore appropriate to ask whether similar factors operate to restrict the diaconate to men in a similar way. There are several lines of evidence here which we must examine in order to assess the grounds upon which we can come to a decision about this. First, we must consider the basic reason why a woman is in the New Testament excluded from the office of elder. This is because a primary and fundamental role of the elder in the congregation is that of ruling, and a woman is excluded from exercising the rule over a man. Does this factor operate in any way to exclude a woman similarly from being a deacon? And the answer we must come to is, 'No'. This same issue goes in fact to the root of the distinction that is made in Scripture between the elder and the deacon: the former rules, and the latter does not, but carries out specific tasks under the direction and oversight of the former. Therefore the factor that in the New Testament excludes a woman from being an elder does not exclude her from being a deacon, for there is nothing in the function or role of a deacon as set out in the New Testament from which a woman is debarred.

In 1 Timothy 3:11, in the centre of Paul's list of qualifications for deacons, he included a specific reference to women: 'The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.' This (from the RSV) is an acceptable translation of the verse (except for the initial 'The', for which there is no justification in the Greek text). However, the verse has been translated (as in the AV) as 'wives' or rather 'their wives', that is, the wives of the deacons-to-be. As the word *gunē* includes both 'wife' and 'woman' within the area of its meaning, it is necessary to examine which is the preferred translation here.

There are three main reasons why it is unlikely that Paul is referring here to the wives of deacons. First, as I have mentioned, the verse begins with the word *gunaikas* without the article. If the *gunaikas* were to be linked to something which had gone before (i.e. if they were the wives of the deacons mentioned previously), then the definite article would be expected here, and it would be translated 'their', giving the reading 'their women', that is, 'their wives'. The absence of the definite article here strongly militates against the *gunaikas* being connected with or related to the deacons mentioned earlier.

Secondly, the verse which follows introduces quite specifically the question of deacons' wives: the deacons are to be the husband of one wife. Now if v. 11 is referring to attributes to be required of a deacon's wife, the place this would be expected to be found would be *after*, not *before*, the verse which mentioned that he was to have a wife.

Thirdly, it is very significant that this verse on the qualifications of women occurs in the middle of the section discussing deacons, but has

absolutely no parallel in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 or Titus 1:5-9, which discuss elders. As all these passages refer to candidates for office being the husband of one wife, the fact that qualifications for the wife are mentioned *only* in the passage discussing deacons would clearly imply that it is important to check out the wife of a prospective deacon, but not necessary in the case of a prospective elder. It would be very hard to explain why Paul should request this. And it can hardly be put down to a case of Paul simply not thinking of it when writing about elders—that passage immediately precedes the one about deacons, and such a suggestion would imply a very odd carelessness on Paul's part.

By far the simplest explanation then is that in verse 11 Paul is not referring to deacons' wives. Nor could he here be referring to wives in general, i.e. all Christian wives. To address a word to them in the very middle of setting out the qualifications of deacons would be even less likely. The explanation then of this special comment about women in a passage on the qualifications of deacons is the one we get if we take it at face value: it is referring to women who are deacons, and giving a special word in regard to what to watch for when appointing them. This interpretation gives a very natural meaning to the whole text. The word *diakonos*, 'deacon', is used of both men and women (see Arndt and Gingrich pp. 183f.) and so Paul here has added a special comment concerning those deacons who are women.

In Romans 16:1 Paul commends to the church at Rome 'our sister Phoebe, a deaconess (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchræe'. Note that there is no difference at all in the word used here to refer to Phoebe (*diakonos*), and that used for deacons elsewhere in the New Testament. Perhaps for the sake of consistency and to indicate that there is no difference we ought to translate it here also as 'deacon', and not 'deaconess'. (It is interesting, by the way, to notice how the NEB handles this point.) This is the only clear reference in the New Testament to a woman deacon. However, there are references to women who were engaged in some of the activities which we have already noted as those in which deacons were engaged.

In 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul refers to the women who prayed and prophesied in the congregation. It is sufficient to note here that prophesying involved the proclamation of the Word of God in relation to a particular situation. Similarly the daughters of Philip had a ministry of prophesying, sufficiently important in the church to justify a specific reference to it (Acts 21:9). We know moreover from Acts 18:26 that Priscilla (and Aquila) exercised a teaching ministry, and if it extended to include the instruction of Apollos we may certainly take it that it included the teaching of others also. We have additional evidence of this in the fact that as they moved from place to place over the course of the years, Priscilla and Aquila would have a church in their homes (Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:9). The mention of Priscilla in association with her husband in each case in relation to the church in

*their* home (not *his* home) is very striking, and indicates the active participation of Priscilla in the church. It is also very striking to notice that apart from the first occasion when we are introduced to Aquila, 'a native of Pontus, lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla' (Acts 18:2) and one other reference (1 Cor. 16:19), every mention of the couple places Priscilla's name first (Acts 18:18,26; Rom. 16:3-5; 2 Tim. 4:19). Now it is in itself very unusual to find the wife's name mentioned in this way at all (for example, Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:16 and 16:15 refers to the household of Stephanas, his first converts in Asia—but he does not name the wife; and in 2 Timothy 4:19 he sends greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus—in the latter case, no wife named). But when the wife is not merely named, but named *first*, in relation to instruction of Apollos, and to the church in their home etc., the significance of this cannot be overlooked. And Paul's strong praise of the couple (Rom. 16:3-5) also names Priscilla first. But we should notice also that Priscilla is never referred to *apart from* her husband.

So we must conclude that Priscilla shared actively with her husband in the ministry in the church and that their joint ministry was widely known and appreciated. It seems highly likely that Aquila was an elder, and even more likely that Priscilla was a deacon. The alternative would be that these two Christian leaders were functioning in the church without any standing or recognition. This is a possibility, but unlikely. The policy which we see set out for us in the New Testament, as our study thus far has shown, is for the formal appointment of people who would be recognised as leaders (cf. Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5). If it be objected that Priscilla is never actually called a deacon, then neither are the seven who were appointed in Acts 6:5-6.

When Paul and his companions came to Philippi (Acts 16:12ff.) they found no synagogue and were not able to follow their usual custom of commencing their ministry there (Acts 17:2). But they did find a group of women meeting together on the sabbath for prayer at the riverside, and they sat down with them and spoke to them of Jesus. Lydia, the merchant dealing in purple goods, responded to the message and was baptised with her household. It is possible that some of the other women who heard the message (v. 14) became Christians, and perhaps also the slave girl (vv. 16-18), though we cannot be sure of this. The only other certain response to the gospel came from the jailer and his household (vv. 32-34). Paul had been staying with Lydia (v. 15); after the prison incident they were required to leave the city (v. 39).

Then comes the rather enigmatic verse 40: 'So they went out of the prison, and visited Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they exhorted them and departed.' Who are these brethren (*adelphoi*) whom they saw, apparently when they visited Lydia? The word here must mean 'fellow-Christians'—but the only Christians we know of in

Philippi were Lydia (and her household), the jailer (and his household) and perhaps some of the other women from the prayer meeting, and the slave girl. We may postulate (without any evidence) that the *adelphoi* were men who were converted while Paul was in Philippi (possibly during the 'many days' of v. 18), but whom, for some unaccountable reason, the record does not mention at all. Yet the whole thrust of the Philippi account seems to be to underline the poor success that Paul had with the men in this city. And if Paul did gain men converts in his short time there, who would they be? They could not (as would usually be the case with Paul's first converts in a city) come from the ranks of the Jews and godfearers, for there was no synagogue in Philippi. If they were complete pagans whom Paul was able to bring to conversion within the short period he was in Philippi, this would be sufficiently noteworthy an event to merit recording. Yet in fact we have no record of Paul proclaiming the gospel anywhere in Philippi except at the women's group at the place of prayer (vv. 13, 16) and to the jailer and his household (vv. 30-34).

It seems to be much more reasonable to treat the Philippi account as self-contained, and to interpret its references within the scope of the facts that we know. The word *adelphoi* in verse 40 is translated 'brethren', but this can mean 'men and women'—it is not limited to men only. Arndt and Gingrich say specifically of *adelphos*: 'The plural can also mean brothers and sisters.' So verse 40 means that Paul and Silas went from the prison to Lydia's home and there they met and said farewell to the brethren, the Christians of Philippi, *most of whom at that time were women*. The verse seems to indicate that they saw the brethren at Lydia's home. As this home was where Paul had been staying before being imprisoned, this would be far from unexpected: but it suggests that Lydia's home had become the meeting place for the infant church.

Paul passed through Macedonia again on his way to Greece (Acts 20:1-2) and gave the Christians there 'much encouragement'. Presumably this would have included a visit to Philippi, though it cannot have been a very long one. On his return journey he did pass through Philippi (Acts 20:6), but once again it cannot have involved a long stay. Paul did keep in touch with the churches of Macedonia through his assistants, but Philippi is not again mentioned in Scripture apart from a reference in 1 Thessalonians 2:2 to Paul's suffering on the occasion of his first visit, and in the letter to the Philippian church itself. In this letter we have a picture of a church which is strong and thriving. And Paul refers to the fact they have been in partnership with him in the gospel 'from the first day until now' (Phil. 1:5), sending gifts 'once and again' for his support 'in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia and went to Thessalonica. In fact they were the only church to help in this way (Phil 4:14-16). In this letter also Paul specifically addresses himself to Euodia and Syntyche, who 'have laboured side by side

with me in the gospel', and begs them to give up their squabbles and be reconciled (4:1-3). This would be rather an extreme thing to do if they were simply ordinary members of the congregation, but completely explicable if they held office in the church.

Thus Paul addresses the saints, elders and *deacons* at Philippi (Phil. 1:1), and that there is in Scripture no other use of the word 'deacon' of anyone at any other church (except at Cencreae, where it refers to a woman deacon—Rom. 16:1) until Paul is advising Timothy on the appointment of deacons for Ephesus, which as we have seen would include male and female deacons.

So it follows that the 'deacons' in Philippians 1:1 included *men and women deacons*; that this situation would have arisen in part from the circumstances of the founding of the church at Philippi, as women made up the majority of the first group of Christians; that Lydia was clearly suited to be a leader in the infant church—head of her own household and a business woman, she would have been well equipped—but that he would not have a woman as an elder and so he appointed her as a deacon; that Euodia and Syntyche were also deacons (also probably from the early days of the church at Philippi), which is why Paul mentioned them publicly in his letter; and that the whole idea worked out so well that Paul is advising Timothy on the appointment of both men and women deacons for Ephesus (not necessarily as initial appointments) in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. This gives a single, cohesive, integrated, overall explanation of a wide range of Scripture references, many of which otherwise remain unexplained: Who are the brethren of Acts 16:40 and why are they at Lydia's home? Why does Paul specifically address deacons at Philippi while they are mentioned nowhere else? Why does Paul publicly refer to Euodia and Syntyche? Who are the women of 1 Timothy 3:11?

As Acts 6:1-6 gives an explanation of how men deacons came to be introduced in the church, so the Philippian situation provides an explanation of how women deacons came to be introduced in the church. If we do not accept this interpretation of the Philippian references, we are left with Phoebe the deaconess at Cencreae as an isolated unexpected phenomenon, and Paul's comment to Timothy on women in the middle of a discussion of deacons (1 Tim. 3:11) as a rather unaccountable parenthesis in an odd place. The explanation outlined above seems far more reasonable, and far more likely.

Women deacons then can certainly fulfil all the roles and activities which we have seen for men. The major role in the congregation which is nowhere attributed to a deacon and nowhere attributed to a woman is the same: oversight, or ruling in the congregation. On the other hand, the major role of a deacon—the carrying out of specific tasks and duties in the congregation which have been delegated by the elders—is certainly one which a woman can fulfil. Also, as we have seen, a woman can carry out the other activities in which deacons are recorded

as having been engaged: prayer, prophesying (which would include preaching) and teaching.

I have also outlined earlier reasons for holding that it was completely appropriate for a deacon to preside at the Lord's Supper (under the general jurisdiction of an elder, though not necessarily in his presence). This would still apply if the deacon is a woman because the administration of the Holy Communion is an activity of serving, not of ruling, and is therefore completely appropriate for a woman deacon. There is no reason why a woman deacon could not serve the whole congregation (men and women) in this way. This question must be decided by a consideration of the general overall teaching of Scripture on the role of women, their eligibility as deacons, whether administering the Holy Communion is an act of ruling in the congregation, and so on, for there is no direct word of Scripture on the matter. And if the point is taken that there is no reference in Scripture to a woman administering Holy Communion, we must all agree, but this in itself hardly establishes the point that it should not be done. There is no reference in Scripture either to a woman *receiving* Holy Communion; but no church advocates refusing communion to women on that ground.

When we look at Paul's qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3: 8-13, there is nothing (apart from being the husband of one wife, which would simply be taken the other way round as the wife of one husband) which would exclude a woman; whereas verse 11 indicates women *were* eligible. Similarly we have seen that there is nothing in the practice of the early church nor in the role and function of a deacon which would exclude a woman from appointment as a deacon in every way on a par with a male deacon.

#### (g) *Summary*

1. The word *diakonos* was the general one for servant or helper, and came thence to mean 'servant of God' or 'of the church' etc., and so 'minister' in a wide general sense.
2. In addition, through the appointment of men to a particular, specific office and function of serving in the church, there developed the use of the word as a technical term for the holder of such an office, 'deacon'.
3. The primary work of deacons was to provide a supplementary or auxiliary ministry for the elders, working under their direction and carrying out duties allocated to them.
4. This did not preclude them from the full exercise of such spiritual gifts as they had been given—evangelism, preaching, teaching, healing, etc.—nor from such a ministry as baptising. In fact there is no reason why they should not preside at the Holy Communion in



the absence of elders (though still under their general jurisdiction and supervision).

5. Qualifications of deacons are: a sound knowledge of the faith, to be full of the Spirit and of wisdom, and of Christian character and good reputation. Not all candidates may necessarily be equally highly qualified, but this does not in itself preclude the appointment of the less gifted if they are called of God and equipped for service. However, there should be adequate provision for testing and examination of candidates as to their qualifications and suitability, before they are appointed as deacons.
6. The primary difference between elders and deacons is that the former rule in the congregation, and the latter serve in the congregation, and that this provides the background and the context within which they exercise their gifts and fulfil their ministries. If a man has the gift and ability to be a leader, an overseer, in the congregation, he would be considered for appointment as an elder. It is implicit in the distinction that there are members of the congregation called of God and equipped to serve him, but under the guidance and direction of others; and that this call is fulfilled in their recognition and appointment as deacons.
7. Being a deacon should not preclude a person from selection and appointment as an elder, if he develops and demonstrates the qualifications for the office; but the two are parallel ministries, not stages of a progression, and elders are drawn from the congregation as a whole, not from the ranks of the deacons, whilst appointment as deacon would normally be to a lifelong ministry in that role and not a step towards becoming an elder.
8. As in the case of an elder, appointment as deacon may have been to a full-time or a part-time ministry, and may have involved full, partial or very limited financial support from the congregation; and the situation would have been very fluid, likely to change over time and likely to differ from church to church.
9. Women are not precluded on any grounds from appointment as deacons, but could and did exercise this ministry in the congregation in the same way and to the same extent as the male deacons, serving under the direction and jurisdiction of the elders.