

Position Paper: God's Design for Men and Women

Conversations around gender can be difficult.

The first mention of gender in the Bible is in its first chapter, and it's encouraging:

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.
(Genesis 1:27)*

From the start, Genesis affirms that gender was God's idea. Our maleness and femaleness is an essential part of what it means to be human. Both men and women are made in God's image. It takes both men and women to fill, subdue, and rule the earth (Genesis 1:28). Gender is a good gift from our good God meant for his glory and for our good.

Humans don't exist only in the world of theoretical ideas; all of us are specifically men or women. When creating humans, God made both male and female bodies. Everyone has a soul that is matched to a male or female body. To be a human person then means to always be a male or a female person,¹ and with that comes specific abilities, gifts, and roles for each gender.²

¹ Intersex is the physical condition of being born "in between" male and female, with a blend of male and physical biological characteristics. But this does not represent a third gender as much as a rare medical condition. See Jennifer Anne Cox, *Intersex in Christ: Ambiguous Biology and the Gospel* (Cascade Books).

² TGC Canada is currently developing a catechism on sexuality. This paragraph borrows from some of the language in that catechism.

Genesis 2:18-25 continues this theme. A male-only humanity is lacking something important. Maleness without femaleness is the first thing in creation that is called “not good” by God. Kent Hughes observes that “not good” is strong language. “It indicates not only the absence of something good but a substantial deficiency.”³

Adam needs someone who corresponds to him, who is like him but has strengths that he lacks. God creates a woman from his side, and Adam erupts with joy and marries her. Their relationship was one of partnership, openness, and transparency. They were different in their gender, but their differences were beneficial and a source of joy.

God intended gender as a beautiful gift for both men and women. Men and women are different, but equal image-bearers before God. Men and women need each other. As Herman Bavinck puts it:

*God is the Creator of the human being, and simultaneously also the Inaugurator of sex and of sexual difference. This difference did not result from sin; it existed from the very beginning, it has its basis in creation, it is a revelation of God's will and sovereignty, and is therefore wise and holy and good. Therefore, no one may misconstrue or despise this sexual difference, either within one's own identity or in that of another person. It has been willed by God and grounded in nature. It was then, and still is, willed by God; he is the sovereign Designer of sex; man and woman have God to thank not only for their human nature, but also for their different sexes and natures. Both are good, even as they both come forth from God's hand. Together in mutual fellowship they bear the divine image. God himself is the Creator of duality-in-unity.*⁴

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 58.

⁴ Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 5.

Even before the Fall, God gave different roles to men and women. Although both are equal in personhood and worth, the first man was given the role of leading with the first woman's necessary help (1 Corinthians 11:7-9; Genesis 2:20; 1 Timothy 2:13). Satan attacked these gender differences from the start.

The wife acting as the head, but not a wise head, and the husband acting as the helper, but not a wise helper — it was the breakdown of marriage that broke everything. The greatest glory in the universe (Genesis 1–2) became the greatest tragedy in the world (Genesis 3).⁵

Things fell apart after the Fall. What was intended to be beautiful became a battleground (Genesis 3:12, 16). Men can be prone to domination or passivity; women can be inclined to resist the leadership of men or become servile. Sin distorted one of God's greatest gifts to us, and we've been living with the consequences ever since.

But sin is not the last word. God is redeeming the world. Jesus treated women with great dignity and respect. The New Testament contains passages that are challenging for modern readers, but that, in their original context, underline the dignity of women (1 Corinthians 7:3-4; 1 Peter 3:7). Women are heirs with men of the grace of life. Early churches were known for how well they treated women.⁶

Until Christ returns, men and women will continue to experience the effects of sin, including on what it means to live and relate as men and women. And yet, as believers, we can pursue godly ways of living as men and women, both in our individual lives and within the church.

⁵ Ray Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel* (Crossway), 36-37.

⁶ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/early-christianity-welcoming-women/>

Equal but Different

The key teaching throughout Scripture is that men and women are equal and yet different — gloriously different. Before sin entered the world, humans didn't struggle with the tension between our equality and difference. Now that we've been affected by sin, we do.

- **Men and women are equal.** Both men and women are created in God's image, and are therefore equal before God as persons. Both men and women possess the same moral dignity and value. Both have equal access to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Both men and women are recipients of spiritual gifts for ministry in the church and beyond.
- **Men and women are different.** At the same time, God made men and women to be different from each other. These differences are designed as a gift from God. Each gender is incomplete without the other, because each gender offers something different that the other needs.

This complementarity is written into all of creation. Andrew Wilson observes:

Complementarity appears to be hardwired into us as human beings, even from the perspective of mainstream secular scientific and sociological research. The vast majority of human societies have known this intuitively, but in a culture like ours, where most of us have never fought for our homeland, died in childbirth, gone down the mines, or settled a frontier, it has become forgotten. Facts, however, are stubborn things.⁷

In other words, our complementary natures as men and women are self-evident, revealed in Scripture, and yet masked and debated in our current culture. Gender is

⁷ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/beautiful-complementarity-male-female/>

meant as a gift, but sin has twisted what was meant as a gift into a source of conflict and tension.

Two Areas of Application

Our equality and differentiation show up in two key areas of life.

Marriage and Family

One area is marriage. In Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul outlines how husbands and wives are to relate to each other in marriage.

First, wives are to submit to their husbands. All believers are commanded to submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21). In particular, women are instructed to offer willing submission to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24). The command is not for all women to submit to all men, but for a wife to submit to her husband. Submission does not imply inferiority, nor does it mean that the wife has no voice in the marriage. It is, however, a reversal of the curse. God created women to help and support their husbands, but one of the effects of sin is that the woman's desire will be to control her husband (Genesis 3:16). Paul aims for women to resist the effects of sin and to willingly submit rather than oppose their husbands.

Second, men are to love and serve their wives. Paul's instructions to husbands are longer and even more challenging than his instructions to wives. Men are tempted to misuse their authority in marriage and dominate their wives. Paul commands men to do the opposite: to lay down their lives in loving service to their wives, just as Christ did for the church. Paul uses striking language: Christ loved the church and gave himself up

for her so that he might sanctify her, “so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27). In a similar way, men are called to love their wives as they love their own bodies, nourishing and cherishing them (Ephesians 5:28-29). Men are called to the ultimate standard of love for their wives set by our Lord himself.

Headship is not about privilege; it is about responsibility. It is about using power to serve so that others can thrive.

As Kevin DeYoung writes:

The overarching command for wives is “submit” because that is what they find most difficult to do as sinful wives. The overarching command for husbands is “love” because that is what they find most difficult to do as sinful husbands.

The commands to submit and love are intended to reverse the curse inflicted in the Garden of Eden. God’s plan from the beginning was for a gentle helping wife and a gracious leading husband. But sin corrupted God’s design.⁸

God intends our marriages to reflect the self-giving nature of Christ, and to therefore mirror the gospel. A marriage that functions this way is not only beautiful, but points people to Jesus.

Within the family, we should celebrate the unique role that women play in reproduction. While not every female will become a mother, childbearing is a role that is unique to women, and it is to be valued, celebrated, and supported as part of God’s design and the mandate given to humanity (Genesis 1:28; 1 Timothy 2:15).

⁸ Kevin DeYoung, *Freedom and Boundaries: A Pastoral Primer on the Role of Women in the Church* (2006: Pleasant Word), 134.

Both fathers and mothers play a role in raising children. The New Testament commands fathers not to provoke their children to anger, implying that fathers may sometimes be tempted to be too harsh in discipline. “This passage effectively rules out reactionary flare-ups, overly harsh words, insults, sarcasm, nagging, demeaning comments, inappropriate teasing, unreasonable demands, and anything else that can be perceived as provocative.”⁹ On the other hand, fathers are instructed to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Fathers are ultimately responsible to teach their children about God and the gospel by example and by words.

Scripture gives us broad and important principles that apply to both marriage and raising children. Couples, not elders or fellow members, are best suited to work out the details of what complementarianism looks like in their own marriages and families. And they (the couples) should do this together. They are best suited to figure out how to apply these principles in their own contexts.

Church

Our maleness and femaleness also plays a role in the church.

God has given both men and women gifts to be used within the church. Women served as co-workers with Paul (Romans 16). Paul encouraged them to use their gifts in public ways in the church (1 Corinthians 11:2-16). At the same time, he cautioned men and women to maintain culturally appropriate expressions of their gender (1 Corinthians 11:2-16). In other words, we should embrace appropriate cultural norms to express our identity as men and women and celebrate, not obliterate, our differences.

⁹ Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 418.

Because the church is the household of God (1 Timothy 3:14-15), some of the gender differences within the home also carry over to the church. Vern Poythress observes:

...the fundamental principles regarding the structures of the human family are to be applied to the church as God's household (1 Timothy 3:15). Our personal relations to others in God's household should take into account what kind of persons they are, whether young or old, male or female (1 Timothy 5:1-2). In particular, the structure of family leadership is to be carried over into God's household: qualified men are to be appointed as overseers, that is, fathers of the church. A woman, however capable and gifted she may be, can never become a father of a family. As a woman, she is simply not so constituted. Likewise, a woman may never become a father in God's household. She may indeed become a "mother" in God's household, and exercise the roles indicated in 1 Timothy 5:2; 3:11; 5:9-10, 14; Titus 2:3-5; 2 Timothy 1:5. The life of the church never overthrows but rather enhances the life of the family, based on God's design from creation.¹⁰

Scripture gives qualified men the unique role of overseers within the church, providing loving, sacrificial leadership for the good of all (1 Timothy 2:11-15). Paul roots our roles within the church not in the ever-changing culture around us, but in God's original creation.

The church functions best when godly men provide loving leadership within the church, and provide healthy, sound, biblical teaching so that the church thrives. Women are encouraged to actively participate in the life of the church in every way except in the pastoral office of elder/teacher. They can play an important role, as Poythress writes, as spiritual mothers within the church.

¹⁰ <https://frame-poythress.org/the-church-as-family-why-male-leadership-in-the-family-requires-male-leadership-in-the-church-as-well/>

God gifts both men and women to teach, and both should be encouraged to use those gifts, although the context of teaching may differ. In a sense, all Christians are called to teach each other (Colossians 3:16). But some are called to the office of teaching within the church.¹¹

It's helpful to distinguish between two types of teaching: Big 'T' vs Little 't' teaching:¹²

- **Little 't' teaching** — 1 Corinthians 14:26 and Colossians 3:16 speak to a type of teaching where everyone in the church (men and women) is encouraged to teach and instruct each other. This certainly includes women. Priscilla as well as her husband Aquila taught Apollos the Word of God more accurately than he had known it before (Acts 18:26). According to Titus 2, older women are to teach younger women. In Hebrews 5:12, the writer tells his audience that they should all, by the present stage of their Christian lives, be teachers. And no matter where one falls on the cessationist versus continuationist debates, all have to reckon with the fact that prophetic words and words of encouragement were deployed through both women and men (1 Corinthians 12; 14:29-32; Acts 2:17; 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16). For Andrew Wilson, this sort of teaching is “something that all sorts of people in the church can do. There is no expectation that it will be done primarily (or exclusively) by people with good character, or by older people, or by leaders; “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,” Paul exhorts the entire church at Colossae, “teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.” The only requirement is having the gift: if your gift is teaching, then teach, and if your gift is exhortation, then exhort (Romans 12:7-8).

¹¹ <https://x.com/drjohnframe/status/1803501998857396295?s=61>

¹² <https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/teaching-with-a-little-t-and-a-big-t>

- **Big 'T' teaching** — 1 Timothy 2 is referring to Big 'T' teaching. It is this type of teaching that is restricted to qualified men, most notably, elders. Robert Yarborough, reflecting on 1 Timothy 2:12 says, “I propose that ‘to teach or to exercise authority over a man’ was Paul’s way of summarizing to his longtime, younger colleague Timothy the chief responsibilities of a congregation’s pastor: (1) instruction via faithful exposition of Scripture, in ways like Jesus nurtured his disciples, and (2) benevolent oversight and shepherding, in ways like Jesus cared for his followers and like early Christian leaders emulated (e.g., 1 Pet. 5:1–5).”¹³

We need both men and women to use their various gifts (1 Peter 4:10-11), and for qualified men to serve as elders.

Gender in the Rest of Life

Our identities as men and women go beyond these two areas. We live all of life as gendered creatures, and we should expect our genders to affect how we live all of our lives. Herman Bavinck wrote, “The human nature given to man and woman is one and the same, but in each of them it exists in a unique way. And this distinction functions in all of life and in all kinds of activity.”¹⁴

The question is how our differences will affect us.

- Some (called **narrow complementarians**) are hesitant to say much more about how we live as men and women than how we function in home and church. They allow for freedom in how we function in our careers and in other public spheres.

¹³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/1-timothy-2-12-teach/>

¹⁴ Bavinck, p. 68.

- Others (called **broad complementarians**) argue that “by God’s design we are born as men or women, and that this distinction is not first of all about ordination or who can preach but is a distinction that functions in all of life and in all kinds of activity.”¹⁵

We realize that the terms can be confusing. The term *narrow* (some people prefer the terms “thin” or “soft”) applies complementarianism to marriage and eldership only. Hence, narrow complementarianism allows for greater freedom for how women function outside of marriage and eldership.

On the other hand, *broad* complementarianism (some prefer the term “thick” or “hard”) applies the gender differences more broadly to every area of life.

For the Christian, deciding between these two forms of complementarianism will dictate how we answer questions about parenting roles, working outside the home, how we raise boys and girls, and the roles that men and women occupy in society and in ministries outside the church.

We need much wisdom in how we think about this. Faithful Christians will disagree on how we work out these issues.

On the one hand, we should be cautious when we go beyond what Scripture says. We do enjoy some freedom in how we work out the implications of what it means to be men and women. On the other hand, we should be careful about obliterating the differences between how we function in our wider roles. Contra the narrow complementarians, if there isn’t a biblical prohibition, it doesn’t mean we enjoy absolute freedom. If

¹⁵ These terms originated in an article written by Kevin DeYoung (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/four-clarifying-i-hope-thoughts-on-the-complementarian-conversation/>), who, along with others like John Piper, takes the broad complementarian view. An example of a narrow complementarian is Kathy Keller, author of *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles* (Zondervan, 2012).

gender is a gift, we should celebrate and enjoy this gift as much as possible in every area of our lives.

Our culture tends to minimize — even obliterate — the differences between the genders. This should not surprise us, but we should be aware of the danger of carrying this mindset into how we think. As a class at Capitol Hill Baptist Church states:

There's a sense in which sexual difference matters much more in both the home and the church than it does in the modern workplace. The closer and more holistic the relationship, the more sexual difference matters. The more distant, transactional, and functional the relationship, the less sexual difference matters. This is one reason why Christians should have no objection to women serving as the heads of corporations, nonprofits, government agencies, and more.

But on the other hand, recognize that this kind of gender-neutral modern workplace is a fairly recent, somewhat artificial development. The family and the church represent basic human reality more fully and clearly than the modern workplace does. In other words, if you spend 50 hours a week in a gender-neutral workplace you should expect to do some “code switching” when you come to church. That shouldn't surprise you. You should view both the family and the church as closer to creation's default settings. The family and the church, not the modern technological workplace, should help you remember and be refreshed by the goodness of God's designs for creation.¹⁶

Simply put, your gender is part of God's design and is part of what it means to bear God's image in this world. It's a gift not only to you, and has implications beyond mar-

¹⁶ Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Man and Woman in Christ: Loving and Living God's Design for Sexual Difference, Class 11 (<https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/man-and-woman-in-christ/>)

riage and the church. We should think carefully about what it means to act as godly men and women in the world and celebrate our differences, even as we remain cautious about the conclusions we draw beyond Scripture.

We want to be a church that teaches complementarianism as an issue of secondary importance. It is not a primary gospel issue, but it is an important one.¹⁷ We also want to be a church that makes room for both narrow and broad complementarians.

Summary and Applications

- Your gender is a gift. It's designed by God, and it's good. You carry dignity and worth before God.
- Men and women need each other. It takes both men and women, working together, to image God and to do the work that God has given us to do in the world.
- Gender has become a battleground, but it wasn't meant to be this way. As Christians, we participate in Christ's undoing of the effects of sin. We enjoy this partially now, but we will enjoy it fully and completely when Jesus returns.
- Within the home, we should act in ways that counter the effects of sin. Women should willingly submit to husbands, and men should lovingly lay down their lives to serve their wives.
- Part of embracing our gender is celebrating the unique role that women play in childbearing. We should see this as a gift from God and resist the view of some that this calling is a lesser one than other vocations.

¹⁷ <https://albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity/>

- Practically speaking, within the church, women should not serve as elders/pastors. Big-T teaching and leadership roles are reserved for qualified men. However, both men and women should be encouraged to use their gifts to bless and serve others within the church.
- Your gender affects all of life, and you should seek God's wisdom to embrace and express your maleness and femaleness to honour God and bless others.

Our goal is to honour God by receiving and celebrating his gift of gender. As a church, we want to foster a culture of happy complementarianism¹⁸ in which both men and women are valued and thrive, and where our differences help and bless each other just as God intended.

¹⁸ <https://www.9marks.org/article/delighting-in-authority-how-to-create-a-culture-of-happy-complementarians/>

For Further Reading

The Danvers Statement, The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (<https://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement/>).

Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Man and Woman in Christ: Loving and Living God's Design for Sexual Difference (<https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/man-and-woman-in-christ/>).

9Marks Journals: Complementarianism & the Local Church (<https://www.9marks.org/journal/complementarianism-the-local-church/>) and Complementarianism: A Moment of Reckoning (<https://www.9marks.org/journal/complementarianism-a-moment-of-reckoning/>).

DeYoung, Kevin. *Freedom and Boundaries: A Pastoral Primer on the Role of Women in the Church*. Pleasant Word, 2006.

Keller, Kathy. *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry*. Zondervan, 2012.

Piper, John and Wayne Grudem. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Crossway, 1991, 2006, 2021. (Available as a free download at <https://www.desiringgod.org/books/recovering-biblical-manhood-and-womanhood>).

Roberts, Alastair. "The Music and the Meaning of Male and Female." *Primer: True to Form*, issue 03, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), August 2018. Available at <https://primerhq.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/primer-03-the-music-and-the-meaning-of-male-and-female.pdf>.

Storms, Sam. Men and Women in Ministry: The Meaning of Headship (<https://www.samstorms.org/all-articles/post/men-and-women-in-ministry:-the-meaning-of-headship>).

Village Church. The Role of Women at The Village Church (<https://link.gfceast.ca/NPIO>).

Appendix 1 — Ministry Roles at GFC East

The following are our present conclusions in terms of applications, flowing from our theological understandings.¹⁹ We recognize that opinions may vary, and it is possible to draw the lines in different places, but we want to provide clarity for practical purposes.

Kevin DeYoung states a general principle:

The position of elder may not be open to women, but there are thousands of other areas that are. Women can minister to the sick, the dying, the mentally impaired, and the physically handicapped. They can share their faith, share their resources, and open their home to strangers. They can write, counsel, mentor, organize, administrate, design, plan, and come alongside others. They can pray. They can minister to single moms, new moms, breast cancers survivors, and abuse victims. They can bring meals, sew curtains, send care packages, and throw baby showers. They can do sports ministries, lead women's Bible studies, teach systematic theology to other women, and plan missions trips. They can raise their kids to the glory of God and they can embrace singleness as a gift from God. I pray for women who love to cook and quilt and work in the nursery. I pray for women to counsel almost-divorced wives, and mentor young ladies, and teach doctrine to other women. There are a thousand things women can be doing in ministry besides the few roles the Bible does not permit them to fill. We need to make this point abundantly and repetitively clear.²⁰

¹⁹ Some parts adapted from The Role of Women at The Village Church (<https://link.gfceast.ca/NPIO>).

²⁰ DeYoung, *Freedom and Boundaries*, 126-127.

It's important, and yet challenging, to work this principle out in practice in our local church. This takes much wisdom. As one church puts it:

In coming to these conclusions and how to implement them, we recognize that some will find our position and practice on women in ministry far too conservative. We also recognize that others will find our position and practice on women in ministry far too progressive. We ask for charity from both as we focus on the primary task of making disciples of Jesus Christ.²¹

We have three goals in how we apply our convictions:

- We want to encourage both men and women to use their gifts to serve God and faithfully carry out the mission God has given us.
- We want to encourage both men and women to see their gender as a gift from God that is meant to bless the world and influence how they live in every area of life. Men and women are not interchangeable, and we should neither minimize or maximize the differences.
- We want to reserve the office of eldership for qualified men, along with pastoral functions such as preaching the Word of God and officiating the ordinances (baptism/the Lord's Supper).

Making these decisions is a matter of prudence and wisdom. The following is our best attempt to apply our convictions, but elders may draw the lines differently in the future.

It can be tricky to make these decisions. Some ministries seem to border on something that an elder might do, such as offering the congregational prayer, calling people to worship at the start of the service, or offering the benediction. But they are not strictly

²¹ Village Church. The Role of Women at The Village Church (<https://link.gfceast.ca/NPIO>).

elder responsibilities, and it has not been our practice to restrict these ministries to elders. Since these ministries are not strictly elder responsibilities, should we open these to female members within the church? We have chosen not to do so at this point because, although they are not strictly elder responsibilities, they *border* on elder responsibilities, and it seems to make sense that godly men fill these roles. We are aware, though, that not everyone will agree.

Jonathan Leeman, a broad complementarian, observes that there are both straight-line and jagged-line issues, and we need to adjust our volume accordingly.²² In other words, we should be cautious about binding what Scripture doesn't bind, and we should also be cautious about underplaying gender differences. We can fall into either ditch.

Overall, the focus should not be on what women *cannot* do, but on how men and women can work together to serve God. The church should encourage both men and women to be involved in the ministry of the church. Men and women should seek each other's counsel, recognizing the value of diverse perspectives in church leadership and life.

A. Deacons

Appendix Two covers the subject of deacon.

B. Corporate Worship

Every role is open to both men and women, except the roles of preaching the Word of God, the congregational prayer, officiating the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper), call to worship, and offering the benediction.

²² <https://www.9marks.org/article/a-word-of-empathy-warning-and-counsel-for-narrow-complementarians/>

At GFC, communion is served either at stations staffed by elders or through passing of elements by elder-designated members. The introduction of communion, including devotional and prayer for the elements, is restricted to elders and male ministry staff/interns at the elders' discretion.

Officiating at baptism is reserved for elders.

The following are open to both male and female members:

- leading songs as the primary vocalist
- distributing the elements during communion
- prayer (other than the congregational/pastoral prayer)
- making announcements
- moderating the Q&R after the sermon

C. Smaller Gatherings and Ministries

Mixed-gender teaching environments and ministries are overseen by elders, and will be led by qualified men. These men should seek out, equip and utilize gifted men and women to help lead and shape these ministries. Within mixed-gender groups, such as Discipleship Classes, men should act as the primary teachers.²³

Within small groups, leadership will ordinarily be shared between male and female small group leaders.

Both men and women may lead and teach in the following ways:

²³ <https://christooverall.com/article/longform/criteria-for-when-a-woman-can-teach-among-christians/>

- facilitating Bible study
- facilitating other book studies/discussions
- leading singing in small groups
- leading prayer
- teaching children (up until youth ministry)
- leading a ministry meeting or a volunteer team

Appendix Two — Female Deacons

The church has two offices: elders and deacons. Elders are to shepherd the flock by authoritative biblical teaching and oversight (1 Tim. 3:2; 1 Pet 5:2). Deacons are to care for the physical and fiscal needs of the church, to create unity in the body, and to support the work of the pastors and elders.²⁴ As Matt Smethurst says, “Elders serve by leading and deacons lead by serving.”²⁵

The office of elder is reserved for qualified men (1 Timothy 2:12-14). Opinions vary on whether or not women may serve as deacons. In his book on deacons, Smethurst lists the case for limiting the diaconal office to qualified men:

1. The Jerusalem church selected only men (Acts 6:2-3).
2. Some argue that Paul referred to deacons’ wives, not women deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13). (The word *gynaikas* translated “their wives” in the ESV of 1 Timothy 3:11 can mean either wives or women.)
3. They also understand Phoebe to be a servant, not a deacon (Romans 16:1-2).
4. Diaconal work entails a measure of authority. The qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3 follow closely a passage on gender-specific prohibitions (1 Timothy 2:11-15).

He then lists the arguments for women deacons:

1. Scripture nowhere forbids female deacons.

²⁴ <https://www.9marks.org/answer/how-do-elders-relate-deacons/>

²⁵ <https://www.9marks.org/message/how-does-the-role-of-deacons-relate-to-the-role-of-elders/>

2. Some argue that Paul referred to female deacons, not deacon's wives (1 Timothy 3:8-13).

3. They also argue Phoebe was a deacon, not just a servant (Romans 16:1-2).

In addition, deaconesses have existed throughout church history. While this is an extra-biblical argument, it informs us of how many throughout church history have interpreted these portions of Scripture.

“Strong arguments exist on both sides of this issue,” he says. “There is room for both conclusions in the kingdom of God.”²⁶ Regarding whether 1 Timothy 3:11 refers to the wives of deacons or to female deacons, William Mounce writes, “Both interpretations have their strong points, and both are possible.”²⁷

We believe, from both biblical evidence and from church history, that the office of deacon is open to both men and women for the following reasons:

- Acts 6:1-6 seems to describe the formation of a temporary, ad hoc group known as the Seven to oversee distribution of food in the early church. It may have influenced the development of the office of deacon, but the lessons of this passage do not translate directly to diaconal ministry.
- It seems strange that Paul would give requirements for the wives of deacons but not for elders. It seems to make more sense to conclude that Paul is giving qualifications for female deacons, not the wives of deacons (1 Timothy 3:11).

²⁶ Smethurst, Matt. *Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church* (Crossway: 9Marks Building Healthy Churches), 113-127.

²⁷ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2000), 204.

- Appointing females as deacons does not contradict 1 Tim. 2:12 because deacons do not teach or exercise spiritual or pastoral authority over others. Instead, they serve.
- Female deacons seem to have been present throughout church history from the early church to the Reformation. Charles Spurgeon argued that deaconesses are “an office that most certainly was recognised in the apostolic churches.”²⁸ In our time, pastors and teachers like John Piper,²⁹ Mark Dever (9Marks),³⁰ and John MacArthur³¹ all affirm a case for female deacons.

Given this, we believe it is biblical to appoint both male and female deacons, although we recognize that godly and knowledgeable believers may disagree. In addition, our current by-laws do not allow for female deacons, which leaves us with a decision on whether or not to change these by-laws.

Overall, we echo the spirit of these words by Charles Spurgeon:

*It would be a great mercy if God gave us the privilege of having many sons who all preached the gospel, and many daughters who were all eminent in the church as teachers, deaconesses, missionaries, and the like.*³²

²⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, “Helps,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 13 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1867), 589.

²⁹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/men-and-women-in-the-deaconate-and-in-the-service-of-communion>

³⁰ <https://www.9marks.org/conversations/episode-53-on-deacons/>

³¹ <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/451020/answering-key-questions-about-deacons->

³² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, electronic ed., vol. 51 (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998).