

# Shall We Have Deaconesses?

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For several years it has been the practice of some religious groups (including the Independent Christian Church) to appoint “deaconesses.” Predictably, some of the “faddists” among us are adopting the practice. Is there Scriptural warrant for it? Those who answer affirmatively usually point to Phoebe who is called a diakonon (feminine form of diakonos, the Greek word for “deacon”) (Rom. 16:1). They will usually suggest that their qualifications are given in 1 Timothy 3:11. Further, they are sometimes identified with the “enrolled” widows in Ephesus (1 Tim. 5:9–10). We are not at all convinced that Phoebe or any other woman was ever a “deaconess” in the sense that certain men were appointed as elders and deacons.

First, diakonos is frequently used in a general sense in the New Testament. The term is applied to civil rulers (not even Christians) and to Christ in the near context (Rom 13:4; 15:8), but surely none would say they were deacons in the church. Paul was not a “deacon,” yet he called himself a diakonos (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6, et al.). By what logic then does one assume that the term is used in an official sense concerning Phoebe? The 149 scholars who translated the King James and American Standard Versions, respectively, simply rendered the term, “servant” in Romans 16:1, rather than “deaconess,” with which we heartily agree.

Paul's reference to the women in the midst of the qualifications of elders and deacons is just that—a reference to women (or wives) (1 Tim. 3:11). Had he referred to “deaconesses” he could have (and doubtless would have) used the term to clearly indicate it, but he did not. Our conviction is that he was referring to the wives of both elders and deacons, since both must have wives to be qualified (vv. 2, 12). Not just any sort of wife would be suitable, but one described in verse 11 would certainly complement the work of an elder or deacon.

The “enrolled” widows (1 Tim. 5:9–10) are just that. To assume that they were “deaconesses” is eisegesis (reading it into the text) rather than exegesis (deriving it from the text). The qualifications of elders and deacons are clearly stated (1 Tim. 3:2–12; Tit. 1:6–9). That these men were appointed and served in the first century church is a matter of record (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Phi. 1:1; Tit. 1:5, et al.). We have none of the above for “deaconesses.”

The mere fact that one serves a church in some capacity does not make one an “official.” The appointment of “deaconesses” is an unauthorized innovation.

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