

The Equipping Servants of the Early Church

Rediscovering the Original Function of the Deacons in the New Testament

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Except where otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the Christian Standard Bible (Holman 2017). All emphasis in citations is mine, unless indicated otherwise.

Executive Summary – The New Testament portrays the early church as a complex network that functioned as an extended family and was capable of rapid multiplication. In this model, pluralities of elders shepherd local networks of house churches which are, in turn, connected by the translocal ministry of influential leaders who moved between churches to strengthen, encourage, and equip believers for the work of ministry. Several of these leaders are referred to in the New Testament as “servants” (*diakonoi*) and are depicted in service to multiple localities of churches. These “equipping servants” serve interdependently with elders, ensuring the church’s unity, stability, and ability to rapidly multiply disciples. Many ecclesiastical traditions have overlooked this translocal leadership function, partly due to translation choices in most Bible translations that distinguish between an assumed “office of deacon” and the people explicitly referred to as “servants” (or “ministers”). This study addresses this misunderstanding, highlighting the biblical function of the “deacon” (*diakonos*) as a translocal equipping servant. The paper advocates for a return to the original meaning of the term and the restoration of the critically important function of the equipping servants of the church.

Table of Contents

1. **Introduction | p. 3**
2. **Setting a Foundation | p. 4**
 - 2.1. Abduction: Inferring the Best Explanation | p. 4
 - 2.2. Post-New Testament Changes in the Church | p. 5
 - 2.2.1. The Institutionalization of the Western Church | p. 5
 - 2.2.2. Are There Offices in the New Testament Church? | p. 8
 - 2.3. The Church as a Complex Multiplying Familial Network | p. 11
 - 2.3.1. The Church is the Family of God | p. 11
 - 2.3.2. The New Testament Church Was a Complex Network | p. 14
 - 2.3.3. The New Testament Church Grew Exponentially on Multiple Occasions | p. 18
 - 2.4. Summary of the Foundation | p. 20
3. **Understanding Acts 6 | p. 21**
 - 3.1. Difficulties with Traditional Interpretations | p. 21
 - 3.2. Reconsidering Acts 6 | p. 22
 - 3.3. Where Did the Assumption Come From? | p. 24
4. **The Function of the *diakonoi* According to Scripture | p. 25**
 - 4.1. Those Called *diakonos* in the New Testament | p. 25
 - 4.1.1. Epaphras | p. 26
 - 4.1.2. Tychicus | p. 27
 - 4.1.3. Timothy | p. 27
 - 4.1.4. Phoebe | p. 28
 - 4.1.5. Apollos | p. 29
 - 4.1.6. Paul | p. 29
 - 4.2. Those with similar ministry to the *diakonoi* | p. 31
 - 4.3. The *diakonoi* as Translocal Servants | p. 31
 - 4.4. A Better Text for Understanding the Function of the *diakonoi* | p. 31
 - 4.5. The Two Leadership Functions in the New Testament Church | p. 32
 - 4.6. The Interdependence of Elders and *diakonoi* | p. 32
5. **Qualifications for *diakonoi* | p. 36**
6. **Core Work of the *diakonoi* | p. 38**
7. **Proposing a Term for a Rediscovered Function | p. 39**
8. **Conclusion | p. 39**
9. **References | p. 41**

1. Introduction

A straightforward reading of the New Testament depicts a unified church that is locally led and also translocally connected.¹ Certain influential leaders were frequently moving between churches to strengthen, encourage, and equip the saints for ministry such that all could grow to maturity in Christ. This paper attempts to illuminate this translocally networked reality of the early church and show that the New Testament refers to this function primarily in terms of serving the church. Several people in the New Testament are explicitly called “servants” of the church (and the gospel) and are depicted in an equipping and connecting capacity, leading to a church that is unified, multiplicative, and equipped to resist false teaching while growing to maturity as disciples of Jesus.

But for centuries, many ecclesiastical traditions have missed this important leadership function of strengthening and connecting networks of churches. We will consider several reasons for this, noting particularly that most translations of the Bible (at least in English) are a limiting factor. English translations of the Bible generally translate a key Greek term (*diakonos*) in two different ways—as “deacon” when referring to what is assumed to be an “office” of the church (cf. Php. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-18; and sometimes Rom. 16:1), but as “servant” or “minister” when the term is used to refer specifically to various people in the New Testament. Thus, we have tended to focus on “the office of the deacon” and assume that the reference to certain leaders in the New Testament as “servants” or “ministers” does not tell us anything significant about their actual leadership function.

In this brief study, I identify where these assumptions about deacons came from and show that they are based entirely in tradition and are not supported by the texts of the New Testament. Then, I will seek to rediscover the biblical function of the “deacon”—which I will refer to generally by the Greek term most commonly used for the function they serve: *diakonos* (plural: *diakonoi*). The intent is to simultaneously provide a term that is less freighted with traditional assumptions and also signal a return to the original meaning of the term. As this paper will show, the actual function of the *diakonoi* in New Testament ecclesiology is so vastly different than traditional assumptions as to require considerable effort to discard the traditional (mis)interpretation of the term.

In rediscovering the biblical function of the *diakonoi* we will encounter in the depiction of the New Testament church a networked ecclesiology that is movementally capable. I will endeavor to show how elders function interdependently as local shepherds of the church, whereas *diakonoi* function in a generally translocal equipping capacity in service to networks (or “families”) of churches. Elders and *diakonoi* work together in mutual submission, such that the church is unified, firmly established, and able to multiply rapidly into unreached people groups and places.

2. Setting a Foundation

Before considering the evidence in the New Testament that suggests a significantly different understanding of the function of the *diakonoi* than has typically been assumed, I must first undertake three foundational tasks. First, I will clarify the abductive nature of this study. Next, I will identify and dismantle certain post-New Testament developments in church structure and leadership patterns that would otherwise prevent the rediscovery of the biblical model. Finally, I will show that the New Testament church functioned as a unified, complex network of family relationships that was movementally capable. Then, after setting this foundation

¹ We will consider the concept of translocality in more detail below. The general definition is “transcends or goes beyond regional or national boundaries; not confined to a particular place” (“Translocal, Adj.”).

in place, I will address traditional misunderstandings of “deacons” in the New Testament (beginning with Acts 6:1-6) and attempt to build from Scripture—and apart from tradition—a biblical understanding of the function of the *diakonoí* in the church.

2.1 Abduction: Inferring the Best Explanation

There are two well-known approaches to studying the Scriptures: Deduction and Induction. These forms of reasoning are briefly described here:

Deductive reasoning attempts to prove a proposition through logic. It deduces a conclusion based on generally accepted statements or facts. *Example: A beverage is defined as ‘drinkable through a straw’ and one might deductively conclude that because soup can be drunk through a straw, it is a beverage.*²

Inductive reasoning attempts to draw a generalized conclusion from observations of particular instances. *Example: You observe 8 out of 10 colleagues enjoying the soup and inductively conclude it is probably tasty.*

The approach we will take in this study is **abductive reasoning** (or “abduction”) which attempts to infer the best explanation from the available evidence. It involves piecing together the known information in order to form the best conclusion that takes it all into account. This is how a detective attempts to solve the mystery of a crime by accounting for the evidence. It is also how physicians attempt to diagnose a disease by forming a hypothesis that best explains the patient’s symptoms. Scientists also use abduction to explain a phenomenon or to infer past conditions from present factors.³ This approach to reasoning is illustrated in Scripture by John and Peter at the tomb. Keller observes:

Unlike Mary, John and Peter go into the empty tomb and begin to look around. They look carefully at the grave clothes and their reasoning powers go into high gear. That is not so clear in the English translation. When verse 1 tells us Mary saw that the stone at the tomb’s mouth had been rolled away, the most typical Greek word for sight is used—*blepei*. But the Greek word used to describe how Peter and John looked at the tomb’s contents is the word *theōreō*, which means to reason, theorize, and ponder. In other words, they were not merely glancing. **They began “theorizing” about the condition of the grave clothes—they began to posit hypotheses in their minds that could account for what they saw.** This is the same reasoning process that a scientist uses in seeking a working hypothesis to explain a phenomenon.⁴

It is important to understand that the logic of abduction “does not produce certainty, but instead plausibility or possibility.”⁵ Meyer explains that abductive reasoning compares multiple hypotheses in pursuit of the best explanation of the evidence:

This method of comparing the explanatory power of competing hypotheses is sometimes called the “method of multiple competing hypotheses” or “inference to the best explanation.” ... In this method of reasoning, **the explanatory power of a potential hypothesis determines which among a competing set of possible explanations is the best.** Scientists infer the hypothesis among a competing group that

² The definitions and examples are adapted from Douven, “Abduction” and “‘Deduction’ vs. ‘Induction’ vs. ‘Abduction.’”

³ Stephen Meyer reflects, “As I began to study the reasoning that historical scientists use to identify causes responsible for events in the remote past, I discovered that scientists who use this reasoning often make inferences with a distinctive logical form, known technically as ‘abductive inferences.’ Geologists, paleontologists, evolutionary biologists, and other historical scientists reason like detectives, inferring past conditions or causes from present clues” (Meyer, *Return of the God Hypothesis*, ch. 9, § “Abductively, My Dear Watson”).

⁴ Keller, *Hope in Times of Fear*, ch. 6, § “John Meets Jesus.”

⁵ Meyer, *Return of the God Hypothesis*, ch. 11, § “Abduction and the Logic of Confirmation of Hypothesis.”

would, if true, provide the best explanation of some set of relevant data.⁶

This approach implements the essence of sound hermeneutics across the New Testament texts, working from the premise that because the church is central to God's purpose and mission, Scripture is not silent about God's purpose and design for it. In this regard, we will seek to employ what Fee refers to as "enlightened common sense" that makes good sense of everything that is written about those called *diakono*i in the New Testament:

The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the "plain meaning of the text," the author's intended meaning. And **the most important ingredient one brings to this task is an enlightened common sense.** The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of what is written. Correct interpretation, therefore, brings relief to the mind as well as a prick or prod to the heart.⁷

Thus, the objective of this study is not to "prove" with logical certainty who the *diakono*i were, but to present a biblically informed hypothesis that adequately accounts for all the evidence in such a way as to infer the best explanation for it. The verdict regarding the success of this attempt is left with the reader.

2.2 Post-New Testament Changes in the Church

For approximately 1,600 years, the dominant model of church in the West has existed as an institutional structure.⁸ Here's a typical definition of institutions, applied to the church:

An institution is an established public organization. The term *institutional church* refers to organized groups of professing Christians who meet in designated church buildings and follow prescribed schedules for weekly worship and teaching... The typical weekly service usually includes corporate worship through music, giving of offerings, and receiving teaching from a pastor.⁹

But the early church was not an institution and functioned differently in many ways. Before we consider how the New Testament depicts the early church, we will look briefly at how the church in the West became institutionalized and how the existence of "offices" in the church became an entrenched assumption without any biblical support for it.

2.2.1 The Institutionalization of the Western Church

Late in the first century and the early part of the second century, various heresies were troubling the church. Over time, the church's response was to shift to a two-tier system where believers were instructed to obey

⁶ Ibid., ch. 11, § "Strengthening Abductive Inferences: Assessing Comparative Explanatory Power."

⁷ Fee, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, ch. 1., § "Introduction: The Need to Interpret." The converse of this approach is much too common, namely, beginning with a set of presuppositions regarding "deacons" and then proof-texting a biblical defense for them (aka "motivated reasoning" or eisegesis—reading into the text what we assume is or should be there).

⁸ We must take care to avoid a common misunderstanding in terminology that arises from the (correct) recognition that Christ "instituted" the church and the (incorrect) assumption that therefore "the church is an institution." This error conflates two different definitions of "institution"—the former refers to "an act of instituting" ("Institution," def. 2) and the latter refers to "an established organization or corporation (such as a bank or university) especially of a public character" (Ibid., def. 1). An example: "The family is the primeval human institution, and the Church is the most important and most comprehensive institution of all, the home in which the whole person is addressed and cared for into eternity" (Mary, et al., *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission* Ch. 4, § "3. Maintaining and using institutions differently"). Thus, in the same way that Christ instituted the family—but the family is not an institution like a bank or university is—Christ also instituted the church, and the church is not an institution like a bank or university, either.

⁹ "What is the institutional church?" GotQuestions.org.

leaders who were positionally elevated above them (the clergy) and defer to them in matters of doctrine.¹⁰ Bosch notes:

The church now had to cope with heresy from without and a hollowing-out of faith from within. In these circumstances **the most reliable antidote appeared to have been to encourage believers to follow the directives of the clergy**, in particular the bishops, who soon—particularly because of the writings and influence of Ignatius and Cyprian—were regarded as the sole guarantors of the apostolic tradition and the ones endowed with full authority in matters ecclesiastical. **Henceforth the ordained minister would hold a dominant and undisputed position in church life**, a situation that was further bolstered by the doctrines of apostolic succession, the “indelible character” conferred on priests in the rite of ordination, and the infallibility of the pope.¹¹

Bosch goes on to note that the first clear use of the term “priest” with regard to Christian clergy did not occur until the year 200, but that the ecclesiastical tradition of a separation between clergy and laity became further entrenched shortly afterward.

After that the term, and the theology behind it, was the ‘received view,’ strengthened by an elaborate ‘sacrament of holy orders,’ which gave the ordinand the power to represent sacramentally the sacrifice of Christ and brought about a mystical and ontological change in the soul of the priest. At the same time, **it cut off the priest from the community, putting him over against it as a mediation figure and as a kind of *alter Christus* (‘another Christ’)**. The priest had active power to consecrate, forgive sins, and bless; ‘ordinary’ Christians, enabled thereto by their baptism, had only a passive role to play, namely, to receive grace. **The church consisted of two clearly distinct categories of people: the clergy and the laity (from *laos*, ‘people [of God]’), the latter understood as immature, not come of age, and utterly dependent on the clergy in matters religious**.¹²

The formalization of the church that began near the end of the first century began to solidify into an institutional structure in the early 4th century. Hirsch observes:

...the transformation of the church from marginal movement to central institution started with the Edict of Milan (AD 313), whereby **Constantine... declared Christianity to be the official state religion**, thereby initiating a process that eventually delegitimized all others... Completing what Constantine started, the emperor **Theodosius (AD 347–395) formally instituted a centralized church organization based in Rome to “rule” the churches** and to unite all Christians everywhere under one institution, with direct links to the state. Everything changed, and **what was thereafter called “Christendom” was instituted**.¹³

An institutionalized, hierarchical expression of the church then became entrenched as the dominant pattern in the West.¹⁴ When the Protestant Reformation occurred some 1,000 years later in the 16th century, the

¹⁰ The threat of false teaching was not new at this time. Paul expended great effort in his teaching and wrote extensively to the churches regarding the defense of sound doctrine. Note the difference between this later approach to defending the truth (i.e. “whatever the leaders say”) and Paul’s approach. He explicitly instructed the churches *not* to merely rely on what anyone said but to test it against the truth they had been taught. If anyone taught anything contrary—whether it was taught by him or an angel from heaven (2 Cor. 11:4ff; Gal 1:6-9)—it was to be rejected. Paul instructed the elders of the church to work together to defend the truth, and he expected everyone in the churches to become mature in Christ (Eph. 4:13; Col. 1:28; 4:12; also the author to the Hebrews: 6:1) and thus to not be “tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching” (Eph. 4:14).

¹¹ Bosch, *Transforming*, ch. 12 § “The Evolution of the Ordained Ministry.”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, ch. 2, § “A Missionary’s Take.”

¹⁴ This does not mean there were no movemental expansions in the church in the West. In addition to early movements associated with Patrick of Ireland and some monastic groups, the 19th century saw movements expanding the church on the American frontier, mostly due to the work of the Methodists and Baptists (cf. Addison, *Movements that Change the World*, ch. 4, § “How the West Was Won”).

Reformers returned to Scripture—apart from ecclesial tradition—and recovered the biblical doctrine of soteriology (salvation by grace alone through faith). But they made only incremental adjustments to the ecclesiology received from the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, such concepts as apostolic succession and the pope were out, but the basic structure of church as a building with a singular leader over a local congregation that attends programmed services was retained. Now, however, the leader presiding over the service was no longer called a “priest” but a “pastor” whose sermon content reflected Protestant doctrine.

Paul teaches that a wide diversity of gifts and services exists within the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), but he says nothing about a mystical gap between sacred clergy and common laity. **If it exists, surely something as fundamental to the Church as a clergy-laity division should at least be mentioned in the New Testament.** The New Testament, however, stresses the oneness of the people of God (Eph. 2:13-19) and the dismantling of the sacred-secular concept that existed between priest and people under the old covenant (1 Peter 2:5-10; Rev. 1:6). **Clericalism does not represent biblical, apostolic Christianity.** Indeed, the real error to be contended with is not simply that one man provides leadership for the congregation, but that one person in the holy brotherhood has been sacralized apart from the brotherhood to an unscriptural status. **In practice, the ordained clergyman—the minister, the reverend—is the Protestant priest.**¹⁵

Over time, the original leadership patterns of the early church were forgotten and the tendency toward eisegesis (the interpretation of a text by reading into it one's own assumptions) increased accordingly. This led to such things as assuming that Timothy and Titus were pastors of congregations in Ephesus and Crete, respectively. This, in turn, led to referring to the epistles that Paul wrote to them as “The Pastorals” (a term not used until the 18th century).¹⁶ Over time, this erroneous assumption became further entrenched in some traditions, to the point that we now have study Bibles that explicitly exchange the “Qualifications for Elders” in these epistles for “Patterns for Pastors.”¹⁷ Some even brazenly call Titus “the Pastor” (presumably of a/the church in Crete?) without any Scriptural basis whatsoever for this unwarranted and erroneous assertion.¹⁸

Another common error is to read into the New Testament the assumption that the church was modeled after the Jewish synagogue. For example, Winter encourages us to “recognize the structure so fondly called ‘the New Testament Church’ as basically a Christian synagogue.”¹⁹ It is understandable how Western Christians—with their long history of institutional church—might assume that “the church meets in a building” and thus gravitate toward the few references of the early church’s use of synagogues in Acts. But it is simplistic to note the use in the early church of synagogues as locations that provided evangelistic opportunity and conclude, therefore, that “church” = “synagogue.”²⁰

¹⁵ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 37. The similarities between Protestant and Catholic ecclesiology is far from a recent discovery. Philip Schaff noted in 1910 “The altar is the throne of the Catholic priest; the pulpit is the throne of the Protestant preacher and pastor” (Schaff, *History*, VIII § 81. “Prominent Features of Evangelical Worship”).

¹⁶ Guthrie observes: “These three Epistles have so much in common in type, doctrine and historical situation that they have always been treated as a single group in the same way as the great ‘evangelical’ and ‘captivity’ Epistles. It was not until 1703 that D. N. Berdot, followed later by Paul Anton in 1726, who popularized it, used the term ‘Pastoral’ to describe them. While this title is not technically quite correct in that the Epistles do not deal with pastoral duties in the sense of the cure of souls, yet it is popularly appropriate as denoting the essentially practical nature of the subject matter as distinguished from the other Epistles attributed to Paul” (*Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, 19).

¹⁷ *CSB Study Bible for Women*, 1550.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1546.

¹⁹ Winter, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission,” 220.

²⁰ Witherspoon quotes Archbishop Whately “...wherever a Jewish synagogue existed... the Apostles did not there so much *form* a Christian church... as *make an existing congregation Christian*... leaving the machinery (if I may so speak,) of government unchanged; the rulers of synagogues, elders and other officers, (whether spiritual or ecclesiastical, or both,) being already provided in the existing institutions.” Thus, he concludes “the primitive Church was built upon the model of the Jewish

2.2.2 Are There Offices in the New Testament Church?

The assumption that the church is an institution leads to (and is consequently reinforced by) the assumption that the church has offices with titles and positions arranged in some kind of a hierarchy. This assumption is deeply entrenched, which is surprising given the lack of biblical support for it. Thus, in order to recover the biblical model of leadership functions distributed across an interdependent plurality of leaders, we must first revisit the common assumption that there are “offices” in the church. Here is one (of many) examples, of the assumption that the church has offices, in a section called “The Office of the Pastor” in a contemporary study Bible:

Paul establishes two offices of church leadership: pastors and deacons (3:1-7). Paul refers to a pastor as an overseer (Gk *episkopes*, Acts 20:28; Tit. 1:7, suggesting the role of watching over the congregation) and as an elder (Gk *presbuteros*, 1 Tim. 5:17,19; Acts 20:17; Tit. 1:5, suggesting spiritual maturity); he uses these interchangeably to designate this pastoral office of church leadership. The duties include teaching, preaching, and generally giving oversight to the church (1 Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17).²¹

The fundamental problem with this doctrinal assertion is that not only did Paul not establish the “office of the pastor,” he did not establish offices in the church of any kind whatsoever. Offices only exist in institutional organizations, and the early church was not institutional. This is important to understand, because the traditional misinterpretation of the role and function of the “deacons” in the New Testament is rooted in institutional, hierarchical assumptions that generally reflect Roman Catholic (and some later Protestant) ecclesiological structures—structures that do not exist in the New Testament texts themselves. Banks observes:

So far as the language for secular offices is concerned, only one of these terms, *office* (*archē*), appears in Paul’s writings but is used exclusively of the governing role played by Christ in the church (Col 1:18). Instead, the language of servanthood dominates.²²

The existence of “offices” in traditional expressions of the church rests on a less likely term, one that occurs in only two texts in the New Testament: *episkopē*.²³ The first is Acts 1:20 (*tēn episkopēn autou labetō heteros*), traditionally translated as “let another take his office” (cf. KJV²⁴, RSV, ESV, NASB). The second passage is 1 Tim. 3:1 (*Ei tis episkopēs oregetai*), traditionally translated as “if anyone aspires to the office of overseer/bishop” (cf. KJV, RSV, ESV, NASB).

synagogue, the government of which, as we have already seen, was distinctively Presbyterian” (*Children of the Covenant*, 158-159. Emphasis in the original).

²¹ CSB Study Bible for Women, p. 1529. Another clear example of the deft switching of “elders” with “pastors” is in the definition used above for “Institutional church” that says: “The presence of senior leadership has been a part of church gatherings since the beginning. Leadership began with the apostles, who appointed qualified men to be pastors as the church grew” (“What Is the Institutional Church?”). This is anachronistic, as it is indisputable that Paul appointed *elders*, which is not equivalent to the office of pastor introduced (much later) in institutionalized expressions of church (cf. Acts 14:21-23; Titus 1:5).

²² Banks, “Church Order and Government.” In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, § 3.4 “Absence of Priests and Clergy.” Banks also notes that “Paul never suggests that it is the role of certain people in the assembly to regulate its gatherings. Unlike the Greeks, he does not use the word *taxis* of an office that is responsible for ensuring that order is maintained (Epictetus 1.29, 39; Josephus Ant. 7.1.5 §36). This is everyone’s responsibility as they share what the Spirit grants them (1 Cor 12:7–11) and discern what the Spirit is contributing through others (1 Cor 14:28, 30, 32)” (Ibid., 132). Institutional leadership is depicted in passages like Titus 3:1 (ὑπομίμνησκε αὐτοὺς ἄρχαῖς ἐξουσίαις ὑποτάσσεσθαι πειθαρχεῖν...) where believers are exhorted to be subject to secular “rulers (ἀρχή) and authorities (ἐξουσία)” (NIV, ESV, CSB). The NLT renders this as “submit to the government and its officers.” Thus, if Paul intended to implement a leadership structure in the church built around positional hierarchies, offices, and titles, it is likely that he would have used similar terminology.

²³ The term ἐπισκοπή occurs two more times in the different sense of “visitation,” c.f., Luk. 19:44; 1 Pet. 2:12.

²⁴ The KJV renders this as “his bishoprick let another take” with “office” as an alternate.

Before we look at these texts and attempt to determine what they are (and are not) saying, we must note that a considerable challenge in correctly interpreting these texts is the sheer number of commentators and lexicographers who approach the texts with the unquestioned assumption that offices exist in the biblical model of church leadership. No doubt, this is due in large part to the ecclesiastical traditions that explicitly assert (albeit without biblical support) that the Bible says the church has offices.²⁵ Works such as these that do not show from Scripture the existence of offices in the church in the first place, but assume them as a given, are not particularly helpful (if not outright detrimental) for uncovering the biblical nature of leadership in the early church. Some commentators point to much later developments in church history—where offices are clearly in existence in a much more institutional era of the church—and seem to be implying it provides evidence for their interpretation of these texts as depicting “offices” in the church. As a whole, the corpus of self-referential commentaries on the offices of the church carries considerable hermeneutical authority but seems at times to be oblivious to how strongly it reads traditional ecclesiological assumptions into the text.²⁶

In Acts 1:20, Peter quotes Psalm 109:8 (“let another take over his position”) in his assertion that a replacement should be chosen to fill Judas’ vacant position as one of the twelve Apostles. The use of the term *episkopē* in this phrase is best translated as “place of leadership” (cf. NIV) or “position (of responsibility for care of the church)” (cf. CSB, NLT) as it is focused on care for others and does not reflect the institutional bias implicit in the term “office.”²⁷

In 1 Tim. 3:1, Paul is providing Timothy with instructions regarding the qualifications for leadership of local churches. The use of the term *episkopē* in this phrase has in focus the function and ministry of an overseer. It is best translated as “aspires to be an overseer” (cf. NIV, CSB) or “sets his heart on being an overseer”²⁸

²⁵ For example, the Lutheran *Book of Concord*: “Jerome, therefore, teaches that it is by human authority that the grades of bishop and elder or pastor are distinct. And the subject itself declares this, because the power [the office and command] is the same, as he has said above... But they themselves should remember that riches [estates and revenues] have been given to bishops as alms for the administration and advantage of the churches [that they may serve the Church, and perform their office the more efficiently], as the rule says: The benefice is given because of the office...” (*The Book of Concord*. “Treatise on the Power & Primacy of the Pope,” ch. 2 “Of the Power and Jurisdiction of Bishops,” § 63 & 80). In *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin writes: “In regard to the true office of presbyter, which was recommended to us by the lips of Christ... Therefore, in desiring to be rivals of the Levites, they become apostates from Christ, and discard themselves from the pastoral office... As to the order of the diaconate, I would raise no dispute, if the office which existed under the apostles, and a purer Church, were restored to its integrity... Is there here one word about the true office of deacon?” (ch. 19, § 28, 30, 32). From *Baptist Confession of Faith*: “A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered), for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power or duty, which he intrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders, and deacons (Act 20:17, 28; Php. 1:1)” (*The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, ch. 26 “Of the Church” § 8). “The office of Apostle was extraordinary and temporary. The office of Elder was essential and permanent... The only officers of the New Testament Church who had authority to rule, were the Elders. Under this generic title all the spiritual rulers of the church are arranged” (Witherspoon, *Children of the Covenant*, 160-161).

²⁶ For example, Beyer’s ecclesiology apparently assumes an office of bishop, and so his interaction with ἐπισκοπή in 1 Tim. 3:1 is not to discern if the text actually establishes the “office of bishop” but to differentiate the assumed office of bishop from the assumed “office of Apostle” in Acts 1:20 (TDNT, *Episkopos*, 608). Then other commentators, many of whom share the same bias, quote these commentators in order to support their own assertions. For example, Knight does not consider whether the term “office” is the correct term, but quotes Beyer in his attempt to differentiate between the “general sense of ‘office’” in Acts 1:20 and the “very specific sense” in 1 Tim. 3:1 (*Pastoral*, 154).

²⁷ Arndt, et. al. translate this as “position as an apostle” and note “not an office as such, but activity of witnessing in line with the specifications in Acts 1:8, 21f” (*Lexicon*, § ἐπισκοπή, sense 2). Louw and Nida concur that this term is not implying an office, but rather emphasizes care for the church: “may someone else take his position of responsibility for the care of (the church).” They go on to note: “Though in some contexts ἐπισκοπή has been regarded traditionally as a position of authority, in reality the focus is upon the responsibility for caring for others, and in the context of Ac 1:20 the reference is clearly to the responsibility for caring for the church” (*Lexicon*, § 35.40).

²⁸ Guthrie, *Pastoral*, vol. 14, 94.

without introducing the existence of an “office” that is not in the text.²⁹ The introduction of the term “office” into the translation steers the implication away from the ministry of an influential leader who cares for the church as part of a complex network—God’s “family of families,” as we shall see below—and toward an institution with leadership bearing titles and holding positions organized in a hierarchical structure. “Offices” fit well in a top-down organizational chart—but no such structure is depicted in the New Testament model of church.

Related passages regarding the leadership of the church contain similar translation biases. Well-known Bible translations refer to “elders who rule well” (1 Tim. 5:17; cf. KJV, RSV, NASB, ESV), and suggest that respect is to be given to “those who are over you in the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:12; cf. KJV, RSV, NASB, ESV). But the Greek *proistēmi* used in both verses does not refer to “ruling” or a positional arrangement of some people in the church who are “over” others. The term refers to leadership, care, and guidance of others.³⁰ The focus is not on rank or authority but “in large measure that of pastoral care... on their efforts for the eternal salvation of believers.”³¹ Better translations of these verses are “elders who lead well” and “who care for you in the Lord” (cf. NIV, CSB, NLT). Banks explains the important distinction between leadership positions and leadership functions:

Alongside the verb *serve* (*diakoneō*), or its nominal form *servant* (*diakonos*), verbs rather than nouns tend to be used more frequently of those making a fundamental contribution to the church. This means that it **is the functions people perform rather than the positions they occupy which is crucial**. So, for example, Paul refers to those who “labor,” “aid,” “admonish” and “teach” (1 Thess 5:12; Gal 6:6). Or, it is the way people have proven themselves (*hoi dokimoi*) through conflict in the church which marks them out from others (1 Cor 11:19). Where nouns are used, as of those who are “helpers” or “administrators” (1 Cor 12:28), they are sometimes given a lower ranking than those who have more dramatic healing or miracle-working skills. Apart from the Pastoral letters (e.g., 1 Tim 5:1–2; Tit 1:5–9), the term *elders* (*presbyteroi*), referring to older, respected Christians who probably had a corporate responsibility for a cluster of churches in a city, does not occur in Paul’s writings (but cf. Acts 14:23). The words *episkopoi* and *diakonoi* appear just once in these writings, in the plural and not presumably as titles (Phil 1:1), and as ancillary to the “saints” in general.³²

The biblical model of leadership portrayed in Acts and the Epistles implements the inverted power structure taught by Jesus to his disciples—a structure that the church has honored with their lips for centuries but that has generally *not* been reflected in the official structure of most churches. Many good-hearted leaders have walked in humility and served the church well, but they have usually done so from within a power structure

²⁹ Arndt, et. al., define the term as used here “engagement in oversight, supervision, of leaders of Christian communities” (Arndt, et. al., *Lexicon*, § ἐπισκοπή, sense 3). Louw and Nida suggest the term be translated “one who serves as a leader in a church—‘church leader.’” They provide a note for those attempting to translate these terms: “In translating ἐπισκοπή (53.69), ἐπισκοπέω (53.70), or ἐπίσκοπος, it is important to try to combine the concepts of both service and leadership, in other words, the responsibility of caring for the needs of a congregation as well as directing the activities of the membership. In some translations an equivalent may be ‘helper and leader’” (Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, § 53.71).

³⁰ Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 464–465. Ewert notes that “*Proistēmi* (lit. to stand before) probably does not refer so much to leading the community [from positional authority] as to caring for it, as can be seen from some of its parallel uses (cf. 1 Tim. 3:4, 5, 12). The noun *prostatis* is used for Phoebe, who was a “great help to many people” (Rom. 16:2)” (Ewert, 1–2 *Thessalonians*, 1083). Wanamaker observes that if Paul “had intended the participle to refer here to ‘presiding,’ it would have been more natural to have put it first rather than in the middle of the series. This argument is persuasive against the idea that the term should refer to those who presided over the church” (*Thessalonians*, 192). He goes on to note that the more likely intent here is that it means “those who stand before you as protectors” and that “figures of relatively greater wealth and status naturally served as patrons or protectors of the community” (193). This interpretation “is confirmed by Rom. 16:1f. where the feminine cognate noun προστάτις (“patron”) describes the role of Phoebe toward the church and toward Paul himself. The meaning “president,” which the noun could have, is not possible in the context because Paul acknowledges that Phoebe served as a προστάτις to him as well... this can only mean that Paul stood in a client relation to Phoebe” (193).

³¹ Reicke, “*Proistēmi*,” 701.

³² Banks, “Church Order and Government.” In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, § 3.5. “Emphasis upon Function rather than Position.”

that contradicts the instruction of Jesus. As long as our model of leadership insists on a vertical hierarchy as in a top-down organizational chart, or at least a two-tier distinction between clergy and laity, we will find it difficult to understand and implement the model of leadership that Jesus decreed for his church:

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over [“dominate”] them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **Not so with you.** Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wants to be first must be your slave (*doulos*)—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served (*diakoneō*), but to serve (*diakoneō*), and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25-28 NIV).³³

Jesus is describing power structures that elevate some people to a position over others in such a way that they can control them and force them to do what they want. The organizational structures of the world appoint some people to exercise unilateral, positional, coercive power over their subordinates. Jesus is describing a top-down structure of power and control, and he commands his disciples—His church—to *not* follow this pattern. Thus, in our seeking to understand who the deacons of the New Testament church were, we must remember that we are not looking for offices in an institution. We are looking for servant leadership functions in a church that functioned as a unified, decentralized network of family relationships.

2.3 The Church as a Complex, Multiplying, Familial Network

In this section, we will consider three important characteristics of the early church. First, it functioned as what it actually is—God’s family. Second, the pattern of relationships within this family formed a complex network in that some of the family members were more connected within the church and, thus, had more influence on the church as a whole. Finally, we will see how the New Testament indicates several occasions where the church grew very rapidly, suggesting the complex network exhibited movemental dynamics.

2.3.1 The Church is the Family of God

The New Testament authors use several analogies to describe the church, including “church is the **body** of Christ” (1 Cor. 12), “church is the **bride** of Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 21:9), “church is the **flock** of the Shepherd” (John 10:1-17; 1 Pet. 5:4), “church is a spiritual **house**” (1 Pet. 2:5), “church is a royal **priesthood**... a holy **nation**... a **people** belonging to God” (1 Pet. 2:5), etc. Each of these illuminates a different aspect of the biblical depiction of “church” and what it means for our relationship to God, to one another, and to the world.³⁴

There is another biblical concept pertaining to church, one that permeates all of the New Testament: **The church is God’s household—His family** (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:5, 15; Tit. 1:7; Heb. 3:2, 5, 6; 1 Pet.

³³ Many translations say that the rulers (ἄρχοντες) of the Gentiles “lord it over them.” The connotation of this phrase in English is that the problem is their nasty attitude about being the boss and that if they were not being disagreeable about their higher rank, all would be well. It is true that leaders *should* have gracious, loving attitudes, but this is not what Jesus is saying. The word used here for “**lord it over**” (κατακυριεύουσιν, combining the concepts of *over* and *lord*) can also be translated “dominate” (HCSB) and “exercise dominion” (KJV). This is supported by the parallel structure of the next phrase: “and their high officials (μεγάλοι) **exercise authority over** them” (ESV, also ASV, KJV). There is no hermeneutical wiggle room here, it is simply talking about having power over someone such that one rules or reigns by exercising authority over subordinates (cf. Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 477). The word used here (κατεξουσιάζουσιν, from *over* and *power*) can also be translated “exercise power” (HCSB), “exercise authority” (WEB), and “use their authority” (NET).

³⁴ For example, the church as the body of Christ illustrates the essential unity and interdependence of the church across a diversity of spiritual gifts and functions, and that we are all in submission to Jesus, the head of the body. The church as the flock of the Shepherd depicts Christ’s leadership, wisdom, comfort, provision, defense, and self-sacrifice, as well as our complete dependence on Him. The church as the bride of Christ illustrates His immense love for us and that He has not abandoned us, but is coming again to take us to His home. The church as a spiritual house illustrates that Jesus is the one who builds His church, the unity of the church, and that the church is the new dwelling place of God’s Spirit, etc.

4:17).³⁵ I argue here that the biblical notion of God as the Father, Christ as the Son, and the church as God's family is much more than mere metaphor—it is a spiritual reality that we understand in light of human families.

The archetypal family is God's family, which is why we refer to "God the Father" and "God the Son." But how should we interpret this? Is the divine Father-Son relationship merely a metaphor, because it is not an actual physical reality in the sense of how humans experience fatherhood or sonship? Or is it the other way around, in that it is the one and only perfect father-son relationship from which all others derive their existence and that are, at best, only poor replicas of the perfect archetype?³⁶ Scripture indicates the latter, particularly in passages like Paul's well-known prayer in his letter to the Ephesians: "...I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph. 3:14-15).³⁷

Our identity as God's children by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, is linked directly to our salvation:

But to all who did receive him, he gave them **the right to be children of God**, to those who believe in his name, who were born, not of natural descent, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13).

Faith is what gives us the right to *be* children of God, born of the will of God. In his first epistle, John underscores this spiritual reality emphatically and repeatedly:

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, **that we should be called children of God!** And **that is what we are!** Dear friends, now **we are God's children**, and what we will be has not yet been made known..." (1 John 3:1-2 NIV).

Regarding this passage, Stott observes:

The mention of being 'born of him' leads John to an outburst of wonder at God's love in making us his children (*tekna*, derived from *tekein*, 'to beget'), the allusion being to the divine nature we have received through being born of God rather than to our filial status... This love God has not only 'shown' us, but actually lavished on us. For **children of God is no mere title; it is a fact**. True, we are called 'children of

³⁵ Banks observes, "Although in recent years Paul's metaphors for community have been subjected to quite intense study, especially his description of it as a 'body,' his application to it of 'household' or 'family' terminology has all too often been overlooked or only mentioned in passing. So numerous are these, and so frequently do they appear, that the comparison of the Christian community with a 'family' must be regarded as the most significant metaphorical usage of all... More than any of the other images utilized by Paul, it reveals the essence of his thinking about community" (*Community*, ch. 5 § "Some Metaphors for Community").

³⁶ Other examples in Scripture where a heavenly archetype is the reality of which physical expressions are merely poor replicas include marriage ("... For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church," Eph. 5:22-33) and the tabernacle ("In the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands (that is, not of this creation), he entered the most holy place once for all time ... For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with hands (only a model of the true one) but into heaven itself..." Heb. 9:11, 24). Regarding the latter, Beale observes, "The pattern seen by Moses on Sinai was a copy of the true heavenly tabernacle that was to appear at the end of history. It was this eschatological sanctuary of which Moses was to make a small earthly model. This was the 'true tabernacle' because it was the 'genuine article', the 'literal' and real one. In contrast, the earthly tent was but 'a copy and shadow' or figurative portrayal of the literal heavenly one (so also Heb. 9:24), 'the greater and more perfect tabernacle' (Heb. 9:11). Some Christian interpreters maintain that what is literal can be only physical and what is non-literal is non-physical. The book of Hebrews however, gives an opposite definition: the 'figurative' sanctuary is the earthly one, and the 'literal' sanctuary the heavenly one (*The Temple and the Church's Mission*, ch. 12, § "Hermeneutical reflections on the theological relationship of the Old Testament temple to the temple in the New Testament." 373).

³⁷ Regarding this, Foulkes observes, "God is not only Father, but he is also the one from whom alone all the fatherhood that there is derives its meaning and inspiration ... In effect the apostle is saying, think of any 'father-headed group' (Allan) *in heaven and on earth*. Each one *is named* from him. From him it derives its existence and its concept and experience of fatherhood. As Severian (quoted by Robinson) puts it, 'The name of father did not go up from us, but from above it came to us.' To such a Father, Father of all, the one in whom alone fatherhood is seen in perfection, men and women come when they come to pray (*Ephesians*, 107-108).

God'. But God gives us this privileged designation only because **that is what we are by his grace**, whatever other people may think or say.³⁸

According to John, the basis for our new, divine nature in Christ (the “new man”) is that we have been born of God. Paul affirms the same spiritual truth—that believers are God’s children—but he illustrates it by the concept of adoption. In this regard, both John and Paul affirm the reality of our identity as God’s children but use the different metaphors of new birth and adoption to illustrate it. Paul tells us:

...all those led by God’s Spirit **are God’s sons**. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, **by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’** The Spirit himself testifies together with our spirit that **we are God’s children**, and if children, also heirs—heirs of God and coheirs with Christ...” (Rom. 8:14-17).

And again: “He predestined us to be *adopted as sons* through Jesus Christ for himself” (Eph. 1:5). Paul directly connects redemption to adoption as sons and the giving of the Holy Spirit, as well as our future inheritance as heirs of God:

When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so **that we might receive adoption as sons**. And because **you are sons**, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” **So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then God has made you an heir** (Gal. 4:4-7).

Heiser underlines this connection of the New Testament church as God’s family to God’s original intent in Creation, and His redemptive plan through the Old Testament:

In Christ, believers are “the sons of God.” The language of inheritance is crystal clear. It derives from and advances the Old Testament idea that **humans were meant to be in the family of God all along**. It’s no coincidence that the New Testament writers repeatedly describe salvation into Yahweh’s family with words like “adoption,” “heir,” and “inheritance” to describe **what the Church really is—the reconstituted divine-human family of God**.³⁹

The New Testament is replete with references to our familial identity as God’s children, including this brief selection: we are “God’s sons... God’s children” (Rom. 8:19, 21), the “children of the promise” are “God’s children... the offspring” (Rom. 9:8), we are “called sons of the living God” (Rom. 9:26, quoting Hos. 1:10), through faith we “are all sons of God in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26), we are to “be imitators of God, as dearly loved children” (Eph. 5:1), we are to conduct ourselves as “children of God who are faultless” (Php. 2:15), God is “bringing many sons and daughters to glory” (Heb. 2:10), we are to endure suffering as discipline, because “God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline?” (Heb. 12:7), “God’s children” do what is right (1 Jn. 3:10), we love “God’s children” when we “love God and obey his commands” (1 Jn. 5:2), the one who conquers “will inherit these things, and I will be his God, and he will be my son” (Rev. 21:7).

Jesus makes it clear that our relationship to one another in the family of God is that of siblings: “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ because you have one Teacher, and **you are all brothers and sisters**” (Matt. 23:8). In the next verse, Jesus emphasizes that the most important identity is not even the earthly family, but the Heavenly Father: “Do not call anyone on earth your father, because **you have one Father, who is in heaven**” (Matt. 23:9). The New Testament authors unanimously and consistently (more than 250 times!) state that our essential relationship is that of “brothers and sisters” (*adelphoi*). Because we *are* family, we are to “love one another deeply **as brothers and sisters**” (Rom. 12:10). Thus, while it is important to acknowledge the rich

³⁸ Stott, *Letters of John*, 121–122.

³⁹ Heiser, *Unseen Realm*, ch. 35, § “If You Are Christ’s, You Are Abraham’s Seed.”

palette of metaphors used in Scripture to describe the church, it is equally important to note the Scripture itself does not reduce the concept of the church as God’s family to merely another metaphor.

Why does this matter for the purposes of this study? It is of immense consequence, because the depiction of church leadership through the New Testament is rooted in the reality that the church is the *one* family of God. There is no fragmentation or separation in the biblical model (e.g., “our church” as opposed to all other churches) and any breakage in the relational unity of the church called forth immediate correction and reunification from the leaders of the early church (cf. 1 Cor. 1-3; 3 John). All leadership in the church is, therefore, familial in its orientation and expression—not hierarchical or institutional.

2.3.2 The New Testament Church Was A Complex Network

The central premise of this section is that the New Testament church was a complex network of gatherings (or “assemblies,” *ekklēsia*)⁴⁰ that functioned as a family of families. A complex network (also called a decentralized or “scale-free” network) is one with high connectivity between nodes, but where some nodes in the network are disproportionately more connected (and thus influential) than others.⁴¹

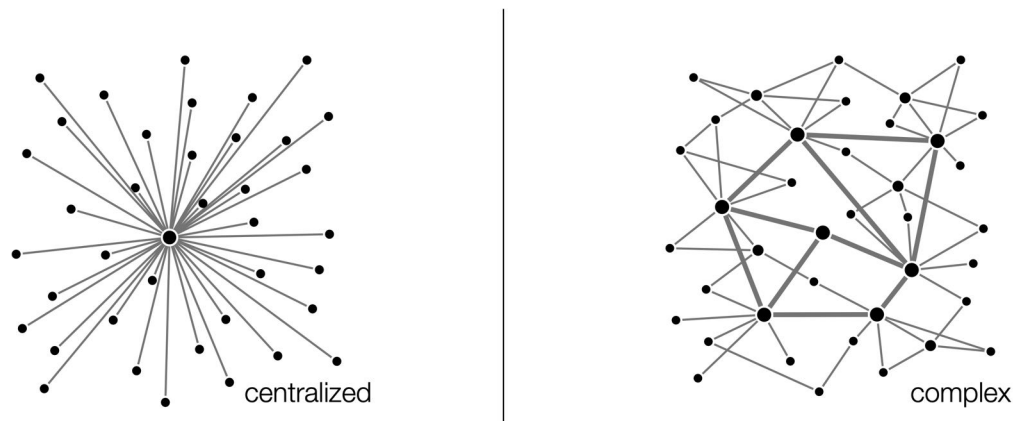


Figure 1: Centralized vs. Complex Networks.

Thus, in the New Testament church network, city-churches (generally comprised of networks of house churches) like Syrian Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome were disproportionately more connected and influential than most other churches. Furthermore, servant leaders like Paul, Apollos, Peter, and James were disproportionately more influential than most other disciples. Yet the church was fundamentally unified.

The foundational element of the New Testament church was the small group gathering—usually assembled in a house. Luke tells us that “every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house (Acts 2:46). When Saul persecuted the church, he “would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison” (Acts 8:3). We are told of churches meeting in the homes of Titius Justus (Acts 18:7), Aquila and Priscilla (Rom. 16:3), Gaius (Rom. 16:23), Nympha (Col. 4:15), Philemon and Apphia (Phm. 1-2). Cooper notes:

The significance of the house as a gathering place for the early church cannot be understated. While there were certainly times when large numbers of believers gathered together, as at the temple in Jerusalem

⁴⁰ *ekklēsia* refers to “...a specific Christian group assembly, gathering ordinarily involving worship and discussion of matters of concern to the community” (Arndt et al., *Lexicon*, 303).

⁴¹ cf. *The Tipping Point* (Gladwell), *Linked* (Barabási and Frangos), *The Starfish and the Spirit* (Ford, et al.).

(Acts 2:46), a dedicated structure for such a gathering was not the norm. In fact, the first undisputed archeological evidence for a church structure is not recorded until AD 241 in Syria. Even here, the structure was a home with a dedicated room for worship (Silver 2010).⁴²

It is not surprising, therefore, that relational leadership in a household was the essential model for leadership in the church:

As the qualifications listed in the Pastorals indicate, such people as *episkopoi* and *diakonoι* should only be encouraged to function as overseers and helpers in the community if they have first proven themselves in their households and are well regarded in their wider community. This suggests that **it was the household, not synagogues or voluntary associations, that provided the basic model for leadership in the church.** Also, that it was the dealings with people, not—except for some aptitude to teach—the manifestation of charismatic gifts (1 Tim 3:1–11; cf. Tit 1:5–8), that was most determinative.⁴³

House churches did not operate in isolation from one another, however. They functioned as an interconnected unity in each given metropolitan location. This is why we read of city churches that exist as a singular entity, e.g., “the church at Antioch” (Acts 13:1) and “the church at Ephesus” (Rev. 2:1). They were networks of house churches that functioned as a single, regionally located element of the broader church network. When Paul wanted to address all the Christians in Ephesus, he sent for the elders. These elders represented the totality of the church at Ephesus. The early church (*ekklēsia*) is depicted in the New Testament in three main groupings: house church, city church, and regional church.⁴⁴ Larsen elaborates:

The term *ekklēsia* is used flexibly in the Bible of three social-unit sizes or levels; all were an expression of *ekklēsia*. *Ekklēsia* multiplied as many house *ekklēsia* which were linked as one city *ekklēsia*. Multiple city *ekklēsia* shared identity with other cities as a regional *ekklēsia*. ... Three levels of *ekklēsia* were linked in a family-like mosaic as they expanded. **All three levels of *ekklēsia* operated as an expanding family network. Kinship terms were commonly used by trans-local apostolic agents as greetings, which helped believers strengthen and broaden their sense of redefined family. Deep relational ties bonded them together.** Disputes were settled in a family way. Donations were carried by apostolic agents from one regional *ekklēsia* to share in the suffering of another regional *ekklēsia* (Acts 11:27–29), which helped strengthen family bonds.⁴⁵

One example of a regional network of city churches is the three city churches of Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse—the urban centers of the Lycus Valley. Paul tells us that Epaphras (a *diakonos*, Col. 1:7) served this network of churches (Col. 4:12–13). They were geographically proximate and thus comprised a sub-network of the global church at the time. Further evidence of this is depicted in how Paul networked them together by means of the letters he wrote. He told the Colossians that, after reading his letter to them, they should also share it with the church at Laodicea, and also read the letter that he wrote to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16).

In the New Testament, we see many leaders moving through the network of churches, strengthening and encouraging them. Examples include: Paul and Barnabas were sent from the church at Antioch and they strengthened and encouraged the Galatian churches (Acts 14:21–23); Judas and Silas were sent from the church at Jerusalem and strengthened and encouraged the church at Antioch (Acts 15:32); Paul sent

⁴² Cooper, *Ephesiology*, ch. 2, § “The Gathering Place of the Early Church.”

⁴³ Banks, Robert J. “Church Order and Government.” In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, § “3.6. Pastoral Care and Family Experience,” 134–135.

⁴⁴ cf. “Greet also the church (ἐκκλησία) that meets in their home...” (Rom. 16:5). “Now in the church (ἐκκλησία) at Antioch there were prophets and teachers...” (Acts 13:1). “So the church (ἐκκλησία) throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was strengthened...” (Acts 9:31).

⁴⁵ Larsen, “God’s Expanding Family: The Social Architecture of *Ekklēsia* Movements.” Ch. 8 in *Motus Dei*, § “Three Levels of Linked Family Networks.”

Timothy back to the church at Thessalonica to strengthen and encourage them (1 Thess. 3:2); Paul and Silas were sent from Antioch and strengthened the churches of Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41). Larsen explains:

Traveling apostolic agents from mission teams commonly used commendations to weave together believers in one area with believers in other areas (cf. Rom 16). The organic social architecture built by apostolic agents framed expansion to other regions and people groups, such as Paul asking the Romans to help with his mission to Spain (Rom 15:22–24). This encouraged *ekklēsia* to bridge from one people group to the next and built unity between them. *Ekklēsia* became a multicultural mosaic at the regional *ekklēsia* level, and in certain multicultural cities, like Antioch.⁴⁶

Ott observes that “Paul connected the various churches with one another beyond their locality. Although local congregations were somewhat autonomous, they were not entirely independent. They were networked in various ways.”⁴⁷ He continues:

Paul reported back to his sending church in Antioch (14:26–28) and to the Jerusalem church (21:17–19). He continually sent coworkers from one church to another, such as Apollos being sent from Ephesus to Corinth (18:27). These coworkers were to be received as representing his apostolic authority teaching and encouraging the churches (Mitchell 1992; Schnabel 2004, 1437–45). We also see such interaction in the many greetings at the end of Paul’s letters, which were also circulated among the churches. **It is noteworthy that Paul’s thirty-eight coworkers named in the New Testament came from nearly every church Paul had planted and worked in locations other than their home. They served as coworkers, travel companions, delegates, or messengers, creating a bond among the churches.** ... The practical advantages of such networking for mutual encouragement, teaching, accountability, and assistance are obvious. However, this practice also represents a deeper theological concern for the unity of the body of Christ (e.g., Eph 4:4–6). Every local church is spiritually linked with the universal church, bridging space and time.⁴⁸

We have seen how the church (*ekklēsia*) as depicted in the New Testament functioned as a network, generally comprised of local churches that gathered in homes (and sometimes in larger gatherings). These small gatherings were networked together as a unity at the city church level, and the city churches were networked together at the regional level. We also see in the New Testament reference to the global church (all believers alive today) and universal church (all believers at all times, whether awake or asleep), as well as various additional groupings of the church, e.g., ethnic, lingual). In all of this, the New Testament portrays the church as a complex network of family relationships that is fundamentally unified.

⁴⁶ Ibid. I will argue below that Larsen’s “apostolic agents from mission teams” are referred to in the New Testament as *diakonoī*.

⁴⁷ *The Word Spread through the Whole Region: Acts and Church-Planting Movements*. Ch. 7 in *Motus Dei*, § “7. Movements Should Be Linked With the Larger Body of Christ.” Ott references Stenschke, Christoph W. 2019. “Die Bedeutung der übergemeindlichen Verbindungen im Urchristentum für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft.” *Journal of Early Christian History*, 9, no. 3: 1–47.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Ott cites the following: Mitchell, Margaret M (Margaret Mary). 1992. “New Testament Envoys in the Context of Greco-Roman Diplomatic and Epistolary Conventions: The Example of Timothy and Titus.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 4: 641–62. Ollrog, Wolf-Henning. 1979. *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter*. Neukirchen-Vluyn, Germany: Neukirchener Verlag. Schnabel, Eckhard. 2004. *Early Christian Mission*, 2 vols. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity. He notes that “This linking of churches with one another was also demonstrated in the charitable collection the Antioch church gathered for the Jerusalem church (11:27–30). Later the doctrinal authority of the Jerusalem council is accepted (Acts 15). This networking of churches was a feature of Paul’s mission, evidenced in other charitable collections (e.g., 2 Cor 8–9), the sending of greetings, and by the exchange of coworkers or representatives from the different churches (Ollrog 1979) (Ibid.).

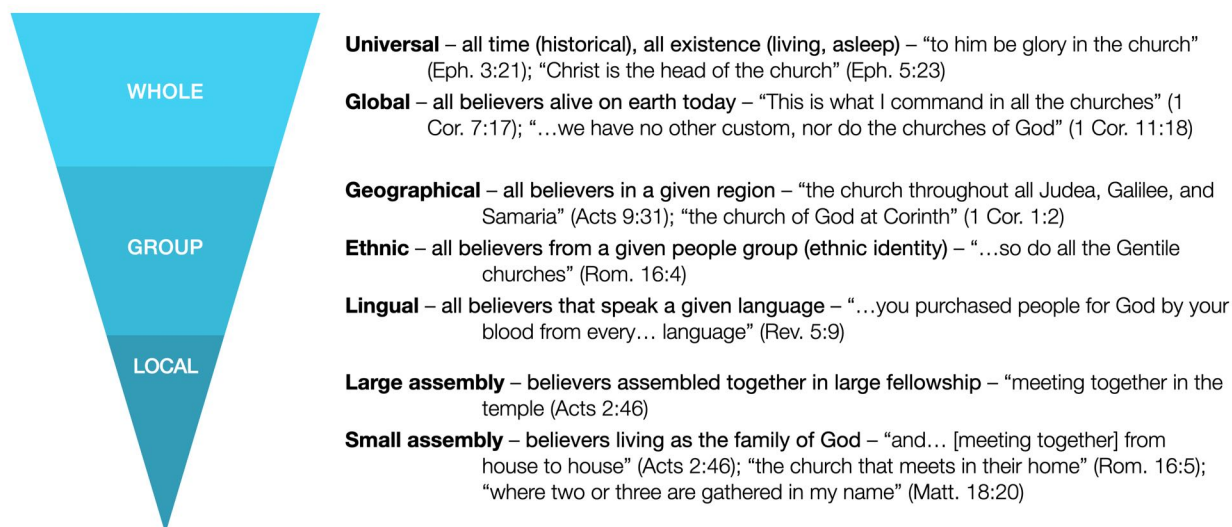


Figure 2: The Unity of the Church at Every “Zoom Level.”

A complex network that is united in the same foundational doctrine, aligned to the same principles and working toward a common goal is intrinsically flexible and effective. Some of the clearest explanations of this phenomenon come, interestingly (cf. Eph. 6:10-18; 1 Pet. 5:8-9; 1 Tim. 1:18; 6:12), from the domain of warfare. Arquilla and Ronfeldt describe the emergence of a new form of networked warfare and explain how an “all-channel” network configuration (roughly analogous to a complex network) can be very effective in adverse contexts:⁴⁹

...[T]here is no single, central leadership, command, or headquarters—no precise heart or head that can be targeted. The network as a whole ... has little to no hierarchy; there may be multiple leaders. Decision-making and operations are decentralized, allowing for local initiative and autonomy. ... The capacity of this design for effective performance over time may depend on the existence of **shared principles, interests, and goals—perhaps an overarching doctrine or ideology—which spans all nodes and to which the members subscribe in a deep way.** Such a set of principles ... can enable members to be “all of one mind” even though they are dispersed and devoted to different tasks. It can provide a central ideational and operational coherence that allows for tactical decentralization. It can set boundaries and provide guidelines for decisions and actions so that the members do not have to resort to a hierarchy because “they know what they have to do.”⁵⁰

Not only is a complex network capable of flexibly accomplishing difficult tasks at scale—due to the shared principles and goals across the network—it is also fault tolerant, due to the existence of “hubs”:

What is the source of this amazing topological robustness? The distinguishing feature of scale-free networks is the existence of **hubs, the few highly connected nodes that keep these networks together** ... Similarly, in scale-free networks, failures predominantly affect the numerous small nodes. Thus, these networks do not break apart under failures. The accidental removal of a single hub will not be fatal either,

⁴⁹ McChrystal, et al., describe the same phenomenon in *Team of Teams*.

⁵⁰ *Networks and Netwars*, 9. Gerke notes this same phenomenon in the church: “A network organization is more agile and adaptable. Individual believers are equipped to carry out the mission of the church wherever and whenever the opportunity presents itself. Because each ‘node’ in the network is able to execute the mission in its context, it does not need the input of another decision-making authority before taking action. When it encounters a situation where additional input is appropriate or necessary, it can take advantage of the broad accessibility of the network and bring in the closest and most appropriate resource to deal with the issue at hand. Leadership is present in the network and is available to communicate and support nodes along the network as needed” (*In the Way*, ch. 5, § “Contrast #4 – Organizational Structure: Hierarchy vs. Network”).

since the continuous hierarchy of several large hubs will maintain the network's integrity.⁵¹

God's design for his church—a complex network served by a plurality of leaders, and strengthened by the *diakono*i who move between churches to encourage and equip—is extremely resilient and missionally capable, even in hostile contexts (e.g., persecution of Christians).⁵² Even when leaders fail, the interconnected nature of the network ensures that the damage is limited and the church as a whole is able to recover quickly from the setback.⁵³

2.3.3 The New Testament Church Grew Exponentially on Multiple Occasions

In the last few decades, missiologists and leaders in the global church have attempted to better understand and implement the patterns that Paul (especially) utilized in the first century that resulted in “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) and led to the growth of the church from ~120 believers at Pentecost to as many as 6 million by the end of the 3rd century.⁵⁴ Nearly 100 years ago, Roland Allen observed:

In little more than ten years St. Paul established the Church in four provinces of the Empire, Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. Before AD 47 there were no churches in these provinces; in AD 57 St. Paul could speak as if his work there was done, and could plan extensive tours into the far west without anxiety lest the churches which he had founded might perish in his absence for want of his guidance and support.⁵⁵

The methodologies and their contemporary names differ slightly (Church-Planting Movement = CPM; Disciple-Making Movement = DMM), but there is considerable evidence that the rediscovery of transferable and reproducible patterns of discipleship is rapidly expanding the church into many unreached people groups and places.⁵⁶ Not everyone is convinced, however, that the New Testament actually depicts this kind of massive multiplication.⁵⁷ Ott argues that we must not confuse modern, technical definitions of CPMs as measured by contemporary missiologists with essential dynamics of a multiplication of disciples:

⁵¹ Barabási and Frangos, *Linked*, § “The Ninth Link.”

⁵² The growth of the Christian church when persecuted is an example of what Taleb calls “antifragility.” He explains: “Some things benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, and stressors and love adventure, risk, and uncertainty. Yet, in spite of the ubiquity of the phenomenon, there is no word for the exact opposite of fragile. Let us call it antifragile. Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better. ... If about everything top-down fragilizes and blocks antifragility and growth, everything bottom-up thrives under the right amount of stress and disorder” (*Antifragile*, Prologue § “II. The Antifragile”). Or, as Tertullian put it in his famous quote: “The oftener we are mown down by you [Romans], the more in number we [Christians] grow; the blood of Christians is seed” (“The Apology,” in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, vol. 3, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, 55).

⁵³ For example, Demas was one of Paul's coworkers who specifically served the Colossian church (Col. 4:14; Phm. 24) but who eventually walked away from the ministry. “Demas has deserted me, since he loved this present world, and has gone to Thessalonica” (2 Tim. 4:10). But Demas was not the senior pastor of a Colossian megachurch, or his departure (and apparent deconversion) would have done untold damage to the church. While the desertion of such an influential leader was undoubtedly distressing, the damage was isolated and the church network as a whole, still served by a plurality of faithful leaders, was not undone.

⁵⁴ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 4-7.

⁵⁵ Allen, *Missionary Methods*, § “Introduction.” Allen continues: “And the work which he did was really a completed work. So far as the foundation of the churches is concerned, it is perfectly clear that the writer of the Acts intends to represent St. Paul's work as complete. The churches were really established. Whatever disasters fell upon them in later years, whatever failure there was, whatever ruin, that failure was not due to any insufficiency or lack of care and completeness in the Apostle's teaching or organization. When he left them he left them because his work was fully accomplished.”

⁵⁶ Some of the most well-documented research is available from 24:14 at <https://2414now.org/resources>.

⁵⁷ Wu, for example, asserts that “not even Paul would have passed a CPM assessment. Why? By the standards used by CPM theorists, we lack evidence. According to the criteria seen above, one cannot find a CPM in the Bible” (“There Are No Church Planting Movements in the Bible,” 14).

Critics of CPM strategies have argued that CPMs do not exist in the Bible (e.g., Wu 2014). It may well be that we have no explicit New Testament description of a movement that would meet the definition of a CPM resulting in hundreds or thousands of churches with tens of thousands of believers within a few years.... However, **we need not find an exact description of a CPM in the New Testament in order to learn from the dynamics of rapidly growing, expansive movements that are described in Acts.**⁵⁸

Complex networks can grow rapidly due to the presence of hubs—those nodes that are disproportionately more connected than others. Virtually every social group has them, and they provide the means to rapidly spreading a new idea or new information through a network. Stark notes that the early church grew primarily through the network of social connections, which made possible an exponential growth rate (which we will consider in the next section):

The basis for successful conversionist movements is growth through social networks, through a structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments. Most new religious movements fail because they quickly become closed, or semi-closed networks. That is, they fail to keep forming and sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow. Successful movements discover techniques for remaining open networks, able to reach out and into new adjacent social networks. And **herein lies the capacity of movements to sustain exponential rates of growth over a long period of time.**⁵⁹

Paul explicitly taught Timothy to implement a multiplicative pattern of instruction: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2, NIV). Luke recounts at least five places in Acts where the growth of the church suggests a multiplicative pattern. Larsen observes that as these “linked movements... expanded in geographic breadth, numbers of believer communities, and ethnic diversity, mobile apostles linked them into a family-like mosaic.”⁶⁰

- The Jerusalem church increased to three thousand on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), then to five thousand men (Acts 4:4; this may indicate about twenty thousand believers) in just three years. By Acts 21:20, Jerusalem Jewish believers are said to number “many thousands.”
- Seven years later, a movement expanded from Jerusalem to Jews in Judea, Samaria, Cypress, Phoenicia, Cyrene, and Antioch (Acts 11:19–21).
- A third movement occurred in the region of Pisidian Antioch, and though Luke does not tell us the number of believers, he implies that the movement spread so far and so rapidly that it may not have been possible to count the number of believers: “The word of the Lord spread through the whole region” (Acts 13:49).⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ott, “The Word Spread through the Whole Region: Acts and Church-Planting Movements.” Ch. 7 in *Motus Dei*, § “Church Planting Movements in Acts?”

⁵⁹ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, ch. 1, § “On Conversion,” 20. Gladwell observes that in virtually every group “there are people whose social circle is four or five times the size of other people’s. Sprinkled among every walk of life, in other words, are a handful of people with a truly extraordinary knack of making friends and acquaintances. They are Connectors” (Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, ch. 2, § 2).

⁶⁰ Larsen, “God’s Expanding Family: The Social Architecture of Ekklesiā Movements,” ch. 8 in *Motus Dei*, § “Five Ekklesiā Movements in the New Testament.”

⁶¹ Wu attempts to downplay the obvious implications of Luke’s statement in Acts 13:49: “It is not clear how many of those that heard this word actually received it with faith. For example, we today could say the gospel has spread (geographically) throughout the Middle East; however, no one supposes that every person in the region accepted the gospel” (“There Are No Church Planting Movements in the Bible,” 8). Naturally, no one is implying that everyone who heard believed. Nevertheless, the most plausible reading of Luke’s authorial intent in showing the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) is that his statement here is, in fact, indicating *immense progress* in the growth of the church throughout that region—and that after Paul and Barnabas continued on in a different direction.

- Three years after establishing churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, Paul commended the new believers in Thessalonica for their influence throughout the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia and beyond (1 Thess 1:7–8), indicating that multiplication of disciples had spread the movement widely.
- A fifth movement occurred in the region around Ephesus, as Paul spent two years intensively teaching the Ephesian disciples. They, in turn, proclaimed the gospel widely during this time, “so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.” (Acts 19:9–10).

Together with other passages indicating rapid growth of the church,⁶² the evidence suggests that “there were indeed indigenous church planting movements characterized by rapid expansion and multiplication.”⁶³ In *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark estimates that Christianity had grown to 10% of the estimated 60m total population of the Roman Empire by the time of Constantine. Given an estimated starting point of 1,000 Christians by ~40AD, he shows that a growth rate of 40% per decade would result in a population of ~6m Christians by the beginning of the 4th century, as depicted in Diagram 2.⁶⁴

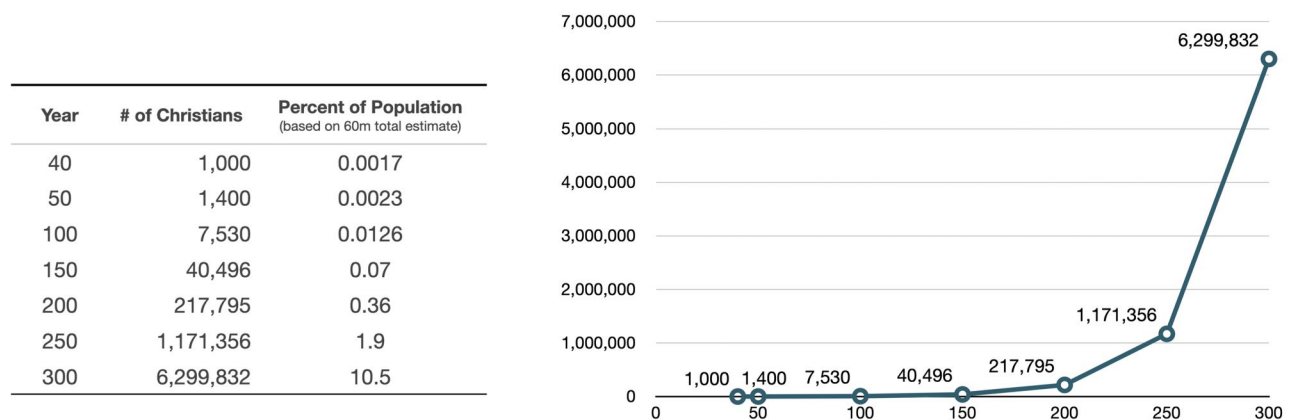


Figure 3: Stark's Estimates of the Growth of the Early Church.

Many passages of Scripture indicate that the early church expanded rapidly on multiple occasions. The historical evidence of the growth of the church in the first centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ suggests that the rapid expansion of the church was not merely additive, but multiplicative.

2.4 Summary of the Foundation

We began this section by explaining the abductive nature of this study, noting that we will seek to infer the best explanation that accounts for all the New Testament texts pertaining to the function of the *diakonoi* in the early church. We then identified and attempted to dislodge the pervasive, post-New Testament

⁶² cf. Acts 1:1-6:7: A description of the first church in Jerusalem, concluding with: “So the word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.” Acts 6:8-9:31: The expansion of the church into the nearby regions, concluding with: “So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” Acts 9:32-12:24: The expansion to the Gentiles (Cornelius the Roman, the Greeks at Antioch), concluding with: “But the word of God flourished and multiplied.” Acts 12:25-16:5: The geographical expansion into the Gentile world, concluding with: “So the churches [throughout Syria, Cilicia and Galatia (15:41-16:4)] were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.” Acts 16:6-19:20: The expansion further westward into the Gentile world, concluding with: “In this way the word of the Lord spread and prevailed.”

⁶³ Cooper, *Ephesiology*, ch. 2. He continues: “Rather than a strategy for the expansion of the gospel, however, the CPMs in Acts were the result of faithful followers of Christ empowered by movement leaders to make more disciples, who assembled together in the homes of believers.”

⁶⁴ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 4-7.

assumptions that the church is an institution with entitled leadership offices in a managerial hierarchy. Finally, we considered how the New Testament church functioned as a unified, complex network of family relationships that was movementally capable. On this foundation, we will now address traditional misunderstandings of “deacons” in the New Testament (beginning with Acts 6:1-6) and consider the many New Testament texts that inform a biblical understanding of the function of the *diakonoι* in the church.

3. Understanding Acts 6

We will begin in Acts 6:1-6, in which seven leaders are appointed by the Apostles to “wait tables.” This text is often cited as the founding of the diaconate and assumed to be an explanation of their function in the church.

In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. The Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, “It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” This proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a convert from Antioch. They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (Acts 6:1-6).

The assumption that this text describes the founding of the diaconate has led some to conclude that the work of deacons consists of “menial tasks and duties,” including such things as serving as ushers, counting the offering, helping distribute communion, overseeing maintenance and grounds, etc.⁶⁵ These interpretations assume that deacons are a secondary role, established to free up the time of the leaders who are doing the more important work of “prayer and... the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

3.1 Difficulties with Traditional Interpretations

Most of these traditional interpretations of the diaconate were developed during an era when the church was almost entirely institutional. For example, Protestant doctrines regarding deacons were developed during an era when churches were structurally institutional and had virtually no sustained missional dynamics. This tended to constrain the interpretation of the function of the deacon to the kinds of needs experienced by institutional Protestant churches. This conflicts, however, with the biblical model, because the church of the first century was a missionally-engaged complex network, not an institution, and the function of the *diakonoι* was fundamentally in service to a network (or “family”) of churches, not an institutional function.

Attempts at defining a theology of the diaconate usually work from only a subset of (or ignore entirely) the many examples of *diakonoι* mentioned throughout the New Testament. There is a rich array of people in the New Testament who are specifically identified as *diakonoι*. Taken together, these texts provide a clear and compelling picture of the diaconate in service to networks of churches. Any attempt to recover a biblical model of the diaconate must take into account not merely the list of qualifications, but the many texts that specifically mention those who functioned as *diakonoι* in the church of the first century.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, 25.

⁶⁶ Alternatively, a compelling rationale rooted in authorial intent and not ecclesiastical tradition must be provided to explain why some texts (Php. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3: 8-18; and sometimes Rom. 16:1) translate *diakonos* as “deacon” and *all* other translations of the same term when in reference to people is translated as “servant” or “minister.”

Finally, the assumption that Acts 6:1-6 is referring to the appointment of deacons of the sort with which institutional churches are familiar is dubious, at best.⁶⁷ Many denominations and traditions have taken this text as the prototypical example of how deacons are to oversee practical and logistical needs in the church so that elders can remain focused on preaching and teaching. While it is possible that these are deacons, there are several factors that suggest a different interpretation.

Regardless of these difficulties, the traditional assumption regarding deacons as secondary leaders under the elders in a local church has been dominant for many centuries. Consequently, this assumption is strongly resistant to change. This is especially true in that the biblical model of the deacon is completely different than what most ecclesial traditions assume. As Cooper notes, “Few functions in biblical ecclesiology have been as misunderstood and as important to recover as that of the deacon (*diakonos*).”⁶⁸

3.2 Reconsidering Acts 6

Unless one approaches the text of Acts 6 with the a priori assumption that it refers to deacons, the text itself does not lead to that conclusion. To begin with, the word “deacon” (*diakonos*) is never used in the Acts 6 passage.⁶⁹ The use of the verb “serve” (*diakoneō*) which refers to the Seven does come from the same root as the noun which is often translated as “deacon” in English, and some take this to mean that these were deacons. But the noun “ministry” (*diakonia*) is used of the Apostles in this passage (“ministry of the word”) and it also comes from the same root, indicating that Luke is contrasting “ministry of the word” with “ministry of the table.” Polhill concurs:

Often the present passage is seen to be the initiation of the diaconate. The word ‘deacon’ (*diakonos*) never occurs in the passage. The word ‘ministry’ (*diakonia*) does occur several times, but it is applied to both the ministry of the daily distribution (v. 2) and the ministry of the word, the apostolic witness (v. 4). In fact, **the word ‘deacon’ never occurs in Acts.**⁷⁰

Thus, the linguistic deduction by which one implies that the Seven were deacons could also imply that the Apostles were deacons as well. Cooper notes that the assumption that Acts 6 introduces the diaconate is correlated with (and predisposes) the institutionalization of the church:

In spite of the biblical data clearly suggesting that the Acts 6 “deacon” evangelized and performed signs and wonders (Acts 6:8; 8:5), the perception that this individual waited on tables leads the contemporary church in the direction of institutionalization. **There is no place in Scripture that suggests the *diakonos* held a position that took care of the menial tasks of a church.**⁷¹

⁶⁷ The assumption that Acts 6:1-6 refers to deacons is often derived from circular reasoning, which goes something like this: *What do deacons do?* Acts 6 tells us that deacons wait tables and thus perform “menial tasks and duties” that free up the main leaders for the ministry of the Word. *How do we know that the Seven (Acts 6) are deacons?* Because they were assigned to wait tables and perform “menial tasks and duties” in order to free up the main leaders for prayer and the ministry of the Word.

⁶⁸ Cooper, *Ephesiology*, ch. 7, § “Paul and His Band of Movement Leaders.” Cooper notes that misunderstanding of the function of the deacon in the first century is obscured by many translations of the Bible: “Church polity is one of those areas where a bias appears to have crept into the interpretation of leadership roles early in the church’s formation, and the bias continues into the twenty-first century. One area where a bias clearly appears is in the contemporary church’s understanding of the position of a deacon.”

⁶⁹ Marshall notes that “although the verb ‘serve’ comes from the same root as the noun which is rendered into English as ‘deacon’, it is noteworthy that Luke does not refer to the Seven as deacons; their task had no formal name” (Marshall, *Acts*, 134–135).

⁷⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, 182.

⁷¹ Cooper, *Ephesiology*, ch. 7 § “Leadership Structure of a Movement.”

An important factor to consider is the evidence of Luke's authorial intent in Acts. He is intentional in other passages about naming other leadership functions in the church (e.g., "elders" in Acts 14:21-23; 15:2-6; 20:17). This suggests that either these were deacons, but he opted to not name them as such, or, more likely, his intent was to show how the leadership need of the rapidly growing Jerusalem church led the Apostles to begin distributing authority throughout the growing church. They did so by appointing godly leaders gifted in similar ways as the Apostles to share in the various forms of ministry (*diakonia*) needed by the church, and this was confirmed by the Holy Spirit through signs and miracles.

This interpretation of the authorial intent of Acts 6 is further supported by the complete absence of any depiction of "menial tasks and duties" of these alleged deacons. The first (and only) two examples of the Seven depict authoritative ministry much more similar to that of the Apostles themselves: Stephen (Acts 7) and Philip (Acts 8). Luke is intentional and detailed in his depiction of their ministry. Upon observation of their gifts and ministry, one is hard-pressed to avoid the conclusion that if they are deacons, they are of a quite different sort than the average deacon in a Western church.⁷² Stephen, for example, "full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). He was also fearless in refuting those who argued against him, and they were "unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking" (Acts 6:10). He was faithful unto death, becoming the first Christian martyr (Acts 6:11-7:60)—the event that sparked persecution and the scattering of much of the Jerusalem church.

Luke continues his narrative and immediately highlights the evangelistic ministry of Philip who made his way to Samaria, as part of the scattering that occurred after the martyrdom of Stephen. "The crowds were all paying attention to what Philip said, as they listened and saw the signs he was performing. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed, and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed" (Acts 8:6-7). Luke again emphasizes "the signs and great miracles that were being performed" as part of Philip's evangelistic ministry (Acts 8:13).

It is clear that the ministry given to the first two leaders in the group of Seven is one of power and effectiveness for the proclamation of the gospel and the advance of the church. Luke's intent in Acts 6-8 is to show the expansion of ministry and appointment of leaders beyond the Apostles, and that the Holy Spirit ordained this and confirmed it through the working of mighty signs and great miracles. This expansion of Spirit-appointed leadership beyond the Twelve to Stephen (Acts 7) and Philip (Acts 8) sets the stage for the introduction of Saul (Acts 9) and the inauguration of his ministry, which is the focus of much of the rest of Acts.

⁷² This has created no small amount of difficulty for those arguing that the Seven in Acts 6 are deacons. The deacons (according to the traditional assumption) perform "specific mechanical or secondary tasks" (O'Donnell, *Handbook*, 9) and not the main work of the "ministry of the word." Yet Stephen and Philip, two of the Seven who are supposedly deacons, are vastly more gifted, Spirit-filled, and effective in proclamation of the word and the advance of the Kingdom than the typical deacon in a Western institutional church. This alone is ample reason to revisit traditional assumptions regarding the diaconate and whether Acts 6 is referring to it or something else. But more often, the strength of the traditional assumption causes this hermeneutical dilemma to be ignored or shrugged off. Sometimes, as in the following example, the ministry of Stephen and Phillip (Acts 7-8) is declared to be outside the scope of their work as deacons and (shockingly) that no Scripture says otherwise: "It is true that the inspired record gives very vivid details of a larger ministry performed by some from among these seven, but there is no passage of the Scriptures which suggests that those activities were related to or resulted from their appointment as one of the seven. Their specific appointment as one of these seven men was to distribute relief to the widows in need. The work of Stephen, mentioned in Acts 6:8 ff., is entirely beyond the scope of the appointment he received in verses 1-3. The same may be said of the activity of Philip (Acts 7). His evangelistic work was over and beyond his appointment as one of 'the seven'" (O'Donnell, *Handbook*, 9-10).

3.3 Where Did the Assumption Come From?

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* informs us that the assumption that Acts 6 is depicting the institution of the office of deacons is a Roman Catholic doctrine:

According to the constant tradition of the Catholic Church, the narrative of Acts, vi, 1-6, which serves to introduce the account of the martyrdom of St. Stephen, describes the first institution of the office of deacon.⁷³

The Catholic assertion that Acts 6 describes the institution of the office of deacon is rooted in the traditions of the Church Fathers which, it is claimed, is “both unanimous and early.”⁷⁴ In addition, this interpretation of Acts 6 is supported by the perceived similarities of the work of the Seven in Acts 6 and the work of early deacons, as depicted in letters from early Church Fathers.

We seem, therefore, thoroughly justified in identifying the functions of the Seven with those of the deacons of whom we hear so much in the Apostolic Fathers and the early councils.⁷⁵

It is significant that already by the time of the early Church Fathers, the networked and familial ecclesiology depicted in Acts and the Epistles was shifting rapidly to an institutional and hierarchical model. Ignatius, in particular, was instrumental in this transition. Rather than the church being led by pluralities of leaders connected by influential relationships (the biblical model), Ignatius proposed a positional power structure, with a single ruler (the bishop) ruling each church. Kruger notes:

While the evidence suggests the first-century Church was largely led by a plurality of elders/presbyters, by the end of the second century that structure had changed considerably. **At some point during the second century, churches began to be ruled by a singular bishop** (as opposed to a plurality of elders) – what some would call a ‘monoepiscopate.’⁷⁶

In this model, Ignatius ranked the bishop highest in his hierarchy, then the elders (the presbyters) under them, the deacons under the elders, and then the laity under the deacons:

See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God... Let the laity be subject to the deacons; the deacons to the presbyters; the presbyters to the bishop; the bishop to Christ, even as He is to the Father.⁷⁷

Given the accelerating shift away from the biblical model of church leadership toward an institutional and hierarchical structure during the second century, it is no surprise that the office of the deacon in the Catholic

⁷³ Herbert, “Deacons,” 647.

⁷⁴ Herbert, “Deacons,” 648. The article in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* notes this support from Irenaeus: “Luke also has recorded that Stephen, who was the first elected into the diaconate by the apostles...” Irenaeus of Lyons, “Irenæus against Heresies” (IV, XV, 1), in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1885, 480.

⁷⁵ Herbert, “Deacons,” 648. In the article, this is the conclusion of the defense against opposing views: “Now, on the ground that the Seven are not expressly called deacons and that some of them [e.g. St. Stephen, and later Philip (Acts, xxi, 8)] preached and ranked next to the Apostles, Protestant commentators have constantly raised objections against the identification of this choice of the Seven with the institution of the diaconate.” It is noteworthy that while some Protestant commentators may rightly object to the assumption that Acts 6:1-6 depicts the institution of the diaconate, many Protestant ecclesial traditions make the same assumption as the Catholics.

⁷⁶ Kruger, *Crossroads*, “Introduction,” § “Ecclesiological transition.”

⁷⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnæans,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, 89-90; 90-91.

Church took on the kinds of responsibilities one would expect in state churches that are generally static institutions in Christendom. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* depicts this vividly:

Then with regard to the bishop, [deacons] were to relieve him of his more laborious and less important functions ... they sought out and reproved offenders as his deputies ... the deacons were the guardians of order in the church. They saw that the faithful occupied their proper places, that none gossiped or slept. They were to welcome the poor and aged and to take care that they were not at a disadvantage as regards their position in church. They were to stand at the men's gate as janitors to see that during the Liturgy none came in or went out ... they were largely employed in the direct ministry of the altar, preparing the sacred vessels and bringing water for the ablutions, etc. ... Most especially were they conspicuous by their marshalling and directing the congregation during the service. ... announcements ... are always made by the deacon.⁷⁸

In the 16th century, the Protestant churches received from the Catholic Church a tangle of hermeneutical assumptions and institutional traditions regarding ecclesiology in general and the function of the deacon, specifically. The Catholic interpretation of Acts 6 as depicting the institution of the office of the deacon to perform “more laborious and less important functions” is still reflected in many Protestant traditions today. Although some Protestant traditions made incremental adjustments to these doctrines, they generally did not return to Scripture apart from these traditional interpretations in order to rediscover the biblical model of the deacon.

4. The Function of the *diakonoi* According to Scripture

As we saw above in Jesus' description of servant leadership, Matthew (20:25-28) as well as Mark (10:42-45) and Luke (22:25-27) all emphasize the term servant (*diakonos*) as the central leadership concept in the model that Jesus establishes for his church. Jesus models the role of a servant to his disciples and instructs them to lead in the same way—as servants. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, the concept of *diakonos* is further clarified:

The New Testament often calls those who serve God and his kingdom servants (*diakonos*) of Christ (Phil 1:1; Col 1:7), of the Lord (Eph 6:21), of the gospel (Eph 3:7), of the church (Rom 16:1), and of the new covenant (2 Cor 3:6). To be a servant (*diakonos*) of God is a gift of grace (Eph 3:7) assigned by the Lord (1 Cor 3:5). God's servants (*diakonos*) can be religious (2 Cor 6:4) or secular (Rom 13:4). Satan, too, has servants (*diakonos*) who mask themselves as servants (*diakonos*) of righteousness (2 Cor 11:15). Sometimes *diakonos* clearly refers to a particular role ... in the church (e.g., Phil 1:1); 1 Timothy lays out particular qualifications required of deacons (*diakonos*; 1 Tim 3:8–13). Both men and women are called to be servants (*diakonos*), as demonstrated by Phoebe, called a *diakonos* in Rom 16:1.⁷⁹

4.1 Those Called *diakonos* in the New Testament

In most English translations, the term *diakonos* is generally translated as “deacon” when it clearly refers to the function in the church, as in Paul's greeting to the “overseers and deacons” in Philippi (Php. 1:1) and the qualifications for deacons (1 Tim. 3:8, 12). But, somewhat arbitrarily, the same term is translated as “servant” or “minister” in other passages. This tends to obscure the fact that the function of the *diakonoi* is clearly depicted in Paul's epistles, and several examples are provided of people who served the churches in this capacity. The burden of proof is on the translators to show that the authorial intent in the texts themselves

⁷⁸ Herbert, “Deacons,” 649.

⁷⁹ Smith, “Church Leadership.”

requires this bifurcation of terminology—without reliance on assumptions rooted in traditional church polities. Cooper notes:

... I am inclined to translate the word *diakonos* consistently whenever it is used in relationship to people. In doing so, the group of leaders at the heart of the movement—Paul, Timothy, Apollos, Tychicus, Epaphras, and Phoebe—were all *diakonoi*, who served the church in the following ways: as apostles (Acts 19:22; Eph. 3:7), as prophets (2 Cor. 3:6, 12-18), as evangelists (1 Cor. 3:5-6; 2 Tim. 4:5), or as shepherd-teachers (sic) (Eph. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-8; 1 Tim. 4:6).⁸⁰

In order to understand the function of the *diakonos* as depicted in the New Testament, we will consider the ministry of each person referred to as a *diakonos*, as well as note which churches they served and the evidence of various fivefold “equipping gifts”⁸¹ they exhibit (i.e., the so-called APEST gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, teacher for equipping the saints for the work of ministry, Eph. 4:11-16).⁸² From the pattern of ministry that emerges, we will be able to identify other leaders in the New Testament who, while not explicitly mentioned in the biblical texts as *diakonoi*, fulfill a similar (perhaps identical) ministry function. As we begin, it is important to remind ourselves that the leadership model of the New Testament church is one that is networked, movemental, connected along lines of influential relationships, and massively plural. Leadership was not a hierarchy, but a function across the church as a network, intended to equip everyone for ministry (*diakonia*, cf. Eph. 4:11-16).

4.1.1 Epaphras

Epaphras: Colosse + Laodicea + Hierapolis – Epaphras is one of the clearest examples of the work of a *diakonos*. The core of his ministry is described by Paul in his letter to the Colossians, one of the city churches that Epaphras served:

You have already heard about this hope in the word of truth, the gospel ... You learned this from Epaphras, our dearly loved fellow servant. He is a faithful *diakonos* of Christ on your behalf, and he has told us about your love in the Spirit (Col. 1:5–8).

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant (*doulos*) of Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. He is always wrestling for you in his prayers, so that you can stand mature and fully assured in everything God wills.

⁸⁰ Cooper, *Ephesiology*, ch. 7, § “Paul and His Band of Movement Leaders.” With regard to the semantic range of the term *diakonos* and how it has been translated into English, Cooper notes, “Paul uses the word [*diakonos*] twenty-one times, and the ESV translates it as ‘servant,’ ‘minister,’ or ‘deacon.’ ... While an argument can be made for the lexical range in Paul’s use of *diakonos* to include all three iterations (servant, minister, deacon), such an argument is not necessary. In fact, since Paul uses δοῦλος (*doulos*; ‘bond servant’) twenty-eight times, one must ask why he would use two different words to communicate a similar idea, especially since he uses *diakonos* in such a precise way as a ‘leader’ in the church” (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8, 12).

⁸¹ Are there five gifts (“shepherds” and “teachers” as separated gifts) or four (“shepherd-teachers” as one gift)? Wallace notes, “Most commentators have seen only one gift here, but primarily because they erroneously thought that the Granville Sharp rule absolutely applied to plural constructions. Also, against the ‘one gift’ view, there are no clear examples of nouns being used in a plural TSKS construction to specify one group... The uniting of these two groups by one article sets them apart from the other gifted leaders. Absolute distinction, then, is probably not in view. In light of the fact that elders and pastors had similar functions in the NT, since elders were to be teachers, the pastors were also to be teachers. Further, presumably not all teachers were elders or pastors. This evidence seems to suggest that the ποιμένας were a part of the διδασκάλους in Eph 4:11. This likelihood is in keeping with the semantics of the plural noun construction, for the first-subset-of-second category is well-attested in both the clear and ambiguous texts in the NT. Thus, Eph 4:11 seems to affirm that *all pastors were to be teachers, though not all teachers were to be pastors*” (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 284).

⁸² A complete consideration of the fivefold (APEST) equipping gifts is beyond the scope of this paper. I am working here with the depictions of the gifts in the New Testament, generally summarized as apostle (A): global expansion + establishing foundations; prophet (P): alignment with truth + faithful obedience; evangelist (E): gospel proclamation + recruitment; shepherd (S): nurture/care + protection of flock; teacher (T): theological growth + biblical understanding. cf. Hirsch (*5Q, The Forgotten Ways*), Gerke (*In the Way*), Ford and Wegner (*The Starfish and the Spirit*).

For I testify about him that he works hard, for you, for those in Laodicea, and for those in Hierapolis (Col. 4:12–13).

Paul depicts Epaphras as a servant of Christ Jesus (Col. 4:12) and a fellow servant (Col. 1:7) who is part of his apostolic team (“my fellow prisoner in Christ,” Phm. 23).⁸³ He is a Colossian (“one of you,” Col. 4:12) and may have been involved in planting the church in Colosse and the nearby urban centers of Laodicea and Hierapolis.⁸⁴ Epaphras serves as a faithful *diakonos* of Christ on behalf of the Colossian church (Col. 1:7). Part of his ministry involves being a messenger between Paul’s apostolic team and the Colossian church (“he has told us about your love in the Spirit,” Col. 1:8) and teaching the Colossians (“you learned this [hope in the word of truth] from Epaphras,” Col. 1:7). He agonizes in prayer on behalf of the Colossians, concerned that they be fully established (“stand fully assured”) and grow to maturity (“stand mature” Col. 4:12). Epaphras is a church planter who works hard in the proclamation of the gospel, the establishing and caring for churches, and teaching them the word of truth. In light of his breadth of ministry, it appears Epaphras had some degree of at least three of the fivefold equipping gifts (Eph. 4:13): apostle (A), shepherd (S), and teaching (T)—and possibly evangelist (E).

4.1.2 Tychicus

Tychicus: Ephesus (Eph. 6:21) + Colosse (Col. 4:7) + possibly Crete (Tit. 3:12) + possibly Corinth (2 Cor. 8:18) – Paul depicts Tychicus as a faithful *diakonos* in the Lord to both the Colossian church (Col. 4:7) and the Ephesian church (Eph. 6:21; 2 Tim. 4:12).

Tychicus, our dearly loved brother, *diakonos*, and fellow servant (*syndoulos*) in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and so that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, a faithful and dearly loved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here (Col. 4:7-9).

Tychicus, our dearly loved brother and faithful *diakonos* in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me so that you may be informed. I am sending him to you for this very reason, to let you know how we are and to encourage your hearts (Eph. 6:21-22).

Paul tells both churches that he is sending Tychicus to them as a messenger, to provide them with an update regarding Paul, and so that Tychicus may encourage their hearts (Col. 4:9; Eph. 6:22). This prophetic ministry of encouraging (part of the P of the fivefold APEST equipping gifts, cf. 1 Cor. 14:3-4) is an essential function of apostolic teams working to expand the church into new regions, and it is closely connected to the function of establishing the church (*stērizō* and cognates).⁸⁵

⁸³ As we shall see below, Paul was a *diakonos* who was sent out by the church at Antioch on various apostolic missions. As part of his ministry, Paul worked with other leaders in many locations around the known world at the time. I use the term “apostolic team” to refer generally to those identified by Paul as his coworkers and partners in the gospel.

⁸⁴ “He was a distinguished disciple, and probably the founder of the Colossian church” (Easton, *Dictionary*, 229). “Paul’s reference to Epaphras’ labor among the believers in Laodicea and in Hierapolis suggests that Epaphras either founded or played a key role in establishing other churches in the region (Col 4:13)” (Barry et al., “Epaphras”).

⁸⁵ For example, Paul and Barnabas (who are among the “prophets and teachers” from Antioch, Acts 13:1) establish and encourage the Galatian churches (Acts 14:22); Paul desires to establish and encourage the Roman church (Rom. 1:11-12); Timothy was sent to establish and encourage the Thessalonian church (1 Thess. 3:2); Judas and Silas, who were prophets and leading men in the church, were sent from the Jerusalem church to Antioch where they encouraged and strengthened the church (Acts 15:22, 32).

4.1.3 Timothy

Timothy: Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:2) + **Corinth** (1 Cor. 4:17) + **Thessalonica** (1 Thess. 3:2) + **possibly Philippi** (Php. 2:19) – Timothy was commissioned for his ministry by a “council of elders” and gifted through the laying on of their hands (1 Tim. 4:14). He was a key part of Paul's apostolic team and was given ministry assignments in Thessalonica, where he was sent to continue the apostolic function of establishing and encouraging the Thessalonian church (1 Thess. 3:2). He also served the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17), though he is perhaps best known for his ministry to the church in Ephesus, where he was serving when Paul's epistles to him were written. Referring to himself and Timothy⁸⁶, Paul tells the Corinthians:

He has made us competent to be *diakono*i of a new covenant... (2 Cor. 3:6).

Working together with [God], we also appeal to you... as God's *diakono*i, we commend ourselves in everything... (2 Cor. 6:1-4).

Later, Paul instructed Timothy to remain at Ephesus in order to “instruct certain people not to teach false doctrine or to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies” (1 Tim 1:3). This prophetic function—(re)alignment of the church with God's truth—was connected to a teaching function. In this context, Paul tells Timothy:

If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good *diakonos* of Christ Jesus, nourished by the words of the faith and the good teaching that you have followed (1 Tim. 4:6).

So in Timothy, we see various of the fivefold APEST gifts—including at least apostle (A), prophet (P), and teacher (T)—directly connected to his function as a *diakonos* of the churches.⁸⁷

4.1.4 Phoebe

Phoebe: Cenchreae + Rome (Rom. 16:1-2) – Phoebe is only mentioned in one passage, but her depiction by Paul as a *diakonos* is unambiguous:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchreae. So you should welcome her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints and assist her in whatever matter she may require your help. For indeed she has been a benefactor of many—and of me also (Romans 16:1-2).

In Paul's commendation of Phoebe to the church in Rome (Rom. 16:1-2), he describes her as a “*diakonos* of the church in Cenchreae” and a benefactor (*prostatis*) of many—and of me also.” The latter term suggests that she was a woman of financial means who used her wealth to support the church and Paul's ministry.⁸⁸ Paul's introduction depicts her as an influential leader and key representative of the church at Cenchrea who is now being sent by Paul to serve the church at Rome. Commentators generally agree that Paul's commendation of Phoebe, and the fact that she is listed first, indicates she was the one who carried Romans to the church in Rome and may have been the one to read it to them. Regardless, as the bearer of the letter, she would have

⁸⁶ c.f. “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, and Timothy our brother...” (2 Cor. 1:1).

⁸⁷ In addition to his prophetic and teaching functions, he was instructed by Paul to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:14). Presumably, Paul's exhortation to this end indicates that Timothy may not have been strongly gifted as an Evangelist, though the work needed to be done, regardless.

⁸⁸ Bruce notes that “Phoebe was evidently to Cenchreae what Lydia was to Philippi (cf. Acts 16:15)” (Bruce, *Romans*, 266). Jewett and Kotansky observe that “the host or hostess of house churches was usually a person of high social standing and means, with a residence large enough for the church to gather, who presided over the eucharistic celebrations and was responsible for the ordering of the congregation. The fact that Paul mentions Phoebe as a patroness ‘to many, and also to me’ indicates the level of material resources that would support this kind of leadership role” (Jewett and Kotansky, *Romans*, 947).

been entrusted with the responsibility of explaining its contents to the recipients, suggesting some degree of teacher (T) gifting.⁸⁹ This indicates that the function of the *diakonos* included exegetical and theological discussion and that women were not excluded from it.⁹⁰

Much of the traditional disagreement around Phoebe's function as a *diakonos* can be avoided if we remember that Paul is not depicting a church office, as though Phoebe had a business card that said "deacon" and we are attempting to discern where in the organizational chart she fits. Phoebe was an important part of Paul's apostolic team, but her function as a *diakonos* (as with all the others like her) was one of strengthening and serving a growing network of churches, not a position or rank in an institutional church.⁹¹

4.1.5 Apollos

Apollos: Ephesus (Acts 18:24-28) + **Corinth** (Acts 19:1) + **possibly Crete** (Tit. 3:13) – Apollos and Paul are both apostles (A) and (thus) *diakonoι* (1 Cor. 4:6, 9).⁹²

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? *Diakonoι* through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So, then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's coworkers. You are God's field, God's building (1 Cor. 3:5-9).

A person should think of us in this way: as *servants* (*hypēretēs*) of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1).⁹³

Paul uses this same term when he described the commission given to him by Jesus ("...I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a *servant* (*hypēretēs*) and a witness of what you have seen and will see of me" Acts 26:16). Although he and Apollos have different primary ministries (Paul planted, Apollos watered

⁸⁹ Stott, *Romans*, 392; Jewett and Kotansky, *Romans*, 943; Lange, et al., *Romans*, 446

⁹⁰ This topic will be addressed in more detail in a forthcoming paper, but the essence of the contemporary confusion about women in ministry can be depicted by attempting to answer the question, "Is it biblical for a woman to fill the pulpit on Sunday?" Responses are generally polarized. Some maintain the answer is "no" because Paul did not permit a woman to teach (1 Tim. 2:11-15) and because he instructed women to remain silent in the churches (1 Cor. 14:33-35). Others, however, note that Paul expected women to prophesy in church (1 Cor. 11:5), that Paul endorsed the ministry of many women, including Priscilla's role in instructing Apollos (Acts 18:26), Phoebe's role in explaining Paul's letter to the church in Rome (Rom. 16:1), etc. The problem with approaching this topic in this way is that the question is loaded. It is deeply rooted in ecclesiological assumptions that reflect the traditions of the Western church, but not the biblical model. Consequently, the answer is neither to welcome women into the clergy together with men, nor is it to forbid women from speaking to the church altogether. Before one can answer the question about the permissibility of a woman filling the pulpit on Sunday, one must first ask why there is a pulpit at all. Where did it come from? Why does it need to be filled? There were no pulpits in the early church, nor were there pastors in the traditional sense of a single ordained clergyman over each individual church, ministering to their generally passive congregation. The church then functioned in very different ways from traditional churches today, and unless we address this first, it will constrain and even distort our ability to think biblically about women and ministry. So we must first recover from Scripture—and apart from sacred traditions—the biblical model of church and ministry that has neither clergymen nor pulpits on Sunday.

⁹¹ Banks notes that "it would be premature to conclude from this that Phoebe held some official position in the church. She has simply distinguished herself by her helpfulness, though (as the word *prostatis* hints) the social level she occupied may well have enabled her to do this" (Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, ch. 14 § "Those With Special Tasks in the Community").

⁹² See Wilson, "Apostle Apollos?"

⁹³ The term ὑπηρέτης refers to "one who functions as a helper, frequently in a subordinate capacity, helper, assistant" (Arndt et al., *Lexicon*, 1035). Thus, Paul is emphasizing the subordination of this function to Christ. "It seems that the word originally meant a rower (*erassō*, to row), one who was on a lower deck of a trireme and hence in an inferior position; then a member of the crew, a sailor under the orders of a skipper; finally, a subordinate, a subaltern, often associated with *doulos* (John 18:18...) and *diakonos*. Anyone who is in service to another person is a *hypēretēs*..." (Spicq and Ernest, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, 398). Jesus referred to his disciples as ὑπηρέτης: "My kingdom is not of this world," said Jesus. "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants (ὑπηρέτης) would fight, so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36).

the plants), they are equal in functional value and unity (1 Cor. 3:5). There is *no hierarchy of importance or position* in such ministry, for “he who plants and he who waters are one” (1 Cor. 3:8). Paul states that the *diakonoi* are God’s coworkers (*sunergos*) in the establishing and maturing of the church (1 Cor. 3:9). In addition to his apostolic (A) gift, Apollos was also a gifted teacher (T), and was also gifted as an evangelist (E) to the Jews (Acts 18:25-28).

4.1.6 Paul

Paul: Antioch + churches all over the known world – Paul is the preeminent example in the New Testament of the ministry of a *diakonos* who works to plant, serve, strengthen, and establish churches. He specifically identifies himself as a *diakonos* in letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, and his function in that capacity touched many (if not most) churches in the first century.

I was made a *diakonos* of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power (Eph. 3:7).

This gospel has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and I, Paul, have become a *diakonos* of it. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I am completing in my flesh what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for his body, that is, the church. I have become its *diakonos*, according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known (Col 1:23–25).

Paul calls himself a *diakonos* of the gospel (Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23) and of the church (Col. 1:25; 1 Cor. 3:5). Paul states that the mystery hidden for ages is that the Gentiles—from every people group and language—are coheirs in Christ through the gospel (Eph. 3:6; Col. 1:26-27). God made Paul a *diakonos* of the gospel and of the church with a specific commission as “a herald, an apostle, and a teacher” (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11):

1. As a **herald**, he was to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles (Eph. 3:8).
2. As an **apostle**, he was to reveal God’s plan for bringing the gospel to the Gentiles: “to illuminate for everyone the stewardship (*oikonomia*) of this mystery” (Eph. 3:9).⁹⁴ Paul directly connects the stewardship of the mystery—the illumination and rollout of God’s plan for expanding the church to the Gentiles—three times in these two passages (Eph. 3:2-3; 3:9; Col. 1:25-26). The purpose of God’s plan is to show His diverse and manifold (lit. “many-colored”) wisdom through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens.
3. As a **teacher**, he was to make the word of God fully known (Col. 1:25)

Thus, we see that Paul stated of himself that his gifts included evangelist (E), apostle (A), and teacher (T), and he may also have been included in the list of prophets in Antioch (Acts 13:1-4).

⁹⁴ The term οἰκονομία has three overlapping senses, each of which is used by Paul to describe God’s purposes for the church and Paul’s service to the church in that regard. The first sense is that of a commission (“responsibility of management”) to manage someone’s household on their behalf (cf. Luke 16:2-4). Paul declares that he has been “entrusted with a commission” (1 Cor. 9:17) that was given to him by God for the sake of the church (Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25). The second sense is that of an arrangement or plan (“the state of being arranged”). Paul declares that God has made known the mystery of His will according to His purpose in Christ as “a plan for the fullness of time” (Eph. 1:9-10 ESV). God then assigned to Paul “the administration of God’s grace” for the church (Eph. 3:2). The third sense is that of training (“program of instruction”) that implements the plan (cf. 1 Tim. 1:4). cf. Spicq and Ernest, *Lexicon*, 568; Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 357–358; Arndt et al., *Lexicon*, 697–698.

4.2 Those with similar ministry to the *diakonoi*

In addition to those explicitly identified as *diakonoi*, there are several others in the New Testament whose ministry and gifting is remarkably similar. These include:

- Barnabas was also among the “prophets and teachers” (P, T) in Antioch, having been sent there from the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:30; 13:1). Barnabas was an apostle (A) who went with Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 14:4, 14) and was thus part of the apostolic team involved in proclaiming the gospel, making disciples, establishing and encouraging them, and entrusting them to the Lord (Acts 14:21-23).
- Epaphroditus was part of Paul’s team, and he referred to him as “my brother, coworker, and fellow soldier, as well as your [Philippian church’s] messenger (*apostolos*) and minister to my need” (Php. 2:25).
- Stephanas was a leader of the Corinthian church, who (along with Achaicus and Fortunatus) are commended for being devoted to “serving (*diakonia*) the saints.” They likely carried the Corinthian’s letter to Paul and Paul’s letter (1 Corinthians) to them (1 Cor 16:15-18).
- Judas and Silas, who were prophets (P) and leading men in the church, were sent from the Jerusalem church to Antioch where they encouraged and strengthened the church (Acts 15:22, 32).
- Others on Paul’s team, including Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, and Trophimus (we will consider this group in more detail below).

4.3 The *diakonoi* as Translocal Servants

The church is a unity (Eph. 4:1-4) that functions as a complex network. As noted above, everyone specifically identified in the New Testament as a *diakonos* ministered to more than one church. We can conclude from this that the *diakonoi* are **translocal servants**, ministering to networks of churches in multiple places. The term “translocal” refers to movement from one place to another, or something that is not confined to a particular place but transcends boundaries. “Translocality” is a related term that refers to a variety of enduring, open, and non-linear processes, which *produce close interrelations between different places and people*.⁹⁵

As we see in the example of Epaphras (Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis), Tychicus (Ephesus, Colosse, possibly Crete and Corinth), Timothy (Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica), Phoebe (Cenchreae, Rome), Apollos (Ephesus, Corinth, possibly Crete), Paul (all over the known world), and others, the *diakonoi* of the early church were generally not stationary or confined to a single location. Quite the contrary, they fulfilled an important “connecting” and “uniting” function between various elements of the church (Col. 4:13; Col. 4:7; Eph. 6:21; Eph. 4:13). Their ministry was fluid and non-exclusive, as they worked together in various churches at various times, depending on the need of the churches.

4.4 A Better Text for Understanding the Function of the *diakonoi*

In contrast with the assumption that Acts 6:1-6 refers to seven deacons (as they have come to be understood in institutional forms of the church), a more helpful text for understanding the work of the first century *diakonoi* is Acts 20:1-6. Here, seven men are identified as key members of Paul’s apostolic team. Two of them (Timothy and Tychicus) are identified elsewhere specifically as *diakonoi*, who serve various churches.

⁹⁵ According to Peth (“Translocality”), these interrelations and various forms of exchange are created through migration flows and networks that are constantly questioned and reworked.

After the uproar was over, Paul sent for the disciples, encouraged them, and after saying farewell, departed to go to Macedonia. And when he had passed through those areas and offered them many words of encouragement, he came to Greece and stayed three months. The Jews plotted against him when he was about to set sail for Syria, and so he decided to go back through Macedonia. He was accompanied by

Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea,

Aristarchus and **Secundus** from Thessalonica,

Gaius from Derbe,

Timothy, and

Tychicus and **Trophimus** from the province of Asia.

These men went on ahead and waited for us in Troas, but we sailed away from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread. In five days we reached them at Troas, where we spent seven days (Acts 20:1–6).

They were a multi-national team (Grecian, Galatian, Asian) who worked with Paul to strengthen and encourage the network of churches. Luke tells us that they have just come from encouraging and strengthening the churches of Macedonia and Troas (Acts 20:1, 6), and are en route to the churches of Tyre, Caesarea, and Jerusalem (Acts 21:3-4, 8, 17). It is noteworthy that the two identified elsewhere as *diakonoi* are not first in the list, nor are they set apart in any way from the others in terms of function or kind of work. This, together with the essentially identical work we see these men doing in this passage and elsewhere in Acts and the Pauline epistles, suggests that all seven listed by Luke functioned as *diakonoi*. They were in service to networks of churches as part of an equipping team focused on strengthening (establishing) and encouraging the church.

4.5 The Two Leadership Functions in the New Testament Church

If we approach the New Testament with an assumption (whether recognized or not) of ecclesiology as fundamentally institutional, we may assume that specific terms refer to offices or titles in the church. By contrast, the churches in the New Testament are not institutional, but are depicted as a unified network with movemental capability. Leadership in this complex network is generally described in terms of functions, not titles. Thus, multiple terms across a semantic range are employed to describe the leadership functions in the church. There are two essential leadership functions depicted in the New Testament, each depicted by a range of terms: local shepherding and translocal equipping.

Local Shepherding (*presbyteros*, *episkopos*, *poimainō*) – Paul called for the Ephesian elders (*presbyteros*) and told them the Holy Spirit had appointed them as overseers (*episkopos*) to shepherd (*poimainō*) the church of God (Eph. 20: 17, 28). Paul told Titus that an elder (*presbyteros*) is an overseer (*episkopos*) of God’s household (which is the church, 1 Tim. 3:15).⁹⁶ Peter wrote that elders (*presbyteros*) should shepherd (*poimainō*) God’s flock, overseeing (*episkopeō*) willingly, not exercising dominion against them, but being examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:1-3).⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Several traditional translations render “τὸν ἐπίσκοπον ἀνέγκλητον εἶναι ὡς θεοῦ οἰκονόμον” (Titus 1:7) as “For an overseer, as God’s stewards” (cf. ESV, NASB, RSV, KJV). The phrase ὡς θεοῦ οἰκονόμον is better rendered as “God’s household” and NIV, CSB, and NLT reflect this more accurate translation: “As an overseer of God’s household.”

⁹⁷ In his instructions to both Timothy (1 Tim. 3:1-7) and Titus (Tit. 1:6-9) regarding the appointment of elders, Paul indicates that this function in the church is limited to men who meet certain qualifications, including that they are “the husband of one wife.”

Translocal Equipping (*diakonos*, *doulos*, *syndoulos*, *hypēretēs*) – Paul referred to Epaphras as both a faithful servant (*diakonos*) of Christ and also a servant (*doulos*) of Christ Jesus (Col. 1:7; Col. 4:12). He referred to Tychicus as a faithful servant (*diakonos*), fellow servant (*syndoulos*), and faithful servant (*diakonos*, Col. 4:7; Eph. 6:21). He referred to Timothy (and himself) as a minister (*diakonos*) of a new covenant and a good servant (*diakonos*) of Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 3:6; 1 Tim. 4:6). He referred to Phoebe as a servant (*diakonos*) of the church in Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1). He referred to Apollos and himself as servants (*diakonoi*) through whom the Corinthians believed and that the church should think of them as servants (*hypēretēs*) of Christ (1 Cor. 3:5; 4:1). Paul referred to himself as a servant (*diakonos*) of the gospel (Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23) and a servant (*diakonos*) of the church (Col. 1:25).⁹⁸

4.6 The Interdependence of Elders and *diakonoi*

God’s design for his church enables the church to expand and strengthen concurrently. An essential aspect of this design is that leadership includes pluralities of interconnected and mutually submissive leaders across both key functions: elders (shepherding and teaching) and *diakonoi* (equipping and expanding). This design can be difficult to grasp, particularly for those who come from a traditional model of church leadership which tends to be either fragmented and isolationist, or MECE (Mutually Exclusive, Comprehensively Exhaustive).⁹⁹ A denominational diocese structure, together with a hierarchical organizational chart provides a classic example of a leadership structure that is mutually exclusive (churches are clearly demarcated and separated) and comprehensively exhaustive (geographic regions are divided up and parceled out so as to account for everything).

Even in post-denominational expressions of institutional church (e.g., megachurch, multisite, etc.), the tendency is to operate in a mutually exclusive manner. There is generally very little in the way of meaningful ministry connection between institutional churches, as each church operates within its own boundaries. Elders of churches in the same geographic vicinity in the West rarely function as a unified plurality of leaders serving and shepherding the network of churches of that region as a unity. If such churches have deacons at all, they are usually relegated to lesser functions in service to the institution, or they may be considered the staff of the church. Regardless, their scope of service is generally limited to the confines of a single local church, such that they generally do not interconnect and strengthen the churches as translocal servants. This contrasts starkly with the interconnected, unified, and interdependent model of leaders in the church, as portrayed in the New Testament.

Interconnection of leadership responsibilities – The primary work of elders interconnects with other elders, as well as with the *diakonoi*.

- As the shepherds and “father figures” of local churches, the **elders** tend to the church in a particular geographical region for which they have responsibility (Tit. 1:7). The elders who oversee a network of churches in a given region function as a united plurality of leaders. The relationship of elders to the churches is close, enduring, and consistent, enabling them to develop deep relationships with the disciples in the church, so as to model the Christian life, teach them in accordance with sound doctrine, and care for their needs (1 Pet. 5:2-3). *An example of this is the elders of the church network in Ephesus (Acts*

⁹⁸ Earle notes that the term *diakonos* occurs in close connection with terms like “coworker” (1 Cor. 3:5...) but has “a somewhat more specialized meaning... it refers to workers with special activities in preaching and teaching, both among Paul and his coworkers (1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; Eph 3:7–8; Col 1:7, 23; 1 Tim 4:6) and among his opponents (2 Cor 11:15, 23; cf. Ellis 1993, 102–3; Georgi, 27–32). Like “the brothers,” the *diakonoi* serve in local congregations (Rom 16:1; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8) as well as on missionary circuits and, as teachers, they are mentioned as deserving of pay (Gal 6:6; Longenecker, 278–79)” (Earle, “Coworkers, Paul and His.” In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, § “1.2.3. Minister (Diakonos).”

⁹⁹ cf. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, ch. 6, § “MECE.”

20:17-38). When Paul wanted to instruct the church at Ephesus, he taught the plurality of elders who were tasked with serving and caring for the churches.

- The *diakonoi* move between the churches to strengthen, encourage, and serve them. They help maintain unity of doctrine and purpose across the entire church network (1 Cor. 7:17; 14:33; 2 Cor. 11:28). They strive to equip the church for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11-16), and labor diligently so that the church grows to full maturity (Col. 1:28; 4:12; 2 Cor. 13:9, 11). *Paul's work with the Ephesian elders is an example of this. When he meets with them, Paul is leading the team of (presumably) diakonoi mentioned above ("... Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia" Acts 20:4. As mentioned above, they have just come from encouraging and strengthening the churches of Macedonia and Troas (Acts 20:1, 6), and are en route to the churches of Tyre, Caesarea, and Jerusalem (Acts 21:3-4, 8, 17).*

Mutual submission – The concept of mutual submission is modeled for us in the Trinity. Each Person of the Trinity lives in loving, humble relationship with each other Person in the Trinity.

Godly leadership is not the preserve of strong individuals who create and dominate organizations to fulfill their vision; rather, the Trinity shows us that true leadership happens in relational communities, where individuals come together in profound sharing and mutual submission. Their lives are interconnected through love, they rejoice in one another's victories, they use their gifts and abilities to serve one another.¹⁰⁰

In light of this, it is fitting that God's design for leadership in the church is also plural and mutually submissive (cf. "...submitting to one another in the fear of Christ." Eph. 5:21).¹⁰¹ Not only do elders work together in this humble and loving way with other elders, but elders and *diakonoi* do as well.

- The *diakonoi* appoint elders in local churches and help complete the work of establishing churches (c.f., Paul and Barnabas with the Galatian churches, Acts 14:21-23; Timothy in Ephesus, 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus in Crete, Tit. 1:5-7¹⁰²).
- The *diakonoi* establish, strengthen, and encourage elders (c.f., Paul and his team with the Ephesian elders, Acts 20:17-38).

¹⁰⁰ Lidstone and Dowsett, *Give Up*, ch. 7 § "The Trinity and Authority." Lidstone and Dowsett note that Jürgen Moltmann emphasized the *perichôresis* of John of Damascus as a most welcome correction to monism—belief in the absolute and undifferentiated oneness of God. For Moltmann, this led to distorted ideas of authority as it implied that the one in authority should be "self-sufficient, aloof from those under him, making decisions by himself, and coercing others to obey." Not only did he see this leadership style replicated in dictators who dominated their subjects, but also "in church leaders for whom spiritual leadership was about exalting themselves and building their own reputations." A trinitarian view provided the corrective: "God himself was not a cold, remote, abstract concept, but essentially relational. Likewise, the Father was not a stern disciplinarian, dominating the Son and the Spirit, but in deep, open and reciprocal relationship with them. God is love, and this love is primarily and originally lived out in community. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father. The Father abides in the Son and the Son abides in the Father. The Father glorifies the Son and the Son glorifies the Father. The Spirit is the third, sharing these relationships, yet in a different way, sent by the Father and revealing the Son. The Father's aim is not to glorify himself, but that all creation should give glory to the Son. He is not jealous of the Son when he is worshipped, but rejoices in the exaltation of his Son. He does not accomplish this alone, but with and through the action of the Holy Spirit. In doing so the Father is truly a father, and lives out fatherhood for us. In sending, empowering, indwelling and glorifying the Son, the Father is showing us the essence of fatherhood."

¹⁰¹ Foulkes notes that Paul "knew from experience that the secret of maintaining joyful fellowship in the community was the order and discipline that come from the willing submission of one person to another (cf. Eph. 4:2-3). Pride of position and the authoritarian spirit are destructive of fellowship... He is to apply this in special instances in the next section, but we should note that he first gives it a completely general application. There must be a willingness in the Christian fellowship to serve any, to learn from any, to be corrected by any, regardless of age, sex, class, or any other division" (Foulkes, *Ephesians*, 1989).

¹⁰² Titus is not specifically referred to as a *diakonos*, but he presumably functioned as one, in light of the nearly identical function he had on Paul's apostolic team as Timothy. This is evident through the notable similarities of the instructions given in Paul's epistles to each of them.

- The elders appoint *diakonoï* to their translocal ministry of serving and connecting churches (c.f., the leaders of the Antioch church commissioning Paul and Barnabas, Acts 13:1-4; the council of elders that commissioned Timothy, 1 Tim. 4:14)

One of the clearest examples of the mutual submission of interdependent leaders in a unified church that functions as a complex network is Paul's account in Galatians 2 of his interactions with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Paul says that he went up from the church in Antioch to the church in Jerusalem and "presented to them the gospel I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those recognized as leaders. I wanted to be sure I was not running, and had not been running, in vain" (Gal. 2:2). The point is not that Paul was developing doubts as to the legitimacy of his gospel, but that his presentation and their confirmation of the message he proclaimed was vital to the unity of the church and integrity of the gospel.¹⁰³ The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 (plausibly the same event about which Paul was writing to the Galatians) is another good example of unity across different expressions of leadership, namely the *diakonoï* (which also included the Apostles), the elders, and the whole church:

...Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue... When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them... The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter... Then the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, decided to select men who were among them and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas: Judas, called Barsabbas, and Silas, both leading men among the brothers (Acts 15:1-22).

Paul models interdependence and mutual submission by presenting his gospel to the leaders of the church for their confirmation (Gal. 2:1-10), but then later holding one of the same leaders of the church who confirmed his gospel (Peter) to account when he transgressed against it (Gal. 2:11-14).

Bilaterally Corrective – God's design for the church displays great wisdom and understanding of human nature, in that it implements a structure for leadership that predisposes health and maturity by counteracting the destructive patterns that frequently occur in singular, hierarchical, isolated leadership. Through mutual submission, authority and responsibility is distributed across a plurality of interdependent leaders. The "single leader at the top" authority structure tends to shield leaders from corrective measures with regard to the formation of their character.¹⁰⁴ Sadly, the history of the church is replete with examples of the disastrous outcomes of such insular leadership structures. The biblical model of interdependent pluralities of leaders profoundly diminishes the worst tendencies of fallen humanity with regard to power and authority. Here are some observations about how interdependent pluralities of elders and *diakonoï* minister together:

- When everything is functioning optimally in a mature network of churches in a given region, elders are the primary leaders in the local churches, with the *diakonoï* as servants with an equipping and strengthening function (e.g., the church at Philippi, where Paul greets the elders first, then the *diakonoï*,

¹⁰³ Bruce notes, "It is most unlikely that Paul would have modified his gospel had the Jerusalem leaders not approved it—he had higher authority than theirs for maintaining it unchanged... But the approval of those leaders made his task less difficult and (as here) could serve his apologetic purpose" (Bruce, *Galatians*, 109). Paul noted that Titus (a Greek), "who was with me" was not compelled to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3) and that the leaders of the Jerusalem church—the "pillars" James, Cephas, and John—not only did not add anything to his law-free gospel message, but gave him and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship to continue ministry to the Gentiles. All of this was part of Paul's authorial intent in communicating to the Galatians that even the Jewish leaders of the church were in agreement on this point. Regarding the concern of "running in vain," Betz notes, "'To run in vain' must reflect the present concern of the Galatians who because of this concern are considering circumcision and obedience to the Torah. It is also the concern of the opposition who would have told the Galatians that without circumcision and Torah they are 'running in vain.' Paul takes this concern up in order to disprove it. His account of the events at Jerusalem provides him with the opportunity to report that at that meeting his presently proclaimed gospel was recognized as not in vain, so that the Galatians' present doubts are unfounded" (Betz, *Galatians*, 88).

¹⁰⁴ See Wilder and Hendricks, *The Other Half of Church*; Wilder, *The Pandora Problem*.

Php. 1:1). The *diakonoi* are primarily the equipping servants of the churches and they are also influential leaders and representatives among the churches (cf. Matt. 20:26). They are honored and appreciated, but *they are not in a hierarchy over the elders*. Another way to look at it is to note the different perspectives from which the church is being viewed. If we zoom in to the perspective of a network of local churches in a given region where the elders function together in relationship with each other, the elders are the “first among equals,” working together with the *diakonoi*. If we zoom out to the perspective of a network of churches that spans a region large enough that elders are not able to be consistently connected through relationships with each other, the *diakonoi* have a more prominent role in connecting, strengthening, unifying, and aligning the churches.

- The elders are the first line of defense when addressing false teachers and unsound doctrine that threatens the church from within (Acts 20:30). But when the problems become too pervasive and problematic, the *diakonoi* help to correct the false doctrine and silence the false teachers. The reason Paul left Timothy in Ephesus was to help the Ephesian church, led by the Ephesian elders, to resist false doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3). Timothy was a *diakonos* coming to the assistance of the Ephesian elders to combat false teaching. In this way, the *diakonoi* work together with the elders to defend the church.
- In the reverse scenario, false *diakonoi* may come to the church teaching a different doctrine. If the *diakonoi* are resistant and unteachable, elders are the ones who resist their teaching and do not accept it (Acts 20:29; Rev. 2:2). If the *diakonoi* are lacking aspects of sound teaching but are teachable and humble, the local leaders have the opportunity (and responsibility) to explain the way of God more accurately to them. An example of this is the ministry of Priscilla (Prisca) and Aquila.¹⁰⁵ Prisca and Aquila are portrayed as leaders in the church who traveled with Paul from Corinth (Acts 18:1-3) to Ephesus (Acts 18:19; 2 Tim. 4:19) and led house churches in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19) and Rome (Rom. 16:5). In addition to shepherding house churches, they helped to increase the theological understanding of Apollos, a *diakonos*. He was a gifted teacher and evangelist, but he was teaching only the baptism of John, not the baptism of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 19:1-7), which Priscilla and Aquila explained to him:

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native Alexandrian, an eloquent man who was competent in the use of the Scriptures, arrived in Ephesus. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately about Jesus, although he knew only John’s baptism. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. After Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately (Acts 18:24-26).

- When elders of local churches fail to persevere in the faith or go rogue, the *diakonoi* help address the problem. An example of this is the church in Galatia which had elders appointed by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:21-23).¹⁰⁶ A short time later, Paul (a *diakonos* of the church) learned that they were beginning to turn away from the pure gospel, which prompted him to pen the Epistle to the Galatians to them with the intent of strengthening and encouraging them to continue on in the faith. A second example is the situation that the Apostle John addressed in 3 John.¹⁰⁷ A local house church leader (Diotrephes) had

¹⁰⁵ Morris notes: “Prisca is mentioned before her husband on four occasions out of six (Acts 18:18, 26; Rom. 16:2; 2 Tim. 4:19; Aquila is first in Acts 18:2; 1 Cor. 16:19), from which some have deduced that she came from a higher social stratum, and others that she was more able than her husband” (Morris, *Romans*, 531).

¹⁰⁶ This is in keeping with the South Galatian hypothesis, that the epistle to the Galatians was written to the churches established by Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey.

¹⁰⁷ The Apostle John is not expressly labeled as a *diakonos* (and he calls himself “the Elder” likely due to his old age), though his apostolic ministry to the churches is similar in many regards to that of Paul. Hill notes that a plausible reconstruction of the timeline of John’s writings is as follows: “The Gospel according to John, the product of many years of preaching and teaching, was completed and sent out at a time when the false teaching known from 1–2 John was already beginning to circulate (1 John 2:19; 2 John 7). This Gospel may have been distributed to churches in Asia Minor accompanied by the letter we know as 2 John as a sort of cover letter—the address to ‘the elect lady’ (2 John 1) being a general one that would apply to any local church in the region. One leader [Diotrephes] in one congregation (house church), however, rebuffed the representatives John had sent to deliver the Gospel and letter, perhaps aligning himself instead with the ‘antichrists.’ In

disconnected his church from the interdependent unity of leadership in the church network and was unwilling to acknowledge John's authority as an Apostle or receive what John had written. Diotrophes "loved to have first place" and was rejecting those from other churches in the network who came to him, even ejecting those from his own church who welcomed them (3 John 10). John wrote to Gaius, who was part of the church to alert him to the problem, to notify him that John intended to come and correct the problem, and to commend Demetrius as a leader who was interconnected with and affirmed by other leaders (3 John 12).

5. Qualifications for *diakonoi*

In 1 Timothy 3:8-18, immediately after concluding his qualifications for those aspiring to be overseers, Paul gives Timothy a list of qualifications for *diakonoi*: "*Diakonoi*, likewise, should be:

- **worthy of respect** (3:8)
- **not hypocritical**
- **not drinking a lot of wine**
- **not greedy for money**
- **holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience** (3:9)
- They must also be **tested** first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons (3:10).
- **husband of one wife** (3:12)
- **managing their children and their own households competently**

This list is fairly straightforward and similar to lists of qualifications for elders, but note an important hermeneutical puzzle: If deacons are merely assistants to elders, why does a deacon's character need to be tested, but no such testing is required of elders? Elders are the ones responsible for teaching the church (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:9) and whose lifestyle is to be imitated (Heb. 13:7) and thus would seem more in need of character testing, if we are speaking merely of ministry in a local church.¹⁰⁸ A more plausible interpretation: *diakonoi* are translocal—meaning the local church sends them out to minister to other churches, away from any direct observation or oversight of their actions by those in the sending church. Thus the need to first test their character and confirm their maturity and integrity.

The last two criteria for *diakonos* in the list above are given after Paul addresses the criteria for women, stating that they should be:

- **worthy of respect** (3:11)
- **not slanderers**
- **self-controlled**
- **faithful** in everything

response, John sent a new letter to Gaius, one of the faithful of the congregation, commending his faithfulness and serving notice about Diotrophes. Finally, after John had visited 'face to face' with some churches and individuals like Gaius, John wrote and sent out to the churches of Asia Minor the general 'letter' we know as 1 John, to deal more explicitly and at length with the issue of the false teachers and to serve as his final witness to 'that which was from the beginning' (1 John 1:1) (Hill, *1-3 John*).

¹⁰⁸ Paul tells the Corinthians "I urge you to imitate me" (1 Cor. 4:11) and "Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). He tells the Philippians "Join in imitating me, brothers and sisters, and pay careful attention to those who live according to the example you have in us" (Php. 3:17). Paul does not distinguish between the functions of the leaders (elders or *diakonoi*), only noting that those who follow the example he has set are to be imitated.

In this context, some translators have assumed that Paul must be referring to the wives of the deacons and translate it as “their wives” (c.f., ESV). But there is no third person plural possessive in the Greek, suggesting that while *gynaikas hōsautōs* could be translated “wives, likewise” it could also be translated “women, likewise.”¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, it is important to note that if Paul’s intent in the passage was to refer to “wives” it introduces a hermeneutical dilemma for those who assume a traditional role for “deacons” (i.e., “assistants to elders”): Why do deacons (mere assistants) have specific requirements for their wives, but no such requirement is placed on the wives of elders where, presumably, the need would be greater as their influence would be greater? A more plausible interpretation: Some *diakonoι* are women (of which we have some examples in the New Testament, notably Phoebe, as we have seen) and they have certain unique qualifications.

The New Testament provides examples of both: women who function as part of the *diakonoι* and others who work together with their husbands in ministry that generally fits the pattern of the *diakonoι*. As described above, Phoebe is the clearest example of a woman identified as a *diakonos* (Rom. 16:1-2). Andronicus and Junia are (apparently) a husband-wife team who served in ministry with Paul. “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (Rom. 16:7 NIV).¹¹⁰ Euodia and Syntyche are two more women who at least partially resemble the pattern of the *diakonoι*. They are depicted as leaders in the network of churches in Philippi who “labored side by side with [Paul] in the gospel ...” (Php. 4:2).

6. Core Work of the *diakonoι*

As we observe the lives and ministries of the people in the New Testament who are called *diakonoι*, we see a network of servant leaders who expand, strengthen, encourage, establish, and equip the church for ministry and growth to full maturity. This was the core work undertaken by Paul, Timothy, Apollos, Epaphras, Tychicus, and Phoebe. The biblical model identifies these leaders as *diakonoι* and depicts their work as that of the APEST leaders in Eph. 4:11-16. The core work of the *diakonoι* can be summarized as follows:

- **Preaching the Gospel** – “they... preached the gospel in that town and made many disciples” (Acts 14:21); “where Christ as not been named” (Rom. 15:20), “in regions beyond” (2 Cor. 10:16), “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5)
- **Fully establishing the church** – “set in order what is undone and... appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5); “appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:21-23); visiting and communicating with churches to continue establishing (Acts 15:36; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 2 Thess. 3:14)
- **Forming new churches** – “they appointed elders for them” (Acts 14:23); “I have laid a foundation as a skilled master builder” (1 Cor. 3:10-11); “planting seed” (1 Cor. 3:6-8)
- **Equipping saints for ministry** – “[Jesus] himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, equipping the saints for the work of ministry...” (Eph. 4:11-12)
- **Building up the church** – “the Lord gave [our authority] for building you up” (2 Cor. 10:8); “everything, dear friends, is for building you up” (2 Cor. 12:19); “the authority the Lord gave me for building up”

¹⁰⁹ Cooper, *Ephesiology*, ch. 7, § “Leadership Structure of a Movement.”

¹¹⁰ There is some ambiguity regarding the phrase οἵτινες εἰσιν ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις which could mean “they are noteworthy in the eyes of the apostles” (c.f., ESV, CSB, NLT, RSV) or “they are outstanding among the apostles” (c.f., NIV, NASB, NRSV). Jewett and Kotansky note that “the honorific expression ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις should be translated ‘outstanding among the apostles’ rather than ‘remarkable in the judgment of the apostles,’ because the adjective ἐπίσημος lifts up a person or thing as distinguished or marked in comparison with other representatives of the same class, in this instance with the other apostles” (Jewett and Kotansky, *Romans*, 963).

(13:10); “to build up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12); “From [Christ] the whole body... promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love...” (Eph. 4:16); “Apollos watered [the seed]” (1 Cor. 3:6-8)

- **Unifying the church** – “I urge you... that all of you agree... that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction” (1 Cor. 1:10); resolving envy and strife (1 Cor. 3:3-4; Php. 4:2); “be of the same mind” (2 Cor. 13:11); working toward “the unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:1-5); “building up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son” (Eph. 4:12-13)
- **Presenting everyone mature in Christ** – “we also pray that you become fully mature... become mature, be encouraged” (2 Cor. 13:9,11); “growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness” (Eph. 4:13); “let all of us who are mature think this way” (Php. 3:15); “we proclaim him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28); “Epaphras... is always wrestling for you in his prayers, so that you can stand mature...” (Eph. 4:12); “complete what is lacking in your faith” (1 Thess. 3:10)
- **Strengthening and encouraging the church** – “strengthening the disciples by encouraging them to continue in the faith” (Acts 14:22); “Judas and Silas, who were also prophets themselves, encouraged... and strengthened them” (Acts 15:32); “we sent Timothy... to strengthen and encourage you... so that no one will be shaken by these afflictions” (1 Thess. 3:2-3)
- **Teaching and defending sound doctrine** – silence false teachers (1 Tim. 1:3); “public reading, exhortation, and teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13); “preach the word... rebuke, correct” (2 Tim. 4:2-3); “hold on to the pattern of sound teaching” (2 Tim. 1:13)
- **Training leaders** (both younger “equipping leaders”, e.g., Timothy and Titus, and “household leaders”, i.e. elders) – “what you have heard from me... entrust to faithful people who will also be able to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2; Heb. 5:12ff) *Note: Paul’s training of leaders was done in the context of local churches and as part of the apostolic team that he led in the expansion of the church.*

7. Proposing a Term for a Rediscovered Function

It is clear from the New Testament that the function of the *diakonoi* is extremely important for the unity, expansion, and stability of the church. The historical misunderstanding of the term and function of “deacons” has hindered our ability to recover this important biblical function, by obscuring it with traditional, institutional assumptions. Thus, it seems that in order to recover the function of the *diakonoi*, two things are necessary. First, we need to rebuild from the New Testament a biblical ecclesiology that does not exclude this function. This study is a modest attempt to point in this direction. Second, we will benefit from the adoption of a general term that speaks to the function of the *diakonoi* without reference to these historical misunderstandings. Thus, instead of attempting to redefine the term “deacon” (which seems irrevocably freighted with unhelpful assumptions), the church may benefit from a new term derived directly from the biblical depiction of the function of the *diakonoi*. Consider the following:

1. The semantic range of terms in the New Testament surrounding this function consistently refers to them as “servants” of the church and of Christ Jesus, namely: *diakonoi*, *hypēretēs*, *doulos*. In fact, Paul expressly tells the Corinthians that this is how to understand the ministry of people like himself and Apollos (both *diakonoi*): “A person should think of us in this way: as **servants** of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1).

2. Those called *diakonoï* in the New Testament consistently portray a variety of APEST gifts in their ministry. Their involvement in the expansion and establishing of the church is all with a view to equipping the church for ministry such that it can grow to unity and maturity:

And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to **equip the saints** for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness (Eph. 4:11-13).

In light of this (and as reflected in the title of this paper), it may be helpful to use the term “**equipping servants**” to refer to the function of the *diakonoï*, noting their generally (but not exclusively)¹¹¹ translocal ministry of expanding and establishing the church.¹¹² The “equipping servant” function compliments and contrasts with the function of the “shepherding elders” in local churches, as they both collaborate together (as “coworkers”) to establish and encourage networks of churches.

8. Conclusion

God's design for His church is gracious and wise. It enables the church to both expand rapidly into any region and become firmly established such that everyone can grow to full maturity in Christ. God's design for leaders of the church to function as an interdependent plurality balances out the weaknesses in the gifting of each leader with the strengths of the other leaders. The net result is a church that is predisposed toward a unified identity across a healthy network of family relationships, equipped to expand and grow strong in the faith in every people group and language. The function of the translocal equipping servants in the New Testament model of church, working in mutual submission to and with local elders, has been forgotten for too long. For disciples of Jesus everywhere, as well as those still unreached, it is imperative that we recover the function of the equipping servants from 1st century biblical ecclesiology and restore it at scale in the global church of the 21st century.

¹¹¹ cf. the “prophets and teachers” in the church (presumably a network of house churches) at Antioch—before Paul and Barnabas are sent translocally; Phoebe is a local *diakonos* of the church in Cenchraea—before being sent translocally to Rome.

¹¹² The term “ministers” points in the right lexical direction, but it is so consistently used in much of Western ecclesial tradition as a synonym for “(the office of the) pastor” that it is likely to be confusing.

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