

# Should Women Serve As Deacons? Seeking the Word and Will of God

*by Administrator on January 4, 2011*

Scripture: Galatians 3

Topic: The Church > Deacons

Series: *None*

---

Should Women Serve As Deacons?

Seeking the Word and Will of God

Dr. Jim Denison

The issue of women serving as deacons is either a very easy or a very difficult question. Some think that the Bible categorically forbids this recognition, while others argue for equal leadership rights for both genders regardless of what the Bible might teach on the subject. But many of us struggle with this issue and want to know what the Bible says. This essay is intended to provide an overview of this complex subject, including succinct statements of my interpretive positions on these passages.

Note that we are seeking not our will but God's. Our opinions are not at the heart of the discussion, but God's revealed word on the subject. So, what do the Scriptures teach on this issue? How should we apply their teaching to our churches and our lives?

Six biblical passages are considered by interpreters to relate directly to our discussion. The last five have been the subjects of very extensive scholarly interest, doctoral dissertations, and intense academic debate. It is not our purpose to discuss such scholarship in detail. Rather, we will study each passage

briefly, consider the larger question of women in biblical leadership, review a very succinct history of this issue from the biblical era to the present, then draw conclusions for our churches and ministries.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female”

Our first text speaks to the general question of God’s view of the genders. In Paul’s letter to the Galatian church, addressing Gentiles who came to Christ through his first missionary journey, the apostle includes the following good news:

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:26-29).

Paul’s statement abolishes the inequality of women common to the first century. In a day when women were the property of their fathers or husbands, with no civil or personal rights or identity, the apostle makes clear that we are “all” the children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Every barrier—Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female—must fall before the universal love of God.

As a result, our present discussion regarding women as deacons in no way calls into question the value of women to our faith or our churches. Whatever a person believes about the question before us, we must all agree that women are as loved by God as men, and equally important to our churches and our faith.

In addition, this passage is considered by some to relate directly to the question of women in leadership. It can be interpreted to mean that all Christians are equally free and called to ministry leadership, whatever their racial, ethnic, or gender distinctions. Or it can be read to support the equal standing of all people in God’s love but not God’s call to ministry. In other words, in this view women are as loved by God as men, but they are not given the same responsibilities in ministry leadership.

My position: I certainly recognize the fact that our text does not specifically assign leadership function to men or women, Jew or Greek, slave or free. At the same time, I would suggest that the “promise” (v. 29) to which men and women

are heirs includes both salvation and service. Abraham's covenant with God related not only to his eternal life but also to his work in sharing that grace with others. He was a conduit through whom God's saving purpose would be extended to the world (Romans 4:18). In the same way, both men and women, Jews and Greeks, slave and free are called to share and lead in Kingdom ministry.

"Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea"

Now we come to one of two key passages related specifically to the question of women as deacons. Paul closes Romans 16 with a list of people worthy of commendation, and begins with a woman named Phoebe:

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. 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" (Romans 16:1-2).

Most interpreters believe that Paul was living in Corinth or Cenchrea (a coastal town just to the east) when he wrote the letter to the Romans, and that Phoebe helped carry Paul's letter to its destination. And so the apostle recommends Phoebe to his letter's recipients with wonderful praise: "she has been a great help to many people, including me" (v. 2).

Germaine to our discussion is his first description of Phoebe: "a servant of the church in Cenchrea." "Servant" translates the Greek word *diakonon*, the same word translated in 1 Timothy 3:8, 10, 12, 13 and Philippians 1:1 as "deacon." So, was Phoebe a "deacon" of the church at Cenchrea? If she was, does her position there bear relevance to our discussion now?

Arguments for Phoebe as a "deacon"

Many interpreters are convinced that *diakonon* in Romans 16:1 should indeed be translated and understood as "deacon," not "servant." James Dunn calls Phoebe "the first recorded 'deacon' in the history of Christianity." He maintains that if Paul meant to identify her only as a "servant" he would have used *diakoneo* (cf. Ro. 15:25) or *diakonia* (cf. 1 Cor. 16:15). He believes that the phrase "of the church" points to a "more recognized ministry" or "position of responsibility within the congregation."

A. T. Robertson, one of Baptists' greatest Greek scholars, agrees: "In favor of the technical sense of 'deacon' or 'deaconess' is the addition of 'of the church.' In some sense Phoebe was a servant or minister of the church in Cenchreae."

Greek scholar R. C. H. Lenski concludes: "Both the participle and the genitive ["being a servant of the church"] indicate that Phoebe occupied an official position by appointment of the church which was similar to that of the seven deacons who were appointed in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-6). She belongs to the class indicated by diakonia in 12:7. Her work of ministering was not mere private effort but was carried on by authorization of the congregation. It is only fair to assume that she was not the only one so appointed in Cenchreae; such an appointment was in all likelihood held by several women."

Lenski adds, "This is the first mention of women deacons in the church. The way in which Paul introduces this deaconess to the Romans indicates that the fact that women serving in this office was not a novelty but something that was already known. While we lack information we must, nevertheless, say that, since the arrangement of having male deacons in Jerusalem had proven highly beneficial at the very start, the appointment of women was the next logical step.

The ministration of the first deacons consisted in the distribution of food to widows. But, surely, it must soon have become apparent that, for instance, in cases of sickness and of poverty and of loneliness, especially of poor widows and orphans, a need had arisen for the alleviation of which men could not be used; only competent women could serve in this capacity. Voluntary efforts would accomplish much, and in many churches they, no doubt, sufficed as they still do; but at least here in Cenchreae we see the forward step, the addition of duly appointed deaconesses."

He concludes, "How the duties of the office were arranged and how it functioned we do not know beyond the one statement that it rendered ministering help for the sake of help. That is the heart of deaconess work today, its present form being a recent arrangement. From 1 Timothy 3:11, which was written a few years later, we see that there were many deaconesses in the Ephesian church; they are simply called 'women,' but the qualifications laid down match those required for male deacons."

F. F. Bruce, the noted evangelical theologian, adds: "In a church context the word should be rendered 'deacon,' whether masculine or feminine. That the duties of a deacon could be performed by either men or women is suggested by 1 Timothy 3:11, where 'the women' are to be understood as 'deacons' (like the men of verses 3-10)." Presbyterian expositor Donald Grey Barnhouse agrees: "The Greek word which tells us that Phoebe was a 'servant' of the church is the word for 'deaconness.'"

Thomas Schreiner, in an essay which takes a decidedly negative view regarding women in church leadership, nonetheless concludes, "In the New Testament, women functioned as prophets and probably deacons but not as elders."

If Phoebe was a "deacon," why did Paul use the masculine Greek word for her designation? For the simple reason that "woman deacon" (*diakonissa*) was not invented until the fourth century. He used the masculine form with the feminine name because it was the only designation for "deacon" available to him.

In conclusion, those who believe that Phoebe was a "deacon" suggest that there is no exegetical reason to exclude her from this ministry office. To the contrary, the Greek syntax seems to indicate that "being a servant of the church" referred to a formal, church-related position rather than a general role of "servant."

#### Arguments for Phoebe as a "servant"

Those who believe that Phoebe should not be seen as a "deacon" in the sense we mean the office today can base their interpretation on two different assertions. First, since *diakonon* or *diakonia* can mean either "servant" or "deacon," we must allow the context to determine which definition we will follow. Despite the argument from Greek syntax cited above, some argue that nothing in the context of Romans 16:1-2 requires that *diakonon* refer to a specific office rather than a servant function.

John Murray asserts: "Though the word for 'servant' is the same as is used for deacon . . . , yet the word is also used to denote the person performing any type of ministry. If Phoebe ministered to the saints, as is evident from verse 2, then she would be a servant of the church and there is neither need nor warrant to suppose that she occupied or exercised what amounted to an ecclesiastical office comparable to that of the diaconate. The services performed were similar to those devolving upon deacons. Their ministry is one of mercy to the poor, the

sick, and the desolate. This is an area in which women likewise exercise their functions and graces. But there is no more warrant to posit an office than in the case of the widows who, prior to their becoming in charge of the church, must have borne the features mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:9, 10."

William Barclay agrees: "Sometimes she is called a deaconess, but it is not likely that she held what might be called an official position in the Church."

A second argument against Phoebe as a "deacon" asserts that the "office" of deacon or deaconess was less developed in the first century than it evolved to become in succeeding generations. James Dunn, while arguing that Phoebe was indeed a "deacon" of the church, adds that "it would be premature to speak of an established office of diaconate, as though a role of responsibility and authority, with properly appointed succession, had already been agreed upon in the Pauline churches. We are still at the stage of ministry beginning to take regular and formal shape . . . and the form in each case would depend very much on the context and needs of particular congregations."

For these reasons, some interpreters are not certain if we should consider Phoebe to be a deacon or not. Robert Mounce concludes, "it is not certain whether this is an official title or a description of what she did."

James Denney agrees: "It is not easy to translate diakonos, for 'servant' is too vague, and 'deaconess' is more technical than the original. Diakonia was really a function of membership in the Church, and Phoebe might naturally be described as she is here if like the house of Stephanas at Corinth (1 Cor. 16:15) she had given herself 'unto the service of the saints.' That is, a life of habitual charity and hospitality, quite apart from any official position, would justify the name diakonos. On the other hand it must be remembered that the growth of the Church, under the conditions of ancient society, soon produced 'deaconesses' in the official sense, and Phoebe may have had some recognized function of diakonia assigned to her."

Everett Harrison is similarly ambivalent: "Phoebe is called a 'servant' of this church. The same word can be rendered 'deaconess' (RSV, JB). Men were serving as deacons about this time (Phil 1:1), and before long women were being referred to in a way that suggests they held such an office in the church (1 Tim 3:11), though the word 'deaconess' is not used in that passage. In any event, Paul is not stressing office but service, as we gather from v. 2."

My position: Phoebe was in fact a female “deacon,” not simply a “servant” of the church in Cenchrea. I agree with Dunn that Paul’s vocabulary points to an office more than a function, and that the syntax of his phrase indicates that she served in an official capacity within the church at Cenchrea.

“A deacon must be the husband of but one wife”

The second New Testament passage which appears to relate directly to the question of women deacons is found within Paul’s instructions to Timothy:

“Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3:8-13).

Two questions within this text pertain specifically to our discussion. First, if “deacons” were to be “the husband of but one wife,” how can women be “deacons”? Does this injunction not limit the office of deacon to men?

How can a woman be the “husband of one wife”?

At the heart of the issue is the phrase, “the husband of but one wife.” The Greek is best translated literally, “a one-wife-at-a-time man,” speaking to the issue of polygamy rather than divorce.

Paul was concerned here about the public witness of deacons. In his day, divorce was tragically common and not typically seen as damaging to one’s witness. But polygamy, while also common, was very destructive to Christian witness and example. And so Paul condemned polygamy for deacons, not divorce.

Given that this phrase refers to polygamy, it is clear that Paul would need to apply it only to male deacons. Women were not permitted to marry more than one husband. Thus, there would be no reason for the apostle to forbid women deacons from polygamy. And so he addressed only male deacons in this regard.

Were these “wives” or women deacons?

A second question within this passage concerns the “wives” of deacons (v. 11). The Greek word is *gunaikas*, translated “women” or “wives.” Some believe that the women in question were in fact “deaconesses” (the NIV provides this alternate translation in its footnote on the verse).

Several assertions support this interpretation:

- “In the same way” may link “women” to “deacons” (v. 10), so that Paul is referencing women deacons or deaconesses. A large percentage of scholars would seem to favor this interpretative conclusion.
- “Their” is missing in the Greek, lessening the possibility that the women in question are “their wives” or even “wives.” Likewise, Paul could have added *diakonon* to specify that they were “deacon wives,” but did not.
- No special qualifications are listed for the wives of overseers (vs. 1-7), making it unlikely that Paul provided a special list of attributes for the wives of deacons but not overseers/elders/pastors.
- No special list of qualifications is provided for these women. If they were deaconesses, we might assume that the previous characteristics (vs. 8-10) apply to them also. If they were not, it is hard to know why their character requirements are not described in more detail.
- Paul did not use “female deacons” (*diakonissa*) because the word had not yet been invented, and was thus forced to use *gunaikas* to designate women.

On the other hand, some interpreters believe that the women in question are in fact the “wives” of the deacons. They point out that deacons are described in vs. 8-10 and 12-13, making this insertion regarding their wives appropriate to the discussion.

Still others suggest that these women constitute a third class of leaders—neither deacons nor their wives. But it is hard to understand why Paul would insert this one verse introducing a new category of service in the midst of a discussion of deacons.



My position: Paul's instructions in this text prohibit men or women from serving as deacons if their marital lives are damaging to their witness. In the immediate context his injunction relates specifically to polygamy. By application, his principle relates to any lifestyle patterns which damage ministry leadership. Even if verse 11 is understood to relate to "wives" rather than female deacons, nothing in this passage prohibits women from serving in this office. And the text seems in fact to refer to (and implicitly endorse) this practice.

"I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent"

As we have seen, some who consider Phoebe to be a deaconess do not believe that this office constituted a position of leadership in the apostolic church. They affirm the formal role of deaconesses as servants, but not as leaders. Three passages relate to this larger question of women in church leadership. We will consider each briefly.

"I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety" (1 Tim. 2:9-15).

Here Paul clearly forbids "a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent" (v. 12). If this injunction is to be interpreted without qualifications, it certainly prohibits a woman from assuming a leadership role such as deacon in our church. But it also forbids women to serve as a trustee, lead a committee, teach a class where men are present, or perhaps lead musically in worship where men participate. Some churches do in fact enforce such prohibitions.

Before we assume that we are wrong to engage women in such leadership positions, or that this text prohibits women from serving as deacon leaders, let's examine the historical context of this passage. The Bible can never mean what it never meant.

Paul is writing Timothy as he pastors the Christian community of Ephesus, on the western coast of Asia Minor. Five questions make clear the context and intended meaning of this passage.

What is the situation behind our text?

The apostle is concerned about issues related to public worship in Ephesus. He speaks to the dress and appearance of women (v. 9), and encourages “good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God” (v. 10). What circumstances in Ephesus could give rise to these concerns?

Remember that the Temple of Diana, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was the most prominent institution in Ephesus. Diana was the pagan goddess of fertility. Thousands of prostitutes were employed by the Temple for men to use in their “worship” of this goddess.

Paul’s concern for appearance with “decency and propriety” contrasts with the shameful, immodest dress of these prostitutes. The apostle’s reference to women’s dress is not repeated in his letters to other churches, signifying that he considered the situation in Ephesus to be distinct and worthy of special attention. This fact further illustrates the uniqueness of Paul’s instructions in this text.

What activity does Paul address?

Women must have been speaking in the Ephesian worship services, or Paul would not have addressed this situation (v. 12). In Ephesus Paul wants women to “learn” (v. 11a, a present tense verb translated “continue to learn”) biblical truth, a significant departure from the Jewish norm. But he also wants them to learn “in quietness and full submission” (v. 11b), for they are to “be silent” (v. 12).

Note that the Greek word for “silent” does not require a total ban on speech. For instance, “Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:12, where “settle down” is the same word as “silent” in our text).

We are all commanded to live “quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim. 2:2). Paul’s word (*hesuchia*) does not only mean “do not speak,” but also “be still” or “be receptive.” If the apostle wanted to silence women completely, he would

have used sigao. And note that “be submissive” can relate to the message which is being taught, not necessarily the person who is teaching.

It seems clear that Paul wanted the Ephesian women not to disrupt the worship services in which they participated, but to listen receptively to what was being taught. Given the role of temple prostitutes in leading “worship” in that city, it is no surprise that the apostle would do all he could to help Ephesian Christians avoid any public identification of their worship with such immorality.

Who are the “man” and “woman” in our text?

These Greek words can easily be rendered “husband” and “wife” throughout these verses. Aner (“man” or “husband”) and gyne (“woman” or “wife”) are found in close proximity 54 times in 11 different contexts; each time the terms bear the meanings “husband” and “wife” rather than “man” and “woman.” Paul would likely have used anthropos rather than aner if he meant to speak about man in relation to woman; he could have used arsen (“man”) and thelys (“woman”), as he did in Romans 1:26f.

Thus it seems that Paul here refers to husbands and wives in the context of public worship. And so a wife is not to “have authority over a husband” when they are in public worship together, but must be submissive spiritually (v. 12).

What does it mean for women not to “have authority over a man”?

It may be that Paul warns against women leading in public worship in Ephesus. But an alternative explanation has received attention in recent years. “To have authority over a man” (v. 12) can also be rendered, “to lead into sexual immorality.”

In this reading, Paul does not prohibit women from leading men, but from leading them into sin. Given the temple prostitution rampant in Ephesus, it is understandable that the apostle would be concerned especially with such behavior in that city.

What does it mean that “women will be saved through childbirth”?

Paul closes our text with the assurance that “women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety” (v. 15). This is one of the most problematic phrases in Scripture, as the following possible interpretations make clear:

- “Saved through childbearing” can refer to physical safety rather than spiritual salvation.
- The phrase can refer to bearing “the” child, i.e., the Messiah (though most scholars dismiss this approach).
- The phrase could mean that mothers are saved socially from engagement in many of the ills of their day by becoming mothers and investing in their families.
- It could be that Paul here refutes the ascetic, antisexual beliefs of some of his opponents who have rejected marriage (cf. 1 Tim. 4:3).
- If “have authority over a man” refers to sexual immorality, “women will be saved through childbearing” can be interpreted, “even if she bears a child in prostitution, she can still be saved through faith, love, and holiness with propriety.”
- And the phrase can be translated, “she will be saved even though she must bear children.”

Whatever the meaning behind this difficult phrase, it is clear that Paul does not here demean women or subordinate them to men. Bearing children is both a physical and a spiritual responsibility.

My position: in the public worship of the Ephesian church, wives were to learn biblical truth from their husbands in quietness and full submission. For them to take a leadership role would have been damaging to their witness in a city filled with temple prostitutes. Thus Paul’s teaching here does not contradict his endorsement of women who “prophesy” in 1 Corinthians 11:5 (to be discussed below). Nor does it prohibit women from serving in leadership in other churches and contexts, including the ministry of deacons.

“Women should remain silent in the churches”

A second text related especially to the question of women in ministry leadership:

“As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (1 Cor. 14:33-36).

As with the passage previously studied, if this text is to be applied without qualifications, it must forbid all speech by women in church. They are not to teach anyone, even children or members of their own gender. They are not to sing in the choir, serve on a committee, or engage in any ministry which requires speech. But again, consideration of the context makes this text clear and relevant to our discussion.

Here's the setting: “women” and “husbands” are present in public worship. The “women” (v. 34) are clearly married to the “husbands” of verse 35. These wives, who typically had received less biblical instruction, were apparently disrupting the public worship services by “inquiring” (v. 35a) or asking questions about what was being said. They are not to voice these questions during worship, but “ask their own husbands at home” (v. 35b).

Earle Ellis, one of Baptists' foremost biblical interpreters, believes that Paul here refers to the wives of husbands who are speaking in public. Asking questions of her husband's message in public would shame him and disrupt the entire worship service. D. A. Carson adds that Paul may be referring to the need for the church to “weigh carefully” what prophets say (1 Cor. 14:29). Perhaps wives are participating in this function in disruptive ways, or are even questioning the prophetic messages their own husbands are delivering.

My position: wives are not to disrupt the worship service they attend. They are to be “in submission” to the message being preached, whether by their husbands or by other church leaders. Given the inequality of education in Paul's day, he directed his instruction to women. His principle would apply equally to wives and husbands today—neither should disrupt worship with their questions about the message. This text does not subjugate women to men, or forbid them from serving as deacons or in other leadership roles.

“Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head”

A third text relates to the question of women in ministry leadership:

“Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of god; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head” (1 Cor. 11:4-10).

“Prophecy” here refers to public proclamation, “preaching” in our vernacular. The biblical “prophets” were more often forthtellers than foretellers, though they were sometimes given a message from God regarding the future. And “prays” in this text refers to public worship, as Paul is concerned with the public appearance of those who lead in this activity.

At issue: women who “pray or prophecy” with their heads uncovered. In Jewish society, women were to cover their heads as a sign that they were under authority; their yashmak demonstrated their moral purity and protected them from slander and gossip. And so a woman who prays or preaches in public must cover her head lest she distract others and invite accusations of impropriety.

Alternately, many interpreters now believe that the issue lay not with head coverings but with hair styles. Propriety demanded that women bind their hair in public, as pagan women often wore their hair unbound and tossed their heads wildly in the worship of Isis, Cybele, and Dionysius. Akatakaluptos (“uncovered”) then refers to unbound hair, not uncovered heads. Wearing their hair with propriety gave women freedom and authority to pray and preach in public without being accused of pagan practices.

This passage is relevant for our discussion, since Paul clearly addresses the Corinthian practice of utilizing women in public worship leadership to pray and/or preach. He has every opportunity to criticize this practice, but chooses

instead to speak only to public propriety in fulfilling this function. His principle applied today would be that women (and men) in worship leadership ought to dress and act in ways which do not distract from worship or dishonor the Lord.

My position: Paul addressed and implicitly endorsed the role of women in preaching and praying in public worship.

Biblical examples of women in authority

The passages studied thus far seem to indicate:

- Women and men are equally loved by God, and may be equally called to ministry leadership (Gal. 3:26-29)
- Phoebe was a deacon of the church in Cenchrea (Ro. 16:1-2)
- Women deacons were required to fulfill the same character requirements as male deacons (1 Tim. 3:3-13)
- Women in Ephesus were not to lead in public worship, lest their activity be confused with that of pagan temple prostitutes (1 Tim. 2:9-15); this passage does not relate directly to the question of women serving in leadership elsewhere
- Wives in Corinth were forbidden to disrupt the message (perhaps delivered by their husbands) during public worship (1 Cor. 14:33-36); this passage neither prescribes nor prohibits women in leadership in other places and/or contexts
- Women who prayed or preached in public were to wear their hair modestly; alternatively; they were to wear proper head coverings (1 Cor. 11:4-10)

Now, how did the apostolic church practice these principles? Do we have evidence for or against women serving in ministry leadership in the New Testament era?

Ephesians 4:11 lists the primary leadership offices in the apostolic church:

- Apostles
- Prophets

- Evangelists

- Pastor/teachers (some interpreters separate these functions, though the Greek syntax seems to indicate that both descriptions relate to the same office and/or ministry)

Philippians 1:2 adds the office of “deacons”: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.” Interpreters are nearly universal in their belief that the function of deacons initiated in Acts 6 had become a formal office by this time in Philippi (though Paul does not address “deacons” in any other church, speaking to this office/ministry only in his instructions in 1 Timothy 3).

We have already noted the likelihood that Phoebe served the church at Cenchrea as a deacon. Did women serve also as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and/or pastor/teachers?

Women as apostles

Included in Paul’s list of greetings and commendations in Romans 16 is this statement:

“Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (Ro. 16:7). “Junias” is Jounian in the Greek, the accusative form; in the nominative it may be either male (Junias) or female (Junia). However, the masculine form has been found nowhere in literature, while over 250 examples of “Junia” have been discovered.

The female form was assumed by commentators from the patristic era to the Middle Ages. James Dunn argues that rendering this name by the masculine “is a striking indictment of male presumption regarding the character and structure of earliest Christianity.” It seems clear that Paul referenced Junia, as “outstanding among the apostles.”

It is possible to interpret this latter phrase as “prominent in the eyes of the apostles.” However, the Greek syntax and phrases “strongly suggest that Andronicus and Junia belonged to the large group (larger than the twelve) of those appointed apostles by the risen Christ in 1 Cor. 15:7.”



Of course, Paul's inclusion of Junia among the "apostles" does not mean that she was part of the original Twelve. Rather, it signifies the fact that she became one of the significant leaders of the Christian church in the years following Jesus' ascension, so that she and Andronicus were "apostles" of the Christian church.

### Women as prophets

Paul instructed women to wear their hair appropriately (or, alternatively, to cover their heads) when they prophesied or preached in public worship (1 Cor. 11:4-10), clear indication that women served in this role in Corinth. Old Testament precedent for women as prophet/preachers includes Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). Anna (Luke 2:36) and Philip's four daughters (Acts 21:9) are New Testament examples of women who prophesied or preached.

### Women as evangelists

Philip was an evangelist (Acts 21:8); his daughters' preaching ministries may have been evangelistic in nature as well. Priscilla and her husband Aquila "explained to [Apollos] the way of God more adequately" (Acts 18:26). And Mary Magdalene was the first person entrusted with the task of telling others the good news of Jesus' resurrection (John 20:17-18). It seems clear that women served in the vital role of sharing God's good news with the lost world.

### Women as pastor/teachers

Here the biblical evidence is less clear. We know that Priscilla and her husband Aquila hosted a church in their home (Romans 16:3-5); this function may have indicated that they served as the congregation's pastor(s). Note that Priscilla is typically listed before her husband in the New Testament record, perhaps indicating that she was the more prominent ministry leader. And Lydia sponsored a church in her home (Acts 16:40), perhaps indicating that she served as the congregation's pastoral leader.

Beyond these instances, we have no clear biblical evidence for or against women serving as pastor/teachers. Paul's instruction that "overseers" must be "the husband of but one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2) prohibited polygamy for those in this role (as did the same phrase with regard to deacons in v. 12). As we noted when

discussing this passage, women were unable to marry more than one husband in Paul's day. As a result, this instruction would have been unnecessary with regard to woman pastors; it assuredly does not prohibit their service in this role.

One reason this question is ambiguous in the biblical record is that the function of "pastor" itself is open to interpretation. The only time the Greek word translated "pastor" is so rendered is in Ephesians 4:11, where no gender identification is made. Every other use of this word is rendered "shepherd" in the New Testament.

Evidence against women serving as pastor may be asserted by studying other words associated by most Baptists with the office of pastor. "Overseers" (episkopos) and "elders" (presbuteros) were responsible for general leadership of the church (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 2:25).

Those who follow the "episcopal" church governance model elevate "bishops" as leaders responsible for churches and pastors. Those in the "presbyterian" model assign a group of "elders" the responsibility for church leadership, the "preaching pastor" among them. (Note that many churches and denominations which recognize "elders" include women among them today.)

Baptists, however, consider these titles to be synonyms for the "pastor" of the church. We note Acts 20:17, where Paul called the "elders" of the Ephesian church together. He then addressed them as "overseers" and "shepherds" of the church (v. 28). Titus 1 speaks of "elders" (vs. 5-6) and "overseers" (v. 7) in apparently synonymous ways.

Here's the point regarding women and church leadership: in his letter to Titus, Paul refers to the "overseer" or "elder" in the masculine throughout his discussion of this role (vs. 5-9), not only with regard to the issue of polygamy (v. 6). If the overseers/elders in Crete were also the "pastors" there, Paul apparently recognized only males in this office.

Those who advocate women as pastors are quick to remind us that these titles may or may not relate to the office of "pastor" as we know it today. And they note that Paul's description to Titus is by no means a prescription against females in this role. Nowhere does the Bible prohibit the ministry of women as pastors, on

Crete or elsewhere. It may be that women served in this role in other places in the Kingdom, and even that they eventually came to such leadership on Crete as well.

Paul is quick to commend women who serve in significant ways within local churches, functions which may or may not have been pastoral in nature. For instance, the apostle refers to Euodia and Syntyche as women who “contended at my side in the cause of the gospel” (Philippians 4:3). He reminds the Romans that Mary “worked very hard for you” (Romans 16:6). And he commends Tryphena and Tryphosa as “women who work hard in the Lord” (Ro 16:12a), as did Persis (v. 12b).

My position: no biblical text clearly describes women serving as pastors in the New Testament era, but no text prohibits such ministry, either. This decision must be left to each church as it seeks the will of God for its pastoral leadership.

#### Historical considerations

Before we come to personal and practical conclusions, we should note the way Christians across our faith history have addressed the subject of women as deacons.

#### Women deacons in early Christianity

Deaconesses were common in early Christianity: “Certainly in the early Church there were deaconesses. They had the duty of instructing female converts and in particular of presiding and attending at their baptism, which was by total immersion.” They “performed for the women of the early Church the same sort of ministrations that the deacons did for the men,” since “the strict separation of the sexes made something like deaconesses necessary for baptism, visiting the women, etc.”

This office was “opened to pious women and virgins, and chiefly to widows, a most suitable field for the regular official exercise of their peculiar gifts of self-denying charity and devotion to the welfare of the church.” Schaff maintains that Phoebe was a deacon, and considers it “more than probable” that Priscilla, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Romans 16) were deacons as well.

Several early documents attest to the fact that women served commonly as deacons:

- Pliny the Younger, in correspondence with the emperor Trajan (A.D. 112) describes one means by which he sought to extract information about Christianity: "I thought it therefore the more necessary to try and find the truth of the matter by torture as well, (and that) from two female slaves who were called Deaconesses. I discovered nothing more than a perverse and contumacious superstition."
- Origen (died A.D. 254) describes deaconesses as those who have given "assistance to many, and, by their good works, have deserved the praise of the apostles."
- Clement of Alexandria (died A.D. 215) likewise speaks of women who accompanied the apostles and shared their ministry "so that the Lord's teaching could penetrate women's quarters without giving scandal."
- The third-century Didascalia Apostolorum describes the office of deaconess as fully intact, and gives the impression that deaconesses have been recognized for many years. It restricts their duties, however, to serving the needs of the women in the church, including baptism and anointing, teaching new converts, and visiting sick women.
- The fourth-century Apostolic Constitutions adds that deaconesses are to be "a pure virgin; or, at the least, a widow who has been but once married, faithful, and well esteemed."

Robinson's study of the subject concludes, "The office of Deaconess . . . is legislated for in two of the general Councils, and is mentioned by all the leading Greek Fathers and historians of the fourth and fifth centuries. Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Epiphanius, Chrysostom, Theodoret and Sozomen all bear testimony to the flourishing condition of the Order. They have preserved to us the personal history of several of its members, and have shown how important was the position they occupied and the service they rendered to the Church."

However, as this role evolved (primarily in the Eastern or Byzantine Church), a strong separation emerged between deacons and deaconesses. The liturgical tasks of the latter were much more restricted than the former: they could only

baptize under the supervision of the priest; and they were never allowed to teach or preach in public.

Roman Catholic theologian Aime Georges Martimort concludes, "the ancient institution of deaconesses, even in its own time, was encumbered with not a few ambiguities, as we have seen. In my opinion, if the restoration of the institution of deaconesses were indeed to be sought after so many centuries, such a restoration itself could only be fraught with ambiguity. The real importance and efficaciousness of the role of women in the Church has always been vividly perceived in the consciousness of the hierarchy and of the faithful as much more broad than the historical role that deaconesses in fact played. And perhaps a proposal based on an 'archaeological' institution might even obscure the fact that the call to serve the Church is urgently addressed today to all women, especially in the area of the transmission of Faith and works of charity." Thus Martimort argues that women should be given important places of ministry in the Church today, regardless of their limited role as "deaconesses" in history.

#### Women deacons in Baptist history

"Separate Baptists" (Baptists which supported the revivalistic efforts of the First Great Awakening) regularly ordained women deacons as well as female preachers. Women served as deacons and deaconesses, and sometimes preached, among seventeenth century English Baptists and in the American South. Baptists apparently ordained women as elders and deaconesses in the eighteenth century, as Morgan Edwards' 1774 work, *Customs of Primitive Churches*, indicates. But the overall role of women in Baptist leadership diminished in this century.

In the nineteenth century, R. B. C. Howell believed that both Scripture and ministry practice warranted the inclusion of deaconesses in Baptist churches. Dr. Howell was an architect of the Southern Baptist Convention, and a writer of vast influence. His book, *The Deaconship, Its Nature, Qualifications, Relations, and Duties* was most significant on this subject. He studied Romans 16:1, 1 Tim. 5:9-10, 1 Tim. 3:11 and concluded, "Take all these passages together, and I think it will be difficult for us to resist the conclusion that the word of God authorizes, and in some sense, certainly by implication, enjoins the appointment of deaconesses in the churches of Christ...Deaconesses, therefore, are everywhere, as necessary as they were in the days of the apostles."

J. R. Graves, an extremely conservative and influential Southern Baptist leader, agreed that “there is no doubt in the minds of Biblical and ecclesiastical scholars, that in the apostolic churches women occupied the office of the deaconship... Phoebe was a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea.” He added, “There is no good reason why saintly women should not fill the office of deaconess to-day in most churches. In fact, they often perform the duties of the office without the name.”

While acceptance of female deacons was fairly common in the nineteenth century, some opposed the practice, and it was often debated at state and local conventions. For instance, B. H. Carroll recognized women deacons in First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas. He thought that 1 Tim. 3:11 should be translated “women deacons” and not “wives.”

However, Carroll believed that women deacons in the Bible were not ordained to this role but appointed. And he insisted that they were not to preach. His belief that women should be appointed to deacon service but not ordained to this position has provoked some debate on the subject. Frank Stagg and other historians have argued that the formal “ordination” of deacons is difficult to demonstrate biblically, whether with men or women. Leon McBeth notes that Charles Spurgeon refused any kind of ordination, claiming that “a commission from God outranked any from men.”

On the other hand, Henry Wheeler argues that women deacons were ordained by the early church in the same manner as were men. And the “Apostolic Constitutions,” a document dating from the second to the fourth century, describes in detail such an ordination service for women deacons.

English Baptists have evolved the role of deaconesses into pastoral functions with full ministerial status. And since 1956, Baptists in New Zealand have included theological instruction for women deacons in their theological colleges.

Leon McBeth, one of Baptists’ most noted historians, concludes, “The evidence suggests that in the nineteenth century many Southern Baptists approved deaconesses and regarded the offices as biblical. Moreover, at least some churches acted upon these views and regularly set aside deaconesses as well as deacons. Probably Southern Baptist churches have never been without deaconesses. Though somewhat in decline, the acceptance of deaconesses persisted into the present century. One finds numbers of Southern Baptist

churches with deaconesses in the 1920's and 1930's, and of course recently the practice is being revived." He later refers to a "spectacular upsurge in the number of women deacons among Southern Baptists."

"Deaconess" and "women deacons"

The preceding discussion could lead us to believe that Baptists have historically affirmed women as deacons in the same way we understand men to fulfill this role. However, such has not always been the case. "Deaconesses" have sometimes served in a subordinate role to "deacons." Some appointed rather than ordained them (cf. Carroll's model), and used them primarily to minister to women and children. McBeth finds that "the deaconess, for most of Baptist history, has had different duties and a status distinctly inferior to men deacons." He cites Howell's opinion that the office of deaconess is biblical, but "they are optional and are merely appointed rather than ordained."

But McBeth adds, "Recent developments . . . mark a significant shift in the status of women set apart for the diaconate. For the most part, Baptist churches today are not appointing deaconesses in the subordinate sense of that word, but women deacons who are elected, ordained, and assigned the same duties as men. Women deacons today do whatever deacons do, whether administration, policy recommendations, or serving the Lord's Supper. They meet with deacons, rather than in separate groups as deaconesses usually do. In short, today's Southern Baptist woman deacon is a deacon in the fullest sense."

Baptists today

If women served commonly as deacons in earlier generations of Baptist life, why are they less common today? As Southern Baptists evolved the function of deacons from ministry to management, women were less frequently asked into this role. Other facts include adverse reaction to the suffragette movement; the formation of the WMU, which gave women alternate avenues of service; and the rise of the modern church committee structure, which allowed women to perform the same work they had done as deaconesses. While recent years have seen an upswing in the popularity of ordaining women as deacons, Baptist opinion on the subject is far from uniform.

Leon McBeth described in 1979 a “mushrooming new role for Baptist women, that of church deacon. While exact numbers are not to be had, apparently some hundreds of Southern Baptist churches now ordain women deacons, and the number is growing rapidly. Perhaps the total number of Southern Baptist women deacons runs into the thousands.”

He offered this explanation for the growth of this trend: “Almost without exception, Southern Baptist churches that have ordained women as deacons report that the experience has been beneficial beyond all expectations. One church in North Carolina was reported to have rescinded an earlier vote to ordain women: most churches that ordain women regard the change as an unqualified success. Reports that women make effective deacons and that churches that have them are benefited, not destroyed, may have more to do with growth of the practice than theology.”

He added, “This [movement] probably means some changes in the historic role of Baptist deacons. For most of the twentieth century the deacons have been regarded, and regarded themselves, more or less as the board of managers of a Baptist church. Visitation, enlistment, and ministry to those in need have at times almost been lost from sight. However, there seems to be a move today to recover the ministry of the diaconate. Perhaps the ordination of women as deacons will help recover the caring aspect of their work.”

W. A. Criswell, in *The Doctrine of the Church*, also believed that “there is clear evidence that the early church recognized an office of deaconess as early as the third century.” Dr. Criswell stated that diakonos is “rarely used as an official title”; the women of 1 Tim. 3:11 may be deaconesses or the wives of deacons, but “certainty about either interpretation is not possible”; and that “the New Testament does not otherwise mention an office of deaconess.”

But he added, “On the positive side, however, there appears to have existed a quasi-official position of service for women in the first-century church. Such a position is suggested openly with regard to widows in 1 Timothy 5:3-6. Because the ministry of the deacons to unmarried women could give rise to difficult situations, it is possible that some godly women were set apart to help in that area. The Scriptures do not reveal how their ministry might have been handled. The records of the early post-apostolic church make plain, however, that the



early church recognized such an office. Whether or not a church interprets the Scriptures to allow for deaconesses, the ministry of godly women is essential if the needs of all believers are to be met.”

### Personal conclusions

We have surveyed briefly those Scriptural passages which relate most directly to the question of women as deacons and church leaders. I believe the biblical evidence indicates that Phoebe was a deacon of the church at Cenchrea, and that this office was part of Paul’s description of deacons in 1 Timothy 3.

Nothing in 1 Timothy 2 or 1 Corinthians 14 prohibits women serving in ministry leadership in the larger Church today; indeed, 1 Corinthians 11:4-10 seems clearly to endorse their role in preaching and praying in public worship. We find evidence in the New Testament era of women serving as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and possibly as pastor/teachers. Deaconesses or women deacons were recognized as a ministry office by the post-apostolic church, and have been affirmed by generations of Baptists as well.

These conclusions certainly provide support for the decision to ordain women as deacons in our churches. However, they do not mandate such a decision. While no biblical text prohibits women from serving as deacons, note that no biblical text requires a church to ordain women to this role. Even Romans 16:1-2, the clearest evidence in Scripture of women as deacons, does not prescribe this practice for other churches. And Paul’s instructions to Timothy do not prescribe that deacons (male or female) be ordained in other churches. We simply find little discussion of “deacons” in the Bible, and no command or prescription that men or women be ordained to this role in any church.

One of the cherished principles of Baptist heritage is that each church is independent. No church’s practice or prescription carries authority with any other congregation. Since the Bible neither requires nor prohibits women serving as deacons in the Church, we are left to make our own decision as a local congregation.

I believe that women should be ordained as deacons for the following strategic and practical reasons. First, ordination to the diaconate is the most significant way most churches recognize congregational leaders. While we know that other

roles are vitally important (i.e, Sunday school teachers and officers, worship leaders, trustees, committee chairs and members), no other roles carry congregational endorsement and recognition equal to that of deacon.

To deny godly women such affirmation seems wrong to me, especially given the strong evidence for this affirmation in the Bible, and in Christian and Baptist history. The signal we send is that our churches do not value the servant leadership of women as fully as it affirms men.

Second, when deacons serve in public roles (as in helping administer the Lord's Supper and leading in congregational business), many see the absence of women as indication that the church devalues their place in ministry. Since there is no biblical or historical reason to deny women this ministry function, we convey the clear impression to others that women are less valuable to the church and her public ministries.

And as Baptist churches grow increasingly diverse, welcoming membership from a variety of denominations which recognize women as deacons, it becomes more and more difficult to explain to these members why we do not affirm women in this role in our churches.

Third, I believe women serving as deacons will help churches fulfill our Great Commission purpose more obediently. Their insights and experiences will help them formulate the most effective strategies for congregational and community ministry. They will help their church relate more effectively to women, mothers, and families. In these crucial days, churches need the spiritual engagement of the entire congregation as they assault the gates of hell together (Matthew 16:18). Ordaining women as deacons will help deacons serve their church and their Commission more effectively.

May the Spirit guide you to know and to obey your Father's will in this matter, as you seek to glorify his Son and to extend his Kingdom around the world.