

SHOULD WOMEN BE ELECTED TO THE OFFICE OF DEACON?

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The Greek word *διάκονος*, transliterated into English as ‘deacon’, occurs twenty-nine times in the New Testament; most often it is rendered ‘servant(s)’, and next most frequently by the English word ‘minister(s)’. Several times it is coupled with the word for overseer or elder as the second of two offices in the New Testament and translated by the word ‘deacons’ (see Philipians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8, 12). The seven elected at Jerusalem were elected ‘to serve tables’ (Acts 6:2, using the correlative verb form of the noun *διάκονος*, namely, *διακονέω*), and the description of their office in correlation with that of the apostles (the first elders, see 1 Peter 5:1) leads one to recognize that they were the first ‘deacons’.

So the ‘deacons’ are in view in Philipians, in 1 Timothy and in Acts 6, and are also alluded to, perhaps, in Romans 12:7 (‘if service, in our serving’), and also perhaps in 1 Corinthians 12:28 (‘helping’). Only one reference is debated as to how it should be translated and understood in English, namely, Romans 16:1–2, to which we will return later in this article.

How Shall an Answer Be Found?

Some think that the answer to the question posed in the title of this article can be answered by simply appealing to the duties of the office of deacon. Their argument states that, since Paul clearly says that women should not ‘teach or exercise authority over a man’ (1 Tim. 2:12), they are obviously ruled out of the offices of ministers and ruling elders; but – here is where the deduction begins – since the office of deacon does not consist of either teaching or exercising authority, women may be elected to the office of deacons. I can understand how one may think this way, for I argued nearly the same idea as one of the propositions in my defence of my doctoral dissertation in 1968 (*The Faithful Sayings*

in the *Pastoral Letters*). It read as follows: ‘The nature of the office of deacon and the nature of woman would permit women to be deaconesses; but the nature of the office of elder or minister and the nature of woman would not permit women to be elders or ministers.’ Though I still hold firmly to the second half of that proposition, I have, in the light of further research in the Scriptures, come to realize that the first part of the proposition is incorrect. How so?

Acts 6:1–6

Let us deal first with Acts 6 in its context. The apostles themselves were exercising the duties of deacons for the church in Jerusalem. In the midst of that care a complaint arose from the Greek-speaking disciples who said that ‘their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution’ (Acts 6:2, emphasis supplied to highlight the connection). To answer this complaint that the Greek-speaking widows were being neglected and at the same time to relieve the apostles so that they could devote themselves ‘to prayer and to the ministry of the word’ (Acts 6:4), the church elected, as requested by the twelve, seven men, all of whom have Greek-sounding names. This action is noteworthy, especially because to offset the complaint from the Greek-speaking disciples the church elected an entire group whose names appear to have been Greek.

If there was ever a church that should have elected women to serve as deacons, particularly when those being helped were women, that is, widows, this is the church that should have done so. But why were none even considered? Because the twelve said that those to be elected were to be ‘men’ (Acts 6:3, the Greek word is *ἄνθρωπος*, the word that usually designates an adult human male, as is also evidenced by the names of those elected, Acts 6:5). So in stating my proposition I had not taken into consideration the fact that the male apostles demanded that *male* deacons be elected. But I and others are bound to the apostolic rule, which is expressed by this demand, since this demand is relevant for all churches as it was for the church at Jerusalem.

1 Timothy 3:8–13

We next turn to 1 Timothy 3:8–13 (in its context of the preceding verses, 1–7). This passage has many things to teach us. First of all, it is

written that both the overseers and the deacons are to be ‘the husband of one wife’ (3:2, 12; for an analysis of exactly what this phrase means see my *The Pastoral Epistles* [New International Greek Testament Commentaries, Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1992], pp. 157–9). This means that they should demonstrate marital and sexual fidelity. Just as in the seventh commandment, ‘You shall not commit adultery’, which is stated with reference to marriage (by using the word *adultery*), the sins of fornication before marriage and other sexual sins are also forbidden. But this requirement of the officers does not demand that they be married (or later, speaking of children, that they must have at least two children to qualify), but that in whatever state they are (single or married) they must demonstrate the kind of fidelity expressed in the language of the marriage situation.

So we learn the binding requirement of maleness stated in the context of being the *husband* of one wife without imposing this requirement beyond what is intended, that is, in ruling out single men for the offices.

Likewise, we learn to recognize the binding characteristic of the maleness required in Acts 6 without insisting that the local need for ‘seven’ be understood as a general apostolic teaching to be applied and followed in every church and situation.

Second, we learn that the word ‘deacons’ is applied to men in both verse 8 and verse 12. This is seen in the fact that the same individuals are in view in both verses; and this is evidenced by the fact that the word ‘deacons’ is used in verse 12 to pick up on the ‘deacons’ spoken of in verses 8–10, thereby skipping over the females described in verse 11. These deacons are delineated as males by their description as ‘the husband of one wife’ in verse 12.

Third, in verse 11 females are presented with certain requirements similar to those required of the male deacons of verses 8–10 and 12–13. By the introductory word ‘likewise’, *ὡσαύτως*, they are both likened to and differentiated from the others in the list, especially the nearest group, the deacons. They are designated in the Greek text with the plural Greek noun *πρωτοκλας* (from the basic form *πρωτή*) which means essentially either ‘women’ or ‘wives’, with the context determining which is meant.

The views that have been held on the identification of those in verse 11 are essentially four: (1) they are also deacons, (2) they are ‘deaconsesses’, distinguished from but comparable with the deacons, (3) they are female assistants to the deacons, or (4) they are the wives of the deacons.

Considering the Four Views of Verse 11

Although the women are dealt with in this section dealing with deacons, an argument for their being considered deacons, and they are also to have characteristics similar to those of the deacons, nevertheless they are too clearly distinguished from the deacons (by the ‘likewise’, by the lack of diaconal title given them, and for one other reason that will be mentioned later) for them to be designated by the title ‘deacons’, since Paul does not give them that title.

To designate them as deaconesses would be to do that which Paul does not do (the considerations for this position may be as readily acknowledged regarding view 3, that they are the female assistants for the deacons, but without a title, which Paul does not give them). The fact of what Paul *did* or *did not* write is more germane to this question than are speculations as to what he *might* have meant.

Having briefly considered views one and two, it is now time to consider the more basic question of whether the Greek word should be translated ‘women’ or ‘wives’, for this is the real gist of the question of understanding what Paul meant by what he wrote.

Here several factors all merge together. Those factors are as follows:

1. The context in which the word appears.
2. Why they are mentioned in verse 11 in the midst of an overarching discussion of the male deacons.
3. Why marital fidelity is not mentioned for them as for the overseer, male deacons and even widows to be enrolled (5:9).
4. Why this word is used without an article or any possessive pronoun connecting them to the deacons.
5. Why they are discussed and marked with these qualifications.

In this passage women in general are not required to have these characterizations, but either assistants to the deacons or wives are. The

nearest usages of this Greek word (*γυνή*) are verses 12 and 3 where the translation is without any doubt that of ‘wives’. And the next following verse, verse 12, is certainly a very near context. [If verse 12 had been written before verse 11, we would probably not even be discussing this question.] From Paul’s concern for the younger widows in 5:11–14, it would seem that he might rather assign wives to help their husbands than women to do so. Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly, the translation of the Greek word as ‘wives’ may help us understand why the treatment of these females is inserted in this passage at this point, and also why there is no demand that they be the wives of one husband, as there is for the deacons.

Why does verse 11 come before verse 12 that deals with the deacon’s wife, children and household? If the ones in view in verse 11 are wives, then they are being addressed as wives in an introduction to the family situation of their husbands that is considered further in verse 12. If the four-point delineation of the wives’ characteristics in verse 11 is analogous in number and substance to those given for the men in verse 8, why is the analogous characterization of being ‘the wife of one husband’ not given for them?

The answer may lie in the fact that, since they are the wives of the deacons, and since deacons’ households are characterized by marital fidelity, that truth applies to their wives and need not be stated again. But if the Greek word is translated as *women*, these answers no longer serve as answers, and the questions remain a problem.

Finally, it is charged that having ‘women’ or ‘wives’ without the addition of an article, or even a possessive pronoun, such as ‘their’, makes ‘wives’ a less clear understanding. It is certainly true that the lack of a possessive pronoun does make the argument less air-tight, but the usage of Paul in this entire section of verses 1–13 shows him referring to people without an article or possessive pronoun (see *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 172), and this is but one verse of several which follow that pattern. Similarly Paul follows this pattern of not using a possessive pronoun when writing about husbands and wives elsewhere (see, for example, *Col. 3:18–19, Eph. 5:22–25*).

It certainly needs to be noticed that these wives are required to have the qualities prescribed for them if they are to assist their husbands in

their duties. They are not required to ‘be tested first’, as are their husbands, the deacons (3:10), because they are not being elected to this office as their husbands are.

But for those wives who manifest these characteristics and who desire to help their husbands as they serve as deacons, each church and the officers thereof should encourage, not discourage, both those wives and their husbands for this to happen.

In doing so we will give full force to what the passage says as well as heeding what it does not say.

A Summary of Acts 6:1–6 and 1Timothy 3:8–12

We need to summarize what we have discovered from Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3. In Acts 6 the apostles prescribed that the ones elected to serve tables should be men, and Paul requires that those now designated and elected as deacons in 1 Timothy 3 must also be men. When he writes about females (wives) with similar requirements to those for male deacons, he does not give the title of deacon to them, although this would have been the time to call them deacons if he had meant them to be such.

Thus in 1 Timothy 3, the most complete passage on deacons in the New Testament, we have deacons clearly designated as males, and wives listed alongside of them, but without the office title.

Romans 16:1–2

This brings us to the disputed passage Romans 16:1–2 which reads as follows:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant (*διάκονος*) of the church in Cenchreae, that you 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 myself as well.

The question at stake here is how *διάκονος* should be translated. Should the word be rendered ‘servant’ as in the ESV and several other versions (NIV, NASB, KJV, NKJV), or as ‘deacon’ (NRSV, TNIV), or ‘deaconess’ (RSV, NIV margin)? A number of the versions render the word as ‘servant’ because this is most in keeping with the usage of the word in

Paul's letters, both positively and negatively. He only utilizes the word in this sense of 'deacon' with men in view in 1 Timothy 3:8 and 12, and he did not apply it to the females in view in 1 Timothy 3:11. This is the normal way of determining the rendering of an English word from the Greek usage of the author.

But because of its usage with the phrase 'of the church at Cenchreae' and other factors that may be impacting translators, some versions have rendered it as either 'deacon' or 'deaconess'. Indeed, one of those factors is the argumentation of some that in the statement 'being . . . a *διάκονος*' the present active participle of the Greek verb (*εἶμι*) is consistently used to identify a person's performance of office in the New Testament. It is sometimes used in this way, but not always or consistently. For one example compare Luke 13:16 where Luke writes of a woman's 'being a daughter of Abraham (or, as in the ESV, simply 'a daughter of Abraham').

'Being' with its following word designates what that person is, whether a 'daughter', as here, or a 'servant', as in Romans 16:1. But it does not always identify a person's performance of office, as is self-evident from the use of 'daughter' in Luke 13:16. It is better to inquire about Paul's usage of the term *διάκονος* elsewhere in the New Testament to determine its significance here than to argue from a less-than-consistent usage.

We have the backdrop of Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3, with its specific usage of Paul. This, to me, settles the case for the understanding of a 'servant'. Romans 16:1-2, therefore, does not present an example of a female deacon. What other factors in the passage might lend their weight to help us further in answering this question? There are two. First, Paul's statement on how she should be welcomed. And second, the reason given by Paul as to why Phoebe should be helped.

Paul states that she should be welcomed 'in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints'. It is as a fellow 'saint' that she should be welcomed, not as an officer in the church. Yes, the introductory words are significant to remind us of her service as a servant, but they describe her saintliness, not her official capacity. And second, it is because of her helpfulness as a 'patron' to so many, including Paul, that he specifically asks that they help her.

How Should We Respond to Our Title Question?

It is my settled conviction that Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3 should settle the question, both for the church and for individual Christians today, and that Romans 16:1-2 are properly understood within the great framework laid out by these passages.

The twelve in Acts 6:3 ask for men to be elected as the first deacons (understood to be such from their tasks). Paul later approached the conclusion of his letter-writing with his words to Timothy in chapter 3 of 1 Timothy where he clearly sets out that deacons should be men (1 Tim. 3:8, 12). Within this clear framework Paul wrote encouragingly about Phoebe, his friend and a servant of the church, that the Roman Christians may help her as she has helped so many.

The question proposed in the title should be answered with the data given in the Word of God. Thus we should continue to elect *men* as deacons, as the twelve and Paul instruct us to do, and we should heed the words of Paul in 1 Timothy 3:11, encouraging and utilizing the wives of deacons in the labours he has called their husbands to perform.