

PHOEBE WAS A DEACON

Other Women Should Be, Too

Robert B. Strimple

I appreciate this opportunity to indicate something of the thrust of my minority report to the 55th General Assembly. But I fear that a brief article which cannot begin to convey the force of the New Testament evidence for recognizing the propriety of qualified women serving as deacons in the church could prove counter-productive! I would therefore urge interested readers to study the full report of over 20 pages which appears in the Agenda for General Assembly (see p. 16).

While I am in full agreement with the bulk of the report of the GA Committee dealing with the role of women in church office and with its argument that the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12 clearly excludes women from the office of elder, I do not believe the Committee is correct in concluding that the Bible also excludes women from the office of deacon.

I. The Regulative Principle and the Burden of Proof

The Committee is certainly correct in asserting that "the answer to the question of whether or not women may be ordained to the office of deacon depends entirely upon the establishment of positive scriptural warrant." But what must we require as to the nature of that positive scriptural warrant? Must it be more clear and explicit than the warrant on the basis of which we have determined other matters relating to the worship and government of the church? Must it be more clear, for example, than the biblical command which grounds the participation of women in the Lord's Supper?

Do we really want to take the position that we cannot act on the basis of what we believe the Scripture teaches, unless we find that teaching so 100% transparent that no counter interpretation with even the slightest degree of plausibility can be suggested? The requiring of such an absolute demonstration may well leave us paralyzed, unable to obey what we have adequate

reason to believe the Bible to be saying.

We must be careful not to make the mistake of thinking that the Reformed regulative principle means that only the positive position, the position that qualified women may be elected as

"The answer to the question of whether or not women may be ordained to the office of deacon depends entirely upon the establishment of positive scriptural warrant." But what must we require as to the nature of that positive scriptural warrant?

deacons, needs to satisfy the burden of providing biblical proof, while the negative position needs to provide no explicit biblical teaching to the effect that women are to be excluded from this office.

Given the Bible's clear teaching regarding the full equality of the sexes before God (accented in texts like Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28), we would seem to require some biblical basis for excluding them from a par-

Given the Bible's clear teaching regarding the full equality of the sexes before God (accented in texts like Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28), we would seem to require some biblical basis for excluding them from a particular role and office in the church at least as much as we would require a biblical basis for opening it to them.

ticular role and office in the church at least as much as we would require a biblical basis for opening it to them.

II. The New Testament and Women Deacons

The New Testament seems to con-

tain two texts which speak quite directly to the subject before us, because they speak of *women* deacons. Since it is the Scripture which must decide the issue, the church must have the courage to take a fresh, unbiased look at what the Scripture says. As the Committee report rightly notes, we must not be blinded by the spirit of our times—whether of feminism or of male chauvinism. Neither must we be content to follow the easy course of maintaining the status quo in the church simply because it is the status quo.

A. Romans 16:1,2

Here the apostle Paul writes, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is also a deacon of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever manner she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well."

It has been noted that the term *deacon* (servant) was used for such a variety of ministries in the church that it is surprising, perhaps, that it ever came to be the designation for a particular ministry or office. It did become such an official title, however, and it is clearly used as such in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8,12,13. The question is whether it is used in such an official sense of Phoebe here. If Philippians 1:1 is the first reference in the N.T. to this particular office of deacon, is Phoebe the first (and only!) holder of this office to be *named* in the N.T.?¹

It is not enough to suggest, as the Committee report does, that there is nothing in the passage that absolutely rules out the general force of deacon here. We must consider what are the elements in the passage which make it,

¹My report includes an extensive study of Acts 6 and concludes that the appointment of the Seven was a special provision for that particular time and circumstance only, but one which did guide the church later, by way of example, when it came to appoint helpers to the elders.

as the Committee itself concedes, more natural, "perhaps even more likely," that it should be "read as a fixed or official designation" here.

Space does not permit a careful look at these elements, but there are at least four:

1. The formula Paul employs here suggests that the reference is to Phoebe's holding the office of deacon. He speaks of her, literally, as "being a deacon." Such a participial phrase is consistently the way in which one identifies the particular office someone holds at a particular time. Examples of this usage in the N.T. are found in John 11:49; Acts 18:12 and Acts 24:10.

2. The force of the "also" in the best-attested Greek text seems to be to emphasize that Phoebe is not only a Christian sister but *also* a deacon in the church at Cenchrea.

3. Most especially, the genitive phrase added ("of the church which is at Cenchrea") does not simply inform us of the place from which Phoebe came, but underscores again her official status, even as today we refer to Tom Bradley, mayor of Los Angeles, or to Jack Peterson, pastor of the church in San Antonio.

4. At the end of v. 2, Paul adds that "she herself has also been a helper of many." If the reference to Phoebe as a "deacon" in v. 1 indicated nothing more than that she had been helpful to many, the words in v. 2 would be a superfluous repetition. As it is, Paul is making clear that not only did she bear the office and title of servant, she really was a servant in her life and practice.

As already noted, it is often asserted that our Reformed regulative principle requires that the alleged example appealed to as providing the biblical warrant for an ecclesiastical practice be clear. But this matter of clarity cuts both ways. We might well be expected to adopt the natural understanding of Romans 16:1,2 unless the teaching of the N.T. elsewhere that it is not proper for a woman to serve in the office of deacon is so clear that we must conclude that this understanding of the Phoebe reference cannot be the correct one.

B. 1 Timothy 3:11

Six pages of my minority report are devoted to establishing the fact that the "women" addressed in this verse are

not the wives of the deacons but are rather women deacons. (The NIV, for example, "their wives," is not translation but interpretation. There is no possessive pronoun in the Greek text, though one would expect such if the deacons' wives were in view.)

In answering the question that naturally arises if one sees this text as giving qualifications for wives of the deacons—namely, Why are the qualifications for the wives of the overseers not given?—the Committee suggests that the wives of the deacons had a part in the work of their husbands in a way in which the wives of the overseers did not.

In explaining why this should have been so, however, the Committee virtually concedes the crucial point which I believe must be emphasized concerning the important difference between the office of overseer and the office of

The Committee suggests that the wives of the deacons had a part in the work of their husbands in a way in which the wives of the overseers did not....[This] concedes the crucial point which I believe must be emphasized concerning the important difference between the office of overseer and the office of deacon, and how this difference makes it appropriate that the office of deacon (but not the office of elder) be open to qualified women as well as to qualified men!

deacon, and how this difference makes it appropriate that the office of deacon (but not the office of elder) be open to qualified women as well as to qualified men! I quote the Committee, "by virtue of the differences between the two offices, deacons' wives could be more directly and extensively involved in the official activities of their husbands...."

III. Elders and Deacons, the Overseers and the Servants

Prof. J. Van Bruggen of the "Liberated" (Article 31) Reformed Churches in the Netherlands uses an interesting figure in arguing that the trail of the women deacons can definitely be traced back into the N.T. itself, but that the church has suffered a "derailment" at

this point.

The leading cause of this loss of the N.T. understanding has been "colored by the work of the overseer" in the thinking of the church; "and the Bible clearly says...that a woman in Christ's church is not permitted to teach or have authority over the man."

This derailment of the N.T. viewpoint is further fostered today by the attempt of many to seize upon the presence of women deacons in the N.T. as an argument for admitting women also to the tasks of oversight and teaching. It is often "as a reaction to this," as Van Bruggen notes, that "others close to women even the door of diaconal work."

The solution to all such derailed thinking is to seek a more accurate biblical understanding of the deacon. The important difference with regard to the nature of the authority exercised between the elders and the deacons would seem to be underscored in the greeting of Philippians 1:1 by the use of the, not merely different, but contrasting titles: "the overseers" and "the servants."

Recognizing the biblical distinctiveness of both the elders and the deacons has proven more difficult for churches from the Dutch Reformed background (with a tradition of seating both on the church consistory with little meaningful distinction) than it should be for Presbyterians. We should recognize that the elders are responsible for the oversight and rule of the total life of the congregation, including the work of the deacons. The deacon is not a ruling office. That priority is reserved for the elders. The deacons are helps to the elders, analogous to the Seven appointed to assist the Apostles (Acts 6).

Sad to say, contemporary advocacy of the admission of women to the diaconate has too often been embraced by those unwilling to be in submission to the Scripture at all points, with tragic confusion resulting. Fear of the advances of such theological liberalism, however, should not be allowed to prevent us from entering into a more biblical understanding of the office of deacon and the exciting possibilities for qualified women—and qualified men!—in that role.

A minister in the OPC, Dr. Strimple is professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in California and has been its president since 1982.