

What is a Deacon?

While the term *deacon* may be familiar to many, the way each of us understands this title may differ depending on our background. As with any issue, we need to go back to Scripture, to God's word, as we attempt to understand and live in light of His truth. So what is a deacon and how should such a role be carried out at *Way of Grace*?

Biblical Foundations for the Office of Deacon

While the Greek terms *diakonos* is used thirty times in the New Testament (usually translated generically as “minister” or “servant”¹), as a title for a specific office, it only occurs four times in two passages². The following principles concerning deacons can be drawn from these passages:

Deacons were key leaders in the early church. In Philippians 1:1, the deacons are addressed right alongside of that church's elders (the term “overseer” used here is another name for an *elder*). Paul even uses the same article to modify both terms. Similarly, in I Timothy 3, elders and deacons are the only leadership positions addressed by the Apostle, and once again, the two offices seem closely linked. The practice of addressing both of these positions together is also apparent in the writings of the early Church Fathers.

Deacons were to be spiritually qualified individuals. In the qualifications of I Timothy 3, the clear emphasis is on matters of character and confession, and not skill. The initial trait, dignity, is qualified by the next three qualities concerning speech, wine, and greed. This character list is completed in verse 9 with an emphasis on the candidate's clear confession of Christ. But equally important, a candidate's confession should be confirmed by their conduct. The maturity of a candidate's faith should be demonstrated by their faithfulness to God's work “in and out of season” and their good standing among God's people.

Deacons were to be domestically qualified individuals. In addition to spiritual qualifications, candidates for the office of deacon should meet certain domestic requirements as well. Men were called to be husbands of one wife, and good managers of their homes. While these can be considered separately, they also serve as reflections of a candidate's character.

Deacons were probably drawn from both men and women in the church. The term “women/wife” in I Timothy 3:11 may have been referring to the deacon's wife or to women who were candidates for the office of deacon³. While good arguments exist for both options, historical evidence seems to confirm the existence of female deacons in the early Church (In Romans 16:1, Phoebe's title as “servant” should probably be taken as “deacon”). If I Timothy 3:11 is to be understood this way, we see that female candidates for deacon have specific qualifications that must be considered. Finally, our understanding of female deacons must be qualified by what Paul has already told Timothy about women and leadership (I Timothy 2:11-15), and by the other passages that speak to this issue.

Biblical Foundations for the Function of a Deacon

While Philippians 1:1 and I Timothy 3:8-13 provide us with some information about deacons, they say nothing about their role in the early Church. Traditionally, Acts 6:1-6 is believed to describe the origin of the diaconate (deacons as a group). But while the verbal form of *diakonos* (deacon) is used in this passage (impartially of the “service” of food (v.1) and the “service” of the word (v. 4)), *diakonos* itself

¹ Cf. I Corinthians 3:5; II Corinthians 6:4; Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:7

² Once in Philippians 1:1 and three times in I Timothy 3:8-13

³ The word *deaconess* is not found in the New Testament.

does not appear. While it would go beyond what Scripture reveals to refer to the Seven (Acts 6:5; 21:8) as deacons, the conceptual distinction made in this chapter between the Apostles and the Seven may be the foundation for the office of deacon to which Paul refers. The following principles might be legitimately distilled from the three passages mentioned above:

A deacon is one who serves the body of Christ. Just as with the term “overseer”, if nothing else, the term deacon itself communicates something about the function of this office. While every member of the body should be serving or ministering, deacons, in concert with the elders, seem to minister to particular, more public needs of the church from a leadership position.

A deacon is a leader, but a leader in charge of fulfilling a particular task. The differences between the qualifications in I Timothy 3:8-13 and 3:1-7 seem to imply that deacons were not teachers (in contrast to elders (3:2)), were not spiritually and authoritatively directing or disciplining others (“gentle” and “uncontentious” in verse 3 find no parallel in 3:8-13), and were not appointed as shepherds (in contrast to elders (3:5)). Instead, if Acts 6 is seen as instructive, deacons were given charge over a particular need or task (Acts 3:3)(though Acts 7 and 8 do go on to show us that an individual’s personal ministry was not limited to their deacon responsibilities (e.g. Stephen, Philip)). In light of Philippians 1:1, deacons should be conspicuous enough as leaders that, if Paul were with us today, it would be natural for him to write to Way of Grace and address the “overseers and deacons”.

A deacon is one who, through his or her service, relieves those who shepherd. In Acts 6, the Seven were charged with overseeing and coordinating the distribution of food in order for the Apostles to focus on prayer and the proclamation of the word. While the Apostles and the Seven are not exactly elders and deacons, they do represent the distinction between those who lead and those who assist, a distinction probably shared by elders and deacons.

In light of the last two conclusions, we might say that *a deacon is one who serves members of the church by assuming administrative leadership over an elder-defined need.* In Acts 6, the Seven were ministering to both an administrative need and the physical needs of a group within the body. If we see this passage as instructive in regard to deacons, the difficulty is determining how narrowly or broadly we should interpret this passage in defining a deacon’s role. A strict view would teach us that deacons simply care for widows. A less strict view would teach us that deacons minister to physical needs (the poor, the sick, etc.). A broader view would teach us that deacons assume administrative leadership over any task with which elders charge them. While the Christian tradition often describes deacons as ministers of mercy, broadening their “service” to other elder-defined needs does not detract from this emphasis.

In light of God’s word, we see that he has called all followers of Jesus Christ, men and women at *Way of Grace Church*, to serve Him and one another in love. But we also see that God gives the church specific individuals, who, appointed by the elders as leaders, are charged with assisting the elders in carrying out the incredible work of caring for God’s people as all of us “proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (I Peter 2:9)

We praise God for raising up deacons for His church, and for those that he will raise up to meet new needs at Way of Grace. Let’s be praying for all who serve as deacons.