

CAN WOMEN SERVE IN THE OFFICE  
OF “DEACON” IN THE LOCAL CHURCH?

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A Position Paper  
of the Elders & Leadership Team  
of Grace Church

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The question this paper seeks to address is a straightforward one: does Scripture allow women to serve in the office of deacon in the local church? The thesis of this paper is that Holy Scripture *does* allow for the inclusion of women in the diaconate, without compromising the God-given differences in role between men and women in the context of the church. However God himself must determine this issue, not human preconceptions or traditions.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the question of women deacons will be examined through an evaluation of the role of the deacon and the biblical qualifications for a deacon, through the exegesis of Holy Scripture.

## THE ROLE OF A DEACON

The English term *deacon* is merely a transliteration of the Greek word *diakonos*. English translations often use the word “servant” to translate *diakonos*, but “servant” does not specify much in terms of a deacon’s role. To discern the importance and function of the “deacon” in the local church, two passages are particularly helpful: Philippians 1 and Acts 6.

### *Deacons - a Local Church Office: Philippians 1:1*

The superscription of Paul’s letter to the Philippians reads, “...To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons...” (Phil 1:1).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the role of deacon is clearly a significant one, as one of only two designated groups that held “some kind of official status” in the church.<sup>3</sup> This means the role of deacon is an “office” to be appointed in the

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1 In terms of the danger of our own preconceptions, Keller helpfully notes, “Many opponents of deaconesses today are operating out of a ‘decline narrative.’ They claim that having deaconesses is the first step on the way to liberalism. But Jim Boice and John Piper, the RPCNA and the ARP, B.B. Warfield and John Calvin, believed in deaconing women or deaconesses. Are (or were) all these men or churches on the way to liberalism? I don’t think so.” Timothy Keller, “The Case for Commissioning (Not Ordaining) Deaconesses.” *Byfaith: the Online Magazine of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Issue 21: August 25, 2008). <http://byfaithonline.com/the-case-for-commissioning-not-ordaining-deaconesses>.

2 All Bible references are to the English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

3 “Paul mentions the (overseers and deacons) in such a way as to distinguish them from the congregation. This implies that he considered them to be persons with *some kind of official status*.” Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 7 (emphasis added).

local church today, as part of normal New Testament polity (the other local church office being “elder”, which is also referred to as “overseer” and “pastor/shepherd” in the New Testament).

This affirmation of the *office* of deacon accents its importance, but defines nothing of its role. To define the specific function or task this office is meant to perform, reference is commonly made to the opening verses of Acts chapter 6.

*The Seven – Diaconal Forerunners: Acts 6:1-6*

Acts chapter 6 reports a dispute between two groups: Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking Christian widows. The apostles respond by summoning the “full number of the disciples”, saying, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.” (Acts 6:2) They call for seven men to be chosen, whom the apostles will appoint to the duty of caring for the widows, that the apostles might “devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:3)<sup>4</sup> The solution was a brilliant one; they quieted the racial and cultural tensions with a bevy of Hellenistic leaders to ensure judicious care for the Hellenistic widows.<sup>5</sup>

The question pertinent to this paper is: are these men actually “deacons” in Acts 6, or are they more akin to forerunners of the office of deacon? If they are clearly deacons, that is significant for the issue this paper is addressing, given that the apostles appoint only men.<sup>6</sup>

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4 The conclusion should not be drawn that practical service is inferior service. Keller notes: “...Jesus makes the startling statement that Christian greatness is the polar opposite of the values of the world: ‘I am among you as one who serves (*diakonon*)’ (Luke 22:27). A *diakonos*! A busboy!” Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 323.

5 Marshall notes: “It seems probable that the men appointed were drawn from the Greek-speaking part of the church which had raised the original complaint.” I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 125. Bruce comes to a similar conclusion: “All seven appear to have been Hellenists... indeed, they were probably the recognized leaders of the Hellenists in the church.” F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 121.

6 It should be acknowledged that many do take the appointment of the Seven as the establishment of the office of deacon. Strauch notes that this understanding has a long history, as Irenaeus (130 – 200 AD) was the first to identify the Seven as “deacons”. Alexander Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon: The Church’s Minister of Mercy* (Colorado Springs: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1992), 44-45.

It is important to note, in this regard, that Acts 6 does not make any explicit identification between the Seven and the office of “deacon”. It is often pointed out that a form of the word for “deacon” is used to describe the apostles not “serving” (*diakonein*) tables. However, the apostles also describe what they should continue to focus on as a “ministry” (*diakonia*) of God’s word. The implication is that both groups will “*deacon*”, just in differing ways: the apostles will “deacon” with God’s word, and the Seven will “deacon” by addressing the specific crisis related to the widows.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, some of the Seven end up serving in the *ministry of the Word*: Stephen and Philip in particular.<sup>8</sup> It should also be recognized that the Seven are appointed to address a very specific situation in the early church.

Because of the specificity of the situation to which the Seven of Acts 6 are called, and the broad range of activities in which they engage, there is good reason to avoid identifying them as the first to serve in the office of “deacon”. For instance, Gordon Fee notes:

“An appeal to Acts 6:1-6 is of no value, since those men are not called deacons. In fact they are clearly ministers of the Word among Greek-speaking Jews, who eventually accrue the title ‘the Seven’ (Acts 21:8), which distinguishes them in a way similar to ‘the Twelve’.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus, it seems best to see a *paradigm* or *pattern* for the office of deacon emerging in Acts 6, though the *office* itself does not do so until later.<sup>10</sup> Strauch seems quite right when he suggests,

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7 Allison highlights the importance of this fact: “Building on the fact that meaning is conveyed not by a word in isolation but by a phrase or a sentence, the specific service or ministry envisioned cannot be determined solely from the word ‘service’ or ‘ministry’ alone...” Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 242.

8 Merkle notes, “The role of the Seven should not be compared too closely with the role of the deacons since Steven (*sic*) was also a miracle-worker (Acts 6:8) and preacher (6:8-10) and Philip was an evangelist (Acts 21:8).” Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 240, n 3.

9 Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 86.

10 Marshall confirms this as he writes, “Although the verb ‘serve’ comes from the same root as the noun which is rendered into English as ‘deacon’, it is noteworthy that Luke does not refer to the Seven as deacons; their task had no formal name.” Marshall, 126. However, eminent scholars like Berkhof disagree with this statement, believing instead that Acts 6 does depict the establishment of the office of deacon. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 587.

“Although the word *diakonos*, the Greek word for deacon, does not appear in Acts 6, the *concept* of an official body of servants who lovingly serve others does appear.”<sup>11</sup>

In this way, Acts 6 can be seen as providing principles that guide the later creation of and role for the office of deacon. Those principles may be summed up as: deacons functioning as *lead servants* to address various needs inside the church (and likely outside the church as well), so that the elders may devote themselves to leading, caring for, and shepherding the congregation (including through the ministry of the Word and prayer).<sup>12</sup> However, as Allison notes, a strict delineation between the deacons addressing “material” needs and the elders addressing “spiritual” needs is not warranted from this passage.<sup>13</sup>

## THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR A DEACON

The focus of this paper is limited to a possible gender qualification: is the office of deacon limited to men, or is it open to *both* qualified men and women? However, in asking that question, it is important to first establish the clear equality of men and women before God.

### *Equality in Value and Dignity: Genesis 1:27*

The Bible is emphatic: men and women are absolutely equal in value and dignity before God, since both are made in image and likeness of God. The first chapter of the Bible teaches this: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and

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11 Strauch, 47-48 (emphasis added).

12 While pastors are not apostles, Stott derives a principle that all pastors and churches should be mindful of: “The apostles discerned a deeper problem, namely that social administration (both organizing the distribution and settling the complaint) was threatening to occupy all their time and so inhibit them from the work which Christ had specifically entrusted to them, namely preaching and teaching.” John Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 121.

13 Allison defines the job description of the diaconate this way: “If the office of elder is dedicated to the work of teaching, leading, praying, shepherding, then the diaconate is devoted to *serving in all other areas of the church.*” Allison, 241. Merkle shares this broader definition: “...based on the pattern established in Acts 6 with the apostles and the Seven, it seems best to view the deacons as servants who do whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church.” Merkle, 240.

female he created them.” (Gen 1:27) Thus, in considering whether or not the office of deacon is male only, the implication must never be made that men are somehow superior to women before God. Neither gender is superior to the other. The absolute equality in value and dignity of men and women must not be lost in the question of any gender qualifications for deacons.<sup>14</sup>

However, it is possible to whole-heartedly affirm this God-given gender equality, while also believing that the office of deacon is restricted to men. This is due to the fact that, within our absolute equality, God stipulates a difference in role between men and women for two arenas in particular: marriage and local church governance.

*Difference in Role Within Equality: 1 Timothy 2:12-14*

1 Timothy 2:12-14 is an important text as it relates to differing roles between men and women in the local church. The apostle writes, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. [13] For Adam was formed first, then Eve; [14] and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” Paul cites a creation ordinance in verse 13 (“Adam was formed first”) as the logical ground for the prohibition in verse 12. This means that the prohibition against women teaching and exercising authority over men in the church transcends cultural distinctions, depicting God’s good wisdom for the church “in all times and places”.<sup>15</sup>

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14 It is worth noting how Ridderbos highlights the significance of gender equality in Paul’s writing, given prevailing attitudes of the culture of his day: “Considering the place women occupied in Paul’s day, both in antiquity in general and in Judaism in particular, the first point of view (Paul highlighting the “complete equality between men and women”) *certainly meant nothing less than a revolution for the position of women in the church as well.*” Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. by John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 460-461 (emphasis added).

15 Moo notes, “These restrictions are permanent, authoritative for the church in all times and places and circumstances as long as men and women are descended from Adam and Eve.” Douglas Moo, “What does it mean not to teach or have authority over men?,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 177. Cerling mistakenly restricts the application to a married woman not being in authority over her husband, and so concludes: “Women need only be prevented from being in authority over their husbands. It is not necessary to prohibit them absolutely from the ministry. ...Women can be ministers (i.e., elders) so long as this does not create confusion in the home.” C.E. Cerling, “Women Ministers in the New Testament Church?,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19-3: 213.

To rightly apply that prohibition, however, it is needful to understand what 1 Timothy 2:12 expressly prohibits. Clowney helpfully captures the essence of this prohibition:

“The teaching office in the church exercises authority through the ministry of the Word... For that reason, (Paul) does not permit women to teach in the church. While teaching and exercising authority are separately forbidden in 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul’s mention of the exercise of authority serves to explain why teaching is not permitted.”<sup>16</sup>

It is on this basis, as well as 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6, that the office of overseer / elder is restricted to men. However, the office of deacon does not exercise “authority through the ministry of the Word”, as affirmed by the omission of a teaching qualification for deacons in 1 Timothy 3.<sup>17</sup> So the question remains: does God apply the same gender restriction to the office of deacon that he does to the office of elder? To answer that question, two other New Testament passages must be considered: Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

*“Phoebe, a deacon of the church...”: Romans 16:1-2*

Paul writes to the church in Rome: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae... for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.” (Rom 16:1-2) Most English Bible translations opt for the more neutral term of “servant” to refer to Phoebe in verse 1, but the Greek word is actually *diakonon*.<sup>18</sup> So, the question is: does Paul mean Phoebe is an exemplary “servant”, or is he referring to Phoebe as an actual “deacon”?

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16 Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 229. Relatedly, Moo succinctly describes these prohibitions this way: “...1 Timothy 2:8-15 imposes two restrictions on the ministry of women: they are not to teach Christian doctrine to men and they are not to exercise authority directly over men in the church.” Moo, *Recovering Biblical Manhood*, 177. However, like Clowney, he notes: “The word teach and its cognate nouns teaching (*didaskalia*) and teacher (*didaskalos*) are used in the New Testament mainly to denote the careful transmission of the tradition concerning Jesus Christ and the authoritative proclamation of God’s will to believers in light of that tradition...” Moo, *Recovering Biblical Manhood*, 181.

17 Carson comments on this omission: “Deacons were responsible to serve the church in a variety of subsidiary roles, but enjoyed no church-recognized teaching authority akin to that of elders.” D.A. Carson, “Church Authority in the,” *EDT*, ed. Walter E. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Backer, 1984), 229. Quoted in Merkle, 238.

18 While Paul uses the masculine form to refer to Phoebe, Stiefel notes that “...specifically feminine gender terms for ‘women deacons / deaconesses’ are not attested until the 4th century...” Jennifer H. Stiefel, “Women Deacons in 1 Timothy: A Linguistic and Literary look at ‘Women Likewise...’ (1 Tim 3.11)”. *New Testament Studies*, Volume 41, Issue 03 (July 1995): 447.

While responsible exegetes differ on this issue, there are indications that Phoebe was truly a “deacon”.<sup>19</sup> Clowney notes, in relation to Romans 16:1, that the present participle of the verb “to be” is often utilized to indicate an office being held (see Acts 18:12, for instance)<sup>20</sup>, and the reference to the specific church in Cenchreae seems to fit such a scenario. If Phoebe was being referred to in the general sense of “servant”, Paul might have clarified that by referring to her as “servant of Christ”. Instead, she is called “a *diakonon* of the church at Cenchreae.” Thus, in context, she appears to be an office-holder in that local church.<sup>21</sup>

The appearance of being an office-holder is reinforced by how Phoebe is described in fulfilling her role.<sup>22</sup> Clowney notes that Paul “formally requests recognition for Phoebe, and full support for her activities. *How do we define ‘office’ if not as a function that requires public recognition for its proper exercise?*”<sup>23</sup> While nothing can be said with certainty concerning the question of Phoebe being a “servant” or a “deacon” in her local church, it is clearly plausible textually that she was a holder of the *office* of deacon in that church.<sup>24</sup>

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19 Piper concurs, saying: “In Romans Phoebe is very probably called a deacon.” John Piper, “Rethinking the Governance Structure at Bethlehem Baptist Church: A Biblical Examination of Key Terms.” <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/rethinking-the-governance-structure-at-bethlehem-baptist-church>. Cranfield was even more definitive, saying that Phoebe being a true deacon was “very much more natural” in the passage, and this identification was “virtually certain”. C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 2:781. Quoted in John Stott, *The Message of Romans: The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 393.

20 Clowney, 232.

21 Moo is in agreement, adding: “...the qualification of *diakonon* by ‘of the church’ suggests, rather, that Phoebe held at Cenchreae the ‘office’ of ‘deacon’ as Paul describes it in 1 Tim. 3:8-13 (cf. Phil. 1:1).” Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 914.

22 While some argue that Phoebe should be called a “leader” of the church, this is to stretch the meaning of “patron” beyond the context. Grudem notes that “The two most recent Greek lexicons do not give the meaning ‘leader’ for *prostatis*, which is the actual word used in Romans 16:2. The BDAG lexicon defines it as ‘woman in supportive role, *patron*, *benefactor*’ (885), and similarly defines the related masculine noun *prostates* as ‘one who look out for the interest of others, *defender*, *guardian*, *benefactor*’ (885).” Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 222. Moo describes the nature of Phoebe’s role in similar terms: “A ‘patron’ was one who came to the aid of others, especially foreigners, by providing housing and financial aid and by representing their interests before local authorities.” Moo, *Romans*, 916.

23 Clowney, 232 (emphasis added).

24 In regards to church history, Chrysostom (349-407 AD) references Phoebe’s “rank of deaconess.” Allison, 246, n 143. Strauch also notes that a third century (c. 230 AD) book of church order called the *Didascalia*

*Wives, Women, or Deacons?: 1 Timothy 3:8-13*

The other especially pertinent passage to examine is 1 Timothy 3, where the issue turns on the interpretation of verse 11: “Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.” (1 Tim 3:11) In that verse, the correct translation of *gynaikas* could be either “wives” or “women”.<sup>25</sup> In considering this interpretive issue, the views of Strauch will be interacted with primarily, as a clear and competent representative of the view that the office of deacon should be restricted to men.

Of particular note in verse 11 is the fact that the word translated *likewise* is used by Paul in similar situations to introduce a new group of people. For instance: “I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; *likewise* also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel...” (1 Tim 2:8-9, see also 1 Tim 3:8; Titus 2:3, 6).<sup>26</sup> Strauch agrees, “the word ‘likewise’ in verse 11 (of 1 Timothy 3) signals that Paul is introducing a new class of people... This new group is distinct from, yet compared with, the male deacons previously mentioned.”<sup>27</sup>

Strauch then posits three options for how to understand *gynaikas* in verse 11: women who assist the (male) deacons, wives of deacons, and women holding the office of deacon. All three options are plausible; one must decide from the cumulative weight of various exegetical

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*Apostolorum* (“Teaching of the Apostles”) positively identifies women deacons in the writings outside of Scripture. Strauch, 119.

<sup>25</sup> All agree that *gynaikas* “is the standard Greek word for wives as well as for women.” Strauch, 121.

<sup>26</sup> Guthrie notes that, “... the word translated *hosautos* translated *In the same way* shows a close connection between the women and the deacons, and would support the contention that a new class is introduced analogous to the preceding order of deacons.” Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 97. Stiefel concurs, writing that the appearance of “likewise” in 3:11 “appears to mark the beginning of another ecclesial topic, the discussion of a third group coordinate to the previous two. This syntactic sign thus points to a distinction of these ‘women’ from the preceding diakonoi.” Stiefel, 447-448.

<sup>27</sup> Strauch, 115.

indicators as to which of these three seems to be the most likely intention of the inspired author.<sup>28</sup>

### **Option 1: Women who assist male deacons**

According to this view, the “women” of 1 Timothy 3:11 are “the (male) deacons’ assistants in helping the poor and needy, etc. These are women who render auxiliary service, performing ministries for which women are better adapted.”<sup>29</sup> This view has a number of factors in its favor. For instance, by taking *gynaikas* as a general reference to “women”, instead of “wives of deacons”, it accounts for why no mention of character qualifications for the wives of overseers occurs in the previous verses of 1 Timothy 3. At the same time, this view allows for the God-given distinction in male – female roles that Paul makes in 1 Timothy 2:12, since there is no question of women assistants inappropriately teaching or ruling over men in the church.

However, some weighty arguments can be marshaled against this view. In Romans 16, Phoebe is either a “servant” or a “deacon”; she does not appear to be an *assistant* to the deacons. In addition, the “likewise” of 1 Timothy 3:11 should be seen as introducing a new group of people into the passage. However, if the “likewise” is merely introducing a group who may assist the deacons, it does not seem as though these assistant would truly comprise a new group for whom specific qualifications must be stated. Such a position would beg the question: would not some women *assist* the elders, as the elders shepherd the flock? One would assume so, so why would no qualifications for female *assistants* be given in the qualifications for an overseer / elder? Though this is an argument from silence, it would seem to have weight given that large

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28 Stiefel’s warning is needful when interpreting 1 Timothy 3:8-13, “Contradictory readings are understandable because the syntactical signals sent by the text itself within its context are in fact ambiguous, orienting attention in different directions. Thus the temptation is to take one signal or another as conclusive and to dismiss the rest.” Stiefel, 445.

29 William Hendrickson, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), 133. Quoted in Strauch, 120.

portions of the congregation would likely be assisting in the deacons' ministry, not just particular women.

Thus, this first view is certainly possible, but it seems to have the weakness of ascribing the *function* of a deacon to women while withholding the *office* of deacon from them.

### **Option 2: The wives of deacons**

A second primary interpretation of *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 is as “wives” of deacons, and this interpretation is also entirely possible. This view has the considerable strength of interpreting *gynaikas* in a consistent way in the immediate context, since the same Greek word in verse 12 is clearly a reference to “wives”. This reality cannot be easily dismissed. Without other indicators in the text, this factor would seem to be decisive.

However, there is an indicator that Paul assumed his readers would make a distinction in how they understood *gynaikas* between verses 11 and 12; namely, the “likewise” of verse 11 is his signal to make such a distinction. As noted above, the “likewise” serves to introduce a new group of people. The absence of “likewise” would clearly mean verses 11 and 12 are both referencing wives, but the presence of the “likewise” points to some differentiation in the mind of the inspired author. It may be hard for us to feel the weight of this as English speakers, since we have different words for “women” and “wives”, but the apostle did not have that luxury. If he meant to indicate “wives” in verse 11, Paul could have used the possessive pronoun, making the verse clearly read “their wives”.<sup>30</sup> Relatedly, Schriener notes: “If Paul were speaking of wives of deacons, he could have made this very clear by adding ‘of deacons’. By leaving the

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<sup>30</sup> Strauch agrees that such an inclusion would have been definitive: “If (Paul) had only written ‘their women’, we’d know, without a doubt, that he means deacons’ wives.” Strauch, 122.

word women without any modifier, he implied that he was speaking of women in general, not just of the wives of deacons.”<sup>31</sup>

In addition, the question of why Paul would add qualifications for the wives of deacons when he does not do so for the wives of overseers / elders in the previous verses must be considered. The office of deacon is clearly subordinate to the office of overseer in terms of its function, yet character requirements for the elders’ wives are nowhere to be found. This, again, is an argument from silence. Yet it seems to be a powerful one given the immediate juxtaposition of the qualifications for these two offices.<sup>32</sup> Lastly one must still weigh the evidence that Phoebe may very well have been a “deacon” in her church (Romans 16:1).

### **Option 3: Women as deacons**

What of the option of *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 referring to women serving in the office of deacon? This position has the strength of giving heed to the “likewise”, which introduces a new group of people into the passage: women who serve in this office. It has the strength of explaining the omission of any reference to overseers’ wives in the previous passage: it is because these are not “wives of deacons” being referenced, but women who are deacons. It also has the strength of explaining why Phoebe is called a “deacon” in Romans 16:1: she appears to be called a “deacon” simply because she is one in the church in Cenchreae.

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31 Thomas R. Schreiner, "The Valuable Ministries of Women in the Context of Male Leadership: a Survey of Old and New Testament Examples and Teaching", in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 214-215.

32 Piper notes the import of this omission: “(Women deacons) is suggested by the fact that no reference to women is made in 3:1-7. Since women were not candidates for the eldership in the New Testament (1 Timothy 2:12-13) because of its authoritative function in teaching and oversight, the absence of the reference to women in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 would be expected. But this confirms the probability that the reference to women in 3:11 is to women deacons, not merely to wives of deacons.” John Piper, “Rethinking the Governance Structure at Bethlehem Baptist Church...” Stiefel agrees, “The inclusion of the women in the topic of deacons would support their identification as wives only if the same inclusion were made for the wives of bishops (i.e., overseers).” Stiefel, 455.

However, arguments can be marshaled against this view as well.<sup>33</sup> As mentioned above, a compelling case can be made for the need to translate *gynaikos* consistently as “wife” in both verse 11 and verse 12; though, the “likewise” in verse 11 does mitigate against this objection. The flow of Paul’s thought is also used to counter this interpretation, given that Paul would be referencing male deacons in verses 8-10, female deacons in verse 11, and then male deacons again in verse 12.<sup>34</sup> This does make for a difficult writing style, but Paul is not immune to sudden interruptions in his flow of thought. In fact, this sort of intrusion into the argument would seem to make perfect sense if the apostle wanted his readers to be very clear that female deacons were completely allowable, given his previous prohibitions in 1 Timothy 2:12.<sup>35</sup> He would make such an allowance unmistakable by outlining specific character qualifications for women deacons.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the flow of thought objection does not seem so damaging to this view.

One other significant argument is levied against this interpretation: there is an inherent authority in the church *office* of deacon, so having women deacons would violate 1 Timothy 2:12. In this regard, however, Strauch reminds us that the diaconate: is not a teaching office, is not a ruling or governing office, and is “the subordinate of the two offices.”<sup>37</sup> Strauch states

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33 Stiefel’s conclusion seems balanced, “The evidence in 1 Timothy 3.11 for a diaconal ministry of women is strong, although not completely conclusive.” Stiefel, 456.

34 For instance, Grudem writes: “...it would seem very odd for Paul to sandwich only one verse about women deacons in the middle of five verses (three preceding and two following) about men who are deacons.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 919, n 25.

35 Stiefel insightfully speculates as to why Paul chose to make this “intrusion” in verse 11: “Neither they, nor the male deacons, are teaching in the congregation; that function is reserved for the *episkopos*. Nor are they functioning as a separate group of women, as the widows have been. *The situation may thus indeed provoke unease, yet not prohibition or redress.*” Stiefel, 456 (emphasis added).

36 Allison notes that, “...the strong parallels between this list for deaconesses and the list for deacons – both must be “dignified”, careful with their words, sober rather than addicted, and “faithful” to the “faith” – reinforce that this is a list of qualifications for women deacons. Because Paul has already covered the similar qualifications for men deacons, he only needs a brief mention of the qualifications for female deacons.” Allison, 245. Clowney agrees: “...the requirements listed for the women in 3:11 are remarkably parallel to the requirements for deacons in general (3:8-10). Paul seems to point out that these requirements apply to women deacons as well as to men, before going on to describe the further requirements for men, and then concluding with a statement of the reward of faithful diaconal ministry.” Clowney, 233.

37 Strauch, 74-75.

plainly, "... the overseers direct the deacons."<sup>38</sup> However, Strauch seems to contradict himself when he writes: "... deacons hold an official position of authority... Deacons guide and direct the entire church's overall welfare ministry. They make decisions that affect the whole church body."<sup>39</sup> In other words, Strauch assumes that this office cannot be exercised by women in a way that would not violate 1 Timothy 2:12. But would women deacons *necessarily* make decisions that affect "the whole church body", given that this not a ruling or governing office?<sup>40</sup>

While some authority is naturally implicit in this church office, it would seem to be an authority delegated to the deacons from the elders, for the purpose of organizing and administrating particular expressions of ministry in the body. Strauch's description of such authority (making "decisions that affect the whole church body") seems better applied to the ruling function of the elder. Given that the deacon is not a teaching or ruling office, it does not appear that 1 Timothy 2:12 would *necessarily* be violated by women serving in that office.<sup>41</sup>

#### WOMEN DEACONS IN HARMONY WITH 1 TIMOTHY 2:12

In light of the various exegetical considerations in Romans 16 and 1 Timothy 3, the best interpretation and application would seem to be option 3: deploying women in the office of deacon, while ensuring that their role does not violate the clear teaching of 1 Timothy 2:12.<sup>42</sup>

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38 Strauch., 75.

39 Ibid., 118.

40 Piper shows the faultiness of this assumption: "The deacons were distinguished from the elders in that they were not the governing body in the church nor were they charged with the duty of authoritative teaching. So the role of deacon seems not to involve anything that Paul taught (in 1 Timothy 2:12 or anywhere else) is inappropriate for women to perform in the church." Piper, "Rethinking the Governance Structure at Bethlehem Baptist..."

41 Allison puts this succinctly: "Like their male counterparts, deaconesses do not have responsibilities to teach, lead, pray for the sick, and shepherd the church; those are the primary responsibilities of the elders. Accordingly, deaconesses do not violate the Pauline prohibitions in 1 Timothy 2:12." Allison, 247. Though he takes a different view on women deacons, Mounce concurs: "Whatever specific interpretation of this verse (1 Tim 3:11) may be, it is not related to the issue of women in leadership since the deacon(ess) does not provide authoritative leadership." William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles: Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 202.

42 Strauch is entirely correct when he states: "First Timothy 2:9-15 and 3:1-13 must never be isolated from each other or allowed to contradict each other. They are inseparably woven together." Strauch, 115.

Such an approach follows the important exegetical principle of having the explicit interpret the implicit.<sup>43</sup> If women serving in the office of deacon is possibly *implicit* in Scripture, but such a role conflicts with the *explicit* teaching of 1 Timothy 2:12, then the matter is settled and women deacons must not be commissioned in the church. On the other hand, if the *implication* of women deacons does not conflict with the *explicit* teaching of Scripture, then women deacons should be allowed on the basis of this principle.

In other words, the textual *implications* pointing toward women deacons (as shown above) need not be denied, so long as the *explicit* prohibitions of 1 Timothy 2 are heeded. Since the office of deacon does not involve a ruling function over the church or an authoritative teaching role in the church, it is not difficult to conceive of woman deacons as *organizing* or *administering* a particular ministry function, but still not be *ruling* over men inappropriately. An inherent authority in the office does exist, but it would be deployed to organize a ministry, not govern the church.

To make this point another way, the corollary of this exegetical principle is to “interpret the obscure in light of the clear.”<sup>44</sup> The *clear* teaching of Scripture is that women may not teach or exercise authority over a man in the local church (1 Timothy 2:12). The somewhat *obscure* issue is whether or not women may serve as deacons. An exegetically responsible position would allow for the relatively *obscure* issue of women deacons, so long as their specific function does not violate what is *clear* in 1 Timothy 2:12.<sup>45</sup>

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43 Sproul states the principle succinctly: “When an implication (of Scripture) is drawn that is contradictory to what is explicitly stated, the implication must be rejected.” R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 85.

44 Sproul, 87.

45 Schreiner’s position affirms this approach: “With respect to women deacons, we need not come to a firm decision, for even if women were deacons this does not refute our thesis regarding male governance in the church. Even if women were appointed as deacons, they were not appointed as elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Two qualities demanded of elders - being apt to teach (1 Timothy 3:2) and governing of the church (1 Timothy 3:5) - are not part of the responsibility of deacons.” Schreiner, “The Valuable Ministries of Women...”, 220.

## CONCLUSION: CAN WOMEN SERVE AS DEACONS?

In summary, the best answer to the question of whether women can hold the office of deacon would seem to be a qualified “yes”: yes, as long as women deacons are deployed in a way congruent with 1 Timothy 2:12.<sup>46</sup> Piper answers the question of women serving as deacons with a “probably yes”, and advocates a similar approach with great pastoral wisdom:

“It appears then that the role of deacon is of such a nature that nothing stands in the way of women's full participation in it. Within the diaconate (*sic*) itself the way the men and women relate to each other would be guided by the sense of appropriateness growing out of the Biblical teaching of male and female complementarity.”<sup>47</sup>

To Piper’s point, deacons will be mature Christians (given the character requirements of 1 Timothy 3:8-13) who should be able to apply the Biblical teaching of male and female complementarity. In addition, the elders retain a governing function over the diaconate, and are thus charged with ensuring the appropriate deployment of any female deacons.

To be sure, the Bible is not perfectly clear about women serving in the office of deacon, and Christians must be allowed to disagree over this issue in good conscience.<sup>48</sup> But the position argued for in this paper does not obscure the God-given differences between men and women, while it recognizes and releases the ministry of women through the office of deacon. Thus, the approach being advocated would seem to be a responsible application of God’s word, “...for we must be careful not to prohibit what the New Testament does not prohibit.”<sup>49</sup>

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46 A deeply committed complementarian like Grudem affirms the possibility of this approach: “...if deacons simply have delegated administrative responsibility for certain aspects of the ministry of the church, then there seems to be no good reason to prevent women from functioning as deacons.” Grudem, *Systematic*, 944.

47 John Piper, “Rethinking the Governance Structure at Bethlehem Baptist...”

48 For instance, in the gracious interaction of Keller and Duncan, Keller rightly calls it an “intramural debate within a strong commitment to biblical complementarianism”. Keller, “The Case for Commissioning...”

49 Though Grudem is addressing other roles in the church, his conclusion is poignant: “... the only question to be asked is whether these offices include the ruling and teaching functions reserved for elders in the New Testament. If not, then all of these offices would be open to women as well as to men, *for we must be careful not to prohibit what the New Testament does not prohibit.*” Grudem, *Systematic*, 944-945 (emphasis added).

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