

Coach's Corner

Vol. 2, Issue 7, August 2009



“Deaconess”

In our last elder board meeting a very good question came up: “What is the biblical teaching on and basis for the office of deaconess?” This is a helpful question since there is not much material on the subject in the New Testament. It is an importance question since many churches have deaconesses. Our desire when it comes to offices or ministries must always be, “What does the Bible teach?” It should not be, “What have we always done?”

There is disagreement among students of the New Testament in regard to the existence of the deaconess office in the pages of Scripture. There are only two passages which potentially teach about these female counterparts to deacons: Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11. Let me explain the points of contention. In Romans 16:1-2 Paul, before he launches into his desired greetings to saints living in Rome, prefaces his closing statements with a desire for the church in Rome to respect and welcome the likely carrier of his letter from Corinth, a woman by the name of Phoebe. He writes: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, [2] that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.. The term the ESV translates “servant” (along with the NIV, NASB, NKJV) is the term elsewhere translated “deacon” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8). However, it can often simply mean “servant” (Mt. 20:26; Romans 13:4). Many argue that there is nothing here to necessitate an office. Paul is simply commending Phoebe as a servant of the Lord and His people.

In the second passage (1 Timothy 3:11), Paul is addressing the qualifications for deacons. In the midst of the discussion Paul turns his attention to some women. There we read: “Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.” (NASB) The first word in this verse, *γυναῖκας* (*gynaikas*), can either be translated “wives” (ESV) or “women” (NASB). Many versions understand it as merely referring to the wives of deacons and not to deaconesses. Those who understand the verse in this manner and then also see Romans 16:1 as not referring to an office known as deaconess see no basis for the presence of deaconesses in the New Testament.

With this said, we need to see that there are a number of reasons why we should understand these two passages as setting forth a church office for women to serve in known as deaconess:

(1) In regard to 1 Timothy 3:11, it seems best to render the term *γυναῖκας* (*gynaikas*) as “women” (NASB) rather than “wives” (e.g. ESV). This is based on:

- The reality that elders’ wives are not discussed in this chapter and one would think that they would be, if deacons’ wives are. Since they are not, this leads us to think that deacons’ wives are not addressed here either.

- There is no possessive pronoun present (“their wives”). We would expect this if the discussion is about deacons’ wives.
- The term “likewise” “appears to indicate a transition from one class to another. “Paul introduces the women mentioned here in the same fashion he introduced the men in 1 Timothy 3:8, i.e., he uses the word likewise.” (William Weinrich, “Women In the History Of The Church: Learned And Holy, But Not Pastors,” in John Piper, Wayne Grudem, ed’s., *Recovering Biblical Manhood And Womanhood* [Wheaton: Crossway, 1991], 264)
- Finally, “The qualifications Paul mentions in 3:12 are identical with or similar to those required of deacons, and this suggests that an office is in view.” (Weinrich)

(2) Certainly if Paul is sending Phoebe as an official representative who is bearing the letter to the Romans, it would be most likely that she was an official deaconess. This would be supported by the strong possibility that the term *προστάτις* (*prostatís*: helper or patron) in Romans 16:2 may be an official designation of one who gives help to others as a legal protector or leader. (Weinrich) Phoebe is not merely any female servant being sent.

(3) Just a few short years after the epistle to the Romans was written it is clear that deacons were officials in churches to which Paul wrote (Phil. 1:1) and deacons had been present years earlier in Jerusalem to give help (Acts 6:1-6). This, coupled with the reality that in some places (especially in the east) women were so secluded that there would be a necessity to have women in some official capacity so they could help give aid to other women demands that the Church had a need for women to be in official capacities which were not elder/teaching positions and which resembled deacons. (D. Edmond Hiebert, *Personalities Around Paul*, 199)

(4) The post-New Testament early Church clearly had deaconesses. This was especially true in the eastern Church (Weinrich) Though the presence of deaconesses so early in the Church does not necessitate that the New Testament taught the need for deaconesses, it does make it most likely.

What did these women do? Such deaconesses in the early Church helped with compassion ministries to other women, evangelizing other women, preparing women for baptism, discipling other women, and anything which would be better done by women to women, than men to women. (Weinrich) Not only their qualifications, but also their ministries were similar to deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13, esp. 11)

Should we have deaconesses today? Of course, the answer is, “Yes,” if our assessment of the biblical material is correct. Stephen B. Clark agrees when he writes that there is a strong need for the deaconess ministry in the current church:¹

The role of "deaconess" and other female leadership roles should be restored in the Christian community.(8) The deaconess was a position in the early church and probably in the New Testament church which supplemented the male headship in the community with female pastoral assistance. This office corresponds to a great need in modern Christian communities, a need which is perhaps even stronger now than in the past. A system for raising people in the Lord in which men care for men and women for women (guideline 4) in itself creates a need for mature Christian women who can work alongside the male leaders of the community and who can watch over those

¹ Stephen B. Clark, “Guidelines For A Modern Church Approach To Men’s and Women’s Roles” (from the web site for the Council On Biblical Manhood And Womanhood).

aspects of community life primarily entrusted to the women. The heads of the community also need the advice of capable female leaders when they are making important decisions. A modern Christian community existing within a technological society has an especially great need for visible female leadership that is respected and honored. Often such a system must be consciously developed, because most modern societies lack an operative clan system with an order of authority and honor among the women that can be put to Christian use. Also, as has been noted, modern society normally devalues the responsibilities and tasks that are part of the woman's role. This disrespect for the female role can be countered in the Christian community by a female leadership position which receives special honor and respect. The type of honor given to male and female leaders should differ so as to express the difference and complementarity of role among men and women, but there should be positions of honor for women as well as for men. The honor shown to female leaders will help to establish the value of the woman's role in the community.

Clark adds: “The deaconesses and other female leaders should not constitute a second network of government acting independently of the male elders. Rather, they should work under the elders as an extension of their care for the community, taking a complementary responsibility.”

Men, I hope this helps us define the ministry of deaconess and gives us guidelines for how we can faithfully shepherd these all important female leaders in our congregation!

Joyfully leading the congregation through change with you,

Tom