

ISSUE

14.33

BULLETIN OF
THE OLSEN
PARK CHURCH
OF CHRIST

Faithful Sayings

August 12
2012

Services

Sunday: 9:30 AM
10:20 AM
6:00 PM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter
Jeff Nunn
Kyle Pope

Deacons:

Dean Bowers
Eddie Cook
Bill Davis
Steve Dixon
Pat Goguen
Jack Langley
Neil Ledbetter
Brady McAlister
Walker McAnear
Lance Purcell
Rusty Scott

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope



The “Gender-Inclusive” Movement Among Churches of Christ

Part Five: Women Deacons and Elders **By Kyle Pope**

In 2010 Dr. Stephen Johnson, and Dr. Lynette Sharp Penya of Abilene Christian University conducted a research project entitled “Gender Inclusivity in Church of Christ Congregations.”¹ The project surveyed 45 congregations that demonstrated elements of “gender inclusivity” regarding their frequency of women’s participation in 15 different “public religious activities.” In spite of what we have seen in our previous articles regarding the biblical prohibition of women speaking in the church assembly (1 Cor. 14:34-35) or teaching over a man (1 Tim. 2:11-12), Johnson and Penya found that 97.7% allowed women to read Scripture; 88.6% allowed women to teach adult classes with adult males present; 77.3% allowed women to lead prayer; 56.8% allowed women to lead singing; 20.5% allowed women to preach on Sunday morning or Wednesday night (6). Johnson and Penya also surveyed these congregations regarding leadership and “formal titles.” While they found that only 40.9% had women serving as “deacons,” they noted that “some respondents indicated their congregations use the formal title ‘Ministry Leader’ for women instead of ‘Deacon’” (2). They found 34.1% used women for what they called “Ministry Leaders” (6). Although as of October 2010 there were no congregations that had appointed women as elders, they reported that “a few congregations noted women have been nominated as elders in their congregations in the past but have not yet been chosen for that position” (2). We saw in our first article in this series that one of the criteria Clarkson uses to identify “Gender-Inclusive” churches is the question: “Do women serve in leadership positions such as pul-

pit minister, worship leader, deacon, and ELDER?” (emphasis mine).² This would suggest to us that we can assume it is only a matter of time before advocates of the “gender-inclusive” movement achieve this objective as well.

Should We Appoint Women Elders and Deacons? It is interesting that Johnson and Peña’s research indicated more reservation among these congregations to appoint women elders than there was to appoint women deacons. From a biblical standpoint the issue is much the same. A clear biblical qualification demanded of both leaders is that they must be **“the husband**



of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2; cf. 3:12). Even so, it is often falsely asserted that there were female deacons in the New Testament church.

This assertion stems largely from the fact by the fourth century the Eastern churches had established an office for women deacons, but this proves nothing about New Testament practice. Western churches had established the office of “pope” by the fourth century, but it was just as unscriptural. The earliest evidence advocates can appeal to is a second century letter written by the pagan governor Pliny to the Roman emperor Trajan regarding the torture of two Christian women whom he says were called “*ministrae*,” the feminine form of the Latin equivalent of the Greek word *deaconos* (*Letters* 10.96.8). Unfortunately, many English translations of this text render *ministrae* “deaconesses,” but that assumes more than is warranted by the text itself, and reads the later practice into the earlier text. The fact is that the Latin word *minister* like the Greek *deaconos* can have a specific or generic meaning in reference to one who is simply a “servant.”

Were There Women Deacons in the New Testament Church? I know of a liberal congregation that decided some time ago that if they appointed women “deacons” too many people would object. To avoid controversy they dissolved the role of deacons and appointed male and female “ministers” instead. It is true that the Greek word *deaconos* means simply “servant,” and properly a *minister* is a servant. Even so, we must recognize that there is something wrong with our commitment to follow the pattern of Scripture if are willing to eliminate a biblical role of organization in the local church, but have no problem with creating a new one?

We could call “deacons” by any number of names that accurately translate the Greek word *deaconos* including servant, minister, or even attendant (see Strongs Greek 1249). This would not, however, change the fact that very specific qualifications have been set for these appointed leaders within a local church. The Holy Spirit commands, **“Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well”** (1 Tim. 3:12). In spite of what advocates of “same-sex marriage” say a woman cannot be *the husband of one wife*! That makes it clear that a woman cannot be a servant of the church in the same sense outlined in these qualifications. Critics point out properly that the Greek word *gune*,

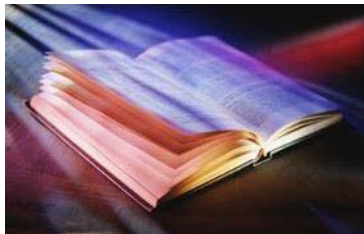
the word translated “wife” in Greek, is the same word that means simply woman. So they argue that what Paul was addressing is polygamy—that is, that a deacon must be a “one woman man.” We would agree that this too is inferred in the command, but it goes too far to try and apply this to the previous verse. “Gender-inclusive” advocates argue that 1 Timothy 3:11 rather than describing qualifications of the “wives” of elders and deacons, instead offers qualifications for “women” who serve as deacons. The problem with this is the presence of the adverb “likewise (*heautos*)” at the beginning of verse eleven. It is translated “even so” (KJV), “in like manner” (ASV), “in the same way” (NIV), and most frequently “likewise” (RSV, NASB, NKJV, ESV). It indicates a comparison or contrast. The same word is used in verse eight when Paul shifts from talking about elders to list qualifications for deacons. So what is the contrast or comparison? Paul can’t be talking about the same group of people (i.e. deacons) because in the next verse he says “Let deacons be the husbands of one wife.” He was talking about deacons before verse eleven and returns to the same subject in verse twelve. So who are the “women” of verse eleven? Certainly all women are to be **“reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things,”** but contextually we must conclude that the “women” of verse eleven are the “wives” of whom both deacons (3:12) and elders (3:2), are to have only “one.” If verse eleven was talking about women deacons, we would expect verse twelve to add the phrase “or the wife of one husband”—a qualification given later of widows supported by the church (cf. 1 Tim. 5:9). The text doesn’t add this! The only way we could argue that the women of verse eleven are female deacons (or elders) is if we argued that they too must be “husbands of one wife”—a condition clearly forbidden by the biblical teaching regarding homosexuality (Rom. 1:26-27).

What About Phoebe? In Romans 16:1 a woman is mentioned by the name of Phoebe. Most translations properly refer to her as a **“servant of the church in Cenchrea.”** The word translated “servant” in this text is the feminine form of the word translated “deacon” in some other places. Several of the modern translations have a footnote attached to this word reading—“Or, deaconess” (ASV, NIV). The Revised Standard actually uses the word

“deaconess” in the text and the New Revised Standard calls her “a deacon.” We must note that the word *deaconos* can be used in a generic sense of servants, and in a specific sense of the appointed servants in a local church. This is seen in the fact that the King James version translated it three times “deacon,” twenty times “minister,” and seven times simply “servant” (7). Most often when it was used in the New Testament it was not referring to the appointed, qualified servants of the local church but to servants in general. This is especially clear in Galatians 2:17 where it refers to Christ. He was a servant, but not a “deacon” of a local church. Why would we assume anything different about Phoebe? She was a servant of the church in Cenchrea, but she was not a “deacon” because she was not (and could not lawfully have been)—“the husband of one wife.”

“Why Should this Matter to Me?” When considering issues of controversy or apostasy it is very easy to say to ourselves, “That could never happen here—that’s someone else’s problem.” Sadly, in far too many cases potential problems ignored are problems waiting to explode.

Ten years ago I visited a sound congregation of Christians in the Midwest. This congregation had be-



gun to conduct their Sunday evening services like a Bible class, but they made no indication of this on their sign or in their announcements. To the visitor it simply appeared as if women were speaking “in church.” I voiced concerns about it at the time, but hoped that it was just a lack of appropriate communication and a lack proper caution. Sadly, that congregation is no longer in existence and some of its former members now worship with a “gender-inclusive” liberal congregation in the same town.

One of its former members recently spoke in Houston at the CBE (“Christians for Biblical Equality”) conference. Explaining the evolution of her change in thinking, she cited a class she sat in 20 years ago in an “extremely conservative church” when she noticed for the first time that “women were prophesying and praying at the church in Corinth.” I assume she was talking about 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 where Paul discussed the head covering that women were to wear when praying or prophesying. She explained that she asked the teacher about it, and

he said, “the women **MUST** have been doing this in private in their own homes” (emphasis hers). This didn’t satisfy her, leading her to conclude, “this was ridiculous and I knew it! Where else had they ever seen mention of someone prophesying that they would say that about? It goes against the very meaning of the word!”³

How I wish I could have been in that class 20 years ago! We could have talked about Miriam, who is identified as a “prophetess” (Exod. 15:20) but is never recorded as having spoken before the formal assembly of Israel. In fact, when she and Aaron questioned Moses’ authority, she was given leprosy for seven days as a punishment (Num. 12:1-16). We could have talked about Deborah, the “prophetess” and judge (Judges 4:4). She too, was never said to have addressed the assembly of Israel, but sat under a Palm tree between Ramah and Bethel and the Israelites came to her for judgment (Judges 4:5). We could have talked about Huldah, the prophetess who gave the frightening prophecy in the days of Josiah that Judah would fall. She did not address the assembly—the priest Hilkiah came to her home in the section of Jerusalem called “the Second Quarter” to hear this prophecy (2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chron. 34:22-28). Even, Anna, the prophetess who proclaimed the identity of Jesus, did so in the temple courts—not in a synagogue or a formal assembly of Israel (Luke 2:36-38). There is nothing in the word “prophesy” that demands the prophecy be revealed in the assembly of the church.

In our final article we will draw our study to a close by addressing some final considerations that must be answered in dealing with this very serious and alarming issue.

¹ “Gender Inclusivity in Church of Christ Congregations.” An Executive Summary of the Research Project conducted by Stephen Johnson, D.Min., Th.D. and Lynette Sharp Peña, Ph.D. October 2010. <http://halfthechurch.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/executive-summary1.pdf>

² January 11, 2012 update, http://www.clarksons.org/spiritleads/gender_inclusive_churches.htm.

³ <http://www.cbehouston.org/Pages/Marilyn.aspx>.

