

Why Women Deacons?

There are some who ask why Grace Fellowship has female deacons. But, before we answer “why women deacons?” we must realize the question comes up because we’ve said “no” to women elders. In the section titled Christ’s Church and Her Ordinances found in Grace Fellowship Statement of Faith it says this:

12.5 We believe that each local church should recognize and affirm the divine calling of spiritually qualified men to give leadership to the church through the role of pastor-elder in the ministry of the Word and prayer. Women are not to fill the role of pastor-elder in the local church but are encouraged to use their gifts in appropriate roles that edify the body of Christ and spread the gospel.

So, it behooves us first to understand why we do not allow women to be elders.

The most comprehensive list of qualifications for elders is found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 which says:

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

However, the primary passage we reference regarding the issue of female elders is 1 Timothy 2:12-14 which says:

¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Paul forbids women from teaching men or exercising authority over men in the church and he grounds this, not in cultural norms, but in creation - meaning it is applicable for all time. Given that “teaching” and “exercising authority” are two key functions of elders, someone who cannot do those things for half the church, cannot serve as an elder.

The next question we should consider is “what is a deacon?”

To state the obvious, they are not elders. This is important because deacons serve at the pleasure of and under the authority of the elders of the church. They do not exercise authority apart from that delegated to them by the elders.

Some traditions vest deacons with authority separate from elders. Scripture, however, does not give us that option. Authority in the local church rests with the elders who are called to exercise it under the authority the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. All other offices and functions function under the authority of the elders.

Wayne Grudem in his Systematic Theology points out:

“It is significant that nowhere in the New Testament do deacons have ruling authority over the church as the elders do, nor are deacons ever required to be able to teach Scripture or sound doctrine.”¹

So, the two functions women are prohibited in Scripture from carrying out with regard to men are never functions deacons are called to perform.

The passage most often cited regarding deacons is from Acts 6:1-6 which says:

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

We see here that the first deacons were chosen to ensure that the physical needs of the congregation were being cared for, freeing up the Apostles to concentrate on the teaching of the Word. Al Mohler in his commentary on this passage says:

Deacons, according to Scripture, are to function as the chief servants within the church. In fact, the Greek word deacon (*diakonos*) means "servant." Deacons are qualified members of the church (1 Timothy 3:8–13) who serve the physical and administrative needs of the body.

They are to free-up the elders to do the things elders are called to do.

So, now, to our question. Can women fulfill that role? Can they serve the church in an official capacity, meeting the physical and administrative needs of the congregation, to remove some of that burden from the elders?

We believe the answer is yes, in some circumstances, and many in the history of the church have believed that as well.

Throughout the history of the church, women have served in this capacity.

As Paul closes out his letter to the Romans he sends greetings to several people, among them, a woman named Phoebe:

1 commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, ² that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well. (Rom 16:1-2)

Some translations say “a deaconess” or “a deacon” instead of “a servant” because the Greek word Paul uses is *diakonos*, meaning servant. The same word used to refer to deacons in the list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3.

While this could just be a descriptor of Phoebe’s actions and not an official title, it’s clear she was acting in a support role serving the church, the very thing a deacon is called to do. It’s interesting that no other woman in this list, or elsewhere in Paul’s writings, is called a *diakonos*. See for example Rom 16:6.

It seems when Paul uses this word, which is translated variously as “minister,” “servant,” and “deacon”, speaking of someone in the church, it is translated “deacon” in English with the sometime exception of the reference to Phoebe (Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:8, 1 Timothy 3:12).

Around the year 112 A.D., Roman magistrate Pliny the Younger wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan, asking for advice on how to deal with Christians. In this letter, he describes Christian beliefs and worship practices. This is one of the earliest post-apostolic references we have to such things. One of the things he mentions is the torture of two Christian women whom he says were called “deaconesses.”

Documents from the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) also speak of “deaconesses” in the church. ²

From a reformed perspective, Puritan Thomas Cartwright, references women deacons around 1575 saying:

...touching deacons of both sorts, namely men and women." Both were to be chosen by the congregation and to be received into their office with the general prayers of the whole Church. ³

In the nineteenth century, the Reformed Presbyterian Church and the Church of Scotland had women serving as deacons with the Scottish church even establishing training schools for them. ⁴

What about 1 Timothy 3:10-12?

Most who believe women should not be deacons refer to this passage, specifically its reference to "wives" in verse 11.

The ESV renders 1 Timothy 3:11: Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

They believe this is a further qualification for deacons, that they have wives with the listed character traits. However, the Greek word translated "wives" can also just mean "women." In addition, there is no possessive pronoun in the Greek. It doesn't say "their women," just "women."

The NIV renders 1 Timothy 3:11: In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

Even here, the NIV used the definite article which is also not in the Greek.

Young's Literal Translation, which attempts to translate the Greek into English word for word as far as possible, renders 1 Timothy 3:11: Women—in like manner grave, not false accusers, vigilant, faithful in all things.

Phillip Schaff in his "History of the Christian Church" points out that the early church viewed this passage as referring to women who served in the church:

Deaconesses, or female helpers, had a similar charge of the poor and sick in the female portion of the church. This office was the more needful on account of the rigid separation of the sexes in that day, especially among the Greeks and Orientals. It opened to pious women and virgins, and

chiefly to widows, a most suitable field for the regular official exercise of their peculiar gifts of self-denying charity and devotion to the welfare of the church. ⁵

Bottom line, there is a difference of opinion on how this verse should be translated and godly men differ on what they believe it should say. Some believe the word *gynaikas* should be translated “wives” and believe it references the wives of deacons, which would imply all deacons must be men. Others believe it refers to women in deacon ministry and is making the point that they should have similar qualifications as the men (see 1 Timothy 3:8).

There is the added complication that qualifications for elders, which are outlined in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, say nothing about their wives. Would Paul specify qualifications for deacons’ wives yet not for the wives of elders? If deacon’s wives must be worthy of respect, how much more so the wives of elders, yet that is not mentioned.

For these, as well as the other reasons discussed here, we do not view this passage as requiring deacons to be men. We recognize that godly men and women disagree on this issue but do not view that disagreement as cause for separation. We see both views as compatible with orthodoxy, much like differing views on eschatology.

What does this look like at Grace Fellowship?

Women can serve in the office of deacon at Grace Fellowship provided that does not put them in a position of authority or teaching over men.

For example, we have a female deacon for our women’s ministry. Under the authority of the elders, she plans and administers various events and programs designed to help women grow in their faith. This includes Bible studies where women teach and disciple other women.

By the same token, we have deacons for men's ministry as well as for our adult Core ministry. Because those ministries involve teaching men, either exclusively or as part of a mixed group, women cannot serve as deacons in those ministries.

Other ministries with no teaching component, such as benevolence or guest services, can have either men or women directing them.

In the end, deacons are servants of the church, not a ruling board or a decision-making body in addition to, much less over, the elders of the church. Given that, women can serve in that role where doing so does not violate other teachings of Scripture.

1. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition, p. 1,131.
2. Schaff-Herzog, *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, volume 3, p. 374.
3. *ibid*, p. 376.
4. *ibid*, pp. 371 & 378.
5. Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume I*, Section 62.