

Deacons at Exodus

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Introduction

From the beginning, Exodus Church has sought to be a redeemed people who worship and serve God in the world as a gospel-centered community on mission with Jesus. On this journey our goal has been and always will be for the Bible to be our final authority for faith and practice. The Bible is not our only guide, but it is the final authority. What it says, we seek to do. Where it directs, we seek to follow. Because we are a people purchased by Jesus, we want to defer to what He has said in determining how we live out His mission.

The Bible is not silent about how a church is to function and be led. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul speaks of elders (also called pastors) and deacons. Elders serve the church by leading, shepherding and overseeing the church. Deacons lead in the church by assisting the elders so that the mission of Jesus is fulfilled. A biblically faithful church will be moving toward a leadership structure that reflects both of these roles.

Some contemporary churches have a single pastor and a board of deacons- a structure which presents a few problems. First, the Bible speaks of a plurality (team) of elders rather than one man serving as the lone pastor¹. Second, this model confuses the biblical role of deacons by effectively making them functional elders, only with a different title. As we understand the Scriptures, a biblically faithful church will be moving toward a leadership structure including the roles of both elders and deacons.

In studying this topic you will notice that for different stage churches, Scripture does vary the prescription for depth of leadership. For example, while Paul commands Titus to appoint elders, he does not mention deacons in that instance². To understand why,

¹ For more on this, read Elders at Exodus.

² Titus 1:5

we must look at the historical context. In Titus's case, he is a church planter starting a new work in Crete. However, when we turn to the example in 1 Timothy, we see in that case he is commanded to appoint both elders and deacons in Ephesus³. Once again looking at the historical context we see that Timothy is pastoring an older, more established church. This is a solid example in the Pastoral Epistles where we witness faithful churches being commanded to move toward a biblical leadership structure. At the same time, we also see Scripture accommodating varying stages of development and growth.

During our short journey together at Exodus, and as the church itself has grown and developed, in obedience we have been moving toward this biblical leadership structure. After appointing elders in 2011, our process continued by moving then to study and discuss the role of deacon. Our goal as the men given the responsibility of care and oversight⁴ is to be thorough in our study and biblical in our conviction. This paper is the distillation of our study, prayer and conversation over the last two years.⁵

What are deacons?

The word for deacon means "servant" or "minister" and is used 29 times in the New Testament. Of these, only four could be said to suggest an official position or office in the church (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 12; Romans 16:1). The root of the word itself (including the verb forms) was always connected to table service in secular Greek.

In Acts 6, actual table waiters assisted the leaders (apostles) of the church by administering this task so that the leaders could focus on shepherding. Together with the fact that the noun "deacon" is not even used in Acts 6, it is our conviction after study and prayer that this account was not about setting up a church office at that time. However we believe it did set a clear precedent and even a pattern for the future offices that would be commanded in Scripture⁶. This pattern describes a church leadership structure that includes shepherds and servants. It is clear in Scripture that both roles are needed so that the church can be cared for and pursue Jesus' mission faithfully.

What do deacons do?

The deacon's role, as with all Christians, is to serve the Body of Christ. The principle difference is that in their service, deacons specifically assist the elders in carrying out an individual church's vision and mission. While the elders of the church are given the role of oversight and leadership, deacons are given certain ministry roles under the elder's direction. These ministry roles can vary widely from church to church, but ultimately they all contribute to freeing up the elders for prayer, shepherding, teaching and vision-setting leadership. In keeping with the Acts 6 pattern, deacons free church elders to faithfully exercise their God-given tasks. In effect, deacons are uniquely dedicated

³ 1 Timothy 3:8-13

⁴ 1 Peter 5:2

⁵ At the end of this paper, you will find some of the resources we used in our study.

⁶ For more on this issue, read John McArthur's "Answering the Key Questions about Deacons" or Bob Thune's "Deacons: A Theological Study"

servants in the church because they specifically assist the elders so that the work of the church can expand and grow.

Practically speaking, at Exodus Church deacons will:

- Serve the Body by using their leadership skills to serve and organize the church for effectively carrying out Jesus' mission;
- Assist the elders, enabling them to devote time to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6);
- Carry out the particular vision and mission of our church, following and assisting the elders as the elders follow the Chief Shepherd;
- Work to organize, delegate, and accomplish the varied practical affairs and tasks that are involved in living out the gospel specifically at Exodus Church.

Who can be a deacon?

Qualifications

As with the office of elder, in 1 Timothy 3 Paul lists the various qualifications for the office of deacon as follows. They must:

- **Be dignified** – deacons should live lives that are worthy of imitation.
- **Not be double-tongued** – deacons should be honest, truthful and careful in speech.
- **Not be addicted to much wine** – deacons should be self-controlled in their lifestyle choices. As with elders, this does not mean that deacons must abstain from alcohol. Rather, it means that they are not to be addicted to it.
- **Not be greedy for dishonest gain** – deacons should serve without the thought of getting reimbursement. This does not mean that deacons could not be paid. It simply means that they should not be motivated by reimbursement or compensation.
- **Hold the truths of the faith** – deacons must have sound theology. At times and in certain contexts they may teach, but to be a deacon they are not required to have this spiritual gift.
- **Be tested** – deacons should have shown themselves to be faithful to Jesus and His Church.

Can Women be deacons?

Paul continues with some additional qualifications for specific types of deacons in vv. 11-13. Before we move to those, it would be appropriate to discuss the question of women as deacons in the church.

At Exodus, we hold and practice a complementarian view of men and women. In other words, we teach from the Bible that God made men and women equal in essence and person. From a scriptural perspective, men are not better than women nor are women better than men. We also understand from the Bible that God created men and women differently. He created them uniquely for different roles in the home and in the church that are designed to complement one another. In the home the husband is to sacrificially lead while his wife faithfully supports his leadership with her gifts and strengths so that the family might thrive.

In the church, because Scripture is so clear on this point, we firmly believe that the office of elder/pastor is only granted to biblically qualified, faithful men. There is no passage in the Bible that can be understood to allow women to be elders or pastors. However, regarding the question of who can be a deacon, the preponderance of passages relating to this question at a minimum open this up for conversation (Romans 16:1, 1 Timothy 3:11).

The notion of women serving as deacons is a hotly debated matter even within biblically faithful churches. There are many biblically faithful churches that decide to have women serve as deacons and others that do not. It is important to note however that even in most churches that decide not to assign the official title of deacon, women are almost always still serving in leadership in many important areas (e.g VBS Director). The irony in the debate is that in the end, these women are ultimately serving in deacon roles, but they are simply not bearing the title.

While we recognize that the Bible does not answer this question as clearly as many others, the elders are persuaded from our study of the Bible, as well as building on the study of many respected historic and contemporary theologians, that women are indeed allowed to serve Jesus as deacons in the life of the local church. The principle reasons are as follows:

- **Grammar**

- **“Their wives...”** - In 1 Timothy 3:11, the verse literally reads “Women [γυναῖκας], likewise must be dignified.” Also, there is no possessive pronoun (their) referring to these women. Additionally, there is a specific Greek word for wives, but this word is not used. The females mentioned are simply “women”. Though not its principal meaning, at times this word γυναῖκας can also mean or imply “wives”. However, there really is no justification for it in this context, which may be why scholars felt they had to insert the word “their” to achieve that meaning.
- **The absence of requirements for elder’s wives** - We are also persuaded that this cannot logically refer to deacon’s wives because there is no parallel mention of requirements for elder’s wives. It would seem that if there were requirements for the wives of those deacons actually serving the elders, then there would also be requirements for the wives of those who would lead the deacons- the elders themselves. We realize that this is an argument from silence, but it is a strong one.
- **“Likewise...”** – In v. 8, this word is used to begin the section on deacons following the passage about elders. Paul is setting aside a group called to a particular role. The same construction is used in v. 11 to refer to the women mentioned in the verse. At the very least, Paul is setting up some role for women in the church regardless of whether or not it is specifically for female deacons.

- **Authority** – 1 Timothy 2:8-15 are quite clear that women are not to exercise

authority over men in the church. So then, how can women serve as deacons? Our understanding of this passage is that the particular authority to which this passage alludes lies specifically with the church elders as they submit to Jesus. The deacons serve under this elder authority, but they do not themselves possess that same authority referenced in 1 Timothy 2:8-15. As such there is no conflict between 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and 1 Timothy 3:8-12. Female deacons (and male deacons for that matter) simply do not possess elder authority. Deacons serve and execute their assigned roles (including delegated leadership) under elder authority.

- **Wisdom** – While we hold that the Bible is the final authority against which all other sources of wisdom and guidance are measured, it is not the only source of guidance in our day-to-day activities. The Bible simply does not speak in detail on every matter under the sun. God intends for us to use biblically informed wisdom and common sense to make many mundane and some not-so-mundane decisions in those places where he is silent or has not provided detailed direction. One such way that we seek guidance when God expects us to use wisdom is by looking to our respected contemporaries as well as our forefathers in the faith
 - The early church – In this case, we see that the earliest churches had female deacons with church fathers even referring to them specifically in 1 Timothy 3:11 and Romans 16:1. There are also mentions of female deacons serving the church in extra biblical sources as early as the 2nd century.
 - Contemporaries – As we researched this issue, we noted that the following widely known and respected theologian pastors are just a few examples of the many that have female deacons (or deaconesses as they are sometimes called) in their own churches:
 - John Piper – Bethlehem Baptist Church
 - John MacArthur – Grace Community Church
 - Mark Dever – Capitol Hill Baptist Church
 - Matt Chandler – The Village Church

As mentioned already, the Bible is always our final authority and standard, but God gave us the church as a gift to all believers and for “...iron to sharpen iron...” (Proverbs 27:17). To ignore this source of wisdom is to ignore one of God’s precious gifts.

As we have studied the Bible, looked at other research and prayed fervently about this decision, we are aware that our context and the church culture in it have a certain perception of churches with female deacons, and not always positive. For some, adopting a position that allows for female deacons is the first sign of a liberalism that would reject biblical authority in favor of cultural values⁷. We seek to assure you in any

⁷ Incidentally, the cultural argument can go both ways. A church could affirm women deacons in order to accommodate to the secular culture or feminism. However, a church could reject women deacons not as a statement of biblical fidelity, but to accommodate the religious culture that wrongly understands the issue. Both are reactions to the culture. Tim Keller’s article says

way we can that we are not moving toward a lower view of the Scriptures. To the contrary, we are seeking to submit to them more fully and to avoid the very trap of not challenging existing traditions simply because our parents' churches did it a certain way. In short, we seek to be Bereans⁸, never settling for a tradition when we discover that Scripture contradicts that tradition.

We are also aware that many of us have attended churches that maintain an unbiblical leadership structure. A good example of this is when there are no elders and deacons effectively serve as elders. In this model, a woman should not be a "deacon" because these deacons are really serving as elders/pastors (which the Bible restricts to men)⁹.

To be very clear, we would affirm that biblically qualified women can serve Jesus in many ways at Exodus. Some of those would include serving as deacon, praying or reading Scripture during a worship gathering, sharing testimony, teaching other women in gender specific studies, teaching mixed gender studies in a way that does not usurp the headship of their husbands or be in conflict with 1 Timothy 2, providing counsel to women (Titus 2) and serving in other ways that are not in conflict with 1 Timothy 2. However, women will not serve as elders or pastors or preach during our worship gatherings at Exodus Church.¹⁰

At Exodus we always seek to structure leadership in a way that reflects what the Bible teaches. Since our desire is to be a biblically faithful church, we want to submit to the Bible more and more fully as we grow in Christ's likeness. To that end, it is the conviction of your elders that qualified women can serve Jesus as deacons at Exodus Church.¹¹

Additional Qualifications

For women deacons – 1 Timothy 3:11

In addition to the other qualifications for deacons in vv. 8-10, the following qualifications are unique to the women who serve as deacons:

- **Dignified** – These must be women who are worthy of respect and who live lives worthy of imitation.
- **Not slanderers** – These must be women who control their tongues. This can

this very well, "If [our denomination] is driven either by reaction to or adaptation to the culture, it is being controlled by the culture instead of the Word." Our desire is to be biblically faithful regardless of the reaction of the secular or religious culture.

⁸ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Acts 17:11

⁹ We found Thabiti Anyabwile's article on this to be very helpful. He writes, "As I recounted earlier, I've been a member at churches that do not have elders but are governed by a group of deacons. If the church does not have elders and deacons perform the teaching and oversight responsibilities biblically belonging to elders, then women should not serve as deacons. I'm a complementarian, so I believe the basic pattern of qualified male leadership in the church should be maintained in joyful obedience to the Lord. But having said that, the more important "fix" to such a situation is not to restrict women from serving in what may be a permissible area of service in the church, but to conform the church itself to the New Testament pattern of governance. We shouldn't restrict women in an effort to maintain irregular governance; we should conform our governance of the church to the word of God and deploy women to serve wherever and whenever appropriate."

¹⁰ For more on this, see "Women's Responsibility and Authority at The Village Church"

¹¹ Some of you may wonder about our connection to the Southern Baptist Convention and our alignment with the Baptist Faith & Message 2000. Our position on deacons does not veer from the position of the BFM 2000. In this document, the role of pastor is assigned to men only. While deacons remains unspecified. This leaves room for churches who hold both positions to serve Jesus together.

mean sharing appropriate information in appropriate ways. It also governs the way in which women speak to others.

- **Sober-minded** – These must be women who are self controlled in their minds and hearts. They cannot be women who are excessively controlled by their emotions. They must be temperate.
- **Faithful** – They must be trustworthy and reliable. If they are going to serve the elders of the church, we all must be able to count on them to get the job done.

For Married Male deacons – 1 Timothy 3:12-13

In addition to the other qualifications for deacons in vv. 8-10, the following qualifications are given to those deacons who are married and to those who have children. Both of these qualifications speak to the importance of a man's leadership in his home.

- **One-woman man** – A Deacon must be a faithful man – whether married or single. However, this seems to be specifically speaking to those male deacons who are married. He is to be a one-woman man. This qualification does not bar divorced men from serving as deacons. However, there is a deeper testing for a divorced man in order to discern the reasons for divorce. Faithfulness in marriage is a necessity for deacons.
- **Manages his home well** – Again, this qualification doesn't mean that a male deacon must have children in order to be a deacon. However, if he does have children, they must be managed well. His children must respect and submit to his leadership if he is to serve as a deacon.

Rewards for Faithful Deacons – 1 Timothy 3:13

The final verse in the passage promises reward for the deacon who serves faithfully.

- **Good Standing** – Deacons who serve well will be noticed and appreciated by those around them. The Church will affirm and respond to faithful deacons who serve well.
- **Great Confidence** – Deacons who serve well will gain a greater appreciation for the power of the gospel in their lives. Both in making them qualified to be a deacon and in equipping them to fulfill the area of service needed.

Practical Matters

Expectations

We expect those who would serve as Deacons at Exodus Church to:

- **Meet the qualifications listed above.** Deacons must meet the biblical qualifications in order to serve at Exodus Church.
- **Be faithful members of Exodus.** Deacons are fulfilling the member covenant with joy. They are giving, participating, serving and seeking to live as a missionary where they live.
- **Be available to serve at this time.** Deacons have space in their lives for something more. It may be that someone is qualified and faithful, but not available. This would include various meetings and other responsibilities.

Installation

The following reflects a minimum path toward deacon appointment.

- **Recognized as servant leaders** – Anyone who pursues deacon ministry must be recognized as a servant leader before a title is given. Deacons must have shown themselves to be faithful, available and teachable.
- **Assessed by the Elders** – Biblical qualifications exist so that deacons may be tested against those qualifications. The character, competency and calling of anyone who desires to be a deacon will be tested and assessed in a fashion that the elders of each local Exodus Church congregation deem appropriate. Part of this process involves a public request for information about the deacon, both from the congregation and community.
- **Approved by the Congregation** – After proper assessment and testing, the elders will place a slate of deacons forward for the approval of the church in an up or down vote.
- **Serve a 1-year term** – Deacons would be asked to serve at least a 1 year term. After this, they would be able to serve again as needed and if they were willing. As needed by the church, there will be a specific classification for any person who continues paid employment after finishing a term as paid deacon, separate from the role of deacon.

Structure

As deacons are to assist the elders to serve the church, each elder will oversee a team of deacons who then work to accomplish the various tasks to serve the Body. The number and roles of deacons will change with the needs of our people and based on the elder team's evolving vision.

Areas of Service

The role of deacon should be seen as an assignment based on the current needs of the elders and the church. The following categories will guide the elders in the appointment and recruiting of deacons, but is in no way exhaustive:

- Roles surrounding the Sunday morning gathering
- Administrative tasks
- Other ongoing ministries
- Other areas as necessary

What's next?

Starting in Spring 2013, the elders will begin contacting those who we have already seen as servant leaders. Our goal will be to assess, train and equip the first slate of deacons to be presented and installed by Fall 2013.

Our hope for any who would serve as a deacon at Exodus Church is a scriptural one—that they would “gain a good standing for themselves and also a great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 3:13) We desire for those who serve Jesus as a deacon at Exodus would have joy in their labor and be encouraged by their time of service. Let's begin praying for our deacons now.

Other Resources

Other Resources:

John McArthur – [Answering the Key Questions about Deacons](#)

Bob Thune – [Deacons: A Theological Study](#)

The Village Church

- [Deacons](#)
- [Women's Responsibilities and Authority at The Village Church](#)

John Piper – [Church Government](#)

Mark Dever – [Capital Hill Baptist Church - Deacons](#)

Thabiti Anyabwile - [Women Can be Deacons](#)

Tim Keller - [The Case for Commissioning Deaconesses](#)

[Various Quotes about Women serving as Deacons](#)