

## WHAT FAIRVIEW ELDERS BELIEVE ABOUT WOMEN AS PASTORS OR DEACONS

Fairview Baptist Church, Apex NC

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*In early 2019, the pastors and deacons began discussing undertaking a revision of our church Bylaws to align them with our ecclesiology and actual practice. We then established the Transitional Leadership Team to lead discussions on our structural change and present the revised Bylaws. During these discussions, the question, "Can women serve as deacons in our new structure?" became a topic of interest among church members. At the time, we believed it would be best to set that question aside and return to those discussions if and when the new Bylaws were approved. The new Bylaws and all the structural changes were approved in September 2023. At that time, we committed to the church that the elders would examine the question of women serving as deacons and bring the discussion back to the congregation within a year. Below, you will find the elder's research on this matter. We present this with full recognition that the congregation is the final authority, as adopting this position as a church would require an edit to the Bylaws.*

### WHAT ARE THE FOUNDATIONAL THEOLOGICAL AFFIRMATIONS?

The Bible teaches that God created two complementary genders, male and female, to bear His image together (Gen. 1:27-28; Matt. 19:4; Mark 10:6). Therefore, men and women are absolutely equal in essence, dignity, and value and are complementary by divine design established in creation order. God intends for men and women to have different yet complementary roles and responsibilities in the church and home. These role distinctions do not arise from cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity but are an integral part of God's plan for humanity, as revealed in Scripture (Gen. 2:18-25; 1 Cor. 11:2-16, 14:33-35; Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-19; 1 Tim. 2:8-15; 1 Pet. 3:1-7). The Bible depicts a vision of men and women laboring alongside one another in the world and the Church for the sake of the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 12:4-31). Indeed, all Christians are charged with the Great Commission. All Christians, both men and women, participate in the ministry of the church. To put it simply, the Elders believe the Bible explicitly encourages and assumes that women will be involved in the ministry of the church.

Jesus welcomed women among His disciples (differentiated from Apostle, capital A), teaching them (Luke 10:39), and involving them in His ministry (Luke 8:1-3). Paul tells Titus that older women teaching biblical wisdom to younger women is a noble, beautiful, and necessary task (Titus 2:3-5). Paul affirms women as teachers of women and children (Titus 2:3; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14-15). In 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul affirms that women can pray and prophesy in the context of the gathered church. He honors Phoebe, a patron and servant of the church of Cenchreae, and likely courier for Paul's epistle to the Romans, for her participation in gospel ministry (Rom. 16:1-2). Euodia and Syntyche labored with Paul "side-by-side" in the gospel (Phil. 4:3). Priscilla, along with her husband, is described as "explaining the way of God more accurately" to Apollos (Acts 18:26).

#### WHAT ARE THE BIBLICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF PASTORS/ELDERS/OVERSEERS?<sup>1</sup>

According to Scripture, qualified men are called by God and called by the local church as pastors/elders/overseers to lead the church. What does the ministry of a pastor/elder entail? First, pastors/elders are to be gifted and responsible to lead the teaching and oversee the teaching in the church (Acts 20:31; Titus 1:9; Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2, 5:17; Heb. 13:7). Second, pastors/elders are called to pray for the members of the church individually and collectively (James 5:14; Acts 6:4). Third, pastors/elders are called to shepherd the church (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2) by providing spiritual nourishment to the congregation through biblical instruction (1 Pet. 2:2; Matt. 4:4), and spiritual protection by watching over their souls (Heb. 13:17; James 5:14). Fourth, pastors/elders are responsible for providing oversight and directional leadership to the ministries of the church (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). Finally, pastors/elders are called to teach and train members and future ministers and missionaries to do the work of the ministry (2 Tim. 2:2; Eph. 4:12).

#### WHAT ARE THE BIBLICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF DEACONS?

According to Scripture, the deacons are to focus on the unity of the church and the service/administrative tasks related to the needs of the church (Acts 6:1-4; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). Based on the scriptural qualifications, the Elders would conclude that deacons serve in areas such as: budget implementation (1 Tim. 3:8), administration (1 Tim. 3:12), member

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<sup>1</sup> The New Testament uses of the terms pastor, overseer, and elder refer to the same role in the local church (cf. Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Pet. 5:1-2).

care (1 Tim. 3:11), meeting the needs of the church family (Acts 6:1-5), and guarding the unity of the church (Acts 6:1-5; Eph. 4:3)

## WHAT DO THE ELDERS BELIEVE REGARDING WOMEN SERVING AS PASTORS?

Scripture clearly affirms that all believers are called upon to serve and minister to one another (Col. 3:12-17). The question to address, posed more precisely, is: “Are there any ministry roles uniquely reserved for qualified men?” Let’s examine a few passages:

### 1 Timothy 3:1-7

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

First note that most translations utilize of the masculine pronouns in the section regarding pastors/elders. For example, the verbs “desires” (v.1) and “fall” (v.6-7) are rendered in the masculine form, and thus the word “he” is brought forth in the English translation. The qualification that a pastor/elder be the “husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) and “must manage his own household well” (1 Tim. 3:4) is masculine, which is consistent with biblical testimony of male headship in the home. These verses teach us that the primary characteristic of the Christian elder/pastor/overseer is that his life constantly reflects Christian values, morality, conduct, and integrity. In some respects, the list is remarkable for being unremarkable. Indeed, with only a couple of exceptions (not a new convert, able to teach), all of the qualifications listed here are elsewhere in the New Testament demanded of all Christians. Importantly, the qualification “able to teach” is one characteristic that is never demanded of deacons.

## 1 Timothy 2:12-14

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

The context of this passage seems to be that some women were causing commotion in the church at Ephesus by their elaborate dress and their desire to teach, thus supplanting the oversight and leadership of the pastor/elders. We read in verse 12, “I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man.” In this passage, Paul forbids women from engaging in two activities that characterize the ministry of pastors/elders/overseers: teaching and exercising oversight or authority. Instructional teaching in the church (men and women) is a means of exercising authority and oversight. We see this in the qualifications for the office, among other places: pastors/elders/overseers must have the ability to teach (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Tit. 1:9; cf. Acts 20:17-34) and to lead the church (1 Tim. 3:4-5; 5:17). According to 1 Timothy 2:11-15 then, women are not called to teach men and/or exercise oversight and authority over them, and therefore it follows that they must not serve as pastors/elders/overseers.

### RELATED QUESTIONS

First, did Paul prohibit women from serving as elders because women in Paul’s day were uneducated and therefore they lacked the ability to teach men well? This argument does not hold up when considering other biblical texts. Pricilla is presented as educated in the faith, as well as other women (Titus 2:3; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14-15). The teaching of children by women is contrasted with teaching the church as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

Second, does Paul ground his teaching in cultural circumstances or in creation order? Paul notes that Adam was made first and then Eve (a reference to Gen. 2:4-25). Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, communicates the significance of God creating man prior to

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<sup>2</sup> In the case of Pricilla, she is shown as teaching an individual with Aquila – her husband (Acts 18:18-28), this not the church as a whole.

the woman, namely, that the man is responsible to lead (1 Timothy 2:13-14). Eve is created as Adam's helper. Some may find the designation of women as helpers as repressive. However, it is no more offensive to say that women were made to be helpers, than it is to say that men need help. In other words, even if men are leading, they need the insight and help of women. What we need to understand about 1 Timothy 2:14, is that Paul teaches that the serpent subverted the created order by deceiving Eve rather than Adam (thereby subverting male headship). Even though Eve was deceived first by the serpent, the primary responsibility for sin fell on Adam's shoulders, pointing back to his headship. This is evident in Genesis 3, for the Lord speaks to Adam first about the sin of the first couple, and this is confirmed by Romans 5:12-19 where the sinfulness of the human race is traced to Adam and not Eve.<sup>3</sup>

Another way to put it, God gives males a heavier responsibility to lead in the creation order. This responsibility has more weight after the fall, but is also affirmed after the fall. It is one way God works to redeem the created order after the fall and reminds us of its continuation. Paul's point in 1 Timothy 2:14 is not that women are more prone to be deceived than men, because elsewhere he commends women as teachers of women and children (Titus 2:3; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14-15). The point is, male leadership is established in the creation order – and the New Testament specifically applies this to the structure of the church and the home. This does not mean *all* women must submit to *all* men. In the context of marriage, the wife submits to her husband. In the context of the church, the congregation submits to the authority of the male eldership. This does not necessarily translate into corporate contexts or other contexts outside of marriage or the church.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

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<sup>3</sup> What we see of men and women's roles in the rest of Scripture confirms this reading of 1 Timothy 2:11-15. The book of Genesis gives us six pieces of evidence that husbands have the primary responsibility of leadership in marriage: 1) God created Adam first and then Eve; 2) God gave the command not to eat of the tree to Adam rather than Eve; 3) Adam named the "woman" just as he named the animals, signifying his authority (Gen. 2:19-23); 4) Eve is designated as Adam's "helper" (Gen. 2:18); 5) The serpent deceived Eve rather than Adam, thereby subverting male headship (Gen. 3:1-6); and 6) God came to Adam first, even though Eve sinned first (Gen. 3:9; cf. Rom. 5:12-19).

Keep in mind, the Elders have already argued above that teaching the church (men and women) and exercising authority are one and the same, both involve explaining and applying Scripture.

### **1 Corinthians 11:5, 14:33-35**

*...but every wife (woman) who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.*

*For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.*

In 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul clearly teaches that women can pray and prophesy in the context of the gathered church. Today, the Elders would argue that *reading aloud* God's revelation from Scripture is the functional equivalent of *prophesying* God's revelation in Paul's day. In this case, it would be in keeping with Paul's instructions for women to be reading Scripture and praying during the gathered assembly of God's people. It is imperative to see that prophecy is not the same gift as teaching, for the gifts are distinguished in the New Testament (1 Cor. 12:28).<sup>4</sup>

What does Paul mean when he teaches that women must not speak in church? 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 makes it clear that as women prophesied they were to adorn themselves in such a way that they recognized and were under the leadership or submissive to their husbands or the pastor/elders leadership (1 Cor. 11:3). Therefore, Paul does not forbid women from speaking in the assembly absolutely. The principle of 1 Cor. 14:33-36 is that women should not speak in such a way that usurps male headship or take upon themselves oversight or authority in the church, thus squaring it with the notion in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 that women should not speak or teach in a way that exercise authority over men. In the context of these

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<sup>4</sup> Women served as prophets in the OT but not as priests. Similarly, they served as prophets in the New Testament but not as elders.

verses, it seems that there were women in the church attempting to subvert God's explicit leadership structure for the church.

## WHAT DO THE ELDERS BELIEVE REGARDING WOMEN SERVING AS DEACONS?

There are basically two schools of thought on this issue. Good conservative Bible-believing scholars and pastors differ on this complex issue.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the Elders caution that we should be careful to approach this issue with wisdom and grace. First, we cannot assume that a church with women serving as deacons is necessarily moderate or liberal in their understanding of Scripture. Many conservative Baptist churches that have male pastors/elders/overseers also have women serving as deacons. Second, we cannot assume that a church with male only deacons is a frumpy fundamentalist church that does not value women in leadership.

### **1 Timothy 3:8-13**

*Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Women/[Their] wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

In this passage, Paul lays out the qualifications for deacons. Now, keep in mind two things. First, remember that deacons serve to keep the unity of the church and to assist in the administrative needs of the church (see above). Second and related, the qualifications for deacons do not require the "ability to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2), which is a requirement given to pastor/elders, which distinguishes it from deacons. In saying this, we recognize that some people may have trouble distinguishing these offices because of previous churches having

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<sup>5</sup> Here are a list of pastor-theologians who argue that Scripture enables women to serve as deacons: John Macarthur (Grace Community Church, CA), Mark Dever (Capital Hill Baptist, DC), Andy Davis (First Baptist Durham, NC), John Piper (Bethlehem Baptist, MN). On the other hand, pastor-theologians like Alexander Strauch and Guy Waters would argue that only men should serve as deacons.

deacons erroneously functioning as elders. However, these are two completely different offices of the church.

In reference to women serving as deacons, the debate centers on verse 11 and its surrounding context, namely: does Paul mean deacons' wives, deacons along with their wives, or women serving as deacons? How one interprets the word translated either women or wives determines where one lands in this issue. Consider a few translations that translate the word differently:

*"Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things"* (ESV).

*"Wives, too, must be worthy of respect, not slanderers, self-controlled, faithful in everything"* (CSB).

*"Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things"* (NASB).

Note a few observations on the Greek text which involve some ambiguity here. First, the semantic range for the Greek word γυναῖς (guné) used in 1 Timothy 3:11 includes both women and wives, and thus can be translated as either. Second, the pronoun "their" is actually not in the Greek, the original language of the New Testament. Some Bible translators argue that it is implied, but it's certainly not explicit. Some have argued that Paul is referring to deacons as a married couple (male and female) serving together in this office. Both husband and wife could inevitably be involved in the deacon ministry to some extent and, therefore, needed to be of good Christian character. However, the absence of the pronoun "their" (as in "their wives") does not allow for an airtight case. Third, one must address how to understand the transitional adverb "too" or "likewise" (1 Tim. 3:8, 11). This is important for the context. The argument seems to be, Paul begins by addressing deacons in general, switches the attention to women or wives specifically in verse 11, and then to male deacons in verse 12. Follow the flow of argument here:



1. 1 Timothy 2:8-15 - Prohibition of women instructing or exercising authority over men in the church, based on creation order.
2. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 - Qualifications for pastor/elders, male only as noted by the usage of male pronouns.
3. 1 Timothy 3:8-10 – Qualifications for deacons in general, note the usage of “they” instead of gender-specific pronouns.
4. 1 Timothy 3:11 – Qualifications for “deacons as women” or “wives of male deacons.”
5. 1 Timothy 3:12 – Qualifications for male deacons still using “their (instead of he), but the words “husband of one wife” provide gender specificity.

Now, one question that is often raised is this: why does Paul not give qualifications for pastor/elders' wives (1 Timothy 3:1-7)? In fact, the paragraph on pastors/elders includes no reference to qualifications of women. Why would Paul have stricter requirements for a deacons' wife than a pastor/elder's wife? Another question, why didn't Paul use the feminine form of the word “deacon” in 1 Timothy 3:11, instead of the word “women/wives”? That would have made it much clearer, right? However, the context of the paragraph (1 Tim. 8-13) is related to deacon ministry in general.

Some may argue that based on Acts 6:3, deacons should only be men. That is because the text reads “select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.” Acts 6:1-6 records the choice of “the seven” to diaconal service. While it does not use the technical term and noun “deacon” for their status or work, it surely provides the background to and informs the content of the New Testament office of deacon. (The Greek verb from which we get the English word deacon, to serve, is used in 6:2.) The question is, should we read this passage as *descriptive* of the early church or *prescriptive* for all churches? Some scholars argue that the office of deacon was developed between the time Acts and 1 Timothy were written.

Finally, how does one deal with Romans 16:1, where the word often translated deacon is used of Phoebe (a woman)? Phoebe is referred to either as a “servant of the church” (function not role), or a deacon of that church (function and role). The question is, does this usage of the word indicate a diaconal role or is it used generically to point to her service? At

the very least, the description of her ministry in Romans 16:2 fits well with the type of ministry associated with New Testament deacons.

## CONCLUSION

Scripture is true, authoritative, and sufficient for all of life and practice. Any attempt to understand personhood and gender must begin with divine revelation and God's created order. Men and women are absolutely equal in essence, dignity, and value. Both are called to labor alongside one another in ministry to the world and the Church for the sake of the kingdom of God. God intends for men and women to have different yet complementary roles and responsibilities.

According to Scripture, the Elders believe that qualified men are set apart by God and called by the local church as pastors/elders/overseers to lead the church. According to Scripture, the deacons are to focus on the service-oriented and administrative tasks related to the needs of the church, and therefore the Elders believe women can serve as deacons if the roles of pastor/elder and deacon are clearly delineated in the context of the local church. In fact, The Baptist Faith and Message (2000), the conservative standard of doctrine for Southern Baptist Churches, allows for gender flexibility in the role of deacon for an autonomous local church by arguing that the "...scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

## FURTHER RESOURCES

### BOOKS

- *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* by Benjamin Merkle
- *Understanding Church Leadership* by Mark Dever
- *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches* by John Hammett
- *Why Elders?* by Benjamin Merkle
- *Deacons* by Matt Smethurst
- *Men and Women in the Church* by Kevin DeYoung
- *Women in the Church* by Schriener and Kostenberger

## ARTICLES

- [Does the Bible Support Women Deacons - Yes](#) (Thomas Schreiner)
- [Does the Bible Support Women Deacons - No](#) (Guy Waters)
- [Men and Women As Deacons](#) (John Piper)
- [Deacons As Servants of the Church](#) (John MacArthur)
- [Church Governance](#) (Mark Dever)
- [Can Women Be Deacons?](#) (Andreas Kostenburger)
- [Does the Bible Support Female Deacons?](#) (Juan Sanchez)

## VIDEOS

- [Sermon: How Does The Church Function?](#) (Phil Newton)
- [Sermon: Congregational Governance](#) (Matt Capps)
- [Sermon: Pastor/Elder Led](#) (Matt Capps)
- [Sermon: Deacon Served](#) (Matt Capps)
- [Discussion Panel: Elders and Deacons](#) (SEBTS)