

## **Gender and the Deacon Office: A Biblical and Historical Analysis**

### **New Testament Evidence**

#### **Acts 6**

The office of deacon is often traced to Acts 6, which describes the resolution of a conflict between Christians in the early church. The Hellenists had complained to the apostles that their widows were being neglected in the distribution of food because of ethnic favoritism on the part of the Palestinians. Elsewhere the apostles themselves are identified as “servants” (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 6:4) a task to which they are called by Jesus (Mk. 9:35; 10:43). However, they determined that “serving” the tables themselves would hinder the ministry of teaching and evangelism to which they had been called, so they told the protesters to select seven men from among themselves who could distribute the food equitably. Those called upon to “serve” in this way were to be “men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (v. 3).

The text does not describe this event as the institution of a new office, but there may be some connection to the later office of deacon.

Since “deacon” (Greek: *διακονος*) means “servant” (Jn. 2:5, 9) many have argued that these seven individuals called to “serve” (*διακονειν*) were the first deacons.

The listed qualifications pertain only to recognized Christian character. This standard is consistent with 1 Timothy 3:8–12, which describes the qualifications of deacons.

These similarities are not sufficient to regard Acts 6 as the institution of the diaconate. In spite of its frequent citation, we cannot conclude with certainty that Acts 6 has direct reference to deacons. I. Howard Marshall rightly comments, “It is noteworthy that Luke does not refer to the Seven as deacons; their task had no formal name. The choice of seven men corresponded with Jewish practice in setting up boards of seven men for particular duties.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it would be inappropriate to use this Scripture to establish permanent standards for the selection, qualifications, number, or responsibilities of deacons. However, we might suggest several legitimate concepts from this passage.

1. Those tasked with pastoral care and instruction in the church should avoid getting so caught up in other concerns that they neglect their primary responsibilities.
2. Church leaders should be quick to address the needs of those who feel neglected or marginalized in the internal ministries of the church. In Acts 6,

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<sup>1</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 126.

the apostles ensured that the Hellenistic believers were cared for by empowering some of them to correct the problems they raised.

3. Teachers and leaders should give public support and affirmation to those serving the church in other ways. The individuals selected in Acts 6 were brought before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (v. 6). This is not necessarily a formal (much less a permanent) “ordination,” which was developed later in church history. But the ceremony undoubtedly conveyed the apostles’ blessing and served as a public endorsement of this new ministry.
4. The primary qualifications for ministry in the church relate to Christian character.
5. The individuals selected to serve tables in Acts 6 engaged in much broader ministries in Acts 7-8. Therefore, the assignment of persons to particular ministries should not restrict our vision for their contribution to the body of Christ.

### **1 Timothy 3**

Qualifications for the office of deacon are stated in 1 Timothy 3:8-12. Paul wrote, “Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are above reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.”

This passage does not make normative any process by which deacons are to be selected. It is likely that they were appointed by Timothy as an apostolic emissary, but there is no New Testament evidence that the apostles intended that authority to be passed on to subsequent generations.

The passage does not identify tasks assigned to deacons. It can be assumed that elders were primarily responsible for instruction and pastoral care (1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1; 1 Pet. 5). However, if Acts 6 does not describe the duties of deacons, the New Testament is silent with regard to the specific responsibilities of this office.

Paul makes special reference to “women” (Γυναικας) in his description of deacons’ qualifications. It has been argued that these are the wives of male deacons, particularly since this is the word most often used to identify married women. Against this interpretation is the fact that Paul made no such mention of the wives of elders in the same passage. Further, Paul introduces the reference to women with the term, “likewise.” As Schreiner notes, “This is the same term used to introduce male deacons in 3:8, so it is

most reasonable to think that Paul is continuing to describe offices in the church.”<sup>2</sup> It seems most likely (and is the opinion of the majority of commentators, both ancient and modern) that Paul is referring here to women who served as deacons. This would not be surprising given his endorsement in Romans 16:1 of the ministry of Phoebe, whom the apostle identifies as “a deacon (διάκονον) of the church which is at Cenchrea.”

## Romans 16

Phoebe is, as one commentator noted, “the first recorded ‘deacon’ in the history of Christianity.”<sup>3</sup> While the word used to refer to her (διάκονον) could simply mean “servant” (KJV, NASB, NIV, ESV) or “minister” (NAB), there is no adequate reason why it should not be translated “deacon” (NRSV, NLT).

Cranfield comments on this passage: “Phoebe is not only a fellow-Christian: she is also a \_\_\_\_\_ of the church in Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth. It is perhaps just conceivable that the word \_\_\_\_\_ should be understood here as a quite general reference to her service of the congregation; but it is very much more natural, particularly in view of the way in which Paul formulates his thought . . . to understand it as referring to a definite office. We regard it as virtually certain that Phoebe is being described as ‘a (or possibly ‘the’) deacon’ of the church in question, and that this occurrence of \_\_\_\_\_ is to be classified with its occurrences in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8 and 12.”<sup>4</sup>

Schreiner agrees with this conclusion in his commentary on Romans. He writes, “It is impossible to be sure, but for several reasons it is likely that [Phoebe] held the office of deacon. First, 1 Tim. 3:11 probably identifies women as deacons. Second, the designation, ‘deacon of the church in Cenchreae’ suggests that Phoebe served in this special capacity, for this is the only occasion in which the term \_\_\_\_\_ is linked with a particular local church. Third, the use of the masculine noun \_\_\_\_\_ also suggests that the office is intended.”<sup>5</sup>

As Schreiner points out, the Greek term here applied to Phoebe is not feminine in form. Since it could just as easily apply to men, it should not be translated “deaconess.”<sup>6</sup> Keener expands the point:

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, edited by James Beck and Craig Blomberg (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 193.

<sup>3</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Dallas: Word), 1988.

<sup>4</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 781.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 787.

<sup>6</sup> The feminine form, “deaconess,” does not occur until the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It should be avoided in biblical translation as anachronistic, but also because feminized versions of male titles are increasingly regarded as inappropriate in contemporary culture. “Stewardess” and “steward” have already been replaced by “flight attendant.” “Waiter/waitress” and “actor/actress” will soon be replaced by more gender neutral “waiter” and “actor.”

Some churches today have redefined Phoebe's role as a deaconess on a level of authority lower than deacons, but Paul does not even employ a special feminine form of *diakonos* here. There is no reason to assume that Paul means by Phoebe's title something other than what he normally means by the term (that is, a minister of God's message, such as Paul himself)—unless we presuppose that he does not allow women's ministry (by reading an interpretation of another passage into this one).<sup>7</sup>

In addition to role as a deacon, Phoebe was a “helper (προστάτις) of many”—likely the sponsor of her church. Keener observes that this term “normally referred in antiquity to patrons, some of whom were women. As a patron, she would own the home in which the church met and hold a position of honor.”<sup>8</sup>

As a deacon or minister who also served as a patron, Phoebe was plainly “a leader of the church in Cenchreae” (NEV). *The Message* reads appropriately, “I heartily endorse both her and her work. She's a key representative of the church at Cenchrea. Help her out in whatever she asks. She deserves anything you can do for her. She's helped many a person, including me.” Dunn concurs, noting (in agreement with several other commentators) that Phoebe was likely carrying Paul's letter to the Romans:

She was a lady of some stature who had acted as patron or protector for many, that is presumably mostly, but not necessarily exclusively Christians, including Paul himself. She was also deacon of the nearby church at Cenchreae and must have used some of her means and influence in the service of the Christians there. She had business in Rome, quite probably a lawsuit. Paul probably had known ahead of her intention to travel to Rome and took the opportunity to write the whole letter, with the commendation of Phoebe attached, so that on passing through to Corinth's western port, she could pick up the letter and carry it forward.<sup>9</sup>

## Summary of the New Testament Evidence

Of the two undisputed references to the office of deacon in the New Testament, one includes women (1 Tim. 3:8ff.) and the other is silent (Phil. 1:1). Of the three non-apostolic individuals named as διάκονοι, two are male (Epaphrus [Col. 1:7] and Tychicus [Col. 4:7]), and one is female (Phoebe [Rom. 16:1]).<sup>10</sup> This pattern continued into the early church, in which women clearly functioned as a vital part of the diaconate.

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<sup>7</sup> Craig Keener, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, edited by Beck and Blomberg, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Hawthorne, G. F., Martin, R. P., & Reid, D. G. 1993. *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Ill.

<sup>9</sup> Dunn, J. D. G. *Word Biblical Commentary* Vol. 38B: *Romans 9-16*. Dallas: Word, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Based on the language used to describe them and the attention given them by Paul, Linda Belleville argues that Euodia and Syntyche, named in Philippians 4:2-3, were also deacons (*Two Views on Women in Ministry*, edited by Beck and Blomberg, 100).

Schreiner seems justified in his defense of women as deacons: “I conclude that women did serve as deacons in the New Testament and that they should serve as such in our churches today. We see once again that women were vitally involved in ministry during the New Testament era, and churches today are misguided if they prohibit women from doing what the Scriptures allow.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Evidence from the Early Church**

There is no doubt that women served the early church as formally appointed, even ordained<sup>12</sup>, members of the diaconate. MacHaffie comments, “Both manuscript evidence and archaeological inscriptions coming from the Eastern churches in places such as Jerusalem, Syria, Greece, and Asia Minor give a clear record of the existence and nature of this ministry.”<sup>13</sup> Linda Belleville states, “In the third, fourth, and fifth centuries virtually every Eastern father and church document mentions women deacons with approval.”<sup>14</sup> This can be seen in several quotations from ancient theologians as they comment on Paul’s reference to Phoebe in Romans 16<sup>15</sup>:

Origen: “This passage teaches that there were women ordained in the church’s ministry by the apostle’s authority. . . . Not only that—they ought to be ordained into the ministry, because they helped in many ways and by their good services deserved the praise of the apostle.”

Chrysostom: “Note how many ways Paul dignifies Phoebe. He mentions her before all the rest and even calls her his sister. It is no small thing to be called the sister of Paul! Moreover, he has mentioned her rank of deaconess as well.”

Pseudo-Constantius: “Here the apostle demonstrates that no discrimination or preference between male and female is to be tolerated, because he sends his letter to Rome by the hand of a woman and sends greetings to other women in the same epistle.”

Theodoret of Cyr: “Cenchreae is a village outside Corinth. It is interesting to note how quickly the gospel was spreading, in that it had already reached the villages. In fact the church at Cenchreae was so large that it even had a woman deaconess, and one who was famous and well known to boot.”

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<sup>11</sup> Schreiner, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, edited by Beck and Blomberg, 194. It is worth noting that Schreiner arrives at this conclusion as part of his defense of complementarianism. In this book, which contrasts complementarian and egalitarian approaches, both sides agree that women were (and should be) deacons.

<sup>12</sup> I see no biblical distinction between formal appointment and ordination, but denominational traditions usually regard ordination as more restrictive and more permanent. For the sake of space (and because it is less of an issue at our church), I will not address the issue of ordination in this paper.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 30.

<sup>14</sup> Linda Belleville, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, edited by Beck and Blomberg, 89.

<sup>15</sup> The quotations which follow come from Gerald Bray, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Vol. VI: *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 369.

While some of these texts use the term, “deaconess,” this appears to be a post-biblical feminization of “deacon” that did not necessarily imply lesser responsibility or authority.

“Despite the distinct possibility that the word ‘deacon’ was gender-inclusive (and therefore ‘deaconess’ was less used), arguments still exist that those who followed Phoebe, as the office of deacon developed, were not deacons at all but belonged to a ‘fourth order’ of service neither identical nor equal to the male diaconate. This ‘fourth order,’ the supposition continues, in turn did not incur or imply ordination as it is now or was then understood. Yet, the same bishops pronounced the same words, and imposed hands on the heads of males and female deacons alike. . . . Independent of the developing notions of sacramental ordination, however men were determined to be deacons in the ancient church, so too were women identically determined, and their service and representation of the body of Christ was identically ceremonially conferred.”<sup>16</sup>

If male and female deacons did have identical standing, it apparently did not take long for responsibilities (at least) to be differentiated by gender. In the Eastern church, the office of “deaconess” finds its clearest description in a second<sup>17</sup> century document called the *Didaskalia Apostolorum*. It reads,<sup>18</sup>

Wherefore, O bishop, appoint thee workers of righteousness as helpers who may co-operate with thee unto salvation. Those that please thee out of all the people thou shalt choose and appoint as deacons: a man for the performance of the most things that are required, but a woman for the ministry of women. For there are houses whither thou canst not send a deacon to the women, on account of the heathen, but mayest send a deaconess. Also, because in many other matters the office of a woman deacon is required. In the first place, when women go down into the water, those who go down into the water ought . . . to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman at hand, and especially no deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint her who is being baptized. But where there is a woman, and especially a deaconess, it is not fitting that women should be seen by men; but with the imposition of hand do thou anoint the head only.<sup>19</sup>

. . . And when she who is being baptized has come up from the water, let the deaconess receive her, and teach and instruct her how the seal of baptism ought to be (kept) unbroken in purity and holiness. For this cause we say that the ministry

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<sup>16</sup> Phyllis Zagano, *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 74-75.

<sup>17</sup> The *Didascalia* was likely revised over time, taking its final form in the third or fourth century.

<sup>18</sup> This translation comes from *Didascalia Apostolorum: The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments*, with an introduction and notes by R. Hugh Connolly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), in Barbara J. MacHaffie, ed., *Readings in Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 18.

<sup>19</sup> Apparently believers typically received the baptism of the second birth the same way they experienced their first birth—naked. The female deacons administered the sacrament to female converts.

of a woman deacon is especially needful and important. For our Lord and Savior also was ministered unto by women ministers, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James and mother of Jose, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, with other women beside. And thou also hast need of the ministry of a deaconess for many things; for a deaconess is required to go into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in that of which they have need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness.

By the end of the third century, ordained deaconesses apparently did not perform all the same functions as male deacons. MacHaffie comments, “Despite the fact that these women were ordained to a clerical office, they were excluded from some of the tasks the male deacons performed. They did not assist, for example, at the Lord’s Supper. In some of the church orders, they were specifically forbidden to carry out activities reserved for the bishops, presbyters, and male deacons. At the baptismal ceremony, they were barred from pronouncing the baptismal formula.”<sup>20</sup>

The authority and responsibilities of the diaconate declined significantly during the medieval era, especially in the West, as ecclesiastical power became more consolidated in the priesthood and adult baptism became rare. The role of deacons was formally reduced through the councils of Nicaea (325) and Toledo (633). The office of deaconess also came under scrutiny. The First Synod of Orange (441) seems to have accepted the office, but ruled against the ordination of deaconesses. The Council of Chalcedon (451) accepted both the office and the ordination, but set up an age requirement: women could only be ordained as deacons if they were over 40. The councils of Epaon (517) and Orleans (533) ruled against the office of deaconess, but the office existed in other places into the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> Eventually, the only women recognized with clerical and juridical authority in the Western churches were abbesses.<sup>22</sup>

In summary, there is significant biblical and historical evidence that women served as members of the diaconate in the early church. They no longer filled that role as the diaconate itself fell into disuse. Now that the office of deacon has been revived, especially in Protestant churches, there is no compelling reason why women should be excluded from it.

## **Recommendations**

1. Churches that have male deacons need to know there is no convincing biblical or historical reason why women should not share in that office. We should appoint women, too, to the office of deacon. For reasons stated above, we should not identify them as “deaconesses,” but should instead use the same title for both men

<sup>20</sup> MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> F. L. Cross and E. A. Lingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 456.

<sup>22</sup> The evidence cited in this paragraph has been condensed from Zagano, *Holy Saturday*, 103-110.

- and women. We might, however, consider abandoning the traditional title altogether (e.g., affirming these men and women as “servant-leaders”).
2. We should not identify too specifically the duties of deacons, which were not described in the New Testament. In our cultural setting, which is very different from that of the early church, we should not make functional distinctions between male and female deacons.
  3. Given the virtues required of deacons in 1 Timothy 3, the office of deacon may not be appropriate for younger men and women.
  4. The men and women functioning as deacons should be mature believers called to minister to the church family in an unlimited variety of ways. They will be in a position to offer unique counsel to elders and pastoral staff regarding the needs of the church body, and they will faithfully perform any duties assigned to them by church leaders. As servant-leaders in the best sense of the term, they will give direction as well as take it. Sarah Sumner comments appropriately: “A *diakonosis* is a leader who serves. A *diakonos* is a leader who acts as a minister of God’s word. A *diakonos* is a leader who understands what leadership is. In Mark 9:35, Jesus said to the twelve apostles, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and *diakonos* of all.’ That’s what Jesus said to them as leaders. He said leaders are ‘deacons of all.’”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church: Building Consensus on Christian Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 243.