

Valley Center Community Church

Position Paper on the Role of Female Deacons

In establishing his church and providing for its care and oversight, God created two very distinct offices or roles, elder and deacon. Those who serve in the role of elder are called by God to exercise spiritual oversight of the congregation. This spiritual oversight is accomplished through the ministry of prayer, the teaching of the Word and overall governance of the church (Acts 6:4; 1 Tim 3:2; Heb 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4). There are very specific qualifications for those who would serve as elders (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) and the Bible teaches that only men can serve in the role of an elder (1 Tim 2:11-12).

As elders seek to shepherd the church, deacons are called by God to serve the church by overseeing and engaging in ministry that frees up the elders to devote themselves to equipping the saints for the work of the ministry (Acts 6:1-4). Like elders, there are moral qualifications that deacons are to hold to and be evaluated by (1 Tim 3:8-13) and while deacons serve in wide-ranging ways, they ultimately do not have teaching or disciplining authority in the church.

Bible-believing Christians disagree on whether women can serve as deacons. Valley Center Community Church's position is that God's word allows women to serve as deacons and gives examples of them doing so. Our position is summarized below.

I. Affirming Women as Deacons from the Scriptures:

1 Timothy 3:11

In 1 Timothy 3:8–13, Paul lists the qualifications needed for a man to become a deacon. In verse 11, however, he introduces the requirements needed for “women.” According to the NRSV, Paul states, “Women likewise must be....” The ESV, on the other hand, reads, “Their wives likewise must be....” The question is whether Paul is speaking of the requirements for the wife of a deacon or for a woman deacon. The following arguments suggest that Paul has the latter in mind.

(1) The Greek term *gunaikas* (from the word *gunē*) can either refer to “women” or more specifically to “wives”—the distinction can only be determined by the context. If Paul was referring to the wives of the deacons, he could have indicated his intention by adding the word “their” (“*Their* wives likewise...”). Because the Greek does not contain the word “their” (although it is included in many English translations), it is best to translate the original text simply as “women.” In this case, Paul is introducing another office and is not merely referring to the wives of deacons.

(2) Paul begins verse 11 in a manner similar to verse 8, which introduces a new office. In verses 1–7, Paul identifies the qualification needed for anyone aspiring to the office of overseer/elder. When Paul begins the next section which introduces the office of deacon, he states, “Likewise deacons...” (v. 8). The point to be made is that verse 11 begins in the same manner which suggests that another office (deaconess) is being introduced. The flow of Paul’s writing then becomes evident: “...an overseer must be (v.2)...deacons likewise must be (v. 8)...women [deacons] likewise must be (v. 11)...” In verses 12 and 13, which refer again to qualifications for male deacons, is additional information that Paul adds as an afterthought, causing a disjointed unit.

(3) Another reason which suggests that Paul is not speaking about deacons’ wives, but rather about women deacons, is that the qualifications for overseers do not include any reference to their wives. It does not seem likely that Paul would add a special requirement for the wife of a deacon when the primary office of overseer has no such requirement. Thus, it does not seem likely that Paul would have stricter requirements for deacons than he does for elders.

1 Timothy 2:12

Many Christians are opposed to allowing women to become deacons because, according to 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul forbids a woman “to teach or exercise authority over a man.” And because all offices in the church, including the office of deacon, possess an inherent authority, women are not permitted to hold such offices. There are two main responses to this dilemma which would still allow women to be deacons.

First, Paul’s prohibition could be limited due to cultural reasons. That is, Paul prohibits women from teaching and having authority over men because the women of Ephesus were either uneducated or were teaching false doctrine (or both). Therefore, in the case where women are educated and are not teaching false doctrine, Paul’s prohibition does not apply.

A second response is that the ministry of deacons is by nature a ministry of service which does not require women to teach or exercise authority over men and would thus not violate Paul’s prohibition. Unlike the elders, deacons do not need to be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2 & Titus 1:9) because their ministry does not involve teaching. Furthermore, it could be argued that the office of deacon is not an authoritative office due to the nature of their service-oriented ministry (eg, Acts 6:1-4). Deacons are not called to lead the church, but to serve the church. Therefore, the two prohibitions given by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:11 are not violated by allowing women to become deacons.

Romans 16:1–2

In this text, Paul commends Phoebe to the church at Rome and calls her a *diakonos* “of the church at Cenchreae.” There are at least three reasons which support the view that this reference of *diakonos* should be translated “deacon,” referring to an office-holder and not merely one who is a “servant.”

(1) Paul uses the masculine form *diakonos* to refer to a woman. Thus, it can be argued that Paul is not using the term generally referring to one who is a servant, but has a specific “office” in mind. The masculine form of *diakonos* used of a woman, suggests that the term became standardized when referring to an office. Paul could have used either *diakoneō* or *diakonia* if he simply wanted to communicate that she served the church and did not hold an office.

(2) When the generic meaning of *diakonos* (i.e., “servant”) is intended, the text usually reads, “servant of the Lord” or something similar. This is the only place Paul speaks of someone being a *diakonos* of a local church. Tychicus is called a “servant in the Lord” (Eph 6:21), Epaphras is named a “servant of Christ” (Cor 1:7), and Timothy is labeled “a servant of Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 4:6). Because only Phoebe is specifically said to be a servant of a local congregation (the church at Cenchreae), it is likely that she was a “deacon” of her church.

(3) Phoebe is sent to perform an official task on behalf of the Apostle Paul and her church. Paul commends her to the church at Rome and urges the Roman Christians to aid her since she is about the important business of the church. He asks that they “welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need..., for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well” (Rom 16:2). Thus, it is argued that such an official task requires an official office.

II. Affirming Women as Deacons from Church History:

Within the first one hundred years of the establishment of the church we find examples of women serving as deacons. In A.D. 111 Pliny, Governor of Bithynia, reported questioning, under torture, two women who called themselves deaconesses concerning Christian rites. He arrested them as Christians, they said they were deaconesses, and he tortured them.[1]

Evidence of female deacons also exists in the second, third, and fourth centuries.

Here is a quote from the third century from the Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, a guidebook written for church plants, based on the teaching of the apostles.

Let the deacons be in all things unspotted, as the elders himself is to be, only more active; in number according to the largeness of the Church, that they may minister to the infirm as workmen that are not ashamed. And let the deaconess be diligent in taking care of the women; but both of them ready to carry messages, to travel about, to minister, and to serve...Let every one therefore know his proper place, and discharge it diligently with one consent, with one mind, as knowing the reward of their ministration.”[2]

And again:

Ordain also a deaconess who is faithful and holy, for the ministrations towards women. For sometimes he cannot send a deacon, who is a man, to the women, on account of unbelievers. Thou shalt therefore send a woman, a deaconess, on account of the imaginations of the bad. For we stand in need of a woman, a deaconess, for many necessities; and first in the baptism of women...”[3]

Here we have those who were disciplined by the Apostles, installing women deacons in the local church. They even wrote a prayer for the installation of women deacons:

O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah; who didst not disdain that Thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, didst ordain women to be keepers of Thy holy gates,—do Thou now also look down upon this Thy servant, who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her Thy Holy Spirit, and “cleanse her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit,” that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to Thy glory, and the praise of Thy Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to Thee and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.”[4]

Greg Allison, professor of Historical Theology at Southern Seminary, in his book, Historical Theology, writes about a generous deaconesses at the church in Constantinople.

“Olympias, a widowed deaconess of the church in Constantinople, leveraged her immense wealth to become a generous patron of the church. She donated many of her estates to the church, supported the ministries of such church leaders as John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus, ransomed exiled captives, sustained a community of 250 virgins, and cared for the poor.”[5]

And a woman named Salvina, Jerome tells us, served as a deaconess under Chrysostom’s ministry. “Salvina, however, consecrated her life to deeds of piety, and became one of Chrysostom’s deaconesses.”[6]

More recently the Reformer John Calvin said...

For deaconesses were appointed, not to soothe God by chantings or unintelligible murmurs, and spend the rest of their time in idleness; but to perform a public ministry of the Church toward the poor, and to labour with all zeal, assiduity, and diligence, in offices of charity.”[7]

SUMMARY:

The debate on the issue of female deacons is complex. Based on the evidence of the Scriptures and church history it is our conclusion that while the Bible is clear that women are not permitted to serve in the role of elder, they are permitted to serve in the role of deacon.

1. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles," in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies*, trans. James Donaldson, vol. 7, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 432.
2. *Ibid*, 431.
3. *Ibid*, 492.
4. Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 25–26.
5. Jerome, "The Letters of St. Jerome," in *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, vol. 6, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893), 163.
6. John Chrysostom, "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy," in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. James Tweed and Philip Schaff, vol. 13, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 441.
7. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997).