

On Women Deacons

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The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government published by the Westminster Assembly in 1645 contains this statement about church officers:

The officers which Christ hath appointed for the edification of this church, and the perfecting of the saints, are, some extraordinary, as apostles, evangelists, and prophets, which are ceased. Others ordinary and perpetual, as pastors, teachers, and other church-governors, and deacons.

In most Presbyterian churches since that time, these offices, or a variation of this list of offices, has been accepted as the full list of biblical offices in the Church of Christ. Differences exist between those churches that consider the pastor-teacher one office and not two. There are also those churches which consider elders (“other church-governors” in the Westminster document) and pastors to be two functions within one office. But whatever the differences internal to this list, it is rare to see an additional office recognized in the churches.

In this paper I will argue that the office of deacon, properly understood, includes the office of deaconess, designed for the service of women. The arguments in support of this position will be Scriptural and exegetical. They will not be historical. In laying out this thesis I am conscious that the issue of women in church office is dividing the evangelical church today. As a consequence I make these arguments humbly, in an attempt to clarify God’s will and not man’s. In reviewing the literature concerning women and the church I have often been struck by how much the interpreter’s cultural context can influence his interpretation of gender roles and the Bible’s teaching about them. I realize that I too am subject to cultural bias. This is why I have attempted to be exegetically precise in my arguments. I only ask the reader to think with me, as I attempt to receive the instruction of the Holy Spirit speaking through the Scriptures.

1.0 Relevant New Testament passages for a discussion of deaconesses

There are three primary New Testament passages that we will study in this paper. They are as follows (NASB and occasionally the author's translation):

1Timothy 3:11 Γυναίκας ὡσαύτως σεμνάς, μὴ διαβόλους, νηφαλίους, πιστάς ἐν πάσιν.

“Women, likewise must be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.”

Romans 16:1 Συνίστημι δὲ ὑμῖν Φοίβην τὴν ἀδελφὴν ἡμῶν, οὕσαν [καὶ] διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχρεαῖς,

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant (mg. “deaconess”) of the church which is at Cenchrea.”

1Timothy 5:9-16 Χήρα καταλεγέσθω μὴ ἑλαττον ἐτῶν ἑξήκοντα γεγονυῖα, ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνή,

“Let a widow be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, the wife of one man...” Verse 16 shows that what is at issue here is a list of widows who are dependent on the church for support, and who in turn serve the church .

1Timothy 5:16 εἰ τις πιστὴ ἔχει χήρας, ἐπαρκείτω αὐταῖς καὶ μὴ βαρείσθω ἡ ἐκκλησία, ἵνα ταῖς ὄντως χήραις ἐπαρκέσῃ.

“If any woman who is a believer has *dependent* widows, let her assist them, and let not the church be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.”

There is a fourth passage which is prominent in the background of the discussion of the service of women in the church, 1Timothy 2:12.

1Timothy 2:12 διδάσκειν δὲ γυναικὶ οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω οὐδὲ ἀθροῦν ἀνδρὸς, ἀλλ' εἶναι ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ.

“But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.”

Any discussion of women deacons in the church must take at least these New Testament passages into consideration.

2.0 Structural Considerations

Exegetical analysis cannot be primarily a concatenation of word studies. The clause, the sentence, and the discourse are all exegetically important levels of analysis. For example, consider the debate on whether the word δῆκονος [diakonos] in Romans 16:1 is to be translated “servant” or “deacon.” Attempting to settle this contention by lexical study is fruitless. The meaning of the word is well known. Although *diakonos* in Koiné Greek was a general term for “servant,” it did also have a more specialized meaning. Moulton & Milligan (1930: 149) point out that the term was used in a technical sense to refer to officials involved in (pagan) religious services, both male and female, together with both male and female priests. References to these inscriptions can also be found in Beyer’s article (Kittel 1964:II:81-93). Knowing the usage of this word does not resolve the issue in Romans 16:1. The exegetical difficulty we face concerns the interpretation of the word in its context. To arrive at a satisfactory interpretation we must make an appeal to the analogy of Scripture, relying on other passages that can clarify the intention of the apostle. Word study is only one part of the exegetical work.

The following is a sketch of structural considerations germane to the issue of whether the Lord has given the Church women deacons.

2.1 Discourse structure of 1Timothy 2:1-3:13

The whole of 1Timothy 2:1-3:13 constitutes a single discourse section of Paul’s epistle which addresses the matter of how one ought to conduct oneself in the Church. This is confirmed by the two verses which bring an end to this discourse section, 1Timothy 3:14-15. In verse 15, Paul explains the motivation for his preceding instructions, confirming the discourse unity of the entire section. He writes:

“...so that you may know how one ought to conduct oneself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.¹

¹The verb “know” εἰδῆς is 2nd person singular, but the infinitival clause *να εἰδῆς πῶς δεῖ ἐν οἴκῳ θεοῦ ἀναστρέφεσθαι*, is impersonal, “how one ought to conduct himself...” as NASB, NIV.

This is the discourse structural background that must guide our interpretation of the whole section.

2.1.1 The entire discourse unit of 1Timothy 2:1-3:13 is further divided into two subsections. The practical matters which Paul addresses in the entire unit are issues of behavior and life in the church. The first subsection runs from 2:1 to 2:15. It naturally divides into three units:

Prayer: Παρακαλώ οὖν πρῶτον v.1, “I urge first of all...” How to pray in the church.

Men: Βούλομαι οὖν προσεῦχεσθαι τοὺς ἀνδρας... v. 8, “Therefore I want the men in every place...”

Women: Ὡσαύτως [καὶ] γυναίκας ... v. 9, “Likewise, women...”

The adverb Ὡσαύτως, [hōsautōs “likewise,” in verse 9 shows that just as Paul has instructions for men’s behavior in the church, he also has instructions for women. Two groups are thus structurally identified by means of this adverb, and to each group Paul addresses instructions. We will see a similar structural grouping in 1Timothy 3:8 and 11. The sum of the apostle’s practical instructions in this first subsection of the larger discourse unit is that men are to be men of prayer and of peace, qualities which are not natural to fallen men. Likewise, women are to be godly and not showy, which are qualities not native to fallen women.

2.1.2 Paul next goes on to discuss conduct for a specific group of the people in the church, church officers:

Church officers: Πιστὸς ὁ λόγος. ... “This is a faithful saying...: If a man desires the position of a bishop,

This is the beginning of the second subsection of the larger discourse unit of 1Timothy 2:1-3:15, which we identified above. We now turn our attention to this second subsection.

2.2 Discourse Structure of 1Timothy 3:1-13

In this subsection, Paul concerns himself with how “one ought to conduct oneself in the household of God.” This “one” is one who would be entrusted to be:

Verses 1-7, Ἐὰν τις ἐπισκοπῆς ὀρέγεται, “if anyone aspires *to be* overseer”

Verse 8: Διακόνους ὡσαύτως σεμνοῦς, ... Deacons likewise reverent...

Verse 11: Γυναῖκας ὡσαύτως σεμνάς,... Women likewise reverent...

Verse 13 ends the section on deacons: οἱ γὰρ καλῶς διακονήσαντες ... “those who have served well/deaconed well...”

In the first subsection of this discourse unit, (2:1-15) Paul addresses matters that concern the church as a whole, while in the second subsection (3:1-13) he addresses matters specific to the officers of the church. Notice that in the first subsection of the discourse, Paul identified two groups of Christians about whom he was giving instruction by means of the adverb ὡσαύτως, *hōsautōs* in 1Tim 2:9, “men,” then “women.” In the second subsection, Paul identifies three groups of Christians -- *overseers, deacons, women* -- about whom he is giving instructions by means of this same adverb, using ὡσαύτως *hōsautōs* in verses 8 and 11.

3.0 Women or wives?

The word I translated as “women,” in 1Tim 3:11, is Γυναῖκας *gynaikas* (acc. plur. of γυνή *gynē*). This word “women” is ambiguous in Greek, as in French and in a number of other languages. It can mean “women” or “wives.” The context or various determiners can disambiguate the word. Because of this lexical ambiguity, commentators have differed much on the correct interpretation of Γυναῖκας *gynaikas* in 1Tim 3:11, as any perusal of translations will demonstrate.

3.1 Wives.

If Paul intends Γυναῖκας *gynaikas* to mean “wives,” the next question we must answer is: *whose wives?* Some translations insert a “their,” linking it with “deacons.” The (N)KJV uses italics to show that the possessive determiner “their” is not present in the Greek original. The NIV cites “their” as if it were part of the text, which it is not. Consider the options for interpretation if we decide to translate Γυναῖκας *gynaikas* as “wives.”

3.1.1 Deacons' wives. If Paul means “deacons' wives,” we are brought to wonder why he would single out deacons' wives (likewise, [deacons'] wives...) and not mention the wives of elders. Since the wives of elders are the God-given helpers of the overseers in the church, one would think that the apostle would be quite concerned with their character, at least as concerned as he would be with the character of the deacons' wives. Further, if Paul were singling out deacons' wives, it would have been more in keeping with his purpose for him to reverse the order of verses 11 and 12, which would give us the more natural reading, as in the hypothetical text below:

(Hypothetical) ¹²“Let deacons be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. ¹¹ Their wives must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.”

In verse 12, no matter what its position in the text, the Greek unambiguously shows that the γυναῖκός *gynaikos* (genitive singular) ‘wife’ is the deacon’s. Similarly, τέκνων *teknōn* ‘children’ and οἴκων. *oikōn* ‘household’ are unambiguously the deacon’s in verse 12. But verse 11, in the context in which we find it in the NT Greek text, does not in its most natural reading refer to the deacons' wives. Reversing the order, yielding the hypothetical text [verses 12 + 11] would have created a much clearer statement. The ambiguity of verse 11 would be resolved. Surely this must have been evident to Paul, native speaker of Greek that he was. Yet, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul gave us the Greek text we have, verses 11 + 12. In this text, Γυναῖκας *gynaikas* ‘women’ does not naturally refer to deacons' wives.

3.1.2 Officers' wives. Another possibility is to interpret Γυναῖκας *gynaikas* in verse 11 with reference to “officers' wives,” that is, referring to the wives of both overseers and deacons. This is Calvin’s interpretation in his *Commentary* on this passage. But then we must ask why Paul would put this instruction about officers' wives in the middle of the text about deacons? It would be one of the most confusing passages the Apostle has written. We would be bringing a complication into a text that has an otherwise clear meaning.

3.1.3 Christian wives. Another attempt might be to say that *Γυναίκας gynaikas* in verse 11 refers to Christian wives in general. But this would make even less sense than the officers' wives argument. There is no sound rhetorical, discourse, or exegetical reason to read "wives in general" in 1Tim 3:11.

All in all, there is little to commend the interpretation that *Γυναίκας gynaikas* means "wives" in 1Tim 3:11. By every exegetical measure, it is a forced interpretation, not one that reads naturally from the text. Let us consider the only alternative.

3.2 Women.

If we interpret *Γυναίκας gynaikas* in verse 11 in its most natural contextual reading of "women," we then need to answer the question: what women? There are three possibilities found in the interpretive literature. (We will exclude a fourth hypothetical interpretation "all Christian women," for the same reasons as in 3.1.3, above.)

3.2.1 Women deacons: this is the view of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. In this view, the women of verse 11 have all the functions and privileges of male deacons. They are discussed in the context of deacons because they are ordained to the same office, have the same responsibilities and place in the Church. These functions and privileges are determined by the Scriptures for women deacons just as they are for men deacons.

3.2.2 Deaconesses: this view is slightly different than 3.2.1, in that it says that the "women" constitute a third class of officers, distinct from deacons, and so must be recognized as such. In this view, women, (deaconesses) have special responsibilities of ministry, perhaps to women and children. They are not entirely identical to male deacons. Yet, they are mentioned in the same passage as deacons because they share with their male counterparts the responsibilities and privileges of serving not only in the church, but in the name of the church. However, the Greek term "deaconesses" did not exist before the end of the third century.

3.2.3 Widows: another view sees the "women" in 1Tim 3:11 being the "widows" of 1Tim 5:9-16. This view was recently defended by Brian M. Schwertly (1998). This is a view which is similar to the analysis that John Calvin proposed in his comment on Romans 12:8 in the

Institutes (IV, III, 9). There he distinguishes between deacons who distribute alms (“he that gives, let him do it with simplicity”) and deacons who devoted themselves to the care of the poor and sick (“he that shows mercy, with cheerfulness”). Calvin goes on:

“Of this sort were the widows whom Paul mentions to Timothy [1Tim 5:9-10]. Women could fill no other public office than to devote themselves to the care of the poor. If we accept this (as it must be accepted), there will be two kinds of deacons: one to serve the church in administering the affairs of the poor; the other, in caring for the poor themselves.

In his commentary on 1 Tim 5, however, Calvin does not refer to the widows as “deacons.”

From the considerations in Section 3.0, I conclude that *Γυναῖκας gynaikas* in 1Tim 3:11 refers to women, not wives. What is yet to be determined is what group of women.

4.0 Women deacons, not widows.

There are good biblical and exegetical grounds to show that the *Γυναῖκας gynaikas* of 1Tim 3:11 are a group of women in the church who are called to the diaconal office, serving as women deacons alongside their male counterparts.

4.1 Women deacons.

Paul does not call them “women deacons,” but simply “women.” Since he is discussing the office of deacons, he calls them “women” to distinguish male from female deacons. These women are a subgroup of deacons, as indicated by Paul’s separate use of “likewise,” *Γυναῖκας ὡσαύτως gynaikas hōsautōs*, and by his deliberate use of *Γυναῖκας gynaikas* “women” in this passage dealing with deacons, before deacons’ wives are even mentioned. These women form a separate class of official church servants. The term “deaconess” was later coined to refer to them, but the New Testament and early patristic literature does not use this term anywhere.

4.2 Not widows.

The “women” of 1Tim 3:11 cannot be widows. If we compare Paul’s discussion of widows (1Timothy 5:9-16) with the passage on church officers in 1Tim 3, we notice clear differences between the two sets of women.

4.2.1 Requirements: First, the requirements for the two groups of women (women deacons and widows) are different. Widows had to be at least 60 years old, and have been married to one man and raised children. Further, widows had to remain single (not remarry) once they were put on the widows list. For women deacons, on the other hand, there is no age requirement, nor is it required that they be or have been married, any more than it is required that elders or deacons be married men.² The woman deacon's age and marital status are not relevant. Her spiritual maturity and godly living are the things that matter if a woman is to be a deacon. Clearly, the requirements spelled out by Paul for widows and those for women deacons are quite different.

4.2.2 Social conditions: Second, the social conditions of the two groups of women are different. The widows have to have no family available to support them; they are entirely dependent on the church. However, nothing is said about the support of the women deacons.

4.2.3 Position: Third, the positions of the two groups within the church are different. Widows are women who depend on the church financially. 1Tim 5:16 shows that widows receive from the church. Women deacons, on the other hand, are women who give to the church, in the same way that deacons give to the church, through their service.

There is no indication in 1Tim 5:9-16 that widows are a class of women set apart for good works within the church, although this is a common assumption among commentators (even Calvin). The good works of widows are in the past, they are women "having a reputation for good works." These works are evidence of a sincere faith. Now, they are unable to work (60 was old in Paul's culture) and they have no one to care for them but the church. The church is

²Some interpret 1Timothy 3:2 and 3:12 as imperatives: elders must be husbands of one wife, deacons must be husbands of one wife. But the text does not say that these men must be married at all; it says that the elder or deacon must be the husband of one wife. The phrase μιᾷς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα, *mias gynaikos andra* is used in both instances. The phrase uses the numeral μία, *mia*, 'one-feminine.' Paul does not use the same terms here ("married," "his own wife" etc.) that he uses in other passages where he discusses married life, e.g., 1Corinthians 7, or Ephesians 5. Nor, conversely, does he use the numeral in these other marriage passages. In 1Tim 3, Paul is saying that church officers, if they are married, must not be polygamists. Notice also the proximity of 1Tim 3:2,12 to 1Tim 2:13-14, where Paul makes direct reference to the Edenic institution of monogamous marriage.

willingly to be “burdened” by them (1Tim 5:16), but only because they are helpless Christian women who have made a lifelong credible profession of faith. They are put on a list (1Tim 5:9).

4.2.4 Widows indeed: On the basis of these facts, it is highly likely that the widows to which Paul refers in 1Tim 5:9-16 are the same sorts of widows which we find in Acts 6. They are the very kind of women for whose help the first deacons were chosen and ordained. Paul says: *Χήρας τίμα τὰς ὀντως χήρας. Xēras tima tas ontōs xēras*, “honor widows who are really widows.” In 1Tim 5:16 he adds: “If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows.” These women who were “really widows” were dependent on aid from the church in an age when there were no social insurance programs and no old age pensions. These features of our modern states were developed much later when biblical principles for caring for the poor and needy were integrated into Western democratic systems. In Paul’s day, old women were either supported by the family, or they begged. The Church, informed by the Torah and the Synagogue, provided a third way.

4.2.5. The ministry of mercy: It is very reasonable to see that the “women” mentioned among the deacons in 1Tim 3:11, were women who shared in the ministry of mercy with their male colleagues. There can be little doubt that the men elected in Jerusalem (Acts 6) would have been aided by women for their ministry to the old widows in Jerusalem. Jewish social structure would have required it. By Timothy’s day, apostolic directions are given to the diaspora church concerning the qualifications of these women, the qualifications of the men, and even the qualifications of the widows who are to receive aid. The widows were dependent, the women deacons help the church to minister to these dependent older sisters. Paul’s instructions show how the Lord is preparing his Church for her post-apostolic mission in the world.

5.0 Phoebe.

It is interesting that the Bible does only once name a specific individual as “deacon of the church ...” That someone is Phoebe, mentioned in Romans 16:1-2. Paul writes: “I commend to

you our sister Phoebe, οὖσαν [καὶ] διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχρεαῖς, *ousan [kai] diakonon tēs ekklēsias tē en Kenxreais*... who is [also] a deacon of the church in Cenchrea. Paul goes on:

“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 benefactress of many, and of myself as well.”

As is commonly thought, it is very likely that Phoebe is the one who brought Paul’s letter to Rome. She is being specifically introduced to the Roman church. But notice that Phoebe is singled out in the Book of Romans for commendation to the church at Rome for their assistance to her. She is mentioned first, and prominently, in a passage that mentions many other people, among whom she is the one individual singled out as performing a mission. All the others are simply greeted.

Phoebe is one who has “been a benefactress to many” including Paul himself, and she is called a “deacon,” of the church. Some argue that the word διάκονον *diakonon* ‘deacon’- accusative singular, must have the general interpretation “servant” of the church here. But it is, in fact, modified here. It is used in this particular collocation, διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας *diakonon tēs ekklēsias*, “deacon of the church.” Nowhere else in the New Testament is this phrase found. It is much more likely that Paul is using the term διάκονος *diakonos* ‘deacon,’ its technical sense, as an ecclesiastical title for Phoebe, to commend her to the church in an official capacity as an emissary from the church at Cenchrea. She is a woman coming to Rome in an official capacity, on a mission, carrying out business for the church. We must not miss that Paul uses his apostolic authority to command the church to receive Phoebe with proper honor and to help her in all her needs in Rome. This is the kind of commendation that Paul usually reserves for his fellow workers (see 1Cor 16:10-11; 15-16; Phil 2:29-30; Col 4:10).

I conclude that in 1Tim 3:11 we are given the qualifications required for women deacons, and in Romans 16:1-2 we are shown an example of such a woman deacon who is sent on a mission by her church. She comes with authority for her mission, and she has the privilege of being assisted by other churches of Christ in carrying out that mission.

6.0 Arguments against women deacons.

There are a number of well known arguments against the view defended here that God has ordained women who can serve in the office of deacon.

6.1 There is no biblical authority for women to hold special ecclesiastical positions.

One of the most common arguments against the office of women deacons is that women have no authority to serve in any particular office or special function in the church. Women can be church members, wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, but nothing else. This argument is derived via the principle that God alone regulates how his church is to function. Thus, the argument goes, men are called in Acts 6, men are called to be overseers, men are called to be deacons in 1Tim 3:8. Women are not called to these offices. This regulative principle states that the whole will of God “is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.6). In other words, unless it can be shown biblically that God has ordained women in special ecclesiastical positions, there cannot be any in the church. However, as I will now argue, a just application of the regulative principle does not yield the conclusion that women have no “official” positions in the church.

The New Testament identifies women in the special positions of prophetesses, deacons, and widows. Consider the following relevant data:

- Philip’s four daughters were prophetesses, Acts 28:8-9.
- Phoebe, is a deacon of the church
- 1Tim 3:11 women likewise are in the diaconal office
- Widows are to be supported by the church, put on an official list

Application of the regulative principle to the place and position of women in the church of the New Testament yields at least these official capacities for women in the church: they can be prophetesses, they can be deacons, they can be widows on an official church list. Obviously, these three positions are “expressly set down in scripture,” even if they are not all three strictly speaking ecclesiastical “office” as the term has come to be understood.

Further, as we would expect for an ecclesiastical position expressly set down in scripture by God, each of these feminine positions is also regulated by apostolic commands. Thus, the New Testament prophetess is regulated by the apostolic commands found in 1Cor 11:2-16 and 1Cor 14:34, the former of which states that their heads must be covered, and the latter that they may not participate in the judging of prophets in the assembly. Women deacons are regulated by the apostolic commands in 1Tim 3:11 as to their qualifications. Widows are regulated by the apostolic commands in 1Tim 5:3-16. The proper application of the regulative principle, far from disallowing women any official position in the church, requires the church to support needy widows, to admit women as a subgroup among the deacons, and to allow women to prophesy and pray in the church with their heads covered. Having prophetesses, women deacons, and widows is neither “contrary to his word, or beside it.” It is plainly revealed in it.³

6.2 Women must not be ordained.

A second argument against the office of women deacons is that women must not be ordained by the church. This is based on the view that ordination is a granting of authority and that women cannot exercise authority in the church (1Timothy 2:12). Further, it is pointed out that there is no example of a woman being ordained in the New Testament, while there are examples of men being ordained: the deacons (Acts 6); Barnabas and Paul (Acts 13:3); elders (Acts 14:23); Timothy (1Tim 4:14).

In answer to these objections, consider first that ordination is not the granting of authority to exercise authority. Rightly understood, ordination is setting someone apart and granting that person the authority to exercise a particular office. Authority may be a privilege and responsibility of that office, as in the case of the king, or the overseer, but ordination itself only grants authority to exercise the office, nothing beyond that. A deacon, for example, is ordained to exercise the office of deacon. In that office, in Presbyterian churches, he does not exercise authority in the church. He is only authorized to serve in the church, and in the name of the

³The argument that the extraordinary charismata have ceased and that there are no longer prophets and prophetesses has no bearing on my argument.

church, representing the ministry of the entire congregation in his work. The deacon's authority is specific, delegated authority: the authority to serve, not the authority to rule. Elders are ordained to rule, and as a consequence women may not be elders, (1Tim 2:12). But we cannot conclude from this prohibition that the Bible withholds from women the delegated authority to serve in the name of the church as deacons, which is not a ruling office, but an office of service.

Phoebe had authority from the church when she traveled to Rome. The apostle Paul presses that fact upon the church by adding his own apostolic authority to back her up in case there were any in the church who doubted it. Surely, in the case of Phoebe, the only New Testament example of anyone called a *διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας* *diakonos tēs ekklēsias*, “deacon of the church” we see a woman who has been granted authority to serve the church (presumably the church at Cenchrea) and to receive support in that service by another church (at Rome). Taken together with the apostolic regulation of the women of 1Tim 3:11, ordaining a woman such as Phoebe to be a *διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας* “deacon of the church” would simply be an act of recognition that God has set her apart to this ministry of serving the church. And this is the heart of the function of ordination: to set someone apart for ministry in the church. It can be argued that there is no example of such an ordination in the New Testament, but this carries no more weight than the argument that there is no example of an infant being baptized or of a woman taking the Lord's Supper. Both are rightly understood to be deduced from scripture by good and necessary consequence by sound, Reformed, principles of interpretation.

6.3 Women's roles make it impossible for women to exercise a diaconal ministry.

A third argument against the ordination of women to the office of deacon is derived from the Bible's purported teaching on the role and service of women. This argument states that women's roles are restricted to serving other women and children, and that ordination to an ecclesiastical office blurs that distinction. However, this argument is fallacious because of the counter examples to its thesis. The New Testament gives us many examples of women doing far more than serving women and children. Women, in fact, ministered to men in the apostolic age. Women supported and helped Jesus. Luke 8:2-3 records that women traveled with Jesus and the apostles, and notes:

“...certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities -- Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for him from their substance [their means].

Are we to believe from this account only that these women gave monetary gifts to the Lord? Is it not rather reasonable to understand that they accompanied their money with actions, work, service to help the Lord and the apostles in their ministries? Consider also that women wept when Christ was led away to the cross. Women stood by the cross, and were witnesses of Christ’s death, even though it was probably not a modest scene. Women were the first witnesses of the resurrection, and women were God’s chosen messengers to announce the good news to the apostles, Luke 24:10:

Now they were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them were telling these things to the apostles.

Notice that these women are exercising a prophetic function here. They are God’s mouthpieces, declaring the good news in obedience to the angel who commanded them (Mt. 28:7; Mk 16:7). Later, women continued to help the apostles in their ministries. Note Paul’s words in Philippians 4:3:

Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the gospel, together with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life.

Once again, are we to understand the “struggle” to mean that the women merely struggled in prayer, and doing laundry and cooking, but not in service to and with the apostle? Indeed Phoebe herself ministered to Paul, as he carefully explains in Romans 16:2

“...for she herself has also been a benefactress of many, and of myself as well.”

In the next two verses of Romans 16, Paul says of both Prisca and Aquila that they are:

“my fellow workers in Christ, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.”

In this verse, Paul does not single out Aquila, but includes both Prisca (mentioned first) and her husband. In verse 6, Mary is honored by the apostle as one “who has worked hard for you.” In verse 12, Tryphaena and Tryphosa (both feminine names) are honored as “workers in the Lord.”

It is clear from all these many references that women were indeed very active in the ministry of the church in the day of the apostles. These examples do not show that it is necessary to ordain women deacons, but they demonstrate that the service of women in the church is broader than is sometimes taught. Taken together with the arguments for the office of deacon which I presented earlier, these examples show that the nature of the service of a woman deacon can very reasonably be deduced from scripture.

6.4 Are women’s roles and service in the church truly restricted to ministering to women and children?

The examples above show that this is not the case. It is true that older women are to teach younger women how to be godly wives (Titus 2:3-4). It is also true that women may not teach or have authority over a man (1Tim 2:12). Women may not engage in questioning in the assembly of the church (1Cor 14:29-35). Women may not pray or prophesy with their heads uncovered (1Cor 11:5). But there are no other restrictions on women’s ministry in the church outlined anywhere in the New Testament. We have seen a significant number of examples that show that women ministered to men, and helped even the apostles in their work. Thus, it is not a valid argument against the ordination of women deacons to say that having them in the church means that women will overstep the will of Christ, somehow blurring sexual identities.

The very fact that Paul teaches about “women” in the middle of the passage in which he teaches about deacons is itself an indication that the apostle has one office of deacon -- male and female -- in mind. Deacons male and female together share that office. There is no question that women deacons will primarily minister to women and children in need, being the arms and legs of the church to show mercy to them. There are many situations where a woman is more effective, more skilled, and where a woman’s service is more appropriate than a man’s. But women deacons, alongside their male counterparts, will exercise all the responsibilities of the work of mercy of the church.

The Law of God teaches us right attitudes and approaches to the ministry of mercy. But much has been left up to us in the details of how to carry out this ministry in our time and circumstances. In our times women are educated and trained in many callings that were formerly the sole domain of men. Biblically informed good sense (the “Christian prudence” of the *WCF*) must be what governs the work of the diaconal ministry. Biblically informed good sense governed by the teaching and ruling authority of the elders, as needed. In fact, you may search far and wide for a biblical description of the work of the deacons; you will not find one. The church is left to determine how it is to use its “servants.”

6.5 Won't women deacons eventually be in a situation where they will overstep the woman's restriction against teaching or exercising (diaconal) authority over a man?

Some fear that women deacons may at times be in a situation where they give biblical counsel to a couple, including a man, therefore teaching a man with “diaconal authority.” But the restriction in woman's teaching and authority in 1Tim 2:12 concerns ruling and teaching in an official capacity in the church assembly -- ruling and teaching as an elder. Women are not restricted from teaching men more generally. Certainly, wives can teach their husbands, and must do so at times as they help their husbands. Women can teach men in conversation, in personal admonition, in church classes and in church discussion. To say that women must be silent in all these contexts is to read into 1Cor 14 what is not there. The context for Paul's instruction there is plainly the worship assembly of the church, and the speaking forbidden to women has to do with evaluating and judging the teaching of prophets. Similarly, to say that women may not exercise even the diaconal authority to serve a man is to read into 1Tim 2:12 what is not there. The passage refers to the exercise of the authority of an elder in the church. The several examples of women ministering to Christ and the apostles should be sufficient to make this point.

7.0 God's design for church offices

God designed church offices to prevent disorder and to assure that the work of the Gospel is carried out in the world. We must be careful not to let cultural attitudes, conservative or liberal, confuse our understanding of God's Word. It is always demanding to achieve clarity of understanding in the things of God. Issues of sexual roles have so deeply touched contemporary society that Christians cannot escape dealing with them. We must guard biblical truth in these matters with care.

Liberal churches will tend to err by removing all gender distinctions in the church, even those imposed by God. They will move the church to conform to a general democratic ethos derived from the world. They will elect women to serve as elders, and will call them to be pastors, relying on the arguments that the "gifts" are evident and that the church is merely giving the opportunity to exercise them. This is an enthusiast's view of the work of God in the church: gifts are greater than doctrine. The Reformed view is that God both gives gifts and also reveals to us in the Scriptures how these gifts are to be used in the church. Both the office of pastor and of elder are denied by the Bible to women, no matter what their gifts.

In conservative churches, we will tend to err on the side of restraining the service of women out of fear of offending the Lord and violating his word. We must be careful not to do that. We must not "hedge" the law. Our fathers in the past have erred in this way, restricting women from serving beyond the noble callings of mothers and wives. Our generation must do its own exegetical work. We must sanctify our cultural attitudes by means of the word of God.

In God's Word, women have varied callings and responsibilities, depending on their God-given circumstances. There are young mothers who can use help from older women, there are older women who can teach younger women, there are widows who depend on their family and widows who depend on the church. But women are not limited to taking care of their homes and children, (Prov 31:14-20, 24-26) although women are not permitted to neglect this care. And, for that matter, neither are Christian men, be they pastors, elders, deacons, or new converts, permitted to neglect caring for their homes and children. Elders must be men who manage their

own households well. In the New Testament, there are prophetesses, there are women serving the church together with their husbands (Apphia, the wife of Philemon; Priscilla the wife of Aquila) and who “risked their own necks (Rom 16:4)” to help Paul, there is a woman deacon sent to Rome, there are women who head their own households (Chloe, 1Cor 1:11; Lydia, in Philippi). There are many women who serve the church in unspecified capacities. Romans 16 mentions several of them: Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Junias, Rufus’ mother, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Julia, Nereus’ sister, Olympas. Some of these are noted by Paul to be “workers in the Lord.” Whatever we may take that to mean, we cannot take it to mean less than what it says. These are women who served in the ministry of the church in some capacity. They went beyond being wives and mothers, and were important in the ministry of the church in some direct way.

God’s design is for men and women to serve together in the church (Gal 3:28). We must use all the gifts that God has given us, not neglecting the gift of women deacons to serve the body of Christ. Since church office is God’s design, we must be careful to respect his design for any office we seek to fill. So we must respect God’s requirements for women deacons: “Women, likewise, must be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.” But where we have gifted women and the needs for their ministry, let us be wise to follow God’s design for the ministry of the church, using all her ordinary offices: pastor-teachers, elders, deacons, both male and female.

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