

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: SERVING AS CHRISTIAN LEADERS
(With Special Focus on the Leadership Ministry of
Elders and Deacons)
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Who or what shapes our understanding of leadership in general and our understanding of elders and deacons in particular? This is a crucial question facing many congregations. No doubt a variety of influences are present, for example—Scripture, tradition, experience, culture, and our opinions. Yet far too often Scripture takes a back seat to other sources of authority.

We must not assume that we know what the Bible says about leaders and the difference they make in peoples' lives. Far too often the ideas we hold are simply not found in Scripture. Indeed, I am convinced that a proper study of God's Word may very well break many of our paradigms and create new ones. Indeed, we may discover that there are some unsettling things God says and demands in his Word.

Accordingly, my strategy is to survey the relevant Scriptures and reflect on the positive impact godly leadership can make in peoples' lives. The study is broken into seven parts.

I. Two General Designations.

A. Ministry (*diakonia*)

By the general term "ministry" (or "service"), the New Testament designates the responsibilities of all Christians: every Christian is a *diakonos*, a servant or minister. The Church is the living body of Christ, and each member of this body is active, in his or her own role, with a view to serving God and people. "To serve" (*diakoneo*) is the vocation and duty of everyone who belongs to Christ who "came not to be served but to serve" and who has made service the norm of all greatness in the Kingdom (Mark 10:43-45).

B. Leader.

"In the biblical context, a person with a God-given capacity and a God-given responsibility to influence a specific group of God's people toward His purposes for the group." See J.R. Clinton, *The Making of a Leader: Recognizing the Lessons and Stages of Leadership Development*, p. 245.

Potentially, every Christian will be leading as he or she is involved in ministry. Indeed, leadership is never static, fixed, and limited to a select group of individuals; it is vibrant, responsive and inclusive. Responsibility lies with every member to play his or her

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particular role in the leadership in the Christian community. Rather than being the task of one person (or a select few) with the remainder "obeying their decisions" or "being served," leadership is a corporate affair devolving in some measure upon all who participate in the community's mission. Neither staff alone nor elders alone can do the ministry demanded of every congregation in order to carry out the mission to disciple the nations. Leadership responsibility can never remain the preserve of a select few but always exists as an obligation upon every member of the community—even if some have responsibilities (due to their character and gifts) that have a more far-reaching impact on the community as a whole or on certain groups within the Christian community.

II. Special Designations for Elders.

Even though potentially all Christians are involved in leadership ministry, it is true that within the congregations of New Testament times there were men who were recognized as leaders who served as elders with specific responsibilities which affected the life of the whole body. It is instructive to be reminded of the six designations.

A. Elder (*presbuteros*) and Body of Elders (*presbuterion*).

"a man of responsibility and influence in a community" (Note: The Bible provides no guidelines with regard to the age of elders; perhaps it could be assumed that these "leaders" would be older than the average person in a group.)

"a council of elders, with emphasis upon maturity of judgment more than mere age."

See Acts 11:29-30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; I Tim. 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; I Pet. 5:1. See I Tim. 4:14 for the reference to "body of elders."

B. Fellow-elder (*sumpresbuteros*).

"a man who is an elder along with others"

See I Pet. 5:1.

C. Care-giver (*episkopos/episkope*).

"a man who has responsibility for the care of someone" (Note: Often this word has been viewed as stressing a position of power, but in reality the focus is upon the responsibility of caring for others.)

See Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; I Tim. 3:1,2; Titus 1:7.

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D. Pastor/Shepherd (*poimen*).

"a man who is responsible for the care and guidance of a Christian congregation"

See Eph. 4:11 (cf. Acts 20:28; I Pet. 5:2).

E. Teacher (*didaskalos*).

"a man who provides instruction"

Eph. 4:11.

F. Steward (*oikonomos*).

"a man who is responsible for the welfare of a community (or household)"

Titus 1:7.

III. Serving as Servant-Leaders—The Ministry of the Elders.

A. Acts 11:29-30.

"The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to **the elders** by Barnabas and Saul."

Function:

B. Acts 14:23.

"And after they had appointed **elders** for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe."

Function:

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C. Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4.

"And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and **the elders**. . . . When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and **the elders**, and they reported all that God had done with them. . . . The apostles and **the elders** met together to consider this matter. . . . Then the apostles and **the elders**, with the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members . . . 'The brothers, both the apostles and **the elders**, to the believers of Gentile origin' . . . As they went from town to town, they delivered the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and **elders** who were in Jerusalem."

Function:

D. Acts 20:17, 28-32.

"From Miletus he sent a message to Ephesus, asking **the elders** of the church to meet him. . . . 'Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **care-givers**, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore, be alert . . . And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified."

Function:

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E. Acts 21:18.

"The next day Paul went with us to visit James; and all **the elders** were present."

Function:

F. Ephesians 4:11-13.

"The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, **some pastors and teachers**, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, so that the body of Christ may be built up until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."

Function:

G. Philippians 1:1.

". . . To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with **the care-givers** and deacons."

Function:

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H. I Timothy 3:1-7.

"The saying is sure: if anyone desires to be a **care-giver**, he desires a noble work. A **care-giver** must be blameless (that is, he is a person of integrity and genuineness; he is not perfect but he is striving to do God's will and no one can accuse him of hypocrisy), a husband who is faithful to his wife, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must care for his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way, for if one does not know how to take care of his own household, how can he take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. And he must have a good reputation with non-Christians, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil."

Function:

I. I Timothy 4:14.

"Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the body of elders."

Function

J. I Timothy 5:17-20.

"Let **the elders** who care well be considered worthy of compensation, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox

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while it is treading out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves to be paid.' Never accept any accusation against **an elder** except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest also may stand in fear."

Function:

K. Titus 1:5-9.

"I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint **elders** in every town, as I directed you: **an elder** must be blameless (that is, he is a person of integrity and genuineness; he is not perfect but he is striving to do God's will and no one can accuse him of hypocrisy), a husband who is faithful to his wife, having children who are faithful in obedience to him, specifically being children who are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. For a **care-giver**, as God's **steward**, must be blameless (that is, he is a person of integrity and genuineness; he is not perfect but he is striving to do God's will and no one can accuse him of hypocrisy)--not arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain; but rather hospitable, a lover of goodness, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message that has been taught, so that he may be able both to encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who contradict it."

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L. James 5:14.

"Are any among you sick? They should call for **the elders** of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord."

Function:

M. I Peter 5:1-5.

"Now as **a fellow-elder** myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort **the elders** among you to shepherd the flock of God, serving as **care-givers** not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it--not for material gain, but eagerly; not lording it over the ones allotted to your care, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you younger men, be subject to **elders**, and all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you."

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N. Summing up.

It appears as if elders quickly emerged within the life of the local congregations in New Testament times (cf. Acts 11:29-30). By the time the council of Jerusalem was held (Acts 15:1f.), elders had come to play a significant role in the leadership of the early Church. The following reflections are offered for consideration.

1. The designations "elder," "fellow-elder," "care-giver," "pastor," "teacher," and "steward" are used interchangeably to describe the functions of a group of individuals in a congregation who have ultimate accountability for the welfare of the congregation as a whole as well as its individual members. The two most frequently used terms are "elder" and "care-giver."
2. Rather than describing an office or a position, in every single appearance in the passages listed above the terms always stress responsibility and accountability. The reference to "office of bishop" in the KJV is, simply put, a corruption of the text; the word "office" does not appear in the Greek text. (Titles emphasizing office or position were readily available {"ruler" or "head"}) but in the New Testament they are never used to describe Christians who function as leaders. Indeed, the renunciation of offices, including the titles and honors that belong to them, is a radical departure from first-century attitudes in various religious groups, including both Roman and Jewish cultures. Cf. Matt. 20:28f.)
3. Never do we read in the New Testament of an individual being designated "the elder" or "the pastor." Rather the emphasis seems to be on a plurality of elders (or pastors, the two terms are used interchangeably) in a congregation. Perhaps such an emphasis frees us up from what may be called "the solo ministry trap" where there may well be pride of place, lack of accountability, and love of power.
4. Except for the involvement of the elders in the decisions reached by the believers in Acts 15-16, it is significant to note that the premier responsibility of leaders who serve as elders is not decision-making (or decision-yielding) but caring for people. Specifically, elders are responsible for the doctrinal well-being of a congregation by teaching sound doctrine and rebuking false teachers (I Tim. 3:2; 5:17f.; Titus 1:9), the equipping of saints for ministry (Eph. 4:11f.), shepherding and caring for the physical and spiritual needs of the members of the flock (Acts 20:28f.; Eph. 4:11f.; Phil. 1:1; I Tim. 3:1f.; Titus 1:5f.; James 5:14; I Pet. 5:1f.), and involvement in financial affairs (Acts 11:29-30; I Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7; I Pet. 5:2). Truly, elders are examples,

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- equippers, and encouragers, not enforcers. They are care-givers and counselors, not care-takers and controllers.
5. In light of the above, are elders decision-makers or shepherds? It is not a matter of being either one or the other; it is a matter of both/and. Yet if there is a tendency toward imbalance in many congregations, it is in the direction of decision-making. Is it easier to make a decision with regard to the spending of funds to repair a roof of a church building or to minister to a family whose loved one is dying of AIDS? Indeed, perhaps many decisions that elders feel they need to be making could be delegated to others who are gifted in the respective areas, thus freeing the elders up to shepherd the flock. Numerous texts place a high priority on personal ministry on behalf of others, with special focus on the view that healthy doctrine produces healthy Christians, while only a few find elders involved in making decisions. When elders provide sound doctrinal teaching and preaching and caring for members of the body, Christians will be able to minister more effectively in the name of Christ. Indeed, church growth depends upon congregational health.
 6. Is it correct to say that no local congregation has the right to the designation "church" unless and until elders are in evidence? No. Elders are necessary for the well-being of a congregation, but not for its being. When Paul and Barnabas appointed "elders in every church" of South Galatia (Acts 14:23), the implication of the language is that the churches were there before elders were appointed in them (cf. Titus 1:5f.). Even though elders may be viewed as a "mark" of the church, we must not confuse such a "mark" with the essence: "Apart from the eternal high priesthood of Christ, no ministry is essential to the Church in the sense that the Church could not exist without it. On the other hand, in an imperfect world of sinful and fallible men and women, some ministry is necessary in the sense that the Church cannot be fully effective for its task without it" (T.W. Manson, *Ministry and Priesthood*, p. 72).
 7. We cannot say that the New Testament presents communities which were hierarchical in structure. The Church is neither a business with CEOs nor an army with officers. Moreover, the Church of the New Testament is not modeled after our American form of government, with elders functioning like senators and deacons functioning like representatives, with both serving as decision-makers and legislators. Authority (the influence of behavior, thought and opinion) is not vested in one person or a group of persons over the remaining members. Why is there no hierarchical form of leadership? What is new in the Christian community is the absolute authority of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, leading as elders flows out of an awareness that all Christians are called to serve and some are called to serve in ways which impact the community as a whole in more far-reaching ways than others. Such differentiation does not suggest

inferiority or superiority. Within the Christian community equality and differentiation live together side-by-side (Rom. 12:1f.; I Cor. 12:12f.; I Pet. 4:10f.).

IV. Reflections on the Family Life of Elders (With Special Focus on Marital Status and the Children).

The meaning of the phrases "one woman man" (frequently translated "the husband{s} of one wife" or "married only once") in I Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6 and "one man woman" (frequently translated "the wife of one husband" or "married only once") in I Tim. 5:9 have been debated from the second century to the present. Through the centuries the focus has been on those texts which address the issue of the marital status of church leaders (I Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). (It has been my experience that little attention has been paid to I Tim. 5:9, a text which emphasizes the qualities of widows who should be helped either by members of the family or by the local congregation. Certainly this is an issue which should be addressed by all congregations {cf. James 1:26-27}. We need to be reminded that even though we are concerned about the marital status of elders and deacons in this study, the conclusions reached about the meaning of the phrases in those texts dealing with leaders will have implications for our understanding of the role the church has in caring for widows who reflect the qualities presented by Paul in I Timothy 5.)

A. A Look at the Structure of I Timothy 3:2, 12, Titus 1:6 and I Timothy 5:9.

Far too often we do not carefully examine the structure of verses. It is always instructive to do so, and the texts under consideration are no exception. We need to be reminded that Paul did not write in English but in Greek and Greek sentences are not organized the way we organize English sentences. Moreover, an analysis of vocabulary is helpful as well. For example, the words "divorce" or "remarry" do not appear in any of the key phrases. We need to keep this in mind, because it underscores the difficulty in properly interpreting the verses.

Putting the Greek into English characters in the order in which the words appear in the Greek text reveals parallelism that is not so apparent in our English translations:

I Timothy 3:2	<i>mias gunaikos</i>	<i>andra</i>
	<i>one woman</i>	<i>man/husband</i>
I Timothy 3:12	<i>mias gunaikos</i>	<i>andres</i>
	<i>one woman</i>	<i>men/husbands</i>
Titus 1:6	<i>mias gunaikos</i>	<i>aner</i>

	<i>one woman</i>	<i>man</i>
I Timothy 5:9	<i>henos andros</i>	<i>gune</i>
	<i>one man</i>	<i>woman</i>

B. A Look at the Key Questions.

Is Paul teaching that an elder or a deacon may have only one wife in a lifetime, thus not permitting individuals to remarry after the death of a spouse or a divorce? Or is he referring only to divorced persons, since the death of a spouse has no moral implications? Or is he stressing marital faithfulness?

Some translations propagate these positions. For example, *The New Revised Standard Version* reads "married only once." On the other hand, *The New International Version* reads "husband of one wife" (assuming that Paul cannot mean "neither more nor less than one"). What about the accuracy of *The New English Bible*: "faithful to his one wife"?

C. A Look at Some Possible Answers.

But what were the options for interpreting the phrases in ancient times? There have been many suggestions (e.g., concubinage), and I have decided to review the major suggestions. The possibilities will be presented in order from least likely to most likely from my perspective.

1. Paul is forbidding a man to be engaged in polygamy. Quite frankly, there is not much support for this position. Polygamy was not practiced in the Roman world outside Palestine, though illegal bigamy and certainly adultery were. Indeed, polygamy was against Roman law, and even in Palestine it was not common but rather monogamy was the norm. Also Jewish people outside Palestine followed the Greek practice of avoiding polygamous unions. We need to remember that in I Timothy and Titus Paul is not addressing Christians living in Palestine but Christians living in Roman Asia and on Crete, respectively. He had no reason whatsoever to address the issue of polygamy to people living in the part of the world where polygamy was forbidden by Roman law. (Note: Women could not practice polygamy even in Palestine.)
2. Paul is forbidding a man to serve as an elder or deacon if he has been divorced, regardless of the reason. A major problem with this view is that the Greek word for "divorce" is not found in I Timothy or Titus. On the other hand, in I Cor. 7:12f. Paul uses the word for divorce, a word he certainly could have used in the letters to Timothy and Titus. When I used to teach Greek, I had students translate the

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following English statements into Greek: "An elder must not be a divorced person" and "An elder must have been married only once in his life." The Greek language has both the vocabulary and the grammatical capacity to construct such clear statements. But Paul does not do so here. Why not? If he is not talking about divorce, what is he emphasizing?

Special Note: Paul is especially concerned with the way church leaders are viewed by those outside the church. Notice how the section on elders begins with an emphasis on being above reproach (v. 2) and ends with the emphasis on having a good reputation with outsiders (v. 7). If Paul is concerned about the church's witness to "those outside," it is next to impossible that he is addressing the remarriage of divorced men, because no one in antiquity, whether Jewish or Greco-Roman, would have looked down on the remarriage of men. What was ridiculed in the first century was successive divorce, bigamy, and marital infidelity.

3. Paul is stressing a husband's faithfulness to his current wife, that is, one-spouse faithfulness. This is the view that I think is most acceptable and likely. In particular, Paul gives a positive statement rather than a negative one. "Husband of one wife" means a faithful husband and presupposes marriage. The emphasis is on commitment and fidelity: a husband (or wife) is physically, spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically committed to the spouse. (Some scholars, for example J.D. Quinn in *Titus*, p. 85, maintain that the focus is especially on sexual control, something lacking in the lives of many men in the first century.)

Note i: It is true that Paul could have used the word "faithful" in describing the relationship but does not. Some would suggest that the argument presented above which noted that Paul does not use the word "divorce" applies here as well. But the various layers of context suggest otherwise. For example, see 4.c and d.

Note ii: The belief that only married men may serve as elders comes into conflict with I Cor. 7:7, 25f. where Paul writes about the advantages of singleness: a person is able to devote more time in service of Christ (cf. Matt. 19:10-11). To insist that Paul is excluding those who have never married is an inference at best and one must be extremely cautious about inferences which clash with other relevant teachings (I Cor. 7 and Matt. 19). Certainly Paul assumes that elders will normally be married, and without doubt the experience of marriage and family life is an asset in their ministry. Nevertheless, Paul is not intending to disqualify those who are single (or indeed married but childless or only have one child).

G.W. Knight III (*Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, p. 157) rejects the notion that an elder must be married and must have two or more children (if we are going to assume the first, then we must accept the latter since the plural word "children" is

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used): ". . . it is exceedingly doubtful that these words and the words about 'children' (plural, vv. 4, 12) be understood as mandating that only a married man with at least two children could be an officer in the church. Probably he wrote in terms of the common situation, i.e., of being married and having children, and then spoke of what should be the case when this most common situation exists in an officer's life. Paul, like Peter (cf. I Pet. 5:1) regarded himself as a fellow-elder or bishop and wrote of his singleness and his apostolic ministry without regarding them as mutually exclusive (cf. I Cor. 9:1ff., especially v. 5; see also 7:7, 8). In fact, he commended singleness, using himself as an example, as a state where one would have more freedom to serve the Lord (I Cor. 7:32f.). {I do not know of a passage where Paul considered himself an elder, contrary to Knight, but I can hardly imagine a congregation rejecting Paul as an elder because he was not married and did not have two or more children!}

Note iii: If Paul is talking about one's current marital status and behavior, this is in line with the other qualities Paul presents. That is, he is addressing their current demonstration of gentleness, caring, etc.

Note iv: Validly divorced people who remarried were considered married to one spouse, the second one, not two spouses. Hence, the functional stress of the phrase is on the husband's (or wife-now-widow in I Tim. 5:9) faithfulness as a good husband (or wife) through the duration of the marriage.

Note v: Because the phrase "husband of one wife" (or "wife of one husband") is not found in any other Greek writing, the importance of interpreting the phrase in light of the various contexts cannot be over-emphasized.

4. Additional issues to consider include the following.
 - a. The marriage relationship is not the one quality or characteristic that is singled out as "the umbrella" for all the other qualities stressed by Paul. Indeed, the word "blameless" is used in both I Timothy and Titus as "the umbrella" term for all the other qualities (see I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6, 7). The word "blameless" does not mean "sinless" or "perfect" but rather refers to the observable conduct which results in a man being considered as a person of integrity and genuineness. He is not perfect but he is striving to do God's will and no one (within the church or outside the church) can accuse him of hypocrisy. The qualities Paul emphasizes shows how the man is to be blameless in domestic, personal, and community areas. Neither

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those within the church nor those outside the church should be able to level the charge of hypocrisy at a church leader (or any Christian, for that matter).

- b. The meaning assigned ("a faithful and loyal spouse who is a good current marital partner") fits the emphasis quite well, matching the stress on caring for the children properly (I Tim. 3:4-5, 12; Titus 1:6) and the concern about false teachers who were ruining whole "households" (Titus 1:11) and forbidding marriage (I Timothy 4:1-3).
- c. That this phrase would bar from leadership an otherwise godly man because of a bad marriage years ago, often before his conversion, is an assumption that has to be read into the text. Moreover, a valid divorce does not leave one still married to the preceding wife, and one who remarries after such a divorce is thus not the husband of both wives, but only of one, the second one.
- d. Marriage to one partner in a lifetime is never applied as a qualification for leaders in the ancient world. The ideal of marital fidelity, however, is often required of leaders, even outside the Bible. Indeed, having one's current household in order was a frequent ancient standard for leadership. For example, the Roman author Plutarch (46-120 A.D.) addressed family issues in "Advice on Marriage" (see his *Moral Essays*), viewing marriage as "a lifelong partnership together" yet "while every activity is carried on by husband and wife in agreement with each other, it will still be evident that it is the husband who leads and makes the final choice. . . . So, as ropes twined together gain strength from one another, the two of them will each contribute his or her share of good will and by their joint action the partnership will be preserved." Near the end, Plutarch writes: "So a man who is going to bring harmony into politics, business and his personal relations ought to see that there is real harmony in his own household."
- e. The passages indicate the importance of a stable family life. It implicitly excludes from ministry those who take marriage lightly, whether by seeking a divorce or by neglecting their families in the name of Christ and service. Indeed, the principle presented by Paul more readily excludes a church leader who spends all his time away from his family, neglecting them because of the demands of leadership.
- f. As noted above, it is necessary for elders to be "above reproach" for the sake of the church's witness in the world. A question we need to wrestle with is the following: What happens when the world calls us on the carpet for having

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"standards" that reflect a Pharisaic legalism rather than the belief that the Cross of Christ really cancels our past?

- g. Even though I do not believe this passage automatically excludes any divorced man from serving as either an elder or a deacon, I believe it is important for there to be a thorough discussion of any person's past marital status as well as assessment of the current marriage. Such an assessment should focus on such issues as the reason or reasons for the divorce, the person's responsibility in the failure of the marriage, etc.
- h. I believe it is important for us to acknowledge that the qualities Paul presents in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not nearly compartmentalized. If there is a weakness in one, there will likely be weaknesses in other areas as well.

D. A Special Note on the Children of Elders and Deacons.

In I Timothy 3:4-5, 12 and Titus 1:6 Paul talks about the care an elder (or deacon) demonstrates for his children as well as a concern for the behavior of those children. In particular, what does it mean that "his children obey him with proper respect" (I Tim. 3:4) and that he is "a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient" (Titus 1:6)? There is not a problem with the translation or meaning of I Tim. 3:4: children are to be submissive and obedient.

The meaning of the phrase as translated in the NIV, "a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient," is not so easy to understand for at least one reason. The Greek word (*pista*) can be translated as "believing" in the sense of children who have become Christians (e.g., baptized believers). But on the other hand, the word can also mean "faithful," with that quality being clarified in the following clause: "are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient." In other words, faithful children are not wild and disobedient.

In his commentary, *1-2 Timothy and Titus*, Philip Towner provides what I think is a detailed helpful discussion:

"The problem lies in the meaning of the Greek word *pista* in the phrase 'having believing [or faithful] children.' One view understands Paul to be limiting membership . . . to those whose family members all believe; *pista* can certainly bear this meaning. Another view is that the term means, more generally, 'faithful' or 'trustworthy' (1:9; 3:8; I Tim. 3:11; compare I Tim. 1:15; 3:1), which quality is then delineated in the phrase that follows. While the first view is possible, it seems to place more stringent requirements on the elder than does I Timothy 3:4. Moreover, in view of this parallel, Paul

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probably means that the elder's children are to be faithful in obeying the head of the house. In fact, the rest of the verse contrasts 'faithful' with 'the charge of being wild and disobedient,' which suggest a more general kind of faithfulness. The code asks that candidates for the office of elder not be those whose children will attract accusations of dissipation and rebellion (compare v. 10). This is very much in accord with I Timothy 3:4."

Hence, rather than translate the word *pista* in Titus 1:6 "believing," it appears that it is best translated "faithful," referring to the need for the children to be submissive or obedient.

Note: Some argue that an elder must have children. Indeed, some go so far as to suggest that since Paul uses the plural form of the noun, an elder must have two or more children. Still further, some have argued that a man must have children living at home during his tenure as an elder. Such hairsplitting needs little, if any, comment.

V. Serving as Servant-Leaders—The Ministry of Deacons.

It is unnecessary to prepare a chart like the one presented above for the elders since there are so few passages in the New Testament concerning deacons. Indeed, what in the world are we to do with those individuals designated as "deacons?" The answer to this question continues to escape many congregations. When compared with the nearly two dozen references to elders in the New Testament, it is interesting to note that we simply do not have much information about deacons. In general, perhaps we can consider them as assistants in ministry, serving in accordance with their character and gifts and in consultation with and with the encouragement of elders who have ultimate accountability for the welfare of the flock.

This section of the study guide is broken into two parts, the first examining the Scriptures properly (or improperly) associated with deacons and the second offering some reflections.

A. Key Scriptures.

1. Acts 6:1-6.

- a. The word "deacon" does not appear in Acts 6 (or anywhere else in Acts for that matter).
- b. The phrase "to wait on tables" in verse 2 refers to financial transactions and/or the distribution of foodstuffs, not serving at the Lord's Table.

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- c. The task of the seven men is given no formal name; neither are they given designations (although Philip is later called an "evangelist" in Acts 21:8 and Stephen's ministry involves performing wonders and proclaiming the Word in Acts 6:8-7:60).
 - d. The choice of seven men corresponds with the Jewish practice of recognizing a group of seven men who would perform particular duties in Jewish villages, specifically focusing on caring for the widows and orphans.
 - e. Simply put, Acts 6:1f. does not refer to the first deacons.
2. Philippians 1:1
- a. The deacons are linked with the care-givers; perhaps they are to be viewed as assistants to the elders.
 - b. Nothing is said about the particular duties of deacons and we do not know why Paul referred to them in the opening of the letter.
3. Romans 16:1-2.
- a. It is unclear if Phoebe is a person recognized as performing the functions of a deacon; Paul may simply be describing her ministry as a Christian.
 - b. Phoebe is commended for providing help to people, including Paul himself (cf. Rom. 12:8).
4. I Timothy 3:8-13.
- a. A key issue is if Paul is referring to both men and women who serve as deacons or to men who serve as deacons with their wives being singled out for special mention in v. 11.
 - b. Notice the structure of the following verses:

3:2 "Now the care-giver must be . . . "

3:8 "Deacons, likewise (*hosautos* = similarly) are to be men worthy of respect . . . "

3:11 "Women (or women who serve as deacons) likewise (*hosautos* = similarly) must be respectable . . . "

The following observations are in order:

- (1) Some suggest that Paul is referring to the wives of deacons and present two arguments in support: (i) the reference to wives is surrounded by references to deacons and (ii) the word "women" is too general a term for "deacon" and thus should be translated "wives."
- (2) The parallel structure presented in section "b" suggests that Paul is referring to three groups of leaders and their qualities. Specifically, the word "likewise" (or "similarly") seems to indicate that Paul is referring to three distinct groups: care-givers/elders, deacons who are men and deacons who are women.
- (3) The NIV translates the word "woman" as "wife" and inserts a word that is not found in the Greek text, "their." There is another Greek word for "wife" (*gune*) and it is not used in this verse. The more general word "woman" is used. I believe the context suggests that Paul is referring to women who serve, specifically assisting the elders, like their male counterparts.
- (4) In returning to men who serve as deacons in 3:12, perhaps we have Paul digressing, first focusing on men who serve, then referring to women who serve, and then returning to men who serve as deacons, focusing on their responsibilities to their families.

B. Additional Observations.

1. Both men who serve as deacons and women who serve as deacons must demonstrate certain qualities (e.g., respectable, sincere, etc.) as well as giftedness as they carry out their respective ministries, assisting the elders in caring for the flock.
2. Indeed, there are certain ministries that it is best for men (elders or deacons) not to carry out and that are appropriate for women.
3. There appears to be no justification in Scripture for suggesting that elders deal with the "spiritual" and that the deacons deal with the "physical." The word *diakonos* (sometimes referring to all Christians and sometimes referring to specific Christians,

- male and female, with specific ministries in association with the elders) was used to describe a variety of ministries.
4. Accordingly, it seems likely that the deacons undertook various kinds of ministry in local congregations, in accordance with their gifts. Furthermore, perhaps elders delegated many duties to competent servant-leaders who are called deacons, thus freeing the elders to do the work of shepherding, teaching, and equipping (among other responsibilities), a principle found in Acts 6:1f.
 5. Nowhere does the New Testament entertain the idea that deacons are apprentice-elders (or "elders-in-the-making"). I have wondered if we have not been reluctant to recognize women as deacons because of our fear that they will be viewed as potential elders.
 6. Nowhere is there any suggestion that a major responsibilities of deacons was "to serve the Lord's Table."
 7. Finally, there is no more support for deacons (male or both male or female) serving on a church board than there is for elders doing so!

VI. The Relationship Between the Qualities Expected of Elders and Deacons and All Christians.

Most of the qualities expected of elders and deacons are expected of all Christians. This often comes as a surprise to believers, but a concordance search confirms this quite easily.

A. Qualities of all Christians.

1. All Christians are expected to be blameless (I Cor. 1:8; Col. 1:22; cf. I Tim. 3:10; Titus 1:6,7).
2. All Christians are expected to be hospitable (I Pet. 4:9; cf. I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8).
3. All Christians are expected to be teachers (Heb. 5:12; cf. I Tim. 3:2).
4. All Christians are expected to be gentle (Phil. 4:5; James 3:17; I Pet. 2:18).
5. All Christians are expected to not be lovers of money (Heb. 13:5; cf. I Tim. 3:3).

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6. All Christians are expected to be submissive (I Tim. 2:2; Eph. 5:21).
7. All Christians are to be non-rebellious and reject debauchery (Eph. 5:18; I Pet. 4:4; cf. Titus 1:6).
8. All Christians are to be stewards (I Pet. 4:10; cf. Titus 1:7).
9. All Christians are expected to be just (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Phil. 4:8; Heb. 10:38; James 5:16; I Pet. 4:18; cf. Titus 1:8).
10. All Christians are expected to be holy (I Tim. 2:8; cf. Titus 1:8).
11. All Christians are expected to be self-controlled (Gal. 5:23; II Pet. 1:6; cf. Titus 1:8).
12. All Christians are expected to be respectful (I Tim. 2:2).
13. All Christians are expected to have a grasp of the word of truth so that they can teach and preach truth and confront evil (I Thess. 5:19f.; cf. Titus 1:9).
14. Numerous passages speak about Christians not being drunkards, not being violent, not being quick-tempered, not being fond of sordid gain, not conceited, not arrogant, etc.

B. Other Relevant Passages.

1. Timothy and widows are expected to be above reproach (I Tim. 5:7; 6:14; cf. I Tim. 3:2).
2. Married Christians are expected to be faithful to their spouses (Eph. 5:21f.; I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6).
3. Older Christian men are to be temperate (Titus 2:2; cf. I Tim. 3:2).
4. Younger Christian women and older Christian men are to be sensible (Titus 2:5,2; cf. Titus 1:8).
5. Married Christians are expected to care for members of their families (Titus 3:8, 14; cf. I Tim. 3:4, 5, 12; 5:17).
6. All Christian children are to be respectful of their parents (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 4:20; cf. I Tim. 3:4; Titus 1:6).

VII. Some Important Questions to Consider.

- A. How can a Biblical understanding of elders and deacons be shared with the congregation as a whole?
- B. Each elder and deacon needs to consider the following questions:
 - 1. What must I continue doing as an elder or deacon?
 - 2. What must I do better as an elder or deacon?
 - 3. What must I begin doing as an elder or deacon?
 - 4. What must I cease doing as an elder or deacon?
- C. What are the differences between an elder who is paid (I Tim. 5:17f.) and elders who do not receive financial compensation? Does the teaching by Paul aid us in understanding the role of many preaching-ministers serving in congregations today?
- D. What is an appropriate way to describe and express the relationship of elders and deacons?