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Deaconess in the Early Church

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of the deaconess in the early church. The time range to be covered will include approximately the first three centuries.

The first possible reference to a deaconess is in Rom. 16:1 where we read, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae." Other translations give "servant" in the place of "deaconess." It is an open question whether he is referring to a fixed office or simply her service for others. Some have suggested "that Phoebe was a person of some wealth and position who was thus able to act as patroness of a small and struggling community."¹ Paul said that she had helped him and many others (Rom. 16:2). One possible objection here is that if she was a woman of means, she would hardly have needed help from the church at Rome. If that be true, the aid she gave others could be not of her own self but as a part of her office as deaconess. One thing to note before leaving this passage is that the term *διάκονος* does not necessarily refer to an office. In many other passages it has to do with service or a ministry.²

¹William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, The International Critical Commentary, ed. by Charles Augustus Briggs, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Alfred Plummer (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), p. 418.

²I Cor. 3:5; Col. 1:7, 25; I Thess. 3:2; Josephus in talking about Rachel says, "who on all grounds deserved his esteem, and not least for her ministry (*διάκονος*) in bringing him to Laban (Ant. 1. 298). "Every activity in the congregation that was important for its upbuilding was called a diakonia, a service. Examples are Acts 1:17, 25; 6:2; 20:24; 21:19; Rom. 11:13; II Cor. 3:7-9; 4:1; 5:18; 6:3; 11:8; Col. 4:17; I Tim. 1:12; II Tim. 4:5, 11." Raymond T. Stamm, "The Status of Women Workers in the Church," The Lutheran Quarterly, X (May, 1958), 139-60.

The next possible reference to deaconesses in the New Testament is I Tim. 3:11 which reads, "The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things." These women could be one of four different groups: (1) the wives of deacons, (2) those who hold the office of deaconess, (3) those who occupy a ministry, or (4) all women. The interpretation of this passage has been largely dominated by the statement of Chrysostom which is that,

Some have thought that this 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.¹

"The arguments against identifying the 'women' here with deacons' wives are that the Greek word has no article, and that nothing is said in the preceding verses about the qualities needed in the wives of bishops."² The fact that these women are considered with two other specific groups, elders and deacons, goes against the idea that they are women in general. On the other hand, as Hendriksen comments,

. . . the fact that no special and separate paragraph is used in describing their necessary qualifications, but that these are simply wedged in between the stipulated requirements for deacons, with equal clarity indicates that these women are not to be regarded as constituting a third office in the church, the office of 'deaconesses,' on a par with and endowed with authority equal to that of deacons.³

Thus, it seems best to regard this reference to be about women in the church who assist the elders in some capacity, but they hold no office. The silence of the rest of the New Testament concerning an office of deaconess should weigh heavily against any argument for the existence of one.

¹Chrysostom Homilies on Timothy 11.

²R. T. Beckwith, "The Office of Woman in the Church, to the Present Day," The Churchman, LXXXIII (Autumn, 1969), pp. 176-77.

³William Hendriksen, Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles. New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), pp. 132-33.

Outside the canonical scriptures the next reference would be in Pliny's letter to Trajan.¹ Here we find that he has questioned two ministrae. This word means "a female attendant, maid-servant, a female assistant, or minister."² Nothing definite can be drawn from this.

Actually, in the first two and a half centuries there is little to support the existence of a church office of deaconess. However, Clement of Alexandria does refer to "women deacons which are given by the noble Paul in his second letter to Timothy."³ Even this reference does not require an order to be existent during the days of Clement.

By the late third century the order of deaconesses is seen in a clearer light. The exact dates of some of the sources are unknown, especially since some of the sources are compilations and revisions of earlier materials. One emphasis in the references to deaconesses is that their ministry is primarily aimed toward women. The Apostolic Constitutions 3. 15 says,

Ordain a deaconess who is faithful and holy, for the ministrations towards women. For sometimes he cannot send a deacon, who is a man, to the women, on account of unbelievers. Thou shalt therefore send a woman, a deaconess, on account of the imagination of the bad.

The Didascalia states that in the choice of deacons it is necessary to appoint "a man for the performance of the most things that are required, but a woman for the ministry of women."⁴ Therefore, the whole purpose of these women was to prevent a scandal being raised.

¹Epistle 96.

²Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, A Latin Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 1146.

³Clement of Alexander The Stromata 6.

⁴Didascalia 3. 12; cf. Eth. Didascalia 3. 16, cited by J. G. Davies, "Deacons, Deaconesses and the Minor Orders in the Patristic Period," The Journal of Ecclesiastical History, XIV (Apr., 1963), 3.

Some of their duties in ministering to women included carrying the Eucharist to a woman who was sick,¹ standing at the entries of the assembly halls through which the women entered,² and be a sort of mediator between women and the bishop and deacons. This last point is illustrated in the Apostolic Constitutions 2. 26 which says, "let not any woman address herself to the deacon or bishop without the deaconess." Another primary concern was modesty. In the baptism of women it was said that "there is no necessity that the women should be seen by the men" so deaconesses were asked to assist.³ This concern for modesty also involved the deaconesses in the inspection of illnesses or suffering when the woman's body must be bared.⁴ Thus, as Epiphanius stated, their duty was "simply to perform certain offices in the care of women."⁵

By this time the deaconesses did form an office in the church. The Apostolic Constitutions 3. 15 says to "Ordain a deaconess." Epiphanius refers to "an order of deaconesses in the Church."⁶ There is even an ordination prayer for deaconesses which is said to go back to Bartholomew.⁷

However, this by no means equates their rank with that of the deacon. An ordination prayer is also included for the sub-deacon and the reader.⁸ In many places the deaconess is placed in a group with other minor orders in the church.⁹ These minor orders included exorcists, confessors (voluntary

¹ Testamentum Domini 2. 20, cited by Davies, "Deaconesses," p. 3.

² Apostolic Constitutions 2. 57; 8. 28. ³ Ibid., 3. 15; cf. 8. 28.

⁴ Epiphanius Against Heresies 3. 2. 79. ⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. ⁷ Apostolic Constitutions 8. 20; cf. 8. 18 for deacons.

⁸ Ibid., 8. 21-22.

⁹ Apostolic Constitutions 8. 21-22, 28; Pseudo-Ignatius To the Antiochians 12.

before Gentile rulers), virgins, singers, doorkeepers, labourers (those who buried bodies), readers, and sub-deacons. To safeguard further against an exaltation of the office of deaconess, limitations were specified. The Apostolic Constitutions 8. 28 says, "they are the ministers to the deacons." Epiphanius asserts that they are "not priestesses" in any sense, that their mission was not to interfere in any way with Sacerdotal functions.¹ In some cases the deacon is allowed to baptize, but the deaconess can not do this. Only the deacon can separate in the absence of a presbyter.² "A deaconess does not . . . perform anything belonging to the office of presbyters or deacons."³ One further distinction is made in that the offerings are brought to the bishop, the presbyters, and the deacons. The deacons then distribute to the rest of the clergy (including the deaconesses) under the guidance of the bishop or presbyters.⁴

Many later references to deaconesses can be found, but they are just an expansion or repetition of what had already developed. At this point a summary statement of Davies is worth noting:

. . . the order of deaconesses came into existence in the first half of the third century. They devolved from and, therefore, shared certain restricted functions of the male diaconate and were drawn from those members of the order of widows who had begun to exercise an active ministry towards the women members of the congregation. Deaconesses were essentially an eastern creation and were not found in the West before the fifth century and were not accepted in Rome until as late as the eighth.⁵

It appears that there was no office of deaconess in the first century church. There were women who were involved in special ministries for the church. This distinction is difficult to make, since we often think in ecclesiastical

¹Epiphanius Against Heresies 3. 2. 79.

²Apostolic Constitutions 8. 28.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 8. 30-31.

⁵Davies, "Deaconesses," p. 6.

terms. Also the word "office" is vague and hard to define. Nevertheless, the silence of any firm reference to deaconesses in the first two and a half centuries denies the existence of any such office. Once the office did develop, it seems to be just a more formal and structured arrangement than was present before. A few duties were added, but no official authority was ever given to deaconesses during this period which equalled the deacons. They may well be called a minor order. In conclusion, the New Testament pattern for the organization of the church seems to exclude the office of deaconess and include women servants and ministers. It is interesting to note that Clement of Alexandria, however accurate his information was, refers to the wives of the apostles as being "their fellow-ministers in dealing with housewives. It was through them that the Lord's teaching penetrated also the women's quarters without any scandal being aroused."¹

¹Clement of Alexandria The Stromata 6.

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