



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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## **“They Must First Be Tested, Then They Must Serve”**

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The title above is my attempt to literally render the key parts of a familiar verse in the passage that names the qualities of deacons (1 Tim 3.8-13). The ESV, similar to translations from the KJV onward, reads, “And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless” (1 Tim 3.10). “Serve as deacons” is a translation of one word, the verb “to serve” (*diaknoneō*). I have used the word “must” to bring out the imperative force of both verbs, “tested” and “serve.”<sup>1</sup> Notice also the word “then,” in both translations, indicating the order of events in Paul’s emphasis: testing, *then* serving.

I stress these things to call attention to a concern that some have expressed when the position and work of deacons are discussed. As stated by Charles Hodge,

Brilliance, talent, education, money, [and] status influence us more than we dare admit! Weekly, preachers declare the abundance of talent where they preach yet [are] still wondering “What is wrong?” Many men have been ordained as deacons simply because of their “social status” rather than their spirituality! If they had been poor, they would never have been considered. Too many believe Christ’s church has two rewards—the diaconate then the eldership! . . . The diaconate is not a “necessary nuisance” in becoming an elder! . . . The diaconate is not a reward, a title, a position—it is a function. . . . God has not, will not, and cannot use title seekers. He can use servants! (*God’s Deacons*, 33).

Why consider this subject? First, “deacon” is one of the English words used to translate *diakonos*. If we are going to study the use of that word in the New Testament, we must think about its implications with regard to the work of deacons. Second, as Hodge’s second sentence suggests, addressing the question of “what’s wrong” in some churches may need to begin with a study of and teaching about the idea of “the diaconate” as it presented in the New Testament.

Simply stated, and as Hodge also suggested, too many view a deacon as one in a position more like a modern mid-level management position than as one called to serve. In noting this, I do not intend to say that first century deacons did not hold a separate position, there there was no “office” involved (cf. Phil 1.1). But the focus in the New Testament is

more on the SERVICE and less on the office, whereas today many seem to focus more on the OFFICE and less on the service. The idea of “menial service,” which we have previously noticed was integral to *diakonos*, is as out of fashion in today’s world as it was in the Jewish and Greek settings in the first century. Who wants to do grunt work?<sup>2</sup>

A more literal translation of 1 Timothy 3.10 exposes the failure of such thinking. In the context, Paul was obviously referring to deacons (see v. 8). But his focus in verse 10 was on *function*, not position. By using imperative verbs, Paul emphasized that it was *expected* that only the men who had first been tested were to be set apart as “special servants” (a more helpful translation of *diakonos* as we seek to stress service over office). He was also saying that they were *expected* to serve. He envisioned servant leadership (cf. Mark 10.42-45), that qualifications for which were deeds that had been done over time by men who showed they were willing to “get their hands dirty” for the sake of the Lord’s work.

Both experience and biblical example (Acts 6.1-7) show that what is everyone’s job is often no one’s responsibility. The analogy of the body (Rom 12.3-8; 1 Cor 12.12-31; Eph 4.11-16) teaches that variously talented people will be doing different things and that it is right for some to have the task of involving others in the use of their unique gifts. God’s church is blessed with many wonderful servants whose formal designation as “deacons” changes nothing about their activity as servants. To elevate the prestige of the office above the function of service hinders the body’s work for the Lord.

“They *must* first be tested, *then* they *must* serve.”

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Both the CSB and NET make the first imperative explicit, e.g., “They must also be tested first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons” (CSB). Daniel Wallace notes that, while the Greek imperative typically involves the imposition of one’s will on another as one of its features, there is often a permissive aspect to the mood. But even when that is the case, “in almost every instance the rhetorical power of the imperative is still felt. Thus, when Paul says, ‘If the unbeliever departs, let him depart (χωρίζεσθω [chōrizesthō])’ (1 Cor 7:15), the permissive imperative is more strongly addressed to the heart than if he had said, ‘If the unbeliever departs, that is OK!’” (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, Accordance electronic ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). My translation above seeks to bring out “the rhetorical power of the imperative” in both parts of 1 Tim 3.10.

<sup>2</sup> In his discussion of the use of the feminine form of the word *diakonos* relative to Phoebe (Rom 16.1), and whether or not that use meant she was formally a “deaconess,” Jack P. Lewis noted references to special women servants in post-biblical Christian writings and then observed, “A further significant contribution to the on-going discussion might be made if one noticed that when deaconesses did appear in the church organization, they kept the doors, aided in female baptisms, and did other work with women. The modern drive for deaconesses would not be at all satisfied with doing such tasks” (*Exegesis of Difficult Passages*, 109).