



Grace Life Church

SHOULD WOMEN SERVE AS DEACONS?

By Pastor Mark Reimer

The question of whether the Bible permits of envisions female deacons is not an easy one to solve. There is not a lot written on deacons in the New Testament, and what is there presents us with some great challenges. But we want to pay careful attention to what Scripture does say about this topic.

FAITHFUL BIBLE TEACHERS DIFFER ON THIS QUESTION

We should realize that among Christian teachers who agree that God has made male and female unique for distinctive roles in the church and in the home, there is disagreement on the particular question of women serving as deacons. This is simply because the biblical data is difficult to interpret.

LOCAL CHURCHES NEED WOMEN

The question we are not asking is whether the work of women in the local church is absolutely necessary for its health. Anyone who has been part of a church for a while knows that women serve the church in many indispensable ways. Many churches have been carried by women, often serving double-duty because of the failure of the men to stand up and serve. Just like many families, the women of the church are the anchor of the church.

WHAT ARE DEACONS?

Before we can properly address the question at hand, we must understand what deacons are and what they aren't.

First, deacons are not elders. These are two distinct offices in Scriptures (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-13; Acts 6:1-7). In Acts 6, the whole point of the passage is that those called to "deacon" (serve) the church in a particular way are to thereby free up those called to lead the church through preaching and teaching. The deaconate is not a teaching office and it is not a shepherding office. Therefore, when Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:12, "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man," he is most obviously speaking to the role of elder. Some churches today have deacons and given them the responsibility of elders. They are charged with shepherding the flock and protecting the church's doctrine. In this case, because they are teaching and exercising spiritual authority over men, the Bible would not permit women to serve in this capacity. But that doesn't answer the question about women serving as deacons as defined biblically.

Second, deacons are not priests. It is likely nobody has explicitly claimed this, but in many churches, deacons are responsible to prepare and then serve the Lord's Supper. Many Christians believe this should be restricted to someone who is 'ordained' in some

way. While it is probably wise to have a teacher (elder) of the church lead the Lord's Supper in terms of outlining who is biblically qualified to participate in the meal, there is no biblical command about who should actually handle the elements to distribute them.

The word *diakonos* (Greek) means "servant". It is used 19 times in the New Testament as a noun (servant, deacon), usually referring to people who serve in some general way. It is used 32 times as a noun describing the action (service, ministry). It is used 34 times as a verb (serving, ministering). Most often, it is used in a non-technical sense.

But in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13, the word 'deacon' refers to a particular position in a church. This is someone who has been set apart to serve in some capacity. While the seven men in Acts 6:1-7 are not called deacons, their work is called 'deaconing' (6:1-2). Unlike instructions for elders which are very clear, we do not have specific instruction about what deacons are to be doing in local churches. What we know is that they serve. In Acts 6:1-7, we do find some principles. Seven men are called to take on the daily service to the widows. They were called to serve physical needs, eliminate a source of disunity in the church, and thereby to free up the apostles for their ministry in the Word and prayer.

Therefore, we see that deacons are servants. But they are servants in a particular way. They are set apart and recognized by the church to work in areas of service that require exceptional stewardship and responsibility. They are managing the church's resources and they are dealing directly with vulnerable and needy widows. From 1 Timothy 3:8-13, we see that there are particular qualifications required for deacons, implying that this is a significant role in the church. In Philippians 1:1, they are specifically mentioned, meaning the position was one of significant prominence in the church.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL DATA

Now that we have defined our terms, we will examine the biblical and theological arguments that are associated with this question.

Since 1 Timothy 3:8-13 is so central to this discussion, we will include it in full here:

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.

We will include arguments for and against having women serve as deacons in a local church.

Biblical and theological arguments for female deacons

In this section we will include some of the common arguments that are used to support women serving the church as deacons.

1. No Clear Prohibition

There is no clear and direct prohibition against female deacons in Scripture. This is very significant and should cause us to proceed with caution.

2. Wives or Women?

In 1 Timothy 3:11, the ESV translates, “Their wives likewise...” The NIV translates this same phrase as, “In the same way, the women...” This difference in translation is the single most important issue in this discussion. We should make clear that neither translation is unfaithful to the original Greek text. Both are fair and reasonable translations. The Greek is literally, “Γυναῖκας ὡσαύτως” – “women/wives likewise”. The Greek language has no words for husband or wife. Instead, it has words for man and woman. Context must determine whether the author is referring to women in general or wives in particular. There are three good arguments for why this word should be translated as “women” instead of wives.

First, one way of identifying husband or wife is by the use of a possessive pronoun. For example, Ephesians 5:28 says, “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.” Men should not all love all women this way, but their women. The proper way to translate this into English is to say ‘wives’ instead of ‘women’. Here in 1 Timothy 3:11, no possessive pronoun is used. While ESV says, “their wives”, the word ‘their’ is not present in the original context, but is used to indicate how they understood the meaning.

Second, the word “likewise” in v. 11 helps structure the passage. In 3:1-7, Paul is addressing overseers or elders. Then in v. 8, he turns the corner and says “Likewise deacons...” He is now on a different topic. Then in v. 11, he again says, “likewise women/wives.” This would lead us to understand that he is now referring to a new topic, which would be ‘women who are deacons.’

Third, there are no qualifications for the wives of elders and so we would not expect qualifications for wives of deacons. This could lead us to the conclusion that these women are not the wives of the deacons but women who serve as deacons.

Therefore, in favor of female deacons, 1 Timothy 3:11 may be providing qualifications for female deacons, not for the wives of the deacons.

3. Female deacons are not teaching or exercising authority over men

1 Timothy 2:12, which prohibits women to teach or have authority over a man, does not directly address deacons. In this view, the role of deacon is not a role of teaching or

authority. Therefore, the biblical principle of male headship doesn't apply to the office of deacon.

4. There is a female deacon in the Bible

Romans 16:1 says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae." (NIV) The Greek word here is 'deacon', and therefore this can be a good translation. Since she is not a sort of general servant but a servant of a particular church, it is often argued that she carried the office of deacon in that church.

5. There are deaconesses in church history

While there is no record of female elders in the early church, there is record of what they called "deaconesses". These women would have a variety of responsibilities, including assisting women in baptism and other church matters.

6. There is neither male nor female in Christ

Paul writes in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ, there is neither male nor female. Ideas that men are favored by God or that they have a better standing in salvation is utterly abhorrent to the Christian view. 1 Peter 3:7 insists that women are "join heirs" with men in the grace of life. Any view that would imply that men are more important to God than woman should be rejected. It is for this reason why many argue that gender distinctions have been erased in Christ. They would view denying the office of deacon to a woman to be violence to the gospel that declares men and women to be co-equal before God.

Biblical and theological arguments against female deacons

In this section we will include some of the common arguments that are used to argue against women serving the church as deacons. We will attempt to match these responses with the ones which argued *for* female deacons.

1. No clear permission

While there is no clear prohibition against female deacons, neither is their strong evidence in support of calling female deacons or of examples of female deacons in the New Testament (more on this below).

2. Wives or women?

Although there are reasons to believe that 1 Timothy 3:11 should be translated as "women" meaning "female deacons", there are also reasons for arguing why it should be translated as "wives" meaning "wives of deacons". In fact, most common English translations have "wives" here (ESV, KJV, NKJV, NLT).

First, the structure of Paul's argument in this chapter also leads us away from female deacons. In v. 8, he shifts from elders to deacons. As noted in v. 11, he then addresses women or wives. In v. 12, he is clearly back to male deacons, because he says they

must be a husband of one wife. It is unlikely that he would switch from male deacon to female deacon then back to male deacon.

Second, it is more likely that in v. 11 he shifts from general qualifications (3:8-10) to qualifications regarding his family life (3:11-12). In v.12, he uses the same word for 'woman/wife' to say that a deacon must be a husband of one 'wife'. It is reasonable to believe that the same word refers to the same person in v. 11.

3. Female deacons would exercise authority over men

It is notable that Paul's prohibition for a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man (1 Tim. 2:12) is not directly linked to the office of elder. Instead, it is a continuation of his instruction for women from 2:9-15. The commands are not about an *office* but about an *action*. This clearly applies to the office of elder since an elder's responsibility is to teach and lead. However, it could be argued that deacons lead the church also. Deacons likely have some authority regarding the money of the church. In Acts 6:1-7, they managed the distribution to the widows, which undoubtedly would have involved some leadership over the church as a whole. While they don't exercise the same kind of authority as elders, it is difficult to see how a deacon could fulfill their responsibilities without some amount of authority given to them by the church.

4. There is not necessarily a female deacon in the Bible

As already noted, the word 'deacon' is often a general term that just means servant. Jesus, Paul, the apostles, and others are called servants or deacons, but this doesn't mean that they held the office of deacon. They were those who served. It is very possible that Phoebe was a servant of the church at Cenchreae in that she served faithfully there as a member. Out of the 19 uses of "deacon" in the New Testament, three of them refer clearly to the 'office' of deacon, and 15 clearly to a general usage of the word. This makes it likely that Phoebe is a general sort of deacon or servant.

In Acts 6:1-7, the apostles instruct the church to select seven men to serve. There is a word for 'men' that is more generic and can be often translated 'people', but this word refers to men specifically. And we see that all seven of these servants had male names. The example of Scripture points to male deacons.

5. Deaconesses in church history may not have been deacons

Just as Phoebe may not have been a deacon in the official sense, these women may also not have been deacons in the official sense. Today, many churches have deacons and deaconesses, and they have significantly different roles. They are not just male and female versions of the same thing. We don't find this helpful because it confuses biblical language. Nobody would doubt that the service of women in the local church is valuable beyond measure, but that doesn't mean that the biblical title 'deacon' is appropriate.

6. Male-female distinctions are not destroyed in the gospel

While the gospel makes clear that men and woman are co-heirs of grace, this does not mean that God's purpose in creating male and female is destroyed. From beginning to end, the Bible uniformly affirms that men and women were created to complement one another. In the garden, God makes Eve as a helper fit for man. Although sin seriously marred this perfect relationship, God's purposes for gender remain. In Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul says that men are to exercise headship by loving their wives sacrificially, and women are to submit to their husbands as to Christ. This pattern of male leadership is also practiced in the church (1 Tim. 2:12). There are no examples of female apostles or elders in the New Testament. If we desired to maintain the pattern of the New Testament and be consistent in applying God's purposes for male and female, we may be led to not call female deacons to serve in the church.

CONCLUSION

It is not surprising that faithful Bible teachers differ on this issue. Because this is difficult, we should be very cautious about hurling accusations of heresy or liberalism or chauvinism across the floor. We must admit that the matter isn't as clear as we would like it. However, we believe that the scales are tipped in favor of not calling women to serve as deacons. We believe the balance of evidence both biblically and theologically indicate that the office of deacon as is understood biblically ought to be held by biblically qualified men. It is for this reason that our Constitution and Bylaws states that deacons shall be qualified men.