

# 1 Phoebe Was a Deaconess, But She Was Not Ordained

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As chairman of the Committee on Women in Church Office I am thankful for an opportunity to respond to Dr. Strimple's summary of his minority report which appeared in the June issue of *New Horizons* titled "Phoebe Was A Deacon, Other Women Should Be Too."<sup>1</sup>

The question before our church is not whether or not women should be performing diaconal work, but rather whether or not women should be ordained to the special office of N.T. deacon. The work of deaconing is not the issue. Who should lead in this work is the question before us. Therefore the point at issue is the nature and authority of the N.T. office of deacon.

## Using the Regulative Principle

As firm believers in the infallible Word, our church is committed to the principle that the doctrine and practice which binds the church must be "expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture" (WCF 1.6). The last phrase of this regulative principle is often misunderstood and misapplied.

Dr. Strimple indicates that the "positive scriptural warrant" demanded by this principle is a matter of degrees. He alleges that the demand for 100% clarity "may well leave us paralyzed" (p. 17, col. 1). This entirely misses the point of our Confession. The principle is a matter of logic (syllogistic reasoning), not probability. The binding conclusions deduced from Scripture must be based on express scriptural premises.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:2 Paul addresses all of the saints in the Corinthian church, male and female. In chapter 11 he delivers the Lord's command for the church to partake of the Lord's Supper. Based on these two clear premises we conclude that women are commanded to partake, too. The conclusion is as binding as the premises. This has nothing to do with probability. If either of the two premises in such a deduction is false or merely probable (unclear), the conclusion is invalid and not binding on the church. This is why our Confession instructs us to let the clear passages explain the unclear (WCF 1.9). Romans 16:1,2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 prove that some women were recognized for their diaconal service in the N.T. churches. These passages do not provide the premises to prove that women were ordained to the office of deacon.

Dr. Strimple's assertion that we need biblical warrant to exclude women from the ordained office of deacon based on Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28 is unfounded. These two passages prove that men and women are equal as God's image-bearers and as redeemed in Christ. They refer to the general office of believer and not special office or marriage roles. I hope to demonstrate that the biblical doctrines of office and ordination, as well as passages dealing with special offices in the N.T., explicitly exclude women from the eldership and the diaconate.

## Ordination and Office

Ordination is the biblical rite of transferring authority from one divinely-called leader (office-bearer) to another, usually with the symbolic "laying on of hands" (1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22). Numbers 27:15-23 is a classic text on ordination. Notice the strong emphasis on authority. "May the

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the Committee.

Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community (v. 16) .... Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him” (v. 20). This was not a magical rite but a public symbol of identification and transfer of power in recognition of God’s call to office.

It is no surprise to find ordination in the N.T. In fact, the first ordination which we encounter after Pentecost is in connection with deacons in Acts 6:1-6. The absence of the noun *deacon* in this passage does not argue against seeing this as the first appearance of N.T. deacons. Here the apostolic foundation was laid for the ordinary office of deacon delineated in 1 Timothy 3. The verb *diakoneo*, “to serve (to deacon)” is used in Acts 6:2, and the ministry of “serving (deaconing)” is used in vss. 1 and 4. Furthermore, there is a list of qualifications for (v.3) and ordination to (v.6) the office.

It is crucial to note that the purpose of the apostles was to appoint men over this responsibility. The verb used means “to put in charge of” (v.3). This language is strikingly similar to that of Numbers 27:16 mentioned above. The apostles understood the importance of ordination in delegating a portion of their ministry to the seven men. Ordination to office is public appointment to oversee the ministry of the church whether it is word or deed ministry.

When the offices of elder and deacon are set forth by Paul in 1 Timothy 2 and 3 the theme of authority and leadership is prominent. In 2:12–13 women are explicitly forbidden to teach or exercise authority over men in the church. Paul’s purpose in writing the entire section was that “you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household” (3:15). Authority in the church is analogous to authority in the family (household). Therefore both elders and deacons should be proven family leaders before they can have leadership in the larger family of the church. Both are to rule (lead, manage, pro/stem/, cf. 1 Thess. 5:12) their own households well (3:4, 12). The emphasis is on oversight and authoritative leadership.

Philippians 1:1 indicates that the apostle thought of both elders and deacons as leaders of the Philippian congregation, since he singles them out in his greeting. The fact that elders and deacons lead in distinct spheres in no way reduces the leadership involved in each. The titles stand as complements, not as a contrast. Paul’s intention is to address them as leaders not to contrast their ministries. Word and deed ministry represents a division of labor in the life of the church (1 Pet. 4:10, 11) which is reflected in the two offices provided to give leadership in these ministries.

Acts 6 is clear in emphasizing the oversight involved in both offices. Our Form of Government reflects this emphasis in stating that the board of deacons “shall oversee the ministry of mercy” (FG XI.4, p. 19). Furthermore when a deacon is ordained, the congregation is asked to “promise to yield him all that honor, encouragement, and obedience in the Lord to which his office, according to the Word of God and the Constitution of the church, entitles him” (FG XXV.7.c, p.83).

### **Deaconing Women**

Who, then, was Phoebe? As I have suggested in the title, she was *a* deaconess; but she was not ordained. Only three of the thirty N.T. uses of the word *diakonos* found in Romans 16:1 clearly refer to the office of deacon. For this reason both the KJV and the NIV translate this word as “servant” in Romans 16:1. The most that can be ascertained from this reference is that Phoebe was recognized for her diaconal service in the Cenchranean church. Nothing is said of her leadership in ordained office.

As Dr. Strimple inadvertently concludes, we must look elsewhere to decide whether or not it is “proper for a woman to serve in the office of deacon.” What is disturbing is that he is willing to ordain women to the diaconate based on a “natural understanding” of a passage which says nothing about ordained office. It is just at this point that we must be guided by 1 Timothy 2 and 3.

Who, then, were the “women” of 1 Timothy 3:11? While both the KJV and the NIV translate this word as “wives,” this probably limits the word more than the context requires. The absence of the possessive pronoun “their” is decisive at this point, though certainly deacons’ wives may have been included. The most that can be concluded from this verse is that some women, like Phoebe, were closely associated with the work of the deacons (which as Acts 6 shows would be of special help in dealing with ministry to women).

The very presence of this verse in the middle of Paul’s discussion of qualifications for the office of deacon proves that he could not have women office-bearers in mind. If women were included in the office of deacon, Paul would have no reason to single out “women” in v. 11. Furthermore, the requirement for deacons to be husbands of one wife and rule their own households well (v. 12) would make no sense. If Paul had female deacons in mind, surely he would have used that word to refer to them here.

What we have in Romans 16:1–2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 are what Calvin wisely referred to as a “second order” of deacons made up of an auxiliary of women who assisted the ordained deacons (*Institutes*. IV.3.9).

### **Van Bruggen**

It is somewhat surprising that Dr. Strimple should quote *so* extensively from Prof. J. Van Bruggen (New Testament professor in the “Article 31” seminary in Kampen, the Netherlands). In *Office in the Apostolic Church*, Van Bruggen contends that there is one continuing office in the N.T., that of overseer or elder. Therefore, deacons should not be ordained as part of the consistory (session and diaconate). They should be “assistants” to the elders and not “deacon-office-bearers.” They are to be elected and appointed, not ordained.<sup>2</sup>

This would effectively remove the possibility “of unlocking the office of teaching and overseeing for women, which Scripture expressly forbids.” If this one-office scheme is to work, “then either one has to change the profile of the diaconate or to declare that the deaconesses to be elected are not female-deacons.” Out of great respect for the history of his church, with its high view of deacons as ordained office-bearers, he concludes, “It is possible to leave the situation concerning the deacons as it is and to create next to it a second diaconate (with deaconesses).”

While I disagree with Van Bruggen’s conclusion that deacons are not ordained officers, I appreciate his respect for the authority connected with ordained office. He has dealt with this question in a way quite different than Dr. Strimple.

### **Some Practical Effects**

Let us conclude by focusing on the practical effects of these three views before us: If the diaconate is not ordained (Van Bruggen) or has no overseeing authority (under a revision of our Form of Government) though ordained (Strimple), the oversight of the broad range of diaconal ministry will burden the elders in precisely the way that the N.T. diaconal office was designed to avoid (Acts 6:2b, 4).

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<sup>2</sup> Quotes are from an “Unofficial and Preliminary Translation of Chapter Five” by Adam DeJong.

1. If women are ordained to the diaconate, it is hard to understand how this will square with the biblical doctrines of the office of deacon and ordination. And because our churches associate authority with ordination and office, two dangerous results are likely: (a) women deacons will exercise authority and oversight in policy-making and administration; and (b) it will only be *a* short step to “unlock” (Van Bruggen) the office of elder to women.

2. If we add a deacon’s auxiliary to our present structure, the ordained deacons will lead the auxiliary in its work, relieve the session of direct oversight and will not compromise on the issue of male headship and authority in the church. And the Phoebes (as well as the Stephens) will be mobilized to use their gifts to God’s glory and the good of the whole body of Christ.

May the OPC not send a mixed signal to our churches or to a watching world. Let us put our Phoebes to work in the way our Lord has ordained in his infallible Word.