

Women in Leadership

Grace Church Position Papers

One common question we receive as a church centers around what the Bible teaches concerning the role of women in church leadership and how that informs our ministry at Grace Church. Why don't women serve as elders or pastors? Should a woman be allowed to exercise oversight and authority to teach and lead the church? And if not, what is an appropriate role in which women can lead within the church?

To bring the clarity of the Scripture to bear on these questions, there are a few things worth considering, including the biblical distinction between the role and qualifications of elders and deacons, the Scripture's direction as it relates to female leadership within the church, and how these things interact to inform the way ministry leadership is practiced at Grace Church.

Elder/Pastor v. Deacon/Minister

First, it is critical to make one very key distinction up front: we believe that the Bible clearly distinguishes between what it refers to as "elders" and "deacons," and we hold to the principle that these are distinct offices with differences in their qualifications and responsibilities.

Elders are men in the church who meet the biblical qualifications (as seen in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9), who have been ordained and given the core responsibilities of teaching and exercising authority in oversight the church (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9; Hebrew 13:17).

Deacons, on the other hand, are individuals (male or female) who meet similar character qualifications (1 Timothy 3:8-15) but whose role and responsibilities are especially marked by service and meeting needs within the church (Acts 6:1-6). Deacons are distinct from elders in their function and in their authority: they are not given the responsibility or authority to teach or exercise directional oversight over the church body—those responsibilities are reserved for the church's elders. Elders carry the weight of the local church's oversight and are assisted in a variety of ways by those who have been officially recognized as deacons.

With that in mind, we believe that the terms "deacon" and "minister" are interchangeable, referring to the same office and qualifications. When we use the word "minister" in our context we are referring to the same office that has been described above as "deacon"—a deacon/minister holds a position of service, not a position of pastoral/elder authority.

In the same way, we also view the terms "pastor" and "elder" to be the same office. Although we have two categories of

"elders/pastors" here at Grace Church (governing elders and shepherding elders), they do fall into the same category biblically and must meet all the same qualifications as elders in order to lead and shepherd members of the local church.

In summary, these are the core functions and responsibilities we see that the Scripture gives for these groups:

- **Pastors/Elders**—to teach and to lead/exercise directional authority
- **Ministers/Deacons**—to serve and to meet specific needs within the church

The Role of Women in Leadership

Naturally, the question that now arises is "What does Grace Church believe regarding women and their suitability to serve in each of these roles?"

We believe that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 clearly teaches that women should neither teach nor lead as elders/pastors/overseers in the church. Since leading and teaching are the two primary responsibilities of elders, we do not believe women should serve as pastors/elders in a local church.

But does that mean a woman can never serve in any type of officially-recognized ministry position within the local church? We acknowledge that elders must be men, but what about deacons? Can women serve as deacons (those whom we would call "ministers")? Answering that question would require us to take a look at 1 Timothy 3:8-13, where Paul addresses the qualifications for deacons:

⁸In the same way, deacons must be well respected and have integrity. They must not be heavy drinkers or dishonest with money. ⁹They must be committed to the mystery of the faith now revealed and must live with a clear conscience. ¹⁰Before they are appointed as deacons, let them be closely examined. If they pass the test, then let them serve as deacons.

¹¹In the same way, their wives must be respected and must not slander others. They must exercise self-control and be faithful in everything they do.

¹²A deacon must be faithful to his wife, and he must manage his children and household well. ¹³Those who do well as deacons will be rewarded with respect from others and will have increased confidence in their faith in Christ Jesus."



Some will look at this passage and think it's very obvious that women cannot serve as deacons—after all, how can women serve as deacons when Paul specifically talks about deacons having wives? On the surface, that sounds valid, but there's a lot more to consider in this passage. The following points lead us to believe this passage does not, in fact, exclude women from serving as deacons:

1. While some English translations render verse 11 “their wives,” the pronoun “their” is not actually present in the original Greek. While some think the pronoun is implied, it is certainly not explicit. There is some ambiguity here, but it's very possible that the best translation for that verse is not “their wives” but, simply, “women.”
2. As we look at this passage as a whole (vv. 1-13), we simply must ask: why would Paul talk about deacons' wives but not talk about elders' wives? It is strange that, despite elders having stricter qualifications, there is no mention of their wives, if we are to believe he later gives direction regarding deacons' wives. We believe this inconsistency supports the conclusion that Paul is actually talking about women deacons, rather than deacons' wives, in verse 11.
3. The structure and flow of the passage seems to indicate that Paul was not referring to the wives of deacons. Paul uses the word “likewise” (NLT: “in the same way”) to transition from talking about elders in verse 7 to talking about deacons in verse 8. The same word is used in verse 11, leading us to believe the more likely flow of the passage is as follows: **first elders—likewise deacons—likewise women deacons.**
4. Paul specifically mentions (by name, no less) a woman in the early church, Phoebe, who is referred to as a “servant of the church” (Romans 16:1). There Paul uses the word **diakonos**, the same Greek word from which we get the word deacon, which indicates she is serving in an officially recognized capacity on par with deacons. Altogether in the New Testament, Paul specifically mentions 17 women who serve the church in similar ways.

Taken together, we believe these points give great credibility to the idea that the Scriptures do in fact allow for women to serve as deacons within the church. There is sufficient evidence from the life of the early church that women were serving and meeting needs within the church and even being officially recognized for their role of service by the apostles. There are basically two schools of thought on this, and we recognize that not everyone sees the text in the way we do, but we do believe it is the most faithful to the original context.

So we would say, based on the evidence we see throughout the New Testament and the description we have of the early church, that women can and should serve in various ministry positions of the church (even as officially recognized ministers) so long as their service is under the authority of elder leadership. Scripture is clear on the prohibitions against teaching and leading as an elder or pastor—beyond that, though, it does not prohibit women serving as ministers.

Women in Leadership at Grace Church

Understanding the distinction between pastor/elder and deacon/minister is critical to understanding what we believe about the role of women in leadership and how that informs our ministry practice at Grace Church. In light of what we believe the Bible says in this regard, we believe we are being faithful to the Scripture when we identify women from our congregation and recognize them in an official capacity, enabling them to serve and meet the needs of the church in specific capacities.

At Grace Church, our female ministers are set apart and entrusted with areas of responsibility within the church where they lead and serve under the oversight and authority of the church pastors and elders. These women serve in a variety of ministries, ministering to the needs of our church alongside our campus pastors, carrying the weight of specific ministry needs that enable our pastors to focus on the pastoring and shepherding responsibilities. Through their service, our church's women ministers play a vital role in our ability to meet the needs facing our church.

The question of a woman's role in leadership is one of many very important issues for us where we want to be faithful to the leading of God through his Word. We recognize that sometimes being faithful to the Bible means that some long-held beliefs based in tradition, personal preference, and culture will be challenged—and that can be very difficult. But our vision is to be a people who are truly defined and directed by Scripture—leaning into the Word when it challenges our thinking, so that we might grow in wisdom and maturity together as we serve one another as the body of Christ.

Notes:

For a more in-depth treatment on the topics of elders, deacons, and the feminine contribution within the church, please refer to the following sermons from our teaching series on 1 Timothy (2012):

1 Timothy 2:8-15 – “Unity and the Feminine Contribution”

1 Timothy 3:1-7 – “A Well-Led People”

1 Timothy 3:8-15 – “A Well-Served People”

For a more in-depth treatment on the topic of elders, please see our position paper that unpacks our church's stance on eldership and what we believe it means to be an elder-led church.

