

A Biblical and Theological Case for Female Deacons

Complementarians¹ (those who affirm *distinct but complementary* roles for men and women) can disagree on the question of whether or not the Bible supports female deacons, or deaconesses. Neither side believes the Bible is explicit in its clarity, nor that it is an issue worth splitting or dividing over. While both interpretations seek to do justice to Scripture and can put forward a reasonable defense of their position, I (and the majority of complementarian theologians and commentators today) find the evidence more compelling for a biblical case leaving the office/role of deacon open to both men and women.

Causes of Confusion or Limitations to Consider

1. There are very few texts about an office or role of deacon in the New Testament, and very few details are given in those texts. Only text that provides details is 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (since Acts 6 seems more like the “seed” of the role, Philippians 1:1 only mentions the offices of elders and deacons, and Romans 16:1 is debated). Our information is scarce, and the term for deacon (*diakonos*) is used numerous times in the New Testament in a general way for serving. This means the material we’re working from is limited, hence the ongoing debate.
2. My experience is many people view the role of deacon through the filter of their own church background and experience. Since the starting point for so many is “what they saw in past churches” rather than the biblical teaching on church government, too many answer the question on female deacons based upon how deacons functioned in their former churches. Since in many of these cases deacons were incorrectly functioning as elders or a leadership board, this personal experience has created an incorrect understanding of the office of deacon, its function, and its authority (or lack thereof).

We cannot decide on an interpretation or determine our view based on a wrong understanding of deacons, where deacons incorrectly function as elders (leaders with authority), and thus rule women out. Instead, we should come to an interpretation with the biblical understanding of church governance (and offices) where elders teach, shepherd, and lead while deacons serve and administrate. Having this right understanding of the complementary and differing roles of both elder and deacon (Phil. 1:1) clears things up a bit, and in my opinion, will lend itself to seeing the office of deacon as open to both men and women.²

3. The primary text is 1 Timothy 3:8-12, with verses 11-12 raising the most questions. A couple things to note from these verses before proceeding.
 - Both sides must reckon with why Paul suddenly interrupts his flow in verse eleven to switch to a second group of people (whether “wives” or “women”) and then returns to who he was talking to in verse twelve. Because of the interruption, there’s some lack of clarity for both sides as they try to make sense of why Paul interrupts his flow but does not go in-depth. This is why arguments on either side will try to make sense of this text, and have to do so in part by their assumptions of whether can be deacons from other texts.

¹ See Mary Kassian, “Complementarianism for Dummies,” 9/4/12 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/complementarianism-for-dummies/>. See also the statement, “[Complementarianism in Beliefs and Practices at College Park Church Fishers](https://www.fishers.yourchurch.com/beliefs)” at [fishers.yourchurch.com/beliefs](https://www.fishers.yourchurch.com/beliefs).

² Thabiti Anyabwile provides a helpful caveat in situations where churches have deacons improperly functioning as elders, as well as a challenge to not stay in that situation. “As I recounted earlier, I’ve been a member at churches that do not have elders but are governed by a group of deacons. If the church does not have elders and deacons perform the teaching and oversight responsibilities biblically belonging to elders, then women should not serve as deacons. I’m a complementarian, so I believe the basic pattern of qualified male leadership in the church should be maintained in joyful obedience to the Lord.

But having said that, the more important ‘fix’ to such a situation is not to restrict women from serving in what may be a permissible area of service in the church, but to conform the church itself to the New Testament pattern of governance. We shouldn’t restrict women in an effort to maintain irregular governance; we should conform our governance of the church to the word of God and deploy women to serve wherever and whenever appropriate.” Thabiti Anyabwile, “I’m a Complementarian, But ... Women Can Be Deacons,” 2/4/11, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/thabiti-anyabwile/im-a-complementarian-but-women-can-be-deacons/>

- 1 Timothy 3:11 literally reads, “women, likewise” and is translated in English Bibles both as “wives, likewise” and “women, likewise.” Some reading an English translation see, “their wives likewise,” and assume this verse refers to the wives of deacons rather than female deacons. Other translations choose “women likewise” or “the women must also.” Translations that have chosen “their wives likewise” provide a footnote indicating it can be translated “women likewise.” The language by itself isn’t determinative, so context and further arguments are key.
- Some who take an interpretation against female deacons often assume 3:12 (“let deacons each be the husband of one wife”) suggests the role is only for men, since women are not included. However, if Paul switches back and forth between male deacons and female deacons, that isn’t a necessary conclusion. This can be a qualification specifically for male deacons that might not necessarily apply to female deacons, since the role of husband requires leadership in the home in a way different than what’s required of women.³ The fact that many female deacons were likely single or widowed also can make sense of why Paul would provide a qualification for male deacons in 3:12 that doesn’t have to apply to female deacons.

For these reasons, among others, there remains confusion for some and ongoing debate on the question. Both sides make a case with the limited amount of information available. Like many beliefs and practices in the church, things are debated because there is rarely a “slam-dunk” verse stating: “this is the Bible’s stance on _____.” Because of that, arguments are put forward based on good exegesis and theology (with support from Church History) to arrive at the most sound conclusion. Some arguments will be stronger than others, and some points more compelling than others for various people, and we rest on the overall strength of an argument rather than on one case-closed point that forever solves the issue. The points below summarize why I think the Bible supports female deacons.

Arguments for Female Deacons

1. The nature of the office of deacon lends itself to both men and women.

When we consider the very nature of the office of deacon as a serving, non-authoritative role, there is nothing that would cause us to limit it to men rather than seeing it as encouraged for both men and women. While the role of elder/pastor refers to those who lead, teach, and shepherd *with authority* over the church (see 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 1 Peter 5:1-5; Heb. 13:7, 17), the role of deacon is not one with authority.⁴

While there might be influence and honor associated with the role of deacon (thus requiring the character qualifications in 1 Tim. 3:8-12), the role is defined by humble *acts of service and administration*, not leading with authority. It is not a “front and center” role but a “behind the scenes” role. Paul’s arguments restricting the office of elder/pastor to qualified men—and that office alone seems restricted in Scripture—do not apply to the office of deacon, and therefore, the very nature of the role of deacon would make it available to both men and women. (This is why the qualifications of elders include the ability to teach in 1 Tim. 3:2, whereas this is clearly removed from the qualifications of deacons.)

³ Among those who support female deacons, there is disagreement as to whether 3:12 “symmetrically” applies to women or not. Jonathan Leeman supports female deacons but leans toward an understanding that 3:12 is primarily for male deacons. He writes, “I do see a formal asymmetry between men and women in the qualification to manage one’s house well. All husbands are responsible to manage their households well in a way that wives are not. I could be wrong here, but this does seem to imply that, formally speaking, a man with an unruly wife may be disqualified from serving as a deacon, while a similarly situated woman with an unruly husband might not be. That’s the formal asymmetry.” Jonathan Leeman, “Mailbag #2: Deaconess Qualifications, Private Baptisms, Knowing Members’ Giving,” 3/13/15, <https://www.9marks.org/mailbag/mailbag-2-deaconess-qualifications-private-baptisms-knowing-members-giving/#a>

⁴ This is a fundamental problem with the Guy Waters’ article, “Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? No” at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-support-female-deacons-no/> 2/19/19. Waters argues the office of deacon possesses authority in it. While there might be a level of influence and honor associated with the role, I fundamentally disagree that the role bears any authority. The New Testament neither explicitly or implicitly suggests such a thing, but rather, the nature of the role is one of servanthood and not authority (which belongs to the office of elder/pastor). This misunderstanding by Waters informs some of his textual and theological conclusions, namely, restricting women from the office under the assumption it carries authority..

To restrict the office to men alone doesn't make sense with the nature of the role within the church and puts an unnecessary limit, or boundary, on what women can do when we should be encouraging women to serve wherever Scripture does not forbid it.⁵ This seems consistent with what we then see in practice with women serving as deacons in Scripture (see argument from Rom. 16:1 in point #2 below) and early church history (see argument in point #6).

2. Phoebe is most likely identified in the official capacity of deacon in Romans 16:1.

Phoebe (a woman) is most likely called a "deacon" in Romans 16:1 rather than merely a "servant" or "minister." Because *diakonos* can be translated for the office of deacon or for the word for servant (or "minister"), context best determines usage (which is why 1 Timothy 3:8 and Philippians 1:1 are translated as "deacons" but most other usages in the New Testament are translated generally as "servant" or "ministers"). While Romans 16:1 can be translated as the general word for servant, context suggests it is better translated as "deacon."

Paul mentions Phoebe is the deacon/servant "of the church at Cenchreae." Douglas Moo writes, "The qualification of *diakonos* by 'of the church' suggests, rather, that Phoebe held at Cenchreae the 'office' of 'deacon' as Paul describes it in 1 Tim. 3:8-12 (cf. Phil. 1:1)."⁶ Tom Schreiner agrees, affirming this wording "suggests an official capacity."⁷ J.A. Medders explains, "That structure, when used in the rest of New Testament is noting a specific person in an official office."⁸ We find strong evidence for this interpretation in the New Testament and earliest church writings.

"First, Paul describes Phoebe as a 'diakonos of the church at Cenchreae,' specifying her function as diakonos to that specific church. This may seem insignificant until we realize that whenever the Greek phrase '_____ of the church' is used in the New Testament and the earliest Christian literature (where '_____' is a personal designation or title), the personal designation refers to an office, not just a generic function (Acts 20:17; Eph. 5:23; Jas. 5:14; Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; Ignatius, Trallians 2.3; Philadelphians 5.1; Polycarp 1.1; Shepherd of Hermas, Vision 2.2.6; 2.4.3; 3.9.7; Martyrdom of Polycarp 16.2; 19.2). Therefore, if Phoebe is merely a 'helpful assistant' of the church at Cenchreae in Romans 16:1, this is the only time the construction is used this way in the earliest Christian literature."⁹

While the translation of Romans 16:1 is debatable, the overwhelming majority of instances where the phrase "of the church of _____" is connected to an official capacity (deacon in this case) and not used generally for servant, makes the identification of Phoebe as a deacon in the church the most likely interpretation. Thus, we have a New Testament example of a female deacons that corresponds to both the earliest records in church history (see point #6 below and the preceding quote) and makes sense in light of the overall understanding of the nature of the office of deacon.

⁵ "Like their male counterparts, deaconesses do not have responsibilities to teach, lead, pray for the sick, and shepherd the church; those are the primary responsibilities of the elders. Accordingly, deaconesses do not violate the Pauline prohibitions in 1 Timothy 2:12. Deacons and deaconesses, by contrast with and as complementary to elders, engage in all the other areas of service in the church." Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 247.

⁶ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 914. Moo adds, "We put 'office' in quotation marks because it is very likely that regular offices in local Christian churches were still in the process of being established, as people who regularly ministered in a certain way were gradually recognized officially by the congregation and given a regular title."

It seems most modern commentators agree with this interpretation of Romans 16. See Moo; Schreiner; Kasemann; Cranfield; Dunn; etc.

⁷ Schreiner, "Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? Yes," thegospelcoalition.org. He continues, "Verse 2 supports this understanding, since Phoebe is designated as a 'patron' (ESV) or 'benefactor' (CSB), which means she regularly helped, perhaps financially, those in need. In addition, many commentators believe Phoebe actually carried the letter of Romans to the Roman church, which would fit with a diaconal position." See also Schreiner's commentary on Romans 16:1.

⁸ J.A. Medders, "Why Have Women Deacons?," written 7/9/18, accessed 2/3/20. <https://jamedders.com/why-have-women-deacons/>

⁹ Michael J. Svelgel, *RetroChristianity: Reclaiming the Forgotten Faith* (Crossway, 2012) found at <http://www.retrochristianity.org/2012/04/14/did-the-apostles-establish-the-office-of-deaconess/>

3. If Paul intended to convey “wives of deacons” rather than women deacons in 1 Timothy 3:11, he could have used more explicit language to do so (which he does elsewhere in Scripture).

Though both sides of the debate have to careful not to speculate or mandate too much about what Paul “should have said,” there were words and phrases available to him to clearly identify “wives of deacons” if that is what he was talking about. If Paul wanted to express the wives of (male) deacons, he could have used a definite article (the wives), a personal pronoun (their wives) or possessive pronoun (wives of deacons) rather than more generally saying “women,” as he does in 1 Tim. 3:11.¹⁰ For examples of Paul using this language to designate the spouse of someone, see 1 Cor. 7:2; Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18, 24; 1 Peter 3:1.

However, there was no female word for deacon (such as “deaconess”) at the time of the New Testament, so the easiest way for Paul to indicate in 1 Tim. 3:11 that he is referring to a gender (female) within his discussion of deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13) is to use the word for women.¹¹ Paul used the word available to him to differentiate that he was talking specifically to women deacons in his discussion of deacons. Though 1 Tim. 3:11 can be translated as either “wives” or “women,” Paul’s decision not to use the available language that would designate a marital relationship (such as “their wives” or “wives of deacons”)—as he does elsewhere in the NT and 1 Timothy—leads me to believe he is talking about women deacons rather than wives of deacons.

4. It seems unlikely that Paul would speak into the qualifications of the wives of deacons when he did not do so for the wives of elders.

The argument against female deacons is built on the conclusion Paul speaks to “wives of deacons” in 1 Tim. 3:11 rather than “women deacons.” However, since it would be odd for Paul to go into the qualifications for the wives of deacons (in 1 Tim. 3:8-12) when he did not do so for the wives of elders (in 1 Tim. 3:1-7), it’s more likely he isn’t referring to wives at all in 1 Tim. 3:11 but women deacons. Since the office of an elder is a more weighty, authoritative, influential role in the Church than that of deacon—not to mention the office of elder is much or of a “leadership role” than the office of deacon—it would make little sense for Paul to list qualifications for the wives of deacons but not elders.

“If the reference is to the wives of deacons, why does Paul omit a reference to the wives of elders, particularly since elders exercise pastoral oversight and overall leadership in the church? It would seem the character of the wives of elders would be even *more* important than the wives of deacons—and thus focusing on the wives of deacons, but not on the wives of elders, is strange. Yet if the reference is to female deacons, we have an elegant explanation for why the wives of elders aren’t mentioned—for the wives of deacons aren’t included either. In other words, Paul isn’t referring to wives at all, but to female deacons.”¹²

¹⁰ “Had Paul wanted to indicate that he was talking about wives, he could have used a prepositional expression (wives ‘of deacons’; in Greek, a noun in the genitive case) or a personal pronoun (‘their’ wives). The fact that he does not make this indication supports the view that he is addressing women deacons. Indeed, his switch from a discussion about deacons to a discussion about deaconesses parallels an earlier move (1 Tim. 2:8-9) from a discussion of men (‘I desire then that in every place men should pray’; v. 8) to a discussion of women (‘likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel’; v. 9). In both contexts Paul used *gunaikas* to indicate the switch.” Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 245.

Allison sees further support for this in the fact that elsewhere in 1 Timothy, Paul uses prepositional phrases for marital relationships. See 1 Tim. 3:2, 12; 5:9. If Paul wanted to refer to “wives of deacons” in 3:11, he could have used the same pattern he does elsewhere.

¹¹ Joel Green states: “While it is true that *gune* [‘women’] seems too common a term to describe an office, the term ‘deaconess’ (i.e., a fem. form of diakonos) did not exist, and with a code listing requirements for an office, a reference to ‘women’ would have sufficed to direct attention to female candidates for the post.” Green, *Letters*, 266.

¹² Schreiner, “Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? Yes,” thegospelcoalition.org

The fact that there are no qualifications for the wives of elders makes it unlikely Paul is then referring to “wives of deacons” rather than female deacons in 1 Timothy 3:11. It makes more sense that Paul switches to talking about female deacons rather than wives of deacons.¹³

5. Paul seems to move from male deacons to female deacons in 1 Tim. 3:11, listing parallel qualifications for both.

Jeff Medders argues the flow of the passage goes as follows.¹⁴

- Male deacons addressed (1 Tim. 3:8–10)
- Female deacons addressed (1 Tim 3:11)
- Male deacons addressed (1 Tim. 3:12)
- Male and Female deacons addressed (1 Tim. 3:13)

Furthermore, the qualifications for male deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-10) and female deacons (1 Tim. 3:11) seem to mirror one another. Both are introduced by the same word, “likewise” (*hosautos*), and connect to the verb “must be” (1 Timothy 3:2) of certain character.¹⁵ Gregg Allison summarizes how this parallel reinforces that Paul is still speaking of “office holders” rather a non-office-holding spouse.

“The list Paul supplies is like the other lists in the immediate context and thus is naturally taken as expressing the qualifications for a church office. Moreover, the strong parallels between this list for deaconesses and the list for deacons—both must be ‘dignified,’ careful with their words, sober than addicted, and ‘faithful’ to ‘the faith’—reinforce that this is a list of qualifications for women deacons. Because Paul has already covered the similar qualifications for men deacons, he only needs a brief mention of the qualifications for female deacons.”

Note the chart below identifying the parallel within the office for both men and women.

v.8	<i>Deacons likewise</i>			
dignified	not double-tongued	not addicted to much wine	not greedy for dishonest gain	hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience
v.11	<i>Women likewise</i>			
dignified	not slanderers	but sober-minded	faithful in all things	

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Both verses eight and eleven are introduced by the same word: “likewise,” or “too” (*hosautos*). This indicates Paul is most likely continuing his list of qualifications for deacons, not switching to a separate group of people (i.e., wives of deacons).¹⁷ The “likewise” for both “deacons” (8) and “women” (11) connecting the two related groups likely implies

¹³ Green: “The omission of a parallel instruction to wives of overseers makes it still less likely that ‘wives of deacons’ would be singled out.” Green, *Letters*, 266.

¹⁴ Medders, “Why Have Women Deacons?”

¹⁵ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 245.

¹⁶ Image from J.A. Medders, “Why Have Women Deacons?”, written 7/9/18, accessed 2/3/20. <https://jamedders.com/why-have-women-deacons/>

¹⁷ See Schreiner, “Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? Yes,” thegospelcoalition.org. See also, Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 244; and Allison, *Raising the Dust*, 14.

both refer to an office, linking the qualifications for the office of deacon to the verb “must be” in 3:2, which was also used in regard to the character qualifications of an office (elder in that case).

6. Early Church History reinforces these conclusions with clear examples of women deacons.

Though we don’t believe Church History is authoritative—like the Bible—we do believe it as a helpful and significant arm of Christian theology, showing the development and practices of common beliefs of the Church. As early as AD 111, Pliny refers to two women deaconesses who were arrested and tortured. “A very early attestation of the existence of deaconesses (Latin: *ministrae*) occurs in the correspondence between Pliny and the emperor Trajan written in the first part of the second century (Pliny the Younger, Letter 10 [to Trajan] 46.8.”¹⁸

This continues in the second-fourth centuries, including in key church fathers (such as Chrysostom), in early Christian documents (such as the “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles”), and in early church councils (such as the significant Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451). For more on deaconesses in early church history, see the examples provided by J.A. Medders in “Why Have Women Deacons.”¹⁹

Conclusion

When these arguments are considered together, it seems likely to me that the New Testament not only does not restrict the office of deacon from women, but that women are actively serving in the role. I think this provides the most likely interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and makes sense of Paul identifying Phoebe as a deacon in Romans 16:1. These conclusions seem to fit best with the nature of the office of deacon in the Bible, and are supported by the earliest practices of the Church in our historical records. For these reasons, we believe qualified women can serve as deacons (or deaconess, if you like) and should be encouraged to do so.

Joel Green agrees when he writes, “in similar parenthetic contexts, the adverb *hosautos* (“likewise”; 2:9; 3:8; Titus 2:3, 6) that changes the topic to ‘women’ serves to introduce a new but related case. As in the case of ‘deacons’ in 3:8 (see discussion), the verb of necessity plus infinitive should be supplied from 3:2 [“must be”].” Green, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 266.

John MacArthur concurs: “The office of deaconess is clearly implied. The “likewise” in verse 11 ties the qualifications of these women to those already given for the offices of overseer and deacon. In verse 11, Paul did not refer to those women as deaconesses because *diakonos* has no feminine form.” <http://www.gty.org/resources/bible-qna/BQ060713/was-phoebe-a-deaconess?term=deacons>

¹⁸ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 247, fn. 144.

¹⁹ J.A. Medders, “Why Have Women Deacons?”, written 7/9/18, accessed 2/3/20. <https://jamedders.com/why-have-women-deacons/>