

## The Case for Commissioning (Not Ordaining) Deaconesses BY Tim Keller ISSUE NUMBER: 21 August 25th, 2008

Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City has since its inception commissioned (but not ordained) deaconesses working alongside male deacons in diaconal work. Why do we do this?

### A Personal History

In 1982 the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod (RPCES) joined with the PCA. Earlier, the RPCES had defeated a motion to ordain women as deacons. But the 155th Synod reminded churches that, “they are free to elect Spirit-filled women as deaconesses and set them apart by prayer.... We affirm the right of a local church to have separate body of unordained women who may be called deaconesses.” The 1982 PCA General Assembly did not consider the actions of the RPCES Synods to be binding on us, but rather “valuable and significant material which will be used in the perfecting of the Church,” and therefore to be granted respect.

This is the reason that a number of churches with deaconesses, including Philadelphia’s Tenth Presbyterian Church under Jim Boice, came into the PCA and were accepted by our presbyteries at that time. The understanding in these presbyteries was that, under Book of Church Order (BCO) 9-7, godly women could be appointed to assist the deacons in their work, and this was a valid way for sessions to do so. In addition, many PCA Korean churches, keeping the traditional practices from their home country, have unordained but commissioned women working with the diaconate. In the mid-1980s I often attended Tenth Church. I saw how important strong diaconal work was in urban ministry, and also how crucial women were to an effective diaconate.

When we began Redeemer I encouraged our new session to establish a diaconate that included unordained, commissioned deaconesses. Our practice was debated but upheld by our Northeast Presbytery in 1994. It was deemed the right of local sessions to determine how the women mentioned in BCO 9-7 were to be commissioned and identified. Over the years the work of our diaconate has become one of the most crucial aspects of Redeemer’s effectiveness in the city, and without deaconesses that would have never been the case.

### A Biblical Basis

The ultimate reason for any church to have deaconesses should not be practical and historical, however, but biblical. There are several good biblical reasons for having commissioned deaconesses in a congregation.

1. The woman Phoebe is called a diakonon in Romans 16:1. The word diakonos elsewhere in the New Testament can mean deacon (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8) and also minister (Colossians 1:25; 4:7) but it can also be taken in a non-official sense as servant (Mark 10:43). So which meaning fits here? It is interesting that older conservative Bible commentators, such as Charles Hodge and John Calvin, concluded that Phoebe was a deaconess, while more recent conservative commentators, such as Doug Moo and Thomas Schreiner (as well as John Piper), all believe that Phoebe held the office of deacon.

Robert Strimple, author of the minority report in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's 1988 "Report on Women in Church Office," makes a detailed exegetical case for why the weight of evidence indicates Phoebe was an office holder. Here's just one example. When Paul refers to Phoebe as (literally) "being (ousan-feminine accusative present participle) ... diakonon" he is using a participial phrase that is consistently used to identify a person's performance of office in the New Testament. Examples of this usage are found in John 11:49 ("Caiaphas, being high priest that year"), Acts 18:12 ("Gallio, being the proconsul of Achaia ..."), and Acts 24:10 ("Felix, being a judge to this nation ..."). The case for reading Phoebe's description as one of office is a strong one. Indeed, Calvin says that Paul is commending Phoebe "first on account of her office" to aid her as she discharges her ministry in Rome.

2. In the New Testament, women were recognized for their diaconal work. Besides Phoebe, Tabitha is noted for her work with the poor and widows (Acts 9:36-40). It was women who served Jesus' disciples as they traveled (Luke 8:2-3), literally "deaconing them out of their own means" (see Dorcas, Acts 9:36). Most interesting of all, 1 Timothy 5:3-16 describes an order of widows who were financially supported and who were "devoted to all kinds of good deeds" and dedicated themselves to "helping those in trouble." Qualifications for membership in the order of widows so approximates an office that Calvin saw a close connection between the work of the diaconate and the 1 Timothy 5 widows. This is why he actually established two "orders" of deacons, one the procurers, administrative workers who collected and managed funds, and hospitaliers, actual care-givers to the poor and sick. The latter order included women (the first did not).

Calvin, then, established an order of commissioned (not ordained) women who did diaconal work. Given the examples of Phoebe, Tabitha, and the order of widows, it is not surprising that the early church developed an order of deaconesses quite early. Pliny the Younger, just a decade after the death of the apostle John (his letter is dated 106 A.D.), attests to the existence of deaconesses in the early church.

3. To me, the most compelling biblical case for a recognized body of "deaconing women" is 1 Timothy 3. Paul gives Timothy screening criteria for elder (v.1-7) and deacon (v.8-13) candidates. However, right in the middle of the description of deacons is v.11 that reads, "the gynaikas [wives or women] likewise must be worthy of respect, not speaking evil of others, self-controlled and faithful in all things." Then, after this statement, Paul goes back to describing deacons.

The first question almost all exegetes ask is who—who are these women? Since the word gynaikas can mean either wives or women, that is a natural question. On one side are those who say that, if this word meant deacons' wives, the possessive pronoun 'their' (auton) would have been used, but it wasn't. On the other side are those who say that Paul could have made it clear these were women deacons by inserting *tas diakonous* (so it would have read "the women who are deacons"), but he doesn't. This debate goes back at least to the Greek fathers—a very important point. If the church as a whole has not been able to settle this conclusively, we should exercise tolerance toward those who disagree with our opinion instead of calling our opponents "crypto-chauvinists" or "proto-feminists" as much of the blog chatter does.

A more revealing line of thinking starts not with the question "who" but "why"—why are these women being screened for their character? One answer is that these are deacons' wives, and therefore the deacons are being qualified for their jobs by looking at the character of their wives.

But why, then, were they singled out for evaluation and the elders' wives were not? Surely, if anything, the standards for elders and elders' wives would be higher! If the purpose of the women's descriptors was to qualify their husbands, why was there no such list for the elders' wives? Some have suggested that the elder candidates were better known and did not need such scrutiny, but if that was the case, why was the elders' list of qualifications longer than the deacons'?

By far the most likely conclusion is that the deacons' wives were being screened with selection criteria because they were going to be appointed to do diaconal work in the congregation alongside their husbands, while the elders' wives were not sharing in the husbands' work of discipline and oversight. The key adverb "likewise" (*hosautos*) further supports this. It precedes the description of elders (v.1,) deacons (v.8,) and women (v.11). This indicates that the evaluation list functioned similarly in each case as a selection criteria for doing work in the congregation.

### Deaconing Women

For me, the penny dropped one day when Dick Gaffin was lecturing in my Doctrine of the Church class at Westminster in the mid-80s. He was an author of the 1988 Orthodox Presbyterian Church's (OPC) Committee on Women in Office. He (and the majority of the Committee) concluded that the "women" of v.11 were deacons' wives. However, he said, even if they were "wives," they were clearly being screened and appointed to do diaconal work in the congregation with their husbands. In fact, in the 1988 OPC majority report, the men who denied the office of deacon to women nonetheless made this very strong statement:

Having denied the ordained status of the "women" (K.J.V. "wives") of this verse, it is all too easy to say no more. That is a shame, because whether these women were wives of elders or deacons or both, it is clear that Paul had "deaconing women" in view. They were recognized as special assistants to the ordained officers of the church. Phoebe is a classic example. Because of this association their spirituality had to be commensurate with the diaconate which they assisted. Furthermore, there are aspects of diaconal ministry which can only properly be executed by women. These focus on (though they are not limited to) personal, private needs unique to women and needs in the area of hospitality. Modern-day diaconates need to employ the gifts of women and even consider publicly recognizing some as officially associated with the diaconate in unordained status. (Majority report of the Committee on Women in Church Office, submitted to the OPC's 55th General Assembly.)

So here's the nub of the matter. Whether the word *gynaikas* is translated "women" or "wives" doesn't matter. Either way, the text is teaching that women can and should do diaconal work alongside the deacons and in a way recognized by the congregation (after all, they are screened and selected). These may have been female individuals selected to do diaconal work with the deacons or wives appointed to do it together with them. But either way they were doing it. They were doing it either as ordained deacons or as assistants and partners, they were still doing it.

The biblical evidence is strong that a) women were examined for and appointed to do diaconal work in the local church, and b) that this work with the poor, sick, widows, and orphans was publicly recognized and was held in honor among all. Indeed, even the thinkers and commentators who deny the ordained diaconate to women agree on the need for appointed

“deaconing women.” So the practice of commissioning “deaconesses” is one good, biblical, and ancient way to follow this biblical pattern. Is the language of BCO 9-7 sufficient to accommodate what the Bible describes? Does it allow PCA sessions to examine and appoint deaconing women who are recognized and honored for their work? For at least 25 years, many presbyteries and sessions in the PCA have judged that it does.

### What About Authority?

But is the biblical evidence above enough to make a case for women to be ordained to the diaconate in the PCA? I would say no. I affirm and support the PCA’s belief in male headship in the home and church. I would never want to see our denomination compromise its support of this biblical complementarianism. Along with Ligon Duncan, I have never seen a credible biblical case made for the ordination of women to be elders or pastors. And when I see some of my friends try to make such a biblical case, I find their use of Scripture alarming and disturbing.

Nevertheless, a denomination as conservative as the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) has ordained women to the diaconate (though not as elders) since 1888, because it understands the office of deacon to be one of service, not of rule. Our constitution is, I think, ambiguous about this distinction. BCO 9 never refers to the diaconate as exercising ruling authority—indeed it is clear that it always acts under the rule of the session, and cannot act without prior permission of the session or in some cases the whole congregation (9-2). However, in 24-5 the BCO requires that members take a vow of obedience to the deacons. This seems to indicate that BCO conceives ordination as always entailing some kind of ruling authority. That would preclude women.

However, I believe—like the RPCNA—that biblically, deacons are appointed to service, not to juridical authority. So I would be happy to see the PCA reconfigure its description of the office to be more in line with that understanding of it. If, as we’ve seen, Paul was admitting deacons’ wives to diaconal work but not elders’ wives to elders’ work, then, in light of 1 Timothy 2:11,12, doesn’t that mean that the apostle saw the office of deacon as a calling to service, not rule?

### A Final Historical Note

I said above that in determining our church practice we should respond to the Bible rather than to our contemporary culture. This is harder than it seems. Many people have said to me over the years they thought that our practice of deaconesses did not flow from our reading of Scripture, but was a capitulation to the egalitarian culture around us. I have tried to show that our reasons are solidly biblical, but I continually try to examine my own heart regarding this. I would only ask our critics to recognize an opposite but equal error.

Many opponents of deaconesses today are operating out of a “decline narrative.” They claim that having deaconesses is the first step on the way to liberalism. But Jim Boice and John Piper, the RPCNA and the ARP, B.B. Warfield and John Calvin, believed in deaconing women or deaconesses. Are (or were) all these men or churches on the way to liberalism? I don’t think so. Nevertheless, one person put it to me like this recently: “Sure, the RPCNA has had women deacons for over a century. Sure, a biblical case can be made. But in our cultural climate, allowing deaconesses would be disastrous. It’s a slippery slope.”

In other words, the Bible probably allows it, but let's not do it because of the culture. Isn't that also responding to the culture rather than to the text? If the PCA is driven either by reaction to or adaptation to the culture, it is being controlled by the culture instead of the Word. Let's allow presbyteries and sessions to use women in diaconal work with the freedom they have historically had in our communion.

I agree completely with Ligon Duncan when he says that the current debate in the PCA is "to determine what its complementarianism is going to look like in the future." That's right. His article and mine represent an intramural debate within a strong commitment to biblical complementarianism. While we argue and discuss this let's keep that in mind.

Tim Keller is the senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City and the author of *The Reason for God*.