



Chapter Title: Deaconesses

Book Title: Women in Early Christianity

Book Subtitle: Translations from Greek Texts

Book Editor(s): Patricia Cox Miller

Published by: Catholic University of America Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fgq5h.10>

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Deaconesses

The office of deaconess is well attested by the third century C.E. in the *Didascalia apostolorum* and is further specified in the *Apostolic Constitutions* of the fourth century C.E. Duties of this office included assisting at the baptism of women and giving them ethical instruction following baptism. In the fifth century, canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.) required that deaconesses be at least forty years of age and that they not marry after appointment to this office. These texts, and indeed the office of deaconess, were indigenous to the eastern parts of the early Christian world.

Didascalia apostolorum 2.26; 3.12

2.26 . . . Let [the bishop] be honored by you as God, for the bishop sits for you in the place of God almighty. But the deacon stands in the place of Christ; and you must love him. The deaconess shall be honored by you in the place of the Holy Spirit; and the presbyters shall be to you in the likeness of the Apostles; and the orphans and widows shall be reckoned by you in the likeness of the altar. . . .

3.12 Therefore, O bishop, appoint for yourself workers of righteousness as helpers who will cooperate with you for salvation. Those that please you out of all the people you shall choose and appoint as deacons: a man for the performance of most of the things that are required, but a woman for the ministry of women. For there are houses where you cannot send a deacon to the women, on account of the pagans, but you may send a deaconess. Also, because in many other matters the office of a woman deacon is required. In the first place, when women go down into the water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman at hand, and especially no deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint the woman who is being baptized. But where there is a woman, and especially a deaconess, it is not fitting that women should be seen by men, but with the imposition of the hand you must anoint the head only. As of old the priests and kings were anointed in Israel, likewise, with the imposition of the hand, anoint the head of those who receive baptism,

whether of men or of women. Afterwards—whether you yourself baptize, or whether you command the deacons or presbyters to baptize—let a woman deacon, as we have already said, anoint the women. But let a man pronounce over them the invocation of the divine Names in the water.

And when a woman who is being baptized has come up from the water, let the deaconess receive her, and teach and instruct her how the seal of baptism ought to be (kept) unbroken in purity and holiness. For this reason we say that the ministry of a woman deacon is especially needed and important. For our Lord and Savior was ministered to by women ministers, “Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James and mother of Jose, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee” [Matt 27:56], and other women besides. And you also need the ministry of a deaconess for many things. For a deaconess is required to go into the houses of the pagans where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them according to what they need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness.

Apostolic Constitutions, selections

This text is a compilation of previously existing material pertaining to a variety of topics, from ecclesiastical hierarchy and discipline to questions of morality and theology. Compiled toward the end of the fourth century, its author and place of composition are unknown.

2.26.6 You should honor the deaconess as an image of the Holy Spirit. She should not do or say anything without the deacon, just as the Comforter does not create or speak on its own, but awaits the will of Christ while glorifying him [see John 16:7, 13–14]. And as it is not possible to believe in Christ without being instructed by the Spirit, so do not let a woman approach a deacon or a bishop without the deaconess.

2.57.2–4 When you [the bishop] gather the church of God together [for worship], command, like the pilot of a large ship, that the assemblies be organized with great skill, directing the deacons, like sailors, to assign places to the brothers as to passengers with all care and solemnity. And first, let the house be oblong, oriented toward the east, with the priestly chambers on both sides, also turned to the east. Thus it will be like a

ship. The bishop's throne will be placed in the middle, with the presbyterate seated on either side; the deacons will stand near at hand, watchful and well-clothed, for they are like sailors and managers of the crew.

2.57.10–13 Let the door-keepers stand at the entries of the men in order to observe them, and let the deaconesses stand at the entries of the women, like sailors who steer a ship. . . . If anyone is found sitting out of place, let the deacon, like a commanding officer, reprimand the person and take him to the proper place. For the church is not only like a ship but also like an animal pen. The shepherds place each of the animals—I refer to goats and sheep—according to species and age, and each of them gathers together with its own kind. Likewise in the church: the young men will sit by themselves, if there is room; otherwise let them stand. Old people will sit in their place, and as for the children that stand, let their fathers and mothers take charge of them. The young women will also sit by themselves, if there is room; otherwise, let them stand behind the adult women. Let the married women with children have their own place. Virgins, widows, and old women will stand or sit in front of all the others. The deacon thus will attend to the seating, so that each one who comes in finds his proper place and so that no one sits near the entrance. Likewise let the deacon watch over the people to make sure that no one whispers, dozes, laughs, or makes gestures. For in church it is necessary to be wise, sober, and attentive, lending the ear to the word of the Lord.

3.16.1–2 Ordain also a deaconess, faithful and holy, for the service to women, because it sometimes happens that a male deacon cannot be sent to the houses of certain women because of the unbelievers. You shall therefore send a woman deacon, because of the suspicion of evil-minded people. Actually we need a woman as deacon for many services. In the first place, in the baptizing of women, the deacon shall anoint only their foreheads with the holy oil; following this the deaconess shall anoint them; for it is not necessary that the women be observed by men.

8.19.1–20.1–2 Concerning [the ordination of] a deaconess, I, Bartholomew, declare the following. O bishop, you will lay your hands on her, in the presence of the presbyterate, the deacons, and the deaconesses, you will say: “O eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the creator

of man and woman, who filled with the Spirit Miriam, Deborah, Anna, and Huldah [see Exod 15:20–21; Judg 4:4; Luke 2:36–38; 2 Kgs 22:14–20], who did not judge it unworthy that your only-begotten Son should be born of a woman, who also in the tent of witness and in the temple appointed women as guardians for your holy gates; look now upon this woman, your servant, who has been chosen for the diaconate, and give her the Holy Spirit, and ‘purify her from every defilement of the flesh and spirit’ [2 Cor 7:1] so that she may worthily accomplish the work with which she has been entrusted, for your glory and the praise of your Christ, through whom be glory and adoration to you in the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.”

Writings Opposed to Women’s Ecclesiastical Duties

Presented here are representative examples of strictures against the performance of ecclesiastical functions by women, mainly functions pertaining to the priesthood.

Didascalia apostolorum 3.9

That a woman should baptize, or that one should be baptized by a woman, we do not recommend, for it is a transgression of the commandment, and a great danger to the woman who baptizes and to him who is baptized. For if it were lawful to be baptized by a woman, our Lord and Teacher himself would have been baptized by Mary his mother, whereas he was baptized by John, like others of the people. Do not therefore imperil yourselves, brethren and sisters, by acting contrary to the law of the Gospel.

Apostolic Constitutions 3.9.1–4

(1) And about a woman’s baptizing, we are informing you that there is no small danger to the women who attempt it. Therefore we do not advise it. For it is dangerous, or rather, it is illegal and impious. (2) For if “the man is the head of the woman” (1 Cor 11:3), he was chosen for