

Ordination of Women to the Office of Deaconess: A reformed perspective

Does the New Testament support ordained deaconesses in the church?

Minor theological issues typically contain evidence for both sides. In some cases, like the issue of deaconesses, evidence is scanty for either view. Despite this, proper hermeneutics urges us to consider all the evidence to determine where the greater weight lies, although the totality of evidence may be small. This brief study aims to show that the view generally held by Reformed churches has the most evidence.

The case of Phoebe: Titles vs functions

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

The word "servant" here translates the Greek noun "diakonos," from which the name "deacon" is derived. This presents a complication regarding the *office* of deacon. The Bible sometimes uses this word without reference to any office as a description of a service performed. Deacons are servants, but not all who serve are *deacons*. It is, after all, quite normal for Christians to serve without holding an office.

It is sometimes necessary to distinguish between the *title* and the *function* when a term is used. When the term "diakonos" is applied to a person, how do we tell if it is the office of deacon or simply a work of Christian service without a title? Usually the context tells us:

But as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: 2 Corinthians 6:4

Paul applies *diakonos* to himself in this verse. In this case, does the word describe an office or a function? Paul was an apostle, not a deacon. At no time do we read that he received ordination to the office of deacon. Nor do we see him performing diaconal functions in any local church. In this context, it refers to his apostolic function as a minister to the gentiles. The usage here is therefore *functional*, with no reference to an office.

The scriptures normally use "diakonos" in this *functional* sense without reference to the biblical office of deacon. Examples:

- A servant attitude that should typify leaders, Matthew 20:26; Mark 9:35.

- Of public officials such as policemen and government leaders. These are not officers in the church, Romans 13:4.
- Of Christ Himself, who surely did not receive ordination to the office of deacon in the local church, Galatians 2:17.
- Of an apostolic team sent by Paul to address affairs in the local church, Ephesians 6:21.
- Of a church planter, the founder of the church in Colossae, Colossians 1:7.

These texts demonstrate that "diakonos" is normally functional and rarely limited to the definition of a local church office. When it refers to an office, the context makes it clear that meaning is intended, as in First Timothy 3, where offices are the subject of the chapter. In other contexts, where church offices are not the subject, the ordinary usage must be assumed, according to the standard rule of hermeneutics.

Why Phoebe is not evidence

To use Phoebe to prove the existence of women deacons in the early church, one must demonstrate that "diakonos" is used for her title as well as a ministry function. Is there such evidence?

No. Absolutely nothing in the context indicates Phoebe held the office of deaconess. It could easily be a description of an activity she performed, regardless of title. To assume Phoebe was ordained to the office of deaconess merely because the word "diakonos" is applied to her would require supposing the same of the apostle Paul.

Nothing in the context where Phoebe is mentioned refers to church offices. Therefore, it should be assumed that use of the word "diakonos" in Romans 16:1 is the usual definition referring to a service being performed. This verse therefore constitutes no evidence for the existence of women in the office of deacon in the early church.

Argument from authority

It has been argued that the office of deacon contains no leadership authority. Correct. However, this does not mean it lacks authority. Although this office submits to the elders, it retains authority in its domain.

The idea of an office without authority is absurd. The very concept of "office" implies authority of some kind, however limited. To ordain a woman to an office is therefore to establish her in a position of authority, contrary to Paul's description of the role of women as non-authoritative in church, as he explains elsewhere

Argument from 1 Timothy 3

The pattern regarding deacons appears to be similar to that of elders. Elders are to be husbands of one wife. Thus, the role refers solely to the male gender. The text then likens this role to deacons: *Likewise... verse 8*.

Arguments exist to circumvent this interpretation but seem coerced. It would be reasonable to take the text in its most obvious sense, that the male gender occupies all ordained offices.

Argument from history

The Bible, not tradition, is the final arbitrator of truth. That is the essence of the Reformed movement. Yet the reformers did not discard traditions simply because they were traditions; they only did so when they felt compelled by Scripture.

For four hundred years the Reformed movement has ordained men only for the reasons above. If this practice is wrong, then it must be changed. The burden of proof resides with those who disagree.