

Women in Office, Especially About “Deaconesses”

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1. Motivation

Reformed Churches today are challenged to give a clear answer to the question of whether females should be allowed into office in the church. This seems to have a lot to do with the rapid changes in the social position of women. At the end of the twentieth century, the women's emancipation movement has widely influenced our family, church, and social life.

Most Reformed Churches accordingly have debated the position of women in the congregation. The Church does not live on an island, she exists in the world. Many sisters have risen socially and often take on leading positions, especially since they are better educated than was the case in previous centuries. In such situations some Churches have accommodated their structures to the spirit of the times and accepted a new hermeneutic: the idea that the teaching of the Bible is bound to a certain time and culture. And they eclectically find statements in the Bible that are said to be out of date and difficult to uphold. On this basis, they have introduced women to the office of the Church.[\[1\]](#)

Some Churches merely accept female deacons, not allowing women the other offices such as elder or minister of the Word.[\[2\]](#) However, in other cases it became evident that the acceptance of female deacons was just a first step toward accepting women in the office of elder and even as minister of the Word. Therefore it is very necessary to examine whether God's Word allows women even to have the office of deacon in the church.

The Bible is the Word of God. God Himself speaks to us from the Bible with absolute authority. God, the Holy Spirit, speaking in the Bible is the supreme judge of all religious controversies and of all private opinion. The Bible is the rule of faith and life.[\[3\]](#) Hence the church should listen to what the Bible says (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 20:17-35; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17; Titus 1:5-9). There are clear commands and requirements for the office. In the middle ages the Church lost its biblical offices because of the hierarchical development in the Church. But the Churches of the Reformation finally restored the office according to the Scriptures. There were few questions about the office of elder, even though there was some unclarity as to the distinction between the elder and the minister.

One of the clear prescriptions for eldership is that it is limited only to male members, because its task is to exercise authority over the congregation and to correct its members by discipline. This is a clear instruction of the Bible. The Holy Spirit says through Paul, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man: she should be silent" (1 Timothy 2:12). Of course, this instruction does not mean an absolute silence of women in all times and places. It is certain that women should not take an authoritative teaching position or a position of authoritative correction (discipline) in the church. But they could pray and prophesy in the congregation (1 Corinthians 11:5). This instruction of silence was given to Timothy not because of the particular culture of Ephesus of that time. It has permanent validity, because the instruction was based on creation. Therefore it is valid in all times and places. For the Word of God, clarifying the reason, says, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived: it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner" (1 Timothy 2:13-14). This instruction was essentially the same as what Jesus had said earlier.

When He was asked by some Pharisees, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" He replied, referring to the ancient law of creation, "Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' . . . Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:3-6). In the beginning God created man, male and female, in His image, and they were united in love ("bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"). However, there was a differentiation in their respective roles: the male bears the responsibility of leading, and the female is to be his help-mate. The functioning of these different roles is necessary not only in matrimony, but also in congregational life. We conclude, then, that God's Word limits the office of elder to males.

2. The office of deacon not limited to the showing of Christian mercy

The Bible does not speak as clearly about the office of deacon as it does about the eldership. There are only two places that clearly mention the deacon as an officer of the church: 1 Timothy 3:8-13 mentions the requirements for this office as it also does for the eldership; in addition, Philippians 1:1 places deacons next to bishops.

Owing to the paucity of evidence about the office of deacons in the Bible, many differing views have appeared in the history of the Church. Churches that maintain an episcopal system of church government have seen it as an office of the minister of the Word. In the Anglican Church, for example, "deacon" is used to indicate the minister.

What was the function of the deacon in the early Church? It is not described as clearly as the eldership. From 1 Timothy 3 it is clear that the deacon should meet almost the same requirements as the bishop, with the exception of the ability to teach. But it is not easy to determine clearly the function of the deacon. For a long time Reformed Churches have understood its task as showing Christian mercy and caring for the people's material need. Its origin is seen in the seven men in Acts 6, although they are never called deacons in that chapter.

However, a different view of these men has recently been presented in Reformed circles. It has been argued that the seven men cannot be related to today's office of deacon, but rather that they were ordained to ensure the proper functioning of congregational communion.[\[4\]](#)

Reformed scholars have often tried to base the ministry of mercy of the deacon office by referring to the threefold office of Christ. According to this view, diaconal ministry is related to the high priestly office of Christ. Dr. H. Bavinck's remark is very pointed:

"Through the teaching office He teaches, through the office of elder He leads, through the office of deacon He cares for His flock; and through all three He shows Himself to be our highest prophet, our eternal king, and our merciful high priest."[\[5\]](#)

In accordance with this view of the offices, most Reformed Churches have long maintained the position that the task of the deacon is strictly limited to caring for people in need. In the many welfare states of this century, however, the necessity of diaconal ministry has gradually decreased and its work is no longer so closely related to that of showing mercy. As a result their field of ministry has broadened. Nevertheless, the task of the deacons in Reformed Churches has for the most part remained limited to the care of the needy.

However, the ministerial field of deacon is certainly broader than that of showing Christian mercy by caring for the needy. The word *diakonoV* means "servant," "helper," and it can be understood in a broader sense than giving material help for the needy in the church. Deacons can serve the Church by helping to improve the functioning of the communion of saints or by assisting the pastoral work of the minister or by looking after the congregational gathering on the Lord's Day. Therefore, it is not desirable to limit the diaconal service to the material care of the needy.

2. The difference between deacons and elders

Our next question is where the differentiation between diacony and eldership lies. It is quite clear that deacons did not have a teaching function, for the requirement "able to teach" is prescribed only for overseers, elders, and not for deacons (1 Timothy 3:1-13). Stephen and Philip, two of the seven men found in Acts 6, did preach, but it is not clear whether they were ordained as deacons, as was mentioned earlier. Deacons are mentioned alongside the bishops in Philippians 1:1, but this does not mean that the deacons were teachers along with the bishops.

However one thing seems to be very clear: elders formed a college distinct from the deacons in the church. The elders of the Church of Ephesus formed a council of elders (*presbyterium*) that laid their hands on Timothy for ordination (1 Timothy 4:14). When Paul called the elders of the Church of Ephesus to him at Miletus, he merely called the elders, not the deacons as well. The contents of his speech was suited only to the elders as overseers of the flock and guardians of the delivered gospel. It was the elders who carried out an authoritative ceremonial act of ordination and exercised authoritative teaching and corrective discipline in the church. No evidence can be found that deacons were involved in this authoritative act.

The word *diakonov* means "one who serves," "servant," or "minister." Hence deacons were really servants who served the congregation just as the word meant. Every believer is living under the command of love and of service (John 15:12). A true Christian serves because the Lord Jesus Christ came to serve in this world (Mark 10:45). The Christian community is a community of love, a community of serving. The Lord wanted to have an office whose leading role was serving in His Church; so He instituted the office of deacon. The prototype of the deacon was Christ. Thus the deacon can be seen as a representative of the serving role of the congregation.

Endnotes

[1] The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. already had female elders in 1930 and female ministers of the Word in 1957. The Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (synodical) accepted female elders in 1967-8. The Christian Reformed Church in North America accepted female elders in 1995 and ordained female ministers of the Word in 1996. The Presbyterian Church in Korea (Tonghap group) accepted female ministers of the Word in 1994. [Editor's note: *The above named Church, in the 1930s, was then known as the Presbyterian Church in the USA (or PCUSA). It was renamed—as above—after the union in 1958 with the old United Presbyterian Church of North America*].

[2] E.g. The Netherlands Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken) accepted deaconesses in 1996.

[3] Westminster Confession 1:2, 10; Belgic Confession Articles 5 and 7.

[4] See J. van Bruggen, *Ambten in de Apostolische Kerk*. Kampen, 1987, pp. 74, 75.

[5] H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4th ed., 4:371.

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