

## Thoughts on Women Deacons or Deaconesses

Due to the pressure of the feminist movement and evangelical egalitarianism, some evangelical and Reformed churches have ordained women into the office of deacon. Usually 1 Timothy 3:11 is used as a biblical basis to substantiate the position of women deacons. Paul's commendation of Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2) is further used to support this belief and action. Occasionally, certain segments of church history are referenced to buttress the claim. I believe this position is an unbiblical one and should be avoided in all biblical and confessional churches. My reasons are as follows:

1. Women deacons violate 1 Timothy 2:12 and the biblical teaching of "office." The biblical office of deacon was instituted primarily to distribute to the poor widows in the church. This was done so that the apostles, and later the pastors and elders, would be able to give themselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:1-7). The initial founding principle of the diaconate is seen as encompassing the temporal matters of the functioning of each local church. "The elders labor within the eternal realm and the deacons' work concerns the physical realm." is an old, yet true axiom. This does not mean there is no spirituality or godliness about them as they conduct their duties. Instead, with *spiritual grace*, deacons administer the business and practical affairs of the church.

Deacons serve to relieve the pastors/elders of general tasks when they are qualified and able to do so. They were not called to be a system of "checks and balances" for the pastors/elders, but to be "waiters on tables."

The deacons are under the oversight and authority of the elders, and the office, in itself, carries no authority. **But**, in the functioning of the office, they carry an authority derived from the elders who oversee the deacons and maintain responsibility for the proper overall functioning of the church. All authority comes from Christ. Even though diaconal authority is a borrowed and delegated one, nevertheless, it is a very real authority. The authoritative office of deacon is not just a position of function void of authority as some claim. The authority of this office will cause women to violate 1 Timothy 2:12, which forbids them having and exercising authority over men.

2. To use 1 Timothy 3:11 as the basis for women deacons is inconsistent exegesis. Allow me to explain.

- A. "Wives" (NKJV, ESV; Gk.— *gunaikas* = "women") in verse 11 is the same as 1 Timothy 3:2, which is without question correctly translated [bishop's] "wives." While it is true that verse 11 is somewhat abrupt and its meaning is contested by some, Greek grammar and consistent exegesis demands the *same* translation for both words in this extended passage. "Wives" is the correct and consistent translation in both verses. There are no rules of Greek grammar or hermeneutical principles of exegesis that allow anyone to translate "*gunaikòs*" as wife in verse 2 and "*gunaikas*" as women or women deacons in verse 11. Just as no one can use verse 2 to teach women elders, no one can correctly use verse 11 to teach women

deacons. In order for anyone to do so, there must be a predisposition toward women deacons in the mind of the exegete before coming to verse 11.

- B. While verse 11 is abrupt, it must be compared with verse 12. When compared with verse 12 it cannot mean women in the office of deacon. In verse 12, deacons, if they are married, must be “the husband of one wife” (lit. Gk. “one-woman man”) *exactly* like the bishop in verse 2. Therefore, consistent exegesis demands deacons must be men only.
- C. Verses 11 and 12 exegeted correctly denotes deacons’ wives and not women in the office of deacon. Verse 11 could possibly mean a subordinate group of women that help the deacons, but I think this is highly unlikely. Should this be the case, they are *not* to be ordained and placed into office.
- D. If Paul wanted to teach women deacons, there was at his disposal a perfectly good classical Greek word — *dikonissa*. This is the very word that came into substantive use by the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD when Rome created the position of deaconess. However, he did not use this readily available word.

3. The original intent of the first deacons in Acts 6:1-8 militates against women in the office of deacon. Many evangelicals today argue that there are certain duties male deacons cannot perform due to the sensitive nature of female issues. Yet, when we come to Scripture and study the first need that arose, which initially caused deacons to be chosen, we see it was a female issue — widows were being neglected. The apostles did not tell the church to choose men *and women*, but men only (i.e. “seven *men*”). If today’s reasoning were followed, women would have been chosen also; but the apostles did not do such. Men were chosen to assist the apostles in this sensitive female issue, and women were not even considered. Original intent demands male deacons only in Christ’s churches today, as in apostolic days.

4. Absence of any mention of women deacons (deaconesses) or any women office bearers in the New Testament further weighs against this position. Immediately, some again bring up Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2. The fact she is described as a “helper of many” denotes she was probably a wealthy person. Many believe she is the one who carried Paul’s epistle to the church at Rome. The word “servant” (Gk. “*diákonon*”) is the same word used broadly of any brother or sister in Christ who does a work of service and ministers to others in any way. It *cannot* be interpreted as one in the office of deacon in the strictest sense. If so, then any Christian who ministers to anyone is a deacon and the whole church is nothing more than a church of deacons. [NOTE: the same Greek word “*diákonon*” is also used of Christ (cf. Romans 15:8). This does not mean that He was ordained into the office of deacon. Rather it correlates with Matthew 20:28.] Phoebe was nothing more than a wealthy member of the church in Cenchrea who had the means to minister and serve others in an extended capacity. It is extremely difficult to find women deacons or officers bearers in the New Testament.

5. There is no command or warrant to ordain women into any office in the New Testament, such as in Titus 1:5. Paul commanded Titus to ordain elders, which we know to be men. But there is no command to ordain women into any office. Some take the position that women

deacons are not forbidden. The position “If not forbidden, then allowed.” is very dangerous. Many things are not directly forbidden in Scripture, yet we must not do them e.g.: genuflection, crossing ourselves, vestments, candles, incense, processions, etc. Roman Catholicism, all forms of Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, liberal Protestantism and many within evangelicalism have always operated under this directive. To them anything not forbidden is allowed. The contrary and biblical position is that churches do *only* those things commanded (i.e. the regulative principle). As the *London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* states so clearly, “But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>1</sup> That keeps a lot of “strange fire” from coming in among us.

6. There are no qualifications given whereby a woman may be judged or evaluated to be fit for such an office, even if the office existed. Some read 1 Timothy 3:11 to mean that Paul was creating women deacons and establishing their qualifications. If they are equal in office, one would expect there would be equality in qualification for office. If Paul was establishing an office of deaconess, why are its qualifications less than the male counterpart? If creating women deacons was Paul’s intention, then the qualifications for women are less stringent than the qualifications for the men found in vv. 8-10 and 12-13. This makes Paul duplicitous by erecting a double standard for the same office. Instead, Paul is simply saying that deacons’ wives must have certain qualities about them. Standards and qualifications for elders are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1: 5-9 and for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, but none are found for women officer bearers of any type anywhere.

7. There are no grounds for women deacons confessionally. For Reformed and Baptist churches, who fully subscribe to the *London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, a major problem exists if a church chooses to have women deacons. While “deacons” are only mentioned two times in the Confession (26:8 & 9), the instances are very informative and instructive; especially 26:9. The framers of the Confession speak distinctly about a deacon being “he.” This is in contradistinction to “she” or “they,” which have allowed room for female deacons. Since the Confession is quite plain, it behooves every confessional church or missionary to be in complete conformity.

8. This last reason is more subjective than exegetical. Nevertheless, it is a valid observation. Historically, deaconesses have always been the door that has opened women into other ecclesiastical positions (e.g., pastor/minister of the gospel and elder). Trace out the historical decline of the major denominations and you will find this to be true. A very present case in point is the Christian Reformed Church, which allowed women elders in the 1996. How did this happen in such a conservative and biblically-based denomination? They began with women deacons and then, through several decades, advanced to allowing women elders.<sup>2</sup> The same

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<sup>1</sup>Chapter 22:1.

<sup>2</sup>William Hendricksen’s commentary on *Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus* takes the position that 1 Timothy 3:11 teaches an auxiliary group of women who were helpers of the deacons. It is my opinion that his position opened the door for the CRC denomination to ordain women deacons and eventually (in 1996) to allow women to be ordained into the eldership. I believe 1 Timothy 3:11 speaks of deacons’ wives.

reasoning and biblical passages used to substantiate women deacons were used to support women elders. Women deacons are the proverbial “Camel’s nose into the tent.” We must beware!

In summary, the New Testament teaches that there are only two offices in the church — elder and deacon (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9). Women are equal members in Christ’s body, the church, and can serve Christ equally in non-office capacities, just like any other member of the church. But when it comes to office, there is a difference between redemptive privilege and ecclesiastical responsibility. Though people may use emotional and pragmatic arguments joined with contrived exegesis to fit females into ecclesiastical offices of pastor and deacon, the inerrant Holy Scriptures do not allow women in either.

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**NOTE:** For further reading on the subject of “office,” I highly recommend John Murray (*Collected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 357-365).

**NOTE:** For further reading on women deacons, I highly recommend the follow books, which have the best exegetical treatment on the subject available today:

1. *The Pastoral Epistles* by George W. Knight III, (part of the New International Greek Testament Commentary series — NIGTC), especially his exegetical treatment of 1 Timothy 3:11 found on pp. 170-173: published by Eerdmans.
2. *The New Testament Deacon* by Alexander Strauch, especially chapter 10, pp. 112-131: published by Lewis & Roth Publishers.