

Deacon Primer & Process (Update 01.16.2012)

Biblical leadership and authority are rooted in the nature and character of the trinitarian Godhead. Each member of the Trinity (Father, Son & Spirit) is equal in divinity, yet there is a functional subordination within the Godhead that creates both leadership and submission between the members. Similarly, though every individual within the church is equal in dignity, God has instituted leadership offices (elder/pastor and deacon) and delegated authority for the service and safety of the Church, His people. Unfortunately, these offices are often neglected, abused or misunderstood. This document is intended to clarify the office of Deacon and provide an overview of the process of becoming a Deacon at Downtown Cornerstone Church.

Q: WHAT IS A DEACON?

The word for deacon (*diakonos*) has a range of semantic meanings, including *servant*, *ministry* and *office*.

Servant

John 2:9: "...The master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the **servants** (*diakonoi*) who had drawn the water knew."

Ministry

1 Tim 4:6: "If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good **minister** (*diakonos*) of Christ Jesus"

Office

Philippians 1:1 "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and **deacons** (*diakonois*)..."

1 Tim 3:8-13 "Deacons (*diakonous*) likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives (*or women*) likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 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."

Q: IS A "DEACON" AN OFFICIAL OFFICE OR UNOFFICIAL SERVANT?

Biblically, it seems both meanings are in view. John 2:9 is a clear reference to servants. However, 1 Tim 3:8-13 and Phil 1:1 both place the office of deacon alongside the office of elder. Acts 6:1-4 is typically viewed as setting an apostolic precedent for this office as they see "it is not right that [they] should give up preaching the word of God to serve (*diakonein*) tables." With this in mind, it is most helpful to say that every deacon is a servant but not every servant is a deacon.

Q: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ELDERS AND DEACONS?

Biblically, elders (or pastors) are appointed first, then deacons. (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) The main task of elders is theological oversight, the ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:4, Titus 1:9). The main task of deacons is practical ministry. The qualifications for the two offices are identical, with the exception of being "able to teach" (1 Tim 3:2). Biblically and historically, elders are seen as delegating tasks to deacons. Theodore of Mopsuestia (392-498AD) wrote, "Deacons... are to be honorable and sincere in performing the duties assigned to them by the presbyters [elders]".¹

¹ Thomas Oden and Peter Gorday, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament vol. 9* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 175.

Q: WHAT ARE THE QUALIFICATIONS OF A DEACON?

1 Tim 3:8-13 Deacons (*diakonous*) likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 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.

General requirements:

- “*Dignified*” - worthy of respect, honorable, highly esteemed; men younger Christians want to be like
- “*Not double-tongued*” - literally, “not double-spoken”, sincere, honest and truthful; careful in speech
- “*Not addicted to much wine*” - no addictions (alcohol, drugs, porn, food, etc); self-controlled in habits
- “*Not greedy for dishonest gain*” - not greedy; not “in it for the money”
- “*Must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience*” - theologically sound; understand the gospel
- “*Must first be tested*” - proved faithful over time; stand up under examination

Additional requirements for wives or female deacons:

- “*Dignified*” - worthy of respect, noble, honorable; women younger Christians want to emulate
- “*Not slanderers*” - malicious talkers or gossips
- “*Sober-minded*” - temperate, clear-minded, self-controlled in habits
- “*Faithful in all things*” - trustworthy in everything, totally reliable; doing well in all life roles (wife, mother, etc)

Additional requirements for married male deacons

“*Husband of one wife*” - literally, “a one woman man,” devoted in heart and mind and body.

“*Managing their children and their own households well*” leads, provides for family; kids respect, obey, love

“Any man unable to govern his children graciously and gravely by maintaining good discipline, is no man for government in the church.” Donald Guthrie. Ephesians 6:4;. Titus 1:6

Q: IS THIS LIST OF QUALIFICATIONS SAYING DEACONS SHOULD BE PERFECT?

The Bible makes plain that neither deacons nor elders are expected to be perfect. Rather, they are expected to be *exemplary*. They should be able to say with the Apostle Paul, “Imitate me as I imitate Christ” (1Cor 11:1). The goal is not perfectionism, but increasing Christlikeness in every sphere of life (calling, character, competency, charisma, and compassion). This is evident by the requirement that we hold fast to the mystery of the faith. The mystery of the faith is none other than the gospel of Christ, the hope of the sinner made saint through the forgiving, renewing, sanctifying work of Jesus through the Spirit. The gospel is strong for our successes and sufficient for our failures. Not perfection overnight but perseverance over a lifetime. (Scott Hafemann) To be “above reproach” means the character and conduct of a deacon in these areas is an area where he cannot be accused of wrongdoing. It does not extend to unrealistic demands of perfection.

Q: CAN WOMEN SERVE AS DEACONS?

The question of whether women should serve as deacons is hotly debated. The Bible renders no conclusive judgment on the matter. Romans 16:1 uses the word *diakonos* to describe a woman named Phoebe: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [*diakonos*] of the church in Cenchrea.” But Bible scholars are divided over whether we should see Phoebe as a “deaconess” (office) or simply as a “servant” (role).

Either way, good exegesis precludes us from arguing conclusively for female deacons from only one verse. So to answer the question of whether women can be deacons, we must take into account the broader teaching of Scripture concerning men’s and women’s roles in the church.

It is the position of Downtown Cornerstone Church that women can and should serve as deacons, provided the church is led by properly qualified biblical elders. This position seems to best allow for the diverse gifting of godly women while still honoring male headship in the family and the church. The following lines of reasoning support this conclusion.

First, the only office specifically restricted to men in the Bible is eldership. Because of the headship established by God in the creation order, Scripture teaches that women must not lead authoritatively in the church.

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. (1 Tim 2:11-14).

Though these verses are complex, the scope of the current study allows for only a brief explanation. Women are prohibited from “teaching or exercising authority over a man.” In the context of 1 Timothy, this seems to be a restriction on authoritative leadership in the church. Women are certainly not prohibited from knowing the Bible and teaching it to others. Scripture even records instances of women being involved in the discipleship of men (for example, Priscilla and Aquila’s teaching of Apollos in Acts 18:23-28).

Taken in light of the rest of the New Testament, this passage in 1 Timothy is not restricting women from all types of teaching and leadership in the church. But it is restricting women from authoritative teaching and leadership in the church, which is the role of the elders. Scripture demands male elders in order to preserve the biblical roles of headship and submission that are expected of men and women in the home and the church: “The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (Ephesians 5:23). Female deacons operating under a plurality of male elders maintains this creation order.

Second, the biblical qualifications for eldership are specific to men, while the qualifications for deacons include women. The elder criteria listed in 1 Timothy 3 are specific to men (for example, “husband of one wife”). The list of deacon qualifications, however, includes qualifications for either female deacons or the wives of deacons: “Their wives [lit. women] likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things” (1 Tim 3:11).

Since eldership is the highest office in the church, it would be strange for God to require something of deacons’ wives that he does not require of elders’ wives. So it seems that these verses are referring to female deacons and not to deacons’ wives. It is better to view the requirements of 1 Timothy 3:8-10 as being for both male and female deacons. Then 3:11 lists additional requirements for female deacons, and 3:12-13 lists additional requirements for male deacons. Paul is indicating that a male deacon is most vulnerable to sexual sins, while a female deacon is most vulnerable to emotional and verbal sins.

Third, the office of deaconess arose very early in church history. Appeals to history are secondary to biblical exegesis, but it does give us helpful insight into how the church has traditionally handled these issues. It is instructive to note that the earliest churches had no problem with appointing female deacons. “It is indisputable... that an order of deaconesses did quickly arise in the church.”² John Chrysostom, one of the dominant church fathers of the 4th century (c. 349-407), understood 1 Timothy 3:11 to refer to “those who hold the rank of deaconesses.”³ In cultures which were strongly patriarchal, the early fathers of the church saw the appointment of deaconesses neither as a threat to male headship nor as an affront to Scripture.

In summary, in light of this biblical and historical evidence, it is our conviction that the church is to be led by biblically qualified male elders who then appoint both male and female deacons to assist with the many practical areas of pastoral ministry. Women can and should serve as deacons under the oversight of a plurality of male elders.

To be a deacon is to gain great confidence in Christ! (1Tim 3:13)

² Beyer, 93.

³ Oden, 175.

Q: HOW DO DEACONS SERVE?

Deacons can serve in a variety of ways. There are two main areas of service—community-focused and mission-focused.

Mission-focused deacons serve in ways that change over time. For example, the early church probably didn't have Media or Arts Deacons but they did have deacons that served widows and orphans. As the church expands and contracts throughout history, moving from continent to continent, culture to culture, the expression of the church varies. As a result, there are some areas of service that remain the same and others that change. Changing and varying cultural contexts will require new pathways of service in order for the church to faithfully engage in its mission to redemptively engage peoples and cultures with the gospel of Christ.

On the other hand, there are deacon ministries that are pretty standard, transcultural and transhistorical, such as: mercy/social justice, community/benevolence, financial, kids, etc.

Additionally, there are also two main ways this service may express itself —specifically and generally. Some will have specific, niche ministries and others will minister more generally as flexible deacons. All will serve the church in some capacity, either generally or specifically. There are areas of ministry that are in service of the church of mission (church-focused) and there are ways of ministry that serve the mission of the church (mission-focused).

Q: HOW LONG DO DEACONS SERVE?

Different churches answer this differently. There is not a hard and fast rule on term of service; however, the notion that there is a term to the office of deacon seems to arise more from business culture than from biblical culture. Not all business culture is bad, but we want to take our deacon cues from the Scripture. Strauch is in agreement: "To arbitrarily limit deacons to a two- or three-year term of service demeans the diaconate to a board status and frustrates a man's god-given desire to serve the Lord's people."⁴ In our view, once a deacon is always a deacon, unless the deacon chooses to step down or is disqualified from service.

Therefore, we prefer to approach the issue of length of service from an active vs. inactive vantage point. There are times when ways of serving will no longer be necessary, at which time a deacon may be inactive or relocate their service. Inactivity of service may also be necessary in order to give the deacon a season of rest/Sabbath. Rest will be encouraged among all deacons, with no hard and fast contractual timelines. Rather, the decision will be made in sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit in the deacon and the status of his or her ministry.

Given this, it will be important for deacons to discern the difference between overworking in the church and overworking in general. Busyness and significance from busyness is an idol most Americans must fight, cultivating discipleship that includes Sabbath rest, not simply from the church but from working too hard and for the wrong reasons. That said, we are in favor of deacons receiving rest as necessary, which will be worked out with elders for the good of the church and glory of Christ.

⁴ Alexander Strauch, Minister of Mercy, 109.

NOTE: Much of the content herein was adapted from Austin City Life's Deacon Training



Deacon Process (beta)

The purpose of the Deacon Process is to disciple and equip leaders for various leadership roles within Downtown Cornerstone Church, including (but not limited to):

- Community Leads
- Cornerstone Kids Leads
- Band Leads
- Mercy & Social Justice Leads
- Arts & Media Leads
- Assistants & Administrators

An individual may occupy the spiritual office of deacon indefinitely or for a limited season, depending on the nature of their mission/role. Prospective deacons may nominate themselves or be nominated by an elder.

STEP ONE

Membership. All deacons must first be members in good standing:

- Growing in community.
- Living missionally.
- Giving regularly, sacrificially and cheerfully.
- Serving consistently in a lead servant capacity.

STEP TWO

Learning assignments.

#1 Prayerfully study and reflect on the qualifications of a deacon as outlined in 1Tim 3:8–16.

#2 Write a one-page essay on “What is a deacon?” and a one-page essay on “What is the gospel?”

#3 Complete any role-specific training and requirements as specified by sponsor.

Required reading includes:

- What is the Gospel? Greg Gilbert
- Bible Doctrine, Grudem or Purswell
- Total Church, Steve Timmis & Tim Chester
- You Can Change, Tim Chester
- Ministries of Mercy, Tim Keller

Additional reading selections may be assigned from the recommended list.

(visit www.downtowncornerstone.org/resources)

STEP THREE

- Character assessment and interview.

STEP FOUR

- Deacon candidates are approved by a unanimous vote of the elder team.
- The deacon will be commissioned with a job description. This may be a role that would continue indefinitely or a fixed assignment after which, upon successful completion, the individual would be transferred to a different area of service, moved to inactive status, or honorably discharged from the spiritual office.
- The elders are responsible for the regular evaluation of the deacons

STEP FIVE

Deacon installation before the congregation.