

A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons

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Introduction

The modern debate regarding the ordination of women to the diaconate began in the 1880s, about twenty years after the rise of what has been called "Christian feminism." During the late 1880s a move to ordain women to the diaconate failed in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) but passed in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). The debate over women deacons re-emerged in the 1980s, about twenty years after the rise of secular and pagan feminism. The fact that the push to ordain women as deacons occurred in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries after certain types of feminism became popular in our culture is very interesting. The arguments set forth by those on both sides of the debate during the 1980s bore a striking resemblance to the arguments offered during the 1880s. At this writing there are a number of ministers in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Presbyterian Church of America who believe that women should be ordained to the diaconate. There are ministers within the RPCNA who do not believe that ordaining women to the diaconate has biblical warrant. Can the debate over women deacons be resolved within these orthodox Presbyterian bodies? Are the biblical passages used in the debate so difficult that the best one can hope for is an "exegetical standoff"? Does the evidence from church history support the pro-women deacon view, as many assert? Is it possible that in certain ways both sides have been wrong and that there is a third alternative? Since these questions are important, and since most of the material dealing with these issues is brief and somewhat superficial, I have endeavored to examine the historical evidence and the biblical passages used in the debate in greater detail. I hope and pray that this little book will help Bible-believing Reformed and Presbyterian pastors and elders have a better grasp of these issues.

I. The Historical Evidence

Those in favor of ordaining women to the diaconate argue that the early church had deaconesses, as did Calvin's Geneva and the early French Reformed churches. The Reformed Presbyterian scholar Rev. T. P. Stevenson was instrumental in convincing RPCNA elders and

ministers that women should be ordained to the diaconate, by pointing to the example of the early church. The authors of the OPC Minority Report¹ also use the example of the early church and Calvin's Geneva as reasons that women should be ordained as deacons. There is no question that deaconesses existed in the early church, in Calvin's Geneva and in the French Reformed churches. But these deaconesses were modeled after the order of widows in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. and *not* after Acts 6:1-6 or 1 Timothy 3:1-10, 12. Those who argue in favor of women deacons who are of the same office and function as male deacons should note that the evidence from church history starting with the earliest church fathers and ending with the 19th century is *overwhelmingly against* women deacons who are in the same office and have the same function as male deacons. There is not a *single instance* in the entire history of the Christian church of women deacons who are of the *same* office and function as male deacons, until the 19th century. The evidence will show that women deacons, whether ordained or not, were in a completely *separate* office from the male diaconate. These women had different functions, different qualifications and a different authority than the male diaconate.

The Old Dispensation

While the New Testament church office of deacon is distinctive to the new covenant administration, there were church officers in the Old Testament administration which had similar responsibilities. The officers in charge of managing the temple (Levites) and synagogue (*chazanim*) funds, and caring for the poor, were always men. James M. Willson's description of the synagogue *chazan* shows that the New Testament office of deacon was probably patterned after the Jewish *chazan*.

The organization of the Jewish synagogue confirms the view just presented of the moral character of the principles embodied in the constitution of the church, during the former dispensation, in regard to the management of fiscal concerns. In the language of Dr. M'Leod, "There were several officers in the Jewish synagogue, and these were authorized to conduct the public worship, preserve the order, *and manage the finances of the congregation.*" This latter officer was the *chazan* or deacon of the synagogue: and in the words of Prideaux, "the *chuzanim*, that is, overseers, who were also fixed ministers, and under the rulers of the synagogue, had the charge and oversight of all things in it, kept the sacred books of the law, and the prophets, and other Holy Scriptures, as also the books of their public liturgies, and all other utensils belonging to the synagogue." The order of the synagogue was, as all Presbyterians hold, the model of that of the church under the New Testament dispensation. In the synagogue was an officer who attended to the poor, had the oversight of the place of worship, and managed the finances. This fact furnishes additional evidence that the deacon's office is not *solely* the care of the poor. The *chazan* of the synagogue had the care of the poor as a part only of his charge: the

¹ Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office (Docket of the OPC General Assembly, 1988 [note: the Majority and Minority Reports were commended for study by the 55th General Assembly but not adopted; they may be found in the bound Minutes of the 55th G.A., pp. 310-373]).

oversight of the fiscal affairs of the synagogue belonged to him. Such officers as the trustee or committee-man of modern days, were not known either in the order of the synagogue, or of the churches.

The scripture argument for committing all the ecclesiastical goods to *deacons*, may be briefly stated thus: Both under the Old and New Testament dispensations, the Bible contains frequent allusions to the funds devoted to ecclesiastical uses—in *all cases* these were managed, until the canon of divine revelation was completed, by *ordained* officers, and such officers only; during the Old Testament dispensation by priests and Levites, during the new by *deacons*. Nor does the Bible contain any account of officers distinct from these, and *unordained*, to whom the fiscal concerns of the church either *were* or *might* be committed. The consequence is plain. Any other officers for the management of church funds are of human invention, and where they exist, occupy a place which should be occupied by officers chosen and set apart for this service according to Christ's institution.²

This does not prove that the ordained diaconate established by the apostles in Acts 6:1-6 is restricted to men. But if God intended to bring women into an office and function reserved solely for men for several centuries, one would expect clear warrant for it somewhere in the New Testament. The fact that the office was restricted to men in the old dispensation, coupled with the clear restriction of the diaconate to men in Acts 6:1-6, is strong evidence against the idea of ordained women deacons in the same office with the same responsibilities as male deacons. If God established women in the ordained diaconal office sometime after Acts 6:1-6, we would expect something clear, because it was such a change from past practice. Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 are considered to be difficult passages. (And in fact are better interpreted in other ways, as we shall see.) If women were in an ordained office which was very similar to the diaconate in the old dispensation, the lack of clear warrant would not be so serious. For example, infant baptism is obviously a continuation of infant circumcision with some minor changes. If the covenant with Abraham and circumcision were non-existent we would need more information in the New Testament regarding it. Therefore, those in favor of opening the ordained diaconal office to women bear the burden of proof.

The Didache (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, c. A.D. 100)

The *Didache*, in a section which deals with the affairs of the church, shows that the office of deacon is restricted to men.³ “Appoint, therefore, for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy

² James M. Willson, *The Deacon: An Inquiry into the Nature, Duties, and Exercise of the Office of the Deacon in the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: William Young, 1841), pp. 30-31. Mr. Willson was pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian congregation in Philadelphia; one of his primary concerns in writing this book was to oppose the innovation of trustees.

³ The earliest reference to the diaconate in the post-apostolic church is found in the writings of the apostolic father Hermas (c. A.D. 90-150). In his *Similitude* 9-27, he says that deacons are "such as have been set over inferior ministries and have protected the poor and the widows" (cited in Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* [New York, 1831], p. 221).

of the Lord, *men* meek, and not lovers of money, and truthful and proved; for they also render to you the service of prophets and teachers. Despise them not therefore, for they are your honoured ones, together with the prophets and teachers.”⁴ The word *aner* is used, which can refer only to the male sex. The placing of *deacon* alongside of *bishop* (and in other early Christian literature, presbyter) indicates that very early in the church male deacons had authority. They, along with the bishop, are the "honored ones." There is no record of an official order of deaconesses in the church at the time the *Didache* was written.

Pliny's Letter to Trajan (c. A.D. 113)

An early possible reference to a woman deacon comes not from Christian literature but from a secular source: Pliny the governor of Bithynia's letter to the emperor Trajan. “Pliny wrote to Trajan at the beginning of the second century that he had subjected women to the torture in persecution that he might extort confession: "*Ex duabus aucillis quæ ministræ dicebantur.*" Evidently one of these nouns, *ancilla*, is the common designation of handmaid, and the other, *ministra*, the official name of a female servant. And this term translates the Greek *diakono* in patristic Latin.”⁵ The patristic Latin could be translated: "I have judged it necessary to obtain information by torture from two servicing women (*ancillae*) called by them 'deaconesses' (*ministrae*).”⁶ This may be the first reference to female deaconesses. It is likely that these women had some sort of special service to the church. But we are given no information as to the role or function these women had in the church. This instance sheds *no* light on whether deaconesses are patterned after Paul's order of widows in 1 Timothy 5:9-12 or held the same office with male deacons.

The Epistles of Ignatius (c. A.D. 115)

Ignatius, who was said to be a disciple of the apostle John, wrote several epistles to the churches in Asia Minor while on his way to Rome to be martyred. This occurred under the persecution of the emperor Trajan. His description of the diaconate is inconsistent with the idea of deaconesses who function in the same office as male deacons.

First note that he assumes that deacons are men: "...it will become you, as a Church of God, to elect a deacon to act as the ambassador of God [for you] to [the brethren there], that he may rejoice along with them when they are met together, and glorify the name [of God].”⁷

⁴ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, revised and chronologically arranged with brief notes by A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, [1886] 1994), 7:381.

⁵ Alexander T. McGill, *Church Government: Treatise Compiled from His Lectures in Theological Seminaries* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1890), p. 380.

⁶ OPC Majority Report, p. 927.

⁷ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:85.

Second, Ignatius attributes an authority to the office of deacon that women are clearly not permitted to have. "I exhort you to study to do all things with a divine harmony, while your bishop presides in the place of God, and your presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles, *along with* your deacons, who are most dear to me, and are entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ."⁸ "Let the laity *be subject* to the deacons; the deacons to the presbyters; the presbyters to the bishop; the bishop to Christ, even as He is to the Father."⁹ "Fare ye well in the Lord Jesus Christ, while ye *continue subject* to the bishop, and in like manner to the presbyters and to the deacons."¹⁰ "My soul be for theirs that are *submissive* to the bishop, to the presbyters, and to the deacons, and may my portion be along with them in God!"¹¹

Obedience and submission are due to not just the bishop or presbyters but to deacons as well. The theory that women and men held the same office of deacon in the early church, until at some time the office of deacon was given more authority than the Scripture warrants, forcing women into a separate office, does not have a shred of historical evidence. It is true that as time went on deacons became part of the sacerdotal class and had more responsibilities and duties than warranted by the word of God. But even the earliest historical evidence sets male deacons apart from female servants giving them an authority that women deacons should never attain in the church.

In all of Ignatius' writings there is not a single mention of deaconesses. Given Ignatius' weighty influence and authority in Asia Minor, it is highly probable that the two deaconesses mentioned in Pliny's letter to Trajan were of the order of widows. Ignatius does mention widows in such a way as to imply an "order."

The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians (c. A.D. 115)

A close friend of Ignatius was Polycarp of Smyrna. His epistle to the Philippians reveals that Ignatius' teaching on the authority of the diaconate was common at this time in the church. "Wherefore, it is needful to abstain from all these things, being subject to the presbyters and deacons, as unto God and Christ. The virgins also must walk in a blameless and pure conscience."¹²

Deacons are placed in a position of authority alongside the presbyters. Like Ignatius, Polycarp gives no indication of a female diaconate at this time. His reference to virgins may refer to an order of virgins or of widows who, according to Paul, were required to be celibate. Ignatius referred to widows as virgins in his *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*: "I salute the households of my brethren with their wives and children and the virgins who are called widows."¹³ The church

⁸ Ibid., 1:61.

⁹ Ibid., 1:90.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1:72.

¹¹ Ibid., 1:95.

¹² *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:34.

¹³ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:92. A footnote referring to this statement by editor A. Cleveland Coxe reads: "The *deaconesses* seem to have been called *widows*."

fathers referred to widows as virgins because they were "virgins in God's sight" or "virgins a second time." They were virgins in heart and spirit.

Polycarp does not mention deaconesses but he does instruct widows: "Our widows must be sober-minded as touching the faith of the Lord, making intercession without ceasing for all men, abstaining from all calumny, evil speaking, false witness, love of money, and every evil thing, knowing that they are God's altar...."¹⁴ It is likely that at this time there was an order of widows in the church. At least one of their responsibilities was making intercession for all men. When we examine the qualifications for women deacons in the fourth and fifth centuries it will become clear that deaconesses evolved from the order of widows. The qualifications for deaconesses are virtually identical to Paul's qualification given in 1 Timothy 5:9-12 except that over time the age limit of sixty was dropped to fifty, then to forty. The female diaconate was restricted to godly widows who made a vow of perpetual chastity for the sake of church service. Remarriage could result in excommunication. To argue that these deaconesses belonged to the same office as male deacons makes no sense whatsoever, as will be seen in a moment.

The Epistle of Zephyrinus to the Bishops of Sicily (A.D. 201)

Zephyrinus, the archbishop of Rome, wrote to all the bishops of Sicily, instructing them on the ordination of presbyters and deacons. Keep in mind that the term *Levite* was used synonymously with deacon in the early church. "Ordinations of presbyters and *Levites*, moreover, solemnly perform on a suitable occasion, and in the presence of many witnesses; and to this duty advance tried and *learned men*, that ye may be greatly gladdened by their fellowship and help."¹⁵

When the epistle to Sicily was written there was no mention of deaconesses at all in the western church. The archbishop restricts the diaconal office to "learned men." If women deacons existed at this time one would expect them to be mentioned alongside the male deacons. If a non-ordained order of widows existed, it would be quite natural to leave them out of a discussion on ordination.

The Epistles of Cyprian (A.D. 250)

Thascius Cyprian, who became the bishop of Carthage in A.D. 248, is considered by scholars to be important with regard to the development of church government in the western church. The important thing to note for our study is that deacons are men. Deacons rule along with presbyters. And deacons at this stage have evolved into assistants to the bishop.

Cyprian to the elders and deacons, brethren abiding at Rome, sends greeting.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:34.

¹⁵ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:611-612.

¹⁶ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:281.

For I am grieved when I hear that some of them run about wickedly and proudly, and give themselves up to follies or to discords; 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....¹⁷

But deacons ought to remember that the Lord chose apostles, that is, bishops and overseers; while apostles appointed for themselves deacons after the ascent of the Lord into heaven as ministers of their episcopacy and of the Church. But if we may dare anything against God who makes bishops, deacons may also dare against us by whom they are made; and therefore it behoves the deacon of whom you write to repent of his audacity, and to acknowledge the honour of the priest, and to satisfy the bishop set over him with full humility.¹⁸

Once again we note that deacons are men who rule along with the presbyters. There is not one mention of deaconesses in Cyprian's writings (which is important considering he often dealt with church government).

The Apostolical Canons (c. A.D. 300 to c. A.D. 350)

“[I]n the main the Apostolic Canons represent the very early canon-law of the Church, that the canons which make up the collection are of various dates, but that most of them are earlier than the year 300, and that while it is not possible to say exactly when the collection, as we now have it, was made, there is good reason for assigning it a date not later than the middle of the fourth century.”¹⁹ In the eastern church the *Apostolical Canons* were generally considered to be an authentic work prepared by the holy apostles. The eighty-five canons were ruled authentic and authoritative at the Synod of Trullo (A.D. 692).²⁰

The *Apostolical Canons* are important for our study because they clearly establish that in the eastern church women deacons were considered to be of a completely separate and inferior office to the male diaconate. This will be proved by the description of the male diaconate in the *Apostolical Canons*. Keep in mind that the women diaconate flourished in the eastern church after the fourth century. The same churches which had women deacons in the east also wholeheartedly accepted the *Apostolical Canons*.

Canon II—Let a presbyter, deacon, and the rest of the *clergy*, be ordained by one bishop.²¹

Canon IV (V)—But the bishops and presbyters should of course give a share of these things to the deacons, and the rest of the *clergy*.²²

¹⁷ Ibid., 5:282.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5:366.

¹⁹ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, [1900] 1994), 14:593.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 14:594.

Canon VI (VII)—Let not a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, undertake worldly business; otherwise let *him* be deposed.²³

Canon VIII (IX)—If any bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or any one of the *sacerdotal* list....²⁴

Canon XV—If any presbyter, or deacon, or any other of the list of the clergy, shall leave *his* own parish, and go into another, and having entirely forsaken *his* own, shall make *his* abode in the other parish without the permission of *his* own bishop, we ordain that he shall no longer perform divine service....²⁵

Canon XVII—*He* who has been twice married after baptism, or who has had a concubine, cannot become a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or any other of the *sacerdotal* list....²⁶

Canon XVIII—*He* who married a widow, or a divorced women, or an harlot, or a servant-maid, or an actress, cannot be a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or any other of the *sacerdotal* list.²⁷

The deacons described in the *Apostolical Canons* are men. They are part of the clergy, part of the sacerdotal class, perform divine service, and are permitted to marry. On the other hand, deaconesses were not part of the clergy. They were never part of the sacerdotal class. They never took part in the divine service or sacerdotal ritual. And they were *never* permitted to marry.

The Council of Neocaesarea (c. A.D. 315)

The Council of Neocaesarea, which met in Pontus, reveals that at this time the church fathers considered Acts 6:1-6 to be the foundation of the diaconal office. "The deacons ought to be seven in number, according to the canon, even if the city be great. Of this you will be persuaded from the Book of the Acts."²⁸ "This canon was observed in Rome and it was not until the eleventh century that the number of the Seven Cardinal Deacons was changed to fourteen."²⁹ This canon was not strictly observed in the eastern church.³⁰ The western churches, which were large, got around this canon by appointing sub-deacons (all men).

The Council of Nicea (A.D. 325)

The first ecumenical council of Nice in Bithynia (A.D. 325) was the largest assembly of bishops help up to that time. The church historian Eusebius places the number of bishops at 250. Athanasius places the number at 318. The difference in numbers is probably due to the fact that

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 14:595.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 14:86.

²⁹ In fact, the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) declared: "The number of presbyters and deacons is to be adapted to the work of the church and to its means" (Canon LXII). In A.D. 451 the church at Edessa had thirty-eight deacons.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 86.

as the council progressed bishops were still arriving from various places in the Empire. If the number of presbyters, deacons and other attendants is counted there were as many as 2,000 clergy present.

Nicea is important to our study because it was primarily an eastern council (the Latin or western church had only seven delegates present).³¹ It was in the eastern church that the female diaconate flourished. Nicea gives an indication of the eastern church's view of deaconesses throughout the empire. This was the general view of the church. This canon does not mean there cannot be localized exceptions (e.g., in the Syrian church order, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* [c. A.D. 300] women deacons were already being ordained). Canon 19 of the council of Nicea indicates that in A.D. 325 the *general* practice of the church as a whole was *not* to ordain women deacons. "Likewise in the case of their deaconesses, and generally in the case of those who have been enrolled among their clergy, let the same form be observed. And we mean by deaconesses such as have assumed the habit, but who, *since they have no imposition of hands, are to be numbered only among the laity.*"³²

Did the early church have women deacons? Yes, absolutely. Were these women deacons in the same office with male deacons? No, clearly not. Male deacons were ordained from the very beginning. Women deacons were not ordained throughout the east until the latter half of the fourth century. Can we assert that women deacons were in a separate (i.e., to women), but parallel, or equal office to men deacons? No, not at all! For as late as A.D. 325 a church council declared that women deacons "are only to be numbered among the laity." From the beginning male deacons were ordained, were part of the clergy and had authority.

The Teaching of the Apostles [*Didascalia Apostolorum*] (c. A.D. 250-300)

The first clear reference to deaconesses in the early church is found in the Syrian church order called the Teaching of the Apostles. There are many similarities between the Teaching of the Apostles and the Apostolic Constitutions (A.D. 381) because the authors of the Apostolic Constitutions incorporated (with minor changes) some of the *Didascalia* into their work. Thus the teaching with regard to deaconesses is very similar.

Wherefore, O bishop, appoint thee workers of righteousness as helpers.... Those that please thee out of all the people thou shalt choose and appoint as deacons: a man for the performance of the most things that are required, but *a woman to the ministry of women*. For there are houses whither thou canst not send a deacon to the women, on account of the heathen,

³¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1910] 1989), 3:624.

³² *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14:40. "It moreover has been suggested that the 'widows' of 1 Tim. 5:9 may have been deaconesses, and this seems not unlikely from the fact that the age for the admission of women to this ministry was fixed by Tertullian at sixty years (De Vel. Virg., Chap. ix.), and only changed to forty, two centuries later by the Council of Chalcedon, and from the further fact that these 'widows' spoken of by St. Paul seem to have had a vow of chastity, for it is expressly said that if they marry they have 'damnation, because they have cast off their first faith' [1 Tim. 5:12]" ("Excursus on the Deaconesses of the Early Church" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14:41).

but mayst send a deaconess. Also, because in many other matters the office of a deaconess is required. In the first place, when women go down into the water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing.... Where there is a women, and especially a deaconess, *it is not fitting that women should be seen by men*: but with the imposition of hand do thou anoint the head only.... Let a deaconess, as we have already said, anoint the women. But let a man pronounce over them the invocation of the divine Names in the water.

And when she who is being baptized has come up from the water, *let the deaconess receive her*, and teach and instruct her how the seal of baptism ought to be kept unbroken in purity and holiness. For this cause we say that the ministry of a deaconess is especially needful and important.... And thou hast need of the ministry of a deaconess for many things...to go into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in that which they have need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness....”But let a woman rather be devoted to the ministry of women, and a male deacon to the ministry of men. And let him be ready to obey and to submit himself to the command of the bishop.”³³

Note that the deaconess's ministry is solely to women. Deaconesses are needed to visit poor women because it would look inappropriate before the heathen to send a man. Deaconesses would baptize women, because it would be improper for men to see women naked (baptism in the early church was immersion in water, apparently with little or no clothing, to represent the new birth). Deaconesses also instructed new female believers in the faith. The intimacy involved in nursing a sick Christian woman back to health can only be done properly by a deaconess.

The Constitution of the Holy Apostles (A.D. 381)

In a section of the Constitution of the Holy Apostles which deals with assembling in the church, it is clear that male deacons are in a totally *separate* office from the female diaconate:

When thou callest an assembly of the Church.... In the middle let the bishop's throne be placed, and on each side of him let the presbytery sit down; and let the deacons stand near at hand, in close and small girt garments, for they are like the mariners and managers of the ship: with regard to these, let the laity sit on the other side, with all quietness and good order. And let the women sit by themselves, they also keeping silence....³⁴

The deacons are placed with the clergy separate from the laity. The deaconesses stand with the women of the church who are segregated from the men: “Let the deaconesses also stand at those of the women, like shipmen. For the same description and pattern was both in the

³³ The Teaching of the Apostles, quoted in Jean LaPorte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity* (New York: Edwin Miller, 1982), pp. 112-114; and in Tony Cowley, "Women Deacons" (*Cornerstones*, September/October 1989, p. 6).

³⁴ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 7:421.

tabernacle of the testimony and in the temple of God. But if any one be found sitting out of his place, let him be rebuked by the deacon.”³⁵

The deacon rebukes those out of place. The male deacon seats the men of the congregation and male strangers. The deaconesses do the very same thing, except for the women: “Nay, if a poor man or one of a mean family, or a stranger, comes upon you, whether he be old or young, and there be no place, the deacon shall find a place for even these, and that with all his heart; that, instead of accepting persons before men, his ministration towards God may be well-pleasing. The very same thing let the deaconess do to those women, whether poor or rich, that come unto them.”³⁶

The idea that deaconesses belong to the same office as the male deacon but minister solely to women is destroyed by an examination of the responsibilities of the male diaconate in the church:

...and afterwards let a deacon or a presbyter read the Gospels.... As to the deacons, after the prayer is over, let some of them attend upon the oblation of the Eucharist, ministering to the Lord's body with fear. Let others of them watch the multitude, and keep them silent.... After this let the deacon pray for the whole Church, for the whole world, and the several parts of it, and the fruits of it; for the priests and the rulers, for the high priest and the king, and the peace of the universe.... If any brother, man or woman, come in from another parish, bringing recommendatory letters, let the deacon be the judge of that affair, inquiring whether they be of the faithful, and of the Church? whether they be not defiled by heresy?³⁷

In these quotes let it be noted that deacons read the Scriptures in public worship, they assist with Eucharist and are of the sacerdotal class. They pray in the public worship service, and are involved in the governmental-judicial affairs of the church. This judicial aspect with regard to judging heresy involves judging both men and women.

Section II sets forth the specific reason that deaconesses were ordained by the bishop:

Let not therefore either a bishop, or a presbyter, or a deacon, or any one else of the sacerdotal catalogue, defile his tongue with calumny, lest he inherit a curse instead of a blessing; and let it also be the bishop's business and care that no lay person utter any curse: for he ought to take care of all,—of the clergy, of the virgins, of the widows, of the laity. For which reason, O bishop, do thou ordain thy fellow-workers, the labourers for life and for righteousness, such deacons as are pleasing to God, such whom thou provest to be worthy among all the people, and such as shall be ready for the necessities of their ministration. *Ordain also a deaconess who is faithful and holy, for the ministrations towards women.* For sometimes he cannot send a deacon, who is a man, to the women, on account of unbelievers. Thou shalt therefore send a woman, a deaconess, on account of the imaginations of the bad. For we stand in need of a woman, a

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 7:421-422.

deaconess, for many necessities; and first in the baptism of women, the deacon shall anoint only their forehead with the holy oil, and after him the deaconess shall anoint them: for there is no necessity that the women should be seen by the men; ...and shall dip them in the water; and let a deacon receive the man, and a deaconess the women, that so the conferring of this inviolable seal may take place with a becoming decency. And after that, let the bishop anoint those that are baptized with ointment.³⁸

Deaconesses were needed *not* to perform all the functions of the male deacon's office, but only to perform certain responsibilities toward women. Deaconesses visited women in the church to avoid the appearance of evil. Deaconesses baptized the women while deacons baptized the men, since baptism was done in the nude.

While it is true that by A.D. 381 the ordination of deaconesses had become the norm throughout the eastern church, it was not the norm prior to A.D. 325, as we have seen. During the fourth century ordination was applied to many servants in the eastern church. Deaconesses were ordained, but so were readers, singers and porters. The ordination of deaconesses was an innovation of the eastern church. It was never universally accepted in the western church. "We do not permit presbyters to ordain deacons, or deaconesses, or readers, or ministers, or singers, or porters, but only bishops; for this is the ecclesiastical order and harmony."³⁹

The deacon has special authority as a messenger and prophet of the bishop:

For now the deacon is to you Aaron, and the bishop Moses. If, therefore, Moses was called a god by the Lord, let the bishop be honoured among you as a god, and the deacon as his prophet. For as Christ does nothing without His Father, so neither does the deacon do anything without his bishop; and as the Son without His Father is nothing, so is the deacon nothing without his bishop; and as the Son is subject to His Father, so is every deacon subject to his bishop; and as the Son is the messenger and prophet of the Father, so is the deacon the messenger and prophet of his bishop. Wherefore let all things that he is to do with any one be made known to the bishop, and be finally ordered by him.⁴⁰

While the deacon has a special authority, he is not to act independently of the bishop.

The deaconess has a ministry *only* to women. She is not equal in authority to the male deacon, but is directly under the authority of the male deacon:

But let the deacon minister to him, as Christ does to His Father; and let him serve him unblameably in all things, as Christ does nothing of Himself, but does always those things that please His Father. Let also the deaconess be honoured by you in the place of the Holy Ghost, and *not do or say anything without the deacon*; as neither does the Comforter say or do anything of Himself, but gives glory to Christ by waiting for His pleasure. And as we cannot believe on

³⁸ Ibid., 7:431.

³⁹ Ibid., 7:430.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 7:411.

Christ without the teaching of the Spirit, so let not any women address herself to the deacon or bishop without the deaconess.⁴¹

The deaconess functioned as an intermediary between women in the church and the deacon and the bishop; thus, any appearance of impropriety was avoided. Keep in mind that deaconesses were widows, older women whose children had grown up. For over three centuries deaconesses were required to be sixty years of age and were required to take a vow of perpetual celibacy. The age requirement was eventually lowered to forty. Celibacy was always required of the deaconesses. The point is that bishops and deacons could interact with the deaconesses who were elderly women without any sense of impropriety both within and without the church.

The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451)

The Council of Chalcedon contains the last statement on deaconesses among the great ecumenical councils: “A woman shall not receive the laying on of hands as a deaconess under forty years of age, and then only after searching examinations. And if, after she has had hands laid on her and has continued for a time to minister, she shall despise the grace of God and give herself in marriage, she shall be anathematized and the man united to her.”⁴² Women deacons are still being ordained at this time. The age of deaconesses is officially lowered from 60 to 40 years of age. If a deaconess give up her vow of celibacy, both she and her husband shall be anathematized (i.e., excommunicated). The fact that the female diaconate is based on 1 Timothy 5:9 is proof positive that deaconesses are not the same as deacons but should be regarded as helpers who function under the authority of the deacons. Those who point to deaconesses in the early church in order to justify female deacons are comparing apples to oranges. The early church's record on deacons and deaconesses clearly and consistently sets forth two separate, distinct offices. Deaconesses are really of the order of widows. The fact that they are called deaconesses has caused much confusion. Here is a summary of the differences in the early church between deacons and deaconesses:

Deacons	Deaconesses
1. The scriptural basis and origin of the office is Ac. 6:1-6.	1. The scriptural basis and origin of the office is 1 Tim. 5:9ff.
2. The requirements for office are derived from 1 Tim. 3:1-10, 12.	2. The requirements for office are derived from 1 Tim. 5:9ff.
3. There is no age requirement for the deacon.	3. The deaconess must be at least 60 years of age (this requirement was

⁴¹ Ibid., 7:410.

⁴² *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14:279.

	lowered to 40 at Chalcedon, A.D. 451).
4. The deacon is permitted to marry.	4. The deaconess must be a godly widow. She must take a perpetual vow of celibacy.
5. The deacon has authority over the deaconess.	5. The deaconess must submit to the deacon.
6. The deacon was ordained from the beginning (Ac. 6:1-6) and continues to be ordained to this day.	6. Deaconesses began to be ordained only locally in the third century. Ordination of women deacons was widespread in the eastern church by A.D. 381 but was eventually discontinued.
7. The deacon ministers to the whole church in worship. He reads, prays, assists with Eucharist and, in some geographical areas even preaches. The deacon handles church finances, oversees charity to the poor, gives personal counsel, and has judicial responsibilities.	7. The deaconess works under the authority of the bishop and the deacon and handles charity, aid and assistance to women only. The deaconess baptizes women (immersion while in the nude), and she instructs new Christian women in the faith.
8. Deacons had authority in the early church. They were considered part of the sacerdotal clergy class. By the fifth century arch-deacons were more powerful than presbyters.	8. Deaconesses were never part of the sacerdotal clergy class. But they did have some authority over women.

While there is no question that the male diaconate in the early church over time was given more responsibility and authority than Scripture warrants, it is still very clear that the female diaconate arose out of the order of widows (1 Tim. 5:9ff.) and is a completely separate and lesser office than the male diaconate. To argue otherwise is to ignore the clear testimony of history.

Concluding Remarks on the Early Church

The study of deaconesses in the patristic age is liable to different interpretations. Some writers (who favor deaconesses in the same office as male deacons) base their argument on the word deaconess without a careful analysis of its meaning or intent. These writers argue that the early church had deaconesses, and so should we. But they are arguing by equivocation. What modern women-deacon advocates are advocating is not women deacons who serve in a separate office from men deacons, who have different qualifications that are based on 1 Timothy 5:9ff. They are advocating something totally foreign to the early church. They believe women deacons would have the same qualifications and serve in the same office as male deacons. They are

comparing apples to oranges. They do not bother to carefully examine the character, qualifications and duties of the office of deaconess in the ante-Nicene age but simply rest their case on the name deaconess. They presuppose that their modern conception of a deaconess is the same as the church fathers and councils, despite evidence to the contrary.

The scholars (that favor women deacons in the same office as male deacons) who actually go into some detail regarding the testimony of the ante-Nicene age are forced by their presuppositions into an awkward and unlikely reading of the relevant data. Warfield follows the interpretation given by Moller:

Female deacons (deaconesses) certainly spread freely abroad, but the official institution of Deaconesses, which is referred to as early as Pliny's letter to Trajan, apparently wholly disappears in the second century until the third,⁴³ while the institution of Widows (*khrai*), who, supported by the congregation, occupy a position of honor and perform their service, is witnessed to everywhere. They bind themselves to live henceforth unmarried, receive a seat of honor, and (at least by Tertullian) are reckoned among the clergy and assist in the instruction of female catechumens. They doubtless also assisted in the labors of the diaconate. Lucian testifies to the visits paid to imprisoned confessors by widows and orphan children in their service. Their chief function seems the guidance and instruction of the female part of the congregation, though it is to be noted that public official teaching in the assembled congregation was excluded from this.

It is only toward the end of the period that an *ordo* of deaconesses appears in the Greek Church. The widows, as a body supported by the congregation, who should give themselves to prayer, recede from that official position, which is transferred to the deaconesses.⁴⁴

Dr. Warfield, Dr. Charteris and others who argue that Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) and the women mentioned in Pliny's letter are deaconesses in the same office with male deacons must explain the fact that deaconesses are not mentioned in any of the early church literature until around A.D. 350. They must argue that the deaconesses which were established by the apostles, and therefore should be found in almost all the churches, somehow vanished from all the churches within a very short time. These scholars do admit that widows as an order are found from the beginning and are universal to both east and west. Eventually in the eastern churches one finds deaconesses, widows and overseer-widows (*prokathymenai*). Most scholars argue that deaconesses received no acceptance in the western church. The interpretation of early church history given by Warfield and others regarding deaconesses is very unlikely. If deaconesses were accepted by the apostles and were part of normal church life during the first century, how did they vanish? Why were they never accepted in the western church? Would they not at least have survived somewhere in the empire? Why is it that every time we do encounter deaconesses, their

⁴³ Pliny's Letter to Trajan is dated A.D. 115. Moller apparently accepts the earlier date of A.D. 270 for the *Apostolorum Didascalia*. There is not one mention of deaconesses from A.D. 115 to A.D. 270 in any church literature in any part of the empire.

⁴⁴ B. B. Warfield, "Presbyterian-Deaconesses" (*Presbyterian Review*, May 26, 1890, p. 285); Warfield quotes Moller.

qualifications are those of Paul's order of widows given in 1 Timothy 5:9ff.? If women served in the same office as male deacons would they not have the same qualifications? Presbyterian scholar A. H. Charteris (a leading advocate of ordaining women as deacons in the nineteenth century) is dismayed and annoyed that the qualifications for the servant widows in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. were forced by emperors and the church upon deaconesses. "Emperors and Councils tried to prevent evils by fixing the age for ordination. We see their perplexity when we find the age fixed at 60, 50, and 40; and legislators quoting St. Paul on widows as though he were regulating the age of deaconesses!"⁴⁵

The advocates of ordaining women and placing them in the same office as male deacons in the nineteenth century (e.g., B. B. Warfield, A. H. Charteris, and T. P. Stevenson) as well as modern advocates (e.g., the OPC Minority Report) are so convinced that women should be in the same office as male deacons that their presuppositions blind them to the most natural interpretation of the rise of deaconesses in the early church.

The most plausible explanation of the appearance of the office of deaconess in the early church is that the office developed out of the biblical order of widows. This view explains why in *every* instance where deaconesses are discussed in the Ante-Nicene Fathers and councils, they always have the exact same qualifications as Paul's servant-widows (1 Tim. 5:9ff.). Given the testimony of church history, it is probable that as time went on, the order of widows became specialized into different functions (for those who find this scenario hard to accept, keep in mind that during this same period of time the male diaconate developed into deacons, sub-deacons and arch-deacons). Some widows were given tasks similar to the men deacons but *only* toward women. These widows were eventually designated deaconesses. Other widows were given the task of teaching and counseling younger women. These were eventually designated as elder-widows or *prokathymenai*. Other servant widows, who were probably of a more delicate physical condition, were given the task primarily of prayer, of intercession for the saints. These prayer warriors were still referred to as widows. (And to make matters even more confusing there were women called widows who did not serve at all but only received charity.) Different specialized functions over a great period of time do appear as separate offices. But given the identical qualifications from 1 Timothy 5:9ff., and the universality of servant widows from the beginning in both the eastern and western churches, and given the fact that the qualifications are given in Scripture to only one office, the interpretation that deaconesses and elder widows evolved from the order of widows makes good sense. It at least avoids the *very unlikely* contention that a scriptural office, deaconess, which was universal to all the New Testament churches, somehow vanished overnight and was not properly restored until the nineteenth century.

John Calvin (1559)

John Calvin's view of deaconesses is almost identical to the view held in the early church. Like the early church, Calvin taught that deaconesses were founded not upon Acts 6:1-6 but on 1

⁴⁵ A. H. Charteris, "Women's Work in the Church" (*Presbyterian Review*, April 1888), p. 289.

Timothy 5:9-10. Calvin believed in two separate functions for deacons and deaconesses. The male deacons administered church finances and the affairs of the poor. This no doubt included oversight of the deaconesses. The deaconesses were not involved in the administration of the church's financial affairs but were involved "in caring for the poor themselves."

The care of the poor was entrusted to the deacons. However, *two kinds* are mentioned in the letter to the Romans: "He that gives, let him do it with simplicity; ...he that shows mercy, with cheerfulness" [Rom. 12:8, cf. Vg.]. Since it is certain that Paul is speaking of the public office of the church, there must have been *two distinct grades*. Unless my judgment deceive me, in the first class he designates the deacons who distribute the alms. But the second refers to those who had devoted themselves to the care of the poor and sick. Of this sort were the *widows* whom Paul mentions to Timothy [1 Tim. 5:9-10]. Women could fill no other public office than to devote themselves to the care of the poor. If we accept this (as it must be accepted), there will be *two kinds* of deacons: one to serve the church in administering the affairs of the poor; the other, in caring for the poor themselves.⁴⁶

For Calvin, the authoritative aspects of being a deacon (i.e., taking care of the financial affairs of the church, and the counseling-judicial aspect) are reserved for the men deacons alone. The women deacons function somewhat like nurses.⁴⁷ The food, water, clothing, and medicine, etc., set aside by the deacons are delivered and administered by the deaconesses. This does not mean that deacons were not involved in similar activities. It only means that deaconesses were limited to separate non-authoritative activities. The only difference between Calvin and the church fathers is that there is no indication by Calvin that the deaconess's ministry was limited to women. And women clearly were not permitted to baptize other women. (Since immersion while in the nude was no longer practiced but was replaced by sprinkling while remaining fully clothed, one could see why deaconesses were no longer needed to baptize.) Once again it is necessary to point out that those who are arguing for women deacons at the present time are arguing for something completely different in character and function than was permitted in the early church and by Calvin. The early church and Calvin had an order or office of widows who happened to be called deaconesses. They were not the same as deacons, as modern advocates of deaconesses assert. The qualifications and functions of the deaconess were the same as the widow of 1 Timothy 5:9-10. "I say it was unlawful to receive women into the vow of continence *before the age of sixty*, inasmuch as the apostle admits only women of sixty years [1 Tim. 5:9] but bids the younger women marry and bear children [1 Tim. 5:14]."⁴⁸

Paul says that the widows who married after having been once received into public ministry violated their first pledge [1 Tim. 5:11-12]. I by no means deny to them that the widows who

⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4:3:9, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1061.

⁴⁷ "Two classes of deacons were employed in the church of Geneva: one for distribution of charities, and the other for service to the sick" 2:1062, ftn.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 4:13:19, 2:1274.

pledge themselves and their services to the church took upon themselves the state of *perpetual celibacy*. But they did so, not because they regarded it as something religious of itself (as afterward began to be the case) but because they could not carry on their function without being their own masters and free of the marriage yoke.... Those widows who were at that time received into public ministry took upon themselves the condition of perpetual celibacy.... But first, I deny that they professed celibacy for any reason except that marriage did not agree with the work which they undertook; and I deny that they bound themselves at all to celibacy except in so far as the necessity of their calling demanded.⁴⁹

In the next section Calvin makes it very clear that he is talking about deaconesses. For Calvin, widows and deaconesses are one and the same. Did Calvin believe in an order or possibly an office of deaconess in the church? Yes, absolutely. Were they considered by Calvin to be in the same office with the same function as the male deacons? No, not at all! While Calvin may have considered the deaconess a subset of an auxiliary office to the deacon, he makes it very clear that deaconesses are fashioned upon Paul's order of widows in 1 Timothy 5:9-10, and not upon Acts 6:1-6.

Developments before the Nineteenth Century

The pattern of the deaconess (servant—i.e., widows) which existed in the early church and in Calvin's Geneva was imitated by the French Reformed churches for about twenty-five years. It was discontinued because of various abuses.

When the Prince of Sedan, for example, turned Reformed in 1559, he established the 'Sisters of Mercy' with formerly monastic revenues. Similarly in La Rochelle there was a deaconesses' house. Women in these Protestant Orders lived communally by an agreed upon order or rule. They were not bound by lifelong vows, but for however long they were part of the movement they devoted themselves to the care of the sick, the aged, and the poor. Aspects of the French and Walloon diaconate influenced the Dutch Reformed tradition (Report 32, p. 506).

In 1556 the Reformed leaders in Amsterdam designated twelve deaconesses to run a home for aged women, an orphanage, and to do a form of house visitation two by two and to report anything needing their attention to the Amsterdam deacons. *These were elderly women of proven Christian virtue*. As in France, however, the deaconesses of Amsterdam seem to have been an institution which was not part of, yet which was in some sense under the direction of, the consistory (Report 32, p. 508).

The Convent of Wesel, 1568, chaired by Datheen, marks the generally accepted point of departure for the shaping of the Dutch church order. Formulations from earlier Walloon assemblies gave way for various reasons to those of Wesel and subsequent gatherings. Wesel's nineteen statements on deacons included such positions as defining the office as a ministry of mercy, *recognizing Calvin's two types of deacon*, and allowing local latitude on many issues related to implementing the office. Because of its significance for today's discussion of women

⁴⁹ Ibid. 4:13:18, 2:1272-1273.

in office, Wesel's provision for women deacons is noteworthy. It allowed that where appropriate, older women of proven and honorable behavior could, following apostolic example, be appointed as deacons.

In the church of Wesel four women were elected by the presbyters and ordained for the period of one year. Problems arose when married women (not only widows), and some of them even younger than sixty years of age, also were elected, this being contrary to what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5:9. When the matter was brought to the Synod of Middleburg in 1581, it was decided not to introduce women into the office of deacon 'for the sake of several inconveniences,' except in times of danger, e.g., plagues (Report 39, p. 580).⁵⁰

Note that when women were appointed as deaconesses who did not meet Paul's requirements in 1 Timothy 5:9ff., it led to problems serious enough that the whole office of deaconess was rejected. If these churches had not introduced innovations by ignoring Paul's explicit instructions for deaconesses in 1 Timothy 5:9ff., then perhaps the office would not have been discontinued. It is most unfortunate that the order of widows was not continued by the Reformed church because of unbiblical abuses. Godly widows have been denied the God-sanctioned opportunity to serve in this official capacity. The Reformed churches of the Netherlands and some very important Scottish Presbyterian divines favored the idea of having deaconesses fashioned according to the office of widow, but unfortunately the idea was never adopted.⁵¹

The consistent pattern of deaconesses who have a different office and function than male deacons was also followed by the English Baptist John Smyth. "In the seventeenth century, the Baptist John Smyth classified deaconesses and widows in the same office and admitted only women over 60. These were ordained and took a vow of celibacy. Their duties were visiting the sick and poor."⁵²

The Westminster Assembly

The Westminster Assembly of divines (arguably the greatest gathering of Reformed pastors, elders, and theologians the world has ever seen) debated the office of deacon between December 15 and 28, 1643. Out of the numerous and somewhat diverse pastors and theologians present, *not one* argued that women should be ordained into the diaconate. But many eminent divines (including Rutherford, Gillespie, and Goodwin) argued that the widows of 1 Timothy 5:9ff. were church officers. The issue of widow-servant officers was debated from December 29,

⁵⁰ CRC Report 32, p. 506; Report 32, p. 508; Report 39, p. 580; cited in OPC Majority Report, pp. 929-930.

⁵¹ J. L. Shaver (*The Polity of the Church* [Chicago: Church Polity Press, 1947], 1:144) comments on the reception of the office of deaconess in the Netherlands: "In the time of the Reformation the Reformed churches of the Netherlands for a short time favored the institution of the office of deaconess, but already in 1581 they decided not to introduce it. On the whole, Reformed churches in the Netherlands favor the employment of women *in support* of the deacon's office when this is needed, but they are opposed to placing women in official service" (quoted in OPC Majority Report, p. 930).

⁵² Report 32, p. 504, quoted in OPC Majority Report, p. 930.

1643 to January 1, 1644. Here are some examples of the arguments given by those in favor of official servant-widows.

Mr. Gibbon: Widows are church-officers, 1. Because in 1 Tim. 3 there is mention of church-officers, and widows come in among [3:11]. 2. These things agree not to an eleemosynary widow, 1 Tim. 5:9,10. 3. She must have a salary from the church: *ergo*, an officer. 4. Me' *katalegestho*. This catalogue was of the officer.⁵³

Gibbon goes on to argue that widows should be "comprehended under the deacon's title." Gibbon argues that widow-servants should be used to help sick and pregnant women:

Mr. Bridges proved by her being chosen at sixty, and not before, that she was an officer....

Mr. Sympson would prove her an officer by these reasons: 1. Here are her qualifications: 1. Some gradually different from other saints: one hopes in God, *id est*, like to her that is unmarried.... 2. Some qualifications common with bishops and deacons.... 3. She an officer, because reckoned up among officers.... 4. There is her election, *katalegestho*; a special register.... 7. Phoebe was *Diakonos*. Then did he cite divers authors, that hold the widow an officer, as Cajetan, Estius &c., and Protestants, Calvin, Beza, Cameron, &c....

Mr. Gillespie: There were some widows that were eleemosynary, and not church-officers; and there [were] those that were both.

Mr. Goodwin urged this phrase of forsaking her first faith, to infer that she had an office: for that it was not unlawful simply to marry. The office of this widow, was not only to attend the sick, but to attend on God in devotion in some singular way....⁵⁴

Then fell we upon Rom. 16:1, 2. Dr. Temple: Two things do here require proof: 1. That Phoebe was a widow. 2. That she was a deacon, "*proprio sensu*" but nobody undertook it, and so it was speedily desired to be waived. But Mr. Sympson answered, That she was a widow, is the common consent of interpreters; and it appears, by that her husband is not named. 2. She is said to be a deaconess of the church of Cenchrea.

Mr. Bridges.... If Phoebe was the same widow that is mentioned, 1 Tim. 5, then this proof is pregnant; but she is so. The widow in Tim. is a church-officer. 1. Because the apostle spends so much time in describing, and requires such prerequisites in her. 2. Divers things in her hold some proportion with other officers. As the bishop and deacon must be husband of one wife, and so she the wife of one husband. 3. Younger widows, if they wax wanton, will marry: but it is no wantonness to marry: *ergo*, it is because they that are devoted may not marry.

⁵³ John Lightfoot, *Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines* (London, 1824), p. 94.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

Now that Phoebe was such a one. 1. She is *Diakonos tys ecclysias*.... And withal he...concluded with the testimony of Origen, Theodoret, Calvin, Osiander, Gualter, Bucan, holding Phoebe to be a church officer....⁵⁵

After a very long debate, the business was put to the question, and voted negatively, viz.: that this place, Rom. 16:1, 2, shall not be brought to prove the proposition; and so we adjourned.⁵⁶

Lightfoot ends the discussion of servant-widows at this point. (Samuel Rutherford's viewpoint regarding servant-widows is taken up under the section in this book dealing with 1 Timothy 5:9ff.) In order to avoid confusion a few things need to be discussed. First, although Phoebe is referred to as a deaconess, it must be borne in mind that the divines did *not* regard deaconesses as holding the same office as male deacons. A deaconess refers to the servant-widow class referred to in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. Thus the comments of the assembly regarding Phoebe should not be misconstrued by those in favor of placing women in the same office as male deacons. The only reason this point is raised is that those who argue in favor of women deacons (in the same office as male deacons) have consistently misrepresented the testimony of the early church, the Puritans, and Calvin.

A second point that needs to be addressed is the issue of ordination. When the divines refer to servant-widows as officers of the church, does this entail ordination? Not necessarily. Calvin and Rutherford both advocated a servant-widow "office." But both were against the ordination of women. Rutherford says so explicitly in his comments on 1 Timothy 5:9ff.⁵⁷ Calvin actually had servant-widows functioning in Geneva. Yet, unlike men deacons, the servant-widows (i.e., deaconesses) were not ordained. (The issue of ordination will be discussed in detail later.)

Alexander T. McGill (1889)

Alexander T. McGill, the distinguished professor of ecclesiastical history, homiletics and pastoral theology at Princeton Seminary from 1854 to 1889, wrote a book on church government where he devotes a whole section to the deaconess. McGill favors having deaconesses in the church. He regards Phoebe of Romans 16:1 as the first named deaconess in the church. McGill quotes with approval a list of commentators who regard Phoebe as an official deaconess: "From John Calvin to Charles Hodge, inclusively, we have a singular succession of learned and illustrious men affirming the official meaning of "deaconess" in its application to Phoebe. Some

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 97.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

⁵⁷ Samuel Rutherford, *The Due Right of Presbyteries, or a Peaceable Plea for the Government of the Church of Scotland* (London, 1644), p. 174.

of these are Beza, Van Mästrict, MacKnight, Bingham, Suicer, Schleusner, Parkhurst, Kitto, Brown, and last—not least, by any means—Thomas Chalmers of Scotland....”⁵⁸

McGill also regards 1 Timothy 3:11 as a reference not to wives but to deaconesses: "It is only female deacons as a distinct variety in the office, enumerated here for the purpose of showing their distinctly similar and proper characteristics."⁵⁹ While McGill believes in and exalts the office of deaconess, he (as the early church and John Calvin) looks to 1 Timothy 5:9ff. as the foundation of the office:

Everything in such language of the apostle is explicable only on the hypothesis of an instituted order being the main drift of these verses, into which the younger widow could not be admitted then lest another marriage would interrupt her usefulness in office and bring condemnation on herself and the order also for mutability in vows and dereliction of engagement on which the giving of charity had relied.

Thus we have an official name, official qualifications and official devotement fairly given by Holy Scripture for the office of deaconess in the Church wherever and whenever God gives the gift on which it is founded. It is for us to interpret the gift when it comes, and the rule of this interpretation is furnished by God's own word.⁶⁰

McGill (unlike the early church and Calvin) thinks that the age requirement was not meant to be taken literally because "...such a widow...could not be found—one among a thousand—in any generation; and even if she could be, she would be too old to last long in the work of distribution."⁶¹ McGill's statement is puzzling because the historical evidence suggests that the age requirement was kept in the early church for over four hundred years.⁶²

McGill deals extensively with the decline of the women diaconate within the church which he attributes to spiritual decline, unbiblical innovations and syncretism with paganism:

The first cause of decay and discontinuance, therefore, in the female diaconate, was the abatement of her own qualifications by reason of spiritual decline....

The invasion of monachism and virginity was another evil which largely accounts for the decline of church "business" in the hands of women. When we consider the model of a deaconess, furnished at first by the Spirit of inspiration (1 Tim. v. 10), and observe that she was a widow who had brought up children, etc., we can see how baleful and subversive to her office must have been the fanatical rage of anchoretic life, in which marriage was avoided and despised as a lower sanctity, if sanctity at all of any degree. The widow might be still a beneficiary, as the vilest wretch might be, but the notion of an office in the Church for any one that ever had been a wife must be exploded. The succession of widows with such contaminating antecedents, or of maidens who vowed never to be married, and of course never to gain the

⁵⁸ Alexander T. McGill, *Church Government, A Treatise Compiled from His Lectures in Theological Seminaries* (Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work), pp. 380-381.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁶² It was changed at Chalcedon (A.D. 451) and by Emperor Justinian to 40 years of age.

experience which the office required at the first institution, would be a departure from the original far enough to make it soon an obsolete office entirely.

Another cause of abolition was the exaltation of male deacons to a position which female deacons could never attain—that of preachers.⁶³

McGill notes that the exaltation of virginity among young women who would serve the church as virgins (and later as nuns) removed an essential aspect of what made deaconesses so important particularly in their service to other women and mothers. The godly wisdom, progressive sanctification, and superior knowledge gained from raising up a godly family from start to finish is something young virgins do not have. And it is precisely this superior wisdom and knowledge that makes the deaconess (i.e., widow) so vital to church life. The unique delicacies of mothering—the sublime mothering instinct and the nurturing-nursing aspect of motherhood, coupled with the unique feminine homemaker skills that are acquired over a lifetime, place the women deacon (i.e., widow) in a special class all her own. No pastor, elder or deacon can adequately replace the deaconess, let alone an inexperienced virgin.

McGill contends that the exaltation of the deacon into a preacher also contributed to the demise of deaconesses. While the author agrees with McGill that the great expansion of the male diaconal role after the third century helped the decline of the female diaconate, he does so for different reasons. It was not because male deacons became something women deacons could not become; the record of the early church and 1 Timothy 5:9ff. indicates that women deacons were never to become like male deacons in the first place. But what occurred with the exaltation of the male diaconate was the elimination of the close supervision and guidance that male deacons had over the deaconesses. When various problems and abuses arose because the biblical pattern was discarded, the church's response was to eliminate the office of deaconess rather than return to the biblical pattern of church government. This also occurred among the French Reformed churches when married younger women were admitted to office as noted above. The reason that modern churches which neglect the biblical pattern of 1 Timothy 5:9ff. do not have similar problems is because modern deaconesses do little other than collecting offerings, making deposits and writing checks, etc. The down-and-dirty diaconal work of old has been obtruded upon by the secular humanistic state.⁶⁴ “Idleness of the deacons, either male or female, at such a time as this, when we are confronted in the world with the gravest problems of modern civilization—the management of work and money for the good of men and the glory of God—will put to hazard the triumphs of the gospel itself.”⁶⁵

⁶³ McGill, pp. 390-391, emphasis added.

⁶⁴ In the 20th century the highly personal diaconal work of old has been replaced by a highly bureaucratic impersonal work of the modern state (no offense intended to many dedicated deacons who are presently serving the church; it is just that our goal should be to expand the diaconal role to its former role, and thus to slow the advance of the welfare state).

⁶⁵ McGill, *op. cit.*, p. 393.

Thomas Withrow (1889)

Thomas Withrow (professor of church history in Magee College, Londonderry) wrote a book on church government which was published in 1889. Withrow's book makes a clear departure from the views held with regard to deaconesses by the early church, Calvin, Rutherford, the French Reformed churches, John Smyth, McGill, Shedd and others. Withrow rejects the view that deaconesses are a separate or lesser office that is based on 1 Timothy 5:9ff. rather than Acts 6:1-6:

Some doubt has been entertained whether the widow of 1 Tim. 5:9, 10 was a deaconess, or only a person to be entered on the list as eligible for the charity of the Church. Calvin thinks that these widows were deaconesses, and that there were two degrees in the order. The same view was taken by some in the post-apostolic Church, and led to their exacting from deaconesses some peculiar qualifications. But the opinion is open to question. From the deaconess an amount of active service would be expected to which a woman of sixty would be scarcely equal. Paul does not assign to the widows any active duty, but speaks of those only drawing support from the Church. On the contrary, the glimpse of their condition given by the apostle conveys to us the idea that they were merely pious women, who, in their day were hospitable and useful; but who, having been left desolate, were comforted by the Church's charity in the evening of their days. There does not seem to be anything in the passage of Scripture cited obliging us to believe that these women held any Church office whatever.⁶⁶

While it is true that 1 Timothy 5:9ff. does not necessarily justify the ordination of widows, if taken in context it does refer to a definite order. The idea that a 59 year old woman (i.e., under 60) or a 65 year old who never married could not receive church funds is absurd. Withrow's interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:9ff. is clearly off the mark (for a closer look at this passage see the section on 1 Tim. 5:9ff.). He, like McGill, has a problem with the age being too old for service. But that is a pragmatic rather than an exegetical consideration. The church was served quite well for over 400 years while it held to the 60-year-old limit. This fact destroys the pragmatic objection because of the age requirement.

Withrow seems to believe that Phoebe was a deacon in the same office as a male deacon:

The case of Phoebe, "a servant of the Church (*diakonon th ekkhhsia*) that is at Cenchreae," proves not only that females were eligible to the diaconate, but that one at least filled that office with the approval of Paul. It does not, however, require us to believe that a female diaconate was universal, or even general in the Churches, and still less that the deaconess filled a distinct and separate office of her own. Women, we may infer, were appointed only in cases where female ministrations were wanted, and where some of the sex developed the necessary qualifications. In the discharge of duties to the sick and poor, cases no doubt often occurred

⁶⁶ Thomas Withrow, *The Form of the Christian Temple, Being a Treatise on the Constitution of the New Testament Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1889), p. 87.

where females could minister most tenderly to their own sex, and where men might be practically useless.⁶⁷

With regard to Phoebe (likely a wealthy widow patterned after 1 Tim. 5:9ff.), see the section on Romans 16:1. That Phoebe was a deacon in the same office and with the same function as a male deacon cannot be ascertained from the text. Withrow's "proof" is only conjecture. The best policy for interpreters is not to differ from nineteen hundred years of church interpretation and practice unless it can be demonstrated that the passage in question has clearly been misunderstood. As has been seen, the almost unanimous consent of the early church and the Reformers who discussed the issue was that Phoebe was a "servant" from the order of widows.

If Phoebe was a deacon in the same office with the same responsibilities as a male deacon, then Withrow's hedging comments are inappropriate. If God teaches that women have the right to the same diaconal office as male deacons, then the churches do not have the option of calling women to this office "only in cases where the female ministrations were wanted." The basis of choice according to Withrow's own definition of the diaconate should be based solely on qualifications and not gender preference.

When Withrow considers the passages which discuss the institution of the diaconate and the qualifications of this office he contradicts his assertions regarding female deacons:

There is no sufficient reason, therefore, for departing from the common belief, that the sixth chapter of Acts records the institution of an order, and that "the seven" were the first deacons.... At the time when the institution was founded, Peter stated that the persons selected *must* be "*men* of good report, full of the Spirit and wisdom...." Let us note the minuteness with which Paul describes the qualifications it requires (1 Tim. 3:8-13).... That he requires to *rule his* own family, shows that the office carried in it some authority, and must be filled by persons of firmness and decision....⁶⁸

When Withrow discusses the clear passages regarding the diaconate, he properly reports that the first seven deacons selected were all men. The first deacons chosen were men because that was the command of the apostles. It was not an arbitrary decision on the apostles' part or merely a coincidence. When Withrow discusses the qualification for deacons he speaks of a male head of household who rules his family well. Unless Withrow attempts to circumvent the regulative principle, as others have, or unless he flatly rejects it, as Papists, Episcopalians and Lutherans do, then he cannot have ordained women deacons who are in the same office with the same function as male deacons. (1 Tim. 3:11, as noted below, is either referring to the wives of deacons or more probably refers to the servant-widows [1 Tim. 5:9ff.] who assist the deacons.)

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 84-85.

B. B. Warfield

Among American Presbyterians in the nineteenth century B. B. Warfield was one of the strongest advocates of placing women in the ordained diaconate. The fact that Warfield was an excellent scholar and theologian and orthodox in his view of inspiration should focus our attention on his arguments. If there was an orthodox Presbyterian scholar who could make a well-reasoned case for placing women in the diaconate, it would be the distinguished professor from Princeton.

In a lengthy article written for the *Presbyterian Review* (1890) Dr. Warfield sets forth his case for women deacons. The article was important to Warfield because he was on "the Special Committee on Deaconesses" which recommended "the revival of deaconesses" to the General Assembly in 1889. Warfield, unlike other advocates of women deacons, admits up front that the scriptural evidence for women deacons is very small: "For it need not be denied that the office of deaconess is a Scriptural office, although it must be confessed that *the Biblical warrant for it is of the slenderest*. We cannot bring ourselves to believe that the Apostle means to speak of deaconesses, in the midst of the requisites for the deacon, in 1 Tim. 3:11, since this would require us to assume in that passage a double sudden transition from one subject to another, of the harshest and most incredible kind."⁶⁹ Dr. Warfield rejects the pro-deaconess interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:11 and in the same article rejects the servant-widow interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:9.⁷⁰ For Dr. Warfield the whole argument must be based on Romans 16:1. Dr. Warfield says, "When we seek Biblical warrant, we have only the isolated phrase, 'Phebe the deaconess.'"⁷¹

After asserting that the whole case for women deacons rests upon the phrase "Phebe the deaconess" Warfield admits that there is no way to know from Scripture whether or not Paul meant *diakonos* in the general sense of servant or in the technical sense of a church officer (i.e., an ordained deacon):

This [Rom. 16:1] is no doubt a narrow, not to say a precarious foundation on which to build much of an ecclesiastical structure. The term here employed (*diakono*) is of very broad connotation; and Phebe might conceivably have been only an humble "servant" of the Cenchranean church, or indeed, for all that the term itself declares, only a Christian belonging to that church (cf. John xii. 26). Nor is there any compelling reason apparent in the context, shutting us up to the technical sense of "deaconess."⁷²

Since Dr. Warfield admits that no one can determine from the context exactly what Paul had in mind, he does what most women-deacon advocates do: he looks to the history of the early church. "Nevertheless this [the technical designation] seems the more likely meaning of the phrase; and this interpretation receives confirmation from a clear indication, coming to us from

⁶⁹ B. B. Warfield, "Presbyterian Deaconesses" (*Presbyterian Review*, 1890), p. 283, emphasis added.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 283-284, 286-287.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 283-284.

the earliest post-apostolic times, that 'deaconesses' were then already an established order in the church."⁷³

Dr. Warfield does not give one scriptural reason why he prefers the technical designation. Given his knowledge of Latin, his choice of Pliny's letter to Trajan (A.D. 112) as proof is truly puzzling. He argues, "...it is clear that *ministrae* (doubtless, as Dr. Lightfoot points out, Pliny's own translation of *diakonoï*) was already a *terminus technicus*, designating a well known office. But this is pretty nearly the only very early reference we have to that office."⁷⁴ Warfield rests his whole case on one word (*ministrae*) taken from an extra-scriptural account. Yet the Latin word *ministra* (plural: *ministræ*) has virtually the identical range of meaning in Latin as does *diakonos* in Greek.⁷⁵ In other words, Pliny's letter to Trajan is just as ambiguous as Romans 16:1. As will be noted in the section dealing with Romans 16:1, the Latin *ministra* has such a broad range of meaning that Jerome invented a Latin word (*diakonus*) to avoid the confusion in his translation of the Greek into the Latin Vulgate. Jerome deliberately left Romans 16:1 ambiguous by translating *diakonon* as *ministra*.

Dr. Warfield (like the modern women-deacon advocates) is locked into the view that the reference to a female servant in Romans 16:1 and to female servants in Pliny's letter must refer to a female diaconate identical to the male diaconate. In a stunning admission that his case was based only upon the slenderest of scriptural evidence he wrote:

When we seek Biblical warrant, we have only the isolated phrase, "Phebe, the deaconess"; when we ask after the testimony of the first age of the church, we have only Pliny's witness that the church in Bithynia had *ancillae* which they called *ministrae*; after that all is darkness until the deaconess emerge into light again as part of the already considerably corrupted ecclesiastical system of the third century. We have no Biblical account of the qualifications for the office or its duties, and no very early account of the functions it actually exercised. We are left only to the meagre inferences that as Phebe was "a deaconess of the church that is at Cenchreae," the office was a local one and inhered in the individual congregation; that as Pliny tortured two *ancillae*, there may have been a plurality of deaconesses in each congregation; and that as the name was primitively the same and the functions exercised by them from the third century were parallel, they constituted a female diaconate similar to and of like standing with the board of deacons, which in the New Testament, we find in every church. Theories aside this is all we know of primitive deaconesses.⁷⁶

If Dr. Warfield and the authors of the OPC Minority Report had a proper understanding of 1 Timothy 5:9ff. then perhaps they would not attempt to force Romans 16:1 (and 1 Tim. 3:11, for the authors of the OPC Minority Report) into an interpretation which contradicts Acts 6:3, 1 Timothy 3:12 and the testimony of church history. If 1 Timothy 5:9ff. refers to an ecclesiastical order, then the whole argument given by Dr. Warfield and others concerning Romans 16:1 and

⁷³ Ibid., p. 284, emphasis added.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 284.

⁷⁵ *Ministra* (fem.), a female attendant, maid-servant, assistant, servant, handmaid, accessory, etc.

⁷⁶ Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 286, emphasis added.

the women of Pliny's letter falls to the ground. Why? Because Paul sets forth a female order with very specific qualifications that both explains Romans 16:1 and the testimony of church history. And because the servant widows that Paul describes were not ordained and only ministered to women, it fully harmonizes with both Acts 6:3, 1 Timothy 3:12 and church history. Our goal when interpreting Scripture should be to avoid contradictions; interpretations that harmonize should be preferred.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (Covenanter), 1888

The first Presbyterian denomination in the United States to ordain women as deacons was the RPCNA. This was the result of an R.P. church's decision to elect a woman, Miss McConnell, to the diaconate. The congregation, located in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, referred the matter to the Pittsburgh Presbytery which passed the matter on to the Synod of 1888. The decision of the McKeesport congregation is recorded in the R.P. magazine *Our Banner* by the Ladies Missionary Society of the North Cedar congregation. Note the postmillennial enthusiasm implied in their statement:

The McKeesport congregation recently at an election for elders and deacons, elected to the latter a lady, Miss McConnell. The question is referred to Synod for its decision. At the December meeting of the North Cedar L.M.S., the following resolution was adopted: We, as the Ladies' Missionary Society of North Cedar R.P. congregation, send congratulations to Miss McConnell on her election to the office of Deaconess by the McKeesport congregation, urging her conscientious acceptance and faithful performance of the duties of that office; while we hope that the Synod of the R.P. Church will lay no obstacles in her way, and pray that the glories of the millennial morning may be withheld from us all until our Church can glory in her Deborahs, Huldahs, Annas, and Phoebes as her Deacons.⁷⁷

These women are apparently saying that the beginning of the millennium should be postponed until the church allows women to be deacons. This statement reflects the "reforming" spirit of nineteenth century American evangelicalism.

The motion to ordain women as deacons was passed by a four-fifths vote. The R.P. seminary in Pittsburgh unanimously supported the motion. Some prominent R.P. seminary professors argued for women deacons at Synod and were instrumental in bringing about the almost unanimous vote. Dr. James Kennedy was on the committee on discipline which recommended to Synod that the motion be approved. "Your committee would reply that such ordination is in our judgment in harmony with the New Testament and with the constitution of the Apostolic church."⁷⁸ Some of the dissenters' names are listed in the Minutes of Synod for that year:

⁷⁷ "For Christ's Crown and Covenant," *Our Banner* XV:1 (Jan. 1888), p. 29.

⁷⁸ "Minutes of Synod Report," *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter*, July/August 1888, p. 287.

The motion under discussion at the hour for recess was taken up, and the item, as amended, was adopted. D. S. Faris asked leave to enter his dissent from the decision of Synod because the step was taken without due deliberation. D. C. Faris, Isaiah Faris, and J. C. K. Faris joined in this dissent. R. J. McCracken also offered his dissent from this action, as it is a departure from the law and order of the church and contrary to the word of God. J. F. Crozier, with elders Joseph Wallace, John E. Willson, and Robert McIsaac placed their names on record as dissenting from this decision.⁷⁹

In order to understand how the RPCNA made such a quick and radical departure from hundreds of years of past church practice we must consider the Synod's decision in its historical context. The movement among Presbyterians in American and in Scotland to ordain women as deacons reached its peak during the 1880s. The movement in the PCUSA, led by B. B. Warfield, to introduce women into the diaconate reached its peak from 1888 to 1890. The PCUSA, unlike the RPCNA, was very cautious regarding the matter, took its time deliberating, and the motion was not approved at that time. Why was the ordination of women as deacons so popular among a number of Presbyterians during the 1880s? Romans 16:1 and 1 Timothy 3:11 have been in the Bible since the first generation of Christians. Why the 1880s—not the 1580s, 1680s or 1780s? There is no reason to believe that the biblical exegesis done in the 1880s was superior to Calvin's, Knox's, Rutherford's, Gillespie's or Alexander Shield's.

The reason that many Presbyterians wanted to open the office of deacon to women had very little to do with the biblical evidence, which is lacking, and very much to do with the cultural climate at that time. There were a number of trends during the nineteenth century which placed women into the forefront of church activism: revivalism and its emphasis on human innovations for results (e.g., altar calls, women preachers), theological deterioration among congregationalists, the holiness or "second blessing" movement, the shift toward sentimentality and the feminization of Christianity, the fact that women composed most of the church members during the nineteenth century (in many areas women "constituted three-quarters of those joining some of the major churches"⁸⁰), the prominent role that women had in the social reform movements (especially among abolitionist and temperance groups), the de-emphasis on theology and the emphasizing of experience, and the rejection of the regulative principle in favor of pragmatism. Church historian Mark A. Noll says of this period:

In the early nineteenth century, women remained the majority of those who adhered most closely to the churches. And it was at this point that changing social conditions and new theological emphases began to offer them more opportunities for public ministry. A more fluid social setting on the seaboard as well in the thinly populated regions newly opened to settlement and the rhetoric of democracy from the Revolution both served to advance women in the public practice of religion. In many areas of the country it soon became conventional to look upon women as the prime support for the nation's republican spirit. Mothers, it was thought, were the

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 286.

⁸⁰ Mark Noll, *History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 181.

ones who could most effectively inculcate the virtues of public-spiritedness and self-sacrifice that were essential to the life of the republic. And such notions were increasingly linked to the idea that women had a special capacity for the religious life, as individuals who could understand intuitively the virtues of sacrifice, devotion, and trust that were so important to the Christian faith.⁸¹

Nineteenth century feminism was the direct result of women's involvement in the various reform movements coupled with the decline of biblical theology in America:

Intense female involvement especially in the areas of temperance (liberation from the bondage of drink) and abolition (liberation from the bondage of slavery) seemed almost naturally to spill over into growing concern for liberation from the social bondage of women themselves. The religious factor in that move was always prominent. The first formal call for fuller women's rights in society, including the right to vote, was issued from Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848, when active abolitionists, men and women, white and black, issued an appeal for the public rights of women. Conveners of the meeting were Lucretia Coffin Mott (1793-1880) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), both of whom had long been nurtured in centers of religious reform, Mott having served as an "acknowledged minister" in the Society of Friends and Stanton having taken a more conventional path through evangelical nurturing to social reform.⁸²

In 1853 the first formal ordination of a woman as a preacher occurred in America. Antoinette Brown was ordained to the ministry of a congregational church. In 1859 the first book to defend a woman's right to preach was published. The book, written by Phoebe Worrall Palmer (1807-1874), was entitled *The Promise of the Father*. Mrs. Palmer, like modern feminists, based her argument on Galatians 3:28 and Joel 2:28. Mrs. Palmer was a product of the holiness-second blessing "revivalism."⁸³ While many Presbyterians were not taken in by revivalism, many were involved in the reform movements. The various revivals in the nineteenth century and the "outward" success of many reform movements became equated in many Presbyterian minds with the dawn of postmillennial glory. Covenanter D. P. Willson equated the freeing of slaves and the larger role of women with the postmillennial hope:

In all this organizing, Christ Jesus is the Head, the Head of the body, the church, and in him there is neither bond nor free, there is nether male nor female, "we are all one in Jesus Christ." It took long years and much counsel to realize the first declaration.... The second declaration is realized as a fact today, but hardly fully as a doctrine; the last is coming.... And the working forces of God's people shall yet bring this rebellious and suffering world into the peace of God, under Christ our Lord.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 181.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 184-185.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 183.

⁸⁴ D. B. Willson, *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVI:11 (Nov. 1888), pp. 394-407.

Since women were becoming more educated and were actively involved in the reform of society, and were even speaking effectively to large groups and holding positions of authority within reform societies, why withhold the office of deacon? While there is no question that pro-deacon Presbyterian church leaders attempted to prove *from Scripture* that women should be deacons, it was the "spirit of the age" which led them in the pro-women deacon direction to begin with. To get an idea how far the RPCNA was infected with "Christian feminism," listen to these comments by R.P. pastor Thomas Wylie:

We have had theorizing enough. Now let the exemplification go on. Christians love and treat their children alike in the family, public school, Sabbath school, and many of the privileges of the church. Why stop, when in Christ Jesus there is neither..."male nor female," &c.

As I have always striven to be in the vanguard in every moral and beneficial reform, I hope and pray for the time when nothing but physical or moral deficiencies will exclude women more than men from *any position in church* or state which they are found qualified to fill, and I hope that our church will "mount higher," until she at least awards to our brave missionary, Miss Wylie, of Latakiyeh, the position she richly deserves. I have seen some women in the pulpit, and *could not raise any valid objection* to any but one, and that one was one of the most noted women in the country, a leader in the temperance movement. But as she was an accomplished barrister, she acted and treated her subject in such a political and lawyer-style and spirit, that I thought such a one should not be allowed to speak in church, or usurp authority, but learn piety at home.

So we see that Paul is right yet, that while in *some* cases one rule will apply, in *others it should not be enforced*.⁸⁵

Wylie hopes for a time when women can hold "any position in the church." Of all the women he has seen in the pulpit he only objects to one. The apparent reason is that she presented herself too forcefully. She preaches like a man. He apparently thinks that Paul's injunction that "women are to remain silent in the church" applies only in "some cases" but not in others.

The contention that ordaining women to the diaconate was more a product of the spirit of the times rather than an outgrowth of careful exegetical considerations is supported by an eyewitness and participant at the R.P. Synod of 1888, the Rev. D. S. Faris. In an article entitled "The Female Deacon and the Sentimental Overflow of Synod" Faris documents that what occurred at the Synod of 1888 was a rush to judgment based on sentimentality and an "overflow of enthusiasm."

...I wish to state those facts which, to my mind, prove that Synod reached its conclusions, not by means of deliberate and sober examination of the whole subject in all its bearings, but by "sentimental overflow." This word "overflow" was used by Dr. Kennedy himself to designate

⁸⁵ Wylie, *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVII:6 (June 1889), p. 194, emphasis added. That Wylie could make such blatantly unbiblical statements in the denomination's magazine is clear evidence of a negative cultural influence.

Synod's method of dealing with the subject. The Synod was borne along by the wave of popular sentiment, and did not act like a deliberative and judicial body. The only scholarly and effective argument in the case was that of Dr. Stevenson. The argument consisted, first, of a construction of certain passages of the New Testament, and second, of an argument based on allusions to the matter in the early fathers. No one was prepared to answer the patristic argument, on the spur of the moment; yet as Dr. Kennedy admitted, this line of argument is worthless, unless a foundation can be found for it in the word of God. The Doctor went about establishing the Scriptural foundation, evidently not with the deliberation and research of a scholar and a theologian, but as one borne along by the tide of sentimentalism. His first statement was that the direct Scriptural proof was wanting; but there are important things that are and must be taken for granted. He said that there is no direct proof that women were baptized or admitted to the Lord's table. This has always been taken for granted, and women's rights to these privileges have never been questioned. So, he said, women have been found doing work belonging to the deacon's office, and therefore we ought to presume that they were ordained. The Doctor in the rush of the overwhelming tide forgot the account of the baptism of Lydia and her household, recorded in Act 16:15. He would not have made such a mistake, if he had been following the matter in a cool, deliberate desire to obtain the truth. He knew better as soon as he had time to think, but he made his argument under the influence of what he himself called an "overflow," and not as a person searching and expounding the word of God deliberately....

Prof. Willson gave us no argument, but intimated, that from a thorough examination of the matter as a theologian, he had views that corresponded to the sentiment of Synod. He was surprised at the unanimous report of the committee, and equally surprised at the mind of the large part of Synod. The Professor should have given us the benefit of his theological researches, but contented himself by saying that he had heard no argument on the other side. Thus he brushed away what had been brought from the word of God, which seemed to demand some answer; and under the influence of the overflow, the Synod was willing to take for granted that the Professor was right, without hearing his reasons or exercising their own private judgment in the case. A few of us were not ready to vote for a measure which, to Presbyterians generally, will seem to be an innovation, at least without time to make up our minds prayerfully and carefully.

Another evidence of the overflow of enthusiasm, was the form in which the committee presented the matter at first, substantially as follows: "That we find nothing in nature nor in the word of God, to prevent a woman from holding the deacon's office." The second member of the committee was Dr. Kennedy, a well-known scholar and theologian, and would have known better than to have agreed to such a report, if at all sober and in his right mind. But being carried away by the enthusiasm in the committee, he agreed to it, and after the prelatial form of it had been objected to by myself, tardily found objections to the negative form of the report of his own committee. The Synod then changed it into the positive form, substantially as follows: "That we find it is agreeable to nature and the word of God that a woman should be ordained to the office of deacon."

Another fact showing the undeliberative character of the proceeding, was the statement by some of the advocates of the measure, in reply to the ground taken by Dr. George, that no authority is conferred in ordination to the office of deacon, but there would be in ordination to that of elder or preacher, and that authority on the part of woman is usurpation, *that they were*

willing for woman to have her equal place with man in all offices, both in church and state. Thus no provision was made against the pressing of the matter further, in future, and the tide rushed onward overflowing the more cautious ground occupied by a few. Doubtless this flood-tide, if it be not checked, will carry women into all places of authority in church and state. Again, I would mention an argument of someone on the majority side, that it was necessary for us to take this step now, so as to continue to lead the churches in reform as heretofore. Reflection ought to convince such enthusiasts that leadership is not desirable unless in a Scriptural progress, and this ought to be first determined in a deliberate and constitutional manner.⁸⁶

Faris's comments reveal a number of troubling things regarding the debate at Synod to ordain women as deacons. Faris reveals that there were members of Synod that wanted to open *all* church offices to women. This indicates that the feminist rhetoric of the preceding thirty years was having an effect on some members of Synod. (We can reach no other conclusion, considering the overwhelming and very clear scriptural evidence against women being pastors or elders in the church.) Other members of Synod argued that women should be ordained as deacons so the R.P. Church could lead other churches in the cause of reform. This supports the view that the popularity of putting women into the ordained diaconate was not based on a new, clearer, more objective understanding of Scripture, but was a direct result of the nineteenth century reform movements, especially the new Christian feminism. The fact that the R.P. committee which recommended women deacons to Synod originally rejected the regulative principle in favor of a "prelatical" argument further indicates that the motivating factor for ordaining women as deacons was not in the first place Scripture but was the cultural environment. These men had good intentions and believed they were doing a good thing for society and the church but in reality they were just following the latest "evangelical"⁸⁷ fad.

Faris's warning that "this floodtide, if not checked, will carry women into all places of authority in church and state" has to a large extent already taken place. The sentiments of R.P. pastors such as Thomas Wylie who wanted to open *all* church offices to women apparently was held by a number of R.P. pastors. Even as late as 1938-39, there was a concerted effort to ordain women as ruling elders: "The Synod of 1938 appointed a Committee on Ordination of Women Elders, which reported to Synod the following year. The committee report recommended the ordination of women to the ruling eldership. Philip W. Martin and Johannes G. Vos responded with a paper entitled *Are Women Elders Scriptural?* etc."⁸⁸

J. G. Vos, who was an excellent scholar and highly respected within the denomination, was largely responsible for stopping the effort to ordain women to the eldership at that time. The present movement within the RPCNA to open all church offices to women is led by Faith Martin. This movement is a product of the feminism of the nineteen sixties and seventies.

⁸⁶ D. S. Faris, "The Female Deacon and the Sentimental Overflow of Synod," *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVI:10 (Oct. 1888), pp. 357-359, emphasis added.

⁸⁷ The term "evangelical" is used loosely here.

⁸⁸ Tony Cowley, "Women Deacons" (*Cornerstones*, March/April 1989).

Another interesting aspect of the Synod of 1888 from a constitutional point of view is "that the Synod...made an addition to the constitutional law of the church, without overture, and thus the rights of the sessions and the people have been invaded."⁸⁹ In order for a change to the constitution of the church to be made, a motion must be approved at Synod and then sent to the sessions for approval. If less than two thirds of the sessions approve of the change the constitution remains unchanged. The new constitution of the RPCNA, which was sent down in overture and approved in 1945, did state that: "Both men and women are eligible for the office of deacon." Thus, from 1888 to 1945, a period of 57 years, the ordination of women as deacons was a violation of the R.P. Church's own constitutional law.⁹⁰ Why did the Synod of 1888 refuse to send their approval of the ordination of women as deacons down to the sessions for approval? We know that it was not a mere matter of oversight on their part for the Rev. D. S. Faris brought the issue up twice in articles published in the denominational magazine. There is the possibility that the ordination of women as deacons, while popular among a majority of ministers at Synod (23 R.P. churches were not represented at the 1888 Synod), was not popular at the local session level. There is no way, however, at the present time to determine the cause of the 1888 Synod's usurpation of the sessions' and people's rights.

II. The Biblical Evidence

Acts 6:1-6

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a murmuring against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them (NKJV).

Acts 6:1-6 is an important passage in the debate over whether or not Scripture authorizes the ordination of women to the diaconate. Given the fact that orthodox Presbyterians have always at least formally considered the regulative principle to be strictly binding on both worship ordinances and church government, Acts 6:3 is a major obstacle for women-deacon advocates.

⁸⁹ *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVI:10 (Oct. 1888), p. 357.

⁹⁰ "No change shall be made in the fundamental law of the church until the proposed change has been sent down in overture and has been approved by two-thirds of all the sessions of the church (not including provisional sessions) that cast votes and a majority of the elders voting. The Synod shall canvass the vote and declare the decision" (Constitution of the RPCNA, p. D38.)

Why? Because the Bible teaches that "whatsoever is not commanded is forbidden." When the apostles commanded the church to choose seven men (*andres*), women were automatically excluded from the ordained diaconal office. If one wants to remain faithful to the regulative principle and have ordained women deacons, one must prove either that Acts 6:1-6 has nothing to do with the diaconal office or that subsequent revelation teaches, either explicitly or by inference, that women were ordained to the office of deacon. (Other methods of dealing with Acts 6:3 which I consider to be unscriptural are dealt with under the section entitled Circumventing the Regulative Principle.) After considering whether Acts 6:1-6 refers to deacons or temporary officers (e.g., proto-deacons) we will consider whether or not there is enough scriptural evidence to indicate that the apostolic church permitted women to serve in the same office as men deacons at a later point in time.

The views held by the authors of both the OPC Minority and Majority Report on Women in Church Office, that the seven men selected in Acts 6 were not deacons but temporary officers (i.e., the precursors of deacons or proto-deacons), has no basis whatsoever from the Scriptures and is merely a theory of modern scholarship. Aside from a few rare exceptions (e.g., Chrysostom, Homily XIV on Acts), the church throughout its entire history has interpreted Acts 6:1-6 as the institution of the diaconal office. Modernistic scholars argue that it is anachronistic to consider these seven as deacons, given the early state of church affairs at that time, but their argument is rooted in their anti-supernaturalistic presuppositions. Though the apostles may not have been fully aware of all the details and requirements of the diaconal office at this early date, surely God was aware and inscripturated the institution of this office.

The idea that the seven were proto-deacons may be popular with twentieth century seminary professors but it was not accepted by the great theologians and commentators of the past. Calvin says, "Luke declareth here upon what occasion and to what end and also with what rite deacons were first made."⁹¹ Matthew Henry says, "the deacons are blessed by the apostles, and the overseers of the poor by the pastors of the congregation...and this was giving them authority to execute that office, and laying an obligation upon the people to be observant of them therein."⁹² J. A. Alexander says, "In the case before us, it has even been disputed whether the act was that of ordination to a permanent office in the church, or only that of designation to a temporary service, like that of Barnabas and Saul in 13, 3 below. But although the title *deacon* is not used in this passage, nor indeed in this whole book, yet the judgment of the church has in all ages recognized this as the institution of that office...."⁹³ The patristic scholar Arthur McGiffert says, "The view that the Seven were deacons appears first in Irenaeus (Adv. Haer. I.26.3; III.12.10; IV.15.1), then in Cyprian (Ep. 64.3), and was the commonly accepted opinion of the Roman Church in the third century (for, while they had forty-six presbyters they had seven deacons)...and has been ever since almost universally accepted. In favor of the identification are urged this early and unanimous tradition, the similarity of the duties assigned to the Seven and to

⁹¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), p. 229.

⁹² Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, 6:71.

⁹³ J. A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Banner of Truth Trust, [1857] 1991), p. 247.

later deacons, and the use of the word *diakonia* and *diakonein* in connection with the "Seven" in Acts vi."⁹⁴ The great Puritan theologian John Owen says of Acts 6:1-6:

"It was *the institution of a new office*, and not a present supply in a work or business, which they designed." And again; "Nor was this a temporary institution for that season, and so the officers appointed extraordinary; *but was to abide in the church throughout all generations*." He speaks of the deacon, in the same connexion, as a known and existing officer, remarking, that "the original institution, nature, and use of the office of *deacons* in the church *were so well known*" that it "was not necessary to insist much on them."⁹⁵

Presbyterian scholar James M. Willson, who wrote the best work on the office of deacon in the nineteenth century, says, "Deacons were ordained in the apostolic churches soon after the day of Pentecost. Of the election and ordination of seven deacons in the church at Jerusalem, we have the history of Acts vi.1-6."⁹⁶ (This same interpretation can be found in the commentaries of John Gill, Frank E. Allen, R. C. Lenski, Simon J. Kistemaker, and many others.) There is the possibility that all Reformed scholars prior to the twentieth century were wrong in their interpretation of Acts 6:1-6, but that is unlikely.

The common objection to the traditional interpretation of Acts 6:1-6, is that two of the seven (Stephen and Philip) engaged in activities beyond the parameter of the diaconal office. This objection was never considered a problem by older commentators. They usually argue that the responsibilities given to the Seven as "the Seven" are fully in accord with those of the diaconal office. The fact that Stephen and Philip preached the gospel, and that Philip administered the sacrament of baptism are not considered a problem, for they engaged in those activities not as deacons but as evangelists.

If interpreters and theologians from every branch of the church have been wrong in their interpretation of Acts 6:1-6 for almost two thousand years, and the modern interpretation is correct, then this passage of Scripture has little to say regarding the debate. One could argue that since the proto-deacons were male then deacons should also probably be male. But since proto-deacons are not deacons, such an argument is very weak, if not useless. But if Acts 6:1-6 does refer to the institution of the diaconate, then women-deacon advocates must find strong evidence to counter such an explicit passage. There is no reason within the immediate or broader context of Scripture *not* to consider the seven as the first deacons—unless one assumes, as modernists do, that the apostles were just improvising as they went along. Furthermore, the offices that were temporary, such as evangelist and prophet, ceased with the close of the canon and the death of the apostles. Anyone well versed in reformed theology understands why these functions ceased. Why would the apostles replace the ordained office of "proto-deacon" with the identical yet permanent office of deacon? There is no theological or practical reason given anywhere in the New Testament for such a change. If the appointment of "proto-deacons" by the church was an

⁹⁴ Arthur Castman McGiffert, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 1:103, fn.

⁹⁵ John Owen, "Treatise on Church Government," quoted in James M. Willson, *The Deacon*, p. 18.

⁹⁶ James M. Willson, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

ad-hoc arrangement, why were they ordained? Why would the Holy Spirit give a detailed account of why and how these men were chosen and ordained if this office was just an ad-hoc temporary arrangement? The idea that the seven men chosen and ordained in Acts 6 were "proto-deacons" is pure speculation and should be rejected.

Those who favor the ordination of women as deacons argue that even if Acts 6:3 does refer to the permanent office of deacon, the fact that only men were chosen should not be considered significant or binding on the church. The OPC Minority Report says,

We need not doubt that the Apostles called for the selection of seven men. Logically, however, the appointment of men in the instance does not in itself constitute a prohibition against the appointment of women in later diaconal elections. (Lenski can even speak of the addition of women in such service as the "next logical step"!) What indicates that the intention of the Apostles was—or that the intention of the Spirit who inspired the record is—to set down here a regulation which is to govern the church with regard to the holders of the diaconal office in all generations?⁹⁷

What the authors of the OPC Minority Report ignore in their comments regarding Acts 6:1-6 is that when the passage says that seven men are to be chosen, women are automatically excluded from the diaconal office unless they are admitted to that office by subsequent revelation. The regulative principle teaches that whatever is *not* commanded is forbidden. "A divine warrant is necessary for every element of doctrine, government and worship in the church; that is, whatsoever in these spheres is not commanded in the Scriptures, either expressly or by good and necessary consequence from their statements is forbidden."⁹⁸ If one can prove by command or inference from subsequent revelation that women were admitted to the ordained diaconal office, then one could say that Acts 6:3 was not meant to be binding on all generations of the church. But anyone who claims to be Reformed and who claims to adhere to the regulative principle must admit that at least at the point in time that the events in Acts 6 occurred, women were not allowed by God to be deacons.

Does subsequent revelation teach us that at some time before revelation ceased and the apostles were all dead, God introduced women into the diaconal office described in Acts 6:1-6? The biblical material regarding the diaconal office does not support the idea that women were admitted to the diaconal office at a later date. The biblical evidence indicates that Acts 6:3 was meant by God to be binding on the church for "all generations."

The institution of the diaconal office occurred almost at the very beginning of God's new covenant church. The events in Acts chapter 6 probably occurred in the spring of A.D. 30, according to the Julian calendar. The New Testament book which gives us the most detailed information regarding the diaconal office is 1 Timothy. The pastoral epistles (1 and 2 Tim. and

⁹⁷ OPC Minority Report, p. 952.

⁹⁸ John Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Havertown, PA: New Covenant Publication Society, [1888] 1983), p. 1.

Tit.) were probably the last letters written by the apostle Paul before his death. Orthodox scholars date 1 Timothy from A.D. 64 to A.D. 67. "According to the *Chronicon* of Eusebius it occurred in A.D. 67 or 68."⁹⁹ The institution of the office of deacon and Paul's instructions to Timothy regarding deacons are separated by a period of 35 to 38 years. This period of time encompasses almost the entire writing of the New Testament. If God had introduced women into the ordained diaconate sometime after the events in Acts 6 were recorded, then we could expect such a change to be reflected in Paul's detailed instructions regarding deacons recorded in 1 Timothy chapter 3. But instead we find the opposite (for a detailed analysis of 1 Tim. 3:11 turn to the section of this book where this passage is considered). 1 Timothy 3:11 cannot refer to women deacons who serve in the same office as male deacons, for the syntax indicates three separate classes of servants: elders, deacons and women who assist the deacons (the order of widows, cf. 1 Tim. 5:9ff.).

In his instruction to Timothy regarding deacons, Paul says, "Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well" (1 Tim. 3:12). As late as A.D. 67 the ordained office of deacon was still restricted to men. Thus the first generation of the Christian church did not have women deacons who served in the same office as male deacons. This fact is significant, for it was during this first generation that the writing of Scripture was completed and all church ordinances were inscripturated and fixed for all subsequent generations.¹⁰⁰ Another significant fact is that both Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:12 are very clear, unambiguous passages. They are not what interpreters refer to as "problem passages." There are sections of Scripture that are less clear than others. There are passages that theologians and commentators have been divided over for centuries, but Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:12 are not disputed passages. Therefore when we come to a disputed passage or passages that are less clear, such as Romans 16:1, we should interpret the less clear in light of the clear passage.

The idea that the apostles' specific command to choose seven men is not important or binding has serious problems. Women-deacon advocates must argue that the command was arbitrary, or that God intended to introduce women into the diaconate at a later time (the idea that the apostles were sexists or that they were just following their patriarchal culture is based on non-supernatural presuppositions and is not worth considering). The idea that the apostles' command to choose seven men was arbitrary must be rejected. The government that God set over His church is not a result of pragmatism or guess work but is the result of the teaching of the apostles, who were infallibly guided by the Holy Spirit. The idea that God introduced women into the diaconate at a later time is not supported by Scripture (see the sections on 1 Tim. 3:11 and Rom. 16:1) and simply does not make any sense. Why would the apostles command that only men be chosen when many qualified women were present? If God intended to introduce women into the diaconate at a later date, why insist that only men be chosen at the beginning of the institution? There is not one instance in the entire Bible where women were admitted to a

⁹⁹ Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 364.

¹⁰⁰ There is strong evidence that the canon of Scripture was closed by A.D. 70—not A.D. 95-96. For a detailed argument that the book of Revelation was written before A.D. 70 see *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

church office that at its institution was reserved for males. Jesus spoke in parables to obscure the truth for reprobates but why would God confuse the church by having her choose seven men when all the time He intended to introduce women into the same office at a later date? The fact that women did *not* serve in the *same* office as men deacons until the nineteenth century indicates that the church took Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:12 literally for eighteen centuries.

Circumventing the Regulative Principle

The Number Seven Argument

One clever attempt to circumvent the regulative principle is to accuse those who argue that Acts 6:3 teaches that deacons must be men of being selective in their use of the regulative principle. They argue that since the *number* of deacons chosen (seven) is not considered normative, why should the *gender* of the deacons chosen be considered normative?

Do we not have in v. 3, it is sometimes noted, the explicit instruction of the Apostles to "select from among you, brothers, seven *men*..." which instruction was carried out in the choosing of seven *males*?

Yes, this is certainly the case. And the word used in v. 3 (*andras*, from *aner*) is not the word which is used generically to indicate "person," "human being" (*anthropos*), but is the word which often accepts gender, man in contrast to woman (though it can also emphasize adulthood in contrast to a boy). We need not doubt that the Apostles called for the selection of seven *men*.

Logically, however, the appointment of men in this instance does not in itself constitute a prohibition against the appointment of women in later diaconal elections. (Lenski can even speak of the addition of women in such service as the "next logical step"!) What indicates that the intention of the Apostles was—or that the intention of the Spirit who inspired the record is—to set down here a regulation which is to govern the church with regard to the holders of the diaconal office in all generations?

It is worth noting that the *number* of those to be selected is just as explicitly given, but few congregations consider this to be normative in every situation. Reasons in the contemporary context for setting the number at seven have been suggested (some note that the local Jewish town councils were known as "the Seven [Best] of the Town," some point to seven as the number of completeness, some suggest that another number (than twelve) was chosen in order to show that the number Twelve (Apostles) was not normative!). But we do not believe that we need to know for certain the reason why that number was commanded in that situation in order to know that it is not binding for every council of deacons. In like manner, we need not establish definitively the reason for the selection of males only in the appointment of the original Seven in order to believe that this is not a normative regulation for every council of deacons.

The situation would be different, of course, were a definite restriction of the diaconal office to men only to be stated, based upon Biblical principle (as is the case with regard to teaching

and ruling elders, 1 Timothy 2:12); but this is not stated in Acts 6, and we should be extremely careful not to read more into the intended instruction for us than is actually there.¹⁰¹

This clever attempt to avoid the clear teaching of Acts 6:3 that deacons are to be men is in reality a veiled attack on the regulative principle. Either the authors of the OPC Minority Report do not understand how the regulative principle works or they believe that the qualifications given for church offices in Scripture are optional. A brief consideration of the regulative principle will prove my point.

The Presbyterians of the seventeenth century applied the regulative principle to worship *and* church government. They spoke of the divine right (*jus divinum*) of Presbyterian church government. "And whatsoever matters in Church government can be proved by Scripture to have this stamp of divine warrant and authority set upon them, they may properly be said to be *jure divino*, and by the will and appointment of Jesus Christ, to whom God has delegated all power and authority for government of his Church (Mt. 28:18-20; Is. 9:6; Jn. 5:22; Eph. 1:22)."¹⁰² When discussing the regulative principle, Presbyterian theologians made a very clear distinction between the circumstances of worship and church ordinances. The circumstances or incidentals of worship and church government apply to those things that are "common" to human societies. Thus what kind of chairs are used, the size of windows, the color of carpeting or whether or not to have carpeting, what color clothes to wear, etc. are all considered circumstances of worship. That is these things are easily determined by "Christian prudence." Even an unbeliever could determine such things apart from special revelation.¹⁰³ For example, unbelievers understand the need for chairs, lighting, a building in cold weather, etc. But worship ordinances can only be learned directly from special revelation. Examples of worship ordinances are: preaching from the Bible (Mt. 26:13; Mk. 16:15; Ac. 9:20; 2 Tim. 4:2), reading the word of God (Mk. 4:16-20; Ac. 13:1), meeting on the Lord's day (Ac. 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10), and hearing the word of God (Lk. 2:46; Ac. 8:31; Rom. 10:17; Jas. 1:22).

This same distinction also applies to the government of Christ's church. The biblical teaching regarding church officers (e.g., pastor, elders, and deacons) and the qualifications given

¹⁰¹ OPC Minority Report, pp. 952-953.

¹⁰² Ministers of Zion College, London, *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici, or, The Divine Right of Church-Government*, ed. by Christopher Coldwell (Dallas: Naphtali Press, [1646] 1995), p. 7, emphasis in original.

¹⁰³ The believer and unbeliever do not have epistemological common ground but do have metaphysical common ground. Both the believer and unbeliever are created in the image of God and both must live and function in God's universe, in God's created reality. While the unbeliever may hate God and worship idols and adhere to an absurd worldview, by virtue of who he is, and by virtue of God's created reality, he must live and function to a certain degree in accordance with that reality, or perish. By virtue of the fact that the image of God in the broad sense has not been eradicated by the fall and by virtue of God's common grace, unbelievers have a surface knowledge or a functional knowledge of reality. Thus when the authors of the Westminster Confession teach that "there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and the governance of the church, *common to both* human actions and societies" (1:6), they simply recognize that people—Christian or otherwise—do not need an explicit or implicit command of God to wear a coat when it is 5 degrees outside. The need for a building, chairs, clothing, etc. can easily be determined by both believer and unbeliever; but worship ordinances, qualifications for office, etc. can only be determined by special revelation.

for each particular church office can only be determined by divine revelation. Therefore, church offices and the qualifications for church office are in the category of governmental ordinances. But the number of elders and deacons in each particular church is easily determined without specific instructions from special revelation. That is why the *number* of elders and deacons in each church was never considered a divine ordinance by Puritans and Presbyterians.

It is obvious that the qualifications for a deacon can only be determined by the clear teaching of the word of God. But the number of deacons (or elders) can only be determined according to the present circumstances of each congregation. Therefore the qualification of deacons in Acts 6:1-6 (i.e., "*men* of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" v. 3) is ruled by the explicit commands of Scripture. The number given is not a divine ordinance but is incidental to church order.

While it is true that some of the churches in the post apostolic period¹⁰⁴ took the number to be binding, the Protestant reformers and all Protestant commentators consider the number to be a circumstance of the church in Jerusalem and therefore non-binding. John Gill says, "...perhaps no other solid reason is to be given, but that the number was judged sufficient for the care of the poor in that church, and at that time; nor is it obligatory on other churches to have just so many, neither more nor fewer; for such officers are to be chosen as the church requires."¹⁰⁵ Matthew Henry says, "*Look out seven men*; so many they thought might suffice for the present, more might be added afterwards if there were occasion."¹⁰⁶ J. A. Alexander says, "*Seven* has been variously explained, as a number arbitrarily selected, or for some reason of convenience, now unknown; or because seven nations are supposed to have been represented; or because the church was now divided into seven congregations; or, most probably of all, because of its sacred associations which may all perhaps be traced back to the institution of the Sabbath...."¹⁰⁷ R. C. H. Lenski says, "Just why seven were proposed no one knows. It is, of course, a sacred number, but here practical considerations evidently governed.... The reason for selecting seven seems to have been obvious to the congregation, but what this reason was we cannot say."¹⁰⁸ Simon J. Kistemaker says that "the number seven represents the number of fullness."¹⁰⁹ If we interpret seven in Acts 6:3 in its usual scriptural sense of fullness or completeness then seven could be interpreted to mean that each church should have the number of deacons necessary to faithfully complete their task. This, of course, would depend on church size and the number of poor Christians in the community.

¹⁰⁴ The Roman church in the third century had forty-six presbyters but only seven deacons. Their mistaken notion that the number given in Acts was binding was easily dealt with by appointing numerous assistants to the deacons (e.g., sub-deacons). Thus we should note that their mistaken notion that the number was binding actually contributed to unscriptural innovations in church government. The Reformers from the Calvinistic wing of the Reformation did not commit the same error until the nineteenth century when numerous innovations were brought in (e.g., trustees, Sunday School superintendents, female missionaries, etc.).

¹⁰⁵ John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament* ([1809] 1979), 8:90.

¹⁰⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, 6:71.

¹⁰⁷ J. A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Banner of Truth), pp. 243-244.

¹⁰⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Augsburg, [1933] 1961), pp. 243-244.

¹⁰⁹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 222.

The reason that the number seven in Acts 6:3 has never been considered a binding church ordinance by any post Reformation theologian or commentator is the simple fact that such an assertion is absurd. If every church, regardless of size, was required to have seven deacons, small churches would have far too many, while large churches would not have enough. A church with 12, 14, 17 or 22 members might have more deacons than persons in need; a church in a poverty stricken area with 10,000 or 20,000 members would have far too few. Therefore it is clear that the number of deacons is one of those things best determined or "ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence." But the qualifications given (which clearly include being a man) can only be learned through special revelation. This fact explains why female deacons *in the same office* as male deacons did not come into existence until the nineteenth century. If the authors of the Minority Report are truly concerned about applying the regulative principle consistently to Scripture then perhaps they will encourage others to ordain seven deacons in each church. The truth is that their argument regarding number is a ploy to blunt the clear teaching in Acts 6:3 that deacons are to be men. Apparently they do not believe that the regulative principle applies to Acts 6:3 at all: "whatsoever is not commanded is forbidden." The Holy Spirit tells the church to appoint men and ordain them as deacons, therefore women are forbidden by Scripture to be deacons. Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 do not contradict this clear teaching because they do not speak of deacons but of the order of widows.

Galatians 3:28

One of the standard methods used to circumvent the regulative principle by those who desire to ordain women to office is to interpret Galatians 3:28 as applying not just to a Christian's salvation in Christ but also to role relationships within the church. If Galatians 3:28 teaches that all role distinctions have been eliminated by Christ, then one could legitimately argue that distinct prohibitions against women serving as elders or deacons are needed in order to justify reserving church offices (e.g., pastor, elder, deacon) for men alone. Thus in this one area of women and church office the regulative principle is suspended. Instead of "whatever is not commanded is forbidden," one could argue that "whatever is not forbidden is permitted." This use of Galatians 3:28 to suspend the regulative principle explains why most Presbyterians who argue for women deacons sound suspiciously like Episcopalians and Lutherans. This tactic is necessary because the Bible explicitly teaches that only men are to be ordained as deacons (cf. Acts 6:3; 1 Tim. 3:12), and the two passages given as positive warrant (Rom. 16:1-2; 1 Tim. 3:11) are better interpreted as *not* referring to women deacons in the same office as men deacons. Before we examine why Galatians 3:28 cannot refer to roles within the church (or family), we first should look at how Galatians 3:28 has been used by the advocates of women deacons (in the same office as men deacons) to place the burden of proof on those who teach that women should not be admitted to the male diaconate.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (Covenanter) opened the office of deacon to women in 1888. This small Psalm-singing denomination was considered by many to

be one of the strictest Presbyterian bodies when it came to upholding the regulative principle. Yet the advocates of women deacons within this denomination sound more like Prelatists than Presbyterians when discussing women deacons:

The Church of the New Testament is a corporate institution, and all her members have all corporate rights and privileges *unless when explicitly excepted*. How far, however, the enjoyment of these rights and privileges has been limited or otherwise, by such exemptions, can seldom be learned from anything said of the ordinance at its first institution [e.g., Ac. 6:1-6], but is to be gathered from subsequent facts...the privilege of holding and exercising the deacon's office, not being in the case of women one of the things excepted, their right thereto is as plain....¹¹⁰

In all this organizing, Christ Jesus is the Head, the Head of the body, the church, and "in Him there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, we are all one in Christ Jesus." It took long years and much counsel to realize the first declaration [i.e., that slavery is abolished].... The second declaration is realized as a fact today, but hardly as a doctrine.... I regard it as a point settled, that experienced Christian women at a time of life, and in circumstances, when they were free to do so, did service in official place in the early church. *There was no reason why they should not....* Whatever you deny to another that you claim for yourself, *you must deny on a sure warrant. Your warrant to prohibit must be clear.*¹¹¹

To anyone familiar with the regulative principle it is obvious that the above writers have clearly abandoned it with regard to the women-deacon issue. The main reason that the regulative principle has been abandoned in this area is the need to explain away the very clear teaching in Acts 6:3 that deacons must be men. Acts 6:3 must be diffused because Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 are very weak support for their position (as we shall see later). The orthodox Protestant rule of interpretation must be subverted in order to have women deacons: "The infallible rule of the interpretation of scripture is the scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture, (which is not manifold, but one) *it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.*"¹¹² Acts 6:3 is clear, while Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 are not. The above writers know this and thus have used Galatians 3:28 to eliminate its importance.

Using Galatians 3:28 as a platform for complete role equality within the church unless "denied on a sure warrant" is still used to circumvent the regulative principle. The OPC Minority Report says, "Given the Bible's clear teaching regarding the full equality of the sexes before God, we would seem to require some Biblical basis for excluding them from a particular role and office in the church at least as much as we would require a Biblical basis for opening it to them.... *Surely if the N.T. explicitly excludes women from the diaconate, they must be excluded.*

¹¹⁰ *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVI:11 (Nov. 1888), pp. 383-384, emphasis added.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 394ff.

¹¹² Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:9, emphasis added.

Whether any N.T. text does this is the question to be examined.”¹¹³ The authors of the OPC Minority Report have wisely not defined what they mean by "full equality of the sexes before God." Apparently they believe that any role differences within the church between men and women have been eliminated by Christ. Such an assertion, while popular in our day, is unbiblical and absurd.

The idea that role differences between men and women in the church are eliminated by Christ cannot be supported by Gal. 3:28 and would involve the New Testament in a whole series of glaring contradictions. Such contradictions are impossible. The standard orthodox interpretation of Galatians 3:28 (which was held by the Reformers and was universally accepted until the church was influenced by feminism in the nineteenth century) is that it speaks "of the oneness of male and female as beneficiaries of God's grace in Christ."¹¹⁴

Martin Luther says,

There is neither Jew nor Grecian.... There is neither male nor female.... Indeed the male, the female, the bond, the free, the Jew, the Gentile, the prince, the subject, are the good creatures of God; but in Christ, that is, *in the matter of salvation* they are nothing.... Him alone doth the Gospel set forth unto us for a pacifier of God's wrath by the shedding of His own blood, and a Savior: without faith in Him, neither shall the Jew be saved by the law, nor the monk by his order, not the Grecian by his wisdom....¹¹⁵

John Calvin says,

The meaning is, that there is no distinction of persons here, and therefore it is of no consequence to what nation or condition any one may belong.... The apostle's object is to show that the grace of adoption, and the hope of salvation, do not depend on the law [or status], but are contained in Christ alone, who therefore is all.¹¹⁶

John Gill says,

But the meaning is, that there is no difference between them [Jew and Gentile], the middle wall of partition being broken down, and that *in the business of justification and salvation*...there

¹¹³ OPC Minority Report, p. 942.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 907.

¹¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (Cambridge: James Clarke, [1575] 1978), pp. 342-343, emphasis added.

¹¹⁶ Calvin, *Galatians*, p. 112.

is no distinction made between male and female as to divine things; as they are alike called by the grace of God, they have the same right to God's ordinances [i.e., the sacraments].¹¹⁷

Matthew Henry says,

"But all who sincerely believe on Christ, of what nation, or sex, or condition, soever they be, are accepted of Him, and become children of God through faith in Him."¹¹⁸

James M. Porteous says,

"That passage also, 'There is neither male nor female' (Gal. 3:28), is entirely irrelevant [to the subject of women teaching in the church]. *The object of the apostle is to show that there is but one way of salvation for everyone alike.*"¹¹⁹

Ernest DeWitt Burton says,

That he is speaking of these distinctions *from the point of view of religion* [i.e., salvation] is evident from the context in general, but especially from his ineradicable distinction of sex. The passage has nothing to do directly with the merging of nationalities or the abolition of slavery.... In the former case the meaning is: once in Christ Jesus, whether you be Jew or Gentile, slave or master, man or woman, all these distinctions vanish (there is no respect of persons with God); it is as if it were always the same person [Jesus Christ] reappearing before Him.¹²⁰

Lange's commentary says,

"All these natural antitheses do not come into account in this relation,—if only one believes on Christ, he is a son of God, let him be what else he may.... All who are in Christ Jesus, are in the same degree 'sons of God,' how different soever they may be in other relations."¹²¹ Lenski says, "all the Galatians are alike clothed with the garment of Christ's perfect righteousness. In God's eyes they are all alike...all these and similar distinctions and differences are wiped out as to your spiritual standing [i.e., salvation].... Paul is here speaking of the spiritual domain, of God's household *in which all believers are equally sons of God.*"¹²²

¹¹⁷ John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, 9:25, emphasis added.

¹¹⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, 6:663.

¹¹⁹ James M. Porteous, *The Government of the Kingdom of Christ* (Edinburgh, 1873), p. 168, emphasis added.

¹²⁰ Ernest DeWitt Burton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980), pp. 206-207, emphasis added.

¹²¹ Otto Schmoller, *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* ([1870] 1978), 2:88.

¹²² R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, [1937] 1961), pp. 188-189, emphasis added.

Stephen B. Clark says,

"It [Gal. 3:28] does not even properly qualify as a key text since it does not explicitly address the subject of the roles of men and women.... For a key statement on men's and women's roles, one should look at the passages on personal relationships and social order that are directly concerned with the matter."¹²³

The OPC Majority Report says,

It must be clear to all that these closing verses of chapter 3 are part of his impassioned argument for the gospel of justification by faith in Jesus Christ.... The same Scripture that reveals that all are sinners announces the good news that salvation is promised to all who believe, whatever their race, social status, or sex.... There is essential agreement that it speaks of the oneness of male and female as beneficiaries of God's grace in Christ. Everyone who believes, without distinction is God's child.... Certainly it would be a mistake to imagine that Paul is suggesting that in Christ the original created male-female relationship is negated.... Redemption does not destroy the creation ordinances of God.¹²⁴

Ronald Y. K. Fung says,

The statement that there is no "male and female" in Christ does not mean, as was believed in later Gnosticism, that in the new era mankind is restored to the pristine androgynous state; nor does it mean that all male-female distinctions have been obliterated in Christ, any more than that there is no racial difference between the Christian Jew and the Christian Gentile. "In Christ Jesus" emphasizes that Paul views *the elimination of these antitheses from the standpoint of redemption in Christ*.... It seem precarious to appeal to this verse in support of any view of the role of women in the church, for two reasons: (a) Paul's statement is not concerned with the role relationship of men and women within the Body of Christ but rather with their common initiation into it through (faith) and baptism; (b) the male/female distinction, unlike the other two, has its roots in creation, so that the parallelism between the male/female pair and the other pairs may not be unduly pressed.¹²⁵

That Galatians 3:28 speaks of salvation in Christ and *not* the role of women in the governance of the church has been the standard orthodox Protestant interpretation for over 400 years. This view is also supported by Paul's explanation of why women are not to teach or have authority over men in the church.

¹²³ Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Women in Christ*, pp. 138-139, quoted in OPC Majority Report, p. 906.

¹²⁴ OPC Majority Report, pp. 906-907.

¹²⁵ Ronald Y. K. Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 175-176.

The basic assumption of those who are attempting to diffuse the regulative principle is that all offices and activities are opened to women by the coming of Christ unless "explicitly excepted." Thus women could speak out in the assembly prior to Paul's writing of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 where women are explicitly forbidden to speak in the church. According to their view women could be preachers, evangelists and elders until it was explicitly forbidden by Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 14:34, 1 Tim. 2:11-12, 3:1, etc.). This view is clearly wrong, however, because it is rather obvious that Paul is not writing new regulations but merely dealing with the abuses of existing laws. If Christ had eliminated any role differences between men and women, then Paul could not have appealed to creation ordinances (1 Tim. 2:13, 1 Cor. 11:8-9), the Old Testament law (1 Cor. 14:34), the submission of Christ to God (1 Cor. 11:3), and Eve's deception (1 Tim. 2:14) as reasons for women to "learn in silence with all submission" and for women "not to teach or have authority over men" in the church.¹²⁶

Unless we assume that Paul is normally incoherent, it would make more sense to begin with the view that Paul had some way of putting together passages like Galatians 3:28 and 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, which were probably written within a year or two of one another; and that Galatians 3:28 is *not* directed against those differences of social role for men and women which other scripture passages indicate are based upon the way God created the human race.¹²⁷

Thus Galatians 3:28 cannot be used to turn the regulative principle upside down, and the burden of proof still rests with those who want to put women in the diaconate.

The Lord's Supper Analogy

Another attempt at circumventing the regulative principle is an analogy between the institution of the Lord's supper (cf. Lk. 22:14-20) and the institution of the diaconate in Acts 6:1-6:

Later practice within the New Testament church determines rights to participation in sacraments, not simply the first institution. (There were no women at the Lord's supper when instituted, but they are soon seen later.) The Church of the New Testament is a corporate institution, and all her members have all corporate rights and privileges *unless when explicitly excepted*. How far, however, the enjoyment of these rights and privileges has been limited or otherwise, by such exemptions, can seldom be learned from anything said of the ordinance at its first institution, but is to be gathered from subsequent facts...a woman's right to be deacon is more clear in scripture than their right to the Lord's Supper.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Feminists—Christian or otherwise—have the mistaken notion that God's ordained order of authority means or implies that women are inferior to men. According to the Bible, nothing could be further from the truth, for Jesus Christ is under God and submits to God the Father, yet is equal to God in every way. The Bible presents Christ's submission to the Father as a noble thing deserving of honor.

¹²⁷ Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*, p. 150, quoted in OPC Majority Report, p. 909.

¹²⁸ *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVI:11 (Nov. 1888), p. 383, quoted in *Cornerstones*, July/Aug. 1989.

This analogy is clever but seriously flawed. It is true that only men (Christ and the apostles) were present at the institution of the Lord's supper. But there is nothing whatsoever in the accounts of the last supper to indicate that this new ordinance was for the apostles only or for men only. In fact, Jesus Christ's own explanation of the sacrament clearly indicates that Christian women should and must participate in the Lord's supper.¹²⁹ "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, even that which is poured out for you" (Lk. 22:20). The cup is for all who believe in Jesus Christ and are cleansed by His blood. Jesus Christ died for both men and women. Those things signified by Christ's death clearly apply to all believers. The Lord's supper symbolically represents Christ's sacrificial death (cf. 1 Cor. 11:26). "It also represents the believer's participation in the crucified Christ."¹³⁰ It strengthens the Christian's faith and it symbolizes the union of all believers (both male and female) with one another (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16-17). The Lord's supper seals believers as participants and partakers of all the blessings that Christ attained for His people. Thus the very meaning of the Lord's supper requires that Christian women be present. The apostles were present at the first Lord's supper as the leaders and representatives of the whole church.

For such an analogy to be effectual, one would have to have at the first institution of the Lord's supper a command from Christ that only men (or only apostles) are permitted to partake of the sacraments (e.g., "Seek out...seven men" [Ac. 6:3], an imperative). A genuine analogy would show an instance (even one instance) where God gave clear instructions regarding church office and then later changed His mind and abrogated the earlier instructions. For example, the duties and office of the Levites were clearly restricted to men. A parallel analogy would have to show women Levites performing duties earlier restricted by God to men. The text would have to show that God approved of such a radical change. There are no such examples in the entire Bible. To argue that Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 are evidence of such a radical departure is fallacious. These passages, as will be shown, are definitely *not* speaking of women deacons in the same office as men deacons.

Furthermore, the Lord's supper was founded upon the Passover. Berkhof writes, "Evidently, the Lord did not finish the Passover meal before He instituted the Lord's Supper. The

¹²⁹ The assertion that there is more evidence in the New Testament for women deacons than there is for women's participations in the Lord's Supper is truly puzzling. The historical passages in the New Testament which are quoted to prove that women were present during the sacrament have never been disputed. In fact it is impossible to interpret them in any other way than having both sexes present. "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about *three thousand souls* were added to them. And *they* continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the *breaking of bread*, and in prayers.... Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common" (Ac. 2:41-44). "While this is a term [the breaking of bread] which, in all probability, does not refer exclusively to the Lord's Supper, but also to the love-feasts, it *certainly* also includes the Lord's Supper" (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939], p. 647). "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together [the many lamps indicate a large gathering]" (Ac. 20:7-8). The passages quoted to prove women deacons (Rom. 16:1-2; 1 Tim. 3:11) are easily interpreted in another way besides requiring women deacons. There has never been agreement over the meaning of these passages by commentators. Furthermore, these less clear passages should be interpreted according to the very clear Acts 6:1-6 and not vice versa.

¹³⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 650.

new sacrament was linked up with the central element in the Pascal meal. The bread that was eaten with the lamb was consecrated to a new use. This is evident from the fact that the third cup, generally called "the cup of blessing" was used for the second element in the new sacrament. Thus the sacrament of the Old Testament passed into the New in a most natural way."¹³¹ Under the old covenant no uncircumcised person was permitted to eat of the Passover (Ex. 12:48). All circumcised Israelites who were ceremonially clean and had sanctified themselves to the Lord were permitted to eat of the Pascal meal. Under the new covenant, circumcision has been replaced by baptism. Both men and women are to be baptized (Ac. 8:12, 16:15). Thus, Christian women should also partake of the Lord's supper.

Once again the attempt to circumvent the regulative principle and the importance of the institution of the office of deacon in Acts 6:1-6 is founded upon faulty reasoning and a misrepresentation of Scripture. The idea that very little is learned at the institution of an ordinance (or church office) and that most information must be gathered from subsequent facts is an obvious attempt to downplay the importance of Acts 6:1-6. While it is true that we can learn more about an ordinance or office from subsequent information given in Scripture, the assertion that most information comes from subsequent scriptural data is simply untrue. In the case of having women deacons in the same office as men deacons, they are not merely talking about further information that clarifies (e.g., Paul adds information regarding celebrating the Lord's supper in 1 Cor. 11:27ff.) but further information that *contradicts*. For God to insist that deacons are to be men and then supposedly clarify our understanding of the office with difficult passages such as Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 is extremely hard to believe. To argue in such a way violates standard rules of interpretation and common sense.

Romans 16:1-2

I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant [*diakonon*] of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also (NKJV).

Of the two passages in Scripture (1 Tim. 3:11; Rom. 16:1-2) which are used in support of women deacons, Romans 16:1-2 is considered to be much more important as a proof text. That is because Romans 16:1-2 is generally considered to be the clearer of the two passages and because Romans 16:1 specifically refers to Phoebe as a *diakonos*, which can be translated as servant or deacon. B. B. Warfield, who was a strong advocate of women deacons, believed that 1 Timothy 3:11 had nothing to do with women deacons. He believed that the whole scriptural argument for women deacons is found in the phrase "I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, who is a deaconess [Gk. *diakonon*] of the church in Cenchrea" (Warfield's translation).

¹³¹ Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 647.

One of the difficulties in interpreting a passage such as Romans 16:1 is the fact that the Greek word *diakonos*, which was used by the early church as a title of a specific church office (i.e., deacon), was also used to describe virtually every form of Christian ministry (e.g., apostle, missionary-evangelist, presbyter, prophet, etc.). The word *diakonos* is used to describe table waiters (Lk. 10:40; Jn. 2:5, 9), servants of sin (Rom. 15:8), servants of the gospel (Gal. 2:17), a servant of the church (Rom. 16:1; Col. 1:25), Paul and Apollos who are servants of both God and the church (1 Cor. 3:5), Epaphras who is a servant of God (Col. 1:7), and Tychicus who is a servant of the Lord (Col. 4:7; Eph. 6:21). The word is applied to Christ, Paul, the apostles, Timothy (1 Th. 3:2), Tychicus (Col. 4:7), Epaphras (Col. 1:7) and of course to Phoebe (Rom. 16:1). The word is used so often to describe people who are not deacons that a careful consideration must be given to all the various indicators within the text to determine if the person is in fact a deacon. In most cases there is no problem because the people in question are described in the immediate context or broader context as apostles or evangelists or table waiters, etc. Thus the English is translated as servant or minister. Of the more than thirty occurrences of *diakonos* in the New Testament, only four occurrences (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12, 13) refer to a specific office-title (i.e., deacon). Whether or not Phoebe was an official deacon, a regular servant, or a servant who holds an office separate from the regular diaconate can only be determined by examining Romans 16:1-2. She is mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament. Factors such as the biblical teaching regarding the diaconate and the testimony of church history are useful when dealing with such a disputed passage.

Phoebe's standing in Romans 16:1-2 can be interpreted in one of three ways. First, Phoebe could be an ordained officer in the church, a deacon. Second, she could be someone who is not connected to any office whatsoever but serves in an unofficial capacity. Third, Phoebe could be an official servant of the church but in a different office than deacon. Remember that the Greek word *diakonos* is often used to describe someone who is not a deacon. The context and indicators within the passage would of course be used to determine what that office is.

Those interpreters who believe that Phoebe was an official deacon usually follow four lines of reasoning. The first (and in the author's opinion, the best) argument used is the official sounding nature of Paul's introduction of Phoebe to the Roman church. Cranfield argues:

It is perhaps just conceivable that the word *diakonos* should be understood here as a quite general reference to her service of the congregation; but it is very much more natural, particularly in view of the way in which Paul formulates his thought (*ousan...diakonan* ties *ekkliesias*), to understand it as referring to a definite office. We regard it as virtually certain that Phoebe is being described as 'a' (or possibly 'the') deacon of church in question, and that this occurrence of *diakonos* is to be classified with its occurrence in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8 and 12.¹³²

Cranfield also believes that Phoebe's description as a helper (v. 2b) supports his interpretation.

¹³² C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans* (T & T Clark, 1979), 2:781.

Cranfield and many others on both sides of the debate have succumbed to the fallacy of black and white in their observations of this text. While it is true that Paul's introduction of Phoebe sounds official, it does not necessarily follow that she was an ordained deacon like the seven in Acts. The idea that Phoebe was an ordained deacon in the same office with male deacons raises a number of serious problems. The first problem is that the office which corresponds to the New Testament office of deacon in the Old Testament (the Levitical aid to the poor) and the synagogue (the *chazan*) was always restricted to men. If God was going to open this office to women then why did He restrict it to men in Acts 6:1-6?

Do we not have in v. 3, it is sometimes noted, the explicit instructions of the Apostles to "select from among you, brothers, seven men..." which instructions were carried out in the choosing of seven *males*? Yes, this is certainly the case. And the word used in v. 3 (*andres*, from *aner*) is not the word which is used generically to indicate "person," "human being" (*anthropos*), but is the word which often accents gender, man in contrast to women.... We need not doubt that the Apostles called for the selection of seven *men*.¹³³

While it is possible that God could have opened the office at a later time to women, there is no evidence of such a change in the New Testament. To assert that God changed thousands of years of procedure with this one ambiguous phrase in Romans 16:1 is a grasping after straw. The fact that deacons had authority, that deacons had to be husbands of one wife, that married women are forbidden by Paul to hold any office because of their family responsibilities (cf. 1 Tim. 5:14) is dealt with in other sections of this book. The reason Paul's introduction of Phoebe sounds official is because Phoebe belonged to the order of widows described by Paul in 1 Timothy 5:9ff.

The second argument for Phoebe being a deacon in the same office as male deacons is the use of church history. A typical example of such reasoning is found in B. B. Warfield's discussion on women deacons. "Warfield is aware that the Greek noun in that passage can be used in a general sense to mean simply "a helper," but he thinks this is unlikely. Warfield argues that the translation "deaconesses" in this passage finds confirmation in a sentence written by the Roman governor Pliny to the Emperor Trajan around A.D. 112 which refers to two women as "ministers," i.e., official servants in the church."¹³⁴ (The historical section of this book shows that every reference to women deacons prior to the 19th century refers to an office totally separate from the male diaconate. Deaconesses are essentially the same as Paul's order of widows in 1 Tim. 5:9ff.) Warfield's selection of Pliny's letter to Trajan as proof of women deacons is rather puzzling. The Latin word *ministrae*, which describes the women to be executed, is in the Latin just as general as the word *diaconos* in koine Greek. The Latin *ministrae* is so general that the great Latin scholar and church father Jerome used a loan-word *diaconus* from the koine Greek to avoid ambiguities. While Jerome used the specific *diaconus* in his Latin Vulgate translation of Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8, 12, he used the more general and ambiguous *ministra* in his translation of Romans 16:1. Jerome did not believe that Phoebe was a

¹³³ OPC Minority Report, p. 952 (emphasis in original).

¹³⁴ Ronald G. Lutjens, "B. B. Warfield on Women Deacons," *Presbyterian Journal*, May 15, 1985, p. 6.

deacon.¹³⁵ And there is no reason to believe that the two women mentioned in Pliny's letter were deacons. They, like Phoebe, were probably in the order of widows.

Another common argument used to make Phoebe an ordained deacon hinges on the Greek word *prostasis*. RPCNA seminary professor D. B. Willson argued in 1888 that: "The word succorer (*prostasis*) means, first, a woman set over others, then one who cares for the affairs of others and aids them in her resources."¹³⁶ While it is true that *prostasis* can mean "ruler," "leader," "president," like its masculine counterpart; it can also mean "benefactress," "patron," or "helper." If *prostasis* is interpreted to mean "president" or "leader" in the case of Phoebe, it would not prove that she was a deacon. It would make Phoebe not a deacon but a pope, for the text clearly says that she was a *prostasis* of many and even of the apostle Paul. It would mean that Phoebe had authority over the apostle Paul—an absurd notion. That is why virtually all translators and commentators translate *prostasis* as "helper," "benefactress," "patron," "succorer" and so on.

A fourth argument rests upon the description of Phoebe's activities by Paul. Phoebe is "a servant [*diakonon*] of the church in Cenchrea." Paul asks the saints in Rome to receive her and to "assist her in whatever she may have need of you." Phoebe's activities are important. Paul asks the church to help her in her mission. Phoebe is described as a "helper of many" and even of Paul. There is no question that her activities sound similar to the activities of deacons. The description of her activities coupled with her official sounding introduction by Paul are the best arguments that she was a deacon. But the interpretation that Phoebe was an ordained deacon in the same office and with the same function as a male deacon raises a number of serious problems. Besides the apparent contradictions with the Old Testament, the synagogues, Acts 6:1-6, 1 Timothy 3:8-10, 12 and 1 Timothy 5:14 (which is dealt with in detail elsewhere) is the fact that female deacons who were in the same office with male deacons are not found anywhere in the early church. As we have seen in the historical section of this book, whenever one encounters a deaconess in the church prior to the nineteenth century she is in a separate office with very different qualifications than male deacons. As demonstrated above, prior to the nineteenth century all deaconesses were patterned after Paul's order of widows in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. (except for a very brief lapse in the Reformed church at Wezel, which led to the abolishing of the office altogether). That means that if Phoebe was a deacon in the same office, with the same responsibilities as a male deacon, then within a generation the office was lost until the nineteenth century. The odds of ordained women deacons who are in the same office with male deacons not surviving in at least some far off corner of the Roman Empire are astounding. However, these

¹³⁵ "I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a *servant* of the church which is at Cenchrea" (Rom. 16:1). "...quae est *ministra* ecclesiae (enchreensis)" (Rom 16:1b). "Likewise must the *deacons* be grave" (1 Tim. 3:8a) "*Diaconos* similiter graves" (1 Tim. 3:8a). "A distinction may be made between all these general uses and the employment of the term as the "fixed designation for the bearer of a specific office" as *diaconos* in the developing constitution of the Church. This is found in passages where the Vulgate has the loan-word *diaconus* instead of the *minister* used elsewhere [cf. Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12]" (Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:89).

¹³⁶ D. B. Williams, "Should a Woman Be Ordained a Deacon?" (*Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVI:11 [Nov. 1888]).

problems are resolved if Phoebe was not in the same office as male deacons but belonged to the order of widows described by Paul (1 Tim. 5:9ff.).

All the indicators within Romans 16:1-2 support the interpretation that Phoebe was in the order of widows (cf. 1 Tim. 5:9ff.). Shedd remarks: "Phoebe was probably a widow; because, according to Greek manners, she could not have been mentioned acting in the independent manner described, if either her husband had been living, or she had been unmarried."¹³⁷ Calvin explicitly says that Phoebe belonged to the order of widows:

But this service, of which he speaks as to what it was, he teaches us in another place, in 1 Tim. v. 9, for as the poor were supported from the public treasury of the Church, so they were taken care of by those in public offices, and for this charge widows were chosen, who being free from domestic concerns, and cumbered by no children, wished to consecrate themselves wholly to God by religious duties, they were therefore *received into this office* as those who had wholly given up themselves, and became bound to their charge in a manner like him, who having hired out his own labours, ceases to be free and to be his own master.¹³⁸

Lenski says that Phoebe "was apparently an *unmarried woman* but of *mature years* and thoroughly competent. She could not have traveled alone in those days; and this means that she most likely traveled with her servants. If other Christians had accompanied her, Paul would have mentioned at least that fact and would have commended also them to the Romans. The only conclusion we can draw is that Phoebe was a woman of means."¹³⁹ Cranfield does not call Phoebe a widow but he does say that she was probably independent: "it seems quite probable that we should be justified in supposing that its choice implies that Phoebe was possessed of some social position, wealth and *independence*."¹⁴⁰ Conybeare says that Phoebe "was a *widow* of consideration and wealth, who acted as one of the deaconesses of the Church."¹⁴¹ Hodge calls Phoebe a deaconess, but he defines a deaconess as an *elderly female* (i.e., a widow) who ministers to other women. "It appears that in the apostolic church, *elderly females* were selected to attend upon the poor and sick *of their own sex*."¹⁴²

The duty of interpreters is to interpret Scripture within both a narrow and a broad context. Scripture is to be used to interpret Scripture. The clearer passages are to be used to shed light on the more difficult and ambiguous passages. Everyone acknowledges that Romans 16:1-2 cannot be properly understood in isolation. When the different interpretations are compared, we should pick the interpretation that best fits in with the more explicit passages on church ecclesiology. Those interpreters who believe that Phoebe was an ordained deacon in the same office with male deacons have a serious problem. The clear passages on the subject (Ac. 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:8-10, 12)

¹³⁷ William G. T. Shedd, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1879] 1980).

¹³⁸ John Calvin, *Romans*, p. 543, emphasis added.

¹³⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Augsburg, 1936), p. 900.

¹⁴⁰ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:783.

¹⁴¹ Conybeare, *St. Paul*, 2:154, cited in J. P. Lange, *Romans and Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), pp. 446-447.

¹⁴² Charles Hodge, *Epistle to the Romans* (Banner of Truth, [1835] 1987), p. 447.

contradict their assertion. Thus they are forced to reinterpret the clear passages to somehow not contradict their interpretation of a disputed, ambiguous passage. Those interpreters, such as Calvin and Rutherford, who argue that Phoebe was in the order of widows do justice to the immediate as well as to the broader context. They are not forced into embarrassing exegetical gymnastics to circumvent the clear teaching of Acts 6:1-6 and 1 Timothy 3:12.

Those who argue that Phoebe was a deacon in the same office as the male diaconate make much of her official sounding introduction by Paul. But if Phoebe was in the order of widows her official sounding introduction makes perfect sense.¹⁴³ There is excellent evidence within the text to indicate that Phoebe was a competent, rich widow. The trip from Cenchrea (a port near Corinth) to Rome was a long one. A married woman in Greek society would not have made such a trip without her husband. Phoebe was rich and independent. It is very unlikely that a young Greek woman would have had such wealth. And it is virtually certain that a young Christian single woman would *not* have made such a trip. The fact that Phoebe was a wealthy widow, and the fact that she was a patron or helper of many in the church, fits perfectly with the description of Paul's order of widows in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. This is the only interpretation that does justice both to Paul's introduction of Phoebe, her official sounding activities and the very clear teaching regarding male deacons (Ac. 6:3; 1 Tim. 3:12). It also explains why female servants called deaconesses were required to fulfill the qualifications of Paul's order of widows (1 Tim. 5:9ff.) throughout church history (as noted in the historical section of this book). The deaconesses in the post-apostolic church should be defined by their qualifications (widows over sixty) and their duties (ministering to women's needs) and not be defined solely by their name.

The technical name for female servants, *diakonissa*, did not come into existence until after the close of the New Testament canon. The fact that widows were eventually referred to as *diakonissa* (i.e., deaconesses) has caused a lot of confusion among those discussing the women deacon issue.¹⁴⁴ Should the church have women in the church who serve in a sort of official capacity such as Phoebe? Yes, absolutely. But their office and activities should be patterned after

¹⁴³ The authors of the OPC Minority Report reject the interpretation that Phoebe was in the order (Calvin says "office") of widows: "Calvin believed that Phoebe held the office described in 1 Timothy 5, that of 'widow.' That is most unlikely, however, since that passage reveals that widows were enrolled in order that they might have their financial needs met by the church, whereas the description of Phoebe in Romans 16:2 suggests that she was probably a woman of considerable means" (p. 945). This objection, however, is based on a misunderstanding of 1 Tim. 5:9-15. Paul is discussing an order of widows who serve the church (see the section on 1 Tim. 5:9ff.). Do the authors of the Minority Report believe that food and clothing should be denied to widows who are 59 years old, or to widows who before their conversion were unfaithful to their husband, or to widows who did not have children, etc?

¹⁴⁴ "The term *diakonos* was a name given to any servant. Its application to Phoebe in Romans 16:1 carries no implication of ordination. The Report [report in favor of women deacons in the rpes, now part of the pca] tries to dispose of this contention on page 134. 'Because the word *diakonos* can be translated either "deacon" or "servant" it is important to note that Paul *did not choose to use the feminine form of the word but rather broke gender to identify Phoebe with the masculine form of the noun* [italics in report]. This very strongly suggests that he was not simply calling her a servant...but was rather using a formal term identifying her as a deacon.' But where in Greek literature does such a feminine form of the word occur? Neither Liddell and Scott, nor Arndt and Gingrich list any feminine form. On the contrary, they both cite passages in which the masculine form applies to women" (Gordon Clark, "The Ordination of Women" in John Robbins, *Scripture Twisting in the Seminaries* [Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1985], p. 77).

the order of widows and not the male diaconate.¹⁴⁵ To put women in the same office as the male diaconate does violence to the male diaconate and the biblical order of widows. It was the perversion of the female order of widows which led to its demise.

Summary of Interpretations of Romans 16:1-2		
Ordained Deacon	Unofficial Servant	Order of Widows
Phoebe was an ordained deacon in the same office as male deacons.	Phoebe was a servant in a non-official capacity who did not belong to the diaconate or order of widows.	Phoebe belonged to the order of widows and served in an official capacity, yet was not an ordained deacon in the same office with the male diaconate.
Advantages: This interpretation comports well with her official sounding introduction by the apostle Paul. It also fits well with her activities of service.	Advantages: This interpretation does not contradict any part of the New Testament.	Advantages: This interpretation does justice to Phoebe's introduction by Paul and Phoebe's extensive activities on behalf of the church. It does not contradict the teaching in the N.T. regarding the male diaconate (e.g., Ac. 6:1-6). This interpretation does justice to indicators within the text: Phoebe was a wealthy widow engaged in an independent activity that would have been forbidden to younger single women and married women. Her office or order is explicitly described by Paul in 1 Tim. 5:9ff. She meets Paul's qualifications. This interpretation fits in perfectly with church history: godly widows over sixty served the church in an official capacity throughout the Roman empire, especially in the east.
Disadvantages: It contradicts the clear	Disadvantages: The official sounding nature of Phoebe's	Disadvantages: None.

¹⁴⁵ I considered my interpretation of Rom. 16:1 (that Phoebe was in the order of widows and not a deacon in the same office as male deacons) somewhat unique until I had the opportunity to look at Rutherford's *Due Right of Presbyteries* and Lightfoot's *Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines*. While Rutherford (*Due Right of Presbyteries* p. 174), Dr. Temple, Mr. Bridges, Mr. Gibbon and other divines argued that Phoebe was a widow of the servant widow class named in 1 Tim. 5:9ff., *no one* of the assembly of divines ever argued that she was a deacon in the same office as male deacons (Ac. 6:1-6). Both Rutherford and Gillespie were in favor of an order of widows, but the motion failed at the assembly.

<p>passages given regarding the ordained (e.g., Ac. 6:1-6) diaconate given in the N.T. It also contradicts the testimony of church history: the O.T., the synagogue, and the early church. Deaconesses prior to the nineteenth century were essentially synonymous with Paul's order of widows (cf. 1 Tim. 5:9ff.). They belonged to a separate office from the male diaconate. They had different qualifications (e.g., widows over sixty) and different duties (i.e., primarily to women). They were called deaconesses [<i>diakonessia</i>] not because they were in the same office as male deacons but because their ministry was primarily to poor women.</p>	<p>introduction by Paul must be explained away. The nature and extent of Phoebe's activities in behalf of the church and Paul seem to indicate she was more than a servant who worked in a non-official capacity. The widespread use of godly widows over 60 in the early church who later were called deaconesses [<i>diakonessia</i>] is ignored by this view.</p>	
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1 Timothy 3:11

In 1 Timothy 3:11 there are two things that need to be determined in order to understand exactly what Paul had in mind when he wrote this passage. First, we must determine whether or not *gunaikas* should be translated as wives or as women. In both classical and koine Greek it can be translated either way. Second, if *gunaikas* is translated women and not wives, what is Paul referring to? Since no interpreters believe Paul is referring to all women in the church the possibilities are: women deacons, women who assist the deacons and serve in an unofficial capacity, and women who assist the deacons who are not deacons but who are the servant-widows described by Paul in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. These two factors are closely interrelated; for example, if an interpreter believes that the New Testament teaches that deacons must be men, then his natural choice would be either to argue that *gunaikas* should be translated as wives or that it refers to women who assist the deacons but are not themselves deacons.

Unfortunately in the modern debate over women deacons the possibility that Paul was referring to women who served but were not deacons (e.g., the order of widows) has been totally ignored. Listen to how the question has been framed in the debate. Clark says, "The substantial question now becomes: Does Paul refer to the wives of deacons or to female deacons?"¹⁴⁶ The OPC Majority Report says, "In 1 Tim. 3:11 the perennial debate, going back at least to the Greek Fathers, is whether 'women' (*gunaikas*) refers to (a) women deacons (deaconesses) or (b)

¹⁴⁶ Gordon H. Clark, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Jefferson, Maryland: Trinity Foundation, 1983), p. 60.

deacons' wives."¹⁴⁷ The OPC Minority Report says, "What 'women' does the apostle have in view here? Several suggestions have been made in the history of interpretation, but the committee seems clearly to be correct in deciding that only two seem plausible: (1) that women deacons are in view, (2) that deacons' wives are in view."¹⁴⁸ Before considering the third possibility that Paul was referring to women who served but were not in the same office as male deacons we will briefly consider the other views.

Those who argue that *gunaikas* refers to women deacons in the same office as the men deacons usually follow four lines of argumentation. They argue that if Paul had wives in mind then he would have used the pronoun "their" (*auton*) or at least the article (*tas*) to make it clear that "their" wives is what he had in mind. The use of the adverb "likewise" or "similarly" (*hosautos*) indicates "a third class of ecclesiastical persons.... Since too the passage states the qualifications of elected officials, elders and deacons, the *likewise* introduces qualifications for this third group of officials."¹⁴⁹ They also consider it unlikely that Paul would give qualifications to deacons' wives while making no mention of elders' wives. Their argument usually ends with a mention of Romans 16:1, Pliny's letter to Trajan and the testimony of early church history. They believe that the testimony of church history strongly supports their interpretation.

The view that Paul is referring to women deacons in the same office as men deacons is almost certainly incorrect for a number of reasons. The appeal to early church history is based on a superficial and flawed understanding of the statements regarding deaconesses made by the various councils, canons and church fathers. The historical section of this book proves that deaconesses were *not* in the same office as deacons; they had a separate office with different qualifications and duties. The appeal to Romans 16:1 and Pliny's letter is not a support because: first, these references are no clearer than 1 Timothy 3:11; and second, they are better interpreted as referring to the servant-widow class of 1 Timothy 5:9ff. which is unambiguous (cf. section on Rom. 16:1), and which does not contradict Acts 6:3 or 1 Timothy 3:12, etc.

The omission of "their" (*auton*) would be significant if the New Testament had been written in English but in koine Greek it is not necessarily significant. Clark argues:

...the word *their* is missing; but first it is not too unusual for Greek to omit an article or demonstrative pronoun. Here there is a possible reason for the omission. Had *their* been in the text, most readers would refer it to the wives of deacons. But before going on with other qualifications for deacons, qualifications that women cannot meet, Paul inserts a note with respect to the wives of both deacons and elders. At any rate, the grammatical omission is far from justifying women deacons. Note also that if extra words are to be inserted into the text, the word *their* changes the meaning of the text far less than the insertion of the word deacons.

¹⁴⁷ OPC Majority Report, p. 921. In fairness to the authors of the Majority Report, they do hint at the possibility of a third alternative under point number 5 of their considerations regarding this passage (cf. p. 922).

¹⁴⁸ OPC Minority Report, p. 946.

¹⁴⁹ Gordon Clark, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation), p. 61.

Those who favor the ordination of women mutilate the text to a much greater degree than those who translate *gunaikas* as wives. Indeed this is not a mutilation at all.¹⁵⁰

If one wants to translate *gunaikas* as wives then Gordon Clark's interpretation that Paul inserts a parenthetical remark to the wives of both elders and deacons makes good sense. Calvin held the same interpretation: "Likewise the wives. He means the wives both of deacons and of bishops, for they must be aids to their husbands in their office; which cannot be, unless their behaviour excel that of others."¹⁵¹ Paul's counsel is necessary considering the number of pastors whose ministries have been destroyed by the conduct of their wives. To argue that Paul's insertion to the wives of elders and deacons appears out of place is very weak considering the manner in which Paul suddenly switches to another thought in his other epistles.

For those who do not believe that Paul is referring to wives but to women deacons an appeal is made to Paul's use of the adverb *hosautos* (likewise). The grammatical structure used by Paul, which connects verses 2, 8 and 11, is considered by women-deacon advocates to be their strongest evidence for making verse 11 a proof text for women deacons. This point is placed at the forefront of the OPC Minority Report's discussion of verse 11. But while the grammatical structure may indicate that Paul does not have "wives" in mind, it also clearly rules out the possibility that Paul was referring to women deacons in the same office as men deacons. Why? Because it indicates that Paul was referring to a distinct *third* class of servants. The OPC Minority Report says, "V. 2 of this chapter begins, 'The overseer must be....' V. 8 begins, 'Deacons likewise....' V. 11 begins, 'Women likewise....' The use of the adverb *hosautos* ('likewise,' 'similarly') points in *each case* (v. 8 and v. 11) *to another class of officials*, similar in some sense to the first class addressed (that of overseer). In other words, the "women" in v. 11 are introduced as a *class parallel* to the deacons and the elders."¹⁵² If Paul regarded the women of verse 11 as belonging to the same office as men deacons, he would have addressed them under the same adverb (*hosautos*) and not separately. Therefore verse 11 *cannot* refer to women deacons in the same office as men deacons.

This assertion is supported by a number of Greek scholars. Lenski says, "First: 'Deacons in like manner dignified,' and now: 'Women in like manner dignified.' The wording is exactly the same.... *Dei einai* in v. 2 governs the construction of *diakonous* in v. 8 and of *gunaikas* in v. 11: 'an overseer—deacons—women must be,' etc. *The very construction indicates three offices.*"¹⁵³ Hendriksen says,

The section with respect to deacons is interrupted by a passage stating the requirements in the case of women. That these women are not "the wives of deacons" nor "all the adult female members of the church" is clear from the syntax: "The overseer *must be*.... Deacons similarly

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁵¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Epistle to Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), p. 87.

¹⁵² OPC Minority Report, p. 946.

¹⁵³ R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, [1937] 1961), pp. 598-600.

(must be)... Women similarly (must be)..." One and the same verb coordinates the three: the overseers, deacons, women. Hence, these women are here viewed as rendering special service in the church, as do the elders and the deacons. *They are a group by themselves*, not just the wives of the deacons nor *all* the women who belong to the church.¹⁵⁴

If the syntax indicates that these women are in "a group by themselves" then these "women" are *not* "overseers" or "deacons." The *Expositor's Greek Testament* says, "These [women] are the deaconesses...of whom Phoebe (Rom. 16:1) is an undoubted example. They performed *for the women* of the early church the same sort of ministrations that the deacons did for the men. In confirmation of this view it should be noted that *hosautos* is used in *introducing a second or third member of a series*.... The series here of church officials."¹⁵⁵ If the *Expositor's* reference to "deaconesses" is defined in the same manner as it was in the early church, i.e., a separate office with the qualifications of 1 Timothy 5:9ff., then his comments are correct. If not, his comments regarding a third member of a series still support my interpretation. Fairbairn concurs: "On the other, the mode of expression employed in introducing the women, *gunaikas hosautos*, apparently *marking a transition to another class* (as at ver. 8, ii 9; Tit. ii 3, 6)."¹⁵⁶

If (as noted above) the syntax indicates three offices or three classes of servants or three separate categories it is logically and exegetically impossible to regard "women" in v. 11 as referring to women deacons *in the same office* as men deacons. If women were in the same office as male deacons, why would they be treated separately? "They fail to note that if some women were deacons, further qualifications would be unnecessary. One does not state the qualification of a United States Senator and then add something additional for red-haired senators, western senators, or women senators."¹⁵⁷ Ironically, 1 Timothy 3:11 is an excellent proof text *against* having women deacons in the same office as men deacons.

If Paul is not referring to the wives of elders and deacons, and is not referring to women deacons in the same office as men deacons, then what does this third category of officers or servants refer to? The most logical and natural alternative would be to regard "women" as referring to the servant-widow class that assists the deacons by ministering to the needs of women. "The simplest explanation on the manner in which Paul, not yet finished with the requirements for the office of deacons, interjects a few remarks about women, is that he regards these women as the *deacons' assistants* in helping the poor and needy, etc. *These are women who render auxiliary service*, performing ministries for which women are better adapted. Here again we refer to our explanation of 1 Tim. 5:9. A few simple words indicate their necessary qualifications."¹⁵⁸ Paul makes a parenthetical remark to a third class of servants. The only female

¹⁵⁴ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), p. 132.

¹⁵⁵ Newport J. D. White, *Expositor's Greek Testament: The First and Second Epistles to Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 115-116.

¹⁵⁶ Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1878] 1952), p. 150.

¹⁵⁷ Gordon Clark, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 61.

¹⁵⁸ Hendriksen, *op. cit.*, p. 133, emphasis added. Fairbairn agrees: "And considering the greater separation which then existed between the sexes, and the extreme jealousy which guarded the approaches to female society, it was in a

third class of servants in the entire New Testament is the servant-widows mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. Since they are the only third class mentioned, and since their duties are diaconal in nature, it is quite natural that Paul would mention them in his comments regarding deacons. The reason they do not receive a separate paragraph with detailed qualifications like the elders and men deacons is because Paul goes into greater detail regarding their qualifications in 1 Timothy 5:9ff.

The interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:11 as referring to "women" who assist the deacons who belong to the order of widows described in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. is also exegetically superior to the "women in the same office" view when the broader contextual matters are considered. If Paul was addressing women who were in the same office with the same qualifications as the men deacons, then the book of 1 Timothy contains a serious internal contradiction. In 1 Timothy 5:9ff., Paul forbids women under sixty to hold a church office (or to be separated to official service). He tells younger women to get married and to manage the house (cf. 5:14). If married women with children who were under sixty were ordained deacons, Paul's comments in 1 Timothy 5:9-14 could not have been written (see section on 1 Tim. 5:9ff.). The word of God cannot contradict itself. If 1 Timothy 3:11 refers to the order of widows who assist the deacons, then both passages are in complete harmony.

A basic principle of biblical interpretation is that when choosing between two interpretations, the interpretation that best fits with other passages on the subject is the preferred choice (Scripture interprets Scripture). Those who believe that women should be ordained deacons in the same office as men deacons have always had difficulty dealing with Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:12. God knows and controls whatsoever comes to pass. God is not the author of confusion. The idea that God eventually intended to have women deacons in the same office as men deacons but specifically chose seven men at the institution of the office is clearly artificial. There were hundreds of qualified women present at that gathering. When the word of God says seven men were chosen, women, according to the regulative principle, are excluded (see section on Ac. 6:1-6). Paul says, "Let deacons be the husband of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well." If women served in the same office as men, Paul's statement that deacons must be husbands doesn't make any sense. These factors, coupled with the fact that the deacon's office has an authority forbidden to women, make the interpretation that Paul was referring to women deacons in the same office as men deacons the worst choice among the views considered. If Paul was referring to the wives of elders and deacons, or the servant-widow class (1 Tim. 5:9ff.), then the broader contextual problems disappear.

The servant-widow interpretation also has the advantage of the support from the testimony of church history. If women served in the same office as men deacons, would there not be some examples found in the early church? There are *no* examples of women deacons *in the same office* as men deacons prior to the nineteenth century (see historical section above). The

manner indispensable that women, with some sort of delegated authority, should often be entrusted with various kinds of diaconal service" (*Pastoral Epistles*, p. 150).

deaconesses encountered in the early church had to fulfill the qualification not of the deacon's office but the order of widows described in 1 Timothy 5:9ff.

Therefore, when the immediate context, the larger context, and the testimony of church history are considered, the weight of evidence against the "women deacons in the same office as men deacons" interpretation is enormous. It is not "an exegetical standoff," as some assert. The "women deacons in the same office" interpretation is clearly incorrect and thus unscriptural.

Elder	Deacon	Servant-Widow
1. The husband of one wife (3:2).	1. Husband of one wife (3:12).	1. The wife of one man (5:9).
2. Who rules his own house well having children in submission with all reverence (3:4).	2. Ruling their children and their own houses well (3:12).	2. If she has brought up children (5:10).
3. Blameless (3:2).	3. Blameless (3:10).	3. Faithful in all things (3:11).
4. Of good behavior (3:2).	4. Let these first be proved (3:10).	4. Well reported for good works (5:10).
5. Hospitable (3:2).		5. If she has lodged strangers, washed the saints' feet, etc. (5:10).
6. Temperate (3:2).		6. Temperate (3:11).
	7. Reverent (3:8).	7. Reverent (3:11).
	8. Not double tongued (3:8).	8. Not slanderers (3:11).
9. He must have a good testimony among those who are outside (3:7).	9. Holding the mystery of faith with a pure conscience (3:9).	9. Younger women are not permitted to join the servant-widow class because their actions can give "opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully" (cf. 5:13-14).
10. Not greedy for money (3:3).	10. Not greedy for money (3:8).	
11. Not given to wine (3:3).	11. Not given to much wine (3:8).	

The Order of Widows (1 Timothy 5:9-10)

In 1 Timothy 5:3-16 Paul instructs Timothy regarding the proper treatment of five types of widows. In verse 4 Paul tells Timothy that widows who have children or grandchildren should be provided for by them. Children and grandchildren have a biblical responsibility to "honor their progenitors." Under such circumstances it is neither the state's nor the church's responsibility but the family's responsibility to provide for their parents and grandparents. This teaching is so important it is reported by Paul two more times. "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8). "If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows" (1 Tim. 5:16).

In verse 5 Paul discusses the widows who are widows indeed. These are widows who do not have any family member (e.g., children or grandchildren) to support them. These widows can only turn to God and his people for help. They should be supported by the church. In verse 6 Paul mentions widows who should not receive church support. These widows are false Christians who dedicate their lives to pleasure rather than Christ. The church should never subsidize the wicked. Paul deals with young widows in verses 11 through 15. Young widows should get married, bear children and manage their house. While it is noble that some of these younger widows desire to serve in the order of widows (v. 9-10), the Holy Spirit wants them in the home. Strong Christian families are vital to the church and society.

After Paul instructs Timothy regarding how widows are to be provided for (v. 3-8), he lays down various requirements for the widows who serve the church.¹⁵⁹ "Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work (vs. 9-10)." These widows are "taken into the number." The verb *katalegestho* can mean, "to choose, to note or register in a list...as, e.g., citizens, soldiers, taxpayers, are classed together, and thus *publicly distinguished from others*."¹⁶⁰ These women are placed on a list. They are publicly set apart from other women in the church. The question that remains to be answered is: are these widows placed on a list in order to receive aid or in order to serve the church? All the evidence indicates that what Paul clearly had in mind was an order of widows set apart in order to serve the church.

There are a number of reasons why this interpretation is superior. Why would Paul give Timothy a set of requirements regarding which widows were to receive aid after he had just done so in verses 4 through 8? Also, the qualifications given in verses 9 and 10 clearly point in the direction of service. The church elder and deacon must be the husband of one wife. The widow

¹⁵⁹ "[Verse] 9) There is no connective; hence, as in v. 3, we have a new topic..." (Lenski, *1 Timothy*, p. 665).

¹⁶⁰ J. J. Van Oosterzee, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1860] 1978), p. 58, emphasis added. Lenski says: "The verb [*katalegestho*] means 'to be elected' and thus 'to be enrolled' or entered on a list...e.g., citizens, soldiers, taxpayers, are classed together, and thus publicly distinguished from others" (*op. cit.*, p. 666).

who serves must have been the wife of one man (v. 9). "The cause of this rule was without doubt the same as in the case of the presbyter and deacon."¹⁶¹ Only women who first had proved themselves as good and faithful wives could be admitted to the order. Would it make sense to deny women sustenance on the basis that they had never married, or if *before* their conversion they had been unfaithful to their husbands? And what about the age requirement? The idea that women under sixty would be denied food and clothing simply because of their age is absurd. But if Paul is speaking about service the age of sixty makes perfect sense. Widows over sixty (whose children had grown) are free from family responsibilities. The temptation to remarry is remote and they are beyond the childbearing age. Women over sixty were accorded a certain respect in Greek society.¹⁶² For example, it would have been considered improper for young women to travel or be apart from their families. Old women could act independently and travel without causing a stir. Phoebe is an excellent example of such independence (Rom. 16:1-2).

Paul stipulates that only women who have raised children can be placed on the list. This requirement echoes the qualification to both elders (3:4) and deacons (3:12). If Paul were giving a prerequisite for those widows who were to receive aid, then we would expect the very opposite. Women without children and relatives were often the most destitute. Would it be fair to deny widows aid solely on the basis of being unable to bear children? The reason Paul gives such a requirement is that one of the responsibilities of the order of widows was to instruct and aid young mothers. "She must be experienced in this line if she is to give counsel and direction to others."¹⁶³ Older women who had been faithful wives and who had brought up children were experienced in applying biblical truth to family living. Their experience was essential in training the younger women in godliness (cf. Tit. 2:3-5). The sanctified experience of being a faithful wife and raising up children as a mother is something men do not have. Elders and deacons, no matter how experienced, have never given birth or breast fed a baby, etc. If the church had a biblical, functioning order of widows, women would not fall prey to so much secular nonsense (e.g., Dr. Spock).

In verse 10 Paul sets forth a number of requirements all dealing with reputation.¹⁶⁴ Once again the requirements for the order of widows echoes those for both elder (3:2) and deacon

¹⁶¹ J. J. Van Oosterzee, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

¹⁶² It is interesting to note that Plato, in his concept of the ideal state, said that the ideal age for men and women to become priests and priestesses was sixty. In the ancient world age sixty was regarded as the age at which it was no longer possible for women to bear children. Furthermore, Orientals regarded the age of sixty as an appropriate time for retiring from the world for quiet contemplation.

¹⁶³ Hendriksen, *op. cit.*, p. 175. Lenski says: "'Whether she brought up children' is naturally the first question, for good motherhood is women's great province" (*op. cit.*, p. 668).

¹⁶⁴ Some commentators even argue that the requirements of verse 10 indicate that the widows in the order were relatively well-off financially. "Poverty and destitution are ruled out, for when hospitality was needed, guests would not be directed to poor homes by elders when there were well-to-do homes to welcome the guests. The suggestion that these women who were now widows became poverty-stricken since their widowhood, is untenable" (Lenski, p. 669). "Does not verse 10 indicate that the widows of which this section speaks were comparatively well to do?" (Hendriksen, p. 173). While it is true that the poor certainly are able to be hospitable, those who are economically well off are in a better position to do acts of charity. Widows whose children had grown, who were of means, had the independence necessary to wholly devote themselves to church service. Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) fits this description perfectly. She was a godly widow of means who served the church. Her independence enabled her to

(3:10). The member of the order of widows must be "well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work" (1 Tim. 5:10). What if a widow was a recent convert and did not have such a stellar reputation? Is Paul telling Timothy to let such women beg on the street? What about widows who were from poor families? Some families, due to conditions beyond their control, are not able to be as hospitable as they desire. It is clear that Paul is setting forth requirements for service. This explains the similarities between the qualifications for elders, deacons and the order of widows.

In verse 11 Paul tells Timothy that younger widows are not permitted to be placed on the list. The main reason given by Paul is that younger widows desire to marry. The clear implication of verses 11 and 12 is that any widow who is placed on the list of widow-servants must take a vow of celibacy. That is, they promise not to remarry. Hendriksen paraphrases verses 11 and 12 as follows: "But younger widows you must refuse (to place on the list); for often when, contrary to (their pledged devotion to) Christ, they grow restless with desire, they want to get married (again)."¹⁶⁵ If the widows described in 5:9ff. are only placed on a list in order to receive charity (and not as widow-servants), then why is a vow to remain unmarried necessary? *If those on the list were receiving charity, we would expect Paul to encourage remarriage as soon as possible to relieve the financial burden of the church.* A vow of celibacy makes no sense whatsoever if the list consisted of widows who were to receive church funds. But if these older widows (over 60) were dedicating their lives to serving the poor and sick, the vow makes perfect sense. These older widows are beyond the age of child bearing. They do not have any family responsibilities. Therefore they have the independence necessary to wholly dedicate themselves to the service of Christ. Younger widows, on the other hand, are to get married and raise a family (v. 14).

The primary reason that younger widows are told to get married is not in order to relieve the financial burden of the church which is what would be expected if those permitted on the list were only receiving charity. God wants younger widows to get married and raise a family because that is their natural desire as young women. "Woman's greatest service to the race is that of motherhood. She may still do any voluntary work that does not interfere with her duty to her husband and children; but she is not free to assume another life-work."¹⁶⁶ Paul gives another reason why the younger widows are not permitted to serve in the order: because they became idle. Instead of instructing other women and being good examples they went about from house to house gossiping. They were busybodies. This indicates that the age requirement of sixty came about not only because this was beyond the child bearing age but also from practical experience.

travel to Rome. We do not know if women in the order of widows were supported by the church or if they were financially independent. The obvious objection to this view is that it reeks of favoritism to the well-off. One could also argue that elders and deacons would have to be well-off for they have to be hospitable also. But it could be argued that having one's house in order also involves economic or financial competence. In either case, the financial argument from v. 10 is not necessary to prove my point, the other evidence being so abundant.

¹⁶⁵ Hendriksen, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

¹⁶⁶ D. S. Faris, "The Female Deacon, Animadversions on the Arguments of Synod's Committee" (*Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVII:5 [May 1889]), p. 140.

It is obvious from these observations that Paul is discussing an order of service and not a list for charity.

The interpretation that 1 Timothy 5:9 is speaking of a distinct group of women set apart in the church for service was common among early Presbyterians. It was held by John Calvin, George Gillespie and Samuel Rutherford. Samuel Rutherford argued that the college of widows spoken of in 1 Timothy 5:9 definitely refers to a group of women set apart to serve in the church. He even argues that Phoebe of Romans 16:1 probably "was such a widow."

But some may object, if these widows had a charge [i.e., a defined duty], and did any work or service to the Church, (as it is clear from the text, v. 9 they did) in overseeing the poor, and the sick, were not wages due to them, for their work? For the laborer is worthy of his hire...[therefore it is] as a debt, not as an alms. I answer, the reason is not alike of the preaching elder, and of the widow; for the pastor's service requiring the whole man was of that nature...but a widow of sixty years being weak and infirm, cannot acquit herself, in such a painful office as does merit poor wages, and therefore the reward of her labour was both wages and alms.

Again, that this widow had some charge or service in the church, (I mean not any ministerial office, for she was not ordained as the deacon, Acts 6 with imposition of hands) I prove from the text. 1. Because this widow was not to be chosen to the number of college of widows, except she had been 60 years [of age], this is a positive qualification of a positive service, as if it were an office; for else what more reason in 60 years than in 61 or 62 or in 58 or 59 if she was a mere eleemosynary [i.e., someone who is dependent or supported by alms] and an indigent woman, for can godliness permit us to think that Paul would exclude a widow of 50 or 54 or 56 years, from the college of widows, who were desolate and poor? Nor, 2. Would Paul rebuke the widow taken into the society of these widows, because she married a husband, except she had entered into this service, and had vowed chastity, nor is marrying the second time which is lawful (Rom. 7:1-2), a waxing wanton against Christ and a casting off of the first faith; as the marrying of these widows is called (vs. 11-12), therefore this widow had some charge and service in the church. 3. The word *katalegestho*—let a widow be chosen of such an age, and not younger, and with such moral qualifications, as is required in the deacon, does also evidence that it was an election to some service of charge, as if she be of good report, if she has brought up her children; if she has lodged strangers; if she has washed the saints' feet; which qualifications not being in a widow [who is] poor and destitute, which cannot exclude her from the [church's] alms, and expose her to famishing for want: (this also does [argue] Ambrose, Augustine)... It is not unprobable to me that Phoebe, called a deacon, or servant of the church of Cenchrea, was such a widow, seeing she is (Rom. 16:1) expressly so called: how she came to Rome, if she was a poor widow and now 60 years old, I dispute not, seeing God's Spirit called her so. We can easily yield that widows of sixty years entering to this service did vow not to marry again; The last canon of the council of Nice denies that widows are church-officers, because they were not ordained with imposition of hands....¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ Samuel Rutherford, *The Due Right of Presbyteries, or a Peaceable Plea for the Government of the Church of Scotland* (1644), pp. 173-174.

D. B. Willson, professor of theology at the RPCNA seminary, spoke on the subject of women deacons ("Should a Woman Be Ordained a Deacon?") at the opening session of the school year 1888-1889. When Professor Willson discussed the experience required for women deacons he quoted from 1 Timothy 5:9ff.: "Let not a widow be taken into the number under three-score years old, having been the wife of one man, well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work."¹⁶⁸ Then Professor Willson commented,

Mark the qualifications of one spoken of as taken into the number, "three-score years old, having been the wife of one man, well reported of for good works, have brought up children...." Now, we ask, must a widow, to be supported, be sixty years of age; again, must a widow, to be supported, have all these qualifications of a past efficient life? *Does the passage not read rather as giving a list of qualifications for office*, and is not the connection this, that of widows supported there were a number supported, as employed? These must be persons of experience, to thus serve the church, even though dependent. The younger widows would look to marriage, as we know this was universal.... To-day, as then, married women, as a rule, have family duties that engage their time and strength, and prevent them from formally engaging to discharge exacting official duties. They are deacons at home, ministering in the honored place of the mother, to the best interests for time and eternity of the children.... There is no holier service for a woman....¹⁶⁹

What is puzzling regarding Professor Willson's comments is the fact that the RPCNA not only ordains women under sixty years of age as deacons but also ordains women under sixty who are married with children. The fact that women under sixty were permitted to be ordained as deacons is explained as follows: "Today [i.e., 1888], fitness does not only come late in life, but far earlier, by special education and from enlarged facilities." If Professor Willson means what I think he means, he not only has contradicted his earlier statement regarding mothers as being too busy to hold church office, but also has violated the regulative principle. If the apostle Paul, speaking by the Holy Spirit, says that only widows 60 years of age and older can serve in the college of widows, it is not our prerogative to change this requirement without scriptural warrant. Willson's argument is nothing more than pragmatism. Furthermore, if young women could be trained in 1888 to serve as widows, they could also have been so trained in A.D. 65. Willson also makes the mistake of equating the college of widows in 1 Timothy 5:9 with the ordained office of deacon. The ordained office of deacon consisted of men who handled the financial affairs of the church and aid to the poor. Servant widows were probably not ordained. They did not handle the financial affairs of the church. And their ministry was directed to women (the fact that they were eventually called deaconesses after the close of the canon is dealt with in the historical section of this book).

¹⁶⁸ *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter*, Nov. 1888, p. 404.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 404-405.

What does Professor Willson do with the requirement that widows who serve must remain unmarried (i.e., celibate)? If 1 Timothy 5:9-14 applies to women deacons, as professor Willson maintains, then why does the RPCNA ordain married women? Apparently Professor Willson does not see any contradiction between his interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:14 and the fact that the RPCNA ignores this requirement. Willson says that "married women, as a rule, have family duties that engage their time and strength, and prevent them from formally engaging to discharge exacting official duties. They are deacons at home."¹⁷⁰ Later, he argues that "There is no call or warrant for the vow of celibacy. The work is free. The rule is for women as for men. Protestantism has no vow or promise of celibacy for church officers. There is to be none for women entering the service of the church."¹⁷¹ Whether Willson's comments are directed at the abuses of Romanism is unclear. But what is clear is that Paul only permits widows over sixty, who promise not to marry a second time, to serve the church in an official capacity. Any church that allows a woman under 60 who is married to serve the church in an official capacity as a servant-widow or deaconess violates the clear teaching of the word of God.

While Professor Willson should be commended for his interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:9ff., his use of pragmatism to ignore the qualifications of servant-widow is disturbing. If better training facilities can be used to ignore the word of God regarding female qualifications for service in the church, then why stop with ordained women deacons—why not female pastors and elders also? The beauty of the regulative principle is that it draws the line where God draws the line. The slow encroachment of innovations that leads to Romanism and other abuses cannot develop in a church that strictly adheres to God's word in *every* area of church polity and worship. (Our prayer should be that the RPCNA would apply the regulative principle as strictly to church government and papal holy days [e.g., Christmas, Easter] as it does with Psalm singing and the use of musical instruments.)

If the order of widows spoken of in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. is a biblical office or service within God's church, would it not be better for Reformed churches to reintroduce this biblical order with its specific qualifications than to seek to ordain women to the male diaconate which has no scriptural warrant, and which cannot be found in the church until the nineteenth century? There are no passages in the New Testament that indicate that the college of widows was a temporary institution. The servant-widows were not connected in any way to special revelations (e.g., prophets) and miracles which ceased with the close of the canon and the death of the apostles. They were not bound up with the ministrations of the apostles in a special way, as were the first evangelists. Do we have the scriptural right to ignore or set aside a ministry to and for women which is founded upon inspired revelation?

Those who are in favor of women deacons who are in the same office as men deacons reject the idea of an order of widows. Why? Because they want women deacons to have the same office, function, and qualifications as the male diaconate. The deaconesses in the early church had different qualifications (widows over sixty), different functions (primarily to women),

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 404.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 406.

different authority (they submitted to the male deacons) and a different office than the male deacons. Modern advocates of women deacons believe that it is perfectly permissible for women who are married, who have dependent children and who are under sixty to be deacons. Yet such thinking clearly contradicts Paul's command to the younger widows in 1 Timothy 5:11-14: "But refuse the younger widows; for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry, having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith. And besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not. Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully." Paul does not permit younger widows into the order. Why? They may break their vow of celibacy by getting remarried (vv. 11-12).¹⁷² They have a different temperament than the older widows. They learn to be idle, "not only idle but also gossips and busybodies" (v. 13).

What does Paul instruct young widows to do? He says, "Get married, bear children and manage the house" (v. 14). Women under sixty are forbidden to hold office in the church. Paul's instruction to young women is *not* to manage the financial affairs of the church but to manage the affairs of the home.¹⁷³ "To rule the house' means as the wife and mother in the home, to manage the household affairs. This is the domain and province of woman, in which no man can compete with her. Its greatness and its importance should ever be held up as woman's divinely intended sphere, in which all her womanly qualities and gifts find full play and happiest gratification."¹⁷⁴ The woman who is married with children has a job that is so important and time consuming that God wants her wholeheartedly focused on her task of managing the household. "No such requirement is listed for women deacons because mothers with children found their duties in the home and *not* in the diaconate."¹⁷⁵

Are the advocates of women deacons willing to argue that younger women are forbidden to be in the order of widows because they should be at home with their children, but are permitted to be ordained deacons in the church with even more authority and responsibilities than the widows? Does it make sense for Paul to say to the younger widows that they should get married and manage the affairs of the household when in the same church young married women were already serving as ordained deacons? If women wanted to serve as widows but were too

¹⁷² "It seems better to suppose, with most expositors, that the allusion is to the vow, which was implicit, included in their reception into the common order of widows. They have thereby dedicated themselves exclusively to the service of Christ and His Church; and as they had freely chosen this work, knowing its duties and its restrictions, a second marriage was in this view a breach of troth to Christ" (Lange, *1 Timothy*, p. 60).

¹⁷³ In Paul's epistle to Titus we learn that God's attitude toward young women is very different than that of our feminist-influenced culture. Women please God by being discreet, chaste homemakers who are obedient to their husbands: "the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed" (Tit. 2:3-5 NKJV). This teaching is completely in harmony with Pr. 31. The virtuous wife is involved in commerce and helping the poor, but it is clear that her priority is the household. "She also rises while it is yet night, and provides food for her household.... She watches over the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness" (Pr. 31:15, 27).

¹⁷⁴ Lenski, *op. cit.*, p. 676.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 594.

young, could they not serve first as deacons? Why does Paul not instruct the younger women who want to serve in the order of widows to become deacons and then join the order when they attain the age of sixty?

Whenever one encounters a deaconess throughout church history prior to the nineteenth century, she is a widow over 60 years of age.¹⁷⁶ The reason for this fact is simple: the church through nearly all of its history regarded 1 Timothy 5:9-14 as binding on deaconesses. Those who would put women into the male diaconate with the same qualifications as men deacons really have no choice but to reject the servant-widow interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:9ff., for it would be absurd for Paul to forbid married women under sixty to serve as widows if they were already serving as ordained deacons. The only alternative would be to do what Professor D. B. Willson did when he altered the qualifications because of purely pragmatic considerations. This alternative is of course off limits to Presbyterians who take the regulative principle seriously.

Ordination and Authority

There can be no discussion of women deacons without a consideration of ordination. After examining some definitions of ordination we will discuss how it has been used in the modern debate. Then we shall determine how the Reformed doctrine of ordination reflects on both women deacons (which has no biblical support) and the order of widows (which has biblical support). The question is: should women be ordained? The editor of the *Second Book of Discipline* noted,

The first Book of Discipline had indicated earlier how 'Ordinarie Vocation consisteth in Election, Examination and Admission', and the second Book of Discipline similarly defined 'ordinarie and outward calling' as election and admission after due examination 'be the judgement of the eldership and consent of the congregatioun' [sic], to be followed by ordination or the solemn setting apart of the candidate to his office in the church, 'the separatioun and sanctifeing of the persone appointit of God and his kirk' [sic]. By 'eldership' is understood the assembly of ministers, doctors and elders from several contiguous congregations; and by 1582 the general assembly had assigned the examination of candidates to 'particular presbyteries'....¹⁷⁷

Certainly, in Scotland what spiritual grace a candidate possessed was thought to be observable before his admission in his performance on the exercise and not to be the product of any ordination ceremony. *The imposition of hands was not held to convey the gifts of the Holy Spirit but acted only as a recognition and seal of the spiritual gifts already present....* Clearly,

¹⁷⁶ The age was lowered from 60 to 40 at the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) without scriptural warrant. There is no reason implied within the passage to regard the age as metaphorical. Calvin, Rutherford, Gillespie, the Puritans and the Baptists who believed in an order of widows all took the age requirement literally. Those who rejected the age requirement because of pragmatic considerations destroyed the order of widows. They ended up not with experienced older women who minister to women's needs, but with women who acted like men deacons.

¹⁷⁷ *The Second Book of Discipline*, with introduction and commentary by James Kirk (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews, 1980), p. 66.

as the second Book of Discipline had illustrated, what remained paramount was not the imposition of hands but the idea of vocation and the two aspects of the call to the ministry. Even so, there can be little doubt that ordination with the laying on of hands had become an accepted practice within the church of Scotland before the end of the sixteenth century.¹⁷⁸

George Gillespie (1613-1649)

“The outward calling is made up of election and ordination.... Let the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles of Paul be read, how ministers were elected and ordained....”¹⁷⁹

“The act of ordination standeth in the mission to the deputation of a man to an ecclesiastical function with power and authority to perform the same; and thus are pastors ordained when they are sent to a people with power to preach the word, minister the sacraments, and exercise ecclesiastical discipline among them. For 'How shall they preach except they be sent?'”¹⁸⁰

John Owen (1616-1683)

“Ordination in Scripture compriseth the whole authoritative translation of a man from among the number of his brethren into the state of an officer in the church.”¹⁸¹

Committee of the Westminster Assembly of Divines (1644)

“Ordination, for the substance of it, is the solemnization of an officer's outward call, in which the elders of the church, in the name of Christ, and for the church, do, by a visible sign, design the person, and ratify his separation to his office; with prayer for, and blessing upon, his gifts in the ministration thereof. Acts vi. 3, 6, Numb. viii. 10-19, Acts xiii. 1-3.”¹⁸²

Samuel Miller (1769-1850)

“Dr. Samuel Miller (1769-1850), professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government in Princeton Seminary in his *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (1831) defined ordination: ‘That solemn rite, or act, by which a candidate for any office in the Church of Christ, is authoritatively designated to that office, by *those who are clothed with power for the purpose*’ (p. 275). Those who ordain have the power to ordain others to the same office. Just like a civil judge the elder is clothed with

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 72-73, emphasis added.

¹⁷⁹ George Gillespie, *Ceremonies*, p. 162/2, cited in Gordon Clark, "The Ordination of Women" in John Robbins, *Scripture Twisting in the Seminaries* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1985), p. 90.

¹⁸⁰ Gillespie, *Ceremonies*, p. 165/1, in Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁸¹ John Owen, *Works*, XIII:219, quoted in OPC Majority Report, p. 915.

¹⁸² Lightfoot, *Journal of the Assembly*, p. 115.

power to execute his office. “They are fully invested with the office, and with all the powers and privileges *which it includes....* [O]rdination is an act not only *official*, but also *authoritative....*”¹⁸³

James Henley Thornwell

“It was generally conceded that ordination was the act of a court—that it was neither analogous to preaching, nor to the administration of the sacraments, nor to any other function which pertained to Ministers in their individual relations as Preachers of the Word. It was a joint and not a several power.”¹⁸⁴

“Then we are required to say whether we believe with the Papists that ordination is a sacrament; with the Prelatists that it belongs to the power of order; with the Independents that it belongs to the people; or with the great body of the Reformed Church that it belongs to the *power of jurisdiction, is an act of government, and must be administered by the legitimate courts of God's house....* We are required to say whether we are Presbyterians or not.”¹⁸⁵

“What, then, is ordination? It deserves to be remarked, in the first place, that the very term itself obviously implies—what every definition, whether Protestant or Papal, Prelatic, Presbyterian or Congregational, assumes as a conceded proposition—that the ministry of the Gospel is an *ordo*. The different gradations which the Churches of England and of Rome have introduced into the general office of the clergy are accordingly styled *holy orders*. In these applications the word *ordo* is used in a sense analogous to that in which it was employed to indicate the rank of a Roman senator. The clergy, as Knapp suggests, seem to correspond to it, while the mass of the people, the laity, are distinguished from them, not as another order, but by the absence of that which, in the other case, is the ground of separation.”¹⁸⁶

“Hence, upon our principles, ordination must sustain a very different relation to the *ordo* from that which is ascribed to it in the Churches of England and Rome. As, with us, it is God through the Spirit who imparts the ministerial commission and conveys the right to discharge the duties of the office, as God, and God alone, can communicate the distinctive qualities of the *ordo*, ordination, with us, can only be an acknowledgment of the fact that a man *is* a Minister of God and entitled to rule and to teach in His Church. We do not undertake to put into the hands of Ministers their Divine warrant for their work; we only receive and set our seal to the credentials which God has given. In our use of the term ordination and that of the Prelatists there is a difference of meaning analogous to that which obtains between Protestants and Romanists in their use of the much more important term justification. To justify, with the one, is to make

¹⁸³ OPC Majority Report, p. 915, emphasis in original.

¹⁸⁴ *Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Banner of Truth, [1875] 1986), 4:78.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:80.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

righteous, as to ordain is to create a Minister; to justify, with the other, is to pronounce righteous, as to ordain is to declare a man a Minister. *Hence, Presbyterian ordination imparts nothing—whether character, power, grace or privilege.* It is neither a charm nor a commission; it is a simple acknowledgment of what God has done. As a right is comparatively worthless whose existence is not recognized by others—the logical maxim *de non apparentibus et non existentibus eadem est ratio* being universally applicable—it is of the utmost importance to the success and efficiency of a Minister that his Divine authority be admitted. *Hence, God has appointed ordination as a public recognition on the part of His Church of the rights which He has supernaturally conferred.* It is the established mode in which it is made to appear that He has called and anointed the subject of it for the work of the ministry.

As it is evidently, therefore, the decision of a question of fact concerning the Divine right of an individual to be ranked in the *ordo*, two elements must enter into it—the investigation of the evidence, and the formal rendering of the judgment. The decision must be made in conformity with the laws of Christ. He has prescribed the principles on which it must depend. He has defined the qualities which characterize the *ordo* and settled the mode in which the knowledge of their existence can be acquired. The whole process in the investigation of the evidence and the declaration of the verdict is only an application of the laws of Christ, and is consequently committed to the same hands with the general administration of government. Ordination is a judicial decision, and therefore belongs to a court. Imposition of hands is the formal rendering of the judgment; and as the judgment is the judgment of the whole court, it must be rendered as the decision of the whole, though a particular individual may be selected as the organ....

Every other doctrine must make ordination the commission of the ministry. The mystical jargon about the transmission of authority, the communication of power, the delegation of office, is essentially Prelatic; and we can conceive of no theory of ordination which renders it incompatible for an Elder to partake in it, which does not assume that its relation to the *ordo* is that for which Prelatists and Romanists contend.¹⁸⁷

“It is not in the power of any or of all the churches in the world to appoint any office, or officer, in the Church, that Christ hath not appointed. And where there are any such, they can have no church-authority properly so called, for that entirely riseth from, and is resolved into, the institution of the office by Christ Himself. And hence, in the first place, all the authority of officers in the Church proceeds from the authority of Christ in the institution of the office itself; for that which gives being unto anything gives it also its essential properties.”¹⁸⁸

Augustus H. Strong

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 95-96, emphasis added. Thornwell and Miller differed as to whether or not ruling elders should take part in the ordination of ministers. The historic Presbyterian position is that ruling elders should not take part.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 98, emphasis added.

“What is ordination? Ordination is the setting apart of a person divinely called to a work of special ministrations in the church. It does not involve the communication of power,—it is simply a recognition of powers previously conferred by God, and a consequent formal authorization, on the part of the church, to exercise the gifts already bestowed. This recognition and authorization should not only be expressed by the vote in which the candidate is approved by the church or the council which represents it, but should also be accompanied by a special service of admonition, prayer, and the laying-on of hands (Acts 6:5, 6; 13:2, 3; 14:23; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22)....

Ordination recognizes him as set apart to the work of preaching and administering ordinances, in some particular church or in some designated field of labor, as representative of the church....

Cambridge Platform, 1648, chapter 9—“ordination is nothing else but the solemn putting of a man into his place and office in the church whereunto he had right before by election, being like the installing of a Magistrate in the Commonwealth.” Ordination confers no authority—it only recognizes authority already conferred by God....

The laying-on of hands is appointed to be the regular accompaniment of ordination, as baptism is appointed to be the regular accompaniment of regeneration; while yet the laying-on of hands is no more the substance of ordination, than baptism is the substance of regeneration.”¹⁸⁹

Regardless of whether one believes that ordination is a bestowal of authority from the laying on of hands of the bishop (e.g., Episcopalianism), or a conferring of authority from the pope, or a conferring of authority directly from Jesus Christ officially and judicially recognized by the presbytery (e.g., Presbyterianism), the person ordained is said to receive *ministerial authority*. When the Puritans (i.e., Cambridge Platform) and Presbyterians say that ordination does *not* confer authority, they are stressing the fact that ministerial authority does not proceed from the church hierarchy or the people but directly from Christ.

Those who believe that women should be ordained deacons do not deny that “ordination is induction into an authoritative order”¹⁹⁰ they simply assert that the type of authority which pertains to the office of deacon does not involve “headship functions”¹⁹¹; therefore, the office of deacon is open to women. They argue “that the nature of the authority to be exercised in the particular office depends on the particular office...the authority of the deacon is not to be equated with the authority of the elder.”¹⁹² The authors of the OPC Minority Report quote the Puritan theologian John Owen in support of their position: “This office of deacons is an office of service,

¹⁸⁹ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium and Commonplace Book Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (1909), 3:918-919.

¹⁹⁰ Gordon Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁹¹ OPC Minority Report, p. 953.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 953.

which gives not any authority or power in the rule of the church; but being an office, it gives authority with respect unto the special work...."¹⁹³

While it is true that deacons are not pastors or ruling elders and do not vote with the session, they still have an ecclesiastical authority in the church that is clearly forbidden to women. The deacons are the financial officers of the church. The collection of tithes and the management of God's money is in itself an authoritative function forbidden to women. The collection of tithes and the management of church funds have always been restricted to men. In the old dispensation the Levites held this responsibility; in the synagogue, the *chazanim*; and in the Christian church, the deacon.

The Bible teaches that the husband is the head of the household and thus has the final say in how money is to be allocated. The wife can and should communicate her desires and concerns, but she must submit to her husband's financial decisions. The idea that women are permitted to control the financial affairs of the church when they are not permitted to have the final say regarding the financial affairs of the home is not logical. Is a woman deacon permitted to have authority over her husband's money in the church, while submitting to his control of the finances in the home? Such a situation is unseemly. The fact that women can be and are the chief financial officers of major corporations is irrelevant. The issue is not one of fitness or ability but of God's ordained order of authority in the household and in the church.¹⁹⁴ The issue of authority and the management of church funds is one reason Calvin made a distinction between those who manage church funds and aid the poor, and those who do not manage church funds but only assist the poor. The first category Calvin restricted to men (i.e., the deacons), the second category included elderly women (i.e., the servant-widows who assist the deacons).

Another reason the office of deacon contains an authority forbidden to women is that helping the poor involves much more than writing a check or giving out a food basket. Often people are poor because of habitual sin patterns. Sometimes the deacon has the task to teach responsibility to those who are irresponsible. While it is true that the church session has the responsibility to handle cases of church discipline, that does not mean that deacons have no authority whatsoever. During the first forty to fifty years of the Reformation, deacons sat with the session and were involved in discipline and decision making.¹⁹⁵ While it is true that the

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 954.

¹⁹⁴ "When, however, St. Paul declares that the man is the head of the woman, as Jesus Christ of the man, and that the covering is a sign of that subjection, then all dispute is laid low; unless once cares to contend with God, who is the author of these ranks and of the distinction that St. Paul makes here. So we see that the reason why St. Paul has gone about it this way was so that there would not be a lot of arguments and back talk; and so that if one cared to render obedience to God, he would hold his peace. Since this is the way it is, we see that the order of nature is changed and perverted unless we govern ourselves as he indicates" (*Men, Women and Order in the Church: Three Sermons by John Calvin*, trans. by Seth Skolnitsky [Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage, 1992], p. 15).

¹⁹⁵ . "Luther, in his *Address to the Nobility*, June 1520, said, 'He [the minister] should have as assistants several priests [the term *priest* continued to be used for a time] and *deacons* who should help him to *govern* the people and congregations with sermons and the administration of the sacraments.' The French Confession of 1559 also says: 'It [the true church] ought to be *governed* according to the policy which our Savior Jesus Christ has established, that is, that there be pastors, supervisors, and deacons.' Note that deacons form a part of the governing body. The Genevan *Ordinances* of 1541 state something similar: '...let the minister distribute the bread in good order and with reverence, and let no others give the cup except the ones appointed or the *deacons* with the ministers.' The *Ordinances* of 1576

deacons' responsibilities were narrowed considerably by the Second Reformation, we should be very careful not to narrow the office to the point of making ordination meaningless. When a deacon confronts a brother who is poor, who is neglecting his family responsibilities, he does so with the full authority of the diaconal office. When he confronts someone who refuses to tithe or care for his family or work, he does so with an authority that the non-ordained church member does not possess.

While it is true that the session (i.e., the elders) has the final say in judicial matters in the local church, there is still an authoritative-judicial aspect to the diaconal office. The deacons decide who receives church funds and who does not. In a first century setting (or even a modern inner city or third-world setting), if every important decision regarding the poor that had an authoritative-judicial aspect had to be referred to the elders, there would be little reason for even having deacons and there would be little reason for ordaining deacons. In our time when the secular humanistic "cradle to grave" welfare states are in crisis, the diaconal office will once again become crucial if churches are going to effectively reach and minister to the poor. All Christians have a biblical responsibility to help the poor. The deacons are the *leaders*, organizers, financial decision makers and ordained authoritative church officers whom God has appointed over this ministry. The wide scope and importance of the diaconal office was recognized in the mid-nineteenth century by the Covenanter J. M. Willson in his classic work, *The Deacon*:

The apostolic churches *felt*, as well as acknowledged, their obligations in reference to the care of the poor, particularly widows and orphans. To attend to this sacred duty they chose, and ordained deacons. Nor is it to be supposed, that their duty to the poor was limited to the mere furnishing them with pecuniary support. The high qualifications required in the deacons warrant us to infer that they have a wider range of duty. Moreover, pecuniary assistance is not that which is alone, or chiefly, needed by the objects of the Christian's charities. They need advice and encouragement. The young, especially orphans, require to be properly educated, and their steps governed by the hand of kindness and charity. For want of proper instruction and counsel, how many baptized children, whose parents have been removed from them by death, have been

make the same statement about the deacons. Again, what Calvin says about women who perform baptism is surely applicable to women who might act as deacons. In his *Tracts* he says: 'Even in the minutest matters, as meat and drink, whatever we attempt and dare with a doubtful conscience, Paul plainly denounces as sin. Now, in baptism by women, what certainty can there be, while a rule delivered by Christ is violated? For that office of the Gospel which he assigned to ministers, women seize for themselves.' Further, Calvin's reply to the Synod of Lyons in 1563 (compare Quick, *Syndicon* I, p. 53) says: '*Deacons* and elders, being the arms and hands of the Pastor...may also distribute [the bread and cup] to those who are remote from [the pastor].' In these passages the mention of deacons is noteworthy because there was a widespread disinclination to allow deacons and even elders to assist in the communion service. Calvin obviously regards deacons as having authority by virtue of the ordination. They are no doubt subordinate to the minister. Ordination confers on the minister the authority to preach the Word, and, since the sacraments require the Word, ordination confers the authority to administer the sacraments, and also, in conjunction with other ordained men, the authority of the keys. But though the deacons are subordinate to the minister, they participate in that authority. The ordination questions are the same; the minister receives the deacons as taking 'part of this office with us;' and the congregation promises obedience to the deacon" (Gordon Clark, "The Ordination of Women" in John Robbins, *Scripture Twisting in the Seminaries* [Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1985], p. 69-70).

lost to the church, and to themselves! Here is a wide field to be occupied by the deacon; he must feed the poor, as the almoner of the church's bounty; and he must do more. He must give to the necessitous advice, and impart to them comfort; not as a spiritual guide, but as a kind friend, and particularly, as sustaining to the desolate and friendless orphan, a relation almost as intimate as the parental.¹⁹⁶

The fact that women-deacon advocates regard the office of deacon as non-authoritative and therefore open to women is based in part on the way orthodox Presbyterian directories for church government emphasize the differences between the office of elder and the office of deacon (this emphasis is necessary because many denominations have turned deacons into virtual ruling elders; e.g., various Baptist groups). For example, the Directory for Church Government of the RPCNA says that "the Diaconate...is neither a ruling nor a teaching office. Its exercise, like the whole life of the church, is under the oversight of the session and its function is administrative.... The board of deacons has no legislative or judicial powers; its work is wholly administrative, subject to the direction of the session and sensitive to the counsel of the congregation."¹⁹⁷ While it is certainly true that deacons are not the judicial body in the local church, and therefore do not have judicial powers, it is a mistake to assume that deacons have no authority at all.

When the Directory for Church Government says that "the diaconate is wholly administrative,"¹⁹⁸ it should be kept in mind that the word administer means "to have charge of, direct, manage." When the Directory says that the diaconate "is neither a ruling nor teaching office," it does not mean that deacons do not teach, counsel or exercise any authority within their sphere of duties. The RPCNA Directory for Church Government describes a number of diaconal duties that involve authority forbidden to women in the church: 1. Meeting jointly with the session for prayer, evaluation and growth in their respective ministries. 2. Serving as *consultative members in higher courts* of the church when appointed.¹⁹⁹ 3. *Leading* the congregation in discerning and ministering to needs such as: local needs of individuals and institutions, national and international needs. 4. *Gathering* and distribution of funds. 5. *Training* the congregation in the use of the members' gifts in the ministry of mercy. 6. Overseeing the work of treasurer. 7. Appointing a finance committee as needed. 8. Preparing an annual budget in conjunction with the session. 9. Offering *family budget counseling*. 10. *Teaching* principles of giving. 11.

¹⁹⁶ James M. Willson, *The Deacon*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁹⁷ Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (1989), pp. D23-D24.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. D24.

¹⁹⁹ As noted earlier, the deacon's authority of office was recognized by the early Presbyterian and Reformed churches. The first generation of Presbyterians permitted the deacons to attend session meetings and "assist in judgement [sic]." Although the deacons were consultive members and not voting members, their regular presence on the court and their freedom to speak are a recognition of their authority. "Men of best knowledge of God's Word and cleanest life were to be nominated annually for election as elders and deacons. The former were to assist the minister in all affairs of the kirk, to hold meetings with him for judging of causes, admonishing evil livers, yea, to take heed to the life, manners, diligence, and study of the ministers, as well as of the flock. The deacons were to assist in judgment, but chiefly to collect and distribute what was provided for the poor. They might also, as in the French Church, be admitted to read the Scriptures and common prayers in the congregation if required and qualified to do so" (Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Scottish Reformation: Its Epochs, Episodes, Leaders, and Distinctive Characteristics* [Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1900], p. 52, emphasis added).

Overseeing the maintenance of property.²⁰⁰ While deacons are not the teachers or overseers of the congregation, their duties require meeting and *consulting* with the session and higher courts, "leading," "training," "overseeing," "appointing," "family counseling," "teaching," etc.

The obvious objection to what I have said above is that there is nothing wrong with Christian women offering Christian men counsel in private or teaching Christian men in private. Did not Priscilla teach Apollos, the great preacher? While there is nothing wrong with Christian women offering men counsel and advice, and there is nothing wrong with Christian women teaching men in private, deacons are publicly ordained authoritative church officers. A woman can meet privately with the session and offer advice, but she cannot be an *official consultative* member of a church court without having authority over men in the church. A woman can teach a man doctrine privately, but she cannot lead or train or teach the congregation without having authority over men in the church. When a Christian woman offers a Christian man advice or counsel in private, the man is not obligated to submit to her authority as a church officer.

Another objection is that "women deacons" are involved in non-authoritative teaching, non-authoritative leadership and non-authoritative counsel. This is totally arbitrary and irrational. There is no such thing in the church as non-authoritative teaching. This innovation was invented so that women could teach adult Sunday School and "lecture" and "speak" during the worship service.²⁰¹ People who invent such concepts as non-authoritative public teaching in church meetings are like the Pharisees who invented all sorts of clever arguments to make the word of God of no effect. The idea of non-authoritative teaching and non-authoritative leadership makes about as much sense as non-explosive explosives or non-authoritative authority. "How unseemly

²⁰⁰ *The Constitution of the RPCNA*, pp. D24, D25. Number 2 is described under Privileges (p. D25). The Directory for Church Government cites Acts 6:3 as a proof text for diaconal standards of character and conduct (p. D24); therefore, the Directory officially recognizes Acts 6:1-3 as the institution of the diaconal office. It is interesting that while the RPCNA has opened the office of ordained deacon to women under 60 who are married, unmarried, or single, it has not attempted to water down the authoritative functions of the office in its description of duties and privileges. The statement that deacons are "under the oversight of the session" and function only administratively somehow makes these duties non-authoritative. Unless one accepts the idea of *non-authoritative authority*, the Directory suffers from an internal contradiction.

²⁰¹ "Paul's admonitions for women to keep silent, not to speak, and to be subject to men are expressed in the firmest terms. These admonitions are not mere suggestions. They are commands! The verbs 'keep silent' and 'be subject' are present imperatives in Greek. An imperative is a command, and the present tense conveys a continued action. The King James Version adds the words 'they are commanded.' to the text in order to accurately convey the meaning of the Greek imperative. What is the command? First, it is for women to keep silent in the church. It is obvious from verse 34 that the meaning of 'keeping silent' is explained by 'not permitted to speak.' God's Word [says] that women are commanded not to speak in the public assembly of the church. Second, women are commanded to subject themselves to male headship by keeping silent. As if the imperatives were not enough to stress the point, Paul uses the strongest of Greek negatives to emphasize his prohibition. One Greek word for 'not' is *ou*. We find these comments in *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* by Dana and Mantey concerning this negative particle: '*ou* is the particle used in summary negation. It is the stronger of the two negatives, and the proper negative for the statement of a downright fact. *Ou* denies the reality of an alleged fact. It is the clear-cut point-blank negative, objective, final' (p. 264). Paul emphatically stresses that women are not permitted to speak in church" (John M. Otis, *Counsel of Chalcedon*, Jan.-Feb. 1990, pp. 29-30.) The attempt to circumvent Paul's teaching 1 Cor. 14:34-35 by asserting that he was only prohibiting women from speaking during the evaluation of the prophets has been thoroughly refuted by John W. Robbins (*Scripture Twisting in the Seminaries*, pp. 1-20). While I would prefer that Robbins take a kinder, gentler approach in his polemic, he does faithfully represent the traditional Reformed understanding of this passage.

a thing it were, that one who is under subjection to one of the members, should preside over the entire body! It is therefore an argument from things inconsistent—If the woman is under subjection, she is, consequently, prohibited from authority to teach in public."²⁰²

Another likely objection is that deacons do exercise authority but they do so outside of "public worship"; therefore, their authority is lawful. This objection is easily dispensed with by the simple fact that the ruling elders' authority is also primarily exercised outside of "public worship." Besides occasionally delivering a public prayer and assisting with the sacraments, virtually everything a ruling elder does is outside of the public church meetings. Thus, such an argument, if valid, would also open up the office of ruling elder to women. This is something virtually all the women-deacon advocates in the smaller orthodox Presbyterian bodies are rightly unwilling to do.

When we examine the deaconesses in the early church, the order of widows as taught by Calvin and practiced in Geneva, the servant-widows in the French Reformed churches and among some of the Puritan churches, we do not encounter the problem of women having authority over men in the church or speaking and teaching in the church. Why? Because these deaconesses or servant-widows were not in the same office as the male deacons. They were patterned after the order of widows in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. The deaconess's or servant-widow's sphere of ministry and authority extended only to women. Handling the financial affairs of the church, teaching, counseling and rebuking men were things that only male deacons were permitted to do. Servant-widows or deaconesses baptized women (in the early church), counseled women, taught women, aided sick women, and so on. The only time servant-widows ministered to men was when, at the direction of the elders and deacons, they visited persecuted Christian men in prison and ministered to men in hospitals as nurses. As noted in the historical section of this book, the testimony of the church prior to the nineteenth century regarding deaconesses or servant-widows is unanimous.

The issue is *not* just whether or not the church should have deaconesses; the issue is whether the church is going to follow the biblical requirements for deaconesses. As long as women-deacon advocates reject Paul's order of widows in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. in favor of placing women in the authoritative ordained office of deacon (which is clearly reserved for qualified men, Ac. 6:3), biblical deaconesses (i.e., servant-widows) will not be restored among Reformed churches.

If Reformed churches did restore the order of widows, should these widow-servants be ordained? If one defines ordination as the church's recognition and public setting apart of a widow who received authority from God for her particular sphere of ministry, then from a strictly logical standpoint there is no reason why these servant-widows should not be ordained. The servant-widows do not exercise any authority over men. Their ministry, which includes counseling and teaching, is directed to the women of the church. All the various problems noted above regarding women deacons in the same office as men deacons do not apply to the order of widows.

²⁰² John Calvin, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), p. 468.

But when the issue of ordination of widows is considered from the angle of divine warrant or the regulative principle, there is simply no biblical evidence to justify the ordination of women to the office of deacon. *Every* example of anointing in the Old Testament and ordination in the New Testament involves men.

There are no less than eleven words in the Greek text of the New Testament, which our translators have rendered by the verb "ordain." Six of these are used of persons being put into a position, such as office of some kind. The first, only applied to Christ, and signifying *to mark off, separate or set apart*, is twice used (Acts 10:42 and 17:3). The second signifying *to make*, and the third *to place*, and the fourth *to become*, are the words used for setting apart the apostles, (Mark 3:14; John 15:16; Acts 1:22 and 1 Tim. 2:7). The fifth *to place in position*, is used of priests (Heb. 5:1 and 8:3) and of elders (Tit. 1:5). The sixth *to elect by raising the hand*, is used of elders (Acts 14:23).²⁰³

The closest thing to ordination of women which one can find in the Bible is Paul's reference to qualified widows being placed on a list (*katalego*). This being "taken into the number" indicates public honor and recognition. While in certain respects this "enrollment" resembles ordination (because the widows found qualified are set apart), it by itself is a weak inference for women's ordination.

The evidence from church history does not favor the ordination of women. There is no evidence of women being ordained until around A.D. 300-350. The ordination of deaconesses in the early church lasted for a few centuries and then was abolished. Calvin, Rutherford and other distinguished early Reformed theologians who believed in an order of widows did not believe that they should be ordained. "The believing Jews before the coming of Christ, as well as the unbelieving Jews afterward, had no woman as priests. Neither does Romanism. Neither does Lutheranism. Among these groups there are differences regarding the nature of ordination, its validity, its authority, and more; but all agree that it is wrong to ordain women. Now, where Rabbis Eliezer and Agiba; Popes Leo and Gregory; and Luther, Calvin and Knox agree on a particular point, it requires overwhelming argument to prove them wrong. On what basis could anyone construct such an argument? There is only one such basis, the Bible."²⁰⁴

While we do not need overwhelming proof, we do need at least justifiable inference.²⁰⁵ This position is supported by Paul's salutation to the church at Philippi. If deaconesses or

²⁰³ "Women and the Deacon's Office," *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVI-11 (Nov. 1888), p. 391.

²⁰⁴ Gordon Clark, "The Ordination of Women," in John Robbins, *Scripture Twisting in the Seminaries* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1985), pp. 70-71.

²⁰⁵ Those who believe that women should be deacons in the same office as men deacons argue that Rom. 16:1 and 1 Tim. 3:11 prove that women should be deacons; therefore, they should be ordained to the diaconal office. I have shown in my sections dealing with Rom. 16:1 and 1 Tim. 3:11 that such argumentation is fallacious. The 1 Tim. 3:11 passage definitely does not refer to women deacons and is actually a good proof text against the "women in the same office as men deacons" view. Rom. 16:1 probably refers to the order of widows mentioned by Paul in 1 Tim. 5:9ff. As noted in the section on Rom. 16:1, given the indicators within the text, the broader context and the testimony of church history, the interpretation that Phoebe was a deacon in the same office as men deacons is very unlikely. The "Phoebe in the same office as men deacons" view is the worst interpretation of the three views

servant-widows were ordained church officers, would they not be included in Paul's greeting to church officers? James Bannerman concurs:

It is hardly possible to conceive, that if there had been any other office-bearers besides bishops and deacons in the Church at Philippi, they would have been omitted in the apostolic salutation; and it is just as difficult to conceive that the Church at Philippi, the first fruits of Paul's labours in Europe, over whose spiritual prosperity he so often rejoices, was destitute of any class of office-bearers necessary for or usual in other Churches. The conclusion seems to be irresistible, that the bishop and the deacon were the only office-bearers of an ordinary and permanent kind known in the apostolic Church.²⁰⁶

Another reason that servant-widows were not included in Paul's salutation is the fact that their ministry extended primarily to the women of the church. Since servant-widows (deaconesses) only had authority over women, and since they served as auxiliary helpers to the deacons, they could not be included in a list of office bearers over the whole church, both men and women. Servant-widows were not ordained office-bearers. But since their qualifications in Scripture mirror many of the elders' and deacons' qualifications, theologians such as Gillespie and Rutherford do speak of them as having an unordained office (Gillespie) or charge (Rutherford). Given the biblical and historical evidence, the church should not ordain servant-widows.

Conclusion

Given the biblical and historical evidence regarding women deacons, the question asked in the modern debate needs to be changed. The question has been: should the church have deaconesses? The question should be: what type of deaconesses does the New Testament authorize? When those in favor of women deacons ignore or misinterpret 1 Timothy 5:9ff. and 1 Timothy 3:11, and therefore argue that deaconesses should be ordained and serve in the same office with the same qualification as men deacons, they must be opposed on scriptural grounds. Why? Because there is not a shred of biblical or historical evidence to support the contention that women served in the same office as men deacons. Those who argue that God has *not* set aside a special "charge" in the church for godly widows must also be opposed on scriptural grounds. The New Testament gives clear qualifications for servant-widows (i.e., deaconesses) in 1 Timothy

considered. It is interesting to note that B. B. Warfield, who definitely favored the ordination of women into the diaconal office, knew that the PCUSA General Assembly would not ordain women in his day (i.e., the 1890s). Warfield and the committee he led, which favored women deacons, recommended that women deacons be set apart by prayer and not by ordination (PCUSA Minutes, 1890, p. 121). Given what we know regarding Warfield's view of women deacons, I believe that the committee's recommendation not to ordain women as deacons was a tactical move designed to get their main objective—women deacons—through the General Assembly. If they could get the PCUSA General Assembly to accept women deacons in the same office as male deacons, then they knew that ordination would eventually follow. Fortunately for the OPC and PCA, the committee's view was never adopted.

²⁰⁶ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, [1869] 1974), 2:297.

5:9ff. and 1 Timothy 3:11. While the New Testament deaconess is a separate office from the male diaconate (with separate qualifications and a different ministry), the office clearly has divine authorization. The simple fact is that having deaconesses in the church is biblical as long as the church defines deaconesses biblically.

It is not enough simply to oppose the "women in the same office as men deacons" view of deaconesses. Churches must study and then put in place the servant-widows that do have divine authorization. Under divine inspiration Paul gives instructions to place godly widows on a list. These servant-widows or deaconesses are needed now just as much as they were in the early church. With the fragmentation of families, single mothers, and the separation of young families from relatives by hundreds and thousands of miles, young women need the support that only servant-widows have to offer.

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