

Q. Biblical roles: May a woman serve as a female deacon (a.k.a. deaconess)?

Discussion: I Timothy 3:8-13 says: “ In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.” (NIV)

In the original language, the term for “women” can refer to wives or simply to women other than wives. There is no specific word for “wives” in N.T. Greek. Whether the word is translated as a wife” or a “woman” depends upon the context in which it is found.

So the words “the women” can refer to wives of male deacons, or to deacons who are women.

On one hand,

1. The term “the women” which is found in relation to male deacons can refer to qualifications of the wives of the deacons, or
2. Since there are no qualifications for the wife of an elder, Paul may be referring not to wives of deacons, but to deacons who are women (deaconesses). The context fits both.

Paul may be referring to such a position when he mentions Phoebe in Romans. Here is how Romans 16:1 is translated in different versions:

- NIV -- “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae.”
- ESV -- “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae”
- NLT -- “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deacon in the church in Cenchrea.”
- NASB -- “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea”

Paul refers to Phoebe as a “diakonon.” This word can refer to a servant, but it is also used to refer to the office of a deacon.

It is not clear whether a female deacon, if authorized in the first place, needed to be married or could be single. There is no marriage requirement if I Tim 3:8-13 refers to female deacons, only that they possess a certain character. This would be unusual since it is clear that male deacons needed to be married. There is no indication whether Phoebe was single or married.

There is evidence that female deacons (deaconesses) existed in some areas of the early first century church. Pliny the Younger (the governor of Pontus/Bithynia in 111-113 AD) refers to two female Christians who were slaves as deaconesses whom he tortures to find out more about Christians.

Clement of Alexandria in the second century speaks of “diakonoi gunaikes” (women deacons/servants) who undertake the instruction of women.

Everett Ferguson in his book on “*Women in the Church*” states:

“It is an open question whether women were recognized for their services to the church as female deacons. Romans 16:1-2 says of Phoebe, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon [diakonos, servant or minister] of the church at Cenchreae, ... for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.”

A benefactor or patron(ess) was a person with resources who provided for others and received duties from them in return. The word diakonos occurs many times for many types of service and only rarely of the office of deacon. Since the predominant use of diakonos in the New Testament is as a general term and only seldom as a technical term for an appointed and representative servant of the church (as in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8), it may be too much (although possible) to claim the latter meaning for Phoebe.

“First Timothy 3:11, on the other hand, has a better claim to refer to women deacons, but the meanings “wives” or (less likely) “women servants” cannot be ruled out. Whether “women” here means women in general, wives of deacons and elders, or women deacons is not certain, but plausibly refers to female deacons. The position of deacon (=servant) was a serving role, and in the organizational structure of the church referred to assistants who functioned under the supervision of the bishops/elders. If these verses refer to female deacons, the result is largely irrelevant to leadership roles in the assembly.”

It seems a question of how the role is implemented and seen in the church. If the role has a headship function in the church, similar to elders which the text in 1 Timothy might imply, then the deacons should be male.

If on the other side the role is understood as a gifted role only, then it should be open to both genders (it appears that some early churches had two types of deacons which would be an explanation for the tension). Such an interpretation and implementation would be consistent with our interpretation on other roles in the church.

So there seems to be several choices and considerations should we consider creating the position of female deacon/deaconess in the BCC

1. It is not clear whether the early church had female deacons. Perhaps some churches did, as evidenced above, but it does not seem to be a consistent practice across all churches.
2. The role of a female deacon therefore would need to be created, since it is not clear whether they existed through churches in the early church. There is no clear role of a female deacon/deaconess in the scriptures
 1. If we decided to create a role of a female deacon in the BCC, it would be similar to the creation of a Region Leader or a Women's Ministry Leader.
3. Female deacons/deaconess need to be married and not single. It would seem to be inappropriate to have single female deacons where there cannot be single male deacons.
4. Female deacons could serve with their deacon husbands. The term "wives" in I Tim 3: 11 could refer to women or it could refer to their wives. It could be a consideration that we as a church appoint female deacons who are married to deacons.
 1. This was actually the practice of the LA church of Christ when it was first started in the 1990s. Their bulletin listed a number of deacon/deaconess couples on the back of their bulletin.
 2. This did not necessarily mean that male and female deacons would serve in the same areas, but that they would be recognized as servants in this special role in the church to serve wherever they would be needed.
5. Female deacons must be married, but not necessarily to a male deacon husband although that would be preferred. (The eldership would set up a standard as to whether this would be acceptable or not.)
6. If the role of a female deacon required an authoritative part that referred to the assembly, then male deacons would perform the function and female deacons would be excluded.

Conclusion: A role of female deacon / deaconess cannot be justified with exegetical reasons. The creation of such a role (i.e. without biblical support) is therefore difficult to rationalize as its benefits don't seem to outweigh the downside of the likely confusion.