

A Biblical Look at the Role of Female Deacons

From the Elders of Grace Bible Church

Introduction and Purpose:

This paper defines the office of deacon at Grace Bible Church and presents the biblical basis for affirming female deacons. Its purpose is not to argue that those who hold a different view are wrong. The question of whether women may serve officially as deacons, or deaconesses, has been debated since the early church. Although women served as deacons in the early church, the practice was not universal. We recognize and respect that others hold a different position; however, Grace Bible Church has maintained this view since its founding in 1986 under its founding pastor and governing board.

The Scripture quotations throughout this paper are taken from the Legacy Standard Bible (LSB). We recognize that readers may prefer different translations; however, translations can reflect the theological perspectives and interpretive choices of their translators. We have chosen the LSB because it is highly regarded by many respected Bible teachers. John MacArthur commented on the LSB as follows:

“It’s everything I would want in a Bible in terms of the way it is produced and manufactured, but more than that, it is everything I would want in a Bible from a translation standpoint. This is the best translation the English language has ever seen, and I know that, because I know the men who produced it...”

He has also called it “the best I’ve ever read” and something “as close as the English language has ever gotten” to the original autographs.”

In support of women deacons:

1. The definition and function of deacons.

διάκονος diakonos; probably from an obsolete διάκω diakō (to run on errands); an attendant, i.e. (genitive case) a waiter (at table or in other menial duties); — deacon, minister, servant. An official church office. Emphasizes humble service rather than governance or teaching authority.

AV (31) - minister 20, servant 8, deacon 3;

1. a deacon is a servant and in no way should be seen as an overseer or having any form of authority over a man. Paul makes this clear in 1Ti 2:9 where he states: *“But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority (usurp authority) over a man, but to remain quiet.”*
2. Definition: one who executes the commands of another, esp. of a master, a servant, attendant, or minister (in our case of the elders).
 1. the servant of a king
 2. a deacon, one who, by virtue of the office assigned to him by the church, to include but not limited to caring for the poor and has charge of and distributes the money collected for their use, specific service to other women where a man would be inappropriate.
 3. a waiter, one who serves food and drink

2. Overview of the passages that mention the word deacon as a role in New Testament

- Act 6:1-6 Often cited as the first deacons of the church. The word 'serve' is mentioned by Peter when he says: "It is not pleasing to God for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables." Seven men are put forth and after praying the disciples laid hands on them. It is questionable whether these men were official deacons in the Jerusalem church. Their title deacon is never given to them nor are they called deacons anywhere else in Acts. They were selected for a specific task (business) and there is no indication that their duties extended beyond this.
- Rom 16:1 "*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.*" Phoebe is identified not as just a servant (διάκονον = deacon) but a deacon of the church in Cenchrea. The choice of words strongly indicates an office in that church.
- Phi 1:1 "*To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:*"
- 1Ti 3:8-12 *Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not fond of dishonest gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And these (men *) must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.*

Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.

Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, leading their children and their own households well.

** Note: Only NASB and LSB have the phrase "And these men" in verse 8. All other translations simply translate the phrase και οἱ τοι δε δοκιμαζέσθωσαν πρώτον as "And let these also first be tested/proved" The word οἱ τοι means: this or these. In this verse it is masculine which is necessary to agree with the gender of the word deacon in verse 8. In the Greek when speaking of mixed company the masculine gender is most often used. Therefore this verse is most likely translated 'and let these also first be proved/tested'.*

The main issue of contention is whether the phrase: Γυναῖκας ὡσαύτως (Women likewise) in verse 11 is speaking about women in general and thus female deacons or wives of male deacons.

It is our understanding that this verse is most likely speaking of women deacons and not wives for the following reasons:

- i. The omission of the qualifications for the wives of elders in 1Ti 3:1-7 begs the question why specify qualifications for the wives of deacons but not for wives of elders. Elders are in a much more visible role in the church and so would be their wives.

Elder's wives do serve alongside their husbands as role models, in hospitality, mentoring of young women and other modes of service. Her character would be highly visible.

To assume that the wives of deacons were to assist their husbands as assistants is extrabiblical (outside the) to writing of Paul to the churches and unsubstantiated. No where does Paul imply that the wives of deacons are to assist their deacon husbands.

- ii. Verse 11 opens with the words, “women likewise” similar to Paul’s opening in verse 8. The word likewise is the Greek word ὡσαύτως, which also translates as: in the same way, even so, after the same (in like) manner. This indicates a new bullet under the previous heading. In this case Paul is writing about the qualifications of a deacon. The opening with *likewise* indicates that he is starting a new bullet or role under the heading of deacon qualifications. Similar to 1Ti 5:24 where Paul is speaking of the sins of some men in 24 and then in 25 opens with *likewise* also the deeds of the good are quite evident. One would not argue that the deeds of the good are connected to the sins of some (vs 24) but rather is a second bullet under the subject that our actions will be exposed now or later.
- iii. γυναῖκας (women) noun accusative plural. It can mean either women or wives depending on context. Frequency of the word woman/women being translated as wife, wives, woman or women:
- bride (1), wife (71), wife's (1), wives (11), woman (96), woman's (1), women (33).
 - Number of times this word is used to mean a man’s spouse = 84 (40%)
 - Number of times this word is used to mean woman or women = 130 (60%)
 - The word γυνή (gynē)(root of γυναῖκας), (woman/women) occurs 214 times in the New Testament. The following is a summary of many of the occurrences of word *woman/women* when translated as wife/wives:
 - Act 5:1 Ananias, with his wife Sapphira. – Σαπφίρη Sapphira, τῆ γυναικὶ wife, αὐτοῦ his
 - Act 5:2 with his wife’s full knowledge – τῆς his. Γυναικός wife’s
 - Act 7:7.and his wife came in – καὶ and, ἡ γυνὴ wife, αὐτοῦ his
 - Act 18: 2 with his wife Priscilla – καὶ with, Πρίσκιλλαν Priscilla, γυναῖκα wife ,αὐτοῦ his
 - Act 21:5 with wives and children – σὺν with, γυναῖξιν wives, καὶ and, τέκνοις children. Here the context clearly is speaking about family both children and wives.
 - Act 24:24 Drusilla, his wife who was a Jewess - ἰδίᾳ his γυναικὶ wife, οὕσῃ who was, Ἰουδαία a Jewess
 - Rom 7:2 for the married woman is - ὕπανδρος married, γυνὴ woman
 - 1Co 5:1 someone has his fathers wife – γυναῖκά wife, τινα someone, τοῦ his, πατρὸς father’s, ἔχειν has. Here the ‘his’ is referring to the man’s (possessive) father, or *his fathers woman (wife)*.
 - 1Co 7:2 not to touch a woman; have his own wife - ἑαυτοῦ his own, γυναῖκα wife, ἐχέτω is to have
 - 1Co 7:10 the wife should not leave her husband – γυναῖκα the wife, ἀπὸ, ἀνδρὸς (genitive = possessive, lit: the woman her man should not leave)

- Eph 5:22 wives be subject to your own husbands – γυναῖκες Wives, τοῖς ἰδίοις to your own, ἀνδράσιν husband
- Eph 5:25 Husbands love your wives - ἄνδρες Husbands, ἀγαπᾶτε love, τὰς your, γυναῖκας wives
- Eph 5:28-33. Love their own wives, own wife, his wife, own wife, wife must ... respect her husband.
- Col 3:19 husbands love your wives - ἄνδρες Husbands, ἀγαπᾶτε love, τὰς your, γυναῖκας wives
- 1Ti 3:2,12 husband of one wife – μιᾶς of one, γυναικὸς wife, ἄνδρα husband – the word for woman here is in the genitive case which indicates a possession, or a man’s woman.
- 1Ti 5:9 wife of one man – similar to the phrase – one woman man in this case the word man is in the genitive case rendering this being a woman of one man.
- Tit 1:5 husband of one wife – same as 1Ti 3:2,12
- 1Pe 3:1 wives be submissive to your own husbands – γυναῖκες wives, ἰδίοις to your own, ἀνδράσιν husbands

In almost all cases the word woman is connected to the man with a possessive pronouns or adjectives such as “his” or “your” or is in the genitive case which implies possession.

In the case of 1Tim 3:11 the word woman has no such dependency. This further supports that argument that this is not speaking of wives of male deacons.

Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was meticulous in his word choices. In most cases when he was speaking of wives, he connected it to their men (husbands) with a possessive style. The fact that he omitted this in the case of verse 11 (female deacons) speaks loudly.

If Paul wanted to say that deacon’s wives were to assist their husbands, he could have easily added the phrase “their wives” in verse 11 instead of “likewise women”. There is NO **Their** There!

3. The history of female deacons in the early church.

- **New Testament Era** (1st century): The Apostle Paul explicitly commends Phoebe as a diakonos (deacon/servant) of the church at Cenchræe in Romans 16:1-2, describing her as a benefactor of many, including himself. She is the only person in the New Testament specifically identified with this title in relation to a local church, and she carried Paul’s letter to Rome.
- **Early 2nd century evidence:** Around 111-112 AD, Roman governor Pliny the Younger (in his letter to Emperor Trajan) interrogated two female slaves called *ministrae* (deaconesses/ministers)

under torture as part of his investigation into Christian practices in Bithynia, providing one of the earliest non-biblical references to women holding this recognized role in the church.

- **3rd–4th centuries (church orders and writings):** Documents like the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (mid-3rd century) and the *Apostolic Constitutions* (c. 380) outline specific roles, qualifications, and ordination rites (including laying on of hands and invocation of the Holy Spirit) for deaconesses, who assisted with baptism, ministry to women, and other service. Church fathers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen also referenced women in diaconal ministry.
- **5th century (ecumenical council recognition):** The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD, Canon 15) regulated the ordination of deaconesses, setting a minimum age of 40 and addressing their ministry, treating it as an official ecclesiastical office parallel in some ways to male deacons. This reflects widespread practice in the Eastern church.
- **Ongoing examples through the early centuries:** Archaeological evidence includes tombstones such as that of Sofia the Deacon (4th century, Jerusalem, called “a second Phoebe”) and others like Olympias (influential deaconess in Constantinople), with inscriptions and records documenting women deacons across regions like Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece, and the West into the 6th century and beyond.

4. The Grace Bible Church Constitution recognize the role of women serving as deacons.

- Article V Offices, Paragraph 3 Deacons and Deaconesses

A. Qualifications:

The candidate must be a godly man or woman, who is a voting member of the church and meets the following requirements:

- 1) Agrees totally with the Basic Statement of Faith for Grace Bible Church
- 2) Agrees with the Articles of this Constitution as written
- 3) Meets the qualifications of deacon as stipulated in I Tim 3:8-13
- 4) Is prepared by experience and shows through his/her actions their ability to fulfill the duties of the position as stated in the Scriptures.

Conclusion:

Our position that women may serve as deacons is grounded in Scripture, supported by evidence from early church history, and affirmed in the constitution of Grace Bible Church. The role of deacon or deaconess is one of service, carried out under the authority and direction of the church elders. While we recognize that not all Bible scholars or churches share this view, we believe this position is consistent with the teaching of Scripture. Therefore, we are prepared to uphold and defend this doctrine and to appoint women as deacons, as needed, in order to serve and strengthen the church body, the bride of Christ.