



Can Women be Deaconesses?

At Harbor Church, we believe that it is both biblical for women to be deaconesses and in line with historic Christianity.

The Two Offices:

The early church had two primary offices in church government: elders (Titus 1:5) and deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13). The overwhelming pattern we see in the New Testament is for the church to be led by a plurality of elders, served by deacons, and congregational. In the New Testament, the term “elder” (πρεσβύτερος; presbuteros), “overseers” (ἐπίσκοπος; episkopos), and “pastor” (ποιμνιον; poimnion) refer to the same office and are used synonymously (see: Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). We do not see a separate office for a bishop, ruling elder, or teaching elder. The office of elder/pastor is one that is reserved for men only (1 Tim. 2:12, 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). The role of a pastor is differentiated from the office of deacon in that it is one of authority, preaching, teaching God’s Word, and correcting those who contradict God’s Word (Acts 6:4; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). It’s not that deacons cannot teach, it is that elders/pastors must be able to teach.

Biblically, deacons physically serve the church (Acts 6:1-6). In fact, when deacons were first implemented in the early church, it was to serve tables and ensure that widows received their correct portion of food (Acts 6:1-6). Deacons physically serve the church, bring unity, and support the ministry of teaching the word through their acts of service.

Elders were a common biblical office amongst Baptists in their early formation and have been a common pillar in Baptist churches throughout time. However, in modern Baptist churches, the word and title “elder” is now foreign to the average member, and the plurality of elders/pastors has been replaced with a single CEO type of pastor. Who is consequently beholden to a deacon board who are not specifically elected to serve the church but instead serve as an executive board that leads the church (in the manner elders were biblically supposed to lead the church). This has caused confusion surrounding the office of elder/pastor, deacons, and the congregational nature of church membership. Instead of creating extrabiblical forms of church government structures and borrowing from the world, the church should follow the pattern explicitly laid out in the Scriptures. A biblical form of church government is the prescribed manner God has ordained for church government. Deacons were never meant to control, govern, or lead the church.

The Qualifications of Deacons/Deaconesses:

While the office of elder/pastor is one that is reserved for men only (1 Tim. 2:12, 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9), the serving office of deacon is biblically open to women. The qualifications for elders/pastors are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 (also in Titus 1:5-9). A detailed reading of the



qualifications for elders and deacons will reveal that there are no qualifications for the wives of elders. Only that elders must be the “husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2). In several translations for the qualifications for deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13) they include what seems to be qualifications for the wives of deacons (1 Tim. 3:11). Why would Paul the Apostle make an office with less responsibility more stringent?

The ESV translates 1 Timothy 3:11 in this way, “Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.” The ESV, along with other translations, adds a footnote after the word “wives.” That footnote usually reads, “women likewise.” Meaning that this verse in Greek could validly be translated as “Women likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.” This is because the word for “women” and “wives” in Greek is γυνή (goo-nay') and can mean wife or woman. So the NIV, NASB, LSB, RSV all translate it as something like “women must likewise be...” So, a fair and valid interpretation of this verse is that Paul is not giving qualifications for the wives of deacons, but instead he is giving qualifications for women who are deaconesses.

Also, look at the pronoun the ESV provides in 1 Timothy 3:11, It reads, “their wives.” “Their” in English communicates personal possession, as in the wives of the deacons. However, In the original Greek, there is no possessive personal pronoun “their” in this clause. The ESV translators added the word “their.” Once again, other translation committees (and translations) left out the possessive pronoun “their” because of this fact. Also, if you dig a little bit deeper, the word for “women” (γυνή) is also not in the possessive or genitive case, but in the accusative case. The accusative case refers to the case used for a noun or pronoun that is a direct object. If Paul was referring specifically to deacons’ wives, then he could have added the Greek equivalent word for “their” (αὐτῶν; autos) or used the genitive case (possessive case).

Some, look at the next clause in 1 Tim. 3:12 and argue that because of 3:12, deacons must be male, because they must be husbands “of one wife.” 1 Tim. 3:12 says, “Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.” However, this follows, “Women likewise must be...” This should be viewed as a separate qualification and clause. After all, we would not argue that all deacons (or elders/pastors) must be married. For this would preclude Jesus and the Apostle Paul both the office of deacon and elder (1 Cor. 7:1-7, 9:5).

Phoebe:

In the ESV translation of Romans 16:1, it states, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae.” Once again, the ESV and other translations include a footnote on the word “servant” that normally reads, “deaconess.” The NLT, NIV, RSV translate this something like, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae.” This is because the Greek word for “servant” is δῆκονον, which is the word we derive our English word for deacon. So, it is a valid and fair translation and interpretation that Paul could be commending Phoebe to the church in Rome and commending her by explaining that she was a deaconess. Considering that Paul uses the formal title “of the church at



Cenchreae,” it is most likely that Phoebe fulfilled the office of deaconess in the local church in Cenchreae. Furthermore, Paul then gives her a short letter of recommendation and explains that she financially supported Paul in his ministry (Rom. 16:1-2).

Some argue that we should just translate *διάκονον* as servant and argue that we all should be servants. This would be an unnatural reading of Romans 16, considering how it operates for Paul in the letter. He is commending and writing a letter of recommendation for Phoebe in this letter to the church in Rome. Most believe that Phoebe delivered the letter of Romans to the church in Rome. Also, he then greets a large number of people in the church of Rome (Rom. 16:3-16) whom he personally knows and does not identify any of them as “servants,” including the famous Priscilla and Aquila (Rom. 16:3). The logical and natural way to read Romans 16:1-2 is as Paul, recommending Phoebe who was or is a deaconess in the church of Cenchreae.

In many ways, the offices of elder and deacon parallel the complementary created distinctions in the roles of genders in the church. Deacons could be responsible for any task not related to teaching and ruling in the church (service, finances, hospitality, ushering, facilities, etc.). This also means that deacons can teach, given the correct context (for example, a deaconess could lead a women’s ministry, a high school girls’ small group, or teach a kids’ class).

Authority is one of the primary objections raised by those who maintain that Paul was referring to the wife of the deacon and not permitting women to be deacons. Their argument is that all church offices, including deacons, possess an inherent authority or leadership position. After all, 1 Timothy 2:12 prohibits women from teaching or having authority over men. This, of course, seems to be an argument of application, context, and delineation of roles. If the church abides by the New Testament responsibilities of the office of deacon being primarily service-driven, then women could serve in this capacity, as there would be no teaching or exercising authority over men.

Historical Argument:

A biblical argument for deaconesses might be new to you and disorienting. However, deaconesses also have a historical backing throughout church history. The historical evidence of women deacons is overwhelming. Scholars confirm that we find evidence in church history of deaconesses in the second, third, and fourth centuries.

A prominent example of this in protestant and Reformed thought can be illustrated in John Calvin’s (1509-1564) commentary on Romans 16:1-2. In regards to Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2, John Calvin commented, “He first commends to them Phoebe, to whom he gave this Epistle to be brought to them; and, in the first place, he commends her on account of *her office*, for she performed a most honorable and a most holy function in the Church” (emphasis added).¹ Calvin goes even further in stating that church members should “love and honor those who perform a

¹ John Calvin, Romans Commentary, Romans 16:1-2.



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public office in the Church.” Here, Calvin was specifically referring to Phoebe being a deaconess.

Led by John Smyth, Baptists organized the first Baptist church in history in 1609, in Amsterdam, Holland. Thomas Helwys soon after led Baptists to form the first Baptist church in England in 1611-1612. Documents written by Smyth and Helwys in the early 1600s clearly showed support and biblical support for women deacons. The first reference to women deacons in Baptist literature appeared in a 1609 writing by John Smyth in which he claimed that “the church hath power...to Elect, approve & ordain her own Deacons both men & women.”²

Thomas Helwys wrote a confession of faith in 1611 that included the following statement concerning deaconesses, “Deacons Men, and Women who by their office relieve the necessities off the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies, Acts. 6:1-4.” Along with other officers, women deacons were to be chosen “by Election and approval off that Church or congregation whereof they are members, Act. 6:3, 4 and 14:23, with Fasting, Prayer, and Laying on of Hands, Act. 13:3 and 14:23.”³

While the Metropolitan Tabernacle (the church Charles Spurgeon pastored) did not formally have deaconesses, Spurgeon promoted women's ministries among Particular Baptists. Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) had glowing remarks for Lavinia Bartlett, who led a women's bible study for female teenagers (her evangelistic efforts were very successful in London). Spurgeon was fond of saying, “My best deacon is a woman,” when talking about Mrs. Bartlett.

The historical case for deaconesses is too strong to ignore (even by those who disagree). Despite popular opinion, female deaconesses are not a minority biblical position amongst protestants who are orthodox and conservative theologically. In our modern era, pastors, theologians, seminary professors, seminary presidents, and teachers like Al Mohler, Thomas Schirner, John Piper, Mark Dever, and John MacArthur all affirm a case for women deacons.

Conclusion:

Therefore, at Harbor Church, we see the office of deaconess as biblical and historically accepted by the church (and historically accepted by Baptists). Women who meet the qualifications for a deaconess laid out in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 can, without reservation, serve the church, help establish unity by making sure no one is overlooked, and support the ministry of teaching, preaching, and prayer through their sacrificial acts of service (Acts 6:1-6).

² John Smyth, “Paralleles, Censures, Observations,” *The Works of John Smyth*, 2 vols., ed. W. T. Whitley (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 2:509.

³ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 121-22.