



The Ordained Women Deacons

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The Ordained Women Deacons

of the Church's first millennium

John Wijngaards



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St Paul (c. AD 58)

*According to scholars, the term 'deacon of the church' probably indicates a true min-
istry, however open-ended the ministry must have been in those early years.*^{[276](#)}

Romans 16:1-2 'Phoebe, our sister, who is a deacon [διακονος] of the
church at Cenchreae. Give her a welcome in the Lord worthy of the saints [i.e. the
Christians], and help her in anything she may need. She has looked after many peo-
ple including myself.'



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Pliny the Younger (112)

Pliny the Younger was a distinguished senator whom the Roman Emperor Trajan had appointed to be governor of Bithynia, a province (in present-day north Turkey) suffering from corruption under previous administrations. In this letter Pliny reports on the presence of 'Christians', among them two women who, he says, were called 'ministrae', which must be a Latin translation of the Greek 'diakonoi'.

[The Christians who were interrogated] asserted that the sum total of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing in choir a hymn to Christ as to a god. They bind themselves, they said, by oath, not to commit some crime, but rather to abstain from fraud, theft, or adultery, and not to default on their trust, nor to refuse to return a loan when called upon to do so. When this [function] was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food – but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called 'deacons'. But I discovered nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.²⁷⁸



Origen (185–255)

This is a commentary on Romans 16:1–2: 'Phoebe, our sister, who is a deacon [διακονα] of the Church at Cenchreae ... She has often been a helper both to myself and to many others.' Though the text has been preserved only in Latin, it was originally written in Greek.

This text teaches with the authority of the Apostle that even women are instituted deacons in the Church. This is the function which was exercised in the church of Cenchreae by Phoebe, who was the object of high praise and recommendation by Paul. He enumerated her outstanding works; she assisted everyone, he said – i.e. she helped them in their needs – she also helped me in my needs and my apostolic work with a perfect devotion. I readily compare her action with the hospitality of Lot, who never failed to welcome guests who presented themselves, and thereby deserved one day to grant his hospitality to angels. In the same manner, likewise, Abraham, who always came forward to greet his guests, deserved to have the Lord with his angels visit him and stay under his tent. Also this pious Phoebe, while giving assistance and rendering service to all, deserved to assist and to serve the Apostle himself. And thus this text teaches at the same time two things: that there are, as we have already said, women deacons in the Church, and that women, who have given assistance to so many people and who by their good works deserve to be praised by the Apostle, ought to be accepted in the diaconate. He also exhorted that the brethren should give consideration to those who are active in good works

in the Church and treat them with honour [and help them] in whatever they may need, even if it involves material help.²⁸⁰



The Didascalia of the Apostles (c. 250)

This was a pastoral handbook for bishops, presented as instructions left by the apostles. Originally composed in Greek, it was soon translated into Syriac, Arabic and Latin. Notice how in Chapter 9 the various 'ministers' are characterized with images taken from their roles in the liturgy. The bishop sits on his throne – like God the Father. The deacon stands at the altar – serving as Christ did. The priests look like the apostles – whose life-size images could be seen on the iconostasis. The woman deacon is less prominent – as the lifegiving, healing, saving, all-pervading Spirit.²⁸⁵

9 § 1 Instead of the sacrifices of that [Old Testament] time, now are offered prayers and supplications and thanksgiving. In that time there were first fruits, tithes, sacrifices and gifts; now there is the offering [i.e. the eucharist] presented to the Lord God by the bishops. They are your highpriests.

9 § 2 The priests and Levites of this present time are the priests and deacons and the orphans and widows – but the high priest and Levite is the bishop. He is the minister of the word and the mediator; and for you he is a teacher as well as your father in God: he gave you birth through water. He is your leader and guide and a powerful king. He guides you in the place of the Almighty. He is to be honoured by you as is God himself, because the bishop presides over you like Almighty God.

9 § 3 The deacon stands next to you like Christ and you should love him. The woman deacon should be honoured by you as [the presence of] the Holy Spirit.

Priests ought to be looked up to by you as the apostles are looked up to, and widows and orphans should be considered by you as you would consider the altar of God.

16 § 1 This is why, O bishop, you must appoint righteous workers, helpers who will co-operate with you in leading others towards salvation. Choose some persons who most please you and institute them as deacons: a man for the administration of the many necessary tasks, but also a woman for ministry among the women. For there are houses where you may not be able to send a deacon, on account of the pagans, but to which you will be able to send a woman deacon. And also because the service of a woman deacon is required in many other domains.

16 § 2 To begin with, when women go down into the water [of the baptismal font], it is necessary that those going down into the water be anointed with the oil of anointing by a woman deacon. Where no other woman is present, especially where no woman deacon is at hand, it will then be necessary that the man who is performing the baptism anoints the woman being baptized [himself], but he should only put his hand on their heads when anointing them. But where another woman is present, especially a woman deacon, it is not good for women to be seen by a man. Just as in ancient times the priests and kings in Israel were anointed, so must you, with the imposition of your hand, anoint the heads of those receiving baptism – this applies to both men and women.



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16 § 3 Afterwards, whether you yourself are carrying out the baptisms, or whether you have entrusted that responsibility to the deacons and priests, a woman deacon should anoint the women, as we have already indicated. But a man should recite the invocation [ἐπικλησιν] of the divine names over them in the water.

16 § 4 When a woman who has been baptized comes up out of the [baptismal] water, the woman deacon should receive her, and instruct her how to preserve the unbreakable seal of baptism in holiness and purity. For these reasons, we assert that the ministry of a woman deacon is especially required and urgent. For our Lord and Saviour was himself served by women deacons, such as Mary Magdalen, Mary, the daughter of James and mother of Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, along with still other women.

16 § 5 You need the ministry of women deacons for many reasons. The fact is that women deacons are necessary for those houses of pagans where Christian women are also living. Women deacons can go there and visit those who are ill, serve them in all their needs and, again, to bathe those who are beginning to recover from their illness.

16 § 6 Deacons should take bishops as models in their conduct. But they should work even harder than the bishop does. And they should not desire dishonest gains but should be concerned about their ministry. The number of deacons should be in proportion to the number of the people in the congregation. There

should be enough so that everyone is known and everyone looked after.

16 § 7 Thus, old women whose strength has declined and brothers and sisters who are ill should be able to enjoy from the deacons the service that each one needs. But it is the women [deacons] who should focus on ministry to other women, and the male deacons on ministry to men.

16 § 8 The deacon should be ready to obey and submit to the commands of the bishop. The deacon should work and spend himself wherever he may be sent to serve or bear a message to someone. It is necessary that everyone should understand his proper function and be diligent in carrying it out. You [bishop and deacon] should have but one aim, one thought, as one soul in two bodies. And know what ministry means. As our Lord and Saviour said in the Gospel: 'Whosoever among you wants to be chief, let him be your servant. Just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'²⁸⁶



The Apostolic Constitutions (c. 380)

This book was composed from many sources, perhaps at Antioch, possibly by a cleric with Arian sympathies. Its influence is disputed. It repeated many of the instructions about women deacons found in the Didascalia. There are, however, some additions that may reflect local pastoral practice.²⁹⁶

II, 26, 5-7 Let the bishop preside over you as one honoured with the authority of God, which he is to exercise over the clergy, and by which he is to govern all the people.

But let the male deacon minister to him, as Christ does to his Father; and let him serve the bishop unblameably in all things, as Christ does nothing of himself, but does always those things that please his Father.

Let also the woman deacon [ἡ διακονῶσα] be honoured by you in the place of the Holy Spirit. Let her not do or say anything without the male deacon; as neither does the Comforter say or do anything of himself, but gives glory to Christ by waiting for his pleasure. And as we cannot believe in Christ without the teaching of the Spirit, so let not any woman address herself to the male deacon or bishop without the woman deacon [τῆς διακονοῦσας].

II, 57, 10 Let the doorkeepers stand at the entrances for men, and keep an eye on them. And let the women deacons stand at those of the women ... Let the gates be

watched, lest any unbeliever, or one not yet initiated, come in.

II, 58, 1-6 If any brother or sister, man or woman, come in from another parish, bringing letters of recommendation, let the deacon [male or female] be the judge of that affair, inquiring whether they are part of the faithful, and to what church [i.e. parish] they belong? Whether they are defiled by heresy? And besides, whether the party be a married woman or a widow? And when [the male deacon] is satisfied on these questions, that they really belong to the faithful, and are of the same sentiments in the things of the Lord, let him conduct every one to the place proper for him ... Let the woman deacon do the same thing to the women who come in, whether they are poor or rich.

III, 16, 1-2 This is why, O bishop, you must choose co-workers with you for [eternal] life and righteousness, people who are pleasing to God, whom you judge from among all the faithful to be worthy and capable to respond to the requirements of the diaconate [διακονίας]. Choose also a faithful and holy woman deacon for ministry among the women. For there are houses where you may not be able to send a male deacon, on account of the pagans, but to which you will be able to send a woman deacon [γυναικα διακονοῦσαν], because of the ignorance of the weak. For we need a woman deacon [γυναικος διακονοῦ] for many purposes. To begin with, when women are being initiated [φωτισεσθαι], the male deacon anoints them first with the



sacred oil on the forehead, and after him the woman deacon [ἡ διακονοῦ] anoints them [over the rest of their body]. For there is [then] no need for women to be seen by men.

III, 16, 4 You therefore, bishop, according to the type [of Christ, the Anointed], shalt anoint the head of those that are to be baptized, whether they be men or women, with the holy oil, to symbolize spiritual baptism. After that, either you, bishop, or a priest who is in your charge, shall baptize them in the water, speaking the sacred calling-down prayer [ἐπικλῆσιν] over them, mentioning them by [their] name, [the calling down] of Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. And let the male deacon receive the man, and the woman deacon [ἡ διακονοῦ] the woman, so that the conferring of this inviolable seal may take place with decency. And after that, let the bishop anoint those who have been baptized with chrism.

III, 19, 1–2 Male deacons should in every respect be blameless, like their bishop, but more hardworking than they are, proportionate in number to the size of the community, so that they can also serve the underprivileged as ‘workers that need not be ashamed’. And let the woman [deacon] be diligent in taking care of the women. Both of them should be ready to carry messages, to travel about, to minister, and to serve, as Isaiah said about the Lord [Christ]: ‘To justify the righteous, serving many people well.’ Let everyone therefore know his proper place, and discharge it diligently with one consent, with one mind, as knowing the reward of their

diaconate. Let them not be ashamed to minister to those that are in want, as even our Lord Jesus Christ came ‘not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many’.

VII, 17, 4 [Only] a chaste, unmarried woman should become a deaconess [διακονισσα]. Or otherwise, a widow who has been married only once, who is faithful and of good reputation.

VII, 27 A male deacon does not bless [any object], does not give the blessing [at the eucharist], but receives it from the bishop and priest. He does not baptize, he does not offer [the eucharist]; but when a bishop or priest has offered [it], he distributes [communion] to the people, not as a priest, but as one that ministers to the priests. But it is not lawful for any one of the other clergy to do the work of a deacon.

A deaconess [διακονισσα] does not bless, nor perform what belongs to the office of priests or deacons, but only guards the doors, and ministers to the priests in the baptizing of women, on account of decency.

A male deacon can dismiss a subdeacon, a reader, a singer, and a deaconess [διακονισσα], if there be any occasion, in the absence of a priest. It is not lawful for a sub-deacon to dismiss either one of the clergy or laity; nor for a reader, nor for a singer, nor for a deaconess, for they are the assistants of the deacons.²⁹⁷



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Ordination rite in the *Apostolic Constitutions*

This is the oldest known text of the ordination to the diaconate, both for men and women. Most commentators consider these ordinations, for both men and women, to have been fully ‘sacramental’ in present-day terms.²⁹⁸



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