

## Doctrine of Deaconess

1. A "deaconess" refers to a female believer serving in the office of *deacon* in a church.
2. The only New Testament reference to deaconess as a church office is Paul's description of Phoebe as a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea.
  - *Romans 16:1 I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea:*
3. The Greek word translated as deaconess in this passage is rendered as deacon and servant by other versions of the Bible. The office of deaconess was similar to the office of deacon. Their spiritual responsibility was essentially the same, except those deaconesses probably rendered a ministry exclusively to women, particularly in the early years of the church.
4. The office of deaconess became a regular feature of church organization as early as the first part of the second century. In A. D. 112, Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan of Rome, indicating that in his investigation of Christians he had tortured two Christian maidens who were called deaconesses.
5. The office of deaconess in the Eastern Church continued down to the 12th century. The widows of clergymen, who were not permitted to remarry, often served as deaconesses. Some scholars believe that Paul's standards for *widows* in 1 Timothy 5:9-12 were applied to these deaconesses.
  - *1 Timothy 5:9 Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man, 10 Well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work. 11 But the younger widows refuse: for when they have begun to wax wanton against Christ, they will marry; 12 Having damnation, because they have cast off their first faith.*
6. No qualifications for the office of deaconess are specifically given in the New Testament. But tradition indicates that piety, discretion, and experience was required of deaconesses.
7. While controversy has centered on the ordination of women through the centuries, deaconesses apparently were installed in their office by the *laying on of hands*, just like deacons. However, there is no account of a deaconess ordination in the Bible. Church groups with both deacons and deaconesses customarily ordain women in the same manner as men.
8. In the United States the office of deaconess is most prominent today among Lutherans, Episcopalians, United Methodists, Presbyterians, American Baptists, and in certain Reform bodies.
9. In the early centuries, deaconesses were especially called on to serve women in situations where custom forbade the ministry of the deacon.

10. Deaconesses:

- Instructed female candidates for church membership.
- Ministered to women who were sick and in prison.
- Assisted at baptisms.
- Assisted the sick in the act of anointing.
- Have been assigned various types of educational, charitable, and social service work in their churches and communities.

11. Deaconesses have traditionally served as greeters in some churches. They may be seen frequently today as ushers and lay readers.