

# What Does The Bible Say About Women Deacons

**INTRO:** Before we form an opinion on any subject, we must ask the all-important question, “*What Does The Bible Say?*” This is far more important than traditions, consequences, or any other opinion-forming question. If the Bible either directly commands it or prohibits it, we have our answer. If not, then we look for some examples or principles that will help us to make a decision.

In order to discuss this particular issue, we need to discuss two related issues: (1) The role of women in the Bible. (2) The role of deacons in the Bible.

1. **The role of women in the Bible.** Surprisingly, you can find a great deal of evidence for women accepting important positions of leadership and/or service in the Old Testament. Miriam was considered part of the leadership team of Moses and Aaron. There were female judges who were leaders in Israel at that time. Deborah, for example, is called a prophetess. It is clear that she is a judge (she “held court . . . and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.”) She was also a military commander. Ruth and Esther were two other prominent women in the OT.

Most positions of leadership and prominence were held by men—but it was not unusual to have women in these positions.

In the New Testament, there are many important women: Mary was not a leader in the traditional sense, but was highly respected in the early church. Mary Magdalene, the sisters Mary and Martha, and others are highly mentioned, in some cases traveling with the disciples. In the early church, there were several women in important positions of leadership.

- o Acts 18:3, Priscilla and Aquila, a husband-wife team in leadership, are mentioned. Priscilla is usually mentioned first—a way of showing her prominence.

- o Lydia in Acts 16 was clearly a leader in the church at Philippi. Acts 16:13-15, “*On the sabbath we went outside the city gate along the river where we thought there would be a place of prayer. We sat and spoke with the women who had gathered there. One of them, a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, from the city of Thyatira, a worshiper of God, listened, and the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul was saying. After she and her household had been baptized, she offered us an invitation, ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my home,’ and she prevailed on us.*”

- o Philip’s daughters are mentioned as prophetesses in Acts 21:8-9, “*Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.*”

- o Romans 16 mentions several women that Paul recognizes as important leaders in the church. For example, “*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. . . .*” Paul mentions 29 people by name in that passage as coworkers to be greeted and at least 10 of them are women; Paul is not the chauvinist he is often made out to be.

**Summary:** Most of the leaders and workers mentioned in the NT are men; but it is not unusual for women to be in important church positions.

2. The role of deacons: First of all, let me say that deacons are servants, not leaders. The word translated deacon is the common Greek word for “servant,” and is not a title as much as it is a description. The Greek word is "diakonos." The feminine version is "diakonas." Both are used in the New Testament to apply to household servants or church workers. As the church matured, the word “diakonas” or “diakonas” came to be used as a title describing a position in the church--the servants that assist the elders or pastors. You can see from Acts 6 that their role is a behind-the-scenes supporting role so that the apostles could continue with their role of prayer and teaching.

There are several key passages to study:.

- a. In Acts 6, a group of men were elected to serve as helpers or assistants to the apostles. They are not yet called deacons, but it is nearly universally accepted that these are the forerunners of the deacons. At this stage, all 7 of those elected are men.
- b. By later, when Paul wrote Romans, Romans 16:1, Phoebe is called a "diakonas." It is translated as "servant" or a "deaconess," depending upon your translation. It is the exact same word—in the feminine—as the word which we use for deacon in other places in the New Testament. She does appear to have some formal role in the church, so it does appear that she is a female deacon..
- c. 1 Timothy 3:11—the context appears to be talking mostly about male deacons, but the word which is often translated “wives,” just means “women.” Some translations use the context to justify the "wives of deacons" inference, but it is just as correct (and more literal) to translate it in this way: “In the same way, the women are to be women worthy of respect.” It can mean wives; it can mean deaconesses. The context does make it appear that it is talking about women who have roles in the church at little more official than just being “wives” of deacons.

Summary: The Bible neither commands nor prohibits women deacons, but it certainly allow for them and there are clear examples of women deacons.

**NOTE about Baptist life and women deacons:** In the early years of Baptist life, there were many women deacons. The first reference to women deacons in Baptist literature appeared in a 1609 writing by John Smyth (recognized as one of the first Baptists) in which he said that "the church hath power . . . to Elect, approve & ordain her own Deacons both men & women." The first English Baptist confession of faith (1611, written by Thomas Helwys) in the paragraph about church officers, listed “Deacons Men, and Women who by their office relieve the necessities off the poor and impotent brethren.” Later, under the influence of (1) a culture that emphasized male leadership, and (2) the Protestant Reformation which also emphasized male leadership, women deacons appear to have fallen out of favor. There have been times in which churches who called women deacons were kicked out of their associations, but that has been rare. Generally speaking, it is considered to be a decision left up to individual churches. Opinion is still divided.