

Of Damsels and Deaconesses

Ecclésiology is often overlooked as one of the most important aspects of Christian theology. Examples of wrong ecclesiology abound in many churches around the world, often manifesting itself in faulty church governance. Here's what I mean by this. Because of egalitarian views infiltrating the church since the dawn of the women's liberation movement, many churches have become open to women in the pastoral ministry and have adopted forms of governance that see nothing wrong with women preaching and teaching, in short exercising authority over men.

Such approaches to ecclesiology are undoubtedly sinful. The Apostle Paul, in no uncertain terms, addresses and prohibits a woman from teaching a grown man the Word of God. In his first letter to Timothy he has these instructions for both men and women during the church assembly:

⁸ I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; ⁹ likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, ¹⁰ but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. ¹¹ Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control."

In addition to his expectation of the men to take the lead with preaching and praying in the assembly, and that while they are doing this, to do so in a clear conscience ("lifting holy hands"), he also expects of women not to exercise authority over a man by teaching him. Rather the command for a woman here is to remain submissive to her husband and to the elders, if she is married, but if not married she should be submissive to the leadership of the men in general, specifically the elders, who have been called to preach the Word.

This is no passive role to play at all, since Paul adds that they should not unnecessarily avoid childrearing. Reminiscent of the Genesis account, Paul instructs them not only to be desiring of children, but more so, to actually actively be working toward having children and to be workers at home, regardless of what society might say is a good age to start a family.¹ Lastly, women may fulfill a valuable role in teaching other

¹ Philip H. Towner (2006:235) comments on the role of women in the church, saying: "From the list of possible interpretations, the language of the phrase and the background considerations suggest that (one way or

women, particularly more mature women teaching women who are younger and less mature in the faith (Tit. 2:3-5).

To the above, all biblical churches would agree. However, not all agree to the actual extent of a woman's involvement in church, in particular with regards to the office of *deacon*.

Generally speaking, good churches who are considered to be "like-minded" are split down the middle as it involves their view of women as deaconesses. Some say "absolutely not," while others say "sure, why not." We as Stellenbosch Bible Church have since our founding in the month of May, 2015, opted for the latter view when the church was constituted by one elder (yours truly) and three other families. Perhaps some might have been led to believe that we do not allow women to be deaconesses because of the absence of women deaconesses in our church. However, their absence in our current detachment of deacons has purely been for circumstantial reasons, in particular personal readiness and qualification of women who have since the church's founding been identified and approached as potential deaconesses by the elder (1 Tim. 3:8-13).

Things have not changed since our founding days. So, in order to help those of you who were not members with us during that pioneering first year of our church, I'd like to briefly offer you the reasons for our acknowledgment of the legitimacy of deaconesses.

1. It is not a sin

As Christians we have to always be sure to call sin for what it is. However, it is equally important that we do not call something sinful, if it is not a sin. We have to take the greatest of care with something like women deaconship to not call it sinful if there is no direct and clear biblical injunction to do so. If we do this then we commit the opposite error which some of John's original readers committed. John references this in 1 John 1, saying, "⁸ *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us...*¹⁰ *If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*" The same would also hold true if we said something is sinful, when in fact it is not.

The apostle Peter committed this error when he disallowed Greeks (gentiles) to retain certain facets of their cultural upbringing, particularly their unique cuisine (basically everything that we love to eat today). Peter would not allow Greeks to partake of anything other than a kosher diet when he was in the presence of other Jews who advocated Jewish dietary laws found in the Book of Moses (Lev. 11). This was a sin on his part and something worthy of rebuke from Paul (Gal. 2:11-14). Why did Paul have to rebuke Peter? Clearly, Peter was doing exactly what I am warning against as we attempt to make sense of deaconesses. He called something sinful that wasn't sinful

another) Christian women were not to forego or avoid pregnancy. Willingness to become pregnant (and perhaps to see it through to childbirth) was apparently a very real concern." In other words, actively working toward pregnancy is the responsibility of every Christian woman.

at all.² And this after God told him in a vision not to call anything unclean that he has called clean (Ac. 10:15).

We have to be careful that our view of deaconship does not morph into a false identification of sin. If Peter fell in this trap, so can any Christian.

Now why is all this background information needed? Why do we need this disclaimer about calling sin, sin? The answer is simply the following:

Women who are deacons are not sinning, neither are the elders who promote this view in a given church.

As is obvious from the title of the main point that we are dealing with, our view of women deacons is not a sin issue. I can't stress this enough. However, some are convinced that women will be exercising authority over a man, thus going against what Paul instructed the Ephesian churches referenced above - if they should be made a deaconess.

Here's the main reason why we can know why a woman will not be exercising authority over a man as a deaconess, and this without the help of any particular view of 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

The reason for its not being a sin, apart from my conviction that it is clearly allowed for in 1 Timothy 3, resides with the lexical definition of the word "deacon." Although there are different forms of the word, whether nouns or verbs, the root meaning of the word remains unaltered. In its purest form "deacon" means "servant." The Greek word "*diakonos*" denotes "a person designated for ministry in the church" (Towner, 2006:260). The office however differs from the office of elders in that it is not a position of authority or ruling.

Again Philip Towner (2006:261) helps us to understand its function within the church when looking at its usage within ancient Mediterranean society. He says:

"...one who served as a *diakonos* in non-church settings did so by commission or order of a superior, and as such both represented and operated with the authority of the superior. This clears the way for an understanding of deacons in the church that incorporates both the authority that comes with commissioning and the importance (rather than secondary nature) of the ministry they executed."

In other words, deacons in the early church were identified, commissioned, and blessed by the elders for the service they signed up for. The role of deacon was never intended to be a position of authority. Apart from the etymology of the word *diakonos*, we at least have one clear biblical example of what was envisioned for this office to begin with. The origin of deaconship goes back all the way to the time of the Apostles.

² Particularly food has become a non-issue in Christian life. What I mean by this is that God does not hold any of his children to a specific dietary code anymore, granted that whenever we eat, we do so with an attitude of thankfulness (1 Tim. 4:4). The same Peter should have known better than to hold the gentiles to a Jewish law which he knew has been served and rendered obsolete (Acts 10:9-33).

And it was nothing more than a practical consideration for men like Peter, John and James to get more help as their responsibilities as elders began to sky rocket. Indeed, when the Jerusalem church began to grow more and more, and the need for shepherding and leading became more intense, the apostles unanimously decided to bring in helpers, or more precisely within the context of Acts 6, to commission “waiters” who would free them up for the work of preaching, teaching and all other pastoring responsibilities. And that’s exactly what these deacons did as they helped the first elders of the Jerusalem church not to “*give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.*”

This is exactly the main reason why we as Stellenbosch Bible Church do not see women deaconesses as sinning because they are ostensibly ruling over men. As has been illustrated, the basic definition of the term does not allow for this interpretation. The position is for serving, for waiting tables, if you will. It is to help the elders not have to do every thing in the church, like set-up duty, maintenance, care-giving, the organising of many of these activities, scheduling, and other similar needs that might arise in the church. This leads us to our second reason for accepting deaconesses.

2. It is needed

One thing that I have learned in my ministry so far is that people differ in their aptitudes. And this is a good thing in the Church. All talents are needed and necessary within the bride of Christ. If we apply this to deaconship it will also help us to understand how a woman can contribute in this very practical labour of love.

There are many aspects in most churches that are in need of some extra help, like facilitation, coordination and planning that are simply not possible for the elders to get to. There used to be many more things that I had to do in order to keep the church going normally, in addition to my actual responsibility which is shepherding in all of its facets. This is why we identified some to help me and future elders at our task of shepherding and to free us up entirely for this purpose.

However in our church specifically, the deacon need still remains for some women to join the corps of deacons and specifically help with things that men might be more challenged with, things like scheduling, caring ministry, mercy ministry, child minding responsibilities, like nursery scheduling and facilitating which allows young moms of infants to listen to a sermon once in a while. These are things that women deacons can stand out for, again not as positions of leadership and exercising authority over a man, rather as those who lovingly *serve* in these capacities. As MacArthur (2010:1679) points out, in the early church women deacons typically “...cared for sick believers, the poor, strangers, and those [Christians] in prison. They instructed the women and children (cf. Titus 2:3-5).” Of Phoebe in particular, who was a servant to Paul it is said that “she had the great responsibility of delivering [the letter to the Romans] to the Roman church.” These female deacons also had to be taken care of as widows if they have served faithfully (1 Tim. 5:3-16).

In other words, what we as a church are promoting through female deaconship is a virtue that should be praised and encouraged in our women, especially those who have already excelled in certain ministries. This is not a position that should forever be doubted as borderline sinful and always seen as something that a male could have done equally well or better. There are many things that women, by design, can do better than men. I am often reminded that women can be more intuitive to the needs of people than men, especially to the needs of other women, children, and all who are hurting in one way or another. And I have my wife's backing when I say this because no one understands the needs of our children better than she does. Perhaps it reverts back to their original purpose which is to be "helpers"³ (Gen. 2:18) which actually motivates the need for deaconesses, instead of discouraging it.

3. It is provable

This is the final consideration for our little excursion into deaconship. To be candid, much ink has been spilled on the topic, but as was pointed out in the beginning, like-minded, evangelical churches have over the years learned to disagree amicably on the topic. That should always be our guiding principle, to be loving above all. However, I am also convinced that there are some good and compelling reasons in Scripture for us to see that the Lord allows for it. In addition to the actual need for deaconesses, as discussed above, here follow some good arguments for the employment of women deacons:

And from here on out our discussion will be fixed on two specific texts that form the basis of my argument. The first text that must be considered is 1 Timothy 3:8-12. The main argument lies in the translation of the word "women" or "*gunaikas*" in the Greek. Many of the English translations that we use, including the ESV, have translated this term as "wives," in the possessive sense, "their wives," which creates the impression that what Paul has in mind are the wives of male deacons, and not necessarily deaconesses. However, upon closer inspection, to read the people Paul addresses in verse 11 as "women" is the better reading in the Greek. Towner (2006:266) for instance, points out that this is supported by the fact that the word deaconess, or the female version of "diakonos" did not exist. Some might think that to have referred to deaconesses as women is too common a term, however in the absence of the term "deaconess" Paul's employment of "women" can be justified.

Homer Kent comments in similar fashion saying, "The term 'wives' is the simple word 'women' (*gunaikas*), and is so translated in the ASV. Since the title diakonos is used as both masculine and feminine (see Rom. 16:1), it could not be employed here without causing confusion with the previous group. Consequently, the general term *gunē* was used and the reader is left to infer 'women deacons.'"

³ Genesis 3:18 shows that Eve was created to be a helper for Adam, in other words, a helper to her husband. This is certainly a wife's main responsibility. However, it should be no mystery to us that this creation characteristic of women becomes evident even outside the nuclear family. This is why women often gravitate after activities that involve hospitality or care. To prove this, just ask yourself how many male nurses do you know?

A second reason why “women” and not “their wives” is in mind when Paul is talking about deaconship is because of the absence of the pronoun “their” in the Greek in this example. For this reason it becomes difficult to justify the ESV’s translation of “their wives.”⁴ MacArthur & Mayhue (2014:772) likewise support this view by saying that since there is no possessive pronoun “their” in this verse, “the grammar [therefore] suggests that the women addressed in 3:11 are relationally distinct from the men addressed in the previous verses.” In other words what Paul seems to be addressing here is a brand-new category, one that does not belong to the previous, namely “deaconesses.”

In addition to the usage of the word “*gunaikas*,” Paul’s employment of the word “likewise” also deserves some attention. Other similar examples show us that whenever “likewise” or “*osautos*” is used it mostly refers to a distinct category that follows it. For this reason it makes sense to understand Paul as speaking of three distinct categories here in 1 Tim. 3, elders, “likewise” deacons, and “likewise” deaconesses (verse 11).

However, if the grammar seems unconvincing, perhaps it would help to draw attention to the fact that if “wives of deacons” were in mind, then why is it that Paul does not give similar instruction to the “wives of elders?” The point is, there are no instructions for elders’ wives, except what is given to all Christian women for that matter. It does not make sense that Paul would hand out instructions to deacons’ wives and not do the same for elders’ wives. One would actually expect the opposite to happen since eldership is of far higher consequence than deaconship.

As a last resort, it is always good to have biblical examples for the things that we uphold as a church, even if there is only one. One of the important laws of hermeneutics is that if something is mentioned once, then it should suffice. Regarding the question of female deaconship, we at least have one such example to go on. Her name? Phoebe. In Romans 16:1 Paul mentions Phoebe (her name meant “radiant”) as a “deacon” or a servant who served the church. She is referred to as a “*diakonon*” who was no less commended to the Romans for her faithful service.

4. It is Desirable

Lastly, deaconship is desirable. It is a noble office to aspire toward for both guys and girls who are, of course, qualified to serve in this capacity as stipulated in 1 Tim. 3:8-12. It is desirable for all the reasons listed above because it is a loving way of assisting the church as the elders are freed up for all their important duties.

⁴ Some might wonder how such inaccurate translations of biblical words can occur. However, 1 Timothy 3:11 is not the only example of such translation error. To mention one more example, the word “*doulos*” which means slave and not “bondservant” or “servant” as is commonly translated in most translations, is only faithfully translated as “slave” in the Goodspeed Bible by Edgar J. Goodspeed.

Damsels⁵ and married women alike can rest assure that they will not in any way be exercising authority over the men in our church, not the least the elders. We will never allow that. Our church constitution does not allow for that. However, the time has come for our church to develop this office more. We cannot sit around and dilly-dally with this because as the church grows more deacons and deaconesses are needed. However, for or *all* our ministries to thrive, *we need that women's touch...*

⁵ Damsel alliterates nicely with deaconess which is why I chose it. It is old English for an unmarried woman. Think *Pride and Prejudice*.