

Women Deacons at Cornerstone By the Cornerstone Elders¹

The New Testament establishes two offices for the government of the church: elders² and deacons. Elders provide leadership for the congregation and are charged with the responsibilities of sound teaching and spiritual care for the congregation. Deacons serve by caring for the physical and logistical needs of the church under the oversight of the elders. At Cornerstone, we believe that God has created all people in his image. Therefore, all people, regardless of gender, possess equal value and dignity. We also believe that God has created each gender uniquely and distinctly so that, by exercising complementary roles, men and women together might more fully display God's character and beauty in the world. We believe that these unique roles provide us with the profound joy of being able reflect the character of the triune God, who exists eternally as three equal yet distinct persons, each of whom carries out unique roles in creation and redemption.

How, then, does our belief that men and women possess distinct and complementary roles affect our understanding of who may serve as elders and deacons? While we believe that only men may serve as elders, we hold that both men and women should hold the office of deacon. Our purpose here is not to defend our belief that the office of elder is limited to men but rather to explain the biblical and theological basis for our belief that women should serve as deacons. The first part of our discussion will focus on the interpretation of 1 Tim 3:11 and the question of whether Paul intended this verse to describe qualifications for women who serve as deacons. Next, we will consider whether women serving as deacons is consistent with the unique duties of deacons and the larger portrayal of the role of women in church ministry in the Bible.

Women as Deacons in 1 Tim 3:11.

In 1 Tim 3:1–13, Paul gives a clear explanation of the qualifications for both elders and deacons. In fact, this is the only passage in the New Testament that explicitly speaks of the qualifications for the office of deacon. Within the list of the deacon qualifications (vv. 8–13), verse 11 has been interpreted in various ways:

In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything (NIV®).

The central interpretive question here is whether “the women” Paul speaks of here are women deacons or deacons’ wives. The Greek text is somewhat ambiguous, using the term *gunaikas*, a common word that may refer either to women in general or specifically to wives. This uncertainty is reflected in the variety of English translations: “women” (NIV, NASB, NRSV, ASV), “their wives” (KJV, NKJV, ESV), and “wives” (HCSB, CSB). Those who understand this verse to refer to qualifications for deacons’ wives rather than women deacons see v. 11 as addressing the same topic as v. 12: the requirement that a male deacon be someone who manages his household well. On the other hand, those who understand v. 11 to concern women serving as deacons see v. 11 as

¹ The following explanation is adapted and altered with permission from “Position Paper on Deacons and Female Deacons” by the elders of Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, KY (special credit: Gregg R. Allison). For more information on Sojourn, see www.sojournchurch.com.

² Elders may also called pastors or overseers.

addressing a new group (women who serve as deacons) before turning to the specifically male requirements in v. 12. While we respect those who hold the former position, we believe that the latter position reflects the best interpretation for the following reasons:

1. *The lack of possessive pronoun (“their”) modifying gunaikas suggests that the verse is speaking of women generically rather than to the wife of a particular husband.* While New Testament Greek does allow for an author to speak of a man’s wife or a woman’s husband without using a possessive pronoun (e.g., Col 3:18–19), the pronoun is usually either included (Matt 5:31–32; 14:3; 19:5 [Mk 10:7]; Lk 1:5, 13, 18, 24; 8:3) or is implied from the surrounding context where the possessive pronoun does occur (compare 1 Cor 7:3–4, 10–11, 14, 16, 33 with 1 Cor 7:2, 39; compare Eph 5:24–25 with Eph 5:28, 33).
2. *In v. 11, women are introduced grammatically in the same way as the deacons in v. 8.* The same conjunction *hōsautōs* (“in the same way, likewise”) is used to introduce verses 8 and 11. In the pastoral epistles, Paul uses this conjunction fairly consistently to signal a shift in addressee when he is giving instructions concerning specific groups within the church, whether on the basis of church office (1 Tim 3:8) or age/gender (1 Tim 2:9; Tit 2:3, 6). Just as the term is used in v. 8 to transition from qualifications for elders to those for deacons, so also in v. 11 the term signals a transition from the discussion of deacon qualifications in general to specific qualifications for women (v. 11) and men (v. 12) who serve in the office. It is likewise significant that v. 11 not only speaks about women as the topic of the sentence but that women also function grammatically as the subject of v. 11, a grammatical role occupied by only elders and deacons elsewhere in the passage when their qualifications for office are under discussion. Additionally, the initial qualification for deacons in v. 8 (*semnous*: “worthy of respect”) is repeated in its feminine form in v. 11 (*semnas*). The sum of these considerations highlights the grammatical symmetry between v. 8 and v. 11: *diakonous hōsautōs semnous* (v. 8a); *gunaikas hōsautōs semnas* (v. 11a).³ That Paul is beginning a somewhat new unit in v. 11 should not be surprising since v. 10, which describes how deacons are approved for service, is a fitting conclusion to the initial set of deacon qualifications in vv. 8–9.
3. *It would be unusual for Paul to give detailed requirements for deacons’ wives while saying nothing about the wives of elders.* Only a brief reading of 1 Tim 3:1–13 will show the similarity between the qualifications given for the two offices. Aside from the requirement that elders be able to teach, the two lists of qualifications are basically the same. Given this similarity, it would be highly unusual for Paul to give a list of

³ In fact, the analogy between the qualifications in vv. 8–9 and v. 11 likely runs even deeper. After “worthy of respect,” each list continues with grammatically negative descriptors. In v. 8, “sincere” reflects the Greek *mē dilogous* (“not insincere”). The term *dilogous* signifies insincerity and is a compound of the terms *di* (“two”) and *logos* (“word”). So, the term does seem to carry an analogy related to speech. Similarly, in v. 11 the second qualification for women is “not malicious talkers” (*mē diabolous*). The next qualification in v. 8 is that deacons are “not indulging in much wine,” which relates closely to qualification in v. 11 that women be “temperate” (*nēphaliou*, a term related to sobriety). The linguistic and ideological similarities between the two lists suggests that v. 11 is doing more than indicating what should be the traits of a wife who is married to a man who manages his household in a way that qualifies him to serve as a deacon. The intention seems more similar to the intention of v. 8: these are the qualifications of a person who is fit to serve the church in the way that a deacon does.

qualifications for the wives of deacons, while for elders, who hold a position of greater authority in the church, there are no qualifications given for their wives.

The Roles of Deacons and of Women in the New Testament

While we hold the interpretation of 1 Tim 3:11 given above to be correct, we recognize that the reading of the verse is highly disputed by many well-qualified interpreters. Thus, we would be hesitant to base our church's policy on this disputed reading alone. Given the scarcity of passages in the New Testament on the topic,⁴ it is important to place the discussion of women serving as deacons into the larger context of how the New Testament speaks of the unique roles of both deacons and women in the church. Though the qualifications for elders and deacons in 1 Tim 3:1–13 are very similar, there seem to be two primary distinctions made between the roles which elders and deacons play in the church. First, elders must be gifted to teach (1 Tim 3:2), while no such qualification is given for deacons. Second, elsewhere in the New Testament, authors instruct members of the congregation to submit to the elders of the church (Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:5); however, no instructions are ever given to submit to the deacons of the church. Thus, a unique part of the elders' job description is that they teach and hold authority in the church. It is these two activities that Paul restricts to men in 1 Tim 2:12. Therefore, women serving as deacons in our church does not jeopardize our commitment to uphold Paul's instructions in 1 Tim 2:12 that women not teach or have authority over men.

Conclusion

On the basis of our interpretation of 1 Tim 3:11 and our understanding of the role of deacons in church ministry, we believe that women should serve as deacons at Cornerstone Congregational Church. In conclusion, we would like to consider a related question: Are deacons leaders in our church? This is a tricky question, because the word "leader" can be used in different ways in English. A leader can be an authority who controls a nation, in the sense that we could say that in medieval times a king was the leader of his people. On the other hand, a leader could also be someone who takes initiative and is exemplary among their peers, like an outstanding athlete on a sports team. In the former example, "leader" could be a synonym for "authority." In this sense, deacons are not leaders but are instead servants. In the same way, we believe that women should not be leaders in the church in the sense of holding authority. However, in the latter sense of the term, we do believe that deacons are leaders in our church. How could we say that anyone who meets the qualifications in 1 Tim 3:8–13 is not exemplary? How could someone who carries out the eternally important tasks of the diaconate not be someone with passion and initiative? In this sense, our prayer is that God would continue to raise up women in our church who are leaders, women who display exemplary, Christ-like character and who take initiative in ministry for the sake of Christ and his kingdom. Please pray for us as your elders that we would teach, shepherd, and exercise authority in a way that helps all in our church grow in Christian character and seek to discover and cultivate their spiritual gifts in unique ministries. May we together as a body reflect the character of our triune God to a world in need.

⁴ Phil 1:1 and 1 Tim 3:8–13 are the only passages in the New Testament that definitely speak of deacons as an established church office.

