

## **Women and the Office of Deacon in the PCA**

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A significant discussion is taking place in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) on women and the office of deacon. The present wording of the PCA's Book of Church Order (BCO) does not allow for the ordination of women as deacons. However, there are some within the PCA who believe that the Scriptures do allow for women to be ordained to the office of deacon. These individuals, recognizing the BCO prohibition of women as ordained deacons, have adopted a certain tack: They allow their congregations to elect men and women as deacons but then do not ordain either the men or the women. The propriety of this practice has raised questions, especially about following the expressed provisions of the BCO.

The intent of this article is not whether women should be ordained as deacons, or to argue for or against this proposition; this is a matter for the PCA General Assembly to discuss and determine. The question at this time is this: Since the PCA Book of Church Order does not allow women to be ordained as deacons is it appropriate (1) for particular PCA congregations to nominate, elect and commission men and women as deacons, and then (2) not to ordain either these men or women? Does the BCO allow for this practice?

A number of PCA Presbyteries are dealing with and studying this practice of local churches within their bounds that are electing men and women as deacons but not ordaining either. The reason for this discussion and study is that there are some ministers and candidates for ordination and licensure who have indicated that they hold the position that their congregations can elect men and women as deacons, which is contrary to the statement that a candidate for deacon "should be an active male member..." (BCO 24-1; 7-2).

First, note what the BCO provisions with regard to the organizational structure of the church with reference to offices in general and deacons in particular. The BCO speaks of the office of deacon as being a regular and perpetual office in the church, and reserved for men only. Note the following:

"The officers of the Church, by whom all its powers are administered, are, according to the Scriptures, teaching and ruling elders and deacons (BCO 1:4)."

A particular church consists of a number of professing Christians, with their children, associated together for divine worship and godly living, agreeable to the Scriptures, and submitting to the lawful government of Christ's kingdom" (BCO 4-1).

The officers of a particular church "are its teaching and ruling elders and its deacons" (BCO 4-2).

"The ordinary and perpetual classes of office in the Church are elders and deacons" (BCO 7-2).

"The office of deacon is not one of rule, but rather of service both to the physical and spiritual needs of the people" (BCO 7-2).

"In accord with Scripture, these offices [elder and deacon] are open to men only" (BCO 7-2).

"The office of deacon is set forth in the Scriptures as ordinary and perpetual in the Church" (BCO 9-1).

"To the office of deacon, which is spiritual in nature, shall be chosen men of spiritual character, honest repute, exemplary lives, brotherly spirit, warm sympathies, and sound judgment' (BCO 9-3).

"Every church shall elect persons to the offices of ruling elder and deacon ... keeping in mind that each prospective officer should be an active male member who meets the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1" (BCO 24-1).

The BCO indicates that ordination to the offices of elder and deacon is required after a man's election. "Upon those whom God calls to bear office in His Church He bestows suitable gifts for the discharge of their various duties. And it is indispensable that, besides possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, every one admitted to an office should be sound in the faith, and his life be according to godliness. Wherefore every candidate for office is to be approved by the court by which he is to be ordained" (BCO 16-3). "Those who have been called to office in the Church are to be inducted by the ordination of a court" (BCO 17-1).

To summarize, the BCO stipulates the following with regard to the office of deacon:

1. That the office of deacon is one of the ordinary and perpetual classes of office in the church (BCO 1-4; 4-2; 7-2; 9-1).
2. That as a perpetual office in the church, each particular church should elect men only to the office of deacon, unless providentially hindered, in which case the ruling elders will assume those duties (BCO 5-10; 7-2; 9-3; 24-1).
3. That those men elected as deacons should be ordained (BCO 16-3; 17-1).

#### **Another Interpretation and Practice**

Counter to the overview above, there are a number of PCA officers and churches who believe that the office of deacon should be open to women and have instituted the practice of allowing their congregations to elect men and women as deacons but then not ordaining either the men or the women. They set those elected apart in a commissioning service. The flow of argument for this practice is gathered from a number of sources and the narrative that follows is a compilation from these sources.

One church stated its positions this way: "The position of this church concerning the role of women in the everyday ministry of the gospel within the context of this local church. It specifically deals with a defense of this church's position to allow women to serve as deacons." (References to specific churches are not included since it is not the intent of this article to draw attention to any church or person but to deal with the issue in the basis of broad principles and the documents of the PCA.)

In defense of their position and practice, a number of PCA congregations use arguments such as the following:

Concurring with the vast majority of confessional Christians now and throughout history, we affirm the plain teaching of the Holy Scriptures that the office of elder is open only to men. This office is also referred to in the Scriptures as bishop, presbyter, and overseer. This includes both the Minister of Word and Sacrament, or teaching elder, and the lay office of ruling elder.

On the question of women holding the office of deacon, the Bible is not completely clear, nor does the Presbyterian tradition speak with one voice. However, at [this] church, we affirm that Scripture permits women to serve as deacons. At the present time, however, the Presbyterian Church in America does not allow women to be ordained as deacons, and so, in submission to our denomination's *Book of Church Order*, we will not ordain deacons to serve the

physical, mercy, and other diaconal needs of [this PCA] church. We will, however, select, train, and commission both men and women to serve this church as deacons in an “un-ordained” capacity.

How can the elders take a vow to support the BCO and yet go against it by allowing women to serve as deacons? We would say that in commissioning all of our deacons, we are not, strictly speaking, going against the BCO.

It is true that an elder takes a vow to uphold the BCO. Those vows are found in BCO 24-5. The third vow asks this question, “Do you approve of the form of government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church in America, in conformity with the general principles of biblical polity?” Answering that question in the affirmative does not require that an elder approve of every detail of the BCO, only of the “form” of government and its conformity with the Bible.

And in saying this, it is not our intention to pick at nits. Interestingly, the second vow asks an elder candidate to receive and adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith as the system of doctrine which best describes that which is taught in Scripture. It specifically asks an elder candidate if he believes in and will support the Westminster Confession of Faith, per se, regarding the area of theology. In other words, it specifically defines the doctrines that an elder must hold as the theology described by the WCF. But the very next vow, dealing with church government, says nothing specifically about the Book of Church Order per se, only requiring that an elder candidate approve of the “form of government” of the PCA. We don’t believe that having women serve as deacons violates the form of government of the PCA. The form of government of the PCA recognizes two offices in the church: elders and deacons—and we have both. We do not believe that the form of government dictates that the deacons only be men.

The natural question to ask is: Why do this at all? Aren’t you causing more trouble than this issue is worth? This may seem like a reasonable question, but that sort of apathy has been detrimental to the church in the past. To let fear or the desire to leave well enough alone keep us from doing something that we believe to be Biblical would have harmful results. The gospel rejects fear and apathy and should move us to courageous action. Fear and apathy also breed legalism, falling back into time-worn routines because it is simply easier. Faithful action, not fearful apathy, will always meet with resistance, but is always worth the trouble.

On this issue, as on all issues, we should bind what the Scriptures bind and loose what the Scriptures loose (Matthew 16:19). We should be as closed as the Scriptures are, but at the same time as open as the Scriptures are. We do not want to prohibit women from doing what we believe the Bible allows them to do. There is nothing in the nature of the office of deacon that precludes women from holding that office, the evidence from Scripture seems certainly not to prohibit women from being deacons, and there are ample records from church history that women actually did hold the office of deacon. Therefore, the elders allow women to hold the office of deacon in the church.

The biblical restrictions placed on women have to do with authority in the church, which is fundamental to the role of the elder. The aspect of authority is carried out in the church through the specific duties of the elder: admitting people to membership in the church and to the Lord’s Table, exercising spiritual oversight and discipline in the lives of the people, giving leadership to the direction of the church, and teaching the Scripture in an authoritative capacity. All other roles and offices in the church beyond that of Teaching Elder are open to women,

including serving on the diaconate, teaching in situations approved by the elders, and serving and even leading various ministry teams in the church.

### **Presbytery Actions**

Ohio Valley Presbytery (OVP) considered the propriety of churches electing men and women as deacons and not ordaining either. At its January 2008 stated meeting OVP adopted the following declarations:

Whereas, it is the constitutional position of the PCA that "In accord with Scripture, [the office of deacon] is open to men only" (BCO 7-2, 24-1), Therefore,

- assigning the title of deacon to women is out of accord with the Constitution of the PCA, and
- having women function in the constitutionally defined role of deacon is out of accord with the Constitution of the PCA, and
- the position that "there is no scriptural basis to differentiate between men and women serving as deacons under the authority of the Session" is an unconstitutional position.

Whereas, it is the constitutional position of the PCA that "Those who have been called to office in the Church are to be inducted by the ordination of a court" (BCO 17-1) and requires that "every church shall elect persons to the offices of ruling elder and deacon ... keeping in mind that each prospective officer should be an active male member who meets the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1" (BCO 24-1). Therefore,

- it is unconstitutional to elect women to office in the PCA and
- it is unconstitutional to elect men to office in the PCA and not induct them to office by ordination.

It is the position of the OVP that differences in these areas may be allowed as exceptions of belief, but not practice.

These declarations should be used by the Examinations and Credentials Committee of OVP to clarify for those seeking admission to OVP the position of and practice acceptable within OVP.

### **PCA General Assembly Actions**

A number of other Presbyteries have handled complaints alleging that some of their candidates are holding to the belief and practice that women can be elected as deacons but not ordained. Out of this discussion an overture was sent to the 36<sup>th</sup> PCA General Assembly requesting it to erect a committee to study the role of women in the church with a special consideration to the ordination of women as deacons. The General Assembly debated this overture at length and voted not to erect a study committee (to read a report of this action go to [http://theaquilareport.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=91:general-assembly-rejects-study-committee-on-women-deacons&catid=40:normal-article](http://theaquilareport.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=91:general-assembly-rejects-study-committee-on-women-deacons&catid=40:normal-article)).

The 36th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America found "unsatisfactory" the responses of Northern California and Philadelphia Presbyteries on their having granted exceptions on women serving as deacons or deaconesses serving on diaconates.

PCA Presbyteries have to submit their minutes for annual inspection by the GA Review of Presbytery Records Committee (RPRC). At the 35<sup>th</sup> PCA General Assembly, the RPRC had recommended that the GA cite the Northern California Presbytery for "an exception of substance" for allowing two newly organized churches to "commission Deaconesses contrary to BCO 9-3." It also cited Philadelphia Presbytery with the following, "Diaconate of a new church includes 4 Deaconesses commissioned contrary to BCO 9-3."

Northern California Presbytery responded with the following to the 36<sup>th</sup> GA: "Presbytery respectfully disagrees with the exception (RAO 16-10.b.2). Presbytery approved the organizing pastor's exception with respect to the diaconate (provided below) upon transfer into Presbytery. The action, thus recorded, is not a matter of substance, but consistent with the approved exception, viz., commissioning of the diaconate."

The candidate's exception approved by Presbytery stated the following:

Ordination and obedience to deacons (specifically BCO 24-5, 24-6). Whereas the BCO correctly identifies Deacons as an office in the church, I believe it misinterprets Scripture regarding their ordination. The question to the congregation in 24-5 asks them to yield obedience to Deacons. In 24-6 (and various other places) the Deacons are referred to as ordained in the same manner as Elders. Until the BCO is amended, I intend to elect and install unordained deaconesses. This is allowable under BCO 9-7.

The 36<sup>th</sup> GA found this response "unsatisfactory," and adopted the following:

Presbytery's response does not adequately address the specific issue identified by the 35<sup>th</sup> GA. The newly installed Session of the particularized church "commissioned" unordained men and women for a body which the Presbytery minutes called the "diaconate" (BCO 9, 19-15, 24-10). However, BCO 9 is clear that only ordained and elected men can be members of a "diaconate." The appeal to BCO 9-7 is flawed because 9-7 addresses people appointed by the Session, not members of a diaconate (Board of Deacons, 9-4). According to BCO 9-3 and 9-4, a diaconate may only include men what are elected, ordained and installed. Therefore, the body referenced in the exception must not be called a diaconate. In addition, this practice, coupled with the minister's expressed view that he intends not to ordain deacons "until the BCO is amended," denies qualified men their constitutional and biblical right to be considered for this office.

Philadelphia Presbytery's response was also found unsatisfactory. The response stated, "Philadelphia Presbytery respectfully request more information from the RPR. Please clarify how the commissioning of 4 unordained women as deaconesses is out of accord with BCO 9-3."

The GA adopted the following in response to Philadelphia Presbytery:

We agree with the Presbytery that BCO 9-3 would not directly apply to the commissioning of unordained women, if they are not considered to be members of the Diaconate. However, the record indicates that "four deaconesses and one deacon were commissioned, "and the record of the particularization service refers to "Vows/Commissioning of Diaconate." BCO 9-3 and 9-4 are clear that only ordained and elected men can be members of a "Diaconate."

To summarize, the GA affirmed:

1. Men only are to be elected by a congregation to the office of deacon.
2. Women cannot be elected by a congregation to the office of deacon.
3. Women cannot be commissioned or ordained as deacons.
4. Women cannot serve on diaconates.

### **Does Being Confessional Matter?**

The Presbyterian Church in America is a confessional church and as such has adopted a Confession of Faith and Catechisms, as well as a Book of Church Order. The BCO states the following to express what the adoption of these documents signifies:

The Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly, together with the formularies of government, discipline, and worship are accepted by the Presbyterian Church in America as standard expositions of the teachings of scripture in relation to both faith and practice (BCO 29-1).

What this provision asserts is that words have meaning and specific definitions. There are expressed provisions within the PCA constitution that direct the definition, use and meaning of titles, phrases, processes, and doctrines. The PCA has chosen to express within its polity certain words and concepts which define and distinguish the nature of the office gifts and those who are qualified to serve in these regular and perpetual offices.

An important hermeneutical principle is that words and concepts must be interpreted in their context, recognizing the historical and grammatical structure of the document in which the words and concepts are used.

If those who desire to change portions of the PCA constitution, which would have the effect of changing the "standard exposition of the teachings of scripture in relation to both faith and practice" (BCO 29-1), the appropriate format is to propose amendments to the constitution. This way the church through deliberative assembly and process can determine whether the proposed amendments should become a part of the standard exposition of Scripture that is confessed together. It is inappropriate to make definitional changes unilaterally regarding expressed provisions in our constitution without the approbation of the church at large.

In a discussion like this there is an unfortunate frame of mind that pits Scripture over against the Westminster Standards and BCO. We need to understand the proper relationship between Scripture and the Standards. The PCA believes that Scripture is the absolute authority for the church. However, it is important to note that the PCA has adopted a hermeneutical framework by which it understands Scripture. As a confessional church its members have agreed together to interpret Scripture within a certain framework.

While affirming that the Scripture is "the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined" (WCF 1.10), and that the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America is "subordinate to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the inerrant Word of God" (BCO Preface, III), and while affirming also that this Constitution is fallible (WCF 31.3), the Presbyterian Church in America affirms that its subordinate and fallible Constitution has been "adopted by the church" (BCO Preface, III) "as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice" (BCO 29-1) and as setting forth a form of government and discipline "in conformity with the general principles of biblical polity" (BCO 21-5.3; 39-3). Because the PCA is a confessional church it asks its officers to take vows in a number of areas; for example:

"Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms* of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures..." (PCA Ordination Vow 2)

Scripture is the absolute authority for the church. This is not the issue in this discussion. The PCA is a confessional church and as such its officers have agreed together that the Westminster Standards and its polity are faithful or standard expositions of the Scriptures. A confession by definition includes and excludes by the system it has chosen to understand and interpret Scripture.

As a consequence, the PCA confesses that the visible church membership is composed of professing believers and their children; this is its understanding of the Scripture's teaching on the covenant. Professing believers holding to a Baptist understanding of the covenant would not agree with this definition of the visible church; they would not present their infant children for baptism or see them as non-communing members of the visible church. As a result, Baptist believers could not affirm the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards. This

same principle applies to professing believers who hold other expositions of Scripture which they confess but do not fit the system of doctrine the PCA has adopted. These other believers follow other hermeneutical and confessional interpretations of Scripture.

Pitting Scripture against the Standards may sound clever, but this line of thinking misunderstands the relationship of Scripture and the Standards. To say that the Standards have been raised over Scripture is not what the Standards affirm and is a faulty assertion. It is more likely a tacit, if not explicit, admission that there is a disagreement over what constitutes the basis of the PCA's exposition. And this may be a reflection of a variance in one's views with the interpretation of Scripture that is presented in the Standards. If one believes that the Standards have not interpreted Scripture correctly, that its hermeneutical approach needs to be changed, then he has the right and duty to propose amendments and let the church through deliberative assembly determine the matter. In this way, the Standards will continue to serve the church as the faithful and standard exposition of Scripture.

A basic principle of confessionalism is that the confessional standards of the church are the corporate expositions of the Scriptures. When these Scriptural expositions are summarized they form the statements and propositions that the church then jointly confesses. If any wording or proposition in these expositions are questionable or appear to be found wanting, then the church through deliberative process opens the Scriptures, does the necessary exegesis, and if any changes in the expositions are warranted, the church determines this. Through this process the church agrees to any new formulations and confesses them. Instead of launching out individually or unilaterally to replace or change the agreed on corporate expositions, the church works in tandem through its courts to produce or amend the standard expositions that it confesses. To be a part of a confessional church means, at least in part, that our personal and private opinions do not sit in judgment over the corporate and standard expositions of the Scriptures.

Since the present expressed position of the PCA Book of Church Order is that the office of deacon is a regular and perpetual office, is reserved for men only, and is an office for which ordination is to be administered, officers and churches are bound to bring their practice into conformity with these expressed principles. The point here is that until the PCA, through deliberative assembly and process, amends its BCO to allow for women to be ordained as deacons, or amends the BCO to allow for the commissioning of women as deacons, churches should not act out of accord with the present provisions of the BCO. Until then it is clear that only men should be elected and ordained as deacons.

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