

Deacons and Deaconesses

Why the Church Kept One and Not the Other

Protodeacon Brian Patrick Mitchell, PhD



History is not Tradition

1. History only becomes tradition when it is handed down.
2. Deaconesses have not been handed down to us.
3. The whole Church has never had a tradition of ordaining deaconesses.
4. But the whole Church has had a longstanding tradition of *not* ordaining them.

The background of the slide is a mosaic. It features a large, stylized cross in the center, rendered in gold and blue. The cross is set against a background of smaller mosaic tiles in various colors, including green, yellow, and white. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional church art.

The Disappearing Deaconess

Why the Church
Once Had Deaconesses
And Then Stopped Having Them

BRIAN PATRICK MITCHELL

- This presentation is based on *The Disappearing Deaconess: Why the Church Once Had Deaconesses and Then Stopped Having Them*.
- *The Disappearing Deaconess* was published in 2021 by Eremía Publications and is available online in hardback, paperback, and ebook versions.
- This 118-page book provides a wealth of information on deacons, deaconesses, and early Christian teaching about men and women, plus two appendices on the question of deaconesses today.
- Each slide of this presentation includes page numbers from the book where additional information and complete citations of sources can be found.

"In this time of gender confusion and speculative theology, we need the clarity found in the pages of The Disappearing Deaconess."

Very Rev. **Dr. Chad Hatfield**, President, SVOTS

BRIAN PATRICK MITCHELL

Origen's *Revenge*



*The Greek
and Hebrew
Roots of
Christian
Thinking on
Male and
Female*

For a fuller analysis of patristic teaching on male and female, see *Origen's Revenge: The Greek and Hebrew Roots of Christian Thinking on Male and Female*.

Origen's Revenge was published in 2021 by Pickwick Publications, an imprint of Wipf and Stock. It is available online in hardback, paperback, and ebook versions.

"Although much has been written about early Christian views of sexuality, no one has put all the pieces together in the same bold and comprehensive way as in this work. . . . A fascinating and provocative book."

David Bradshaw, University of Kentucky

"This is not so much a book as it is a whole course in theology—highly readable, brilliant, illuminating, with insights on practically every page."

Fr. Lawrence Farley, author of *Feminism and Faith*

What is a “deacon”?

- Greek *diakonos* → Latin *diaconus* → English *deacon*
- A ***diakonos*** was more than a mere servant and certainly not a ***doulos*** (bondservant, slave).
- A *diakonos* was a trusted subordinate serving someone in authority as his steward, messenger, representative, official, or deputy.
- In other words, a ***minister*** in the service of a ***magister*** (whence *master*).
- ***Diakonia*** — service, ministry

New Testament uses of *diakonos*

Named:

- **Christ** (Rom 15:8, Gal 2:17)
- **Paul** (1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6, 6:4; Eph 3:7; Col 1:23, 25)
- **Apollos** (1 Cor 3:5)
- **Tychicus** (Eph 6:21, Col 4:7)
- **Epaphras** (Col 1:7)
- **Timothy** (1 Thes 3:2)
- **Phoebe** (Rom 16:1)

Unnamed:

- **The Apostles** (2 Col 11:23)
- **All Christians** (Mt 20:26, 23:11; Mk 9:35, 10:43; Jn 12:26; 2 Cor 6:4, 1 Tim 4:6)
- **Earthly rulers** (Rom 13:4)
- **A king's henchmen** (Mt 22:13)
- **The wine stewards at the wedding in Cana** (Jn 2:5–9)
- **Bishops' "deacons"** (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8, 12)

The First Deacons

- **Acts 6:1–6:** To ensure that Greek and Hebrew widows were treated equally, the Apostles ordained seven men by prayer and a laying-on of hands.
- Nowhere in Acts are “**the Seven**” identified as “deacons.”
- But Acts 6 does speak twice of *diakonia*:

The Apostles’ “*diakonia* of the Word” (Acts 6:5)

The Seven’s “daily *diakonia*” for widows (Acts 6:1)

A Common Misconception

- The mention of “**waiting tables**” (Act 6:2) has been thought to refer to serving meals, essentially a charitable work.
- *But why would the Apostles not want to involve themselves in charitable works?*
- The answer is that the “tables” in Acts 6:2 were not dining tables: They were counters for receiving donations and distributing aid.
- The same Greek word (*trapeza*) is used in the Gospels for the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. From this use, it came to mean “**bank**” in Greek, just as the benches (*banci*) used by Italian moneylenders (*banchieri*) gave their name to banks in the West (Italian *banca*, French *banque*, English *bank*).
- **The Apostles wanted no part of the worldly business of collecting and disbursing money, so they appointed the Seven to decide who got what from the Church’s treasury.**

Were the Seven “deacons”?

- **St. John Chrysostom** acknowledges the financial nature of the new office in his homily on Acts 6:

“But observe, I pray you, if there were need of seven men for this, great in proportion must have been the sums of money that flowed in, great in proportion also the number of widows.”
- But because in his day deacons no longer managed the Church’s money, St. John did not believe the Seven were deacons, and the Fathers of the **Council in Trullo** in 692 agreed with him.
- Yet the Church’s earliest tradition was that the Seven were the first deacons:
 - In the 2nd century, **St. Irenaeus** of Lyon named the first of the Seven, **St. Stephen**, as “the first deacon elected by the Apostles.”
 - In the early 3rd century, the Church in Rome limited its deacons to seven, in imitation of the Apostles; the Council of Neocaesarea did the same in 315.

The Authority of Deacons

The duties of deacons often involved an exercise of authority:

- **St. Ignatius** (+108) writes that all the faithful are “subject to the bishop, the presbyters, the deacons.”
- The 3rd-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* tasks deacons with making sure people take their proper places in church, “And let the deacon also see that no one whispers, or falls asleep, or laughs, or makes signs.”
- The 4th-century *Apostolic Constitutions* gives deacons authority over subdeacons, readers, chanters, and deaconesses, calling them the deacon’s ministers.
- **St. John Chrysostom** says, “If anyone misbehaves, call the deacon.”
- Still today, deacons tell the people when to pay attention, pray, sing, kneel, bow, leave, and bar the doors.

Deacons as Administrators

- Deacons were the **executive assistants of bishops** and often represented their bishops at councils and at court.
- When bishops sent priests to care for parishes in their dioceses, they did not send deacons with them because **priests did not rate deacons**.
- Rome's seven deacons each administered one of the city's seven precincts, with a **staff of seven assistants—one subdeacon and six acolytes**.
- Rome's deacons were responsible for constructing catacombs, recording the acts of martyrs, and caring for over 1,500 widows and indigents. **St. Lawrence** was chief among them when he was martyred in 258.
- Constantinople's deacons filled the highest offices of the patriarchal administration, serving as *oikonomos* (treasurer, property manager), *skeuophylax* (sacristan), *chartophylax* (librarian, archivist, and later patriarchal chancellor), *sakellarios* (treasurer, later supervisor of monasteries), and *synkellos* (personal aide and confidant of the patriarch).

The Power of Deacons

- The ordination of a deacon to the priesthood was sometimes seen as a **demotion** in that it deprived him of his administrative position to assign him the care of souls.

In 453, Pope **St. Leo** the Great rebuked St. Anatolius of Constantinople “for degrading his archdeacon Aetius by making him a presbyter.”

Pope **St. Gregory** the Great (+604) rebuked bishop Natalis of Salona for making his archdeacon a presbyter to wrest control of diocesan finances from him.

- Deacons sometimes succeeded their bishops in office.
St. Athanasius the Great was a deacon when he accompanied St. Alexander of Alexandria to Nicaea in 325, led the opposition to the Arians as St. Alexander’s spokesman, and succeeded him as patriarch in 328.

Deaconesses?

- *Diakonos* is a masculine noun and normally takes a masculine article: *ho diakonos*.
- When applied to women, it was given a feminine article (*hē diakonos*) or the modifying noun “woman” (*gynē diakonos*).
- The gender-specific term *diakonissa* (deaconess) appears first at the First Ecumenical Council (I Nicaea) in 325.

The council considered what to do with the “deaconesses” of the heretical Paulianist sect upon their return to the Church.

The council decided they were to be treated as laywomen because they had received no “imposition of hands” (*cheirothesia*).

- The terms *diakonissa*, *gynē diakonos*, and *hē diakonos* were **used interchangeably**, with no difference between them.



Two Traditions

"I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant [diakonos] of the church which is at Cenchrea"

Romans 16:1, KJV

- In the **Greek-speaking East**, *diakonos* in Rom 16 was taken to mean that St. Phoebe was a deaconess.
- In the **Latin-speaking West**, *diakonos* in Rom 16 was always translated to mean "servant."
- Western Christians had **no tradition of deaconesses** and therefore did not understand St. Phoebe to be a deaconess.
- Consequently, East and West also differed on the "women" in 1 Tim 3:11. In the East, they were deaconesses; in the West, they were the wives of deacons.
- Even in the late 4th century, many Western Christians believed only heretics had deaconesses and were surprised to learn that the Church in the East had them.

Pliny's Letter to Trajan

- The only certain mention of historical deaconesses in the Church's first three centuries is **Pliny the Younger's** letter to the emperor Trajan.
- Pliny was governor of the Greek-speaking province of Bithynia and Pontus (now northern Turkey) when he wrote, circa 112:

"I deemed it all the more necessary to question under torture two servant girls called ministrae [female servants] and extract from them what was the truth. I discovered nothing, however, but a depraved, extravagant superstition."
- Pliny doesn't tell us anything more about the women—nothing about their duties or status among Christians.
- He also doesn't tell us enough about their community to know how orthodox they were.
- Some early heretical sects such as the **Montanists** did have female clergy; Pliny may have stumbled upon one such sect.

Scant Evidence of Deaconesses

- Evidence of actual deaconesses is **largely limited to the Greek-speaking East, minus Egypt**. None of the great Egyptian saints—St. Athanasius the Great, St. Cyril of Alexandria, or St. Isidore of Pelusium—mention deaconesses in their many works.
- Most ancient deaconesses are known only through inscriptions or hagiographic tradition. In both cases, it is not certain whether they were deaconesses or the **wives of deacons**, who were also sometimes called *diakonissa*.
- Our chief sources of general information about deaconesses are three apocryphal works, believed to be of Syrian origin:
 - Didascalia Apostolorum* (3rd century)
 - Apostolic Constitutions* (4th century)
 - Testament of Our Lord* (5th century)
- These are of unknown authorship and never received the full approval of the Church.

Duties of Deaconesses

Didascalia Apostolorum, 3rd Century

- Anointing women at baptism for the sake of modesty
- Instructing newly baptized women on how to preserve their purity and holiness
- Visiting sick women at home “and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness”

Apostolic Constitutions, 4th Century

- Assisting in baptism
- Minding the women’s doors
- Delivering messages and aid to women.

Testament of Our Lord, 5th Century

- Minding the women’s doors
- Taking Communion to pregnant women unable to be in church on Pascha.

Limitations on Deaconesses

Didascalia Apostolorum, 3rd Century

- Forbidden to teach: *"For if it were required that women should teach, our Master Himself would have commanded these [Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Joseph, and Mary the mother of James and John] to give instruction with us."*
- Forbidden to baptize: If Christ had meant women to baptize, He would have been baptized by his mother.

Apostolic Constitutions, 4th Century

- *"A deaconess does not bless, nor perform anything belonging to the office of presbyters or deacons, but only is to keep the doors, and to minister to the presbyters in the baptizing of women, on account of decency."*
- Must be either a "chaste virgin" or a widow once married.
- Forbidden to act without consulting a deacon.

Testament of Our Lord, 5th Century

- Ranks widows over deaconesses, leaving little for deaconesses to do.

Deaconesses in the East

"It is plain too that there is an order of deaconesses in the church. But this is not allowed for the practice of priesthood or any liturgical function, but for the sake of female modesty, at either the time of baptism or of the examination of some condition or trouble, and when a woman's body may be bared, so that she will not be seen by the male priests but by the assisting female who is appointed by the priest for the occasion, to take care of the woman who is in need of it when her body is uncovered."

St. Epiphanius of Salamis (+403)



- **St. Olympias** is the only deaconess we know much about, mostly because she was an ally and confidant of St. John Chrysostom.
- Olympias as a wealthy heiress in Constantinople who was widowed at an early age before bearing children.
- The emperor **St. Theodosius the Great** wanted her to marry a member of his court, but she refused and dedicated her life to charitable works such as founding a hospital and a monastery for women.
- In 390, when Olympias was still just 29, the archbishop of Constantinople, St. Nectarius, made her a deaconess, eliminating any chance of her marrying again.
- Later that year, St. Theodosius decreed that deaconesses must be **at least 60**, the age the Apostle Paul set for Church-supported widows in 1 Timothy 5:9, which the decree cited.

Deaconesses in the West

- Deaconesses are **not mentioned in any early Latin text**, including St. Hippolytus of Rome's 3rd-century *Apostolic Tradition* and Pope Cornelius's letter to the patriarch of Antioch providing staffing numbers for the Church in Rome circa 300.
- They are also **not mentioned** by any of the great Latin-language writers of Africa: Tertullian, St. Cyprian of Carthage, or St. Augustine of Hippo.
- The first word we hear of deaconesses in Latin is a fourth-century condemnation by **Ambrosiaster**, who dismissed them as a "foolish presumption" of Montanist heretics.
- Several early councils in Gaul (modern France) **banned** deaconesses: Nîmes in 396, Orange in 441, Epaone in 517, and Orleans in 533.
- Deaconesses appear in parts of Italy in the 7th century, but they are not attested in Rome until the end of the 8th century. Little is known of them except that they soon came to be identified with **abbesses** of convents.

Deaconesses were never the equals of deacons

- They had to be **much older** (over 40 by canon).
- They had to be **celibate** (as widows, virgins, or wives whose husbands were made bishops).
- Their duties were always **very limited**, both because they were women and because their ministry was confined to women.
- They had **no vocal role** in worship beyond singing with other women.
- They had **no authority** over men.
- They were **not ubiquitous** as were deacons.
- There were **far fewer** of them even where there were deaconesses.
- They were treated as “**minor clergy**” in almost every way.
- **Laywomen** could and often did perform all of the duties of deaconesses, which is not true of laymen and deacons.

Decline and Disappearance

- Though popular at court in Constantinople, deaconesses were never found in great numbers elsewhere.
- The order survived mainly as honor bestowed on wealthy widows, abbesses of monasteries, and the wives of men made bishops.
- The order was already in decline by the early 6th century, when **Severus of Antioch** wrote to Monophysite priests in Syria:
"In the case of deaconesses, especially in convents, ordination is performed less with regard to the needs of the mysteries than exclusively with regards to doing honor."
- In the 12th century, Patriarch Mark III of Alexandria was surprised to read of deaconesses in church canons and wrote to the canonist (and deacon) **Theodore Balsamon** in Constantinople asking about them.
- Balsamon answered that deaconesses were **no longer ordained**, that some nuns in Constantinople were wrongly called "deaconesses," that they minded the *gynaeceum* (women's section) of the church, and that they did not serve in the altar.

Why did deaconesses disappear?

- One reason was **infant baptism**, which eliminated the main duty of deaconesses, leaving them with little to do.
- But assisting at baptism was never much of a reason for deaconesses from the start, because the rule was always that any pious woman could assist in baptizing women when no deaconess was available.
- And when no pious women were available to assist, priests could just say their prayers and do their best.
- **This explains why so much of the Church never had deaconesses: They were never really needed.**

What about ritual impurity?

Feminists have argued that growing concern for **ritual impurity** in the 8th century, following the Council *in Trullo* (692), led to women being **excluded from the altar**.

But concern for ritual purity appeared much earlier and pre-dates the heyday of the female diaconate:

- 3rd-century: **St. Dionysius** of Alexandria barred menstruating women from approaching the altar or touching the Holy Gifts.
- 4th-century: **St. Timothy** of Alexandria barred menstruating women from receiving Holy Communion.
- 4th-century: The **Council of Laodicea** barred women from the altar, although without giving a reason.
- 4th-century: The ***Apostolic Constitutions***'s prayer for the making of deaconesses includes a petition to “cleanse her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit,” which is assumed to refer to menstruation because it does not appear in the prayers said over male clerics.

What about alien influence?

Feminists have also argued that early Christians were originally more tolerant of women in leadership roles but became less tolerant as a result of **alien influence**.

In that view, the disappearance of deaconesses was —

- Either a “gynekophobic” reaction to women taking leading roles in pagan cults or heretical sects
- Or a “gynekophobic” imitation of Jewish or Muslim disdain for women.

But there is **no evidence** that early Christian thinking about gender roles changed over time.

On the contrary, there is **ample evidence** that early Christians believed from the start that leadership was properly the man’s responsibility on account of both Nature and the Fall.

Natural Order

"But I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God."

1 Cor 11:3

- In the Septuagint, the word *kephalē* ("head") is used interchangeably with *archē* ("beginning") to translate the Hebrew word *rosh*, as in *Rosh Hashanah*, the "head" or beginning of the new year.
- The woman was created from the man (Gen 2:18–25, 1 Cor 11:8).
- The man is therefore the "head" or source of the woman (1 Cor 11:3–16), as Christ is the "head" or source of the Church (Eph 5:22–33), and as the Father is the "head" or source of the Son (1 Cor 11:3).
- This "headship" consists of the **self-giving** by one who is the source of a **thanksgiving** other.
 - In the Gospels, between the Father and the Son, all the **giving** is done by the Father, and all the **thanking** is done by the Son.
 - This accounts for both their **order** and their **equality**.

Economic Order

God subjected the woman to the man on account of the Fall, to keep them together and thus ensure her protection and the survival of the race:

- “Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.” (Gen 3:16)
- “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.” (1 Cor 14:34)
- “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” (1 Tim 2:12)

“For with us indeed the woman is reasonably subjected to the man, since equality of honor causeth contention.”

St. John Chrysostom

The problem with women “deacons”

All Church Fathers upheld the natural and economic order of the man and the woman, seeing it firmly grounded in both Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition.

Making women “deacons” and ranking them among the clergy **violated the natural and economic order** by appearing to place women over men in the Church hierarchy.

This explains —

- why deaconesses were **so limited** where they did exist,
- why they were **so strongly resisted** elsewhere, and
- why they eventually **ceased to exist** everywhere.

The Fathers tolerated the custom of honoring some women as deaconesses because people assumed it to be apostolic, **but they did much to discourage it and eventually abandoned it.**

Deaconesses Today?

- The advocates of deaconesses today **do not want a restoration** of the ancient order with all its limitations, including age and celibacy.
- They want **a new order of women deacons ranked as “major clergy”** with each bishop given a free hand in deciding on their duties, honors, and limitations.
- Some would have young married women do **everything male deacons do**, including preaching, administration, attending the altar, and leading people in worship.
- They would have women do **things never done** by ancient deaconesses, including some things explicitly forbidden by Apostolic ordinance and Church canons.
- This is why scattered attempts to revive the order in the past century have **not led to general acceptance**.

A Need for Deaconesses?

Advocates of deaconesses claim that the Church needs them today to care for women:

Historically the female deacon assisted with the needs of women. How might she help in this way today?

The presence of the female deacon can protect, support and expand the ministry of the priest and Bishop in cases of:

- Domestic abuse
- Sexual abuse, assault and rape
- Sexual trafficking/ Prostitution
- Infertility
- High risk/ difficult pregnancy
- Miscarriage
- Unexpected or unwanted pregnancy
- Abortion
- Illnesses uniquely impacting women

But the care above (comforting and counseling women in distress) is **not sacramental** and therefore **does not require ordination**.

Another Need for Deaconesses?

Advocates of deaconesses also argue that women **feel devalued** by the exclusion of women from the ranks of the clergy, and that this causes them to leave the Church.

But —

1. This argument reveals the push for deaconesses to be less about the needs of women than about the **desire of a few women for rank, honor, and power**.
2. It treats sacramental ordination rather lightly, as an **appeasement of women** who wrongly feel slighted because women can't be clergy.
3. Fewer women would feel slighted if some Orthodox pastors were bolder and better about teaching **what the Church has always taught** about male and female.
4. Some people will always choose the world and its ways over the Way of the Cross, but **the churches seeing the most growth** are those holding fast to Holy Tradition.

*"And **be not conformed to this world**: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."*

Romans 12:2

What's at stake?

At stake are **two fundamental principles**:

1. God has created us either male or female and called us to live as we were created.
2. There is a natural and economic order between the two that we are obliged to respect.

Feminists **deny** the second principle and **disregard** important differences between men and women, emptying the first principle of **significance** and thus paving the way for the **gender confusion** of our present age.

Making women deacons would **contribute to the confusion** by (a) blurring the distinction of men and women and (b) placing women over men in the Church.

This would beg the question of **why women cannot also be priests**.

Thinking Ahead

Already some advocates of deaconesses say they see no **“theological” reason** women should not be priests.

We cannot therefore accept their assurances that deaconesses today will not lead to **priestesses tomorrow**.

*“We also ought not to think only of what we ourselves might tolerate today. **We must think generationally**. Just as children who grow up in parishes with female readers are more likely to believe as adults that women should be deacons or deaconesses, so children who grow up in parishes with deaconesses will be more likely to believe as adults that women should be priests and bishops.”*

A Public Statement on Orthodox Deaconesses
by Concerned Clergy and Laity
January 15, 2018

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Thank You!

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