

Servants of the Word

A Paper by Robert Jackson

This paper constituted my contribution to a leadership debate that occurred earlier in the year 2003 in the Sydney church. Relevant associated papers are available at www.aprchurches.org.

This paper concerns the Biblical role of the Evangelist, and the current debate over the interpretation of [1 Timothy 3:8-13](#). Perhaps I should open this paper with a defence of the notion that a word is almost always better *translated* than *transliterated*. Those who have studied ancient Greek know that transliterating is very often deceptive – a smokescreen, a diversion, a dishonest dealing with the text. The word *diakonos* means “servant”, and should be translated as such. It could likewise be argued that translating it as “minister” is just as deceptive, because that is simply the Latin word for the same. However, the English word “minister” is in far wider use than “deacon”, which is almost exclusively an ecclesiastic (i.e. “religious”) word. Although I must concede that “minister” also has strong religious overtones, so it may be preferable to avoid it also, because *diakonos* was such a common Greek word.

In [1 Timothy 3](#), Paul gives us a list of requirements for two different kinds of church leaders – Elders and Servants. We can glean from [Matthew 20:26-27](#), as well as the context of 1 Timothy 3 itself, that a Servant (which is obviously being used in technical sense), like an Elder, probably has a very important part in the leadership of a church. The question is whether it refers to an Evangelist, or a general kind of “service role” in the church, such as a waiter (a la Acts 6), usher, Kids Co-ordinator, or a presiding member of an order of widows.

It is my strong conviction that the passage is referring to Evangelists, as we are rapidly coming to understand them – powerful preachers of the word who lead mission teams, establish churches, network them and (if the letters of Timothy are anything to go by) could stay for a long time in a key congregation (such as a “missions centre”) in order to combat false doctrine and be a powerful part of the leadership dynamic.

I believe that having leaders in numerous areas of service within the church is essential as needs multiply and churches diversify. We need Kids Class Co-ordinators, lead ushers, technical operators, and so on. If we want to standardise and “appoint” these roles within the church, go for it. If we want to set down requirements, that’s fine. If we want to arrange them into a committee, great. All of these roles are *non-biblical*, but far from *un-biblical*. Like having a Sunday worship service, it’s something that *helps* us to follow the Bible, while not being a “Biblical” practice (or mandate) as such.

I do not believe, however, that there is any consistent biblical designation of such people as being Deacons with a capital D. I believe that these people are servants in the non-technical sense of the word. The technical sense of the word refers to Evangelists, who are servants of the Word (the Gospel), the mission and the assemblies of God as well.

This is clearly an issue where it would be *ideal and highly desirable* for us to have unity as a congregation. For there to be disunity on what role 1 Timothy 3:8-13 refers to is far

from a fatal church division, but it is a very unfortunate situation because it will inevitably lead to some being convinced that the leadership designations (and possibly structure) is simply unbiblical. By way of trying to gain unity on this issue, I offer the following in support of the Evangelist=Deacon view.

Phillip the evangelist, one of the seven

The Bible does not say that Phillip was an Evangelist who then became one of the seven. The Bible does not say that Phillip was one of the seven who then became an Evangelist. The Bible refers to him as “Phillip the evangelist, one of the seven.” ([Acts 21:8](#)) In other words, in one of the “precious three” occurrences of the word “evangelist” in the Bible, it is *equated* with being one of the seven.

Any literal translation should reflect the fact that there is a participle linking the two phrases. (The word is suppressed in the NIV, in accordance with a good dynamic equivalence policy of ignoring the participle of the verb *eimi* – to be – if it is not necessary in English, as it often isn’t). The word is simply *ohn*, “being”, and as far as the grammar goes, it could be taken in many different ways. But I am convinced that the correct way of taking it is also the most natural and obvious – as a participle of association: “Phillip the evangelist (seeming as he was/because he was) one of the seven.”

But how could [Acts 6:1-7](#) be referring to the appointing of Evangelists, when it seems that they are to “wait on tables”. At the outset, I take it as a slight to the role of Evangelist to assume that this cannot be one of their responsibilities. Jesus could not have made this issue any clearer in [Matthew 20:26-27](#).

But there is a lot more at play here. The main historical context of the appointment is not so much the dispute between the Hebraic and Hellenistic widows¹, but the simple fact that the church was rapidly increasing in number ([verse 1](#)). My reading of Acts 6 is that Luke is putting forward the complaint as a *symptom of a wider problem* – the multiplying needs of a growing church. Now, obviously, the fact that the dispute was between two Jewish factions has several other religious and economic implications, but I do not think that these are directly relevant to our discussion.

The church was rapidly increasing, and the current leadership was simply unable to meet all the needs. The leadership structure of the church had to develop in order to accommodate the changes which had occurred. And so, the Apostles appointed as Evangelists seven men nominated by the church, and the result of that was that “the word of God spread” and the number of disciples “increased rapidly.”

It has been argued that the most natural reading of Acts 6 is that the Seven were being appointed to some kind of Service role or “Deaconate” with the express purpose of ministering to the widows. But this view does not square with Acts 21:8. Furthermore, if we then take that reading of Acts 6 and bring it to bear on 1 Timothy 3, we are left in the position where our church servants (which potentially includes a vast array of

¹ Or, more likely, their more vocal counter-parts. It was the non-widows who actually did the complaining.

ministries) must *all* be married and “first tested”. Why would God have such requirements for a waiter or a lead usher in the church? There are many sound reasons, however, for why such requirements ought to be put on Evangelists.

Answering Opposing Views

The argument has been put forward that because Evangelists start churches, they would never need to be chosen by the church, but were likely chosen by other Evangelists. Yes, they start churches, but they must come from somewhere! Why shouldn't a mature church put forward candidates to be Evangelists who then go on mission teams? Their role in no way precludes this. Maybe some were chosen by other Evangelists – Luke shows us that there is diversity in the way leaders are selected.

Furthermore, Apostles then lay hands on them, just as the Elders did with Timothy in [1 Timothy 4:14](#). The natural way of reading 1 Timothy 4:14 is that the “gift” is that of being an Evangelist ([2 Timothy 4:5](#)), and the laying on of hands was his appointment. To use the method of appointment in Acts 6 as an argument against the Seven being Evangelists has no biblical basis, since it follows precisely the method of appointing Evangelists.

I agree with the view that 1 Timothy 3 mandates marriage for both Elders and Servants. An Evangelist should be married, although there is no further requirement that his children be believers, as for Elders.

No one can deny the weight of the argument that it is unreasonable and unnecessary to demand every “service role” be fulfilled by a married person. To say that the solution is to “not call unmarried servants Deacons” goes to the heart of the whole issue. We're admitting that they are fulfilling a significant, possibly even great, service role in the church, but they cannot be a part of the Diaconate, because they are unmarried. Perhaps it's our interpretation of the bible that is wrong here. Why would God put such an unreasonable and stringent requirement on such a general and multi-arrayed role? Surely the passage is referring to a very particular type of servant, a “capital S” Servant, an Evangelist.

This is as we would expect, because Elders and Evangelists would very naturally form a dynamic and powerful leadership team, especially in the case of an Evangelist staying put for a time, as was the case with Timothy in Ephesus.

If “Deacons” are left out of [Ephesians 4:11](#) because it is not their primary role to build up people for works of service (but simply to serve), then how come they have such pride of place in 1 Timothy 3, where it is church leadership that is so clearly in view? The view that Deacons refers to Evangelists makes sense of all these Scriptures.

There are so many tensions and discrepancies to the “serving role” interpretation of 1 Timothy 3 that we should consider the Deacon-Evangelist link, and I see nothing against the view that Paul is referring to Evangelists, and a great deal to commend it.

Summary

I see little to commend the view that 1 Timothy 3 refers to “service deacons”. My reading of the New Testament is that the only time that *diakonos* is used in a technical sense is in reference to Evangelists, both in 1 Timothy 3 and throughout the letters of Paul. But I stress, *sometimes* he is referring to Evangelists, as in [Philippians 1:1](#), and sometimes he uses the word non-technically, as in [Romans 16:1](#).

I think that having something acting like a “Deaconate”, a recognised team of leaders who serve in various capacities such as Pre-Teen Overseer, HOPE Co-ordinator etc., is a great idea. I see no reason why this needs to be restricted to marrieds, especially in cases such as head usher, technician or singles ministry co-ordinator. Why should such roles be excluded from a “Deaconate”?

I would strongly suggest that the name of such a group be changed, and that they not be called Deacons, because insofar as it can even be called an English word, it is highly tainted by religiosity, in stark contrast to *diakonos*, which just means Servant. I would suggest any of the four permutations of “Congregational/Special Servant/Minister”, with “Congregational Servant” being my preferred option. If there is a (in my view unwarranted) feeling to avoid the word “Servant”, then I would suggest “Congregational Minister”.

I believe that the use of the term “Deacon” in the Sydney church and throughout the former ICOC has been based on a mis-interpretation of 1 Timothy 3. I would advocate revoking this erroneous biblical interpretation, and changing the name of the role (to something like Congregational Servant) in order to avoid further confusion.