

On the Issue of Women Deacons

Whenever addressing an issue such as this, there always occurs the possibility of misunderstandings and reactions that bring disharmony and division within the body of Christ. Our goal in sharing our particular perspective is to honor the Word of God and also to be articulate in presenting a clear, consistent, and faithful interpretation of Scripture. While it is understood that there are many Godly people on both sides, I also am determined to stand on the convictions I believe is most representative of God's truth.

Our sole and final authority is the Bible, but to be thorough, it is important to briefly share the viewpoints found in Church History and also some definitions. Beginning with the early church and the writings of the Church Fathers up until the 19th century there is not a single instance of a woman serving as a Deacon in the same capacity and function as male Deacons. There existed women servants, but these were patterned after the teaching of Paul concerning the order of Widows in 1 Timothy 5:9. I share this only to see that history can provide some background that is helpful in sorting out this complex issue.

Biblically, it is affirmed upfront that both men and women are spiritually equal before God, made in His image, and are both of the same value in His sight (Gal 3:28). The issue here is not about worth, but of role. Just as there exists in the marriage a definite role for the Husband and the Wife, there also exist various roles of authority and leadership within the Church. Paul lays the foundation of these roles in 1 Timothy 3. He begins by laying out the qualifications and requirements for Elders. This position is closely aligned and is the natural successor to the male apostles. God speaks through Paul in calling for the Elders to be the husband of one wife (1 Tim 3:2), which shows clearly that Paul was addressing this responsibility to men. It is evident that God was not allowing for women to be in this Elder position of authority which is consistent with His teaching in 1 Tim 2:9-15. He then proceeds to discuss those serving in the capacity of Deacon (1 Tim 3:8-10). It is not coincidental that God speaks of these servants also as being husbands of one wife (as opposed to the common practice of polygamy). The word for Deacon in Greek is *diakonos* and the basic definition is *servant*. However, it is used here in these passages of an office of a servant with the accompanying qualifications.

After addressing these issues, Paul begins to address the qualifications of the Deacons' Wives. This is the crux of the issue as it relates to understanding what God has instructed. The Greek word here is *gune*, which can be translated either as "woman" or "wife" (1 Tim 3:11). The context is what determines the usage. Some translations render this as "wives" of the deacons (ESV, KJV, NKJV, NET, NIV, NLT) and others as "women" (NASB, NRS, YLT). Again, it is understood that there are great scholars on both sides, but the majority of scholars believe the evidence is most consistent as setting forth the qualification for the "wives" of the deacons. I will provide a lengthy quote from the translators of the New English Translation (NET) on this issue from their notes on this passage:

"The translation "wives"--referring to the wives of the deacons--is probably to be preferred, though, for the following reasons: (1) It would be strange for the author to discuss women deacons right in the middle of the qualifications for male deacons; more naturally they would be addressed by themselves. (2) The author seems to indicate clearly in the next verse that women are not deacons: "Deacons must be husbands of one wife." (3) Most of the qualifications given for deacons elsewhere do not appear here. Either the author has truncated the requirements for women deacons, or he is not actually referring to women deacons; the latter seems to be the more natural understanding. (4) The principle given in 1 Tim 2:12 appears to be an overarching principle for church life which seems implicitly to limit the role of deacon to men."

Our position is consistent with the comments in this quote. After addressing the wives of the deacons in verse 11, Paul continues to set forth further qualifications of the Deacons. As noted, it seems odd that if he was speaking of a separate Women Deacon office to go back to speaking of the male requirements. It is most natural to interpret this, not as woman deacons, but instead as the responsibilities of the wives of the male Deacon office. This brings up a logical question: "Why does Paul address the wives of the Deacons and not the wives of the Elders?" This has to do with the positions being discussed. The Elder position is primarily a spiritual position of authority. This is a position where the wife of the Elder could not exercise authoritative assistance because of the restrictions Paul gave in 1 Tim 2:9-15. There was no need to provide those qualifications because it was assumed she could not assist him in those spiritual functions. However, the Deacon position is one of service and it would be expected for the wife to help assist her husband's service to the church. This is probably another reason why Paul subsumes the requirements for the wife within the overall instructions on the Male Deacon office.

What about Romans 16:1-2? This is the only other passage in the entire New Testament that is used by some to affirm women deacons. It is said that Phoebe is a *diakonos* (Greek) but is this *deacon* or *servant*? The word usage depends on context. Once more there is a difference as to which English translation is used. Most have translated this as *servant* (ESV, KJV, NASB, NET, NIV, NKJV, YLT), but others as *deacon* (NRS, NLT) or *deaconess* (RSV). I will once again share the notes from the New Testament scholars from the NET translation team:

It is debated whether *diakonos* here refers to a specific office within the church. One contextual argument used to support this view is that Phoebe is associated with a particular church, Cenchræa, and as such would therefore be a deacon of that church. In the NT some who are called *diakonos* are related to a particular church, yet the scholarly consensus is that such individuals are not deacons, but "servants" or "ministers" (other viable translations for *diakonos*). For example, Epaphras is associated with the church in Colossians and is called a *diakonos* in Col 1:7, but no contemporary translation regards him as a deacon. In 1 Tim 4:6 Paul calls Timothy a *diakonos*; Timothy was associated with the church in Ephesus, but he obviously was not a deacon.

This word, *diakonos*, (noun form) appears 28 times in the Greek New Testament and is translated only four times referring to the office of Deacon (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8, 12, 13). The rest are all translated basically as *servant*.

One final point will be made as it relates to the office of Deacon. Most scholars believe the origination of the Deacon position began in Acts 6:1-6. In the early church there arose a dispute about the distribution of financial resources to those widows who were needy. The Apostles summoned the disciples and encouraged them to choose from among them seven *men* who could serve in this task. The Apostles affirmed that they personally were not called to *serve* tables (Greek verb from of *diakonos*). This demonstrates the more spiritual function of Apostle (later Elder) versus that of the Deacon office. Without minimizing the worth of women and their role in other capacities, it is clear that Apostles established a norm of choosing men to fill this office. Later, Paul adds even further qualifications to the office while also putting forth requirements for the wives of the male Deacons.

In summary, it is my position that although there is an inherent spiritual equality for both men and women (Gal 3:28), God has instructed us in His Word that the positions of Deacon (and Elder) are to be reserved for men only. Nevertheless, God can and desires to use faithful women to serve in many areas of His Church. We should all eagerly encourage God's faithful daughters to rise up and serve the Lord Jesus as He has instructed in His Word.