

The Gathering's Position Concerning the Ministry of Deacons

In any church, the responsibilities of Pastors, also referred to as Elders, are immense. According to Acts 6, the primary responsibilities are ministry of the Word and prayer. If done well, this takes a great amount of time. Within those two areas of ministry include many hours of sermon preparation as well as a great deal of time spent on administration and oversight of all that makes up the church and her ministries. Part of the ministry of the Word involves caring for the *spiritual* needs of the covenant members which can involve many hours and arise at any moment.

In addition to the responsibilities of the elders, there is another vital function of church life that must be addressed. That is taking care of the *physical* needs of all Covenant Members.

Physical needs can come in many forms, sometimes easily resolved with a phone call or email, while other times can require involvement from many people over a number of days. There are times that members in our church go through struggles financially or are in need of emergency help with their house or their children, or need food brought to their homes after a baby is born or when they are sick or any other number of needs that arise.

The elders can try and meet the needs, but when that happens, some of the above responsibilities specific to elders will suffer. Though there are times when the elders do meet needs when they are able, what if that happens on a regular basis? What if there are 3 or 4 needs that come up in the course of a single day which does, at times, happen?

To prevent the Church from becoming spiritually emaciated from a lack of focus by the elders on tending the flock's spiritual needs and providing necessary oversight of the ministries of the church, God provided a special ministry to help provide for their physical needs.

That is where the Deacon Ministry comes in providing two specific functions within the church body (Acts 6):

1. To assist pastors in caring for physical needs. They serve the elders so that they can fulfill their calling to lead, teach and pray for the Church by taking over many of the physical, care-giving responsibilities.

2. To protect the unity of the Church. In the course of meeting the needs of the first church, the deacons solved a physical problem that was causing disunity among the members. Today, deacons serve as the “first-responders” to crises and, as such, are often the first to hear of discontent or disunity and are in the best position to help offer solutions.

For decades in the American church, the role of deacon devolved into something that Scripture never prescribed. Rather than simply fulfilling the two primary functions, deacons became a group of men chosen by the church to essentially provide checks and balances to the pastor. They often served to “keep the pastor in line”. In essence, they served as the “congress” to the pastor’s “presidency”, acting as representatives of the people’s demands of the pastor. They practically became something of a hybrid group between deacons and elders, serving the function of lay elders within the church without the actual *calling* of an elder. This has been the source of much of the tension and stifling of ministry for pastors within the church. Quite simply, it is not the design of God for His Church.

In a healthy church, deacons function as *lead servants*, setting an example of servanthood within the church, both meeting needs, personally, and organizing the body to take care of each other’s needs. A church cannot possibly meet the needs of all the people unless all the people are taking care of all the needs.

This, then, means that all members should be focused on becoming the kind of servants that Paul describes to Timothy:

1 Timothy 3:8-13

⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹ *Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, [¶]faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons each be [¶]the husband of one wife, [¶]managing their children and their own households well. ¹³ 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. [^{*}or “the women”]

In an attempt to help our members understand the nature of the Deacon Ministry, we have provided answers to some frequently asked questions:

Who can serve in the Deacon Ministry?

The above passage speaks of the character of the person who is to serve as a deacon in that they must be respectable, committed to the Truth, self-controlled, honest and know what they believe and why. Of course, this does not require perfection, but they must be mature enough to understand their need for grace and model a life of humility and repentance.

What about women?

At The Gathering, we believe the Scripture is very clear that only men can serve in the capacity of Elder/Pastor. However, based on our understanding of Scripture and according to the job description laid out in Scripture, we believe that women who meet the character qualifications are allowed to serve in this particular ministry.

What is the biblical rationale for allowing women to serve in the deacon ministry?

First, we need to understand something of the nature of what was originally written. In many translations, verse 11 reads, "their wives". This is an interpretive decision - gunā (pronounced "gunay") can equally mean either "wives" or "women," leaving the determination of whether Paul was talking about "their wives" or "the women" up to translators.

There are 6 major clues in Scripture that lead us to believe that Paul's intention was "women":

1. The word, "Likewise" tends to introduce a new but related case. In verse 8, Paul says that in a similar manner to elders, "deacons likewise...". In verse 10, Paul does the same thing in turning to women, indicating the possibility of saying something along the lines of, "as for the men who serve...likewise, the women who serve must...". Thus, he would be speaking to each group, separately, of those serving in the capacity of deacons.

2. The lack of similar instructions to wives of elders in verses 1-7 makes it less likely that “wives of deacons” would be singled out when the wives of *elders* are arguably more scrutinized, demanding more rather than less qualifiers and attention.

3. There is indication that women already served the church in this capacity in Romans 16:1. Paul says, “I 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 (“helper”) of many and of myself as well. The word Paul uses for “servant” in verse 1 is the same word he uses for deacon in 1 Timothy. Literally, “Phoebe, a ‘deacon’ of the church at Cenchreae” demonstrates the existence of women serving in the capacity of deacons and the use of the masculine term to refer to a female deacon.

4. Similarly, Paul writes in Ephesians 4:11-12: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

The word used for deacon in 1 Timothy 3 is the same word Paul used in verse 12 to refer to the “work of ministry” that the all members of the church are to be involved in.

5. Many scholars agree that verse 11 turns briefly to women deacons, then back to men on 12 as that verse is important as a “men only” instruction, dealing with “the husband of one wife.” We agree with the majority of scholars who do not believe this refers specifically to divorce (though certainly all of the teaching on divorce would apply as well), but the context is most clearly referring to *polygamy*, which was a common problem during this time-period. Polygamy was an issue only men would have been responsible for according to the family structures and practices of that day. Men may have had multiple wives, but women never had multiple husbands.

6. The biblical job description of the deacon should, in no way, discount women from serving since they are neither teaching nor overseeing men, but serving the entire church by helping take care of practical, physical needs (which they tend to be more gifted in, to start with!).

Should women *always* be allowed to serve within the deacon ministry?

Quite simply, no.

In churches that confuse the roles and functions of deacons with elders (which is the case of many churches), so that deacons "govern" the church along with the pastor(s) rather than solely serve the church's physical needs, we would say it would be inappropriate. Further, we would recommend to such a church that the problem they are faced with that is greater than women serving as deacons is the biblical error of deacons acting as elders.

Are divorced individuals prohibited from serving as a deacon?

We do not see where Scripture outright prohibits divorced people from serving as deacons within certain parameters:

As stated in point 5, most scholars agree that Paul was not referring to the divorced, but to the polygamists. That said, there are biblical instructions on those who are divorced. Divorce always involves sin, but it does not mean everyone involved in divorce has sinned. If a spouse is deserted, Scripture is clear that the faithful spouse is free from the broken marriage covenant. Further, we believe that a repentant divorcee may be restored to full service just as much as one who has sinned in any other way may find full restoration (2 Timothy 2:20-22, 1 John 1:9). Quite simply, divorce is not the unpardonable sin. Therefore, even one who has divorced in an unbiblical manner in the past and has since remarried, once they are made aware of their sin and repent, can be eligible for deacon ministry at The Gathering. However, one who has divorced and is unrepentant is ill-equipped and unfit to serve in *any* capacity within the Church.

Managing their children and their own households well.

Can individuals with unbelieving or rebellious children serve as deacons?

This is an area that must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. On the one hand, this refers to proper and consistent training and disciplining children according to the Gospel and working to keep peace within the home.

On the other hand, this cannot mean that only parents of children who never rebel or even reject the faith are qualified, even though the children are raised in a Christ-honoring home. That is outside of the control of any parent beyond loving them and raising them up in the Word.

If an individual being considered for the deacon ministry has demonstrated faithful and consistent ministry to their children, raising them according to the Word, praying for them regularly and creating a safe environment in which no negligence is demonstrated on the part of the parents, there is no reason they must be disqualified from serving.

Conclusion:

It is goal and desire of the Elders and the Covenant Members of The Gathering to base our decisions regarding the roles in the Church and who may or may not serve within those roles on Scripture rather than any man-made rules or tradition. We understand that many come from backgrounds in which women or those who are divorced would never be considered for deacon ministry. Many of us come from those same backgrounds. However, our responsibility is not to our backgrounds or our traditions, but to the Word of God and we humbly and fearfully submit ourselves to the mercy and guidance of Christ in all decisions and interpretations we must make.