

## Should the Church Appoint Women Deacons?

**T**he question posed in the title of this study is a matter that many churches throughout the country have wrestled with from time to time. At issue is whether or not the Bible authorizes women to serve as the appointed servants of the local church known as “deacons.”

### The Organization of the Local Church

To begin we should first note what the Bible authorizes for the organization of the local church. In Philippians 1:1 the Apostle Paul addresses the epistle “...**To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons**” (NKJV). This describes the core relationships of service and leadership that are set in the local church:

**Bishops:** Overseers of the “flock” (also known in Scripture as elders, presbyters, pastors, shepherds or overseers).

**Deacons:** Servants of the local church.

**Saints:** All believers set apart by the gospel of Christ unto service to the Lord.

The workers referred to as “deacons” are to be appointed based on qualifications outlined in First Timothy 3:8-13. These qualifications in brief are:

1. Reverence (3:8a).
2. Not double-tongued (3:8b).
3. Not given to much wine (3:8c).
4. Not greedy for money (3:8d).
5. A pure conscience (3:9).

6. Proven (3:10a).
7. Blameless (3:10b).
8. Husband of one wife (3:12a).
9. Ruling house well (3:12b).

## ***“Why Do Some Think That Women Can Serve In This Role?”***

The reasons that some struggle with this question are fourfold:

**I. Phoebe.** In Romans 16:1 a woman is mentioned by the name of Phoebe. Most translations refer to her as a “**servant of the church in Cenchrea.**” However, the word translated “servant” is the feminine form of the word translated “deacon” in other places. Several of the modern translations have a footnote attached to this word reading “Or, *deaconess*” (ASV, NIV). The Revised Standard uses the word “deaconess” in the text and the New Revised Standard calls her “a deacon.”

**II. “Likewise *their* wives...”** In the list of qualifications given in First Timothy 3:8-13 verse eleven lists qualifications for women. This is generally understood to qualify the character of the wives of men serving as deacons and elders. However, given the fact that in general the words for “woman” and “wife” are the same in ancient Greek, some translations have taken this to be a list of qualifications for women deacons (ASV, NASB, RSV, NRSV).

**III. History.** By the fourth century history records that churches in the East had women deacons as an established office of the church. Prior to this a second century letter from a Roman governor named Pliny to the emperor Trajan describes his torture of two Christian women he says were called “*ministrae*” (the feminine form of the Latin word “minister” meaning “attendant, servant,

helper, assistant, agent, accomplice” (*Langenscheidt’s Latin-English Dictionary*, 200).

**IV. “Women have been neglected!”** Finally, some in today’s churches have the feeling that women have been neglected by not having been allowed to serve the Lord in the same way men have within the local church. As a result, many are looking for ways to involve women in public roles of leadership which they feel have been denied to them in the past.

### *Does This Prove The Church May Appoint Women?*

To answer this let us address each point:

**I. Was Phoebe a Deacon?** As we can see from the diversity of translations there are a number of meanings that are attached to the word from which the word “deacon” is translated. The King James version translated its various uses in the New Testament in the following frequencies: “deacon” (3), “minister” (20), and “servant” (7). Clearly most of the times it is used it does not refer to the appointed, qualified servants of the local church but to servants in general.

**This is especially clear in Galatians 2:17 where the word refers to Christ.**

**II. Are Qualifications Given For Women Deacons in 1 Timothy 3:11?** While it is true that the word for “wife” and “woman” are generally the same the context of the verse must be taken into consideration. Verse twelve clearly lists two qualifications for deacons that could not apply to women: **“husbands of one wife”** (a woman can’t be the husband of one wife) and

**“ruling...their own houses well”** (God has given man the responsibility of “ruling” the home – Genesis 3:16).

### **III. Does History Prove There Were Women Deacons in the Early Church?**

Although most commentators accept without question that the early church had women deacons I would argue that they do so based on supposition more than evidence. Concerning Pliny's Letter to Trajan after translating *ministrae* “deaconesses” Henry Bettenson notes: “If so, this is the last reference to ‘deaconesses’ til the fourth century, when they attained some importance in the East. They seem to have been unknown in the West until the recent establishment of the office in the Anglican Church” (*Documents of the Christian Church*, by Henry Bettenson, p. 5). *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* notes that in early documents: “The distinction between widows and deaconesses is rather obscure” (380). There is no question that the early church offered regular support to qualified widows who had proven themselves to be “servants” of the church (see 1 Timothy 5:3-16). Was Pheobe such a widow?

In the Biblical record of the history of the church, in the first reference to those appointed as qualified servants of the local church we find that the church in Jerusalem was instructed to — **“...Seek out from among you seven MEN of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business”** (Acts 6:3, emphasis mine). While there is some question as to whether or not this is the same kind of role qualified in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 the gender of those serving is clearly identified. (Note: various forms of the word translated deacon are used throughout the account in Acts 6 describing the work to be done.)

**IV. Have Women Been Neglected?** To answer this we must clarify exactly what is meant by the question: Are there ways that churches have not effectively utilized their women (and men)?—Yes! There are always ways that Christians can be more effectively used in the local church. On the other hand, does appointing only men as deacons leave women neglected in the local church?—No! There is much work to be done in the local church which has nothing to do with the public assembly or roles of leadership. Examples of such work are described in First Timothy 5:10 and Titus 2:3-5.

### **The Authority of Scripture**

What we must always remember in questions such as this is exactly what it is that serves as our pattern for faith and practice—the Word of God! That means that we must not yield to our sympathies about what we wish were done. Nor give way to the pressures of a culture opposed to Biblical patterns of male and female roles. We cannot even base what we do upon what secular history records. How can we know when history records apostasy and when it records sound doctrine if not by Scripture? Let us hold with patient confidence to the Biblical pattern.

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