



SHOULD WOMEN SERVE AS DEACONS?

Is It Biblical For Women To Serve As Deacons?

M. V. Pereira

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ABBREVIATIONS

Bible Translations

AMP	Amplified Bible (Copyright © 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by the Lockman Foundation)
ASV	American Standard Version (1901)
ESV	English Standard Version (Copyright © 2001, 2007, 2011 by Crossway Bibles)
GW	God's Word® translation (Copyrighted © 1995 by God's Word to the Nations)
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible (Copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 by Holman Bible Publishers)
KJV	King James Version [Authorized Version] (1769 Blayney Edition of the 1611 King James Version of the English Bible)
MIT	The Idiomatic Translation of the New Testament (Copyright © 2008 by William Graham MacDonald)
NASB	The New American Standard Bible (Copyright © 1977 and 1995 by The Lockman Foundation)
NEB	New English Bible (Copyright © 1970 The Delegates of the Oxford University Press and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press)
NET	New English Translation (The NET Bible — Copyright © 1996-2006 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C.)
NIV	The New International Version (Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by International Bible Society)
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible (Copyright © 1985 by Darton, Longman & Todd Limited and Doubleday)
NKJV	The New King James Version (Copyright © 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.)
NLT	New Living Translation (Copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation)
TNIV	Today's New International Version (Copyright © 2001 by International Bible Society)
WNT	Weymouth New Testament (public domain)

WuestNT	The New Testament: An Expanded Translation (Copyright © 1956, 1984 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company)
YLT	Young's Literal Translation (The English Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible 1862/1887/1898, by J. N. Young [public domain])

1

Is It Biblical For Women To Serve As Deacons?

This is not a question of preference. It is not a question of whether or not we think local churches should have deaconesses. It is emphatically a question that seeks to understand the meaning of God's word on the subject and humbly yield to that meaning in practice.

A most prevalent tendency is to answer this question in our minds before any honest examination of God's text. When we do this we allow preconceived ideas to govern the church and our lives, and that can be very harmful. Whether we allow historically conservative traditions or culturally attuned influences to move us, the biblical challenge in controversial subjects like this is to turn to the Scriptures in humble inquiry with a teachable faith that follows understanding with practice.

There is no question that women have a very significant place in the ministry and life of the church. On the day that the Holy Spirit enraptured the disciples for the explosive birth of the NT church, women were explicitly included among the faithful (Acts 1:14). As the church began to grow, women were continually identified, overtly, as being added to the native constitution of the church: "And all the more

believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number” (Acts 5:14). The church was comprised of those who “believed . . . the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” and “were being baptized, men and women alike” (Acts 8:12). When the gospel reached the Gentile territories, again, the Lord was adding “a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women” (Acts 17:4). Contrary to custom, in one example women are even listed before men so as to accentuate the matter: “Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men” (Acts 17:12; cf. 17:34; 21:5). The first recorded convert in Europe was a woman named Lydia (Acts 16:14). Like Lydia, it was not uncommon for women to open their houses to the church of God for the assembling of the saints. In fact, “we are more often given the names of women in whose homes churches met than we are of men (cf. Acts 12:12; 16:40; Rom 16:3-5 [cf. 1 Cor 16: 19]; Col 4:15).”¹

Women were not only consumers of service in the church, they were servants. The prominence of women in the early church was not merely confined to membership, they were significantly integral to the life of the church. Both men and women were being dragged off and persecuted for Christ’s sake (Acts 8:3; 9:2; 22:4). In Philippians 4:2–3, Paul says that two women, Euodia and Syntyche, ‘contended together with’ (*synathleō*: *syn*, ‘together with’; *athleō*, ‘to contend’) him in the gospel. He identifies these women, as well as Priscilla (Rom 16:3), as ‘fellow workers’ in Christ Jesus, which is quite a remarkable designation considering that this is the label he gave Titus (2 Cor 8:23), Timothy (Rom 16:21; 1 Thess 3:2; Phile 1:1), Mark (Phile 1:24), and Luke (Phile 1:24). The hard labors (*kopiaō*, “of strong exertions *work hard, strive, struggle*”) of the missionary gospel were performed not only by men, but also women: Mary (Rom 16:6), Persis (v. 12), and Tryphaena and Tryphosa (v. 12). Ministry is service and women along with men who faithfully served were called ‘servants’ and ‘ministers’. On this ground

¹ Robert Saucy, *Women and Men in Ministry*, 163.

did Paul commend Phoebe to the church in Rome: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well” (Rom 16:1–2). “One way or another, it’s clear that the women were not regarded as silent onlookers, but as people with roles to play and responsibilities to be, in their own right, people of exemplary Christian character.”¹

Now the question before us is concerned particularly with the diaconate, whether or not the Scripture places women in it. Our point here is plain: regardless of which position one takes on this particular question, it is irrefutable that Paul often commended women for faithful service to God and the church (cf. Rom 16:1-5, 6, 12). With this in mind, let us consider the common views advanced on this subject.

¹ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone : The Pastoral Letters : 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 36.

2

The Definitive Text

“WOMEN MUST LIKEWISE BE DIGNIFIED, NOT MALICIOUS GOSSIPS,
BUT TEMPERATE, FAITHFUL IN ALL THINGS.”
1 TIMOTHY 3:11

There is no more definitive text in the Bible to go to than 1 Timothy 3:11 in order to answer the question: Is it biblical for women to serve as deacons? Because this is the section of God-breathed Scripture that explicitly addresses the order and qualifications of church leadership, the answer to our question will rise or fall here. This is prescriptive text, not merely an historical example, a narrative of supernatural exception, or the expression of a circumstantial preference. The third chapter of First Timothy furnishes timeless instructions to the “household of God” concerning its order and leadership—these imperatives transcend time, place, and culture and therefore apply to us.

A straightforward survey of common English translations promptly reveals the controversial ground of what J. N. D. Kelly calls “a puzzle which will probably never be solved to everyone’s satisfaction.”¹

¹ Kelly, 83.

Even so must their wives (KJV)
Likewise their wives must (NKJV)
Their wives likewise must (ESV)
Their wives, equally, must (NEB)
Their wives must also (GW)
Wives, too, must (HCSB)
Likewise also their wives must
 (NET)
In the same way, their wives must
 (NLT)

Women in like manner (ASV, Darby,
 DRA, RV, YLT)
Women must likewise (NASB)
Women must also (CEV)
The women likewise
 (RSV, Amplified)
Women, likewise (WuestNT, NRSV)
Similarly, women (NJB)
Also it behooveth women
 (Wycliffe Bible)
In the same way, women who are
servants in the church (CEB)

The difficulty that translators face in this matter is further illustrated in the changing of position by the translation committee of the New International Version (NIV):

In the same way, their wives (NIV 1984)
In the same way, the women (NIV 2011 and TNIV)

Finally, two translations introduce interpretive conclusions:

Deaconesses, in the same way (Weymouth NT)
Deaconesses likewise must (Montgomery NT)

The primary difference that is surfacing in the comparison of these translations is the rendering of one Greek word: *gynaikas* (from *gynē*). This is the most generic word in the Greek language to denote an adult female, particularly in distinction from the male.¹ It may be used of a virgin, a bride, an unmarried woman, a married woman, and a widow—as always, context determines meaning. A key factor in this discussion is

¹ TDNT, 1:777.

whether *gynaikas* should be translated ‘wives’ or ‘women’. Greek scholar, Kenneth Wuest, says, “the word when used in reference to the marriage relation, means ‘a wife.’ Here, it should be translated ‘women.’”¹ It should be noted that both usages occur in the Pastoral Epistles and especially in 1 Timothy (‘woman’ in 2:9, 10, 11, 12, 14; ‘wife’ in 3:2, 12; 5:9; cf. Tit. 1:6).² The best word choice—whether ‘women’ or ‘wives’—can only be determined after a thorough examination of the context is considered. Such an examination follows. In the meantime, the more literal ‘women’ will be used to designate those in view here since ‘wives’ is an interpretive translation that presupposes the outcome of the examination.

Common Views

Even if *gynaikas* is here rendered ‘women’, the case is not closed—our question is not necessarily answered. A rendering of ‘women’ still leaves several possibilities of meaning open. One hypothetical possibility that must immediately be dismissed is that ‘women’ would here refer to all women in the church in general. This is certainly not the case in the midst of a discussion concerning special qualifications and responsibilities of lead servants. Three major views remain to be studied:

Wives of Deacons

This view simply maintains that *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 should be translated ‘wives’ and therefore the qualifications that follow relate to the wives of deacons rather than to unrelated women. Three different answers to the question at hand are offered in this view:

(1) *Women may serve as deacons but only alongside their deacon husbands.* This is a comparatively rare reading. One distinctive of this position is that while it takes *gynaikas* as ‘wives’ it does not prevent women from assuming the title ‘deacon’ or ‘deaconess’ provided that they are serving in conjunction with their deacon husbands. Some have

¹ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1 Ti 3:11.

² Knight, 171.

suggested this position on historical grounds. Scottish archaeologist and New Testament scholar, William Ramsay, confirms that “there was among the pagans a tendency, and even in some cults a positive custom, that the wife of a priest was officially a priestess; and it is quite likely that among the Christians some tendency to appoint husband and wife as deacon and deaconess prevailed.”¹ Others have reasoned that “it may also be that at first the women who served as deacons were the wives of deacons, so it would have been natural for them to be addressed within the section applying to their husbands.”²

(2) *Women may serve alongside their deacon husbands, but they themselves are not deacons.* This interpretation generally insists that it is not biblical for women to serve as deacons even though these wives may serve in some diaconal capacity with their husbands. According to this position, “If it is wives that are in view, then the verse fits here as another qualification necessary for one who would be a deacon and who would conduct his ministry with his wife’s assistance.”³ Thus, “the reason of the special exhortation would then be, not, as Heydenreich says, that even the domestic life of the deacons should be considered, but that the office of the deacons, consisting in the care of the poor and the sick, was of a kind in which their wives had to lend a helping hand.”⁴ Strauch argues that “we can conclude that Paul is referring to wives who help their deacon husbands. We can also conclude from this passage of God-breathed, holy Scripture that a New Testament diaconate comprises only men.”⁵ This is the most common of the three interpretive applications for this ‘wives of deacons’ view.

(3) *Women may not serve in the diaconate; these qualifications are purely for their husbands’ service.* This position argues that the qualifications presented for the ‘wives’ are purely for the qualification of the husband and do not technically ‘qualify’ the wife for any diaconal service (so

¹ Ramsay, 81.

² Walter L. Liefeld, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 134.

³ Knight, 172.

⁴ Huther, 152.

⁵ Strauch, *New Testament Deacon*, 126.

Heydenreich as quoted above). Luther maintained that there is a “need for them to learn to be serious, to have the sort of clothing and behavior that befits the honor of the wife of an elder and that is proper for the wife of a deacon.”¹ Marvin Vincent suggests that this verse urges that “a deacon whose wife is wanting in the qualities required in him, is not to be chosen.”² According to this interpretative application, women are not permitted to serve as deacons or as diaconal assistants.

As the first of the three major views, this view will be considered in greater detail below.

Female Assistants of Deacons

This mediating view contends that *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 should be translated ‘women’ but strictly refers to female assistants of male deacons. According to this view, women are not deacons. It is reasoned that these assistants are here addressed because they are so closely associated with the diaconate. Hendriksen argues that “the simplest explanation of the manner in which Paul, not yet finished with the requirements for the office of deacon, interjects a few remarks about women, is that he regards these women as the deacons’ assistants in helping the poor and needy, etc. These are women who render auxiliary service, performing ministries for which women are better adapted.”³ This interpretation takes an interesting middle ground, but in the end is the least supported of the three major views. While several aspects of this view will be treated in greater detail below, let it suffice to point out a few key observations.

First, if assistants are in view, then it is hard to imagine that Paul would encourage married men (v. 12) to be closely engaged in diaconal ministry with adult females other than their wives. There is no known historical precedent and to the contrary such a practice would present an offense in its original culture.

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 28 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 298.

² Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2002), 1 Ti 3:11.

³ Hendriksen, 133.

Second, if assistants were intended, we might have expected something like, *hupēretēs* ('assistant, helper'), *boēthos* ('helper'), *paraklētos* ('one called alongside to help'), *prostatis* ('a woman who renders assistance from her resources, helper'; cf. Rom 16:2), or an adjectival form of *eparkeō* ('help'; used in 1 Tim 5:10, 16 of women who serve). The question remains, why are overseers (v. 2) and deacons (v. 8) clearly identified while this third category—female deacons' assistants—are mentioned in such obscurity?

Third, this interpretation does not adequately explain the use of 'likewise' (v. 11), which is also used in v. 8 to mark the transition to a new class of lead servants. It is better to understand these women as being included in the qualifications of male deacons ('likewise their wives') or to see them as a second group of deacons, namely female, delineated by 'likewise'.

For these reasons, this view will not be directly addressed in the remainder of this study.

Female Deacons

This view obviously maintains that *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 should be translated 'women' with the implication that qualified women may serve in some capacity as deacons. This view was advocated as far back as the Patristic Era and has seen growing support among scholars since the Reformation. This view is not without its difficulties, but it is the conviction of this student of Scripture to be the most accurate reading. The most compelling exegetical evidence points here. These are the conclusions of an extensive study, the arguments of which follow.

Now there are two branches of this view: (1) women may serve in the order of deacons; and (2) women may serve in a separate order of deacons for females usually labeled deaconesses. This discussion will be addressed in a later section, for now both labels will be used interchangeably.

In an effort to answer the propositional question, the service of women in a diaconal capacity will be explored in three focal arguments: The argument of (1) *culture*; (2) *church history*; and (3) *context*.

The Argument of Culture

Observations of human society are not decisive in determining the meaning of a given text of Scripture. Yet, the historical context within which a text is born often proves exceedingly helpful to the endeavor of accurately extracting authorial intent. The culture cannot be ignored if the text is to be taken as historically reliable.

The argument of culture, then, takes an honest look at the cultural conditions and customs that help to color the background of the sacred text given through the Apostle Paul in First Timothy. The main point of this argument may be captured in the observation that cultural customs of the first century Mediterranean world called for distinct public segregation of men and women, particularly in ministerial services, and that this gave rise to the need of women serving in the diaconate. English theologian and scholar of extensive studies on the Apostolic Fathers, J. B. Lightfoot notes that “the strict seclusion of the female sex in Greece and in some Oriental countries necessarily debarred them from the ministrations of men: and to meet the want thus felt, it was found necessary at an early date to admit women to the diaconate.”¹ In other words, “The strong separation between the sexes in the East would have made the service of women indispensable for certain tasks within the church, and order would demand that certain ones be appointed for these ministries.”² There is substantial evidence that in the primitive church women “were actively engaged in the kind of work which was proper to deacons. And considering the greater separation which then

¹ Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Dissertations on the Apostolic Age* (London; New York: Macmillan, 1892), 148.

² Saucy, *The Church*, 160. “Considering the rigid separation of the sexes in the Near East at that time, female participation in church ministry stands out in bold relief” (*Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Deaconess”). “Such women were called deaconesses as served the church in those offices in which the deacons could not with propriety engage” (*A Dictionary of the Holy Bible* [New York: American Tract Society, 1859], s.v. “Deaconess”).

existed between the sexes, and the extreme jealousy which guarded the approaches to female society, it was in a manner indispensable that women, with some sort of delegated authority, should often be entrusted with various kinds of diaconal service.”¹

Again, the argument of culture suggests that social mores presented formidable barriers for men to adequately minister in the most practical manner to women in deep need of physical care. If this assessment is accurate, then it becomes easier to see how the apostle was ordering the servanthood of the church to meet the practical needs of the neediest, both male and female. This understanding significantly depends upon the conception of the diaconate as an office of servants who provide loving service of practical care to the needy of the church—not an office of authority, administrative management, or teaching.

William Weinrich, Professor of Early Church History and Patristic Studies at Concordia Theological Seminary, summarizes the argument of culture for women serving in the diaconate:

Especially in eastern Christianity (Syria, Chaldea, Persia), social mores that severely limited social access to women required the creation of a distinctly female diaconal ministry for the evangelization and care of women. The order of deaconess first takes concrete form in the *Didaskalia*. The first duty of the deaconess was to assist the bishop in the baptism of women by anointing their bodies and ensuring that their nudity was not seen. Beyond this duty, the *Didaskalia* says that the deaconess had the responsibility of teaching and instructing the newly baptized women, apparently serving as a spiritual mother exhorting them to chastity. In addition, the deaconess was to visit Christian women in the homes of the heathen, to visit women who were ill, to bathe those women who were recovering from illness, and to minister to women in need.²

¹ Fairbairn, 151.

² William Weinrich, "Women in the History of the Church: Learned and Holy, But Not Pastors," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood And Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 264.

The Argument of Church History

Similar to the argument of culture, the argument of church history considers recorded testimony regarding women in the church serving in some capacity of the diaconate. These considerations serve to inform the historical context and setting familiar to the audience of the New Testament. Most of the data available to us in this category of analysis properly follows the writing of First Timothy, and thus proves less informative to the exegesis of our passage and more reflective of its normative understanding and application in the churches of early Christianity. Again, while this data is not decisive in the matter, it proves helpful in the effort to discern the historical application of the apostles' teaching on this particular subject.

Whatever the conclusion may be regarding 1 Timothy 3:11, virtually all scholars agree that women certainly did serve in diaconal capacities in the early church.¹ There are clearly differences of opinion on the instructions laid out in the NT concerning this subject, but "it is indisputable, however, that an order of deaconesses did quickly arise in the Church."² What's more is that this development does not appear to be independent of the apostles' sanctioning. Henry Alford, highly respected Greek scholar and Dean of Canterbury (1857–1871), referring to the interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:11 as relating to female deacons, said, "In this view the ancients are, as far as I know, unanimous."³ His point is that the earliest commentators on this passage take the view that Paul is addressing female deacons. Rather than seeing the historical development of females in the diaconate as contrary to the order laid down by the apostles, the early church identified their practice as deriving from the Scripture.

¹ "It is certain that women served actively as deacons" (G. M. Burge, "Deacon, Deaconess," in *EDT*, 320-321). "A diaconate was fairly certainly fulfilled by some women, either along the lines of the ministry of the women to Jesus or more especially in the visitation of other women" (W. A. Heidel, "Deacon; Deaconess," in *ISBE*, 1:880).

² *TDNT*, 2:93.

³ Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament*, 3:327.

Tabitha

There are a few examples in the NT of women who are distinguished servants of the Lord and His church. In Acts 9, “a disciple named Tabitha” was described as a woman “abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did” (Acts 9:36). Even though there is no claim here that she officially served as a ‘deacon’, this is a fit description of diaconal service. Deacons minister to those in need in deeds of kindness and charity. Women deacons would have specifically ministered to those women in most need, which would naturally have included widows (cf. 1 Tim 5:16). This appears to be precisely what Tabitha was ‘continually’ doing. When Tabitha died, Peter was called to the room in which her body laid. Upon his arrival, those who knew Tabitha “brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas [Tabitha] used to make while she was with them” (Ac 9:39). The deep appreciation and love that these widows had for Tabitha is demonstrated in their emphasis on her loving care for them as shown in the garments and tunics that she labored to provide for them. Tabitha is a commendable example of a diaconal servant. Although she and her example likely predate the official order of deacons, they certainly attest to a very early historical precedent—furnished in Holy Scripture.

Phoebe

Among the women who stand in the legacy of dedicated service to the Lord and His church, perhaps the most historically distinguished from the NT is Phoebe, the woman who was openly commended by the Apostle Paul as “a servant (*diakonos*) of the church which is at Cenchrea.”

I COMMEND TO YOU OUR SISTER PHOEBE, WHO IS A SERVANT OF THE CHURCH WHICH IS AT CENCHREA; THAT YOU RECEIVE HER IN THE LORD IN A MANNER WORTHY OF THE SAINTS, AND THAT YOU HELP HER IN WHATEVER MATTER SHE MAY HAVE NEED OF YOU; FOR SHE HERSELF HAS ALSO BEEN A HELPER OF MANY, AND OF MYSELF AS WELL.

ROMANS 16:1–2

Notice he commended her as ‘a servant’ rather than for ‘her service’. He used the word from which we get ‘deacon’ (*diakonos*) to describe her, translated as such in Phil 1:1, 1 Tim 3:8, 12. Some translations reflect the possibility that the use of *diakonos* here could very legitimately indicate that Phoebe was a ‘deacon’ in the official sense (RSV, Phillips: ‘deaconess’; NIV[2011], TNIV, NLT: ‘deacon’; NEB: ‘who holds office’; Tyndale used ‘minister’). Still the majority of translations render *diakonos* as ‘servant’ (as in nine other places). A translation of ‘servant’ is nevertheless accurate, “because deacons and deaconesses were involved in a servant ministry.”¹ Murray offers a strong argument against the position that Phoebe was officially recognized as a ‘deacon’:

Though the word for “servant” is the same as is used for deacon . . . the word is also used to denote the person performing any type of ministry. If Phoebe ministered to the saints, as is evident from verse 2, then she would be a servant of the church and there is neither need nor warrant to suppose that she occupied or exercised what amounted to an ecclesiastical office comparable to that of the diaconate. The services performed were similar to those devolving upon deacons. Their ministry is one of mercy to the poor, the sick, and the desolate. This is an area in which women likewise exercise their functions and graces. But there is no more warrant to posit an office than in the case of widows, who prior to their becoming the care of the church, must have borne the features mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:9, 10.²

Though we must concede that Phoebe could be called a *diakonos* without necessarily holding office as a ‘deacon’ in the official sense of 1 Timothy 3, we should also acknowledge that she is here prominently commended in her relation to the church as an important ‘servant’, being at the head of a long list, as one who has “also been a helper of many.” Indeed, a fitting description of a deacon. Not only did Paul commend

¹ R. C. Sproul, *The Gospel of God: An Exposition of Romans* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications., 1994), 249.

² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 2:226.

her as 'a servant' but "he praised her as a 'helper' (v 2), a word that denotes leadership qualities (cf. Rom 12:8; 1 Tm 3:4–5)."¹

Was Phoebe recognized as someone dedicated to diaconal service in the church? Cranfield argues, "It is perhaps just conceivable that the word *diakonos* should be understood here as a quite general reference to her service of the congregation; but it is very much more natural, particularly in view of the way in which Paul formulates his thought ('being → a servant → of the church'), to understand it as referring to a definite office. We regard it virtually certain that Phoebe is being described as 'a (or possibly 'the') deacon' of the church in question, and that this occurrence of *diakonos* is to be classified with its occurrences in Phil 1:1 and 1 Tim 3:8 and 12."² Taken in context, the argument is strengthened. Saucy observes:

The fact that she is specifically stated to be a 'servant of' a particular church rather simply 'serving' (cf. 15:25) or devoting herself to service or ministry (cf. 1 Cor 16:15) suggests that the reference is to a definite recognized ministry. Furthermore, the nature of her service as 'helper' or 'patroness' providing material assistance to the needy in the church as well as hospitality for visitors and strangers, and other services to the church at large, fits well with what is known of the ministry of deacons.³

While our conclusions concerning Phoebe are not determinative for our conclusions in 1 Timothy 3:11, it is helpful to note that historically the church has recognized her as a deaconess. Our purpose here is to take notice of this detail as an argument of church history—though not authoritative. If the recipients of the apostles' letters, and their followers in the early church, understood the apostles' to mean that women should serve in the diaconate then we should expect reflections of this understanding in the annals of church history. This appears to be what we find. For example, Origin (A.D. 185–254) asserts that 1 Tim 3:11

¹ Tyndale Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Deaconess."

² C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 1979), 2:781.

³ Saucy, *Women and Men in Ministry*, 174.

teaches “that women also were set in the ministry of the Church; in which office Phoebe was placed in the Church which is in Cenchreae.”¹ In a message on loving service toward others in lowliness of mind, Chrysostom (A.D. 347–407) places Phoebe in class with Paul and the other disciples in their service:

And that the disciples too were bound up with Paul with all perfectness; and that not men only, but women also, hear what he says about Phœbe. “Now I commend to you Phœbe the sister, being a deaconess of the Church which is in Cenchreæ; that ye may receive her in the Lord worthily of the saints, and stand by her, in whatever matter she may require you, since she has proved a helper of many; and of me myself.” But in this instance he bore witness to her of her zeal so far as help went . . .²

Chrysostom is accentuating the virtues belonging to Christ-like diaconal service and overtly recalls Phoebe as a fit example. In light of her testimony, he makes ostensible mention of women as being in company with men as devoted, lowly-minded, servants in the church, discerning Phoebe to be a ‘deaconess’. This reputation and classification of Phoebe is remarkably noted in an inscription from the second half of the Fourth Century, which reads:

Here lies the slave and bride of Christ, Sophia the deacon (*diakonos*) the second Phoebe, who fell asleep in peace on the 21st of the month of March.³

It is no small incident to have a woman’s epitaph read, ‘the deacon’, and then to be described as ‘the second Phoebe’. Clearly, this female servant of the Lord, whom Paul commends to Rome, was seen as a lead ‘servant’ (*diakonos*) in the early church.

¹ Quoted by Mounce, 211.

² John Chrysostom, “Concerning Lowliness of Mind,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, Volume IX (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 150.

³ M. Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca*, IV, Rome: 1978, 445, fig. 132. Translated by Professor Greg Horsley of Macquarie University, Australia.

Deaconesses in Bithynia

In *Book X* of Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Luci), a Roman governor of Bithynia, letters from Pliny to the Emperor Trajan, who reigned from A.D. 98 to 117, preserve some of the first extant writings concerning the Christian “problem.” In *Epistle 96*, written in approximately A.D. 110, Pliny relates to the Emperor his initial encounter in dealing judicially with Christians residing in his province. He accounts the capture and investigation of those belonging to this “strange sect”:

I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.¹

After offering release to all who recant Christ, and observing their peculiar resolve to not deny their Lord, he proceeded, in this example, to torture two slave-women that were known and identified as ‘deaconesses’:

This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women (*duabus ancillis*), whom they called deaconesses (*ministrae*).²

Written in Latin and at a very early time, this attestation furnishes compelling evidence that women were indeed ranked among those in the church dedicated to diaconal service, known as deacons (or the feminine form: deaconesses). The choice of the Latin word *ministrae* is helpful in this discussion as it is the most approximate translation of the Greek word *diakonos* in its technical sense of a religious office of service.

¹ Pliny, *The Letters of The Younger Pliny*, trans. Betty Radice (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 294.

² *ibid.*

There are over a dozen terms for ‘servant’ in Latin¹ that could have easily been employed here, yet the most exact term for a female ‘minister’, predominately translated ‘deaconess’, was used.

Ante-Nicene Developments

The argument of church history is further advanced by additional testimonies recorded in the period spanning from the late first century to the early fourth century. Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150–220) speaks of ‘women deacons’ or ‘ministering women’ (*diakonōn gynaikōn*) as well as ‘fellow deacons’ (*syndiakonoi*) who traveled with the apostles “not as wives but as sisters.”² Mounce notes that “the third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* shows that the office of deaconess is fully intact. It gives the impression that deaconesses have been recognized for a long time.”³

In a related ecclesiastical document originating from approximately the second half of the third century, translated “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” a set of instructions and orders of conduct are outlined for the church. In it overseers (bishops) are called to ordain deacons who are described as “fellow-workers, the labourers for life and for righteousness.” The selection of servants for the diaconate explicitly includes women:

Such deacons as are pleasing to God, such whom thou provest to be worthy among all the people, and such as shall be ready for the necessities of their ministration. Ordain also a deaconess who is faithful and holy, for the ministrations towards women. For sometimes he cannot send a deacon, who is a man, to the women, on account of unbelievers.⁴

¹ For example: *administra*: servant, underling, assistant, agent; *amministra*: assistant, supporter, helper, handmaiden; *ancilla*: maidservant, female slave (used in the same sentence); *appareo*: one who serves; *apparitio*: a public servant, attendant, one who waits upon another; *cacula*: servant, servant of a servant; *familiaris*: a family slave, bondservant; *kalator*: personal attendant, servant, secretary; *pedisequs*: attendant, servant, go-between; *pedissequus*: attendant, servant; *mercennarius*: a hired servant; *ministratrix*: servant, attendant, assistant; *servitium*: household slave; *servus*: servant, slave.

² Quoted by Mounce, 211.

³ Mounce, 211.

⁴ *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, Bk. III, sec. II, ANF VII, 431.

In prescribing the character necessarily fit for deacons, the *Constitutions* again overtly includes females in the diaconate:

Let the deacons be in all things unspotted, as the bishop himself is to be, only more active; in number according to the largeness of the Church, that they may minister to the infirm as workmen that are not ashamed. And let the deaconess be diligent in taking care of the women; but both of them ready to carry messages, to travel about, to minister, and to serve.¹

These historical developments appear to reflect an understanding that the apostles both permitted and sanctioned women to serve, at least in some capacity, in the diaconate. Given the language in these early documents, it is most apparent that they modeled their structure and order after the inspired writings of the apostles. In relation to 1 Timothy 3:11, it has been noted that “major documents such as the Syrian *Didascalia Apostolorum* (third century) and the *Apostolic Constitutions* (fourth century) indicate that the church interpreted this verse to mean an office of deaconess.”²

Nicene and Post-Nicene Developments

The literature from this period, being from A.D. 325 to 451, abounds with references to women in the diaconate. “It is legislated for in two of the general Councils, and is mentioned by all the leading Greek Fathers and historians of the fourth and fifth centuries. Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Epiphanius, Chrysostom, Theodoret and Sozomen all bear testimony to the flourishing condition of the Order. They have preserved to us the personal history of several of its members, and have shown how important was the position they occupied and the service they rendered in the Church.”³

A few examples include: Theodoret (c.393–c.460), bishop of Cyrus, refers to, “a lady remarkable for her devotion and admitted to the order

¹ Ibid, 432.

² Lewis, 170.

³ Robinson, 85.

of deaconesses.”¹ He also writes: “To the Deaconess Celarina” and deaconess “Casiana” (*Letter CI*). Basil writes “To the deaconesses, the daughters of Count Terentius” (*Letters*, “Letter CV”). Chrysostom writes to “divinely favored deaconess Olympias” (about A.D. 368). He was also noted for promoting a deep appreciation for women who served faithfully in the diaconate. He appears to have been familiar with their services as it is recorded that “there were 40 deaconesses attached to the great Church of Constantinople in the time of St. Chrysostom.”²

At the First Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) orders concerning deaconesses were codified into the canon law of the church. By this time, a vow of celibacy and confinement to reside in monasteries had developed (Canon LXXIV). This reflects not only a well-established order, but one undergoing ecclesiastical change. At Nicea, women were not permitted to office until age 60 (Canon XXIV), a law that was later changed to age 40 at the Council of Chalcedon (Canon XV of the Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451). While there was an established ‘order’ of female deacons, at Nicea ordination of women to the office was forbidden (e.g. declared that “deaconesses . . . are not sharers of ordination,” Canon XIX). Yet Mounce notes that 1 Timothy 3:11 “was used by the Montanists to support the ordination of women (as deaconesses).”³ Included in the *Constitutions* (predating the First Council of Nicea), is an extant prayer said to have been used for the blessing of the ordination of a deaconess:

O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah; who didst not disdain that Thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, didst ordain women to be keepers of Thy holy gates,—do Thou now also look down upon this Thy servant, who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her Thy Holy Spirit, and “cleanse her from

¹ *The Ecclesiastical History Of Theodoret*, b. 3, ch. 10.

² J.R. Dummelow, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible: The One Volume Bible Commentary* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1909), 998.

³ Mounce, 204.

all filthiness of flesh and spirit," that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to Thy glory, and the praise of Thy Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to Thee and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.¹

Substantial documentation with reference to women serving in the diaconate stands tall from the Nicene and Post-Nicene periods and thereby contributes to the argument of church history. But positive attestations do not only come from early church support of women serving in some diaconal capacity, the diminishment of the order is yet another contribution to the argument.

Diminishment of the Female Order

Church history shows both support and prohibition of women serving in the diaconate. The bulk of that history manifests the latter, and this too contributes to the argument in addressing the question, Is it biblical for women to serve as deacons? In the Western churches, "the deaconesses existed but a short while. . . . the first council of Orange, A.D. 441, in its twenty-sixth canon forbids the appointment of deaconesses altogether, and the Second council of the same city in canons xvii and xviii, decrees that deaconesses who married were to be excommunicated unless they renounced the men they were living with, and that, on account of the weakness of the sex, none for the future were to be ordained."² There was clearly a gradual suppression of ordained female ministry in the early Middle Ages.³ "By the sixth century, such consecrations were becoming less and less common in the Western church. . . . church councils during the sixth century gradually lowered the status of these women until the position of deaconess was virtually nonexistent."⁴ The diaconate during this period was undergoing major change, especially for women.

¹ *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, Bk. VIII, sec. III, ch. xx, ANF VII, 492.

² Henry R. Percival, "The Canons of the 318 Holy Fathers Assembled in the City of Nice, in Bithynia," *NPNF XIV*, 42.

³ Weinrich, 276.

⁴ *Ibid*, quoting Tucker and Liefeld.

In the West, the sisterhood of women servants was institutionalized, typically with a vow of celibacy, as a formal alternative to congregational deaconesses. The Roman Catholic Sisters of Charity is a notable example of a particularly 'deacon' focused institution of women. Celibacy was not always a requisite but illustrates the seriousness of devoted service with which the office was taken.¹ By about the sixth century, the service of women in the diaconate was discontinued in the Western church primarily because the diaconate had evolved into a priestly office which women could not fill. Nuns then took the place of deaconesses.² However, due to diverging differences between the Eastern and the Western church, women in the East continued to serve in the diaconate to the end of the twelfth century.

This history may help to explain why there is so much confusion on the subject and such a lack of consistent tradition. Though neither authoritative nor determinative, there is a clear testimony in church history that from the beginning women served in some official diaconal capacity and yet that order was significantly diminished in the course of time with change in post-Apostolic ecclesiastical polity.

Reformation Reclamation

The Reformation witnessed a sizable effort to reinstate a biblical diaconate wherein woman could again be permitted to rightly serve. It is said that Calvin was a powerful advocate for the restoration of the diaconate, which he too understood to, in some manner, include women. Commenting on 1 Timothy 3:12, Calvin argued:

But what ground can there be for applying this passage to nuns? For deaconesses were appointed, not to soothe God by chantings or unintelligible murmurs, and spend the rest of their time in idleness; but to perform a public ministry of the Church toward the poor, and to labour with all zeal, assiduity, and diligence, in offices of charity. They did not vow celibacy, that they might

¹ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 1:X.62.

² Thomas Armitage, *A History of the Baptists* (Roger Williams Heritage Archives, 1886), 134.

thereafter exhibit abstinence from marriage as a kind of worship rendered to God, but only that they might be freer from encumbrance in executing their office.¹

So also “in some Reformed communions the attempt to find a distinctive place for the ministry of women in the church has led to appearance of the woman deaconess, often set apart for full-time service.”² This is where several deaconess movements seen in the Moravians, in the Lutheran, Episcopal, and other churches find their origin. Among them is the notable German movement known as the Evangelical Deaconesses of Kaiserswerth, whose “focus was the care of the sick poor, the orphan, discharged women prisoners, and the mentally ill.”³ They are described as “the band of Protestant deaconesses in this Rhineland town [Kaiserswerth] was begun by T. Fliedner in 1836 to meet the need of the reformed Churches for an organization of women devoted to the care of the sick and the education of neglected children.”⁴

Among the follows of Menno Simmons, deaconesses were restricted to older widows, in an effort to recapture the practice of the early church:

Also that honorable old widows should be chosen as servants, who, besides the almoners, are to visit, comfort, and take care of the poor, the weak, the afflicted, and the needy, as also to visit, comfort, and take care of widows and orphans; and further to assist in taking care of any matters in the church that properly come within their sphere, according to their best ability.⁵

Conclusion

The preponderance of evidence powerfully testifies to the historical certainty that woman served as deacons, in various capacities, from the earliest of church history—to this there can be no dispute.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xiii.19.

² *ISBE*, 1:881.

³ Weinrich, 265.

⁴ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 924.

⁵ J. S. Hartzler and Daniel Kauffman, *Mennonite Church History* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Book and Tract Society, 1905), 385.

The arguments from church history and this conclusion must not, however, be confused with biblical exegesis. Regardless of what councils have decreed and churches have practiced in the course of time, the final answer to the question at hand rests on the biblical data. The authorial intent of the inspired writings cannot be overthrown by any amount of ‘evidence’ that church history may offer. The issue lies not in what the church has practiced as much as it does in what the Scriptures say. With this in mind, we turn our attention to the last—and only authoritative—category of arguments, namely the argument of context.

The Argument of Context

The argument of context is the determinative argument. It is the careful examination of the Scripture on the subject. While all other data is researched in an effort to better understand both the background and historical applications, only a careful analysis of the Scripture will finally yield an authoritative statement.

If there is any hope of discovering the authorial intent of a passage, it can only definitively come from diligence in the context. Only context makes it possible to determine the meaning of a given text—culture and history can help to inform the background and periphery, but context yields the substance.

First Timothy 3:8–12 frames the central context from which this study will seek to answer the question: *Is it biblical for women to serve as deacons?* The next two chapters examine this passage in detail, considering first the arguments against women serving as deacons followed by the arguments in favor of women serving as deacons. The *argument of context* is embodied in these observations, the conclusions of which follow.

DEACONS LIKEWISE MUST BE MEN OF DIGNITY, NOT DOUBLE-TONGUED, OR ADDICTED TO MUCH WINE OR FOND OF SORDID GAIN, BUT HOLDING TO THE MYSTERY OF THE FAITH WITH A CLEAR CONSCIENCE. THESE MEN MUST ALSO FIRST BE TESTED; THEN LET THEM SERVE AS DEACONS IF THEY ARE BEYOND REPROACH. WOMEN MUST LIKEWISE BE DIGNIFIED, NOT MALICIOUS GOSSIPS, BUT TEMPERATE, FAITHFUL IN ALL THINGS. DEACONS MUST BE HUSBANDS OF ONLY ONE WIFE, AND GOOD MANAGERS OF THEIR CHILDREN AND THEIR OWN HOUSEHOLDS.

1 TIMOTHY 3:8–12

3

VIEW ONE: *Wives of Deacons*

Many very capable scholars have argued that *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 should be translated ‘wives’ and therefore the qualifications contained within this verse relate to the wives of deacons rather than to women as deacons. This remains a possible translation and conclusion of the Greek text. There are several good arguments for this view, the best of which follow.

Arguments For VIEW ONE

The following set of arguments seek to advance this view by furnishing reasons why 1 Timothy 3:11 should be understood as pertaining to wives of deacons.

- 1. Given that deacons are addressed on either side of this verse, it is most natural to take verse 11 as referring to their wives.**

It seems most unnatural to place a discussion about female deacons in the midst of a discussion concerning male deacons.¹ Verses 8 and 9

¹ Conybeare, 2:556.

explicitly deal with qualifications for male deacons and then verse 12 resumes the same line of argumentation. The most natural assumption is that the interposing verse would continue the flow of thought as yet another qualification for the same subject, namely male deacons.

Strauch offers the most compelling explanation for this view concerning the connectedness of context: “Verses 10 and 11 form a break in the list of personal character qualifications, yet they also list important requirements for deacons: they must be examined and approved (like the overseers in verses 2 through 7), and their wives must be morally fit (like their deacon husbands in verses 8 and 9).”¹

So why does verse 11 list qualifications? Knight answers, “If it is wives that are in view, then the verse fits here as another qualification necessary for one who would be a deacon and who would conduct his ministry with his wife’s assistance. Thus the wife’s qualifications are part and parcel of his qualifications for the office of *diakonos*. And after giving the qualifications for the deacon’s wife, Paul then goes on to the deacon’s fidelity to his wife and his children and thereby completes the picture of his family life (v. 12).”²

Towner concedes that “the most convincing argument that wives rather than women deacons are in view is the abrupt placement of the reference in the midst of qualifications for male deacons.”³

2. The next verse seems to infer that deacons are by definition male (i.e. ‘must be husbands of one wife’).

Not only is verse 11 met with an explicit address to ‘deacons’ (*diakonoî*) on either side, but the next verse repeats ‘deacons’ with the imperative ‘must be (*ōsautōs*) husbands of one wife’; this seems to infer that deacons are by definition male. This suggests a shift in who is being addressed, as though these ‘women’ were not ‘deacons’. Strauch argues, “Particularly arresting is the use of the word ‘deacons’ in verse 12, which

¹ Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon*, 123.

² Knight, 172.

³ Towner, 265-6.

alerts the reader that Paul is resuming his subject of the deacons' personal qualifications. His insertion of the word 'deacons' makes it appear that verse 11 refers to someone other than women deacons."¹

|| 3. Verse 11 and verse 12 belong together.

It has been argued that verses "11 and 12 develop the common theme of the deacon's family: his wife must be blameless; he must be faithful in marriage; his children must be well-managed. These verses are thus dealing with the same topic and belong together."²

|| 4. Verse 10 is a semi-parenthetical explanation of verse 9.

B. B. Warfield suggests that verse 10 is essentially a parenthetical comment on verse 9, which means that verse 11 continues the thought of verse 9 and not a new thought. In other words, verse 11 assumes the verb, 'holding to' (*echontas*), from verse 9 to convey something like: "The deacon must have the mystery of faith in a pure conscience—and must not be accepted until his life has shown this possession—and a wife, like him grave, and full of other virtues."³

|| 5. The same word appears in the very next verse and clearly means 'wives' there.

Some have argued that because the same term that is used in verse 11 (*gynaikas*) is used again in the very next verse and clearly means 'wife' that it seems likely to mean the same here. Moreover, the preceding occurrence was in verse 2, where there too it means 'wives'.⁴

¹ Strauch, 118.

² Mounce, 203.

³ Rendering produced by Mounce, 203.

⁴ Knight, 171.

6. Men were often ridiculed for their wives' behavior in ancient society.

Some have noted that in ancient society, men were often ridiculed for their wives' behavior, which explains why Paul mentions wives here.¹

7. The nature of the ministry of deacons assumes the involvement of wives.

An argument that is seen with some frequency is that the nature of the ministry of deacons assumes the involvement of wives and therefore *gynaikas* should be translated 'wives'. "Wives are introduced because they are expected to help their husbands in their ministry and therefore it is appropriate to recognize them and to give their qualifications."² Why? Because "the office of the deacons, consisting in the care of the poor and the sick, was of a kind in which their wives had to lend a helping hand."³ "Because in certain parts of their office, especially in ministering to the poor and the sick, their wives would naturally co-operate with them, and often do a considerable part of the work. Whence, quite naturally, the wives of deacons might be noticed with a view to their proper qualifications, while nothing was said of the wives of the bishops or pastors, because the latter could not participate in the official service of their husbands."⁴ Thus, "a deacon and his wife are in the ministry together, so the wife must be as honorable as the husband."⁵ Barnes suggests that "it would seem that it was supposed that the deacons would be taken from those who were advanced in life, and that their wives would have some superintendence over the younger females of the church. It was, therefore, especially important that they should be persons whose influence would be known to be decidedly favourable to

¹ Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

² Elwell.

³ Huther, 152.

⁴ Fairbairn, 150.

⁵ Phillips, 94-95.

piety.”¹ Therefore, “as spouses of the deacons they are to be involved with their husbands as their husbands seek to fulfill their diaconal service. The translation ‘wives’ expresses this unique relationship and responsibility.”²

8. If females would assist the male deacons, then wives would be preferred to other women.

If women either assisted or served alongside men in the diaconate, it stands to reason on the biblical ground of the sanctity of marriage and the principles of sexual purity among men and women in the church that wives would be preferred over other women to serve in some capacity alongside their husbands. Thus, it is “more likely that Paul, who was wise concerning sexuality (cf., e.g., 2:9; 5:11, 15; and perhaps 5:6), would propose the deacons’ wives as their assistants rather than women in general.”³

Arguments Against VIEW TWO

The following set of arguments seek to advance this view by furnishing reasons why 1 Timothy 3:11 should not be understood as pertaining to women as deacons.

9. More detail is expected if a third category was being introduced here.

If verse 11 were introducing a third category of subjects (i.e. overseers, deacons, female deacons), then more detail concerning this third category would be expected.

¹ Barnes, 149.

² Knight, 171.

³ Knight, 171.

10. The word used for 'women' (*gynaikas*) is never used of itself to denote deaconesses.

If Paul intended to address female deacons, then “a more explicit term than 'women' would have been used.”¹ It is argued that “*gynē* (root of *gynaikas*) is too general a term to designate an office, but is a common reference for a ‘wife’.”²

11. If female deacons were intended, then why didn't Paul use a form of *diakonos* like he did in Romans 16:1?

This argument is quite similar to the previous. First, if Paul intended to address female deacons, then why did he not indicate such by using some feminine construction of *diakonos* like he did in Romans 16:1? Regardless of the meaning of *diakonos* in Romans 16:1, it is plain that he employed the term to describe Phoebe. If the same were done in this context it would naturally be taken in the official sense of the office. Since Paul did not, it seems likely that women as deacons is not the intention here.

Second, it is argued that a feminine form of *diakonos* did not exist at the time of the writing of 1 Timothy, but “Paul shows a readiness, both in the PE [Pastoral Epistles] and elsewhere, to create words to meet his needs. It would have been very easy for him to have written *tas diakonous* or perhaps *diakonissas* and prevent what would be otherwise confusing if in fact he had changed topics.”³

12. Verse 11 lists qualifications that are essentially parallel to those of verses 8 & 9 and therefore seem unnecessary if the women in view are deacons.

The issue here is that verse 11 largely repeats the qualifications outlined in verses 8 and 9. “If these women were female deacons, then

¹ Barrett, 61.

² Marshall, 493.

³ Mounce, 203.

there would be no reason for Paul to repeat here that they are to be dignified. He had already stated that in verse 8.”¹ The repetition seems to suggest that Paul is addressing a non-deacon group since he has already plainly outlined these qualifications for deacons.

13. If verse 11 is to be taken as women as deacons then more qualifications are given for men than women.

For instance, “it is not said of the *gynaikas* that they must be first tested and be beyond reproach, because it is not they, but their husbands, who are being elected to and put into office.”²

14. No marital qualification is given for these ‘women’, which is always mentioned for those who serve in a church office (cf. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6).

“Another consideration that favors the understanding ‘wives’ in v. 11 is the omission of any reference to their marital status and fidelity (i.e., ‘the wife of one husband’), as is found with reference to the bishops and deacons (vv. 2, 12) and in the qualifications for enrollment for older widows (5:9). This omission is significant because this qualification is always mentioned in the PE where positions of ministry or service are in view and because it stands out as such a striking difference between the otherwise nearly parallel qualifications of the *diakonoi* and the *gynaikas*.”³

15. Women serving as deacons contradicts 2:12 and therefore cannot be what is intended here, just one chapter away.

The principle of 1 Timothy 2:12 “appears to be an overarching principle for church life which seems implicitly to limit the role of deacon to men.”⁴ “Prohibitions against women teaching and ruling in 1

¹ Charles Ray, *The Books of First and Second Timothy, Titus and Philemon* in Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary Series (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2007), 61.

² Knight, 173.

³ Knight, 171.

⁴ NET Notes.

Tim 2:11–15 make a reference here to women workers unlikely.”¹ On this ground, it would be very unlikely that Paul would be designating them for an office in the church.

16. First Timothy 5 addresses an order of women to serve.

It has been suggested that “the ministry of women is dealt with in 5:3-16, and there women workers are 'widows'.”² Some argue that it is difficult to take *gynaikas* in 3:11 as referring to women deacons “in view of the special section later in the Epistle devoted to women workers.”³ The sum of this argument postulates that if elderly women are specifically outlined in chapter 5 with qualifications for special services among women then such could not be the intention here.

17. In Acts 6 only men were selected for the diaconal task, and they served women.

It is frequently maintained that a foundational reason for women serving in the diaconate is to meet the needs of needy women, a task that would particularly require the services of a woman. Strauch addresses this argument that says “that women deacons serve only women and that male deacons serve only men. But this is pure conjecture and contrary to the example of Acts 6. In Acts 6, seven men were appointed to provide for and protect the Jerusalem church's helpless widows. Does this not fit the biblical picture of what mature men, by nature of their God-created masculinity, are called to do—protect, lead, and provide for women.”⁴ If only men were selected in Acts 6 to minister to needy women, then why not here as well?

¹ Marshall, 493.

² Barrett, 61.

³ Guthrie, 99–100.

⁴ Strauch, 118; cf. Barnes.

18. The existence of an order of female deacons in the ministry is not so clear in the NT.

This is the general argument that the NT does not offer sufficiently clear evidence that women were appointed to diaconal service in any official sense.

4

VIEW TWO:

Women as Deacons

While several very good and reliable English translations of the Bible, as well as many capable scholars, render *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 as ‘wives’, it is the contention of numerous other scholars that the greater evidence is with the translation ‘women’ as deacons. This has been the position of many native Greek scholars, including the earliest of NT commentators. John Chrysostom (A.D. 347-407), for example, plainly stated, “He is speaking of those who hold the rank of deaconesses.”¹ The historical position is summarized in the words of Ramsay, “It has been thought by Luther and others that the women who are here meant are the wives of deacons. There can, however, be little, if any, doubt that the reference is to all women officially selected for congregational work.”²

Arguments Against VIEW ONE

On the ground that some translations assume ‘wives’ as the correct rendering, the view for women as deacons will first be argued from reasons that show the weakness or inconsistency of the position that insists on ‘wives of deacons’ as the meaning here.

¹ Homily XI, *Homilies on the First Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy*.

² Ramsay, 80.

1. In response to (#1) ‘deacons’ being addressed on either side of this verse

Strauch concedes that “the placement of verse 11, although problematic, is not a decisive argument against the interpretation that *gynaikas* refers to women deacons.”¹ Several persuasive counter arguments may be advanced to demonstrate that taking verse 11 in context as relating to women deacons is not a forced solution.

(A) The explicit repetition of *andres* (‘man’) in verse 12 marks a shift back to male subjects as from female.² Paul specifically reverts to qualifications applicable strictly to men only after discussing what is in effect common to both sexes,³ and verse 13 can apply to both men and women.⁴

(B) This argument fails to adequately account for the delineation that ‘likewise’ (*hōsautōs*) introduces in the relationship of these verses (addressed in the discussion of *View Two*).

(C) Rather than being ‘problematic’, the placement of verse 11 induces a much more likely significance, namely that Paul is specifying qualifications for female deacons. “The fact that Paul is talking about *diakonoi* both before and after v. 11 suggests that he is also talking here about women deacons, and that men and women alike could be deacons.”⁵ Andreas Köstenberger similarly argues that “the framing device by which 3:11 is sandwiched between 3:8–10 and 3:12–13 indicates that one large category is in mind, that of deacon, with Paul first addressing qualifications for male and then female officeholders, after which he briefly returns to male deacons and closes with a general statement pertaining to both.”⁶ The text both before and after verse 11 is concerned with ‘deacon’ qualifications, and verse 11 is no exception.

¹ Strauch, 118.

² Quinn, 286.

³ Roloff, 164f.

⁴ Marshall, 494.

⁵ Brown, “*gynē*,” NIDNTT, 3:1065.

⁶ Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Hermeneutical and Exegetical Challenges in Interpreting the Pastoral Epistles,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Volume 7, 3 (Louisville, KY: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), 11.

Within the context of addressing qualifications for those who would serve in some diaconal capacity, Paul now briefly turns (e.g. 'likewise') his attention to 'women' (*gynaikas*) who would 'likewise' serve in that capacity. That deacons are explicitly addressed on either side only fortifies the position that standing behind *gynaikas* is women who would serve in the diaconate.

(D) Lastly, an alternate explanation to the flow and connectedness of the immediate context is certainly viable. R. C. H. Lenski argues that,

Paul divides the enumeration of the requirements for deacons by inserting those for women deacons in v. 11, between v. 8–10 and v. 12. His intention is to place together and on a par the personal moral requirements of men and of women deacons. In the case of the men v. 12 adds also the requirement about family life. We note that while this requirement is divided with reference to the overseer ('one wife's husband' in v. 2 the rest in v. 4, 5), it is combined with reference to deacons in v. 12. No such requirement is listed for women deacons because mothers with children found their duties in their homes and not in the diaconate.¹

2. In response to (#2) the apparent inference that deacons are by definition male

It may be argued, as above, that the repetition serves to reinforce unity of thought rather than a shift of subjects. If indeed Paul is speaking of female deacons in verse 11, using 'deacons' is a more effective choice of words than even 'men' as this may foster greater ambiguity concerning verse 11. By specifically designating the men that are in view in verse 12 as 'deacons' he fortifies the context to be regarding that particular office of practical service.

¹ Lenski, 594.

3. In response to (#3) the appearance that verses 11 and 12 belong together

This presupposes the function of verse 11 and assumes that deacons' wives are under examination for the qualifications of their husbands. This is particularly difficult to defend in light of the fact that the theme of the overseer's family (vv. 4-5) did not place any requirements on his wife. Also, if this argument intends to stress that these two verses belong together because they are dealing with the same topic, it may be responded that we can hardly insist that verse 11 is discussing the same topic of family when *gynaikas* has no modifier to denote the relationship of these females to the deacons. The point is, this argument first assumes that these women are wives. If they are not, the argument is weightless. The same topic they are dealing with is deacons, for this reason, these verses belong together.

4. In response to (#4) the idea that verse 10 is a semi-parenthetical explanation of verse 9

While this argument shifts the focus from the qualifications of the *gynaikas* to the quality of their likeness to the *deaconoi*, it does not ultimately remove the difficulty. The qualifications listed must still be explained. More importantly, this suggestion is highly questionable on grammatical grounds. It is quite unnatural to understand the construction of verse 11 as meaning "like him . . ." It is not used in this manner anywhere else in the NT.

5. In response to (#5) the argument that the same appears in verse 12 and clearly means 'wives' there

To this argument it must be acknowledged that the meaning of a given word is not solely, nor even primarily, determined by its use in adjacent verses. While this is an important data point, it is not decisive on its own. Whether this term is to be taken as 'women' or 'wives' is more dependent upon contextual relationships than its rendering in nearby verses.

6. In response to (#6) the evidence that men were ridiculed for their wives' behavior

This would argue more in favor of an overseer qualification. The importance of reputation is more explicitly emphasized in the list of qualifications for overseers than for deacons. In other words, why does the mention of wives occur only here and not also in the discussion of overseer qualifications?

7. In response to (#7) the argument that the nature of the ministry assumes the involvement of wives

This is a good argument but not one deriving from the text. Nothing is stated in the context that would anticipate this conclusion. While it is a reasonable argument, its strength is not mounted by the immediate context. Another counter argument that has been raised challenges the assumption of this argument as raised over and against the importance and involvement of overseers' wives in their ministries. Mounce reminds us that it was not only the responsibilities of deacons that would assume some level of their wives' involvement but also "the overseers are responsible for hospitality, and hence their wives presumably would be involved."¹

8. In response to (#8) the idea that wives would be preferred to women if women serve

This argument is quite compelling so far as it is reasoned here. However, it stands upon a significant assumption, namely that men and women in the diaconate serve in close connection with one another. The problem is that this assumption is nowhere indicated nor validated. It seems, at least in the case of hospitality, that the overseers would require a greater degree of connectedness with their wives than deacons. There is no reason to assume that the male and female members of the diaconate had to serve together, especially if diaconal services required

¹ Mounce, 204.

gender specific care. In fact, there is good reason to understand that female deacons served in quite a separate capacity from the male deacons.

9. Translating *gynaikas* as ‘wives’ in this verse is inherently interpretive.

There is no dispute that *gynaikas* is the standard Greek word for ‘wives’, as stated above, but it is rendered as such only when the immediate context or syntactical construction demands it. In its basic meaning the word denotes a woman and to translate it otherwise without a modifier is inherently interpretive. There is no disputing that these are ‘women’, the question is, are these women married to the deacons of verse 8 and thus their ‘wives’. No modifier is used in the original and yet to render the text ‘wives’ is to modify ‘women’ by a marital relation that is not specified in the text. So, to begin with, the translation ‘wives’ is more interpretive than literal.

10. There is no possessive pronoun or modifier to link *gynaikas* to the deacons.

If wives of deacons were intended by the text, we would expect the possessive pronoun ‘their’ to designate ‘their wives’. But no pronoun (i.e. *autōn*) or article (i.e. *tas*) is used. Thus, “it would have been more common to indicate this with either a possessive pronoun or the definite article (e.g., 1 Cor 7:2, 3; Eph 5:22; Co1 3:18, 24; 1 Pet 3:1).”¹ Alternatively, a genitive construction could designate these women as being wives ‘of deacons’, but no such construction is in the original. “We should have expected the definite article before ‘Women’, or at least the genitive pronoun after it, or some other turn bringing out that they were ‘their wives’.”² As Barrett argues, “if the author had referred to deacons’ wives he would have been obliged to be more precise, by writing ‘*their* wives’ (there is no possessive pronoun or article in the Greek, though a

¹ Towner, 266.

² Kelly, 83.

possessive pronoun is introduced into the translation), or by using a construction like that of v. 4 (*gynaikas echontes* [*having wives*]).”¹ One of these grammatical features would have to be in the text in order to assert with certainty that wives of deacons is indeed the intended meaning.

We agree that “it could, on the other hand, be argued that if Paul switched topics, some qualifier such as ‘women who serve as deacons’ or at least a specifier at the beginning of v 12 would be expected.”² But this observation does not resolve anything nor favor the interpretation ‘wives of deacons’, it only states the case that must be solved. The point is that without a ‘specifier’, an apparent ambiguity remains that must be carefully resolved.

It has been argued that an article is not necessary here. “It may be responded that in the whole pericope Paul refers to people anarthrously [without the article].”³ Yes, but in none of the other occurrences (vv. 2, 4, 8, 12) does the meaning of the noun used change with or without the article. Only here is *gynaikas* used in the accusative case without a modifier, in each of the other occurrences it is found in a genitive construction, which designates relationship. In fact, the only other time that *gynaikas* occurs in 1 Timothy in the accusative case is in 2:9 where it is universally translated ‘women’.

It has been argued that a possessive pronoun was not necessary for the original audience to understand what was intended, and this is certainly true. The most natural meaning of *gynaikas* without any modifier would be women, this would be naturally understood. An argument against this point is that verses 8-13 are clearly about male deacons and therefore the use of *gynaikas* here would most naturally be understood to mean ‘wives’.⁴ But one must ask, is the focus on these men or is it on deacons? If indeed the emphasis was on a particular office holder, rather than the office, then this argument would be more

¹ Barrett, 62.

² Mounce, 204.

³ Knight, 172.

⁴ Strauch, 122.

persuasive. But as it stands, the context is concerned with the office (the title of which is repeated) and lends nicely to the natural understanding of *gynaikas* as 'women' in that office. In other words, without a possessive pronoun in a context concerned with an office rather than with men, it is more natural to read *gynaikas* as 'women' in that office.

If females who serve in the work of the diaconate are to be absolutely limited to women who are married to male deacons, then one would fully expect a qualification of such significance to be plainly stated. If females may serve, this does not exclude wives, but if only wives can serve, then the church must understand that non-wives are not permitted. To insist that the text is demanding this type and degree of restriction is to go beyond what is written. In other words, there is no prohibition in this text for women who are not wives. "The passage does not require all deacons to be men, just as it does not require all deacons to have more than one child (cf. *tekna*, 'children,' in v 12). . . . There is nothing in this paragraph that would prohibit women from being deacons."¹

11. Why must deacons' wives be qualified and not overseers' wives?

If it is to be argued that the women in view are the wives of deacons, several considerations are in order. For instance, is it to be assumed that the quality of character of these wives is merely an added factor of qualification for their husbands to serve as deacons? If so, then why are not the wives of overseers likewise an added factor of qualification for them? After all, the office of the overseer is by design more highly scrutinized and particularly so with regard to reputation. If, however, *gynaikas* is taken to mean 'women' as deacons, then its placement here fits nicely and the omission among the overseers is explained since only men serve as overseers.

¹ Mounce, 204-05.

Counters have been offered that claim that this is an argument from silence, or that this makes Paul's list more rigidly formal than is justifiable, or that this may have been "an ad hoc list related to the problems prevalent at Ephesus, it might have been easy for [Paul] to overlook the qualities of the overseer's wife."¹ These counters are unconvincing, offering precious little positive evidence. It is more substantial to see that "such an omission is hard to explain if he is speaking of the wives of deacons in 1 Timothy 3:11. One would expect that higher qualifications would be demanded of wives of elders than of wives of deacons. But if Paul is referring to women who were deacons, then the omission of women among elders is because women could not be elders, although they could be deacons."²

How else is this omission among overseers to be explained? The most common answer is that the nature of the office of deacon allows for women to assist while the office of overseer does not. But the answer cannot be quite that simple.

If it is suggested that qualifications are given because these wives are expected to serve alongside their husbands, then it cannot be said that women are truly barred from serving as deacons. This position grants that women may serve in the diaconate so long as they are married to a male deacon. Effectively this attempt merely imposes an unstated qualification upon women who wish to serve as deacons, namely they must be married to a deacon. If the heart of concern is that women should not serve as deacons, then this solution (e.g. 'wives of deacons') does not solve that problem, it only conceals it behind indirection. "If one were to ignore the evidence so far, and assume these are in fact deacons' wives, then he must also assume that both a deacon and his wife are elected to fulfill these service obligations. Thus an office

¹ Mounce, 203-04.

² Schriener, "The Valuable Ministries of Women in the Context of Male Leadership," 504.

of 'deaconess' is created, open only to those women whose husbands seek the office of deacon."¹

This is not to ignore the claim that a husband-wife arrangement would appoint wives in a subordinate service with respect to their husbands, it simply challenges the textual basis of that dynamic. First, that the *gynaikas* ('wives' or 'women') are subordinate to the male *diakonoï* is not explicitly stated and arguably not even implied in the context. Second, this arrangement introduces a level of hierarchy that is nowhere else stated or supported by example. There is no indication that the male deacons are related in authority over the female deacons, even if they are supposed to be 'wives'. So if wives are in view, then it is questionable what their marriage connection contributes any resolve to the problem.

If only wives of deacons are in view, do they hold office in any official sense? Strauch says, "The wives are not deacon officials, however. They don't hold the office of deacon or any special title."² If not, then why qualifications? The text does not say that "the [male] deacon must have a wife who..." Rather it says, "Likewise, women." The qualifications are connected to the woman, not to the man who is assumed to be the husband of the woman. The woman is being qualified, not an assumed husband. If the woman must be qualified, is she to serve? If she is to serve, under qualifications, then how exactly is she not an office holder? If these women serve, in assistance or otherwise, they still serve. We cannot get around the plain implication that these women were to be qualified because they were to serve in diaconal service—whether wife, assistant, or simply 'woman'. We can alter titles and labels but in the end it is clear that women served in diaconal capacities (cf. Acts 9:36-39; Rom 16:1, 12). The core issue appears to be concerned with women holding an 'office' because in our minds it infers authority over others. To place women in authority over men would indeed be in direct

¹ Robert M. Lewis, "The 'Women' of 1 Timothy 3:11," in *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 136, 542 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979), 169.

² Strauch, 127.

contradiction to 2:12, but the diaconate is not an office that exercises authority in any ruling sense (more below). Nor would women who serve in the diaconate have authority over men. Therefore, to exclude women from the diaconate on the ground of 2:12 only shows a lack of understanding the diaconate. There is no way around the fact that this text points to women who are involved in diaconal work—title or not.

To this, even those who hold to a ‘wives of deacons’ view, concede that “whichever position is adopted as to whether women are to be ‘deaconesses,’ there is still consensus that women should be involved in ‘diaconal’ or service ministries in the church, whether they are elected as ‘deaconesses’ or not.”¹ But one must ask, if women are to serve in diaconal service regardless of office or title, then are their qualifications for them (more below)?

What if a deacon’s wife is not qualified? Does that disqualify the husband deacon or just the assistance of his wife? There is not sufficient evidence to conclude that a husband and wife must both qualify in order for either to serve in this capacity. If this was the intention, we might expect some mention of ‘both’ or a connection between the two of them in the qualifications. What if the deacon’s wife is obligated with the responsibilities of a large home? Would that disqualify him for service in the diaconate since she could not serve with him? To this Strauch argues the logical conclusion, “If a prospective deacon's wife isn't willing or able to help or doesn't meet the qualifications mentioned in verse 11, the prospective deacon isn't eligible at that time for office.”² But nowhere in the text is this indicated. There is no stated contingency that a deacon’s wife must be able and willing to serve with him. This argument is postulated because it is the logical conclusion of the assumption taken. But the text does not require it, and to the contrary this assumption imposes qualifications on the office that Scripture does not.

¹ Knight, “The Family and the Church,” 354.

² Strauch, 127.

12. It is grammatically unnatural to take verse 11 as an additional qualification for the deacons mentioned in verse 8 and 12.

Some have contended that “the examination process for deacons is to include the moral fitness of their wives.”¹ But grammatically, there is too great a distance between verse 9 and verse 11 for it to be naturally assumed that the moral fitness of a deacon’s wife was to be added to his qualification list. Verse 10 prepares the reader for transition away for the outline of verses 8 and 9, and the beginning of verse 11 confirms that transition with ‘likewise’. As argued above (reason 3), grammatically it is the ‘women’ who are under examination in verse 11, not anyone in relation to them. To take this to mean that it is actually the related male deacons that are being qualified here is exceptionally difficult to construe from the grammar.

13. There is a remarkable lack of relationship between verses 11 and 12 if the same people are in view.

The point here is that if the *gynaikas* of verse 11 are the wives of verse 12, then a closer relationship between these two designations might be expected. For example, “although 3:12 mentions that [deacons] should have one wife, 3:11 does not identify these women as their wives.”² Similarly, it is odd that verse 12 would immediately charge the male deacons to be faithful to their wives. In other words, “the introduction of the injunction respecting the deacons, as a new particular, which would hardly be if their wives had been mentioned before.”³

14. Wives have their primary responsibility at home.

Another consideration that is sometimes overlooked is the biblical priority of home-life and the implications this has for wives. Lenski

¹ Strauch, 123.

² Johnson, 228.

³ Alford, 327.

reasons that “it would certainly be the sensible thing to elect unattached women. Paul would be the last one to select both husband and wife for an office and assign to the wife duties that would take her away from home and her children.”¹ With regard to the ‘women’ in verse 11, “nothing is said concerning their family relationships. This suggests that they are single and elderly ladies who devote all their energies to the community.”² This reasoning is consistent with Paul’s insight in 1 Corinthians 7:34, “the woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.”

With regard to Paul’s focus returning to male deacons in verse 12, Lenski adds, “because these men alone have families, the qualifications in regard to this point follow in v. 12.”³ If ‘wives of deacons’ be accepted, it should be noted that all men with young families would likely be precluded from serving since it would require that their wives be qualified and available, which would likely be at conflict with their priorities in the home during that season of life.

15. Natural order of would expect verse 11 to appear after verse 12.

It has been suggested that in the order of thought and communication, we would have expected that verse 11 appear after verse 12, which would be the natural order of the family.⁴ If verse 11 represents qualifications for the male deacon assumed in verse 12, then the natural order would expect the mention of the deacon’s relationship with his wife before mentioning her qualifications.

Even on grammatical grounds, “if v. 11 had been written after v. 12, the understanding of *gynaikas* as wives, even without any qualification,

¹ Lenski, 599.

² TDNT, *gynē*, 788.

³ Lenski, 599.

⁴ Collins, 90.

would likely be more apparent just because of the order and the usage of the anarthrous *gynaikas*, which would have been immediately preceding.”¹ The point here is that if verse 11 followed verse 12, then the relationship of the ‘women’ in verse 11 would be more readily identifiable according to the grammatical pattern established elsewhere in this passage.

Arguments For VIEW TWO

Having considered a few of the arguments against interpreting *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 as referring to the ‘wives of deacons’, we now turn our attention to the positive evidence in favor of reading verse 11 as ‘women’ as deacons.

16. Both verse 8 and verse 11 depend upon the main verb of verse 2.

It is significant to note that verse 11 does not contain a verb and therefore depends upon a preceding verb to make grammatical sense. This common feature in the Greek language is called an ellipsis and is sometimes used to maintain structural unity among various thoughts and lay stress on the application of the main verb upon those thoughts.² The importance of this here is that verse 11 structurally parallels verse 8, both being dependent upon verse 2 for the main verb, namely ‘must be’ (*dei*). The consequence of this parallel structure is that each of these verses (2, 8, and 11) form parallel sections. The first section deals with ‘overseers’, the second with ‘deacons’ (male), and the third with ‘women’. “That these women are not ‘the wives of the deacons’ nor ‘all the adult female members of the church’ is clear from the syntax: ‘The overseer therefore *must be* ... Deacons similarly (*must be*) ... Women similarly (*must be*) ...’ One and the same verb coordinates the three: the overseer, deacons, women.”³ On the basis of this grammatical

¹ Knight, 172.

² Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (London; New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode; E. & J. B. Young & Co., 1898), 2.

³ Hendriksen, 132; cf. Fee, 88; Köstenberger, 12; Marshall, 493.

relationship, the most viable reading is one that reflects some degree of similarity in structure between overseers, (male) deacons, and women. It is difficult to maintain this grammatical relationship if 'wives' of deacons is proposed. The functional implication of this parallel structure is that it "suggests that Paul was intending to start a new discussion on a new category of worker."¹ This category is best described as being 'women' in the context of deacons.

17. The use of 'likewise' signals another class of a similar kind.

Perhaps the strongest of all grammatical arguments in favor of taking *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 as 'women' (as deacons) is the connection explicitly made by the use of 'likewise' (*hōsautōs*). "From the situation of this sentence and from the introductory word 'in like manner' (*hōsautōs*), it seems beyond question that this sentence refers not to Christian women in general, but to the class of women who were selected for congregational work, that is deaconesses."²

The coordinating conjunction *kai* should have been used instead of *hōsautōs* if these 'women' were to be included in the list of qualifications for male deacons. The fact that 'likewise' (*hōsautōs*) is used emphasizes distinctiveness and the introduction of a new subject rather than the continuation of the same grammatical subject (like *kai* does). The theme of deacons continues but the subject of male deacons is transitioned to their female counterparts.

The grammatical construction bears the marks of transition to another class, which is demonstrated in 2:9 and in Titus 2:3.³ Thus, it is observed that "in similar parenetic contexts, the adverb *hōsautōs*; ('likewise'; 2:9; 3:8; Titus 2:3, 6) that changes the topic to 'women' serves to introduce a new but related case."⁴ Consider the transition from 2:8 to

¹ Kitchen, 144.

² Ramsay, 80.

³ Fairbairn, 150.

⁴ Towner, 266.

2:9, where *gynaikas* is undisputedly rendered ‘women’. The construction of that transition is very similar to what we have here (e.g. both ‘likewise’ and ‘women’ are used in a similar relationship).

Now the connection of ‘likewise’ makes it clear that they are ‘like’ something. Clearly, deacons are not equivalent to overseers, so the term cannot mean equivalent (cf. v. 8). What is the essential ‘likeness’ that is here being indicated? In verse 8 it most obviously transitions offices; in verse 11 it most clearly transitions gender.

Wuest notes that here ‘likewise’ “is used in introducing a second or third in a series. The series here is of Church officials.”¹ The grammar of this sentence suggests “a new class is introduced analogous to the preceding order of deacons” (Guthrie, 100); “a new ecclesiastical class” (Alford, 3:327). In persuasive favor of this view “is the structure of the sentence itself, which is the exact equivalent of verse 8, both of which in turn are dependent on the verb *must* in verse 2 (thus implying three categories).”² Because verse 11 does not supply a verb to modify, ‘likewise’ grammatically depends on the main verb previously stated in verse 2. The ‘likewise’ of verse 8 functions in precisely the same manner, which positions both of these verses in a grammatically parallel relationship and not a hierarchical one. Therefore, the ‘likewise’ of verse 11 modifies the same thing that the ‘likewise’ of verse modifies, namely what the subjects of the respective sentences ‘must be’. So “an overseer must be” (v. 2), “deacons likewise must be” (v. 8), and “women likewise must be” (v. 11) qualified. It is noteworthy that the ‘likewise’ of verse 11 does not grammatically modify the subject of verse 8. This means that ‘likewise’ does not modify something concerning the deacons of verse 8, as though it were adding to their qualifications. Rather, it is making the case for a third application of the ‘must be’ imperative (v. 2), namely the subject of verse 11 ‘must be’ qualified in order to serve.

¹ Wuest, 1 Ti 3:11.

² Fee, 88.

Just as in verse 8, ‘likewise’ indicates a distinct, though similar, group is under consideration¹ and differentiates between men and women in the same function.² Consequently, “all three sets of officers must meet certain requirements in the same way and cannot be chosen without them.”³ ‘Likewise’ in verse 11 connects these ‘women’ with the male deacons of verse 8, so that verses 8 through 12 are “giving express directions as to the qualifications of men-deacons and women-deacons alike.”⁴

There is some relationship here indicated. Deacons are linked to these ‘women’ in some manner. One counter argument is that ‘likewise’ “is as easily explained by saying that just as deacons are to be dignified so also are their wives.”⁵ But the text does not state that relationship as a marital one. The relationship in view does not need to be a personal relationship, but rather a functional classification. The relationship is one of category and not personal in nature. It does not mean that the women worked alongside the men, for instance; nor does ‘likewise’ properly connect ‘deacons’ with their ‘wives’. It means that women like men must be qualified if they are to serve as deacons. This would be the most customary reading in the original.

18. The absence of an article for *gynaikas* tends to promote a quality of distinction.

Though a minor point, it is not without value. The absence of an article for *gynaikas* is, if anything, in favor of ‘women’ being used almost adjectivally—‘deacons who are women’.⁶ It is not ‘the women’ that are identified (or ‘the wives’), but more closely, those who are women. Thus, a quality of distinction is more apparent than any other relationship (e.g.

¹ Marshall, 493.

² Johnson, 228.

³ Lenski, 599.

⁴ Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Dissertations on the Apostolic Age* (London; New York: Macmillan, 1892), 149.

⁵ Mounce, 203.

⁶ Kelly, 83.

‘wives’). The distinction between verse 8 and 11, then, is that these deacons are ‘those who are women’.

19. Verse 10 intensifies the separation of verses 8–9 and verse 11.

Verse 10 intensifies the separation of verses 8-9 and verse 11, and therefore suggests in verse 11 an identity that is distinguished from those in verses 8-9. Again, there is a necessary similarity of kind (deacons) conjoined with a distinction of class (male/female). So the separation of verse 10 promotes greater differentiation for *gynaikas* as ‘women’ to be more clearly distinguished from the male deacons. When taken with the construction of ‘likewise’, this argues for women as deacons and against wives of deacons.

20. Since *diakonoi* is used both in masculine and feminine contexts, it could not have been used here without causing confusion.

Some have argued that if Paul intended to identify women deacons then he could have specified deacons in a feminine construct. One problem with that assumption is that “the word *diakonos* is understood generically of both sexes.”¹ So, since it “came to be used for both the masculine and feminine gender, it seems natural to suppose that Paul’s use of *gynaikas* in verse 11 is to avoid confusing the previous group with those being introduced here.”² While not authoritative or decisive in this discussion, it is interesting to note that the Latin Vulgate employs the plural of *mulieres* (woman; wife [ambiguous]) instead of *bimaritus* (wives).

Verse 11 does not introduce a new title and therefore is in keeping with the understanding that the same office is in view, only a different candidate has been introduced. On this reading, *gynaikas* is not used as a title for office, it simply describes a differentiated group corresponding

¹ Ramsay, 80.

² Lewis, 169.

to that office. In the choice of words, it “would have sufficed to direct attention to female candidates for the post.”¹ In this sense, the author was only obliged to use a word that identified this category of candidates for the diaconate as ‘women’.²

21. The four qualifications outlined in verse 11 correspond to those outlined in verse 8 for ‘deacons’.

It has been widely noticed that the four qualifications outlined in verse 11 correspond to those outlined in verse 8 for ‘deacons’ (see Figure 1 below). That these qualifications are substantially parallel is an argument in favor of reading ‘deacons’ and ‘women’ as belonging to the same general category of service. If the nature of service corresponds in any way to the qualifications outlined, then it stands to reason that these two groups are being qualified for the same general category of service, namely the diaconate.

22. The qualifications correspond to the *gynaikas*; whether they are wives, assistants, or deacons, they still ‘serve’.

It is significant that the qualifications set forth in verse 11 correspond to the *gynaikas* of verse 11 and no one else. These qualifications are connected to the women of verse 11. If it is asserted that these women are ‘wives’ then the qualifications of verse 11 are to qualify these ‘wives’; the qualifications are not for those related to these ‘women’.

Qualifications for service necessarily imply responsibility in that service, whether as an ‘assistant’ or not. So this strongly suggests that the ‘women’ in view are being qualified for diaconal service. Regardless of titles and labels, verse 11 implies women who are qualified accordingly serve in some diaconal capacity. And this service is qualified service, suggesting appropriate and official appointment. Public affirmation is

¹ Towner, 266.

² Barrett, 61.

asserted elsewhere for deacons. This is said to set the deacon apart from other servants in the church and necessarily corresponds to the explicitly listed qualifications. This plainly argues in favor taking verse 11 as addressing women as deacons.

23. The qualifications for the *gynaikas* fit diaconal service and not domestic responsibilities.

The core issue is that women, whether wives or not, are here being qualified for diaconal service—this cannot be casually dismissed. Unless one argues the untenable position that the qualifications of verse 11 apply to a husband deacon, and yet while his wife must be morally fit she is not to serve in any capacity, the wife would in practice be qualified and serve as a deacon. If the issue was merely gender, then it is unclear how marriage would solve that condition.

To appeal to the idea that a wife would be under the submission of her husband, though biblically sound in principle, is not alluded to in the text. If “managers of . . . their own households” (v. 12) is appealed to, it would be a qualification of the husband and not the wife; and offers no help in addressing the present issue. How exactly would ‘wives’, instead of ‘women’, make women serving in the diaconate acceptable? It should be kept in mind that a wife’s submission is never issued as an instruction to husbands, but rather to wives. The idea of submission, then, would necessarily be required as a statement to the wives, and no such qualification is presented in the text. In other words, if a wife’s submission to her husband in service is a key reason why ‘wives’ may serve in the diaconate and not ‘women’, then it stands to reason that some aspect of submission would be included in the qualifications listed for ‘wives’, but no such qualification is mentioned.

Furthermore, the qualifications listed for the ‘women’ of verse 11 fit diaconal service and do not correspond to domestic responsibilities that might be expected if ‘wives’ were in view. The qualifications are not at all related to the responsibilities of a wife but rather the responsibilities

of a deacon.¹ The qualifications, then, do not serve to identify a fit wife in support of her husband but rather a fit woman for diaconal service. It is interesting that verse 12 contains domestic duties to qualify the man for the diaconate. If wives were intended, surely there would be some sort of corresponding qualification in their domestic duties. Just as the man must be qualified in his loving headship in the home, so also the wife might be expected to be qualified in her loving submission to her husband.

In summary, “the statement places the personal qualifications of these ‘women’ on a level with those required of the men deacons. If the reference is to the wives of the deacons it would have been more appropriately introduced in connection with the domestic qualifications of the deacons.”² Furthermore, “these women have their own set of qualifications, and these stand both in contrast to the qualities some women in the Ephesian church displayed (1 Tim 5:11-15; 2 Tim 3:6-7) and parallel to the requirements for deacons (1 Tim 3:8-9).”³ Therefore, it is more natural to read verse 11 as setting forth qualifications for women as deacons rather than wives of deacons.

24. The entire context is one that is dealing specifically with church officials.

An important observation is that the entire context of 1 Timothy 3:1-13 is one that is dealing specifically with church officials. To assume that *gynaikas* is referring to wives without any modifier or specified relationship seems exceptional to the focus and flow of the context. Because the immediate context is dealing with deacons, how would ‘wives’—who are qualified to serve—stand in relation to the office of deacons? To this point, Mark Dever insists that “the expression cannot

¹ Fairbairn, 150.

² Hiebert, 70.

³ Kitchen, 145-6.

refer to the wives of deacons or of ministers, because they do not stand in any official relation to the Church.”¹

25. It is plain that women served in the church in some capacity (cf. 5:9f), and that official service without qualification for that service would seem quite irresponsible.

The main point of this argument is that if women are not prohibited from diaconal service (whether as wives, assistants, or simply women), then to admit them to service without qualification would be irresponsible. “For such work certain moral qualities would be essential whether for deacons’ wives or for deaconesses or deacons in their own right.”² Furthermore, to admit them by qualification, as the male deacons, and yet without any official acknowledgement would seem unjustifiably biased. For this reason, it is best to understand 1 Timothy 3:11 as addressing women as deacons and not merely wives of deacons. “There can be no doubt, however, that these were women in ministry, requiring qualifications for service, whose qualifications were set rhetorically right beside those of male deacons.”³

26. It is clear that elsewhere older women are instructed to minister to other women (cf. Titus 2:3ff).

The instructions in Titus 2 furnish a biblical precedent for women to serve in the practical care of other women. In 5:16 it is plainly evident that widows were being cared for in a significant manner by the church. It is reasonable to conclude that those who primarily attended the needs of these widows were female deacons, especially if the needs of the widows exceeded the need for distribution of food and alms.

¹ Dever, *Polity*, 360.

² Guthrie, 100.

³ Oden, *First and Second Timothy, Titus*, 149.

27. Elsewhere in the NT women are seen contributing in various and significant ways (cf. Rom 16:1, 12).

The argument of church history covers this particular point in detail. It is mainly concerned with the evidence that instead of prohibiting women from diaconal type services (whether or not they are elsewhere given the official title of 'deacon'), the NT bears plain examples of it. Lenski argues that "Paul, for instance, entrusted his letter to the Romans to Phoebe, and she herself was a deaconess and not merely some deacon's wife."¹ Commenting on Romans 16:1, Brown states, "Paul's use of the masculine term *diakonos* not only suggests the existence of an order of women deacons but also that the women were included in the same order as male deacons. This explanation would make the best sense of the injunction to women in 1 Tim. 3:11 which occurs in a discussion of the qualities required in deacons."²

28. Some have argued for evidence that women were already assuming the office of deacon.

Some have argued that deacons in Ephesus assumed some activity of preaching, which is why Paul addresses women in this regard in 2:11f in his prelude to a discussion on order among church leadership. On this supposition, it is said that this is evidence that women were serving as deacons: "Another argument advanced in favour of 'deacons' is the author's attitude to women teaching and exercising authority over men. Oberlinner, 141-3, holds that the deacons were active in preaching and raises the question of the activity of female deacons in this respect (2:11f. is clear evidence that they were so active!)."³ Marshall goes on to suggest that it is "probable that the author simply forbade women deacons from doing all that the men did."⁴

¹ Lenski, 600.

² Colin Brown, "γυνή," *NIDNTT* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 1065.

³ Marshall, 494.

⁴ Marshall, 494; cf. Townner, 265-66.

29. In response to (#9) the argument that more detail would be expected

Regardless of who is in view here, verse 11 is markedly brief. Some have suggested that verse 11 is first explained as brevity of expression.¹ It may be argued that this brevity of expression implicitly assumes a view to female deacons, since deacons have already been introduced and all that is needed here is explicit gender distinction (i.e. ‘likewise women’). Accordingly, “the rather casual insertion in the context of deacons probably indicates that they were not as prominent as the men, but were to be considered as belonging to the same ministry.”² On this reading, it may be reasoned that the concluding qualification for these women, namely being ‘faithful in all things’, “may be Paul’s summary way of applying the qualities of a deacon to a deaconess.”³

30. In response to (#10) the argument that ‘women’ is never used of itself to denote deaconesses

This assumes that *gynaikas* is to be taken as a title for the office, a point that is not advanced by the opposing view. It is not expected to be used to designate an office, neither here or anywhere else in the NT. As for the commonality of *gynaikos* for ‘wife’, this is true because, as stated above, it is designedly used as a title for women who are married. But this is only valid in contexts where marital relations are clearly identified.

31. In response to (#11) why Paul did not use the same form of diakonos that he did in Romans 16

This solution may not prove to be as effective as it appears at first glance. *Diakonoι* could be used in masculine and feminine contexts and would likely only introduce greater confusion if used here. If a view to deacons (*diakonoι*) continues in verse 11, then the use of *gynaikas* would

¹ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*.

² Saucy, *The Church*, 160.

³ Mounce, 203.

be plenty sufficient to describe the new class of deacons (i.e. ‘likewise, women [deacons]’). See reason #12 of the opposing view.

32. In response to (#12) the argument that the qualifications are essentially parallel

The repetition of qualifications may at last prove to be a stronger argument for women as deacons than against it. The qualifications are close enough to clearly reflect a parallelism but are distinguished enough to accommodate differences between the sexes.

33. In response to (#13) the argument that more qualifications are given to men

First, a difference in the number of qualifications may correspond to a difference in the number or types of responsibilities. Differences of these kinds are to be expected if the distinctions of biblical womanhood and manhood are to be maintained. It may be plainly argued that female deacons do not have to do everything that male deacons do and therefore do not require exactly the same qualifications. Second, there is no textual reason to exclude the ‘women’ of verse 11 from the practical guidelines of verses 10.

34. In response to (#14) the argument that no marital qualifications are given

Knight also notes that “the omission can, however, be explained if the requirement is inherent in their position as wives of the *diakonoi*.” It could also be argued that in the biblical order of family, the husband, being the head of the home, is the one primarily responsible for both his marriage and household. Since the primary appointment of these responsibilities fall upon the husband they are always a part of his qualification for office, while the same is not true for the wife. It has also been argued that “no such requirement is listed for women deacons because mothers with children found their duties in their homes and not

in the diaconate.”¹ In other words, this argument loses its force if the service of women in the diaconate was implicitly never in contention with household priorities.

35. In response to (#15) the argument that women deacons contradicts 2:12

The validity of this argument turns on the understanding of the diaconate. As argued above, the diaconate is not an office of teaching, authority, or rule. It is distinctively a designated servanthood that is chartered to meet the practical and temporal needs of the saints in acts of kindness, mercy, and care. To argue that 2:12 precludes women from serving as deacons is to misunderstand the prohibitions of 2:12, or the diaconate, or both.

36. In response to (#16) the argument that 1 Timothy 5 addresses an order of women to serve

The chief weakness of this argument is that the role and purpose of enrollment for the widows discussed in 5:9 are not explained. Many have inferred that an official class of servants is in view there, but this is far from unanimous and has very significant contextual evidence against it. Mounce points out that 5:9-13 “confirm that the central purpose of vv 3–16 is to differentiate between the widows who should be cared for and those who should not, rather than to specify duties.”² There is good reason to understand the widows in 5:9f to belong to a special group who were cared for by the church in a particular way (cf. 5:16). Given the age requirement (‘not less than sixty years old’, 5:9), it is more likely that these widows were enrolled to receive care rather than to serve at giving care.

¹ Lenski, 594.

² Mounce, 286.

37. In response to (#17) the argument that only men were selected in Acts 6

We must guard from assuming that the temporal assignment of Acts 6 is equivalent at every point with the diaconate established in the Pastoral Epistles. Key to this discussion is the implicit differences of responsibilities. The assignment that the Seven received was most particularly to meet the needs of those who “were being overlooked in the daily serving of food” (Acts 6:1). This task was specifically identified as a task “to serve tables” (6:2). There is no reason why serving tables would require female servants. However, inferred in the types of responsibilities inherent in the more fully developed diaconate are tasks of service that would require more intimate engagement between the servant and the one being served. Therefore, to argue against women as deacons here on the basis of Acts 6 is unconvincing. Moreover, this same argument would similarly serve to oppose the understanding that wives are in view, since there is no indication that wives assisted in the task of Acts 6. Consequently, this argument does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the existence of 1 Timothy 3:11.

38. In response to (#18) the argument that an order of female deacons in the ministry is not clear in the NT

“To this it might be answered, that even were they nowhere else mentioned, the present passage stands on its own grounds; and if it seemed from the context that such persons were indicated here, we should reason from this to the fact of their existence, not from the absence of other mention to their non-indication here.”¹ A similar argument could be posed against the very existence of the diaconate.

¹ Alford, 3:327.

5

Qualifications

The qualifications set forth for the ‘women’ of verse 11, though not identical, are remarkably comparable to those listed in verses 8 and 9 for ‘deacons’. Not only are they similar, they “enumerate in the same order the aspects of character and behavior we have already seen in the case of the male deacons in 3:8. And equally the goal is to define in more concrete terms the meaning of the general requirement.”¹ Just as male deacons are to be ‘men of dignity’ (*semnos*), so female deacons are to be ‘dignified’ (*semnos*). Just as male deacons are not to be ‘double-tongued’ (*dilogos*), so female deacons are not to be ‘malicious gossips’ (*diabolos*). Just as male deacons are not to be ‘addicted to much wine’ (*oinō pollō prosechontas*), so female deacons are to be ‘sober-minded’ (*nēphalios*). Just as male deacons are to be ‘holding the mystery of the faith’ (*echontas ... pisteōs*), so female deacons are to be ‘faithful in all things’ (*pistas en pasin*). In the following table, this parallelism is illustrated with each requirement generalized (left column) to show how it may be captured in one essential quality for both male and female deacons.

¹ Towner, 266.

Quality	Male	Female
<i>"worthy of respect"</i>	<i>"dignified"</i>	<i>"dignified"</i>
<i>integrity & communication character</i>	not double-tongued	not a slanderer
<i>sobriety & level-headedness</i>	not given to much wine	sober-minded
<i>faithfulness & trustworthiness</i>	holding the mystery of the faith	faithful in all things

Figure 1

Regardless of gender, the one who serves in a diaconal capacity is to be someone 'worthy of respect' (*semnos*). This quality stands not only first, but representative and inclusive of the others. It is interesting that this is the only quality listed that is exactly the same for both males and females (the feminine form being used in verse 11).

Now if the other qualifications were simply intended to be applied to both male and female members of the diaconate, then why repeat them? Why not simply introduce both male and female members at the beginning or conclude with some sort of inclusion for females, like, "likewise, women also." If male and female deacons are in view, then why repeat the qualifications for the 'women' when essentially the same qualities have already been addressed for the office (vv. 8-9)? For one, an emphasis for men appears to be placed on sexual purity, while an emphasis for women on verbal purity. Perhaps these two qualifications generally reflect the greatest vulnerability of each respective gender. Secondly, there may be some particular interest in addressing the women separately in order to more clearly counter the behavior of some disruptive women. Thus, "we may contrast what is said here with what is said in 1 Timothy 5:11-15 and 2 Timothy 3:6-7 about the women who are out of line. What I am suggesting is that Paul is positively comparing overseers, deacons and deaconesses, but he is also doing a rhetorical *synkrisis*, or contrast, with the false teachers and misbehaving women who are discussed elsewhere in this document and in 2 Timothy."¹

¹ Witherington, 241-242.

Because the character qualifications for ‘deacons’ and the ‘women’ of verse 11 are substantially parallel, it stands to reason that these two groups are engaged in substantially parallel service. The distinction between these two groups turns on the gender distinguishing term ‘women’. On this reading, both men and women were admitted to the diaconate on the basis of certain character qualifications. Just as overseers and (male) deacons are not qualified or disqualified on the basis of marital status (see Appendix 12), so also women are not qualified or disqualified on the basis of marital status.

The Diaconate is a Non-Teaching, Non-Authoritative Office of Service

One argument towers above all others against the view for women as deacons in 1 Timothy 3:11, namely it appears to contradict what is stated just fourteen verses prior: “But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man” (1 Tim 2:12). The core issue is one of authority. To say that it is biblical for a woman to officially serve in the diaconate—that is to hold an office in the church—in light of 2:12 appears contradictory to some. For instance, Strauch claims that “Paul’s restriction on women having authority over men in the local church (1 Timothy 2:12) raises serious doubts about 1 Timothy 3:11 referring to women being deacons.”¹ But in response, it may be argued that “Paul’s mention of deaconesses coheres well with his earlier prohibition of women serving in teaching or ruling functions over men (2:12) and his lack of mention of women elders in 3:1–7. Since being a deacon does not involve teaching or ruling, women as well as men are eligible to serve in this capacity.”² Kitchen observes that “some argue that Paul has limited women’s involvement in ministry (2:11-15) and that this means he is unlikely to designate here a church office for women. However, the role of deacons did not apparently carry the same responsibility as overseers with regard to teaching and authoritative oversight. Thus it would hold

¹ Strauch, 118.

² Köstenberger, 12.

to reason that neither would the role of the deaconesses. Paul, rather than holding women out of ministry, often commended them for their service to God and the church (e. g. , Rom. 16:1-4, 6, 12)."¹

The whole issue is contingent upon how the diaconate is defined and what its appointed purpose is in the church. "The problem in our day is that we have made deacons an executive board which, because of other passages in Timothy, seem to rule out women. However, deacons are meant to be servants, and therefore, women have an appropriate role."² So, the answer to the question, 'Is it biblical for women to serve as deacons?', depends upon one's 'biblical' understanding of the office of deacon. A faulty view of the office will likely result in a faulty answer to the question. Would it violate biblical teaching to have a women serve as female deacons? "Actually, it would violate biblical teaching only if one misunderstands the office of a deacon. In those churches where deacons are in a position of authority, having deaconesses would be a violation of biblical teaching. But biblically, a deacon is a servant, and since there is nothing wrong with female servants, there is nothing biblically wrong with an order of deaconesses, if the office is kept biblically."³ Schreiner notes that "the deacon's task consisted mainly in practical service to the needs of the congregation. . . . Elders were given the responsibility to lead and teach the congregation. Thus, women being appointed to the supportive and complementary role of deacons supports the major thesis of this chapter, as does the exclusion of women from the office of elder."⁴ Mounce concedes, "Whatever the specific interpretation of this verse may be, it is not related to the issue of women in leadership since the deacon(ess) does not provide authoritative leadership."⁵

Another key consideration observes the biblical principle of women ministering to women (cf. Titus 2:3-5; Acts 9:36-39) and applies it as the normative practice in the diaconate. Accordingly, women who serve as

¹ Kitchen, 144.

² Utley, 47.

³ Fruchtenbaum, 25.

⁴ Schreiner, "The Valuable Ministries Of Women In The Context Of Male Leadership," 220.

⁵ Mounce, 202.

deacons would be responsible to serve other women in some diaconal capacity and not men. This encourages even greater assurance that 2:12 is not at odds with women serving as deacons.

Some have argued that in Acts 6 only men were selected and yet they served women, so why must women serve women in the diaconate? Two responses are in order. (1) Those selected in Acts 6, though likely reflecting a prototypical origin of the diaconate, are nowhere explicitly declared deacons. Their assignment was essentially temporary, their qualifications were different than those outlined in 1 Timothy 3, and it is nowhere indicated that they were responsible for general diaconal service to meet various practical and physical needs. In contrast, the NT diaconate is an office designed to meet ongoing and various needs of a congregation. The officers of the diaconate are servants who are the appointed ministers of mercy to those in greatest need. It is quite likely that the needs of the widows in the church extended well beyond the specific task of “serving of food” (Acts 6:1). As the church grew and extended into foreign regions and in various situations of need, it is most probable that women, like widows who are cared for by the church (cf. 5:16), required sufficiently personal care to warrant female assistance. (2) It is nowhere stated nor demonstrated that those selected in Acts 6 were also endowed with ruling authority. As for teaching, while none of them are seen teaching in the church, it is reported that two of them did engage in personal evangelism—Stephen and Philip. But preaching the gospel was extracurricular to their appointed task of diaconal service. Philip, for instance, was not restricted to the temporary task of serving food to the neglected widows. He was later identified not as a deacon but rather as “Philip the evangelist” (Acts 21:8). Therefore, any preaching that they did was (a) seen as evangelism and (b) as evangelists, not deacons. These observations appear to disarm the argument raised against female deacons on the ground of Acts 6.

In sum, we see that only when the roles and responsibilities of the diaconate are distorted, does conflict arise with 1 Tim 2:12 and women serving as deacons. Köstenberger suggests that “the implication for the

church's contemporary practice seems to be that it may be only a matter of time until more churches will allow women to serve in the role of deaconess (assuming a biblical definition of 'deacon' as a non-teaching, non-ruling office)."¹ Deacons are not to take on the authoritative roles of shepherding, leadership, and oversight; they are qualified and appointed servants of personal needs.

Suitable Helpers

Included in the consideration of women serving in a diaconal capacity is the biblical perspective of God's design of womanhood. Every woman is created in God's image (Gen 1:27). The Bible presents the differences between man and women, being both made in God's image, as complimentary. As a woman created in God's image, she is equally valuable, with equal dignity, as a man. In their being, man and woman are equal; however, in their functional roles and responsibilities they are different by design in a complimentary fashion. The NT upholds this complimentary view of manhood and womanhood in the life of the church. Personal equality in Christ (Gal 3:28) between men and women in the church is in perfect harmony with functional distinction (1 Tim 2:12). Women enjoy the same privileges of the glorious love of God in the gospel of Christ and are appointed to minister to other women accordingly (Titus 2:3ff). "The gospel of Christ brought a new dignity to women in ancient times, not only giving them personal equality before God, but a share in the ministry."²

It is not insignificant that from the very beginning, in a key description of woman, God identifies her as a 'suitable helper'. In Genesis 2:18 we read, "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.'" The import of this description can only be appreciated biblically when one considers how the term 'helper' (*ezer*) is used elsewhere. The term is

¹ A. Köstenberger, "Hermeneutical and Exegetical Challenges in Interpreting the Pastoral Epistles," Southern Baptist Journal of Theology Volume 7, 3 (Louisville, KY: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), 13.

² Saucy, *The Church*, 161.

predominantly used of the Lord, the helper of Israel (cf. Hos 13:9). In the Psalms it is used exclusively of divine help.¹ It conveys a tenderness of compassion and mercy, and often speaks of meeting the needs of the needy and the underprivileged.² In Psalm 10:14, the Lord is described as “the helper of the orphan.” The characteristics of this helper’s service is noted in Psalm 72: “For he will deliver the needy when he cries for help, the afflicted also, and him who has no helper. He will have compassion on the poor and needy” (Ps 72:12–14). The Lord, as helper, is the one whose caring service comforts people (Ps 86:17). In each of these cases, the essential description is quite fitting to the characteristic service and ministry of a deacon. The substantial application is that this term that is used so fittingly to describe mercy ministry (diaconal work), is the term that describes one of woman’s design features—she was created as a ‘suitable helper’. Duncan and Hunt summarize this point well:

The office of deacon is one of service . . . It is by serving one another that we become a community of compassion. . . . Much diaconal ministry is a life-on-life ministry of covenantal compassion. When those who need care are female, wise elders and deacons realize that it is not good for them to do this work alone. The complementary blend of the male and female design and function is needed. It is imprudent and inappropriate for men to give the relational care needed by hurting women. . . . A woman's creation design equips and compels her to give this help.³

¹ NIDOTTE, 3:379.

² TWOT, 661.

³ Ligon Duncan and Susan Hunt, *Women's Ministry in the Local Church*, 87-88.

6

One or Two Offices?

If we have discerned correctly that the weight of biblical evidence sanctions the service of women in the diaconate, the question remains: Does the diaconate consist of one or two offices? Is there to be one office of male deacons and a separate office of female deacons? Are these independent offices? Some consider the common use of the term ‘deaconess’ to infer a separate office, while others see it as merely referring to an order of females within the office of deacons. It is suggested that “women who bear office are called deaconesses. It is debatable whether this is only a difference in terminology or whether a new order had been formed.”¹ The evidence suggests a single office of both male and female deacons. The “best exegesis” suggests that the reference to ‘women’ in 1 Timothy 3:11 points to “women deacons.”²

A church ‘office’ is here understood as a formally sanctioned ministry within the church that is charged with a particular class of duties and responsibilities. By this definition, to suggest that women shared the same ‘office’ with men as male and female deacons is to imply one basic class of duties and responsibilities shared by the two distinct orders of deacons. This explanation may prove to be helpful in clarifying the essential and unified commission of the diaconate.

Many of the arguments for translating *gynaikas* as ‘wives’ in 1 Timothy 3:11 more consistently serve to argue for a single office of

¹ Oepke, *TDNT*, 789.

² Burge, *EDT*, 321.

deacons shared by men and women. First, if the females in view represented a second and separate office of deacons then why did they not merit a separate paragraph and introduction? Hendriksen argues, “the fact that no special and separate paragraph is used in describing their necessary qualifications, but that these are simply wedged in between the stipulated requirements for deacons, with equal clarity indicates that these women are not to be regarded as constituting a third office in the church.”¹

Second, the fact that they are not given a distinct name seems to further underscore this point. So instead of arguing for ‘wives’ on the ground that a feminine form of ‘deacon’ (*diakonos*) is not used to identify them, it may be better to see that ‘women’ (*gynaikos*) is most suitable to indicate a female order of deacons. An office title is given in verse 8 (‘deacons’), and although ‘likewise’ is employed in verse 11 to clearly indicate another class is under consideration, a title is not given in verse 11. So the ‘likewise’ more suitably functions to signal a new class within the stated office. This also comports best with the understanding of the diaconate as being a single office of personal care servants. Nowhere in the NT is a third office indicated by title; the NT only knows of ‘overseers’ and ‘deacons’ (cf. Phil 1:1).

Third, the brevity with which female deacons are addressed, rather than suggesting that ‘wives’ are in view, suggests that these ‘women’ belong to the same office of service as the men under consideration. “It would seem strange for Paul to introduce a third office of the church so briefly and then return to the former topic of male deacons without some further explanation.”²

Fourth, the content and placement of qualifications suggest that the ‘women’ serving are within the same office of service. In this case, ‘likewise’ indicates “not a third office, but a third class of persons. Since too the passage states the qualifications of elected officials, elders and deacons, the *likewise* introduces qualifications for this third group of

¹ Hendriksen, 132-33.

² Lewis, 171.

officials.”¹ The content of the qualifications also infers that the women are to be subject to the same essential character qualities as the men who serve in the same office. No home life qualifications are mentioned for the women, which would be fully expected if a separate office were under consideration.

In summary, it is worth noting that just because men and women belong to the same office, and are qualified for the same service, does not mean that they necessarily work together. A separate office is not necessary for there to be appropriate segregation of services. One office is appointed to the ordained parameters of diaconal duty and responsibility, namely ministering practically to the needs of the poor, suffering, widowed, and disadvantaged. Since the diaconate is not a ruling office, matters of authority structure, accountability, and reporting should not conflict with men and women serving in the same office. On the internal arrangement and protocol of interaction among deacons, Scripture is silent. Perhaps cultural variation will influence variation in practice among churches of different ages and geographies. It is most reasonable to surmise from the manners and customs of the first century Mediterranean world that men and women did not work together in their services. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that the deacons received guidance and instruction from the overseers and reported to them.

Deaconess or Female Deacon?

What about using the term ‘deaconess’? Its use is perfectly suitable so long as it is intended to address deacons who are female. Guthrie argues that “the reference is too general to postulate with certainty a distinct order of deaconesses or of women deacons, but some feminine ministration was necessary.”² So does it even matter what label we use? After all the greater issue is understanding the biblical sanction of women serving in diaconal services. The concern is, as with many terms

¹ Clark, 61.

² Guthrie, 100.

that have been variously used as titles, that the use of a separate title tends to imply a separate office or category of service, which careful exegesis argues against. Female deacons are deacons, male deacons are deacons, there is one diaconate and gender distinction does not substantiate a distinct office (see above).

Some contend that 'deaconess' designates a separate office in the church. Thus, "it should also be kept in mind that a deaconess is not a female deacon."¹ So in reference to 1 Timothy 3:11, "we can also reject the suggestion that a group of female deaconesses (as distinct from female deacons) are meant."² Others see the use of the term 'deaconess' as semantically equivalent to 'female deacon' with no necessary connotation toward a separate office. Mounce asserts that the women of 1 Timothy 3:11 may have been called "deaconesses, not so much as an established order but as women involved formally and officially in serving the church."³ So rather than seeing a male diaconate alongside a female one, "perhaps more accurately the early church saw the emergence of both men and women as deacons."⁴ Therefore, whether the 'women' were called 'deaconesses' (a title that likely developed later) or not, they were female deacons.⁵

Should we avoid using the term 'deaconess'? All titles need not be gender specific. The English title 'nurse', for instance, is commonly used today in a gender neutral manner; a nurse may be either male or female. There are several titles of official designation that have no special word form to distinguish the gender of the person serving (i.e. 'servant', which is closest in direct equivalence to 'deacon'). So it does not seem necessary to use 'deaconess' and may introduce unnecessary confusion. For these reasons, it seems preferable to identify the 'women' who serve in the diaconate as female 'deacons'.

¹ Clark, 62.

² Marshall, 492.

³ Mounce, 210.

⁴ Vorländer, *NIDNTT*, 1065.

⁵ Clark, 60.

Duties and Responsibilities

We can be certain that women in the early churches were involved in caring for the needy (cf. Acts 9:36-39). The most compelling evidence from the context of 1 Timothy 3 and elsewhere suggests that women served in the diaconate, an office of deacons specifically charged with serving the poor and sick and providing assistance, as needed, with the ordinances of the church. The most obvious view of the duties and responsibilities that the ‘women’ of 1 Timothy 3:11 maintained is simply that “they performed for the women of the early Church the same sort of ministrations that the deacons did for the men.”¹ Notwithstanding the discussion concerning the identity of these ‘women’, seemingly all agree that their duties and responsibilities were comparable to the male deacons but respectively toward women. Thus, “whatever is the proper translation of *gynē*, the broader application is the involvement of women in ministries of caring.”² As for addressing deacons in general, it is clear that their duties and responsibilities are finally exemplary for all members of the church. As it relates to the ‘women’ of 1 Timothy 3:11, “it is surely safe to say that the requirements here mentioned are such as may well be regarded proper for all women workers in the church, whether deaconesses, the wives of deacons, or other women performing similar tasks.”³

¹ Nicoll, 115.

² Duncan, 85.

³ Erdman, 50.

With that in mind, it is also inferred that just as deacons are charged with the characteristic duties and responsibilities of all Christians and yet they are officially sanctioned for particular ministry, so also these 'women' should be sanctioned. So while the duties and responsibilities are not directly contingent upon how one translates *gynaikos*, it is most consistent to correlate duties and responsibilities with those who are officially appointed to the charge. For this reason, it is argued that 1 Timothy 3:11 is in "reference to official deaconesses with much the same duties as their male counterparts."¹

The records of church history bear impressive detail concerning the duties and responsibilities that women deacons assumed. It is said that "they were to instruct the female catechumens, to assist in the baptism of women, to anoint with holy oil, to minister to believers who were languishing in prison, to care for the women who were in sickness or distress . . . they were employed in those works of charity and relief where heathen public opinion would not permit the presence of the deacons."² As they related to the male holders of office, "deaconesses, or female helpers, had a similar charge of the poor and sick in the female portion of the church. This office was the more needful on account of the rigid separation of the sexes at that day, especially among the Greeks and Orientals. It opened to pious women and virgins, and chiefly to widows, a most suitable field for the regular official exercise of their peculiar gifts of self-denying charity and devotion to the welfare of the church."³ It is said that "the patristic church enjoyed the service of an independent order of women deacons, as witnessed to in the *Syriac Didascalia*. From the fourth century on, their common title was 'deaconess'."⁴ So the legacy stands that "from the earliest times deaconesses visited the sick, acted as doorkeepers at the women's entrance for the church, kept order among church women, assisted in

¹ TDNT, 788.

² Merrill Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), s.v. "Deaconess."

³ Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 1:X.62.

⁴ EDT, 321.

baptism for women, taught females in preparation for baptism, and acted as sponsors for exposed children.”¹ Church historian Philip Schaff affirms that “the office of deaconess . . . which originated in the apostolic age” consisted of designated women whose “functions were the care of the female poor, sick, and imprisoned, assisting in the baptism of adult women.”²

By the early fourth century, duties and responsibilities of deaconesses were documented in the Constitution of the Holy Apostles (c. A.D. 325), which reads:

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.³

By the Fourth Council of Carthage, which met in A.D. 398, deaconesses were referred to as “Widows and dedicated women (*sanctimoniales*) who are chosen to assist at the baptism of women, should be so well instructed in their office as to be able to teach aptly and properly unskilled and rustic women how to answer at the time of their baptism to the questions put to them, and also how to live godly after they have been baptized” (Canon XII). According to the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, “their duties are restricted to serving the needs of women in the church, including baptism and anointing, teaching the newly baptized, and going ‘into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in that of which they have need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness’.”⁴ Other duties and responsibilities documented in church history include the supervision of “the seating

¹ Griffin, 120, referencing J. M. Ross “A Reconsideration of the Diaconate,” SJT 12 (1959), 153.

² Schaff, 3:V:52.

³ In Book VIII, Section III, Paragraph XXVIII of “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles”, trans. James Donaldson, ANF, Volume VII (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 494.

⁴ Mounce, 211.

and behavior of the female part of the worshiping community.”¹ One unique duty of deaconesses was “to bring communion to pregnant women unable to attend Easter mass (Test. II 20.7).”²

Much of the distinction between male and female deacons lies in the appropriate manner of tending to the personal needs of men and women respectively. For this reason, it has been observed that in regions where greater cultural restrictions are imposed upon the mingling of the sexes, a greater need for female deacons in the church is realized. Consequently, the opposite is also true and apparently has contributed to the decline of women in the diaconate, particularly in the developments of the western church. Several reasons are offered for the decline and abrogation of deaconesses in church history: (1) the care of the sick and the poor, which was originally a responsibility of the local church was in the time of Constantine assumed by the State; (2) after the introduction of infant baptism, the need for female assistants at this ordinance became of less importance; (3) with the cessation of the *agape* meal of the primitive church, the services of deaconesses in the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper likewise became of less importance.³ A typical defense of certain modern practices is seen in the following response and reflection of the preceding observations: “In a word, the order was abolished because it was no longer necessary. These helps were needed only for a time. The circumstances which required them have passed away.”⁴ Likewise, William Williams (1821-1877), Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Church Government, and Pastoral Duties in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, stated: “Whatever can be shown to have had its origin in the peculiarities of that time, is not binding, the same peculiarities no longer existing. Upon this principle, deaconesses, a

¹ Weinrich, 264.

² Ibid.

³ J. L. Reynolds, “Church Polity or The Kingdom of Christ,” 1849, ch. XII; quoted from the reprint version in Dever, *Polity*, 360.

⁴ Ibid.

plurality of elders, and the ‘holy kiss’, are omitted now.”¹ Perhaps these conclusions, which have so widely influenced our contemporary practices, bank too heavily upon cultural developments and all the while neglect careful attention to the foundational charge of the diaconate. If the local church today recovers the conviction to care for the needs of its poor, sick, disadvantaged, elderly, and widowed in personal and practical ways, rather than deferring entirely to the State, then perhaps the appropriation of female deacons would again be properly appreciated. Moreover, if baptism was administered only to those who competently profess and articulate their faith in Christ, then perhaps the assistance of women at the baptism of young ladies and women would again be properly appreciated.

While the female diaconate disappeared by the twelfth century, “the deaconess ideal of charity and teaching for the sick and poor experienced a significant renewal in the nineteenth century.”² Many in the Reformed tradition apprehended the biblical appropriation of women deacons and sanctioned them accordingly. Some have even argued that to neglect this ministry opportunity for appropriately qualified women is a disservice to the church of Christ. It is plain that the church of the second, third, and fourth centuries seemed capitalize on this opportunity. However, today “these same ministries (visiting the sick, counseling, comforting the lonely, etc.) are today not performed for the most part by married women but by paid pastoral staffs while the church’s unmarrieds sit idly by.”³

In summary, the duties and responsibilities of women deacons have found varying expression throughout church history, the chief of which include: ministering to the poor, sick, and widows; discipling female converts; assisting with the baptism of female candidates; and administering communion to women, especially those who are confined

¹ William Williams, *Apostolical Church Polity*, 1874, Ch. I; quoted from the reprint in Dever, *Polity*, 537.

² Weinrich, 265.

³ Lewis, 175.

to their homes. The role of women deacons, as with male deacons, is not a role of authority or administrative leadership in the church, and the assumed responsibilities corroborate with this principle. “Thus while the New Testament prohibits women from assuming the role of leadership in the church (1 Tim 2:11-12; 1 Cor 14:34), they do appear as having a significant ministry in the church along with men in the subordinate auxiliary role of the diaconate.”¹

¹ Saucy, *The Church*, 161.

Conclusion

We must at once dispel the apparent tendency to link an interpretation favorable to the idea of female deacons with liberal leanings. It is not more theologically conservative to insist that only men may serve in the office of the diaconate. The most theologically conservative view is that view which most tenaciously adheres to the best understanding of holy writ and is most willing to abandon personal feelings, manmade traditions, and ill-informed or poorly reasoned convictions that prove to be out of step with the text. Scripture, and Scripture alone, must be our chief authority; with context, grammar, history, and principles of consistency driving interpretation. This is not to say that only a careless handling of the text explains the opposing views. This is a very sensitive and potentially emotional subject, with far reaching ramifications—and neither side has incontestably explicit support from Scripture. If pressed, we must finally concede that “both interpretations have their strong points, and both are possible.”¹ However, the evidences presented here do confidently argue in favor of taking the ‘women’ of 1 Timothy 3:11 in the form of *women as deacons* and concluding that women were authoritatively sanctioned for participation in the diaconate.

We may also conclude that “nothing can erase the fact that according to Scripture, and particularly also according to Paul’s epistles,

¹ Mounce, 204.

women perform very important ministries in the church. It is also true that the extent and value of the service which they are able to render has not always been fully recognized or appreciated.”¹ While the New Testament provides no evidence that women served in the office of overseer, in a role of authority and with general teaching responsibilities in the church, it is evident that women were “appointed along with men to the recognized function of deacon, giving leadership to the church’s ministry of mercy.”²

Finally, let us not fail to acknowledge the blessedness of all who faithfully serve in the church. Warren Wiersbe says it well when he calls us to “thank God for the ministry of godly women in the local church, whether they hold offices or not! It is not necessary to hold an office to have a ministry or exercise a gift.”³ May we humbly appreciate and give thanks to God for the godly women who have faithfully served Christ’s church throughout the ages.

¹ Kistemaker, 133.

² Saucy, *Women and Men in Ministry*, 176.

³ Wiersbe, 2:222.