

Deacons: From the Reformation to the Present

Martin Luther

The diaconate . . . is a ministry, not for reading the Gospel and the epistle, as the practice is nowadays, but for distributing the Churches bounty to the poor, in order that the priests might be relieved of the burden of temporal concerns and give themselves more freely to prayer and the Word. This was the purpose of the institution of the diaconate, as we read in Acts 6. Therefore, whoever does not know or does not preach the gospel is not only not a priest or a bishop but is a plague of the church. Under the false title of priest for bishop he is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Such men oppress the gospel. (*The Babylonian Captivity*, WA 6: 566–567.5)

John Calvin

The care of the poor was committed to deacons, of whom two classes are mentioned by Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, "He that giveth, let him do it with simplicity;" "he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness" (Rom. 12:8). As it is certain that he is here speaking of public offices of the Church, there must have been two distinct classes. If I mistake not, he in the former clause designates deacons, who administered alms; in the latter, those who had devoted themselves to the care of the poor and the sick. ***Such were the widows of whom he makes mention in the Epistle to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:10). For there was no public office which women could discharge save that of devoting themselves to the service of the poor. If we admit this (and it certainly ought to be admitted), there will be two classes of deacons, the one serving the Church by administering the affairs of the poor; the other, by taking care of the poor themselves.*** For although the term *diakonia* has a more extensive meaning, Scripture specially gives the name of deacons to those whom the Church appoints to dispense alms, and take care of the poor, constituting them as it were stewards of the public treasury of the poor. (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.3.9)

Post-Reformation: Scotland

- They supported the pastor, the schools, and the poor with in their parishes.
- The church's whole neighborhood was envisioned as a ministry area for the deacons.

Post-Reformation: Netherlands

- *The Synod of Dort* (1574) instructed deacons to help civil magistrates care for the poor. They were extensions of the state, but the state and church were of a piece.
- *The Synod of Dort* (1618–19) reinforced care for the poor – first for members of the church, but also for "inhabitants and strangers."
- Seventeenth-century deacons supported "orphanages, homes for the elderly, schools, several clothing manufacturing shops and bakeries for distribution to the poor."

Post-Reformation: England

- The Westminster Assembly spent months discussing elders and the Presbyterian system of church. How many days did it spend on deacons? Only one. Inattention to this vital office is not new!
- Focus on the poor remained.

American Presbyterian

- First American General Assembly (1833) – deacons were to care for the poor in the church and "the temporalities of the church" (general care, maintenance of property, etc.)
- The scope of mercy varied – some restricted care to the congregation, others sought to give charity to non-Christians "to open the door for more direct spiritual ministrations."

American Reformed

- The Reformed church brought with them the heritage of their Dutch forefathers—deacons were ministers of mercy and not CFOs. Deacon ministry was a key way of community outreach for Dutch churches.
- In this structure, deacons often worked in pairs and not by themselves.

Baptist Church Confessions

A Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles (1609)

John Smyth

The ministers of the church are not only bishops (*episcopos*), to whom the power is given to dispense both the word and the sacraments, ***but also deacons, men and widows, who attend to the affairs of the poor and sick brothers.*** (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 101; Allison, *Historical Theology*, 606)

The Declaration of the Faith of English People Remaining in Amsterdam in Holland (1611)

Thomas Helwys

The officers of every church or congregation are either elders, who by their office do especially feed the flock concerning their souls (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2–3) or ***deacons, men and women who by their office relieve the necessities of the poor and impotent brother concerning their bodies*** (Acts 6:1–4). (*BC*, 121–22; *HT*, 606)

Second London Confession (1689); Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742)

Chap. 26.8. A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered), for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power or duty, which he intrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders, and deacons. (Acts 20:17; Philippians 1:1)

Chap. 26.9. The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the office of bishop or elder in a church, is, that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself; and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands of the eldership of the church, if there be any before constituted therein; ***and of a deacon that he be chosen by the like suffrage, and set apart by prayer, and the like imposition of hands.*** (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 4:14; Acts 6:3, 5, 6)

New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833)

XIII. Of a Gospel Church. We believe that a visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by his laws; and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word; that its only scriptural officers are bishops or pastors and deacons whose qualifications, claims and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus.

Baptist Faith and Message (2000)

VI. The Church. A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, **governed by His laws**, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible **and accountable to Christ as Lord**. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. **While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.**

The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, **believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.**

Women Deacons: From Rome to the Reformation to the Present

Widows

During the Middle Ages, widows continued to care for others and many roles once given to deaconesses were passed on to widows. This would show up again in Calvin's Geneva. Still, there were other considerations.

Physical Uncleaness (Menstruation)

Influenced by the ongoing application of the Levitical priesthood (unmediated by Christ), women began to be excluded from diaconal service because of their menstruation.

Theodore Balsomon (12th C. Greek canonist): "In times past, orders of deaconesses were recognized and they had access to the sanctuary, but the monthly affliction banished them. . . ."

Matthew Blastares (14th C. Eastern canonist) ... female deacons were discontinued "because of the monthly flow that cannot be controlled." Cf. Gregory I (590–604)

Female Deacons in Geneva

Such were the widows of whom he makes mention in the Epistle to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:10). For there was no public office which women could discharge save that of devoting themselves to the service of the poor. If we admit this (and it certainly ought to be admitted), there will be two classes of deacons, the one serving the Church by administering the affairs of the poor; the other, by taking care of the poor themselves. (4.3.9)

The Colloquy of Wesel (1568)

- This non-binding council provided advice for churches:

Article 5.5–6: "Especially in the more important cities, it will not be unsuitable to establish two kinds of deacons, some of whom will devote themselves to the work of collecting and distributing alms . . . The others have especially the care of the sick, wounded, and captives"

Article 5.10: "In certain places it will also be suitable, we think, that women of approved faith and probity [virtue] and advanced age be admitted to this office, according to the example of the apostles"

Korean Presbyterian Church

- In Korea, the Presbyterian Church has had deaconesses for a long time. It originated with cultural standards regarding men and women, not feminism.

Baptist

- "Among Baptists, there has been a mixed appraisal of deaconesses." (Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 202).
- "Although deaconesses have existed in every century of Baptist life, the position has never been widespread." (Charles Deweese, *A Community of Believers*, 102)
- Thomas Helwys made a place for them (1611), but most confessions have been silent about the office.
- Generally, General Baptists were more open than Particular Baptists to women deacons. Notable exceptions include R.B.C. Howell, J. R. Graves, and B.H. Carroll.

Baptist Voices

R. B. C. Howell, *The Deaconship*, 131, 34.

Scripture “authorizes, and in sense, certainly by implication, enjoins the appointment of **deaconesses** in the churches of Christ.”

They were “female assistants to the deacons,” who ministered to females, help sick and helpless, and assist females in baptism.

J. R. Graves, *The Baptist Newspaper* (February 22, 1879)

“No good reason why saintly women should not fill the office of **deaconess** to-day in most churches. In fact, they often perform the duties of the office without the name.”

Charles Spurgeon

Deaconesses, an office that most certainly was recognised in the apostolic churches.¹

It would be a great mercy if God gave us the privilege of having many sons who all preached the gospel, and many daughters who were all eminent in the church as teachers, **deaconesses**, missionaries, and the like.²

John Piper

It appears then that the role of deacon is of such a nature that nothing stands in the way of women's full participation in it. Within the diaconate itself, the way the men and women relate to each other would be guided by the sense of appropriateness, growing out of the Biblical teaching of male and female complementarity.³

Mark Dever

That deacons are commanded to be the “husband of one wife” does not preclude the service of women in diaconal positions. The example of Phoebe in Romans 16:1, the use of “deacon” words elsewhere of women in the Scriptures, and to a lesser degree, the long history of deaconesses in Baptist churches, has led our own church happily to embrace the ministry of women serving us as deacons.⁴

John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue

The apostle did not need to address women in his articulation of elder qualifications for the simple fact that there are no female elders. However, he did address women in 3:11 because there are female deacons. Third, the description of Phoebe in Romans 16:1 provides a likely example of a woman who served as a deaconess. There Paul writes, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [a form of *diakonos*] of the church at Cenchreae.” It appears that Phoebe served in some recognized capacity within her local congregation.⁵

¹ *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 13 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1867), 589.

² *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 51 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1905), 259.

³ **Biblical Eldership**: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/biblical-eldership-session-1#Deacons>

⁴ *The Display of God's Glory*, 14.

⁵ *Biblical Doctrine*, 773.