



Monte Vista Presbyterian & Reformed Church

Position Paper on the Office of Deaconess

Scripture prescribes two offices in the church, that of Elder and Deacon. We believe that the office of Deacon is open to both men and women suitably gifted and called by God.

The argument against the Deaconess is basically twofold:

1. Scripture emphasises the headship of man over woman (Eph. 5:23; 1 Cor. 14:33). No women may be placed in any office or position which makes her an authority over men. Women are not permitted to rule over men.
2. The office of Deaconess does not appear in Scripture – reference taken as referring to the Deaconess are misunderstood. 1 Tim 3:11, and Rom 16:1, are such cases. In 1 Tim 3:11 Paul refers to either wives of Deacons or to women who render auxiliary services, performing ministries for which women are better adapted. Rom 16:1 Phoebe must be seen as a servant not as a Deaconess.

To these objections we answer as follows:

1. We do not believe that the duties and function of the Deacon as set out in Scripture commands the authority, which would set a Deaconess in a position to rule over men. The functions and duties as given are not services that require authority to rule. The first objection assumes that the office warrants authority to rule.
2. Concerning 1 Tim 3:11 we would answer those who hold that reference here is to the wives of Deacons as follows:
 - 2.1 The office of Elder is higher than that of Deacons, why does the Scripture set out qualifications for the wives of Deacons but not for the wives of Elders?
 - 2.2 Commenting on the text the following stand against interpreting the text to read wives of Deacons:
 - 2.2.1 The absence of all expressed reference to the Deacons such as might be given by "αὐτῶν" (even so) or by "ὡσαυτῶν", (all).
 - 2.2.2 The expression of "ἀσσυτῶν", (Likewise) by which the Deacons themselves were introduced in verse 8, and which seems to mark a new office.
 - 2.2.3 The introduction of the injunction respecting the Deacons "ἑστῶσαν μιᾷ γυναικὶ ἀνδρὲς", verse 12 (Let the Deacons be the husband of one wife) as a new particular, which would hardly be if their wives had been mentioned.
 - 2.2.4 The circumstances connected with the mention of Phoebe as of the church at Cenchræ in Rom. 16:1 that unless these are Deaconesses, there would be among these injunctions no mention of any important class of persons employed as officers of the church. To those who hold that 1 Tim 3:11 refers to certain women in the congregation who would be of assistance to the Deacons, doing auxiliary tasks more suited to women, we answer: This argument concedes that these women are gifted, qualified and actually do the work of a Deacon, thus one would have ordained Deacons and unordained women doing the same service. On what grounds then are women debarred from office? It can not be authority, the women are already doing the work. No satisfactory answer can be found. The flow of the passage from verse 8-13 is very conclusive to understanding the reference to Deaconesses, it would be very poor structure to have an interjection concerning certain women in the middle of a discussion concerning Deacons. The thought flow would deal with each issue in turn, Paul follows this, verse 1-7 covers the office of Elder, verse 8-13 covers the office of Deacon, which is open to both men and women, if suitably gifted and called by God.

According to Pliny who writes in the period AD 111-113. the office of Deaconess existed in the early Church. The works of Pliny were written before the corruption of Church structures caused by the Edict of Toleration issued by Constantine AD 313, and the action of Theodosius AD 378-398, making Christianity and church membership compulsory for every citizen in the Roman Empire. As far as it can be discerned all ancient sources accepted the office of Deaconess.