

## Chapter 3: Women as Deacons

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What do we do with the women mentioned in First Timothy 3:11? We cannot just skip the verse; we cannot pretend it's not there, leaving the matter wholly unaddressed.

*Their [guna] likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one [guna], managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

1 Timothy 3:11-13 (ESV)

What's a "*guna*?" It is the first Greek word (γυνή, "goo-nay") in what is now verse 11 of First Timothy chapter 3. Its Greek meaning was interchangeably either woman or wife, the specific translation of which depended entirely on context alone. There are no spelling differences, differences of accent or declension. Please remember this word, because to avoid confusion throughout the chapter, I'll use it – "*guna*" – when addressing the biblical passage so as to avoid unintentional biasing.

The Greek text of 1 Timothy 3:11 is absent of any definite article (the) or possessive pronoun (their) before *guna*. "The" or "their" is added by several popular English translations. The verse simply starts, "*Guna* likewise..." Translations are, in fact, fairly evenly divided on these additions. In short, a clear translation of the first phrase of 3:11 would be most accurately rendered: "Women / Wives likewise..." There is no "the" or "their" in Greek. Here is a chart of eight English translations depicting uses of "women" or "wives," indicating use or non-use of an article, in this verse:

| Translation                  | Word  | "Their" | "The" |
|------------------------------|-------|---------|-------|
| Holman Christian Standard    | Wives | –       | –     |
| New Living Translation (NLT) | Wives | ✓       | –     |
| English Standard Version     | Wives | ✓       | –     |
| King James Version (KJV)     | Wives | ✓       | –     |
| New International Version    | Women | –       | ✓     |
| New American Standard        | Women | –       | –     |
| American Standard Version    | Women | –       | –     |
| Revised Standard Version     | Women | –       | ✓     |

Translation is always, to some extent, an art, and Jerome's Latin Vulgate translates the Greek *guna* in 1 Timothy 3:11 as Latin's *mulieres*, which can be flexible between "woman" or "wife," similarly to Greek.

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But unlike Greek, wife and woman do have distinct words in Latin, respectively, *uxorem* and *mulieres*. Jerome used the Latin word that could be interchangeable, rather than one that exclusively meant “wife.”

In light of this topic, we must also remember Romans 16:1-2 (ESV):

*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchraeae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.*

Paul here introduces us to Phoebe, explicitly describing her as a deacon – a servant. “Deacon” is a descriptive term of function, the gender about whom it is used is of little to no importance.<sup>1</sup>

## Who were these Women?

Who were the *guna* in 1 Timothy 3:11? In order to provide an accurate interpretation, whoever they are must be explained in the context of the church’s lead ministry servants, since servants – deacons – are the topic of the verses immediately prior to and following verse 11. To suggest otherwise would violate not only every hermeneutical principle but also common sense. Several possibilities have been articulated regarding the *guna* of 1 Timothy 3:11<sup>2</sup> and we will now consider those possibilities.

**Are They Christian Women in General?** Maybe the *guna* are just “women.” This is a broadly suggested interpretation and it is equally as broad in its application. Are we not all to be servants, including women? Indeed, we are. However, does this relate to the immediate context? It would make little sense to discuss elders/overseers, then deacons/servants, then introduce a general instruction to all women, then return to deacons/servants as a focused topic. Hence, this interpretation has never been the most widely accepted.

**Are They Widows?** Could the *guna* be the widows mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:9-10?<sup>3</sup> If that was Paul’s intended meaning here in chapter 3, why didn’t he just use the word for widow (*chera*, χερα) as he did in chapter 5, rather than *guna*? Widows are more likely to be those who receive ministry from servants, rather than being those who actively do the ministry<sup>4</sup> (and that was precisely what happened in Acts 6:1-7).

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<sup>1</sup> James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), 184-185.

<sup>2</sup> Compare Blackburn, 303-310; Gareth L. Reese, *New Testament Epistles: 1 Timothy, Titus, 2 Timothy* (Moberly, Missouri: Scripture Exposition Books, 1999), 140-141; Sandifer, 33-44; Alexander Strauch, *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons* (Littleton, Colorado: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 2017), 121-123, 155-170; Jennifer H. Stiefel, “Women Deacons in 1 Timothy: A Linguistic and Literary Look at ‘Women Likewise...’ (1 Tim. 3:11),” *New Testament Studies* (Vol. 41, 1995): 451-456.

<sup>3</sup> M.H. Shepherd Jr., “Deaconess,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), Volume 1, 786.

<sup>4</sup> Van Dam, 118.

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**Are They Women Helpers to Male Deacons?** Some see these *guna* as deacon assistants, since the word “helper” (Greek *prostatis*, προστάτις) is used of Phoebe in Romans 16:2 (rendered “patron” in ESV). However, as with the previous two interpretations, this one simply doesn’t have a lot of credence, nor even context. Romans 16:2 is the only use of *prostatis* in the entire New Testament. Given the broader context of 1 Timothy 3:8-13, this understanding of being helpers would seem to belong *after* Paul’s description of deacons, not dead center in the middle of his discussion of them.

**Are They Wives of Deacons and Elders?** Could *guna* qualifications apply to the wives of both the elders and servants alike? This interpretation could be more highly regarded if, as above, verse 11 followed the list of qualifications for servant, applicable to both elders and deacons, but it does not. Paul wrote about elders, deacons, *guna*, and then went back to deacons. This interpretation – that *guna* indicates “merely” the wives of elders and servants, but cannot be elders nor servants themselves – would be more palatable if Paul had written about elders, deacons, *guna*, and then stopped. But he didn’t. He mentions them within his discussion of servants, so whoever these *guna* are, they must be tied more directly to the concept of servant leader.

**Are They Wives of Deacons?** Could the *guna* in verse 11 be the wives of servants, but not servants themselves, nor wives of elders? If this is the case, we must note that similar qualifications are never given for elders’ wives in any of Paul’s writing; hence, his giving of qualifications to these *guna* pushes us to understand that servants are either men or women – husbands and/or their wives. If these are qualifications for the wives of servant leaders merely because they are their wives, then why didn’t Paul dictate similar qualifications for wives of elders, who are of a “higher” role in the church’s leadership? Being that verse 11 is in the middle of the text regarding qualifications of servants, one practical observation is that, perhaps, the wives of servants were to serve alongside their husbands; perhaps individuals were not so much appointed to service, but couples were jointly appointed. This may be demonstrated by the fact that the wives of servants have qualifications, whereas the wives of elders do not have explicit qualifications, hence, Paul did not see elders’ wives joining the ministry of their husbands in contrast to his expectation that couples jointly minister in these servant roles. To reiterate, the New Testament uses *deacon* as a role and function descriptor, not as a gender-dependent title like “chairman” or “chairwoman.”

**Are They Women Who Are Deacons?** Could the *guna* be servants who are women? This final interpretation seems the simplest. Once again, this is not the office of “deaconess,” which does not appear in Scripture. Rather, this understanding is the function and role of *servant* being fulfilled by women. Candidly, this is the more obvious, plain meaning, but it’s not free from question.

Some draw a distinction between being a deacon and being in the diaconate, an official body of “designated servants.” In such discussions, Phoebe is often assumed to be the former, a servant, but not included in the latter, part of a body of official designees. However, this seems to be more of an interpretive bias by high church exegetes accustomed to considering the role more formally and officially. They often will separate early references to servants (Acts 6 being around 32 AD) from later

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references (Philippians 1, 1 Timothy 3, both probably in the late-60s AD) for this reason. An additional reason to set aside deacon-diaconate as a false dichotomy is the recognition that the *guna* are getting equal attention in terms of qualification. The word “likewise” is used in both verses 8 and 11, paralleling the two, that is, both of these statements by Paul are laying out qualifications of a servant. When Paul wrote this letter to the preacher at Ephesus, he gave instructions about those *serving* and described expectations of them, some of whom were women. Paul expected the Church in Ephesus would have women deacons.

In sum of these six possibilities, the latter two interpretations have the most validity, with women simply being servant leaders having the fewest exegetical concerns. Because of the biblical testimony, we should affirm women servants, whether we take the position that this means that wives of servants serve jointly with their husbands, or we understand this as being women placed directly in the role and function of a leading servant.

## Did the Church Have Women Deacons?

While perhaps unfamiliar to many contemporary congregations, women servant leaders, or “deaconesses,” are present throughout the history of Christianity. The early church created the term. In 112 AD, with the Church under persecution, Governor Pliny the Younger sent a letter to Emperor Trajan with this insight:

*Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called ministrae.*<sup>5</sup>

*Ministrae* is the Latin equivalent to *diakonoι*, which is a plural form of the personal noun *diakonos*.

A number of women’s tombstones from the early church were engraved with *διακονος*, such as “Sophia, the deacon.”<sup>6</sup> As early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, the Syrian *Didascalia Apostolorum*, chapter 16, “On the appointment of Deacons and Deaconesses,” explained their value in ministry as “especially needful and important,” especially to other women.<sup>7</sup> However, debate began in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>8</sup>

Women servants historically have had a place in the older church traditions, such as the Roman Catholic, Byzantine and Orthodox churches.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, women servants were present throughout

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<sup>5</sup> Pliny, *Letters*, 10: 96-97; <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html>; see also Blackburn, 314; and the Vulgate translation of Romans 16:1.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth A. McCabe, “A Reevaluation of Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 as a *Diakonos* and *Prostatis*: Exposing the Inaccuracies of English Translations,” *Women in the Biblical World* (New York: University Press of America, 2009), 100-101.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didascalia.html>, Feb. 17, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Barry L. Blackburn, “The Identity of the ‘Women’ in 1 Tim. 3:11,” *Essays on Woman in Earliest Christianity, Volume 1* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1993), 303.

<sup>9</sup> Phyllis Zagano, *Women Deacons? Essays and Answers* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016); Gary Macy, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2011).

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various traditions in the Reformation.<sup>10</sup> While some may be tempted to dismiss the place of women servant leaders as a matter for only the high churches, they are present in virtually all Protestant traditions. For example, the European Baptist tradition historically has accepted women servants, though the majority of Baptist churches in the United States do not.<sup>11</sup> But what about the Restoration Movement?

## Did the Restoration Movement have Women Deacons?

There is no dispute that the churches of the early Restoration Movement valued and affirmed women servant leaders, often called “deaconesses.” Alexander Campbell notes that “Amongst the Greeks who paid so much regard to differences of sex, female deacons, or deaconesses, were appointed to visit and wait upon the sisters,” noting “Phebe of Cenchrea, and other persons mentioned in the New Testament, who labored in the gospel.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, W. K. Pendleton in 1848 wrote “Besides deacons, every church should have deaconesses, whose duty it is to perform such offices as cannot be so well performed by deacons, and especially such to females, as could not with delicacy and propriety be laid upon the deacons.”<sup>13</sup> In his pivotal series on permanent offices in the church, Robert Milligan in 1855 wrote, “The Phebes [i.e., women deacons] should, therefore, constitute a part of the διακονοι [deacons] of every fully organized Christian congregation,”<sup>14</sup> which included ministering to “the feeble, the sick, the poor, and the destitute, especially of their own sex.”<sup>15</sup> Notice that Milligan did not limit female servants only to ministry to other women; he simply noted the particular advantage of women ministering to women.

The most comprehensive study on the subject of deacons in the Restoration Movement was completed by J. Stephen Sandifer, who wrote *Deacons: Male and Female – A Study for the Churches of Christ* (1989). It traces the existence of women servant leaders in all three main divisions of the Restoration Movement – a capella, independent, and Disciples – well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, in 1932, Standard published R. C. Harding’s *Handbook for Elders and Deacons*, which stated emphatically, “It seems clear from the Scriptures that there must have been a least some of the churches with female servants or deacons,” citing Romans 16:1, 1 Timothy, and their presence in early Christian sources.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Herbert E. Winkler published *The Eldership* in 1950, dedicating an entire chapter to affirming the biblical presence of “Deaconesses;” its subsequent chapter “Should We

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<sup>10</sup> Sandifer, 99-107; Cornelis Van Dam, *The Deacon: Biblical Foundations for Today’s Ministry of Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage Books, 2016), 115-130.

<sup>11</sup> Charles W. Deweese, *Women Deacons and Deaconesses: 400 Years of Baptist Service* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things. No. XIX. The Deacon’s Office,” *Christian Baptist*, 1826 (reprinted 1983), 335.

<sup>13</sup> W. K. Pendleton, “Deacons – Should the Church Have Them,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1870): 54.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Milligan, “The Permanent Orders of the Christian Ministry,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1855): 626.

<sup>15</sup> Milligan, 626.

<sup>16</sup> R. C. Harding, *Handbook for Elders and Deacons* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1932), 95.

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Have Deaconesses Today?” argued pragmatically of the necessity of mobilizing the majority of our church members – women – and the unimaginable results of failing to so do.<sup>17</sup>

## Why the Objections to Women Deacons?

While it is true that now the a capella Churches of Christ and Christian Churches / Churches of Christ typically do not have women servant leaders, it has not always been the case. From our Movement’s inception, the early leaders of the Restoration Movement affirmed and valued women servants. Why the change? Why did the Restoration Movement seem to remove women servants? There are several reasons which contribute to varying and overlapping degrees.

**“Deaconesses are not biblical!”** The perennial question for any believer is, “Do we have a text?” The term deaconess does not occur in the pages of the New Testament – it is true. Many individuals reject the notion of women servants by noting that we hear nothing of “deaconesses” in the New Testament. It is true, but is an argument from semantics.<sup>18</sup> No one suggests that the early church had “elders, evangelists, deacons and deaconesses,” a fourth and separately identified role. (Again, we simply note that servants were male or female. Paul calls Phoebe a deacon, not a deaconess.<sup>19</sup>)

The question here is about women servants, whether they are servant-leaders themselves or “merely” the wives of ministry leaders, serving alongside their husbands. The notion of women servants is plainly present in the New Testament in at least both 1 Timothy 3 and Romans 16. It is additionally possible in Philippians as some have speculated about Euodia and Syntyche being servants in light of Paul’s addressing of his letter to “overseers and servants” in Philippians 1:1, combined with his direct address of these two women in Philippians 4:2. One commentator observed, “Critics frequently object that the Scriptures do not say much about female deacons. Those critics should be reminded that the Scriptures do not say much about the male deacons either. It is scholastically dangerous to be dogmatic about either sex in the diaconal role in the first century.”<sup>20</sup> In sum, one factor for the gradual erosion of the woman servant leader was this semantic debate.

**The Divergence of the Restoration Movement** took place gradually from 1906 through the 1960s into what have now emerged as the right (a capella), center (Independent), and left (Disciples) segments. As the division grew, the Disciples retained women servants, and have them even today. The a capella churches moved away from appointing “deaconesses” and the centrists divided over the issue, though with time leaned toward their non-instrumental brethren.

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<sup>17</sup> Herbert E. Winkler, *The Eldership* (Nashville, Tennessee: Williams Printing Company, 1950), 169-179, 180-182 respectively.

<sup>18</sup> See James D. Bales, *The Deacon and His Work* (Shreveport, Louisiana: Lambert Book House, 1967), 75-79.

<sup>19</sup> Aheto Sema, “Phoebe: Deacon or Deaconess,” *Bible Translation* (April 2009): 106-111.

<sup>20</sup> Sandifer, 41.

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Likewise, geography played a role. The more progressive Disciples of Christ gravitated toward the north and tended to affirm women deacons. The more conservative south tended to, over time, remove women servants.<sup>21</sup> However, the presence of women servants was not the catalyst for the division of the Restoration Movement; it was, rather, a casualty of the division.

**The Influence of J. W. McGarvey** has been felt in our movement from his lifetime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century until even today. One of the most significant voices in the Restoration Movement, one that opposed the advent of liberalism among what would eventually become the Disciples of Christ, was J. W. McGarvey. Part of our a capella brethren, he was a preacher, professor, and author. In two *Christian Standard* articles (1902, '06), he opposed the notion of women servants in general.<sup>22</sup> His voice carried weight not only among the a capella churches, but into instrumental Christian Churches as well. While others directly opposed his opinion, few had the reputation or influence of McGarvey. Even Philip Y. Pendleton, tasked with completing McGarvey's unfinished Standard commentary on Romans following his death, opposed McGarvey's opinion. Commenting on Romans 16:1, he noted "The word 'deaconess' is found only here; but this single reference with commendation stamps the office with apostolic sanction and approval."<sup>23</sup> McGarvey's opinion, though, has continued echoing to the present.

**Women's Suffrage** in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century became one focus of the staggering pace of social and cultural change. Unions, President McKinley's assassination by an anarchist, the NAACP and rise of communism, and the suffragette movement endeavoring to grant women the right to vote, even equal standing under United States law, all created deep concern among conservative Christian Churches. Church leaders recoiled from these rapid social changes and challenges – and recoiled from appointing women to the role of servant. Even today, concern over women servants is often expressed as compromise toward, or complete agreement with, egalitarianism, which it is not. "Whatever the 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. There is no question that women were to play a significant role in serving the church."<sup>24</sup>

**"They would have a vote on the Church Board!"** As will be demonstrated in a later chapter of this book (Chapter 6), the Church Board – wherein elders and deacons have equal voice and votes on a Board as stipulated in by-laws – was a 20<sup>th</sup> century development in the Restoration Movement. Women had "deaconed" well in these churches for generations; with the advent of new leadership structures and the prospect of women having votes alongside elders and other leaders, while they still

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<sup>21</sup> Sandifer, 167-171.

<sup>22</sup> J. W. McGarvey, "Deaconesses," *Christian Standard* (November 22, 1902): 1616; "Deaconesses," *Christian Standard* (February 3, 1916): 166.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Y. Pendleton, *Commentary on Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1916), 545.

<sup>24</sup> William D. Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 46: Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 202.

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couldn't cast votes politically, the conclusion became self-evident in the thinking of many: *we can't have women deacons*. If this sounds like a stretch, consider that in 1927, *Christian Standard* replied to this question: "Do we have any Scripture authority for calling women to the official board to act as deacons?"<sup>25</sup> More recently, a 1990 *Standard* editorial observed, "The problem, it seems to me, is not with what the Scripture says, but with our twentieth-century concept of a 'church board,' and the mind-set that sees in the word 'deaconess' some sort of authority or power."<sup>26</sup> Indeed. In order to preserve an unbiblical approach to church governance, "the board," we removed from our practice the perfectly biblical role of servants – deacons – who are women.

**"We've never had women deacons before!"** If by "we" one means the Restoration Movement or conservative, Bible-believing traditions, it simply is not true. If by "we" one refers to one's own congregation, then the leadership should explore the church's history to determine if such was always the case. If by "we" someone refers their own personal memory and experience, then it may be true. In the end, the presence of women servants falls to each individual congregation to explore Scripture and decide accordingly.

Anecdotally, my wife's home congregation in Memphis, Missouri was founded in 1850, making it among the oldest active Christian Churches / Churches of Christ congregations. While they do not have women servants today, the church records make frequent reference to all of the ministry accomplished by "deaconesses."



Who do you think the *guna* of 1 Timothy 3:11 are, and does this understanding affect how you view Phoebe in Romans 16?

Whatever your understanding of *guna*, how does it influence your understanding of "deacon" both biblically and practically?

If your church does not currently have women servant leaders, and this chapter has modified your understanding, will you make any changes in your congregation? Why or why not?

If your congregation does not currently have women servant leaders and you do want to make changes, you should create a policy to firmly establish expectations and boundaries. What should it contain? When will it be implemented? How will it be introduced and explained to the congregation and by whom?

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<sup>25</sup> J. B. Briney, "Several Questions Considered," *Christian Standard* (April 2, 1927), 318.

<sup>26</sup> Editor, "Should We Have Deaconesses?" *Christian Standard* (February 18, 1990): 3.