
SERVING CHRIST BY SERVING OUR NEIGHBOR: THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LUTHERAN DEACONESSES

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Lutheran deaconesses serve Christ by serving their neighbor. They receive their office of service from the very person of Jesus Himself who came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Jesus tells His disciples, after breaking bread with them on the night in which He was betrayed, that “I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:27). All Christians are called to this service, but deaconesses embody this life of *diakonia* as called laborers in Christ’s church to demonstrate in their lives and actions the mercy and compassion of Christ. The motto of Lutheran deaconesses says it best: “What is my want? I want to serve. Whom do I want to serve? The Lord in His suffering ones and His poor.”¹

In a church body that does not ordain women, deaconesses provide women with an opportunity to serve in the church that reflects who they are as women. A deaconess brings a uniquely feminine care, perceiving need and responding with gentle helpfulness, expressing the compassion of Christ in a tender, nurturing way. She serves by using her skills and theological training to embody Christ’s incarnational care in the midst of suffering. A deaconess serves alongside a pastor, attending to those in need and dwelling with them. She points them to the pastor and the means of grace where Christ comes to them in His body to join them to Himself for eternity.

Congregations that are served by male pastors are able to care for the needs of God’s people in an essentially masculine way. Without the presence of women serving as deaconesses alongside the pastors, a feminine care is often absent from a congregation’s service to her members. Just as a family needs both a father and mother to



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¹ This motto was created by Wilhelm Loehle for his deaconesses in Germany.

nurture and teach the children, so also will congregations be blessed by having a pastor and a deaconess serving together, representing the care that is uniquely characteristic of both their offices and their genders.

Through the deaconess programs in our church, we are now able to offer women a rigorous program of theological study. This provides them with the foundation for a charitable life as they live and breathe the Gospel as servants of Christ in the midst of His people. Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, was founded in 1846 to share the Gospel of Christ as biblically and historically confessed by the Lutheran Church. One of its founders, Pastor Wilhelm Loehe of Neuendettelsau, Germany, was committed to the training of deaconesses for service in the church through acts of mercy and charity.

The Mercy of Jesus: The Theological Foundation for the Office of Deaconess

Even though it is not possible to establish the office of deaconess from the New Testament, the theological rationale and foundation for the office is clearly affirmed in the person and work of Jesus and in the teaching of St. Paul. For both Jesus and Paul, the Gospel must be embodied, that is, the love of God that entered our world in His only Son continues now through us by the Spirit of the Son who comes to us in the waters of our Baptism (Gal. 4:3–5). Christ, by His Spirit, brings us into communion with Him and His life that knows no end. His life is now our life. He lives through us, and His love continues in the world through us, through our mouths and hands (Gal. 2:20–21).

Our life in Christ is founded on this remarkable reality: that in this present evil age, Christ dwells among us as Emmanuel and has rescued us by giving Himself up for our sins (Gal. 1:4). Our sins are evidence that this world had been infected with a virus from which we cannot escape. Things are very wrong. Everyone can see it, especially in those people who suffer physical, emotional and spiritual pain from the consequences of sin — those broken by violence and tragedy, by sickness and death — the very ones deaconesses are called to serve. Only God is able make right what has gone wrong in this world. He does it by sending His Son from heaven into our world to show us His mercy through miracles of healing the sick and raising the dead. The ultimate miracle that healed the whole creation was that He loved us so much that He was willing to bear all our burdens, even to the point of death, a death through which He brings in the new creation. When He rose from the dead on the third day, He showed us what we will one day become and already are now: bodies washed clean and made holy, healed eternally from sin's dread disease. In Jesus' resurrected body, we see ourselves, Jesus in us and we in Him. Heaven and earth are embodied in Jesus and now in us. His mercy for a fallen creation is now present in the creation through our acts of mercy as we bear witness to Him in all we say and do.

It is the mercy of Jesus Christ that is at the heart of the theological foundation for the role of the deaconess. Jesus calls us to a life of charity when He tells us to “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). In the Early Church, the office of deaconess existed as a vocation for women in consecrated service of Christ and His church, providing acts of mercy through various tasks that served the neediest in the church's midst. They served Christ by serving “the least of these my brethren” (Matt. 25:40), providing the hungry with food, the thirsty with drink, welcoming strangers into the community of saints, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and those who are in prison (Matt. 25:35–36). “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” echoes the Old Testament creedal description of God as “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ps.103:8). Still today, this theological foundation has not changed. Deaconesses continue to carry out the mercy that God in Christ shows to us.

The Service of Women to Jesus

Many people are unaware that it was through the loving service and financial means of women on behalf of Jesus and the apostles that enabled Him to engage in a three-year ministry of teaching and performing miracles. Luke reports the news that some women put forth their possessions and their time in caring for Jesus and the Twelve (“were serving them” [Luke 8:3]). Thus they helped make it possible by providing the human care necessary for Jesus to travel about with His disciples, who themselves served through the Word and healing they brought. Those named in Luke 8 appear again prominently as witnesses of Jesus' death and resurrection. They watch the crucifixion from a distance as they mourn for their Lord (23:49); they come to the tomb early in the morning to finish anointing His body (23:55–56a); they are the first witnesses of the resurrection and the first evangelists as they report the passion and resurrection facts to the 11 apostles (24:1–12). These women who were with Jesus since early in His ministry and through the three days of His passion and resurrection will be key members of the emerging church in Acts (see

Acts 1:14). They will be essential links in the “chain of evidence” for the Christian claims about Jesus,”² helping to transform the 11 and others who were “eyewitnesses from the beginning” into “ministers of the Word” (Luke 1:2).

According to the theology of the cross (or the “Great Reversal”), to serve is to be great in God’s kingdom. Of the eight occurrences of *diakonia*, “service,” in Luke, the first three are of women who serve Jesus: Peter’s mother-in-law (4:39), these women (8:3) and Martha (10:40). In serving, they are following Jesus’ own ministry as one of service; by becoming the “least,” they are among the “greatest” (Luke 22:24–27). The women’s service to Jesus is of great import, particularly in the context of the attitude prevailing in Judaism of Jesus’ day regarding the exclusion of women in religious matters. In the kingdom He brings, the Spirit is poured out on His male servants and His female servants alike (Acts 2:18). Whoever does the will of God, which is to believe in Him, is His brother and sister and mother, for they “hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21).³

A Corporate Office of Mercy

The diaconal role of women is rightly identified in the context of the life of the church. The church’s activities fall into three categories. *Leitourgia*, or Divine service, is the foundational activity of the church where God is serving us with His gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation through the bodily presence of Christ in Word and Sacrament. *Marturia*, or public witness, is our response to the gifts as we confess to God and to the world that which He works in us, namely, our faith. *Diakonia*, or service, is Christ in us in the midst of the world as we act out the love, mercy, grace and charity God gives to us in Christ amongst one another as He satisfies the needs of our neighbor through us.

These three activities take place in each one of us as we are members in the Body of Christ. This incarnational reality of God’s presence in us is also true among us, thus these activities are located corporately in the church. *Leitourgia* takes place regularly in the public worship service at font, pulpit and altar, as Christ comes to us and as we come into communion with Him. In the Divine Service, we do not serve ourselves inwardly by turning in upon ourselves, but rather Christ serves us through the office of the public ministry as the pastor stands in the stead and by the command of Christ. Through the pastor, Christ speaks His Word and serves His Bride, the church, at His table. *Marturia* occurs both as an act of worship, in the Creed of the church, in hymns and prayers, as well as proceeding from the church into the highways and byways as we bear witness to the hope that is in us. *Diakonia* flows from the altar where we are served and takes place outside the doors of the worship service, finding expression wherever suffering and sin afflict and infect our lives.

While pastors carry on the work of the apostles among us, deacons and deaconesses are offices created in Christian freedom to ensure that this work of practical, human serving of need is completed. It was in the midst of a particular need that individuals were first consecrated and set apart by the church to administer its care. In Acts 6, the diaconal office is first seen when seven men were appointed to administer the care of the physical need of widows. Those chosen were “full of the Spirit and wisdom” and given the responsibility of acting on behalf of the church. The work they were given was crucial and necessary to the existence of the church as it lived out its daily life. In the same way that justification and sanctification cannot be separated, faith must live by expressing itself as love in action. God’s desire and will to extend compassion to both body and soul must be expressed corporately by the church. As the church grew, it continued to appoint and consecrate individuals for tasks on its behalf. One example is Phoebe, who met the needs of the saints in the particular, located church at Cenchreae in a different way, a need that was best met by a woman.

Phoebe: The First Deaconess?

No one really knows for sure what Paul meant when he referred to Phoebe as a deaconess in his letter to the Roman Christians. He calls her “our sister Phoebe, a deaconess (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae” (Rom. 16:1). Most scholars believe that what we today know as the office of deaconess did not exist in the New Testament era, although Phoebe’s loving service became the foundation for the order of deaconesses in the early church. St. John Chrysostom, a patron of deaconesses, said this about Paul’s reference to Phoebe: “Note how many ways Paul dignifies Phoebe. He

² L. T. Johnson. *The Gospel of Luke*. Sacra Pagina. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 383.

³ These paragraphs on the ministry of women with Jesus are adapted from A. A. Just Jr., *Concordia Commentary: Luke 1:1–9:50 and Luke 9:51–24:53*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 1996 and 1997.

mentions her before all the rest and even calls her his sister. It is no small thing to be called the sister of Paul! Moreover, he has mentioned her rank as deaconess as well.”⁴

Phoebe was a “*prostasis*” or protectress (Rom. 16:2), indicating that she was a person of means and influence in the community that she could lend to saints, both in the public forum and in her own home. She expressed the gift of hospitality, hosting apostles and saints who were about the ministry of the Word in much the same manner as the women in Luke did for Jesus. She probably opened her home for the gathering of the church and was entrusted by Paul as an assister and helper, traveling to deliver his letter to the church at Rome.

Regardless of the status of development of churchly offices in New Testament times, Phoebe expressed the service that marks the diaconal office. She is an inspiration for all women who have chosen to serve their Lord as deaconesses. She served others, especially the apostles and saints, because her Lord first served her by giving up His life for her. The name Phoebe comes from the word “*phoibe*,” which is translated “radiant.” Phoebe’s service is commended by Paul since she clearly cast a bright beam of light through her presence in the church.

A Brief History Beyond the New Testament

The first secular mention of women ministering to the church is found in the second century in a letter of Pliny the Younger, a governor in the Roman empire, to Emperor Trajan, requesting guidance in the matter of persecution of the captured Christians. He writes:

I judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled deaconesses: but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.⁵

This Roman governor testifies that very early on, women who received the gifts of Christ in the church’s *leitourgia* shared both the activities of *marturia* and *diakonia* in appointed roles of service on behalf of the church.

The roles of deacons and deaconesses were not exactly parallel. Both deacons and deaconesses were responsible for the care of individuals in need. From the beginning, however, deacons performed liturgical duties and assisted in the public worship. Deaconesses never performed liturgical duties, but rather functioned as leaders and keepers among the women of the assembly, primarily as caretakers of the suffering and the poor who were in need of human care. They also served as supporters and advisors of women catechumens in applying the teaching of the bishop to matters of feminine propriety. They assisted in the baptism of women, visited the sick, took care of the believing women in the homes of unbelievers and ministered to those who were unable to worship with the faithful.

Formal affirmation of the role of the deaconess is found in the *Didascalia*, dated in the early to mid-third century. The chapter entitled “On the Institution of Deacons and Deaconesses” states:

The ministry of deaconesses is necessary for you for many reasons. The fact is that deaconesses are necessary for the houses of pagans where Christian women are also living. Deaconesses can go there and visit those who are ill, serve them in whatever their needs might be and bathe those who have begun to recover from their illness ... There should be enough so that everyone is known and everyone succored. Thus, old women whose strength has declined and brothers and sisters who are ill should be able to enjoy from the deacons the service they properly need.⁶

The stated purpose of the diaconal offices as instituted in the Early Church is the same purpose of deaconesses today: to serve so that “everyone is known and everyone succored.” Even the most marginal received honor and worth in God’s eyes, becoming known to the community through deaconesses who embodied Christ’s mercy as they reached out to give help in time of need.

The third through the seventh centuries are known as the “Golden Age of Deaconesses.” Deplorable social conditions, coupled with the urgent response of the church to care for those in need, caused the number and work of deaconesses to multiply. St. John Chrysostom both appointed deaconesses and was assisted by them in his service to the saints. Perhaps the most well-known of the deaconesses of his era was Olympias, a beautiful young widow of means who

⁴ Cited from J. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans 30* in the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Romans*, edited by G. Bray (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 369.

⁵ William Weinrich. *Readings in Early Church History*. (Fort Wayne: CTS Press).

⁶ Aime Georges Martimort. *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 38–39.

lived in Constantinople in the fourth century, where she built a hospital and orphanage and devoted herself to serving the poor and needy. Her noble character and servant heart has been an inspiration to deaconesses to this day.

The presence of deaconesses in the church declined with the approach of the Middle Ages. This was largely due to the fact that the theological foundation of incarnational care from which deaconesses sprung gave way to asceticism, causing the feminine churchly vocation of service to decline and retreat into the cloistered life. While the Reformation reclaimed this theological foundation, it was not until the early 19th century that the deaconess vocation again experienced a resurgence in the Lutheran church under the guidance and separate efforts of both Wilhelm Loehe and Theodore Fliedner.

Both pastors Loehe and Fliedner were instrumental in planting of deaconesses in the United States. Such efforts were received and carried on by pastors in this country, leading to the establishment of the first Missouri Synod Lutheran deaconess training school in Fort Wayne during the early 1900s. Today, there are more than 270 rostered deaconesses in the LCMS who stand in continuity with Phoebe, Olympias and all deaconesses who have served their Lord by serving their neighbor.

Standing alongside the pastor, who dispenses Christ's gifts as a steward of the mysteries, deaconesses bind up the brokenhearted and the distressed. They go out from the door of the church and bring in Christ's lost and broken lambs into His sheepfold where the Pastor feeds these lambs by bringing them into communion with Christ as He comes to them in Word and Sacrament. Throughout our church today, watch for deaconesses to declare humbly through their *diakonia*: "What is my want? I want to serve. Whom do I want to serve? The Lord in His suffering ones and His poor."



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