

Introduction

At the December deacon meeting, a deacon raised the issue of including women in the deacons' election process. A general discussion followed and those present agreed without dissent that women could effectively serve as deacons. The deacons decided to ask the church for guidance.

Next, the deacon officers [Winn Self, chair; Doug Fuller, vice-chair and Phillip Ford, secretary] briefed the church council on the matter. The church council was supportive.

The deacons want the church to discuss this issue. Should the names of women who feel led to serve as a deacon be placed on the deacon ballot? The church elects from the ballot those who would serve as deacons. Most years the number on the ballot and the number needed are the same. Being on the ballot is tantamount to election. The primary question is: "Should women, if they feel called and gifted to serve the church as a deacon, have their names listed on the ballot?"

What does the Bible teach about deacons?

Unless noted differently I used the New American Standard Translation of the Bible. This is the most literal version in English. The word "Deacon" is a transliteration of the Greek word *diakonos*, which means a servant. [See appendix one for a list of how the word is translated in the New American Standard Bible] It is the same word Jesus used when he said that the one who would be great should be a servant (Mark 10:43). So in the most basic sense deacons are to be servants of the church. So the word deacon is actually the English spelling of a Greek word meaning servant.

The early church selected men in Acts 6 to serve as a benevolence committee. Luke never employs the name deacon concerning them. Their job is very consistent with the ministry of deacons that churches later established.

The Bible teaches very little about deacons. In fact the word deacons is used by the translators in the New American Standard Version only five times. Those are in Phillipians 1:1 and I Timothy 3: 8, 10, 12, 13.

In Phillipians 1:1 Paul is greeting the church, pastors and deacons. All we can deduce from this passage is that they established the office of a deacon at the time of writing. Paul wrote the book around 61 AD.

In the I Timothy passages the concern of Paul is that Timothy helps the church select deacons who meet specific qualifications. Paul wrote this book around 65 or 66 AD.

So the Bible, except job qualifications, tells us nothing about the ministry of the deacons. Church history teaches us that deacons served the church. They met spiritual and physical needs. As the church grew in size and organizational complexity, deacons became assistants to the priests. Eventually they called priests in training deacons. Deacons serving as lay ministers were lost from the church for centuries.

The first Baptists [in the early 1600's] wrote confessions of faith that recognized two officers in a church: pastor and deacon. Deacons were servants concerned with a ministry. Some early confessions of faith by these churches include deaconesses or an order of widows.¹ It is unclear if these women functioned like male deacons or if they were in a different, but related, ministry. Today some, but not many, Baptist churches have women serving as deacons.

In the latter part of the 19th century deacons transitioned from ministry to management. The impact of the Industrial Revolution and the changing management practices in business affected the idea of deacon ministry. During this time the idea of deaconesses was lost. By the early years of the 20th century deacon boards ran most churches. They decided and acted as a management or ruling group.

In the late 1960's a trend began for deacons to regain the ministry role and let church committees tend to their areas and report directly to the congregation.² Not many Baptist churches took this route of reclaiming the Biblical idea of deacon ministry [based on the meaning of the word]. F. B. C. Warm Springs did. The church bylaws contain this paragraph [the entire section is in appendix two]:

In accordance with the meaning of the work and practice in the New Testament, deacons are to be servants of the church. The task of the deacon is to work with the pastor in leading the church, proclaiming the gospel and caring for members of the church and community. Deacons are not granted any administrative authority. Their activities should be guided by the ideal of serving as servants of the church.

What about women deacons in the Bible?

We need to look at texts that may address women serving in the diaconate. Two passages cited in relation to women deacons are Romans 16:1 and I Timothy 3:11. There is no consensus on how to interpret the passages. Generally your presuppositions will guide your interpretation. A more general question that underlies this issue is the proper role of women in a church. How you feel about that will largely determine how you interpret these texts.

Romans 16:1-2

Romans 16:1-2 "I commend to you our sister, Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, myself as well."

Phoebe probably carried the letter to the Romans. Paul uses the Greek word *diakonon* to describe Phoebe as a servant of the church. The New American Standard Bible margin notes that servant could be translated "deaconess." This is the masculine form of the noun deacon. It is used in I

¹ William Lumpkin, Baptist Confessions of Faith (Valley Forge, Judson Press 1959) pp. 73, 101, 121, 138,

² Robert Sheffield, The Ministry of Baptist Deacons (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990)

Timothy 3 and Philippians 1:1 to refer to deacons who served the church. The same word is translated other times as minister or servant. As seen above, the word *diakonos* is the specific word used by Paul to identify someone serving as a deacon.

Was Paul telling them she held the office of a deacon at her home church or that she was a special leader in that church? Since she was "a helper of many" does that mean a ministry like we assume deacons preformed? Maybe. Even scholars who reject her as a deacon recognizes her special service. She was a key leader in her church.

Those who do not see her as a deacon generally base their position on the belief that the church had not yet established the office of a deacon. Paul wrote this letter around 55 AD. We are sure early in the next decade the church [see Phillipians 1:1] had established this office. The primary argument is she could not hold an office that was not established. Others would argue that biblical principles would prohibit a woman filling any church office in which she would exercise authority over men [see 1 Timothy 2:12; 1 Corinthians 14:34-36].

I Timothy 3:11

Women must likewise be dignified (3:11a). The margin of New American Standard Bible reads, "i.e., either deacons' wives or deaconesses." The Greek word used here is "*gyne*." This is the root word from which we get gynecology. No basis exists in the Greek language for the King James and New International versions to translate the word "wives." They are interpreting the text, not translating it. The word clearly should be translated "women."

However, the use of 'women' does not mean this verse refers to women who served as deacons. There are basically three positions held by conservative Bible scholars:

- A. Women who serve as deacons along with men in the church
- B. A separate office held by women who serve as deaconesses
- C. Wives of deacons

Women as deacons along with men

Southern Baptist scholar A. T. Robertson comments on I Tim. 3:11: "Apparently 'women as deacons' and not women in general or just 'wives of deacons.'" ³ Robertson was recognized as one of the leading authorities in the world on New Testament Greek. His big grammar, published in 1914 and having over 1,400 pages, is still acknowledged to be the authority on New Testament Greek language studies.

J. N. D. Kelly one of the world's most respected evangelical scholars on the pastoral epistles writes:

"The following verse contains a puzzle which will probably never be solved to everyone's satisfaction. It is agreed on all hands that Paul cannot, in a passage concerned with special groups, be interjecting a reference to the women of the congregation in general. The words could, however, mean, 'Let their wives [i.e. of the deacons] similarly. . .' and many commentators

³ A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament [Nashville: Broadman Press 1931] p. 575.

prefer this rendering. But if this is the sense,

- (a) we should have expected the definite article before 'women', or at least the genitive pronoun after it, or some other turn bringing out that they were 'their wives';
- (b) it is very strange that only deacons' wives are singled out for mention, since the overseers' wives occupied an even more influential position;
- (c) the adverb similarly repeated from 8, leads us to expect a fresh category of officials, as does also the list of parallel, if not identical, qualities.

For these reasons the translation women deacons is likely to be the correct one. The absence of the article is, if anything, a point in its favour, women being used almost adjectivally--'deacons who are women'. It has been asked why, if Paul meant deaconesses, he did not use a separate technical term, but a sufficient answer is that the N. T. does not know one. Phoebe, for example is simply called 'deacon of the church at Cenchrae' in Rome 16:1. ⁴

A separate office held by women who serve as deaconesses

Some understand "deaconesses" as rendering a special service apart from male deacons. They are a group by themselves, not just the wives of the deacons, deacons in an equivalent sense with men and not all the women who belong to the church. They believe that Paul regards these women as the deacons' assistants in helping the poor and needy, etc. These are women who render auxiliary service, doing ministries for which women are better adapted. ⁵

B. H. Carroll, who founded Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1908 and before that was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, in his commentary on the English Bible writes about this passage:

We need now to consider only one other sentence: "Women in like manner must be grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things." As this verse is sandwiched between two paragraphs on the deacon's office, and is part of the section on church officers, it would be out of all connection to interpret it of women in general. And as there is no similar requirement concerning the pastor's higher office, we should not render it "wives" meaning the wives of deacons. The context requires the rendering: "women deacons." This rendering not only has the support of Roman 16:1, commending Phoebe as a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea and as doing work supplemental to the preacher and the administrator of charity help, but meets a need as obvious as the need of a male deacon.

In every large church there is a deacon's work that cannot be well done except by a female deacon. In the administration of charity in some cases of women--in the preparation of female candidates for baptism, and in other matters of delicacy there is need for a woman church official.

The Waco church of which I was pastor for so many years, had, by my suggestion and approval, a

⁴ J. N. D. Kelly *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1963] pp. 83-85

⁵ Leon McBeth, *Women in Baptist Life* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979] pp.140-143.

*corps of spiritually minded, judicious female deacons who were very helpful, and in some delicate cases indispensable. In churches on heathen mission fields the need is even greater than in our country. Many an embarrassment did the worthy deaconess save me from, even on the subject of visitation. In some cases appealing for charity, only these women could make the necessary investigation.*⁶

In 1877 the First Baptist Church in Waco set aside six deaconesses and specified their duties. Their function was to serve and minister. They apparently did not exercise an administrative or leadership role.

The wives of deacons

Other scholars believe the reference to women means the wives of deacons. Charles Ryrie editor of the popular Ryrie study Bible observes,

*"this is a reference to the wives of the deacons, rather than to a separate office or deaconess, since the qualifications for deacons are continued in v. 12. If he had a different group in mind, it would seem more natural for Paul to have finished the qualifications for deacons before introducing the office of deaconess. The "women" of I Timothy 3:11 probably refer to the wives of deacons rather than to deaconesses."*⁷

A. T. Hanson in the New Century commentary writes:

*"in favour of the meaning deacons wives it can be said that this list of requisite qualities has much in common with the list requisite for older women in Titus 2:3, where there is no question of deaconesses. . . We conclude that on the whole it is more likely that the author is referring to wives of deacons here. It looks as if the author had a document before him which gave a list of desirable qualities for any office holder. He applies it to bishops and then decides it could be used for deacons and their wives also."*⁸

What are the qualifications for these women?

Whoever these women are, Paul established qualifications for them that parallel the one for deacons and pastors. There are four things that should characterize them:

First, they are to be "dignified." This is the same word Paul used to describe the men. These Women are to be realistic people, not dreamers who never complete a task. They ought to deal realistically with life and God's service.

Second, they are not to be "malicious gossips." Literally, in the original language, the term is, "she-devils." It refers to women who were given to the practice of gossiping and slandering the

⁶ B. H. Carroll An Interpretation of the English Bible volume 6 [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1948], pp. 45-46.

⁷ Charles Ryrie, The Ryrie Study Bible [Chicago: Moody Press, 1976] p.1711

⁸ A. T. Hanson The New Century Bible Commentary, The Pastoral Epistles [Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1982] pp. 80-81.

reputations of others. Women must not be wreckers of reputations or slanderers.

Then third, women are to be "temperate." Here again is a word about their drinking habits. We should read that it included other habits such as eating, perhaps, or even work.

Then the last qualification is that they are to be "faithful in all things." They are to be responsible, trustworthy individuals; having been given assignments, they will carry them through. Thank God. We have many such women in our congregation.

What is an appropriate role for women?

Inherent in these discussions is the role of women in a church. Your feelings about this will generally guide your interpretation of the passages above. It is good to briefly look at this issue as it may help us to understand God's direction for us.

Female subordination

Others view male female relationships in terms of female subordination to males. While God equally offers salvation to men and women, the leadership roles or functions in a church are exclusively the domains of men. Proponents usually cite two New Testament texts. They are I Corinthians 14:34-35 where Paul writes that women are to be silent in church and are to ask no questions. The other passage is I Timothy 2:12, where Paul wrote, "I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet."

Either of those passages alone would mean a woman:

- Should not be a deacon.
- should not be teaching classes with men and teen age boys
- should not chair church committees
- should not lead any ministry in the church where a man would serve under her leadership.
- should never speak publicly in church, that means on a literal level, make no announcements, asking no questions and express no public opinions.⁹

What if no men were willing or available? Charles Ryrie suggests that in those circumstances the work must be done, so women could temporarily assume those positions. He writes:

"However, women must be cautioned that against continuing in such work after there are trained men available for the job. Any women who finds herself doing a man's work should so aim her own work that a man can assume it as quickly as possible. The acid test any woman can apply to such situations is simply this: 'would I be willing to give over all my work to a trained man is he should appear today? To know the scriptural pattern is absolutely essential. To aim our labors

⁹ Charles Ryrie, The Role of Women in the Church [Chicago: Moody Press, 1970] pp. 70-91

*toward attaining the ideal is the only practical way to serve in the present day situation.*¹⁰

Spiritual and Functional Equality

Those who take Galatians 3:28 [“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave or freeman, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”] literally argue that spiritual equality must equal functional equality. Paul really meant that nationality, social rank and gender does not make anyone a better or more usable Christian than someone else. Equality in the New Testament meant:

- Women were blessed equally in the promise of the Spirit on Pentecost, see Peter's quote from Joel (Acts 2.14 ff)
- Women had equal responsibility to share the gospel with everyone. In Philippians 4:3, Paul commends women who struggled with him in the cause of the gospel.
- Women had equal guilt with the men as indicated by Acts 5.9: Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."
- Women were persecuted equally. “But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” (Acts 8.3) and “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest (2) and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.” (Acts 9.1-2)
- Women could host at least five house churches mentioned in Acts and Paul's writing.
- Women received the same spiritual gifts as men.
- Women could pray or prophesy. In Acts 21.8-9 we read “Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. 9 He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.” In Corinth, they could pray or prophesy if they wore a hat or scarf over their head. Prophecy means telling God's truth about a situation.
- Women could ask for help and tell other Christians what to do. In Romans 16:1-3 Paul writes for them to do whatever Phoebe asked of them. A woman was to be obeyed or at least they were to do what she asked.
- Women could teach men. Priscilla helped her husband teach Apollos in Acts 18:24-28. Three times out of five Priscilla is mentioned first and many scholars believe this implies that she was at times the leader for the couple. Priscilla and Aquilla were close friends of Paul.

Is there middle ground?

Given the number of texts that are in apparent tension here what are we to do? If the Bible is internally consistent and in harmony how do we resolve these differences that are 180 degrees apart?

Perhaps one solution lies in recognizing the cultural and situational context of Paul's writings.

¹⁰ Ibid pp. 80-81.

Corinth and Ephesus [the location of Timothy in I Timothy] were churches in trouble. Perhaps circumstances in those churches made necessary the remedial directions of I Corinthians 14 and I Timothy 2. If a church were in a similar context with the same problems as Corinth and Ephesus then those remedial actions would be wise and necessary.

Perhaps the texts on Spiritual and Functional Equality cited above reflect the more normative practice of men and women serving as God called and gifted them.

Conclusion

My prayer is that this paper and our discussions [please express your opinions and ask questions] on Wednesdays will cause all of us to reflect on what we hear, pray for guidance and understanding. Then as we sense the Holy Spirit leading us to a consensus on this issue let's follow.

Yours in a Common Cause,

Bob M. Patterson

Appendix one

The translators of the New American Standard Bible chose to translate these Greek words into these English words. The basic definition of the word is given before the references.

diakoneo: meaning to serve, minister; is translated into these words

administered (1), administration (1), cared for (1), contributing to the support (1), **deacons (2)**, do the serving (1), employ in serving (1), minister (3), ministered (2), ministering (3), servant (1), serve (5), served (3), serves (5), services he rendered (1), serving (3), take care (1), wait on (1), waited on (3).

diakonia: meaning service ministry, ministry:

ministries (1), ministry (19), mission (1), preparations (1), relief (1), serve (1), service (7), serving (2), support (1).

diakonos: meaning a servant or minister:

deacons (3), minister (7), servant (10), servant (9).

Appendix two, FBC Warm Springs bylaws related to deacons

Section Three---deacons

In accordance with the meaning of the work and practice in the New Testament, deacons are to be servants of the church. The task of the deacon is to work with the pastor in leading the church, proclaiming the gospel and caring for members of the church and community. Deacons are not granted any administrative authority. Their activities should be guided by the ideal of serving as servants of the church.

The church recognizes the scriptural qualifications of I Timothy 3:8-13. People who are divorced

or single may serve as a deacon in this church. The church also recognizes certain practical qualifications:

- A person must be twenty-one years old and been a member of the church for at least one year.
- The person must support the entire program of the church.
- The person should have a good reputation within and without the community.

The deacon body will in October of each year survey the members who meet these qualifications and ask if they would serve if elected. The deacons may hold a general orientation meeting to explain the function and purpose of deacon ministry. A list will be compiled of those willing to serve.

The list will be presented to the church during a morning worship service in November. The church will then vote to elect the number of deacons needed to fill the vacancies on the deacon body. The vacancies will be filled by those receiving the greatest number votes.

The active body of deacons shall consist of nine members. Deacons will be elected for a term of three years. The deacons will maintain a ratio of one deacon to every twelve to fifteen families. Additional deacon positions will be created or deleted when needed to maintain the ratio.

One-third of the deacon body will rotate off each year. In the event of death, removal, resignation or inability to serve the church will elect a replacement to fill the unexpired term.. After serving a term of three years a deacon is ineligible to succeed themselves. They must remain off the body for one year. The deacons will elect a chairman, vice-chairman and secretary from among themselves.

There shall be no obligation to constitute as an assigned deacon one who has been a deacon in another church. The deacon shall be eligible for election after meeting the requirements listed above. Their previous ordination by another church of like faith and order shall suffice for this church.

When people are elected that are not ordained the pastor and deacon body will plan an ordination service. The service may be part of a regular service. The entire church may participate in the prayer and laying on of hands on each person being set aside for ministry.