

Trinity's Position on Woman Deacons

The question of how God calls women in the church to participate in diaconal (mercy) ministries is one that has recently come to the fore in our denomination. The tension involved in recognizing both the biblical order and also the biblical equality between men and women has led otherwise like-minded churches to adopt differing practices. These range from commissioning both male and female deacons to restricting the oversight of mercy ministries solely to men.

The issue is not a simple one. It involves careful analysis of the biblical text and patient submission to the policies of the denomination that help the churches try to work through the issue together. Such complexities demand charity towards others and an ongoing openness to correction.

In seeking to be faithful to Scripture and maintain unity within our congregation and denomination, Trinity's Session has determined that the deacon-related ministries of our church will be carried out by a "diaconal team," comprised of both men and women. Those ordained as deacons will be responsible for leading this team, and only men will be eligible for ordination. The following is our attempt to explain the basis for our position.

Foundational Convictions

As we seek to outline our position on the complexities of this matter, it is valuable first to articulate those things we consider to be clear.

Order in Creation: We believe that Scripture is both consistent and clear in presenting a divinely-ordained order within the human household, which has existed from the beginning of creation.¹ In marriage, God has ordained the husband to be the leader in the relationship;² likewise, in the church (the "household of God"³), God has ordained that certain men are to be those given the spiritual authority, under Christ, over that congregation.⁴ We believe this order in no way denigrates women, but rather is analogous to the order within the Trinity, in which the Son and Spirit, though equal to the Father, submit to him.⁵

Equality between Men and Women: We believe men and women, as co-image bearers,⁶ are equal in value and importance within the people of God. Because we are all exhorted to use those gifts God has given us in service of his church,⁷ the church should encourage women to serve in all areas of the church's ministry that do not involve spiritual authority over the congregation. As a general rule, all ministries open to unordained men should also be open to women. These include (but are certainly not

¹ Gen 2:18; 1 Cor 11:7-9; 1 Tim 2:12-13.

² Eph 5:22-24.

³ Eph 2:19.

⁴ 1 Cor 14:34; 1 Tim 2:11-15.

⁵ E.g., John 12:49-50; cf. also 1 Cor 11:3.

⁶ Gen 1:27.

⁷ Rom 12:6-8

limited to) praying and giving testimonies during the worship service,⁸ ministering to the physical needs of the congregation,⁹ and providing pastoral oversight over other women.¹⁰

The Importance of Maintaining Unity: We are called to “maintain” a visible unity within the church, even as we seek to “attain” a more mature unity in Christ.¹¹ This involves sensitivity to the consciences of those in our congregation,¹² and, for our church, a submission to the denominational standards of the PCA.

Women and the Diaconate

We now move to the complex question of how specifically to apply these convictions with regard to deacons.

In Scripture

The office of deacon is only explicitly described in 1 Tim 3:8-13 (although some believe Acts 6 describes the ordination of deacons). Since deacon literally means “servant,” the church has generally understood this office to be one of mercy, ministering to the needs of the church. For example, the PCA’s *Book of Church Order*, which articulates our denomination’s standards for government and discipline, states, “The office of deacon is not one of rule, but rather of service both to the physical and spiritual needs of the people.”

Regarding gender, on one hand, Paul makes the majority of his comments about deacons in reference to men.¹³ These include a statement similar to the one made about that elders that the deacon needs to be the “husband of one wife,” who manages his household well. This latter phrase implies leadership and proper exercise of authority might be part of what is required in a deacon. All of this perhaps suggests that Paul is specifically identifying males as deacons.

On the other hand, one distinct difference from the instructions given to elders is that Paul’s words to the deacons includes qualifications for women (v 11), which may be referring to wives of deacons (as with the ESV and NIV) or simply women deacons (both are possible in the Greek). These standards suggest that Paul expects women to be involved in diaconal ministry in a way that they cannot be involved in the ministry of elders. Further reinforcing this impression is Paul’s description in Rom 16:1 of Phoebe as a “servant” (*diakonos*, the same word used in 1 Tim 3:8 for deacon) of the church at Cenchrae.

Thus in these verses we find apparent precedent both for involving women in diaconal ministry and also, perhaps, for restricting the actual office of deacon to males.

⁸ 1 Cor 11:5.

⁹ Rom 16:1; 1 Tim 3:11.

¹⁰ Tit 2:3-5.

¹¹ Eph 4:1-16.

¹² Rom 14:13-23 ; 1 Cor 8:7-13.

¹³ The “Women, likewise” of verse 11 demonstrates Paul until this point has been addressing men.

In Our Denominational Context

As a member of the PCA, we submit to certain denominational standards, not because we believe them to be inspired or without error, but because we think it is biblical and pleasing to God to make significant decisions together with other churches, rather than by ourselves. Three aspects of these standards, stated in our Book of Church Order, are relevant to this discussion.

First, in our denomination there are certain “offices” within the church that we “ordain” people to. In ordaining, the church publicly bestows and recognizes spiritual authority in certain individuals.¹⁴ Second, deacon is one of the two offices (along with elder) that we are instructed to ordain people to.¹⁵ For this reason, our Book of Church Order explicitly states that the office of deacon is open to men only.¹⁶ Finally, these standards also recommend that godly women work with deacons in their work.¹⁷

Trinity’s Practice

As was previously stated, the Session of Trinity has determined that the oversight of our mercy-related ministries is to be given to a “Diaconal Team,” comprised of both men and women, and that male, ordained deacons will lead this team. We certainly do not believe this is the only biblically viable practice: it appears to us that the Scriptures allow room for variety in this area. Yet we see this as a practice that both faithfully reflects the biblical witness and also maintains unity within our denomination by being in accordance with our standards.

For more on the roles and qualifications for the diaconal team and for deacons, see the “Diaconal Team & Deacon Job Descriptions.”

¹⁴ BOCO 17, 24-6.

¹⁵ BOCO 4-2, 24.

¹⁶ BOCO 7-2.

¹⁷ BOCO 9-7.