

Getting Our Deacons in a Row

Lessons from Church History: The Early Church

What Did Deacons Do in the Early Church?¹

Clement of Alexandria (150–215 AD)

“In the church, the elders attend to the department [service] which has improvement [of the soul] for its object; the deacons attend to the ministerial [service]” (Clement, *Stromata*, 7:1; ANF 2:523)

Hippolytus of Rome (170–235 AD)

But the deacon is not ordained to the priesthood but to serve the bishop and to carry out the bishop’s commands. He does not take part in the council of the clergy. . . . He receives only what is confided to him under the bishop’s authority. (Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, 43.9; HT, 594).

***Apostolic Constitution* (ca. 380 AD)**

The deacon is to the “minister to the bishop, as Christ does to his Father. Let the deacon serve him without blame in everything, as Christ does nothing of himself, but always does those things that please the Father.” (*Apost. Const.*, 2.4.26, ANF 7:410; HT, 594).

Let the bishop judge the weighty matters. But let the deacons be the bishop’s ear, eye, mouth, heart, and soul. In this way, the bishop will not be distracted with trivial things but only the more considerable matters. (*Apost. Const.*, 2.6.44; ANF 7:410; HT, 594)

“[The bishop] does not baptize, nor does he administer the Lord’s Supper. But when a bishop or presbyter has administered the Supper, the deacon distributes the elements to the people, not as a priest but as one who ministers to the priests.” (*Apost. Const.*, 8.3.28; ANF 7:494)

What Did *Diakonia* (Service) Look Like?

- Meeting Physical Needs
- Responding to Plagues
- Giving to the Poor
- Caring for the Imprisoned

How Did the Diaconate Change?

- Hierarchy Pervaded
- Deacons Became Sub-Bishops
- Service Fell to the Laity
- “Parachurch” Ministries Emerged (e.g., individuals, confraternities, monastic societies, etc)

What Can We Learn?

- Confusion in the Diaconate, When Deacons are Oriented to Elders / Leadership
- Deacons Seeking Positions of Leadership Invites Pride
- The Needs of the Church Suffer When Deacons Don’t ‘Serve’
- The Needs Will Be Met By Faithful Christians in Structures Outside the Church

¹ For a biblical response, see the handout ‘*Getting Our Diakonoi in a Row.*’

Were There Female Deacons in the Early Church?

Pliny the Younger (Governor of Pontus/Bithynia 111–113 AD)

Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition. ([Letters, 10.96](#))

Clement of Alexandria (2nd C.)

Clement speaks of *diakonoi gunaikēs* who undertake the instruction of women ([Clement] supposes that the wives of the apostles acted in this capacity as *syndiakonoi* with their husbands). (Commentary on 1 Corinthians 9:5; *Stromata* 3,6,53.3-4; in Lampe 62–63)

Origen of Alexandria (3rd C.)

“This text [Rom. 16:1] teaches . . . two things: that there are . . . women deacons in the church, and that women, who have given assistance to so many people and who by their good works deserve to be praised by the apostle, should be accepted in the diaconate.” (*Commentary on the Epistles to the Romans*; in *HT*, 594)

Apostolic Constitutions (380 A.D.)

Honor the deaconess in the place of the Holy Spirit. She should not do or say anything without the deacon, as the Comforter does not say or do anything of himself but gives glory to Christ by waiting for his pleasure. And as we cannot believe in Christ without the teaching of the Spirit, so do not let any woman address herself to the deacon or bishop without the deaconess. (2.4.26; ANF 7:410)

Ordain a deaconess who is faithful and holy for ministry toward women. For sometimes the bishop cannot send a deacon—who is a man—to the women on account of unbelievers. Therefore, send a woman—a deaconess—on account of the vain imaginations of the wicked. (3.2; ANF 7:431)

Let the deacons be in all things unspotted, as the bishop himself is to be, only more active; in number according to the largeness of the Church, that they may minister to the infirm as workmen that are not ashamed. **And let the deaconess** be diligent in taking care of the women; but both of them ready to carry messages, to travel about, to minister, and to serve. . . . Let every one therefore know his proper place, and discharge it diligently with one consent, with one mind, as knowing the reward of their ministrations.” (ANF 7:432)

O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah; who didst not disdain that Thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, didst ordain women to be keepers of Thy holy gates,—do Thou now also look down upon this Thy servant, who is to be **ordained to the office of a deaconess**, and grant her Thy Holy Spirit, and “cleanse her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit,” that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to Thy glory, and the praise of Thy Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to Thee and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.” (ANF 7: 492)

Jerome (347–420)²

“Salvina, however, consecrated her life to deeds of piety, and became one of Chrysostom’s deaconesses.” (*NPNF2* 6:163)

Chrysostom (349–407 AD) in a message on 1 Timothy 3:11

“Some have thought that this [1 Tim. 3:11] is said of women generally, but it is not so, for why should he introduce anything about women to interfere with his subject? He is speaking of those who hold the rank of Deaconesses.” (*NPNF2* 13: 441)

What Should We Learn from Deaconesses in the Early Church?

² At this same period time, Gregg Allison (*Historical Theology*, 25–26) describes a widowed deaconess named Olympias. She supported the ministries of John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus.