

# Church Leadership at First Baptist Church

## Introduction

In the church, there are two primary “offices” named in the Bible--elder & deacon. Some may think of elders as a board of directors, who are in charge of keeping an eye on the pastor. Others see elders as representatives of the people in the congregation, similar to how we elect government officials in the United States. And deacons...does anyone know what deacons are supposed to do? Then, there are questions about who can serve as elders or deacons. What about the church staff? How do they fit into the leadership structure of the church?

Although there may be various opinions about church leadership, we must look at what the Bible has to say. That’s the purpose of this booklet. We will look at what the Bible says (and what it doesn’t say) about church leadership so that we can become more informed and unified about the topic.

## Start With The Bible

There are four primary passages of Scripture that must be looked at in order to understand biblical church leadership.

### Scripture #1:

**1 Timothy 3:1-13 (ESV) - 1** The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. **2** Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, **3** not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. **4** He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, **5** for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? **6** He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. **7** Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

**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.*

Here we find the qualifications and characteristics required of elders and deacons.

To start, church leadership begins with a call from God. This is what Paul means when he says, “if anyone aspires.” Therefore, we must be careful about thinking that church leadership begins with a nominating process. It actually begins with an internal call by God.

Secondly, the characteristics of an elder are qualities that should be seen in any follower of Jesus, with the exception of being “able to teach.”<sup>1</sup> So, the internal call to serve in leadership and the ability to teach are two qualities that stand out from the rest.

Thirdly, just because the “husband of one wife” is mentioned doesn’t exclude singles from serving in church leadership.<sup>2</sup> It simply means that if you are married, you should be faithful to your spouse. In fact, the Apostle Paul was certainly qualified to be an elder and he was not married.

Finally, when the Apostle Paul writes that an elder should be “able to teach,” this doesn’t necessarily imply that every elder must be able to preach. In fact, Paul says (in the same letter), “Let the elders who rule be considered worthy of double honor, *especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*”<sup>3</sup> So, all elders are to be able to teach, but some elders “labor in preaching and teaching.” The distinction is that some elders are paid to preach and teach the Bible. They have most likely had more education in how to preach and teach. Therefore, their primary role is as the preacher and teacher of the church. However, all elders are to be able to explain what the Bible means to others in a way that is faithful to Scripture. Opportunities to teach may include, but are not limited to, leading a small group, preaching, counseling people, leading a Bible study, or teaching children.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 3:2, ESV.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 3:2, ESV.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 5:17, ESV.

**Scripture #2:**

**Titus 1:5-9 (ESV)** - **5** *This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—* **6** *if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.* **7** *For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain,* **8** *but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.* **9** *He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*

There isn't anything new in this passage, but there is a bit more clarity about elders being able to teach. The teaching includes "giving instruction in sound doctrine" and also being able "to rebuke those who contradict it."<sup>4</sup> This denotes that all elders should know basic doctrine and be able to recognize contradictions to that doctrine.

**Scripture #3:**

**Ephesians 4:11-16 (ESV)** - **11** *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,* **13** *until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,* **14** *so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.* **15** *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,* **16** *from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

This is another letter written by the Apostle Paul, which he writes to the church in Ephesus. This is the church that Timothy is pastoring as an elder. There are a couple of things we should see here about church leadership.

First, elders equip the saints--the congregation--for the work of ministry. Often, people view pastors and the church staff as the people who should do the ministry of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Titus 1:9, ESV.

church. That's not what Paul is saying. He clearly indicates the role of the pastor is to train and equip the congregation for the work of ministry. This is done primarily through preaching, but it can also be accomplished through other teaching opportunities.

Second, the “equipping of the saints” through preaching and teaching is to continue until the congregation measures up to the “stature of the fullness of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Because this won't happen in all fullness until the time of Christ's return, pastors must keep preaching and teaching until then.

#### **Scripture #4:**

**1 Peter 5:1-5 (ESV)** - *1 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. 5 Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*

In this passage, Peter helps us clarify the role of an elder as a “shepherd.” An elder is a care-taker, who provides compassionate oversight while looking out for the spiritual welfare of the congregation. He uses the words “exercising oversight,” which is spiritual leadership for the church. When elders offer spiritual leadership to the church, they are representing the mind of Christ in wisdom for the sake of the church. Peter also reminds elders that their reward is not primarily earthly but heavenly--“a crown of unfading glory.”<sup>6</sup>

Peter also counsels the congregation to “be subject to the elders” and to be humble.<sup>7</sup> This correlates with what the author of Hebrews writes when saying, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.”<sup>8</sup> Later, Hebrews states: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who

---

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 4:12-13, ESV.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 5:4, ESV.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Peter 5:5, ESV.

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 13:7, ESV.

will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”<sup>9</sup>

## The Difference Between Elders & Deacons

Acts 6 will help us understand the difference between elders and deacons.

**Acts 6:1-7 (ESV)** - **1** Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. **2** And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. **3** Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. **4** But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” **5** And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. **6** These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. **7** And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

In 1st century Jerusalem, the church has experienced rapid growth. It went from 120 believers at the beginning of the Book of Acts, to 3,000 believing after Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, to 5,000 men believing in Acts 4, and the number has only been increasing since then. Obviously the size of the church has increased, but the diversity of the church has also increased. Jews, Gentiles, and all sorts of cultural backgrounds are represented in the church. This is the context of Acts 6.

Widows are coming from a Greek cultural background and are being neglected in the daily distribution of provisions for the needy among them. This is not right. It’s an example of injustice.

The good news is that someone brings this to the attention of church leadership. After hearing the complaint, Peter and the other church leaders say: “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 13:17, ESV.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 6:2, ESV.

Notice a couple of things:

- (1) The role of the elder is clear. Their primary responsibility is to preach and teach the Word of God. Sometimes this is forgotten in the modern church. We either undervalue the pastor/elder's responsibility of preaching and teaching or we expect him to have other responsibilities that distract him from what is most important.
- (2) It's not okay for the widows to be neglected. We see this in Acts 6:3-4. In order for the widows to be taken care of, without Peter and the other elders neglecting their primary responsibility, others in the church would need to step up to lead.

So, what's the difference between elders and deacons?

Elders lead the church through the ministry of the Word and prayer. This means they primarily do Word-based ministry. Therefore, the pastor(s) of the church should spend the majority of his time focused on his primary responsibilities of preaching, teaching, and prayer. This includes a lot of study time so that sermons can be faithful, accurate, and Bible-centered. Prayer should also be very intentionally emphasized by the pastor(s) of the church, which also requires significant time.

Deacons lead with their hands, which frees up the elders to give attention to their primary focuses of preaching, teaching, and prayer. In the New Testament, the word *deacon* actually means *servant, attendant, or minister*. Deacons should give their primary focus to the physical work and administration of the church, which may include overseeing the facility, making preparations for the Lord's Supper, recruiting/coordinating/scheduling volunteers, stewarding the church's finances and other resources, and leading ministries of hospitality and care.

## **Does Gender Matter?**

Depending on your church background, you may have noticed that churches don't seem to agree on what leadership roles women can hold in a local church. Some churches have women as pastors, elders, and deacons, while others don't allow women to serve in any of these roles. Additionally, there are churches who hold a perspective in between.

Although this can be a divisive topic for some, we must look at what Scripture says as our guide. In Romans 16, we see an example of a female deacon.<sup>11</sup> This woman, Phoebe, is referred to as a *servant*, using the same Greek word for deacon (*diakonos*). The Apostle Paul considers Phoebe as a key servant or deacon of the church in Cenchrea. Therefore, we believe the Bible teaches that it is biblical to invite both men and women to serve as deacons, assuming they are called by God to do so.

We teach that the church leadership position of elder or pastor is for qualified men only. We do not do this because of male-centered tradition or because we believe women have inferior qualifications to men. We do this because we believe the Bible teaches this view, and as Christ-followers, we must submit ourselves to Scripture. We realize that this view isn't popular for our modern ears, but it's what the Bible teaches. Let's look at Scripture together:

**1 Timothy 2:12 (ESV)** - *I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.*

This verse is found in the same letter of Paul's where we found all the qualities and characteristics for elders and deacons. The key to point out here is the action of *teaching* and *exercising authority*. These duties are linked together in this verse, and remember, being able to teach is a biblical requirement of an elder.<sup>12</sup> Paul's rationale that he gives for this is not based on a cultural situation that can be done away with in our modern culture, but by the created order, which gives us another picture of God's design and plan to show his authority over us.<sup>13</sup> It also points to the gospel influencing and guiding our highest calling in life.

Unlike Phoebe, we cannot find a woman in the Bible being referred to as an elder in the New Testament church. In Acts 18:24-28, we do see a wife, with her husband, help teach someone whose doctrine needed some correcting, but the husband and wife did this together. In this instance, it's also difficult to determine if they were teaching the

---

<sup>11</sup> Romans 16:1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Some have tried to argue that Paul isn't making a universal statement about women in church leadership, but is referring to a specific situation in Ephesus where some women were causing divisiveness in the church through their teaching and exercising of authority. The problem with this view is that nowhere in 1 Timothy does Paul address these women. This is surprising, given that he does call out men (by name) in the letter who are causing division. Also, we know that Paul isn't afraid of naming women publicly who need to be corrected. He does so to two women in his letter to the believers in Philippi. Therefore, it's believed that Paul is in fact making a universal statement about women in church leadership rather than addressing a specific situation going on in Ephesus.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Timothy 2:13-15.

man in a church leadership capacity or simply helping a fellow believer to understand things better.

Finally, Jesus was very radical when it came to the cultural expectations of his day. He hung out with tax collectors and allowed a prostitute to wash his feet. So, if anyone was going to make a statement that countered the cultural expectations of his day about women in church leadership, Jesus would have been the person to do it. But, he didn't. He chose 12 men to lead the church. In fact, choosing a tax collector would have been seen as more radical than choosing a woman.

You may be wondering, what about the women in the Old Testament? Women like Deborah and Esther obviously led the people of Israel. They did. They were chosen by God to be in leadership roles of influence and authority for the people of Israel. But, in the Old Testament, Israel is not the same as the New Testament church. In the New Testament, there are no teachings or examples of women as elders in a church context.

This does bring up a good distinction, though. There are plenty of examples of women serving, women using their God-given gifts to help others, and women in leadership roles. Women are very capable of filling leadership roles in the church, in society, and throughout our world. However, the Bible teaches that men should fill the role of elder or pastor in a church leadership context.

### **What About the Church Staff?**

You may be wondering if church staff can serve as elders and deacons. The answer is yes. There is no biblical reason to disqualify someone from being an elder or deacon simply because they are paid by the church. In fact, the Apostle Paul expects that some elders are to be paid by the church, and we have no reason to limit this solely to the pastor.<sup>14</sup>

Most likely, every staff member is already functionally fulfilling one of the two roles (elder or deacon), whether they are officially ordained to the office or not. Either they are leading the ministries they oversee through preaching, teaching, and prayer or they are assisting other staff who lead in such ways. For example, our office assistants and

---

<sup>14</sup> 1 Timothy 5:17.



ministry directors serve in a way like that of a deacon, regardless if they have been given the recognition of being a deacon in our church.