

2. Why is it wrong to think that someone must become a deacon before he can serve as an elder?
3. What is the appropriate relationship between the deacons and the elders?
4. Why is the office of deacon such a crucial office in the church?
5. Does your church celebrate the work of the deacons? What could be done to show appreciation to them for their work?

QUESTION 38

What Are the Reasons for Affirming That Women Can Be Deacons?

The question of whether women can be deacons must be considered independently of whether they can become elders. While many Christians believe the Bible forbids women to hold the office of elder, some of these same Christians also are convinced that women can hold the office of deacon. In the following pages, we will consider the most common arguments given in favor of allowing women to be deacons. In particular, we will present the arguments related to three crucial texts: 1 Timothy 3:11; 1 Timothy 2:12; and Romans 16:1-2.

1 Timothy 3:11

In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Paul lists the qualifications needed for a man to become a deacon. In verse 11, however, he introduces the requirements needed for “women.” According to the NRSV, Paul states, “Women likewise must be . . .” The ESV, on the other hand, reads, “Their wives likewise must be . . .” The question is whether Paul is speaking of the requirements for the wife of a deacon or for a woman deacon. The following arguments suggest that Paul has the latter in mind:

1. The Greek term *gunaikas* (from the word *gunē*) can refer either to “women” or, more specifically, to “wives”—the distinction can be determined only by the context. If Paul was referring to the wives of the deacons, he could have indicated his intention by adding the word “their” (“*Their* wives likewise . . .”). Because the Greek does not contain the word for “their” (although it is included in many English translations), it is best to translate the original text simply as “women.” In this case, Paul is introducing another office and is not merely referring to the wives of deacons.

2. Paul begins verse 11 in a manner similar to verse 8, which introduces a new office. In verses 1–7, Paul identifies the qualifications needed for anyone aspiring to the office of overseer. When Paul begins the next section, which introduces the office of deacon, he states, “Deacons likewise . . .” (v. 8). The point to be made is that verse 11 begins in the same manner, which suggests that another office (deacons) is being introduced. The flow of Paul’s writing then becomes evident: “. . . an overseer must be [v. 2] . . . deacons likewise must be [v. 8] . . . women [deacons] likewise must be [v. 11] . . .” Verses 12 and 13, which refer again to qualifications for male deacons, include additional information that Paul adds as an afterthought, causing a disjointed unit.

3. Another reason that suggests that Paul is not speaking about deacons’ wives but rather about women deacons is that the qualifications for overseers do not include any reference to their wives. It does not seem likely that Paul would add a special requirement for the wife of a deacon when the more important office of overseer has no such requirement. Thus, it does not seem likely that Paul would have stricter requirements for deacons than he does for elders.

1 Timothy 2:12

Many Christians are opposed to allowing women to become deacons because, according to 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul forbids a woman “to teach or exercise authority over a man.” And because all offices in the church, including the office of deacon, possess an inherent authority, women are not permitted to hold such offices. There are two main responses to this dilemma that would still allow women to be deacons. First, Paul’s prohibition could be limited due to cultural reasons. That is, Paul prohibits women from teaching and having authority over men because the women of Ephesus were either uneducated or were teaching false doctrine (or both). Therefore, in the case of women who are educated and are not teaching false doctrine, Paul’s prohibition does not apply.

A second response is that the ministry of deacons is by nature a ministry of service that does not require women to teach or exercise authority over men and thus would not violate Paul’s prohibition. Unlike the elders, deacons do not need to be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2) because their ministry does not involve teaching. Furthermore, it could be argued that the office of deacon is not an authoritative office due to the nature of their service-

oriented ministry. Deacons are not called to lead the church but to serve the church. Therefore, the two prohibitions given by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12 are not violated by allowing women to become deacons.

Romans 16:1–2

In this text, Paul commends Phoebe to the church at Rome and calls her a *diakonos* “of the church at Cenchræe.” There are at least three reasons that support the translation of *diakonos* here as “deacon,” referring to an officeholder and not merely one who is a “servant.”

1. Paul uses the masculine form *diakonos* to refer to a woman. Thus, it can be argued that Paul is not using the term generally to refer to one who is a servant but that he has a specific office in mind. The masculine form of *diakonos* used to reference a woman suggests that the term became standardized when referring to an office.
2. When the generic meaning of *diakonos* (i.e., “servant”) is intended, the text usually reads, “servant of the Lord” or something similar. This is the only place Paul speaks of someone being a *diakonos* of a local church. Tycheus is called a “minister [or servant] in the Lord” (Eph. 6:21), Epaphras is named a “minister [servant] of Christ” (Col. 1:7), and Timothy is labeled a “servant of Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 4:6). Because only Phoebe is specifically said to be a servant of a local congregation (the church at Cenchræe), it is likely that she was a “deacon” of her church.
3. Phoebe is sent to perform an official task on behalf of the apostle Paul and her church. Paul commends her to the church at Rome and urges the Roman Christians to aid her since she is about the important business of the church. He asks that they “welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need . . . for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well” (Rom. 16:2). Such an official task, it is argued, requires an official office.¹

1. Many scholars posit that Phoebe was in fact the bearer of the letter of Romans, so C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1979), 3:780; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 226; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 913; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, trans. Scott J. Hattemann (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 246; and F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, rev. ed., TNTC (Leicester: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 6:252.

Summary

The conclusion drawn from the above data is that women can be deacons in the church. In 1 Timothy 3:11, Paul gives the qualifications for women deacons and in Romans 16:1 specially names Phoebe, a sister in the Lord, a “deacon of the church at Cenchreae.” Furthermore, allowing women to become deacons does not violate Paul’s prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12 since a deacon does not “teach or exercise authority” in the church.

Reflection Questions

1. Are you persuaded that 1 Timothy 3:11 refers to a woman deacon and not simply the wife of a deacon?
2. What individual arguments do you find the most persuasive?
3. Do you agree with those who maintain that the office of deacon is not an authoritative office and therefore does not violate 1 Timothy 2:12?
4. What are the reasons for affirming that Phoebe was a deacon of her church?
5. Why do you think that many churches who do not allow women to be elders will allow them to be deacons?

QUESTION 39

What Are the Reasons for Affirming That Women Cannot Be Deacons?

We will now offer the reasons in favor of not allowing women to be deacons. It must be acknowledged, however, that while many of the following arguments suggest that women were not deacons in the New Testament, such conclusions must be tentatively held due to the paucity of information. As with the previous question, we will discuss the arguments related to 1 Timothy 3:11; 1 Timothy 2:12; and Romans 16:1–2.

1 Timothy 3:11

Although the Greek text is ambiguous as to whether Paul is referring to the wives of deacons or to women deacons, the following reasons favor the former reading.

1. In the immediate context, the Greek term *gunē* is translated “wife.” For example, in verse 2, Paul states that overseers must be the “husband of one wife [*gunē*]” and in verse 12 he similarly writes that deacons must each “be the husband of one wife [*gunē*].” Therefore, because the usage of *gunē* in the preceding context (v. 2) and the usage of *gunē* in the following verse (v. 12) has the meaning of “wife,” it is consistent with the context to translate *gunē* as “wife” in verse 11.
2. In the context, the possessive article “their” is not required to make the passage understandable as referring to the wives of deacons. It is obvious that if “wives” are referred to in verse 11, they could only be the wives of potential candidates for the office of deacon. On the other hand, if Paul switches to the qualifications for a separate office of female deacon, we would expect a clear indication—such as “women who serve as deacons.” Furthermore, in verse 12 Paul shifts

- back to speaking about male deacons without giving any indication that he ever left the topic. Thus, if the text referred to women deacons, it would disrupt the natural flow of the text, lacking a clear transition back to male deacons in verse 12.
3. If Paul is referring to women deacons in verse 11, we would expect some reference to their marital status and fidelity. In every other list of qualifications (for elders/overseers, deacons, and church-supported widows), Paul includes such a reference. In 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6, an elder/overseer must be “the husband of one wife”; in 1 Timothy 3:12 a deacon must be “the husband of one wife”; and in 1 Timothy 5:9 a widow supported by the church must have been “the wife of one husband.” In verse 11, however, Paul makes no mention of a woman’s marital status or fidelity.
 4. The argument that the “likewise” in verse 11 must introduce a new office is not compelling based on other uses of the same term in 1 Timothy. For example, in chapter 2 Paul states, “I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling” (v. 8). In the next verse, he adds, “likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire” (v. 9). Paul links his injunctions to men and women with “likewise,” but his comments are very different. He states that men are to pray . . . likewise women are to dress appropriately. He does not say, “Men are to pray . . . likewise, women also are to pray.” Therefore, to maintain that the “likewise” in 3:11 must introduce a new office interprets the word too narrowly. Rather, Paul is saying that just as deacons are to be dignified, likewise, so are their wives.
 5. It would be strange for Paul to give the qualifications for male deacons in verses 8–10, interrupt himself to introduce a new office of female deacon in verse 11, and then return to the qualifications for male deacons in verses 12–13. If verse 11 refers to the wife of a deacon, however, then verse 11 fits nicely in the flow of the section. Verses 11 and 12 form the second half of a deacon’s qualifications. Verses 8–10 speak of a deacon’s personal and moral qualifications, whereas verses 11–12 refer to his family and home life. That is, his wife is to be dignified, he is to be faithful to his wife, and he is to govern his home and children well. Thus, verses 11 and 12 form a common theme of

- the deacon’s family. These verses are dealing with the same topic and naturally belong together.¹
6. It is also unlikely that verses 12 and 13 are an afterthought, being listed after the requirements for female deacons. Why would Paul forget to mention that a deacon must be the husband of one wife or a good manager of his household? Such requirements are very significant to the office and ones that Paul had just mentioned in relation to the qualifications for overseers. Therefore, the idea that Paul simply forgot to mention some qualifications and then returns to them after he introduces the qualifications for women deacons is not persuasive.
 7. If Paul had intended to establish an additional office (female deacons), it is more likely that he would have done so explicitly, rather than incidentally. For Paul to provide only one sentence with only four requirements seems unlikely. He lists fifteen requirements for overseers and nine (or ten) requirements for deacons, whereas female deacons would be given only four requirements. Such a short list would be surprising, especially since we know that women were being led astray by the false teachers (1 Tim. 5:13; 2 Tim. 3:6–7).
 8. Although it is true that nothing is said concerning the wife of an elder, one cannot base too much on this argument from silence. It must be remembered that the lists of requirements in 1 Timothy 3 are not formal lists but are ad hoc in the sense that they are directed at countering specific problems prevalent in the church at Ephesus. It is entirely possible that, for reasons we do not know, Paul deemed it necessary and important that the wife of a deacon meet a certain standard. Furthermore, it is likely that the deacons’ wives participated in their husbands’ ministry of serving in a way that elders’ wives did not. Since the deacons were not involved in a teaching and ruling ministry (which was forbidden for women, 1 Tim. 2:12) but in a serving ministry, their wives could easily be involved in their ministry. The Seven chosen in Acts 6 were all men. What is interesting is that their ministry involved ministering to widows. It seems reasonable to assume that the wives of the Seven could have been involved in such a ministry, whereas the wives of the apostles would not have assisted their husbands in preaching the Word.

1. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 919n. 25, for similar arguments.

1 Timothy 2:12

In 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul forbids a woman “to teach or to exercise authority over a man.” As we have seen, many argue that because the office of deacon is not a teaching office or an office that exercises authority, a woman is allowed to become a deacon. Such an argument, however, is unconvincing for the following reasons.

1. Although it is true that deacons are not given a teaching ministry, it is a mistake to assume that deacons do not exercise any authority in their ministry. Deacons are servants but they are also leaders in the church, and as leaders they possess authority. The Seven chosen in Acts 6 were given oversight over the daily distribution of food—a responsibility that certainly involved exercising authority over others. Deacons exercise authority in the physical/logistical realm, which would be inappropriate for women.
2. It would seem that by definition an office assumes a certain amount of authority. If no authority is involved, then the office is, in a sense, irrelevant. Other features related to the concept of office also indicate that authority is involved. Those appointed to the office of deacon are usually officially appointed before the congregation and are given the designation “deacon,” which sets them apart for their office. If they are merely servants who by virtue of their office have no authority over others, then why is it necessary to set them apart and give them a distinct title?
3. If deacons do not exercise authority, then why is it necessary for them to meet so many qualifications? If the Seven chosen in Acts 6 had no authority, then why was it necessary that they had a good reputation and were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom? If deacons have no authority, then why is it necessary that they not be greedy for dishonest gain, manage their household well, and are first tested?
4. Even if having women deacons does not violate 1 Timothy 2:12, it does not follow that women can or should be deacons. Nowhere in Scripture is there a clear example of women being deacons—except perhaps Romans 16:1. When the early church had an issue related specifically to women, they appointed men to handle the problem. Because there is no indication that women were appointed to any of-

face in the New Testament church, it would be wise for the church today to follow God’s designed pattern of leadership.

Romans 16:1–2

In Romans 16:1, Paul commends Phoebe to the church at Rome and calls her a *diakonos* “of the church at Cenchreae.” While it is possible that Paul’s use of *diakonos* is used in the more technical sense of a church office, the evidence for that conclusion is weak.

1. Although it is true that the masculine form *diakonos* is used to describe Phoebe, this may be because the feminine form did not exist at that time. Thus, the use of the masculine form has no real significance here. On the other hand, Paul could have created a Greek word for a female deacon if he had wanted to make it clear that Phoebe held the office of a deacon. Elsewhere in his writings, Paul sometimes created his own words when necessary to convey his intentions.
2. That Phoebe is described as a *diakonos* “of the church at Cenchreae” does not prove the term is used as a designation for an office. Since she was sent on an official mission by Paul (most scholars assume that Phoebe was the bearer of the letter to the church at Rome), it could be that he needed to describe the church from which she was sent. Thus, the term is used in a more specific sense, not as a designation of a church office, but as a designation of someone who is sent on an official task on behalf of Paul.²

Summary

Although the grounds for not allowing women to become deacons is not as strong as those for not allowing women to be elders, there is still sufficient evidence that such was not God’s design for the church. It is unlikely that in 1 Timothy 3:11 Paul is listing qualifications for the office of a female deacon. Rather, he is identifying the traits needed for the wife of a deacon. Allowing women to be deacons also violates 1 Timothy 2:12, which states that women are forbidden to exercise authority over men. The closest evidence that the

2. John Murray notes, “If Phoebe ministered to the saints . . . 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” (*The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968], 2:226).

early church had women deacons is found in Romans 16:1–2 with the example of Phoebe. This text, however, is not conclusive, and basing an office on one verse or passage is never a good practice. Therefore, it is best to not allow women to hold the office of deacon.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the reasons for affirming that 1 Timothy 3:11 does not refer to women deacons?
2. What individual arguments do you find most persuasive?
3. What are some reasons for believing the office of deacon is an authoritative office?
4. Are you convinced that Phoebe was a deacon? Why or why not?
5. Do you think women should be deacons?

QUESTION 40

Is It Important to Use the Titles “Elder” and “Deacon”?

Many churches that have leaders who essentially function as elders are not called “elders” and “deacons.” Thus, the question before us is whether it is essential that each congregation employ this terminology or whether other terms will work just as well. In this section, I will seek to demonstrate that although the terminology used is not as important as the actual role of church leaders, there are good reasons for employing biblical terminology.

Titles Are Not Essential

Although titles often are used for church leaders, Jesus warns against seeking after them. In contrast to the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus instructs us, “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ” (Matt. 23:8–10). There is a real danger of men seeking leadership in the church simply for the title or the recognition that the title brings. Jesus warns against such motivation by stating, “The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:11–12). Leadership in the church is not about acquiring titles but about becoming a servant.

The particular title used to describe a church leader is not the central issue. The more important issue is the role that person is fulfilling. As we have seen, the apostle Paul sometimes uses titles to describe particular church leaders. It should be noted, however, that Paul is more interested in service