

THE CASE FOR OUR CURRENT POLICY ON  
**Female Deacons**  
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The PCA is a solidly complementarian denomination. In its history and theology – both public and official – it is unambiguously committed to leadership in the church by godly, qualified male elders, and to the godly spiritual leadership of Christian husbands in the home. In fact, a good case can be made that the PCA is more deliberately complementarian now than it was in 1973.

Nevertheless, the role of women in the church is one of the hottest issues in the PCA today. Recently, we have grieved over the defection of a few high-profile PCA ministers and churches to egalitarian settings, heard calls for an expansion of the use of women’s teaching gifts in the church, and heard recommendations for including women as non-voting members on sessions. At our last General Assembly, overtures were debated asking the PCA to study or approve the ordination of women deacons. This suggests that our denomination is struggling to determine what its complementarianism is going to look like in the future and how it is going to be positioned in a dominant egalitarian culture.

This larger discussion forms the backdrop of our present debate on the ordination of women to the diaconate. I think we would all be wise to question ourselves as to how that larger debate influences our thinking on this issue. In the end, we will all be best served if our prime desire is simply to follow the clear teaching of Scripture, rather than to respond (whether by reaction or adaptation) to our present cultural context.

I believe that the position set forth in our doctrinal standards is the biblical view, that is, the office of the diaconate is for qualified men only. I also believe that our *Book of Church Order* (BCO) is biblical when it says that “the Session of a church should select and appoint godly men *and women* [emphasis mine] of the congregation to assist the deacons in caring for the sick, the widows, the orphans, the prisoners, and others who may be in any distress or need.” This is precisely what is in view in 1 Timothy 3 and 5, and precisely what “deaconesses” did in patristic and reformation era churches. They assisted the deacons. They were not ordained female deacons, nor was there a separate ecclesiastical office of deaconess. “Deaconesses” were diaconal assistants.

That having been said, I want to say emphatically that the discussion over female deacons is a very different discussion than the debate over the ordination of women to the pastoral office or to eldership. With the vast majority of Christendom, in history and worldwide today, I do not believe that a credible biblical case can be made for the ordination of women to the teaching and ruling office of the church. The kind of exegesis required to sustain such a view so distorts the plain teaching of the Bible as to make it a wax nose capable of any shape. If you can get “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man” (1 Timothy 2:12) to mean “I do permit a woman to teach and exercise authority over a man” then you can get the Bible to say

anything.

But the discussion of women's ordination to the diaconate is different, and more difficult. First, there are essentially only two passages on which the whole discussion is based—Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 (in conjunction with 1 Timothy 5:9ff). Second, the fact that the diaconate is not a “teaching/ruling” office but a “serving” office offers a clear and obvious rationale for exploring the legitimacy of women holding the office, even in the minds of many complementarians. Third, women have always participated in the diaconal ministry of the church. The New Testament and church history show this (though determining the exact status they held in doing so is not always easy), and this very fact encourages some to explore the potential of recognizing a class or office of female deacons.

For these reasons it is important that we take up this discussion with an understanding of the legitimacy and challenges of the question, and with full respect for our fellow churchmen who hold to views differing from our own. I, for one, have the highest regard for my PCA colleagues who want to see our polity amended on this point. I think of men like Tim Keller, Phil Ryken, Jim Hurley, Ralph Davis, and others like them who believe, on scriptural grounds, that women ought to be ordained or appointed to the office of deacon, or to be ordained or appointed as deaconesses. These men are towering giants of theology and ministry, as well as dear friends and heroes to me. I care about what they think. I have not a shadow of a doubt about the purity of their motivations on this question. I take joy in their ministries and sit at their feet to learn from them with gladness in my heart. I rejoice that we are part of the same branch of the Lord's church, because of who they are (by God's grace) and what they do, and I want to be at least a small part of the reason that they rejoice in being in this communion too.

But I also think that our denominational standards are clear and correct on this issue, and that the biblical evidence for the ordination of women as deacons is slender and weak, at best. Further, there are better-attested ways of encouraging our women in the diaconal ministry of the church than creating a class of female deacons (and there are already helpful suggestions toward that better way in our standards). I'll state this case briefly.

### **What Do our Standards Say about Women and the Diaconate?**

The PCA was established in the context of a theological downgrade in the old Southern Presbyterian Church (PCUS). In particular, a low view of the doctrine of Scripture pervaded the seminaries and denominational leadership of the PCUS. This low view of Scripture had a number of obvious manifestations, one of which was the promotion of egalitarianism in church office. So, when our founding fathers were putting together our *Book of Church Order*, and writing or editing its sections on church office, they were not unaware of the historic and contemporary discussions on the admission of women to church office. Nor were they misogynists and reactionaries. There is every evidence that they had a high and respectful view of women, and indeed some of them would have been comfortable with women serving in roles and capacities that would make many of us today distinctly uncomfortable!

So, what they stated in the BCO regarding the Bible's teaching on church office and women's roles reflected a serious, non-reactionary wrestling with the teaching of Scripture and the

testimony of church history and historic Reformed and presbyterian polity. It is significant, then, that BCO 7-2 says: “The ordinary and perpetual classes of office in the Church are elders and deacons. ... The elders jointly have the government and spiritual oversight of the Church, including teaching. ... The office of deacon is not one of rule, but rather of service both to the physical and spiritual needs of the people. In accord with Scripture, these offices are open to men only.” Our standards thus specifically assert, as a matter of principle, that in submission to Scripture, elders and deacons in the PCA are to be qualified men.

BCO 9-3 goes on to say, “To the office of deacon, which is spiritual in nature, shall be chosen men of spiritual character, honest repute, exemplary lives, brotherly spirit, warm sympathies, and sound judgment.” And BCO 24-1 adds, “Every church shall elect persons to the offices of ruling elder and deacon in the following manner: At such times as determined by the Session, communicant members of the congregation may submit names to the Session, keeping in mind that each prospective officer should be an active male member who meets the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.”

So, whatever the practices of some of our churches (and I freely admit that there is some historical diversity here), the BCO itself is utterly unambiguous on the question of the nature, composition, and qualifications of the diaconate. This is one reason why many in our denomination have been frustrated by what they see as a disregard or contradiction of our polity when, in order to have non-ordained women deacons of the same status and class as their male counterparts, congregations have refused to elect and ordain male deacons according to the rules of the BCO and have instead chosen to have no ordained deacons (male or female) at all, and instead to “commission” male and female deacons.

These kinds of moves are, in my judgment, disruptive of the unity of the church and fail the test of submission to the brethren. While I am fully sympathetic to the assignment of some degree of latitude and flexibility in the implementation of our polity in local situations, we must all take care that we do not create alternative structures that end up displacing the form of government that we have solemnly affirmed to be “in conformity with the general principles of Biblical polity” in our ordination vows (BCO 21-5 and 24-5, vow 3).

### **What Does the Bible Say?**

But the real question here is: What do the Scriptures say? What is the Lord’s command for His church? Our polity is subordinate to Scripture and correctable by it. But in this case, our standards clearly accord with Scripture. Let’s consider three important passages.

Acts 6:1-6 records the ordination of “the seven” to diaconal service. While it does not use the technical term and noun “deacon” for their status or work, it surely provides the background to and informs the content of the New Testament office of deacon. (The verbal form *diakonein*, to serve, is used in 6:2.) This passage indicates that all the persons appointed to the task of ministering, especially to widows, were by apostolic directive to be men only: “pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.”

“The twelve” here require that the persons who are to lead in the diaconal care of needy women in the congregation are to be males, by using the word *andras*—the plural masculine for adult males (not the generic plural of *anthropos*—which can be used for men and women). Surely, if ever there were an occasion that called for women to serve as deacons (in order to minister to needy women), it was this. But the express command here is for males to lead in this diaconal service.

Romans 16:1 is the only candidate for *locus classicus* on female deacons, and even B.B. Warfield (who favored deaconesses) admits “it must be confessed that the Biblical warrant for it is of the slenderest. We cannot bring ourselves to believe that the Apostle means to speak of deaconesses, in the midst of the requisites for the deacon, in 1 Tim. iii. 11, ... [we find] indication of the existence of women-deacons in the New Testament only in Romans xvi. 1 ....” In this oft-studied passage, Paul says, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae.”

Phoebe may well be the carrier of the letter of Paul to the Romans, and is probably a Gentile Christian (this we surmise from her pagan Roman name, an unlikely one for a Jewess), possibly a freedwoman. She is apparently a wealthy businesswoman – perhaps on a business trip to Rome, with her own retinue. And she is a patroness of the Corinthian/Cenchrean church, as Paul calls her “helper” of the Church, indicating she had means at her disposal and used them for the well-being of the church.

Phoebe is also called a “servant” here, not a deaconess (there’s a word for that and it’s not used here, or anywhere else in the New Testament). That is, she is identified as a particularly valuable and outstanding servant of the Corinthian/Cenchrean church. Servant is the standard term and role for every Christian and every ministry/office in the church.

It is not insignificant that the ESV, NIV, and NASB all render *diakonon* here “servant,” not “deacon.” Since many New Testament scholars are inclined to believe in a rather late development of the formal diaconate, *diakonon* in this context is not usually viewed as a technical or official term (Warfield and Cranfield’s opinions notwithstanding). Indeed, this word is more often applied to ministers in the New Testament than to deacons. And more than either of those specialized uses, it is correctly translated as “servant”—as in this passage—29 times in 27 verses in the New Testament. John Murray eloquently concludes, “Phoebe is one of the women memorialized in the New Testament by their devoted service to the gospel whose honor is not to be tarnished by elevation to positions and functions inconsistent with the station they occupy in the economy of human relationships.”

Though 1 Timothy 3:11 is sometimes appealed to as evidence for ordained female deacons, Warfield himself admits that that interpretation “would require us to assume in that passage a double sudden transition from one subject to another, of the harshest and most incredible kind.” This is why Daniel B. Wallace, an outstanding contemporary evangelical New Testament scholar says, “If women deacons are in view in v. 11, it seems rather strange that they should be discussed right in the middle of the qualifications for male deacons, rather than by themselves; ... Paul indeed seems to go out of his way to indicate that women are *not* deacons in the very next verse.”

Because the passage comes in the midst of a section dealing with deacons' qualifications, and uses neither the term for "deaconess" nor the female form of "servant," but rather *gunaikas* (which could mean "women" or "wives"), you end up with either the ESV rendering: "Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things." Or the NASB rendering: "Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things." Either way, the meaning is clear. The verse refers either to the wives of deacons or to the women who assist the deacons or both. Interestingly, this is precisely how Calvin viewed deaconesses. Not as ordained female deacons, but as women who assist the deacons, and our Book of Church Order already makes allowance for such.

Once again though (as with the apostles in Acts 6:3), this passage provides Paul with the perfect opportunity—if he wants to establish warrant for women holding the office of deacon—to employ a technical term for "female deacon" or "deaconess," and he doesn't do it. Instead he uses the generic "women" or "wives" even though the context is loaded with technical terms for elders, deacons, and widows.

### **So What?**

There is no directive for the ordination of women to the diaconate in the New Testament, and no unambiguous witness to or example of women holding the office of deacon. That women assisted the deacons in their ministry is uncontested and incontestable, and is corroborated by patristic and reformation era testimony. So the real question we ought to be asking is not "Should we have ordained female deacons, or deaconesses?" but rather "What kind of deaconess, or female diaconal assistant, does the New Testament authorize and the best testimony of church history and historic Reformed polity confirm?"

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