

WOMEN ARE NOT TO BE APPOINTED TO THE OFFICE OF DEACON

Ashby Camp

Copyright © 2019 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

It is clear from Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8-13 that the church of the first century included a formal office of "deacon" to which only qualified persons could be appointed. The question is whether Scripture indicates that women are eligible for appointment to that office. Many answer "Yes," claiming that 1 Tim. 3:11 gives qualifications for women deacons and that Rom. 16:1 identifies Phoebe as a woman who had been appointed a deacon by the church in Cenchræa. The following is an explanation of why I reject those claims and conclude that women are not permitted to serve as deacons.

Paul lays out qualifications necessary for appointment to the office of overseer in 1 Tim. 3:1-7.¹ He says the candidate must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, level-headed, sensible, respectable, hospitable, skillful in teaching, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, uncontentious, not loving money, managing his own household well, having his children in submission with all respectfulness, not a recent convert, and one with a good reputation with those outside. That the office of overseer is restricted to men is clear from the requirement that the candidate be the husband of one wife and from the earlier indication that leadership authority in the church is limited to men (1 Tim. 2:11-14). The restriction of the office to men also is implied from the requirement the candidate be skillful in teaching, a task that in the assembly is done only by men (1 Tim. 2:12), and not be violent, a sin to which men are especially vulnerable.

Paul then turns his attention to the qualifications for deacons. In the translation below, I transliterate the word *gunaikas* at the beginning of v. 11 because its meaning is contested and key to the debate.

⁸Deacons likewise are to be worthy of respect, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money, ⁹holding securely the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰Let these also first be tested; then, if being blameless, let them serve. ¹¹*Gunaikas* likewise are to be worthy of respect, not slanderers, level-headed, and faithful in all things. ¹²Let deacons be husbands of one wife, who manage their children and their own households well. ¹³For those who have served well gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

He notes that deacons, like overseers ("likewise"), are required to possess certain character traits and proceeds to spell them out. He says in vv. 8-9 that they must be worthy of respect, not double-tongued (not hypocritical or duplicitous), not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money, and holding securely the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. He says in v. 10 that, as with the overseers ("also"), prospective deacons are to be examined ("tested") to see if they have what is required to serve in that position. After the controversial statement in v. 11, which I discuss below, he says in v. 12 that deacons must be husbands of one wife who

¹ Three specific Greek terms refer to this one leadership position: *presbuteros* (translated elder), *episkopos* (translated overseer or bishop), and *poimēn* (translated shepherd or pastor). In church history, bishop came to be used of a distinct and preeminent position.

manage their children and their own households well. He concludes in v. 13 by assuring them that those who serve well gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

In the middle of his instruction about the qualifications of deacons, Paul says in v. 11: ***Gunaikas* likewise are to be worthy of respect, not slanderers, level-headed, and faithful in all things.** *Gunaikas* is the plural accusative form of the noun *gunē*, which means either woman or wife depending on the context; it does not mean deacon.² If Paul was referring to women deacons, instead of distinguishing these women from deacons, there is no reason he would not have written *Tas diakonous*, applying the feminine form of the article to the same noun form used to refer to deacons at the beginning of v. 8 (the masculine noun *diakonos*, which generally meant "servant," could apply to both men and women).³ That would have made his intent clear, whereas writing *gunaikas* was a sure prescription for misunderstanding. Why refer to women deacons as women/wives instead of referring to them by their office as was done with the overseers in vv. 1-2 and the male deacons in vv. 8 and 12?

Those who believe Paul in v. 11 is giving qualifications for women deacons get there by rendering *gunaikas* as "women" rather than "wives" and insisting that the context establishes that the women under consideration are women deacons. But the context provides no such support. If the women were female occupants of the office of deacon, the same office occupied by the males of 3:8-10, it would make no sense for any of the qualifications given in vv. 8-10 to be repeated for the women in v. 11. If the women were deacons, they would be subject to the requirements for deacons given in vv. 8-10, so repeating any of them in v. 11 would be redundant. And yet, one is repeated exactly (σεμνοῦς/σεμνῆς – worthy of respect) and one or more of the others arguably are repeated in substance.⁴ To borrow Alexander Strauch's illustration, "That would be like saying that all nurses must attend four years of college and then singling out male nurses and repeating with slightly different terminology that male nurses must attend four years of college. The required four years of college apply to all nurses, male or female."⁵

Nor would it make any sense for the list of qualifications for deacons in vv. 8-10 and 12 to be truncated for deacons who happened to be women, as is done for the women of v. 11. If they are deacons, why would they not have to be tested? Why would they not have to be "single-tongued"? Why would they not have to be free from overindulgence in wine (cf. Tit. 2:3)? Why would they not have to be free from a love of money? And why would they not have to be the wife of one husband (cf. 1 Tim. 5:9)? Even if one accepts the questionable assertion that proscriptions of being double-tongued, overindulging in wine, and loving money all are repeated in substance in v. 11, the other qualifications certainly are not applied.

² Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 208-209.

³ Thus, the oft-repeated claim that *gunaikas* was the only way Paul could refer to a female deacon because there was no feminine form of "deacon" in his day is incorrect. Paul also could have coined the feminine form of "deacon" (*diakonissa* – "deaconess") as was used for the office that developed later in church history.

⁴ See, for example, the claim in Barry L. Blackburn, "The Identity of the 'Women' in 1 Tim. 3:11" in Carroll Osburn, ed., *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999), 1:309-310.

⁵ Alexander Strauch, "Women Deacons, Deacons' Assistants, or Wives of Deacons?" *Emmaus Journal* (Winter 1992), 200.

If one explains the repetition and omission in v. 11 of certain character traits elsewhere specified for deacons by claiming the women are not female occupants of the same office occupied by the males of 3:8-10 and 12 – not deacons "in that sense" – but occupants of a distinct position having its own qualifications, one has separated them from the only office (deacon) that is mentioned in the text. If they are not holders of that office, there is no reason to insist they are holders of some other office, let alone a deacon-like office. They simply may be women who are related to the deacons in some unofficial capacity for which qualifications are relevant, such as wives or informal assistants of deacons. In other words, one cannot admit they are not the deacons being discussed and then claim the discussion of deacons reveals them to be holders of a deacon-like church office. Once it is conceded they are not the deacons being discussed, one has forfeited any basis for limiting the options for their role to church officers. The context requires only that they in some way be related to the deacons.

Understanding these women to be deacons also rests on the dubious claim that the office of deacon does not involve an exercise of authority. Otherwise, women serving in that capacity would run afoul of the prohibition in 1 Tim. 2:12 of women exercising authority over men in the church. The fact the office of deacon is not a teaching ministry does not mean it is not a position of authority, as teaching is not the only way in which authority can be exercised. The appointment of deacons to their office invests them with authority to direct others in the administration of their ministry on behalf of the church.⁶ One could dodge this objection by asserting that women deacons were limited to dealing only with women in their ministry, but if Paul is identifying women eligible for appointment as deacons one would expect him to make that restriction known.

All these problems evaporate when one recognizes that the *gunaikas* are not deacons. Rather, v. 11 is most likely a parenthetical statement about the character traits necessary for the wives of deacons. It is included because their character is a requirement for their husband's eligibility for appointment as a deacon. It is parenthetical because it relates to their character rather than his own. Attention is immediately turned back to the deacon's own character, now in the just-mentioned context of marriage, by declaring, "Let deacons be husbands of one wife."

That Paul is speaking of wives in v. 11 was recognized by virtually all English translations from the Tyndale New Testament (1526) until the RV/AV (1881, 1901). This includes the Coverdale Bible, Matthew's Bible, Great Bible, Geneva Bible, Bishop's Bible, and King James Bible. The lone exception during that span was the Roman Catholic Rheims New Testament (1582), which had "The women." Modern English versions that render *gunaikas* in v. 11 as "wives" include the NEB, NKJV, NIV'84, GNT, GW, NET, HCSB, LEB, ISV, NLT, ESV, and CSB. Modern scholars who accept "wives" as the better translation include Burton Scott Easton, Alan Richardson, Herman Ridderbos, Charles Ryrie, Ralph Earle, A. T. Hanson, George

⁶ The early church understood the office of deacon to be a position of authority. See, e.g., Ignatius's letter to Polycarp 6 ("I am devoted to those who are *subject to* the bishop, the presbyters, *the deacons*"); Polycarp's letter to the Philippians 5 ("Wherefore it is right to abstain from all these things, *submitting yourselves* to the presbyters and *deacons* as to God and Christ"); Tertullian's *De Fuga in Persecutione* 11 ("But when *persons in authority* themselves—I mean the very *deacons*, and presbyters, and bishops—take to flight); and Cyprian's Epistle V:3 ("that members of Christ, and even members that have confessed Christ, are defiled by unlawful concubinage, and *cannot be ruled either by deacons* or by presbyters").

Knight, Alexander Strauch, Wayne Grudem, James Barnett, William Mounce, Jack Cottrell, Benjamin Merkle, and Guy Waters.⁷

Though most modern scholars favor rendering *gunaikas* in v. 11 as "women," which they take to mean women deacons, their reasons for rejecting the translation "wives" are not strong. They typically raise three main objections. First, they point out that no character traits are specified for the wives of overseers and argue that this makes it very unlikely there would be character requirements for the wives of deacons, but that does not take seriously enough the differing roles of deacons and overseers. Robert Lewis summarizes the common response to this objection:

To counter such an objection, mention is made that only the wives of deacons could assist their husbands in actually carrying out their ministry while the elders' wives could not. Indeed the wife of an elder would be strictly prohibited (1 Tim 2:12) from those teaching and ruling functions which he performs in the church. Concerning the deacon's wife, however, no such prohibitions exist. On the contrary, as a deacon carried out his service and visitation duties, certain situations would arise which only a woman could perform. Such functions a deacon would quite naturally turn over to his wife whose character was complementary to his own.⁸

Paul is not suggesting the character of an overseer's wife is irrelevant to his suitability for the position but indicating it is less directly relevant than the character of a deacon's wife. The character failings of an overseer's wife could affect whether he was above reproach, managed his household well, and had a good reputation with outsiders, but since the deacon's wife would be assisting the deacon in taking care of the personal and physical needs of congregants, which probably would involve the use of mercy funds in the church, her character requirements are stated expressly.

Second, it commonly is asserted that Paul would have used a modifier after *gunaikas*, either *diakonōn* (of deacons) or *autōn* (of them), if he was referring to the wives of deacons, but that is uncertain. Such a modifier is not required when, as here, the context makes clear of whose wife one is speaking. Grudem remarks, "It is true that Paul simply says 'the wives' rather than 'their wives,' but Greek frequently omits possessive adjectives when the person named (brother,

⁷ Burton Scott Easton, *The Pastoral Epistles* (New York: Scribner's 1947), 132-134; Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 333-334; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 461 (n. 99); Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Role of Women in the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 90-91; Ralph Earle, "1, 2 Timothy" in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:368; A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 80-81; George W. Knight III, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 170-173; Alexander Strauch (1992), 204-207; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 919 (n. 25); James Monroe Barnett, *The Diaconate*, rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 40; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 202-205; Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), 439-440; Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 253-255; Guy Waters, "Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? No." (February 19, 2019; retrieved on 3/5/19 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-support-female-deacons-no/>).

⁸ Robert M. Lewis, "The 'Women' of 1 Timothy 3:11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April 1979), 168.

sister, father, mother, etc.) would have an obvious relationship to the person being discussed in the immediate context."⁹ There are multiple examples where a husband or wife is referred to without such a modifier (e.g., Mat. 18:25; 1 Cor. 7:3-4, 14, 33; Eph. 5:25; Col. 3:18-19; 1 Cor. 7:2-4, 11, 14, 33) including some in which the noun "wife" has no definite article (Mk. 10:2, 12:19; Lk. 18:29, 20:28; 1 Cor. 7:11).¹⁰

Finally, it commonly is asserted that the adverb *hōsautōs* ("likewise") which follows *gunaikas* in 1 Tim. 3:11 means the *gunaikas* also are church officers like the previously mentioned offices of overseers and deacons, but that puts more weight on the word than it can bear. The point of comparison indicated by *hōsautōs* is not that all three groups (overseers, deacons, and *gunaikas*) are formal church officers but that all three have character requirements. It functions similarly in Tit. 2:3 where older women, like older men ("likewise"), are to possess certain virtues. In the case of the *gunaikas*, those requirements bear on the husband's eligibility for appointment as a deacon and are specified because of his wife's presumed involvement in his ministry.

The weaknesses of the claim that 1 Tim. 3:11 refers to women deacons often are not given due weight because it is believed that interpretation is confirmed by Paul's identification of Phoebe as a deacon in Rom. 16:1. But the claim that Paul identifies Phoebe as one appointed to the office of deacon is itself problematic. It gets bolstered by appeal to 1 Tim. 3:11. So one is left with two unlikely interpretations each of which is assumed to be correct for the purpose of fortifying the other. Unlikely interpretations do not transform into likely ones by appealing to each other.

In Rom. 16:1-2 Paul writes (two key words transliterated):

Now I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is [also] a *diakonon* of the church in Cenchrea, ² that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints and may assist her in whatever matter she has need of you, for she herself has also been a *prostatis* of many, myself included.

Some recent English versions render *diakonon* in v. 1 as "deacon" (NRSV, GW, NLT, ISV, NIV) or "deaconess" (RSV, NJB) suggesting Phoebe had been appointed to the office of deacon by the church in Cenchrea. It is true that *diakonos* is the word for the office of deacon (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12, 13), but it can mean simply "servant" or "minister" without any connotation of a church office or position.¹¹ Indeed, it is translated that way in the vast majority of its 29 occurrences in the New Testament. It was rendered "minister" in Rom. 16:1 by Tyndale

⁹ Grudem, 919 (n. 25). He assumes the article is implied (e.g., RSV, NIV, LEB).

¹⁰ Regarding the latter group, Blackburn argues (p. 308-309) that in those verses it is more certain than in 1 Tim. 3:11 that the *gunē* is the wife of the man just mentioned. Assuming that is the case, the question is whether it is *clear enough* that the *gunaikas* of 1 Tim. 3:11 are the wives of deacons to make those examples relevant. The fact 3:11 is sandwiched by the discussion of qualifications of male deacons and followed immediately by a reference to their being husbands of one wife makes the identification sufficiently clear. As for the absence of the article before *gunaikas*, Knight remarks (p. 172), "in the whole pericope Paul refers to people anarthrously (*diakonous*, v. 8; *diakonoi*, v. 12; *teknōn*, v. 12; *tekna*, v. 3; *andres* in v. 12, *andra* in v. 2; *ton episkopon*, v. 2 is the sole exception, probably because of its generic usage)."

¹¹ BDAG, 230-231.

(1526), and that term was used in that verse in the Coverdale Bible, Matthew's Bible, Great Bible, Bishop's Bible, and the Rheims New Testament. The word was translated "servant" in Rom. 16:1 in the Geneva Bible (1560), which was followed by the King James Bible (1611) and all subsequent English versions until the RSV (1946), which introduced "deaconess." Modern English translations have continued to favor "servant" by a significant margin (NAS, NKJV, NIV'84, GNT [serves] NASU, NET, HCSB, CEB, LEB, ESV, and CSB).

Most modern scholars understand Phoebe to have been a deacon or deaconess, but they frequently grant the possibility that Paul was using *diakonos* in Rom. 16:1 in its generic sense of "servant." For example, Douglas Moo writes, "Paul may, then, simply be highlighting the fact that Phoebe has effectively 'served' the church to which she belongs."¹² Grant Osborne states, "Then she is a 'deacon' of the church in Cenchrea, which could refer to a general service to the church or an official office in the church" (parenthetical citations omitted).¹³ Modern commentators who believe Paul is identifying Phoebe simply as a notable servant rather than a church officer include John Murray, Jack Cottrell, and Robert Mounce.¹⁴

Proponents of the translation "deacon" or "deaconess" put much stock in the fact Phoebe is identified not simply as a *diakonon* but as a *diakonon* "of the church in Cenchrea." They claim this indicates she was an officer of that church rather than an unofficial servant because those occupying the office of elder are described in Acts 20:17 and Jas. 5:14 as elders "of the church" and angels representing the various churches in Revelation 2-3 are described as the angel "of the church in X." But the phrase "of the church" or "of the church in X" does not define the role it modifies; it says only that the role is related to the church. As one could identify someone as an owner, coach, or fan "of the team in Phoenix" without implying they all were related to the team in some official capacity, one could identify someone as an angel, elder, or servant "of the church in X" without implying they all were officers of the church.

Paul is commending Phoebe, who may well have been carrying the letter, to the church in Rome. He informs the saints there that she is a sister in Christ and praises her as a servant of the church in Cenchrea, the church where she lives. His purpose for commending her is that they may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints and may provide her whatever assistance she needs. In other words, he is telling them to treat this woman they had never met with the utmost warmth, generosity, and hospitality. He adds that doing so would be especially fitting in her case because ("for") she herself had *also* been a *prostatis* of many, himself included. Thus, the reception Paul is requesting they give Phoebe is analogous to what she had given others in her role as *prostatis*.

The word *prostatis* is found only here in biblical Greek. It refers to a female patron or benefactor,¹⁵ one who helped people or institutions, especially financially. "It is easy to imagine Phoebe as a woman of wealth and high social status . . . who accommodated the assembly of

¹² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, NICNT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 929-930.

¹³ Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 402.

¹⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 226; Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 272; Jack Cottrell, *Romans*, CPNIVC (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1998), 2:461-463.

¹⁵ BDAG, 885.

Christians in Cenchreae in her house and provided practical help to Paul and his coworkers during their ministry in the area."¹⁶ That role would explain why Paul describes her as a "servant" (*diakonos*) of the church in v. 1. The saints, the church, in Cenchrea were primary beneficiaries of her generosity, and sharing of material blessings was understood as an act of "service" (*diakonia* – 2 Cor. 9:1, 12-13) thus making the sharer a "servant" (*diakonos*).¹⁷ As James Walters rightly acknowledges, "the meaning 'servant' for *diakonos* could refer merely to Phoebe's work as a patron."¹⁸ Aimé Mortimort likewise states:

[I]t is possible to argue that what follows in the text provides the best clue to the nature of the service rendered by Phoebe. St. Paul specifies that for him, as for many others, she has been a helper, or protectress (*prostatis*). This term suggests activities pertaining to the established and accepted practices, recognized by all, of providing hospitality and assistance. This interpretation is especially plausible when we remember that Cenchreae was the port of Corinth facing east; it was there that the Christian brethren from Syria or Asia Minor would normally have debarked in Greece.¹⁹

In this light, there is no adequate reason for concluding that *diakonos* in v. 1 carries the technical sense of one appointed to the church office of deacon. John Murray's words still stand:

It is common to give to Phoebe the title of "deaconess" and regard her as having performed an office in the church corresponding to that which belonged to men who exercised the office of deacon (cf. Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). Though the word for "servant" is the same as is used for deacon in the instances cited, yet the word is also used to denote the person performing any type of ministry. If Phoebe ministered to the saints, as is evident from verse 2, then she would be a servant of the church and there is neither need nor warrant to suppose that she occupied or exercised what amounted to an ecclesiastical office comparable to that of the diaconate.²⁰

Appeal sometimes is made to church history to rescue the claim that 1 Tim. 3:11 and Rom. 16:1 refer to women deacons, but that effort fails. The *Didache*, a manual of church life that commonly is dated from the late first or early second century,²¹ makes clear that the office of deacon was understood to be restricted to men. Paragraph 15 of that document (Lightfoot translation) begins: "Appoint for yourselves therefore bishops and *deacons* worthy of the Lord, *men* [ανδρας – accusative masculine plural of ανηρ] who are meek and not lovers of money, and

¹⁶ Frank Thielman, *Romans*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 712.

¹⁷ Similarly, the statement in Mat. 27:55 that certain women had followed Jesus from Galilee "to serve" (*diakoneō*) him seems to refer to their providing for him from their own resources (Lk. 8:3).

¹⁸ James Walters, "'Phoebe' and 'Junia(s)' – Rom. 16:1-2, 7" in Carroll Osburn, ed., *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999), 1:181.

¹⁹ Aimé Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses An Historical Study* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 20.

²⁰ Murray, 226.

²¹ For example, Willy Rordorf says of the final redaction of the work in "Didache" in Angelo Di Berardino, ed., *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 1:709, "we align ourselves with A. Adam and J.-P. Audet, who maintain that the whole of the work goes back to the 1st c."

true and approved; for unto you they also perform the service of the prophets and teachers."²² The word for "men" is the same word used in Acts 6:3 where the apostles directed the disciples to choose seven *men* for appointment to the task of distributing food. The fact all of those chosen were males indicates the word in that context was sex specific. In other words, it was not used to represent both males and females. This is especially significant given that Acts 6 was understood in the early church to involve the appointment of deacons, a conclusion no doubt reached because of the presence of *diakonia* in v. 1 and *diakoneō* in v. 2.²³

Proponents of women deacons cite Pliny's letter to Emperor Trajan, written in Latin, as proof there were women deacons in Bithynia in the early second century, but his statement on the matter is ambiguous. He says of certain female slaves he tortured to obtain information about Christianity that they were called "*ministrae*" (plural of *ministra*), but *ministrae* has the same obscurity as the Greek word *diakonos*. As Jack Lewis points out, "They [Pliny's *ministrae*] could be servants of the church, or they could be appointees of the church. No one can know."²⁴ The text provides no information about the status and function of these women in the Christian community. Even if they held a formal position in the church, it may have been that of enrolled widows (1 Tim. 5:9-16) who served in some capacity rather than that of deacons. J. G. Davies summarizes the matter well:

When we recall that there is no convincing evidence of the existence of an order in the Apostolic Age and that the first definite reference to it is not found before the middle of the third century, the only reasonable conclusion upon the available evidence is that, whoever Pliny had examined and whatever unspecified functions they had previously performed, we cannot say with conviction that they were members of an order of deaconesses.²⁵

The other early text that sometimes is cited in support of women deacons is a passage from the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a Christian document written in stages from the late-first century to around the mid-second century. In Vision 2.4.3, a revelation is given to Hermas by an elderly woman later identified as the church. He is told (Lightfoot's translation): "Thou shalt therefore

²² J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987 [reprint 1891]), 234.

²³ See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, ch. 12:10 ("Stephen, who was chosen the first deacon by the apostles"), Book IV, ch. 15:1 ("Luke also has recorded that Stephen, who was the first elected into the diaconate by the apostles"); Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against All Heresies* ("He was one of the seven deacons who were appointed in the Acts of the Apostles") [The work is thought to be related to the lost treatise of the early third-century theologian Hippolytus of Rome titled the *Syntagma* – see Reinhard Plummer, *Early Christian Authors on Samaritans and Samaritanism* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 32]; Cyprian, *Epistles of Cyprian*, Epistle LXIV:3 ("while apostles appointed for themselves deacons after the ascent of the Lord into heaven"). This understanding is reflected in Eusebius's early fourth-century work, *The History of the Church*, Bk. 2:1 ("By prayer and laying on of the apostles' hands they were appointed to the diaconate").

²⁴ Jack P. Lewis, *Exegesis of Difficult Passages* (Searcy, AR: Resource Publications, 1988), 108. Everett Ferguson likewise remarks in *Women in the Church* (Chickasha, OK: Yeoman Press, 2003), 47: "The Latin *ministrae* was a general word for women servants that in this passage could refer (1) to the feminine worshipers of a deity (Christ), (2) slaves (on this meaning, perhaps Christians chose to use this term rather than slaves for their fellow believers), (3) women especially active in service (in this context Christian service), or (4) "deaconesses" (in view of the apparent reference to a special Christian usage)."

²⁵ J. G. Davies, "Deacons, Deaconesses and the Minor Orders in the Patristic Period," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 14 (April 1963), 2-3.

write two little books, and shalt send one to Clement, and one to Graptē. So Clement shall send to the foreign cities, for this is his duty; while Graptē shall instruct the widows and the orphans." The fact Graptē is to instruct the widows and orphans does not establish her as a formal officeholder such as a deacon. She is not described that way, and there is no reason to infer such from the fact she was to teach widows and orphans. In Tit. 2:3-4 Paul commands older women generally to teach good things to younger women and says nothing about the need for appointment to an office to do so. There is no impediment to women teaching other women of any age or children because the restriction on their teaching in 1 Tim. 2:11-12 relates to teaching men in the assembly.

It is not until the third century, in the document known as the *Didascalia of the Apostles*, probably of Syrian origin, that clear evidence arises for women being appointed to a church office of deaconess.²⁶ Martimort states, "It is on the eastern *limes* of the Roman Empire that we finally see deaconesses emerging. The first document that specifically mentions deaconesses, one that, in a sense, constitutes their birth certificate as an ecclesiastical institution, is the document called the *Didascalia of the Apostles*."²⁷ If women had been serving as official deacons since the first century based on Paul's writings, it is deeply puzzling why no clear indication of that office exists prior to the third century and why the earlier *Didache* restricted the office to men. It is noteworthy that the duties of a deaconess were confined in the *Didascalia* to "the ministry of women." One gets the impression this is not what modern proponents of women deacons have in mind. Ferguson writes:

With the decline of adult baptism, one of the important functions of deaconesses became unnecessary. The order of deaconess appears to have been primarily an eastern creation and to have lasted longer there. Councils at Epaon (517) and Orleans (533) in France abolished the office, but there were survivals even in the west.²⁸

Ryrie's caution is wise: "one must be on guard against reading back into the New Testament subsequent development in church organization."²⁹ The appearance of deaconesses in the Eastern church of the third century does not mean that practice reflects the teaching of the New Testament. Indeed, the abolition of the office by later church councils supports the contrary. This certainly would not be the only drift from biblical faithfulness that occurred in the centuries after the apostles. The standard is the word of the God, and I have explained why I am convinced there is no biblical authority for appointing women to the office of deacon. I pray that what I have written will be helpful.

²⁶ It is debated whether the document dates to the first or second half of the third century. S. Stewart-Sykes gives only a *terminus ad quem* of the mid-fourth century noting "though much of the material may be earlier." "Didascalia Apostolorum" in Angelo Di Berardino, ed., *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 1:709.

²⁷ Martimort, 35. See also, Ferguson, 48; Lewis, 108.

²⁸ Everett Ferguson, "Deaconess" in Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 322. He notes prior to the quoted text that "[t]he deaconesses did not perform baptism (cf. Tertullian, *Bapt.* 17) but assisted at the baptism of women."

²⁹ Ryrie, 90.