

ELDERS, EVANGELISTS, DEACONS & TEACHERS

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(slightly revised, Sydney, 2003)

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4.11).

INTRODUCTION

In a growing movement grows, terminology changes. A developing movement brings (a) the generation of **new terminology** to describe what's happening in the movement, then (b) **consistency in terminology**, as terms multiply and are used in different, possibly confusing ways, and finally comes the need for (c) **accurate terminology** — from a biblical perspective, as much as possible. This paper concerns leadership positions.

New Terminology (a) is spawned naturally as we seek to describe what God is doing in biblical terms. We've conscientiously tried to use "Bible names for Bible things." Many of our old terms have been replaced with simpler or more biblical names (*Soul Talk* became *Bible Talk*, *minister* gradually gave way to *evangelist*, and so forth.)

Stage (b), consistency of terminology, comes as we attempt smoother communication between churches, for example standardization of "*sector-region-zone*" terminology, while stage (c), sharpening terminology and ensuring it's as biblical as possible, may be overlooked — as we tend not to question the terms we've inherited from the Churches of Christ and Protestantism in general. This is particularly true in regard to leadership titles.

I do recognize that a single individual can embody several different offices. Consider Peter. Peter was an apostle, evangelist, teacher, elder, and probably a prophet as well! I also recognize that there is a certain fluidity in NT leadership designations, a fair degree of overlap, and we must be careful not to define terms more strictly than their biblical usage dictates.

Still, the question must be asked whether our terminology corresponds accurately to biblical terminology and doctrine. For example, the common denominational appellation "father" applied to a church leader is completely unbiblical (Matthew 23.9). Certainly we want to follow the Bible as closely as possible.

This paper offers comments on elders, evangelists, and teachers, as well as "deacons" (according to our current tradition) in the Bible. This is especially relevant as more and more congregations are installing elderships (praise God!) and diaconates.

OUTLINE

The outline follows the title:

- I. ELDERS
- II. EVANGELISTS
- III. DEACONS

IV. TEACHERS

Translation

Part of my position hangs on a matter of translation. For the record, it must be said that it's possible for our English Bibles to mistranslate or poorly translate an original Hebrew or Greek word. Let's consider two classic poor translations: *church* [εκκλησια, *ekklesia*] and *baptism* [βαπτισμα, *baptisma*]. The first is translated by a now obscure English word, the second is merely transliterated.

Assembly and Immersion

In the case of *church* no one doubts a return to its true meaning *assembly* would help clarify the present denominational confusion, which confuses the building with the body. *Church*, originally indicating the building, comes from an old Greek word, κυριακον, *kyriakon*, *the Lord's house*. [Derivation: *Church* < *kirika* (Old Scandinavian) < *kyriakon* (Greek).]

For example, Acts 19.32 correctly translates *ekklesia* as "assembly". But really all disciples know what's meant by *church*, so it's not a matter of urgency to alter the term. Though more controversial in the religious world, a better translation of *baptisma* would be *immersion*. This transliteration can and does cause confusion, yet it isn't difficult to give our word *baptism* a biblical and readily intelligible definition from the relevant scriptures.

In the same way, there are a number of words confusingly transliterated or translated in our English Bibles, as the table below will demonstrate. My aim is to clarify, not to obscure; however, some reference must be made to the original language in this paper in order to convince those familiar with the original text. The following table will begin to prepare us for the serious consideration of alternative translations for our key terms.

TABLE OF N.T. TERMS OBSCURED THROUGH TRANSLATION			
English term in most Bibles	Original Greek word	Transliteration to English alphabet	Correct Translation
Church	εκκλησια	<i>ekklesia</i>	assembly
Baptism	βαπτισμα	<i>baptisma</i>	immersion
Disciple	μαθητης	<i>mathetes</i>	learner, pupil, disciple
Good news	ευαγγελιον	<i>euangelion</i>	good news = <i>god spel</i> [Old English]
Tongues	γλωσσαι	<i>glossai</i>	languages, tongues [organ of mouth]
Apostle	αποστολος	<i>apostolos</i>	one who is sent, missionary
Evangelist	ευαγγελιστης	<i>euangelistes</i>	preacher [of good news]
Minister Deacon	διακονος	<i>diakonos</i>	servant
Pastor Shepherd	ποιμην	<i>poimen</i>	shepherd
Bishop Overseer	επισκοπος	<i>episkopos</i>	overseer

Elder Presbyter	πρεσβυτερος	presbyteros	elder
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All these terms would be better *translated* than transliterated or watered down. This doesn't mean our Bibles are unreliable. Rather, it points out the continual need for accurate and contemporary translation. Yet it will help us to see where some of the confusion over church offices arises, particularly in reference to deacons. But first, let's examine eldership.

I. ELDERS

Several common terms in the Greek NT indisputably refer to the eldership. The first, πρεσβυτερος (presbyteros, *elder*), refers simply to the age, respect and social function of the man considered an elder. The second term ποιμην, (poimen, *shepherd*) speaks of his duty to care for the flock who are his charge. The Latin equivalent is *pastor*, which is retained in most English translations of Ephesians 4.11 out of deference to those denominations who seek biblical example of their favored term. The third term, επισκοπος (episkopos, *overseer*), speaks of the elder's oversight of his flock in a less personal way than *poimen*.

In Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5 these three terms are clearly used interchangeably. Nearly all N.T. scholars agree that what would later become separate offices originally were one.

Function

It's likely that the Old Testament functions of eldership spilled over nearly 100% into the New Testament role. Elders were older, more experienced men whom God held accountable for the spiritual well-being of their tribes and clans and hence for that of all Israel. They were, spiritually speaking, *shepherds and overseers*. Unfortunately, however, in O.T. history their spiritual oversight generally turned out to be just that — *oversight!* They neglected their primary responsibility (Ezekiel 34).

The failure of eldership as a whole under the old covenant in no way reduces the critical need for elders today, however. The church will never reach the maturity God intended without strong, spiritual elderships in place (Ephesians 4.11-13).

Motion

As shepherds over a flock, elders tend to be fairly stationary. While evangelists may move from church to church, region to region, elders do not. The simple reason: evangelists, as individuals, move about freely, plugging in where the Holy Spirit needs them and motivating the saints. But flocks don't really move that much: for all intents and purposes they're *stable*, and their shepherds stay with them. And *that* is precisely why eldership is long-term, *local* leadership, whereas evangelists rarely meet that description.

Compensation

Two questions arise in connection with the ministry of elders: *were they full-time* and *were they compensated for their service?*

There's little evidence from the NT that elders worked full-time. Peter seems to be the only clear example of a full-time elder (1 Peter 5.1). But then Peter was also called by Jesus to be a full-time apostle. The silence of the scriptures can lead us to and justify either position. Local practical needs determine whether elderships are primarily full-time or secular workforce elders. In some cities, all elders are full-time and fully supported by the church (San Diego); in others, most of the elders have regular jobs (Washington DC); in future perhaps some elderships will be completely non-full-time. As for whether elders were paid, the most meaty passage is 1 Timothy 5.17-18:

The elders who direct the affairs of the church are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages."

These Ephesian elders (Timothy led the church at Ephesus, 1 Timothy 1.3) not only *taught* but also *preached*. Jesus made it clear in Matthew 10.10 and Luke 10.7 that preachers had the right to financial support. The comment about

the ox is found in a similar discussion in 1 Corinthians 9.9, and the mention of the wages due a worker is found in both the Matthew and Luke passages. So there's a strong case for elders being compensated, whether on a stipend or salary basis.¹

Suffice it to say that there seem to have been different types of elders, and from a NT perspective compensation was certainly not out of the question. (Other passages to consider: Galatians 6.6, 1 Timothy 3.3, Titus 1.7, 1 Peter 5.2.)

Corruption

In later church history, the elder assumed more and more authority. With the rise of the monarchical episcopate in the 2nd century, emphasis was increasingly laid on *episkopos*, which in later English was contracted to *bishop* [derivation: ePISKOPos > BISHOP]. He was seen as the only one authorized to preside at the communion, as we read in the early 2nd century letters of Ignatius of Antioch. He ruled over his fellow-elders, who came to be known as *presbyters*, while the deacons (servants) assisted them.

The same sort of corruption happened with the term *presbyteros*, or elder. *Presbyteros* was eventually contracted to *priest* [derivation: PRESbyTeros > PRIEST]! Through the 2nd and 3rd centuries, as it became the view of the church that only an elder should preside at communion, and as the communion began its slow transformation into the "mass," the elements of bread and wine taking on an efficaciously sacrificial aspect, the original *elder* did in fact become the "priest" of modern, full-blown Roman Catholicism.

The big surprise

In the N.T. church, who oversaw the flock? The overseers. Who led the flock; who did the sheep follow? The shepherds. It is nothing less than double-talk to say that the evangelists "lead" the church while being "overseen" by the elders. The sheep follow the shepherd, pure and simple. The aim of church builders should be to establish elderships as soon as possible. It is understandable, even desirable, that a fledgling congregation be led by one person, since it is small and immature. Yet when the church has been planted five or ten years ago, and still has no eldership, something is wrong. The system we have advocated through the years has actually proved inimical to eldership—which is why in most cases the eldership dissolved or "shrank" to a single overseer. This is not God's plan.

Like parents grudgingly "releasing" their adolescent children, we have been slow to allow God's people to lead themselves. This is not to advocate some sort of pseudo-egalitarian democracy. The Bible clearly indicates NT leadership positions.

The surprise is this: the mainline Churches of Christ, to whom we historically stood in a state of reaction, were right. Preachers answer to the elders, not the other way around. Not only will this work better, it is biblical. At the risk of repetition, an evangelist establishes a congregation and leads it till such time as the elders can take over. (In the book of Acts, the time interval was only a few years.) Thereafter, the elders (which could conceivably include some of the older evangelists) lead the church. We are to submit their authority (Hebrews 13:17).

II. EVANGELISTS

The Greek word εὐαγγελιστής (euangelistes, *evangelist*) literally means *one who proclaims [good news]*. While all apostles were evangelists, it's clear from the NT that not all evangelists were apostles, since the apostles had personally witnessed the risen Lord (Acts 1.22, 1 Corinthians 9.1).

Euangelistes occurs only three times in the NT, in connection with Philip (Acts 21.8), Timothy (2 Timothy 4.5), and the major gifts to the church in Ephesians 4.11. If *evangelist* means preacher, as we all hold, the fact that the word appears only three times doesn't diminish its importance. But it is strange that the term often rendered *minister* appears five or six times as often. What's the difference between an evangelist and a minister?

¹ The word translated *honor* in the NIV (τιμή, *timé*) can also be rendered *reverence*, *respect*; *honorarium*, *compensation*. Perhaps it should be rendered *pay*, as some contend (TEV, see NEB: *stipend*), but this meaning is more suggested by context than by the range of meanings of *timé* in NT or Classical Greek. The same word is found in 1 Timothy 6.1 — slaves considering their masters worthy of full *respect*. A slave could hardly consider his master worthy of full *pay*, could he? Other way around, perhaps. Anyway, there are linguistic difficulties in translating *timé* by the English word *pay*.

Mobility in the evangelist position

From even a cursory reading of the NT, it would appear that evangelist was something of a *roaming* position. Philip and Timothy travel extensively. Paul too seems to be an evangelist. In contrast to elders, evangelists' local ministry is temporary. Evangelists *should* expect to move on: it's our experience, it matches *Acts*, and even in the US policy manuals, we have up till now been encouraged to rent rather than buy. For many years we've implicitly understood this but acted as if (or hoped) we'd be in one spot forever! This was not only unrealistic, it was unbiblical!

Denominationalism has called what would properly be the evangelist by the term "pastor". Actually a pastor is a shepherd, hence a more fixed position, whereas the biblical position of evangelist appears to be a highly mobile position:

- Philip the evangelist preached in Judea, Samaria and Galilee (in the towns of Jerusalem (Acts 6), Samaria (Acts 8.5), Azotus (Acts 8.40), Caesarea (Acts 8.40), and Ptolemais (Acts 21.9).
- Stephen, who seems to have an identical role though the word *evangelist* is not specifically applied to him, preaches in Jerusalem only, any further plans curtailed by his martyrdom (Acts 6.5-8.1).
- Timothy ministers with Paul in numerous cities in Europe and Asia, starting at Lystra (Acts 16.1), passing through Ephesus (1 Timothy 1.3), even spending a time in prison (Hebrews 13.23).
- I believe Paul was an evangelist. He calls Timothy an *evangelist* in 2 Timothy 4.5, yet he calls both himself and Timothy *ministers* or *deacons* (Ephesians 3.7, Colossians 1.23, 25, 1 Timothy 4.6), implying the similarity of their roles. Paul traveled all over the Roman world, sometimes spending two or three years in one location (Acts 18.11, 20.31, 28.30), other times just a few weeks (Acts 13.14-50, 17.1-9). So it follows that *all* the apostles were evangelists.
- I believe we'd be surprised to hear Peter wasn't an evangelist! Or Epaphras, Barnabas, or the many others of Paul's entourage. Some of these men traveled continuously, others stayed put for a longer period of time before moving on, like Peter. *All* these men were evangelists.

The point is, evangelists travel. No one should be surprised! It may even set a church up for disappointment when an evangelist promises to remain till his dying day in a certain city. Such a promise is more appropriate (and believable) from the lips of an *elder*, who is more stationary. But evangelists *travel!* They establish beachheads for the gospel. While they may remain stationary—as Philip did in his later years—the nature of their job demands flexibility.

Qualifications

In common understanding, whereas the character qualifications for elders and deacons are clearly delineated (1 Timothy 3), there exists no *list* of qualifications for evangelists. This is odd, especially since evangelists seem to play a much more major role in the NT than deacons.

The Seven

One more item to consider: the fact that of the Seven appointed in Acts 6, traditionally considered to be "deacons", the only two we know anything about (Stephen and Philip) are both clearly evangelists (Acts 6-8). So who's right? Those who call the Seven *deacons* or those who maintain they are *evangelists*? The answer: both are! What's the difference between an *evangelist* and *minister*? None at all, as we'll demonstrate in the next section!

Evangelists plant churches, service churches, and then plant and support new churches. The denominations, in calling the "minister" by the term "pastor", have (a) mistakenly taken a term for elders and used it for evangelists and so (b) reinforced settled, comfortable, inward-focused religion, instead of the radical, ground-breaking, earth-shattering explosive religion of which we read in the living and active pages of the New Testament!

III. DEACONS

The meaning of διακονος (diakonos) is *servant*. Sometimes it's translated *deacon*, other times *servant*, and other times *minister*. As you can see, *deacon* is the transliterated term, and also the least helpful. *Minister* is a word we all recognize, yet we may not be aware that it's merely the most natural *Latin* equivalent of *diakonos*, thus only serving to obscure the meaning. *Servant* is by far the most helpful translation.

Diakonos

The term *diakonos*, like *episkopos*, was common in Greek language contemporary with the NT, and the Holy Spirit took these familiar terms and gave them quite a new twist. Thus we read in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*:

In pre-Christian Greek we never find the words ἐπισκοπος [episkopos] and διακονος [diakonos] used in the Christian sense, whether individually or in the distinctive Christian relationship. Early Christianity took over words which were predominantly secular in their current usage and which had not yet been given any sharply defined sense. It linked these words with offices which were being fashioned in the community, and thus gave them a new sense which was so firmly welded with the activity thereby denoted that in all languages they have been adopted as loan-words to describe Christian office-bearers (Theol. Dict. N.T. II:91).

From the original sense of *diakonos* a shift occurred. In my understanding of church history, as churches became more settled in, the “deacon” was seen less and less as a servant of the gospel and more and more as a servant of the overseer, or bishop! (Where did the evangelist go?!) This may be a bit simplistic, yet I have done my best to interpret the testimony of the patristic writers. Even the church historian Henry Chadwick confesses, “*The exact history of this transition within two generations from apostles, prophets and teachers to bishop, presbyters and deacons is shrouded in obscurity, though our sources give occasional glimpses of the process*” (Chadwick, *The Early Church* 46).

Settled, comfortable Christianity saw a shift from the sacrificial to the sacramental, from the evangelistic to the eucharistic, from elders and evangelists to “bishops”, “priests” and “deacons”.

Dictionary definition

Does the dictionary afford any help? Consider some of the Oxford dictionary definitions of *deacon*:

The name of an order of ministers in the Christian church... in Episcopal churches, a member of the third order of ministry, ranking below bishops and priests, and having the functions of assisting the priest... In the Presbyterian system, one of an order of officers appointed to attend to the secular affairs of the congregation... In Congregational churches, one of a body of officers elected to advise and assist the pastor and attend to the secular affairs of the church... The cleric who acts as principal assistant at a solemn celebration of the Eucharist... (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary)

So engrained did this concept become through history that the consensus view of modern Christendom is that the “deacon”, far from being a preacher of the word, handled administrative and other practical duties, answering to the “bishop”. Not that there isn’t a need for an order of willing servants in various areas of servants — our present “deacons” — there certainly is! But the frequent NT use of *diakonos* as a servant of the gospel has been all but lost!

Why the translation “deacons”?

The Latin word *pastor* is retained in most translations of Ephesians 4.11, since this is the only place in the NT the word *pastor* appears, and to translate it correctly as *shepherd* would mean the Lutherans and other Protestants wouldn’t be able to find their term *pastor* in the Bible!

In the same way the transliterated word *deacons* appears only twice in the New Testament, first in Philippians 1.1 and then in 1 Timothy 3, so to correctly translate it *servants* would mean the word *deacon* is not a “Bible name”. I suggest that the only reason to retain the translation *deacon* is a political one. Many people, especially Catholics, Baptists and others who have given their own definition to *deacon*, would be most upset!

Power rangers or powerful servants?

Though both *minister* and *deacon* sound more official — more “respectable” — than *servant*, this is the term that, in my view, best captures the spirit of Christlike leadership. In the Greco-Roman world, *diakonos* wasn’t a particularly glorious word. “How can a man be happy when he has to *serve* [diakonein] someone?” Plato had said (*Gorg.* 491e). But in the words of the Suffering Servant to his ego-driven disciples:

... whoever of you wants to be great will be your *servant*
(...ος εαν θελη εν υμιν μεγας γενεσθαι εσται υμων **διακονος [diakonos]**)
and whoever wants to be first will be your slave
just as the Son of Man *did not come to be served but to serve...*

The spirit of Jesus' leadership style explains why the term *diakonos* was applied to ministers. Traditionally we have assumed that the diaconate was *separate* from the office of evangelist. This is precisely the assumption I will challenge in the next section. More specifically, I hold that evangelists are a recognized order of servants — servants of the word.

Who are diakonoi in the New Testament?

It may be helpful to list a few individuals *explicitly* referred to as *diakonoi* in the NT:

- Apollos & Paul (1 Corinthians 3.5)
- Paul (Ephesians 3.7, Colossians 1.23, 25).
- Tychicus (Ephesians 6.21, Colossians 4.7).
- Phoebe (Romans 16.1)
- Epaphras (Colossians 1.7).
- Timothy (1 Timothy 4.6).

All these are *servants*. But servants of what? Acts 6 may provide some help:

...The Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution [diakonia] of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on [diakonein] tables... We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry [diakonia] of the word (Acts 6.1-4).

Here we see two types of *diakonia*: *diakonia* of the word and *diakonia* of tables. Just as in English, service is particularized. Moreover, "there are different kinds of service" (1 Corinthians 12.5). A table waiter is a *diakonos*. And a servant, or minister, of the gospel is also called a *diakonos*! Once again, the meaning of *diakonos* has to be determined from a careful examination of the passage in which it is found.

Curious omission

Compare Ephesians 4.11 with Philippians 1.1 and an interesting observation emerges. Paul greets the overseers (elders) and deacons at the church at Philippi, without so much as a word for the evangelist(s). Yet in Ephesians he fails to even mention deacons in his list of offices or gifts to the church for the purpose of teaching and edifying it. Let's read the passages carefully:

Paul and Timothy, servants [douloi] of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons (Philippians 1.1).

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4.11).

My translation: It was he who gave some [to be] missionaries, some [to be] prophets, some [to be] preachers of the good news, some [to be] shepherds and teachers.

Did Paul space out? Did he omit deacons in his five-fold list? Or did the church at Philippi perhaps lack evangelists? Consider this: **that an evangelist is merely one sort of "deacon"**. If you serve/minister the gospel, you're a servant/deacon of the gospel, like Epaphras and Timothy. If you serve/wait on tables, you're a servant/deacon of tables. The type of *diakonia* must be determined from context.

This view explains the curious lack of mention of *deacons* in Ephesians 4 and the apparent oversight of the *evangelists* in Philippians 1. Moreover, it becomes clearer why Paul did not instruct Titus to appoint overseers and "deacons" in every town on Crete (Titus 1.5), and why only elders were appointed by Paul and Barnabas in the towns of Asia Minor (Acts 14.23). A church would have normally evangelists before it had elders, since an evangelist plants the church (1 Corinthians 3.5-6, where also these church planters are called *diakonoi*). This is the pattern of Acts and indeed the pattern in our time. Quite simply, evangelists *are* deacons!

Family?

What about family? Doesn't 1 Timothy 3 say that the deacon must be married? Wouldn't that rule out Paul and Timothy? Before going through the relevant sections of 1 Timothy, let's first lay out the assumptions of most readers on the subject of deacons:

- We trust "deacon" is a good translation for *diakonos*.
- We believe the deacon *must* be married.
- We also assume he *must* be a family man.
- We suppose that Timothy, among others, was *not* a deacon.
- We more or less take for granted that the traditional Churches of Christ correctly assessed the role of the deacon.
- Tradition assumes the Seven of Acts 6 were deacons.

These assumptions must of course be tested. In fact, this paper will challenge all but the last of them. Now let's see what the text of Paul's first letter to Timothy actually says:

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

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

A deacon must be the husband of one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 3.8-13).

Here are a few observations one can make about deacons and evangelists from the standpoint of this passage and considering the weight of the NT evidence concerning *diakonia*:

- Paul covers **three scenarios** in relation to "deacons": all deacons, deacons' wives or deaconesses, and the family of the deacon. One possible view takes the three situations as applying at the same time (that is, a deacon must be a family man). But another interpretation sees three separate situations: single/married deacons, married deacons, and married deacons with children. (Technically the "household" would include domestic servants, so a strict scenario interpretation of 3.13 would imply a household wider than "family".) Why insist on the third scenario (married with children)? We don't consistently insist that *all* an elder's children be baptized, though it could be argued that the passage on elders requires it. We're *selectively* strict, but the broader interpretation of the passage has biblical merit and makes equally good sense.
- In short, there's no *logical* reason a deacon would *have to* be married, though if he is he must meet the requirements. So it is with drinking wine: "not indulging in much wine" doesn't mean he absolutely *has to* be a wine drinker. It merely lays down an important principle in the event that he is one.
- There's no evidence that a deacon who's a family man is under the precept of verse 5; why would he have to have family experience to discharge his duties? Family in that case would not be a (positive) requirement, rather a potential (negative) disqualification. Anyway, it's not clear-cut why our present "deacon" would need to be a family man. Yes, in certain cases a family man would have demonstrated a higher leadership ability than a non-father, and we should definitely take this into account. But really, must the brother in charge of facility booking and clean-up be married? Why? Must the bus driver be a parent? Does the church accountant (a type of servant or deacon) have to be married? There could be some advantage but that interpretation seems doubtful.
- It's far easier to see why an evangelist, if he *were* married, would need a spiritual wife and children who were a credit to the gospel.
- This view allows Timothy, who seems to have been unmarried, to be a "deacon." In actual fact he was an evangelist. Paul calls him evangelist in 2 Timothy 4.5 — but, though most people are unaware of it, Paul calls him a "deacon" — a servant of the gospel — in 1 Timothy 4.6. Timothy is both an evangelist *and* a servant of the gospel — a "deacon", if you will.

Further observations

- Paul gives Timothy instructions about appointing leaders (1 Timothy 5.22). We know that he had the authority to appoint elders (Titus 1.5), and surely he appointed evangelists too! Requirements for both are set out in 1 Timothy 3.1-10. Since elders are by definition older than most evangelists, Paul urges Timothy not to let the eldership look down on him for his youth (1 Timothy 4.12) — an important principle for harmonious relations between elders and evangelists.
- Timothy, like these men, was commanded to hold on to the “deep truths” or mysteries of the faith (4.6); fallen leaders Hymenaeus and Alexander had failed to do so (1.19). Who needs to keep his convictions about the gospel strong? *Preachers and teachers*, above all others, need to keep their convictions straight.

Terminology

Elders are described by three separate terms: as *overseers*, because they oversee the flock, *elders*, since they are older, more respected members of the community, and *shepherds*, appropriate since God’s people are so often called sheep. In the same way evangelists too are called by at least two differing terms: by *evangelist* (as rare term in the NT as the word *Christian*), since they proclaim the good news, and by *servant* (*minister* and *deacon* being two common translations) since they are servants of the gospel. Don’t be thrown off by the different terms!

For all these reasons it’s difficult to see why 1 Timothy 3 is *not* talking about evangelists as deacons — servants — of the gospel. They are one and the same.

Evidence from Early Church History

What light, if any, does the confused patristic testimony shed on the matter? In short, the minister, or servant (*diakonos*) moved from inspirer of the church and preacher of the gospel to assistant to the bishop (*episkopos*) in the 2nd century to ultimately, in Anglo-Catholic tradition, “ranking below bishops and priests.”

First Clement, the letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, was written just a few years before the start of the 2nd century (96 AD). Clement writes

[The apostles] preached in country and city, appointed their first converts, after testing them by the Spirit, to be bishops and **deacons** of future believers. Nor was this any novelty, for Scripture had already mentioned bishops and **deacons** long before. For this is what the Scripture says somewhere: “I will appoint their bishops in righteousness and their **deacons** in faith” (*1 Clem* 42.5).

Surprisingly, the reference is to the Septuagint *Greek* translation (the Bible of the early church) of Isaiah 60.17, which more accurately reads

And I will give your **rulers** in peace, and your overseers in righteousness (*Isaiah 60.17 LXX*).

Clement has the two parts of the passage reversed: *bishops in righteousness* is the Septuagint *overseers in righteousness* while Clement’s *deacons in faith (!)* is equivalent to *rulers in peace*. There is certainly room for improvement in Clement’s exegesis, but the passage is useful for the situation it illuminates a full generation after the apostolic age: that “deacons” (ministers, servants) *ruled*. Their responsibility was considerably more than assisting as “runners”, menial workers or church handymen.

As evidence that deacons originally had more of a preaching/teaching role, moving the church, consider the following passage from the 2nd century *Didache*. Some scholars believe the *Didache* (literally, *Tradition*), dates to the 1st century, but I am not so sure about this view.

You must, then, elect for yourselves bishops and **deacons** who are a credit to the Lord, men who are gentle, generous, faithful, and well tried. For their ministry to you is identical with that of the prophets and teachers (*Did.* 15.1).

Ignatius of Antioch wrote a number of letters to various churches in the early 2nd century. His letter to the Smyrnaeans says

It was good of you to welcome Philo and Rheus Agathopus as **deacons** of the Christ God. They accompanied me in God's cause... (*Ign. Smyrn. 10.1*; see also *Ign. Phila. 11.1*)

These men *traveled*. This reminds one of the traveling companions of Paul, his entourage of evangelists who sometimes accompanied him, at other times were deployed by him in the various areas he took responsibility for evangelizing.

Next consider Polycarp's letter to the Philippians, dated around 150 AD, which includes this passage on deacons:

Likewise the **deacons** should be blameless before his righteousness, as servants of God and Christ and not of men; not slanderers, or double-tongued, not lovers of money, temperate... compassionate, careful, living according to the truth of the Lord, who became "servant of all"... (*Poly. 5.2*).

By the end of the 2nd century the deacon is definitely the assistant of the bishop:

[The deacon] is not ordained for priesthood but for the service of the bishop (Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, c.200-220 AD).

Conclusion: Historical Evolution of "Deacon"

Thus we see that the role of *deacon* slowly evolved from traveling minister to assistant to the bishop, serving at the celebration of Mass in full-blown Catholicism just a few short generations after the passing of the apostolic age (70 AD).

Our present "deacons"

What then should we do with our *present* deacons — dismiss them in shame? Not at all! It is 100% biblical to place people in positions that correspond with their strengths, even giving them a title, authority and honor. Yet it would cause less confusion in the long run if we simply called these men and women of God by the simpler and more biblical name "servants"—or, one step closer to the Greek though not so radical a change in nomenclature, we could call them "ministers".

Since in the NT both evangelists and "deacons" are "servants," I suggest we clarify which type of service is meant — ministry of the word or ministry of tables etc — possibly through the use of two separate terms: evangelist/minister and servant.

As for the term "deacon"—throw it away! (a) It's confusing, (b) it's only a transliteration, (c) it's been kept in most English versions for church political reasons, and (d) it is bound to only perpetuate the confusion over the roles of evangelist and other servants/ministers.

All our present "deacons" would be renamed "servants" or "ministers", care being taken to point out that 1 Timothy 3.8-10 refers to servants of the gospel (ministers of the word) and not directly to other servants.²

IV. TEACHERS

The role of *teacher* has received increasingly emphasis in recent years, a positive development with potential to enrich the churches by ensuring the Bible is interpreted in context. Teaching is one of the few gifts mentioned both in the lists of Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12, and in light of James 3.1 and other passages doesn't seem to be a position that passed away with the completed revelation of the New Testament.

Many brothers are interested in becoming teachers, yet it's probably wise to define what they're becoming before putting them in the role!

² What about the female deacon of Romans 16.1? Phoebe could have been either kind of *diakonos*. One thing is sure: if she was a minister of the gospel, she didn't disobey Paul's clear teaching about not teaching the men (1 Cor 14, 1 Tim 2). By the way, Phoebe is definitely a woman. (Don't be thrown by the seemingly masculine $-\omicron\varsigma$ ending of $\delta\alpha\kappa\omicron\nu\omicron\varsigma$. The rule is that the feminine ending $-\alpha$ or $-\eta$ becomes $-\omicron\varsigma$ in nouns compounded with prepositional formants.)

Yes, the Bible seems to allow considerable flexibility with respect to teachers, perhaps as much flexibility as there is with the role of evangelist. Still, there are a few hard and fast principles that can be culled from the pages of scripture.

Since the role of the teacher is touched on several times in the NT, a collection of the major passages will simplify our discussion. Only *teacher* passages not referring to Jesus have been cited:

- *In the church at Antioch there were prophets and **teachers**: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul (Acts 13.1)*
- *And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third **teachers**... (1 Cor 12.28-29)*
- *It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be [shepherds] and **teachers** to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching... (Eph 4.11-14)*
- *And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle — I am telling the truth, I am not lying — and a **teacher** of the true faith to the Gentiles (1 Tim 2.7).*
- *And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a **teacher** (2 Tim 1.11).*
- *In fact, though by this time you ought to be **teachers**... (Heb 5.12)*
- *Not many of you should presume to be **teachers**, my brothers, because you know that we who **teach** will be judged more strictly (Jas 3.1).*
- *But there were false prophets among the people, just as there will be false **teachers** among you... In their greed these **teachers** will exploit you... (2 Pet 2.1-3)*

Though exactly what a teacher is remains undefined, we may suppose their primary job was to teach the scriptures, like Ezra in the post-exilic times of the 5th century BC. False prophets promulgated false teaching in NT times just as in OT times (Jeremiah 8.7-8), so to keep on the straight and narrow we need teachers of the truth (Matthew 7.13-14, 15).

Teaching power at Antioch

The teaching nucleus at Antioch (Acts 13.1) included several well educated men. **Barnabas** was a landowner, thus probably from the wealthier classes and an educated person. **Manaen** was brought up with Herod the Tetrarch — another man of some education, possibly with access to the best his generation had to offer. (His Hebrew name was Menahem, so we are dealing with a man learned in the scriptures sharing his knowledge in the Gentile city of Antioch.) **Simeon**, with his Jewish upbringing (Simeon is a Hebrew name) would also have had a solid grounding in the OT scriptures, and Cyrene, on the North African coast, home of **Lucius**, had a large Jewish settlement. And then there is **Saul**: by far the most educated of the apostles, as a reading of his letters makes obvious.

Teachers or Preachers?

You will have noticed that Acts 13.1 says these men were prophets and teachers. They weren't mere academics in ivory towers, but dynamic gospel preachers who sought to teach the scriptures to their generation in a powerful, pertinent, persuasive way.

So what's the difference between teachers and preachers? The same as the difference between teaching and preaching: one is primarily *instructional*, the other is primarily *motivational*. Both are didactic (they impart information), yet they are by no means the same. In the case of the above men, they combined both roles (as prophets *and* teachers), yet there's no reason that preaching and teaching gifts would always have to be combined in the same person.

Few are chosen

I believe the situation is little changed today. Few Christians have the gift of teaching, and, although teaching the gospel is a command for all disciples, still only a few should aspire to be *teachers* in the more specialized sense of the word. Some evangelists are also excellent teachers, though not all have sufficient grasp of the scriptures to qualify as teachers.

The percentage of teachers in the movement may be small, yet as many as possible ought to aim to be teachers, as this is crucial if we as a movement are to do all we can to remain on track scripturally. For comparison's sake, the percentage of disciples who serve as evangelists, women's ministry leaders and interns is rarely higher than 3-5% of the membership. Moreover, from the NT it's unclear whether teachers serviced a number of congregations, like the apostles, prophets, and evangelists after whom they're listed, or remained stationary, serving the local church, like the shepherds with whom they're named.

A role in evolution

Ultimately I believe the teaching role may evolve as has the ministry role, which at present has in practice 6 or 7 levels. (From International Missions Leader, World Sector Leader, and Geographical Sector Leader to Lead Evangelist, Associate Evangelist, Intern or temporary trainee.) Time will tell, but in the meantime we need to encourage those with the teaching gift to be ambitious, just as in the last two decades we have urged able men and women to consider the full-time ministry.

Wrap-up: Teachers

From the passages above we may conclude that:

1. Only a few Christians in the early church had the gift of teaching.
2. A preacher could also hold the gift of teaching.
3. Teaching is an essential gift to safeguard the church against heresy and apostasy.

SUMMARY

Inspired apostles and prophets (Ephesians 4.11) formed the foundation of the early church (Ephesians 2.20). Their departure left only evangelists, shepherds and teachers. This being the case, there is no clear separate "order of deacons". In the NT when deacons, servants or ministers are mentioned, *evangelists* are normally meant. There are gifts and ministries of service (1 Peter 4), but this is not a teaching leadership position in the same sense that elder or evangelist or teacher is.

Changes need to be made in our terminology. Not that we can ever *perfectly* translate Greek terms into English equivalents, but here (evangelist/deacon) is a case where we can clearly come closer.

The following chart explains where we go from here with our terminology. The leftmost column is our current terminology, the second column a suggested, more biblical terminology.

Old title	Suggested title	Function	Scriptures
Elder	<i>Shepherd, elder</i>	Overseeing Lead the church	1 Tm 3, Ti 1, 1 Pt 5
Teacher	<i>Teacher</i>	Teaching Bible teaching	Eph 4, Jas 3, Acts 13
Deacon	<i>Servant, minister</i>	Serving Various ministries	1 Pt 4, <i>not</i> 1 Tm 3)
Evangelist	<i>Evangelist, Preacher</i>	Preaching Preach the word	2 Tm 4, 1 Tm 3

THE SALIENT POINTS

ELDERS: Elders, in continuity with the OT, advise and oversee the flock. They must be men of impeccable character with outstanding family qualifications. In contrast to evangelists, they are stationary, remaining with the flock as a shepherd with the sheep. Their relationship with the evangelists is one of cooperation, though the elders lead the church. Elders may receive compensation, and it is possible some elders served full-time. Each congregation should strive to have elders, who are vital to the maturing and stability of the church. They are its leaders; other leaders answer to them, since they themselves answer to God (1 Peter 5).

EVANGELISTS: In contrast to elders, evangelists are more mobile. They should therefore relate to the congregation in a quite different way to how the elders relate to it. Though they're usually called *servants (ministers)*, the term *evangelist* is occasionally used in the NT. The passage 1 Timothy 3.8-10 has long been mistakenly applied to an imaginary order of church leaders who in fact turn out to be evangelists!

DEACONS: There's no harm in recognizing an order of servants, yet it would not be wise to retain the term "deacon" since this will unavoidably point us towards 1 Timothy 3, leading us to ignore the primary reason for the qualifications: criteria for the evangelist position. 1 Peter 4.11, which has the Greek term *diakonei* (serves), is enough to justify recognized servants. For this reason I recommend that the biblical term *servant* replace our present term *deacon*. Paul nowhere mentions "deacons" in the top 5 offices of Ephesians 4.11, because "evangelists", mentioned in that passage, are a kind of "deacon." Other orders of service are not primarily didactic, whereas all five offices in Ephesians 4 are didactic in nature.

TEACHERS: Only a few Christians have the gift of teaching, yet this is an essential gift to safeguard the church against heresy and apostasy. The teacher's main qualification is a solid grasp of the whole Bible. Teachers aren't necessarily preachers, though the roles can be combined in the same individual.

Taking it to the people

The issues this paper touches upon deserve some consideration before elders and "deacons" are installed in the local congregation. As a movement we like to explain to our people what we're doing from the scriptures — and rightly so! Yet actually every time we explain ourselves from the Bible we're teaching our people how to exegete the scriptures, for they are sure to follow our lead.

How are we doing? How careful are we in our handling of the scriptures? What we unconsciously convey to the people is either a *solid* or a *faulty* method of Bible study, depending on how solidly *we* as leaders exegete the scriptures.

The greatest of care must be taken whenever we define our terms, since so many other things hang on these basic building blocks. So let's make sure our method is solid! It's my prayer that this paper is of help to that end, as well as of service in our never-ending striving for biblical leadership.