

# Can women serve as deaconess?

Churches disagree on whether or not women may serve as deacons, based on Paul's qualification for deaconship:

**1 Timothy 3:8-13 (NIV)** <sup>8</sup> Deacons, likewise, are to be men [*Note: "men" does not occur in the Greek and is not found in most English translations*] worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. <sup>9</sup> They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. <sup>10</sup> They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

<sup>11</sup> In the same way, their wives [*Greek: gune, a term meaning either wife or woman – Greek has no separate terms for the two*] are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

<sup>12</sup> A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. <sup>13</sup> Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

As noted above, the challenge of this passage is that it is unclear if verse 11 is speaking of the wives of deacons or female deacons ("deaconesses"). Either meaning is equally possible in the Greek, so we must look to the broader context to determine the meaning.

If Paul is indeed referring to deaconesses, then it is evident that female deacons should serve as leaders in the church alongside male deacons. The Elders are of the opinion that Paul is referring to deaconess for the following reasons:

*First*, the qualifications for eldership or deaconship intentionally mirror each other in many ways. Why then would he include a special qualification for a deacon's wife, but not an elder's wife?

*Second*, Paul's prohibition on women serving as the teachers or leaders of the church in 1 Timothy 2:12 uses a rare Greek word "authority" which refers to the final position of authority, not any and every position of authority. Therefore it is neither surprising nor contradictory that he would provide women with a position of authority (such as the deaconship) under the final authority of the elders.

*Third*, it is clear that women did hold roles of authority in the early church:

**Romans 16:1-2 (NIV)** I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [*Greek: diakonos, same word translated "deacon" in 1 Timothy 3:8-13*] of the

church in Cenchrea. 2 I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.

**Philippians 4:2-3 (NIV)** 2 I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Beginning with Jesus, the early church showed women more respect than the surrounding culture and had them serving in greater areas of leadership. It is ironic that many today consider the Apostle Paul misogynistic when in his day and age he would have been considered radically “pro-women”!

*Fourth*, we know that deaconess were a recognized role throughout early church history, as early as 112 AD.<sup>1</sup> This was less than 60 years after the writing of First Timothy and in a region less than 300 miles away from Ephesus (where Timothy was serving). It is hard to believe that in such a short period of time the church would have gone from prohibiting deaconess to permitting them, especially considering that the surrounding culture was male-dominated and would have worked against (not towards) such a change.<sup>2</sup>

*Finally*, nearly all churches have women serving in areas of authority; indeed, very few churches would be able to survive without them! We see no good reason biblically to deny them the honor of recognizing that their role is the office of deaconship. Furthermore, by using the title of “deaconess,” we may clearly expect them to meet the qualifications of deaconship.

In summary, the Elders of The Gathering unanimously believe that called and qualified women should serve as deaconess, alongside male deacons, under the authority of the male eldership. At the same time we recognize that Christians may legitimately disagree on this topic and we will therefore avoid being contentious over this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> From Pliny the Younger’s letter to Trajan, X.96. Also of interest is a ordination prayer for deaconess found in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century “The Constitution of the Apostles”:

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;<sup>138</sup> 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,”<sup>139</sup> 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. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. VII:Chapter XX*

<sup>2</sup> As in fact it did: The role of deaconesses effectively ceased to exist by the 11<sup>th</sup> century.