

**1 Timothy 7****1 Timothy 3:8-13****March 10, 2013****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We considered the qualifications for the office of overseer or elder last Lord's Day evening. Now Paul turns to the qualifications for the office of deacon. There is comparatively little said about the office of deacon in the New Testament. There was no such office in the ancient church; we do not read of deacons in the Old Testament. On the other hand, almost all religious and social groups have officials who render assistance to the leaders and so there is nothing unlikely or unusual about the office. Indeed, there was an assistant, the *chazzan* [חזן], in the Jewish synagogue who had at least some responsibilities similar to some of those our deacons have today, but only some and not the principal one of charitable service. Just as the Lord Jesus was a preacher and just as he laid down rules for the life of his followers, so he served others. He healed the sick, he fed the hungry, and he comforted the downhearted. This too was a fundamental part of his ministry. The deacons represent *that* part of the Lord's work in the church and the world. Unlike the office of elder, which in ancient days arose naturally and without comment out of the patriarchate of family and clan, this is an office that was actually invented out of whole cloth. We have an account of its institution and the reasons for it in Acts 6:1-6. We also find elders and deacons listed together in the address of Paul's letter to the Philippians, so we know that churches in this early period regularly had both elders and deacons.

But nowhere apart from Acts 6, and there only very generally, are we given a definition of the office or a list of its responsibilities. We know that the word "deacon" means "servant" -- in fact, in most of its uses in the New Testament it has that general meaning (only a few times does it refer to the church office) -- and that the particular service in view was both assistance given to the pastors and elders and the distribution of the church's charitable support to those in need. The fact that the duties of this office are not made explicit in the New Testament is perhaps one reason why so many other responsibilities were soon added to the office. In the early church, deacons, as they do here, helped with the administration of the Lord's Supper, assisted at baptisms, at a time when the ritual was considerably more elaborate than it is today, acted as ushers and kept order, ministered to believers imprisoned for their faith, administered church property, and were responsible for the burying of the dead. In early Christianity bishops often had an assistant who was a deacon, a kind of right-hand man, his eyes and ears in the community, his messenger, and so on. At least in a few cases the position of deacon became higher than that of presbyter or elder and a cause of controversy as a result. [E. Ferguson, "Deacon," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) 321]

Eventually the diaconate became simply a lower order of the ministry and then a stepping stone to the ministry and it fell to the Protestant Reformers to recover the biblical simplicity of the office and restore its place among the laity rather than the clergy.

### **Text Comment**

- v.8 What is immediately obvious is that the qualifications for the office of deacon overlap with those of the elder. So the “likewise” with which the list begins. Of the nine characteristics of a deacon listed here, six are directly parallel to the qualifications listed for an elder in the previous verses. The primary qualification of either church officer is a godly character and an exemplary Christian life. In the Christian church, one’s life is not only a qualification for his ministry, it *is* his ministry in many ways. Mature Christians whose lives are above reproach, who are an adornment of the gospel of Jesus Christ, are to be church officers because the work of both is the exercise of such character. The primary differentiation between the two offices is thus found in the titles of each: overseer in the one case, servant in the other.

The requirement that they not be greedy may suggest that it was understood that deacons were responsible for the church’s funds and were thus exposed to the temptations that a greedy man would find hard to resist. So we learned in Judas’ case, who handled the funds of the Twelve Disciples and helped himself on occasion. [Mounce, 195]

- v.9 This requirement has sometimes been taken to mean that the deacons too were to be teachers, perhaps assistants to the ministers in their teaching. [Stott, 100] But given what is said before and after, it seems more likely that this is simply another way to say that they must be faithful Christians, as faithful in their doctrine as in their life. As this was a problem in Ephesus, as we will read again in 4:1, it bears repeating that Paul wanted the church’s officers to form a solid wall of opposition to any departure from the apostolic gospel.

That these men should have a *clear* conscience contrasts with the false teachers whose consciences, Paul says in 4:2, were *seared*.

- v.10 This is another way of saying what Paul said of elders in v. 6. It is not an office for novices.
- v.12 As was said of the elder (vv. 2, 4-5), a deacon must have a faithful and fruitful home life. That is where character is best tested and proved.

v.13 The “good standing” that faithful deacons would gain for their faithful service was for a long time taken to be a reference to the next office up the chain. So a faithful deacon would move from that office to that of presbyter or elder or overseer. In that way, again, the diaconate came to be regarded as a stepping-stone to higher things. In all likelihood Paul is not talking about preferment or promotion here but either a place in the esteem of the church or a greater measure of the Lord’s approval. Fulfilling one’s calling in the Christian life is a sure way to a greater measure of assurance or confidence in one’s Christian life and work.

In any case, Paul says nothing here to suggest that the deacons hold a position *below* or *inferior to* that of the elders. [Mounce, 196] Indeed, in the teaching of the Lord Jesus he who is the greatest is the one who serves!

All of that seems pretty straightforward. But, as many of you know, in reading these few verses I passed over the statement that has become a very hot topic in our own church in recent years and threatens our unity as conservative Presbyterians. I am referring, of course, to v. 11 and the statement “Their wives likewise must be dignified, and so on.” The word translated “wives” is the word “woman,” in the plural of course. To be sure that word is very often rightly translated “wife.” It is so translated and uncontroversially in this very passage. When Paul wrote that an overseer must be the husband of one wife, the word “wife” there is this same word “woman.” Indeed, in the very next verse, we read that the deacon himself must be the husband of one wife, and the word “wife” there also is this same word “woman.” That the word should often be translated “wife” and often means “wife” is admitted by all.

But there are those, and have been since the days of the early church, who have argued that Paul is not talking about the wives of deacons here in v. 11 but of women deacons. The word deaconess, a feminine form of deacon, had not yet been invented. There is no instance of the word “deacon” in the feminine form before the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed the word “deacon” in its masculine form, and only in its masculine form, is used in the New Testament to describe everyone who is a servant, male or female. In Romans 16:1 Phoebe is called a “servant” or “deacon” and the term there is the same masculine term we find here in vv. 8, 12, and 13. *So the question is: who are these women to whom Paul is referring here? Are they women deacons or are they the wives of the deacons?*

I’m not always sure whether to bring up controversies that have surfaced in our church. In some respects the longer you remain blissfully unaware of the disagreement the better off you are. It can be discouraging to find that we Presbyterians are now arguing about something else. Controversies always tempt people to take sides and then to get their dander up. If it is not a controversy *here*, in our own congregation, do we have any real need to get involved, even by so much as examining the issue? But, like it or not, this is not an issue that is going away. You will

hear more and more about it as time passes and, I suspect, the controversy will become more troublesome to the peace of the church. I trust you to be thoughtful and peaceful in your consideration of the question and careful in your conversation about it. That is what we are going to need from everyone!

This is already such an issue for some ministers and some churches in our denomination that they have given up ordaining anyone to the office of deacon because our church law does not permit them to ordain men and women equally. In order to have *women* deacons they simply do not ordain *any* deacons. They call the people they elect to the office deacons, whether men or women, but they do not ordain them and by so argue they have not violated the church's law. The *Book of the Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America makes explicit that both offices are open to men only, but it assumes -- this controversy had not arisen when the Book was written -- that anyone elected to that office would be ordained by the laying on of hands. Since that is not done in these churches they are content to believe that they meet the letter of the law even while skirting its obvious intention. So there are already a number of PCA churches, including some in our own Presbytery, that have both men and women deacons. They would look to 1 Tim. 3:11 as justification for the practice, and to Romans 16:1 where Phoebe is referred to as a *diakonos*, a "deacon" or "servant."

Now they have their arguments and they are not without considerable weight.

1. Some of the church fathers, for whom Greek was their native tongue, such as the great preacher John Chrysostom, understood Paul to be talking about deaconesses in v. 11. Now, to be sure, it doesn't appear that Chrysostom meant women deacons -- and, as we shall see, we should not assume that the deaconess and the woman deacon are the same thing -- but he certainly did not think that Paul was referring to the wives of these deacons. Indeed, we can come forward to virtually the present day. The RPCNA, that is the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, the so-called "Covenanters," -- the Presbyterians who sing only psalms and use no musical accompaniment -- have had women deacons since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
2. The "likewise" in v. 11, like the "likewise" in v. 8, could be easily taken to refer to another set of officers, as it did to the deacons in v. 8.
3. If this is a reference to the character of the wives of the deacons, we might have expected a reference to the character of the wives of the overseers, but there is no such reference.
4. While it is hardly made necessary by the rules of Greek grammar, there is no "their" there. That is, the text doesn't explicitly read "*their* wives" referring to the wives of the deacons Paul had been talking about. The translation "their wives" is contextual, not literal. Again, everyone admits you could translate the word in either way "the women" or "their wives."

5. It is argued, at least by our men, that since the office of deacon is not an office of authority, having women in that office would not violate the principle of 1 Tim. 2:12. "I do not permit a woman to exercise authority over a man."

Against the reading "women" and for the reading "their wives" are these considerations.

1. If Chrysostom can be quoted in defense of the translation "deaconess," his contemporary Jerome, a far more considerable scholar, can be quoted in defense of the translation "their wives."
2. In virtually all of Christian history the diaconate has been an office open to men only.
3. If Paul is introducing a new class of persons in v. 11, why does he immediately return to the same male deacons he has been talking about in v. 12? It seems that he has been talking about men all along and that what he says in v. 11 has to do with them as well: as they must be dignified and sober-minded, so must their wives be. It makes for an awkward transition if v. 10 is about men, v. 11 about women, and v. 12 about the men again. Indeed, the great B.B. Warfield, who argued *in favor* of the restoration of deaconesses in the Presbyterian Church, nevertheless admitted that the biblical warrant for such an office "is of the slenderest." He goes on to say, "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. [*Presbyterian Review* (1890) 69] He means from men to women and back to men again in just three short verses.
4. The "likewise" fits as well with the one interpretation as the other. If Paul is talking about deacons here he means only to say that their wives must also be a recommendation of the faith.
5. If v. 11 is really about women deacons they seem to get short shrift from Paul. Not only does he say just a few things about them but immediately returns to talk about the men. In fact, the qualifications for these women, if they be understood to be deacons, are very simple. If Paul were actually introducing a new set of officers we would expect more, all the more given the fact that when he talks about the order of widows in chapter 5, which may, in fact, be the origin of the early church office of deaconess, not this verse 11, he says a great deal more about those women and about their work.
6. Vv. 11-12 can easily and naturally be taken to refer to the deacon's family life. He must have a faithful wife, he must be a faithful husband, and must have raised his children well. The fact that the elder's wife is not mentioned in the same way proves nothing. The lists aren't identical, they're somewhat interchangeable, and the general points are the same even if made in slightly different ways. We could use verse 11, in other words, to talk about elders' wives as well.

7. The word “woman” occurs in the very next verse and there it is unmistakably a reference to the deacon’s wife.
8. If Paul meant to include women among the deacons, it seems sensible to many that he would have said so in a more unmistakable way than what he wrote in v. 11.
9. Finally, for us Presbyterians, the New Testament does not say that the office of deacon is without authority, the diaconate in church history has exercised a wide variety of functions that involve authority of one kind or another -- in our day, of course, if you control the money *everyone thinks you have authority* -- and so the principle of 1 Tim. 2:12 cannot so easily be thought irrelevant to the question of the interpretation of 3:11. If women are not to exercise authority over men, it is doubtful they would occupy a formal position of authority in the church.

Now there is another wrinkle to this debate as I mentioned earlier. Paul does write explicitly and at some length about an order of women workers in the church in 5:3-16. There are many reasons to think that 1 Tim. 5, not 1 Tim. 3 is the origin of the early church’s office of deaconess. We can look more carefully at that when we get to that text, but for the moment take note that Paul wrote in chapter 5 that no women should be enrolled in the order of widows until she was sixty years of age. Olympias, Chrysostom’s close friend and assistant, was made a wealthy widow as a young woman but it was controversial when she was ordained as a deaconess because she was far short of sixty years of age. That suggests that they were looking in those days to 1 Tim. 5, not to 1 Tim. 3 for their understanding of what deaconesses were.

The people who are pushing for this change in our church, who want the church law to be changed to permit the ordination of women deacons, argue, and I have no reason to think they are insincere in this, that we have been withholding from our women an opportunity to serve the Lord. That would not be a good thing, were it to be true. Those who are resisting the pressure to open the office to women argue that the reservation of the office to men is what in fact we are commanded in the Word of God and to do otherwise would be disobedience. That likewise would not be a good thing were it to be true. *Now what are we to make of this?* I will tell you what I think and I think I can fairly say that I am at least representing the great tradition of Christian and of Protestant and Presbyterian thought and practice.

*The first thing* that I think important to say is that *everyone, on both sides of the debate, must recognize and salute the other side’s concern.* Surely we all should be concerned to benefit as much as we possibly can from the gifts and graces of the church’s women. Those who are convinced that the Bible reserves the office of deacon to men should stand very ready to ask if we have unwittingly understated and undervalued the gifts and the abilities of Christian women and have failed to exploit the resources the Lord has put in the hands of their half of the church. The early church had deaconesses, whether on the basis of 1 Tim. 3 or 1 Tim. 5 is a separate question, and they made an important contribution to the life and work of the church and its

ministry to the community around it. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Robert Murray McCheyne's St. Peter's Dundee congregation employed female pastoral visitors to attend to the large number of single women Irish immigrant workers in Dundee. McCheyne also had an order of deaconesses whose ministry it was to attend to the poor and sick women of the town. Who could say that there was anything amiss in any of that?

On the other hand, those who favor women deacons should have deep respect for the concern of others not to disobey what they take to be a direct commandment of the Word of God. The fact is, many of our men, and I among them, are not persuaded that the argument for women deacons is a very strong one. Advocates of the change point to Romans 16:1 where Phoebe is called a deacon or servant. The term usually means servant and it isn't clear to me that we have some reason to regard her as an officer of the church. How else would Paul have said that she was a faithful servant of the Christians in Cenchreae where Phoebe lived? Indeed, the word "deacon" can bear a number of meanings in Paul's use of it there. To call her a "servant" might mean that she was a wealthy woman and a patron of the church and of Paul's ministry. It could also literally mean that she was a messenger of the church, bearing Paul's letter to Rome as she did. All of these are typical meanings of the word *diakonos*.

What is more, the text in Acts 6 is virtually never mentioned by the advocates of reading 1 Tim. 3:11 as "women deacons." Some have argued that Acts 6 is *not* the origin of the office of deacon because the word "deacon" is not found there. But the noun "service" (*diakonia*) and the verb "to serve" (*diakonein*) are found there, the basic profile of an office of service is laid out there, and the early church certainly thought Acts 6 was the beginning of the diaconate. The church in Rome still had but seven deacons into the 4<sup>th</sup> century because the apostles had told the church in Acts 6 to "choose seven men." The word "man" there, by the way, is the term used for the male human being in distinction from the female. And not only did the apostles tell the church to choose seven *men*, but the seven individuals chosen all had a man's name. This is the more remarkable because the ministry that called the office into being was a ministry to widows. One would think that if the apostles had women deacons in mind, they would have chosen some for *this* work at *this* time. But they did not. For many of our men Acts 6 is a much more important information on the diaconate in apostolic Christianity than a statement like Romans 16:1, that is ambiguous and might be taken in a variety of ways, or 1 Tim. 3:11 that, likewise, is hardly clearly a reference to women church officers.

*The second thing* we ought to insist upon is the honest recognition of each other's suspicions. The side that is advocating for the introduction of women into the diaconate clearly feels that this is a change whose time has come, that a failure on the part of the church to accommodate the practice will result in the further and unnecessary marginalization of the church. We live in a feminist culture and we need to make every change that we can make in faithfulness to the Bible in order not to give unnecessary offense. Their suspicion -- and I have talked to enough of these

men to know this -- is that the other side is conservative by tradition and temperament and is holding back the men who want to take the church forward. All of our men, by the way, who favor adding women to our diaconates, insist that they have no interest in ordaining women ministers or elders. They are clear that the Bible forbids *that*, but they think we should make this change to demonstrate that we have nothing against women, that we are willing to adjust to the changing practices of the culture, and that we want the service of women as fully as we want the service of men. You will not be surprised to learn, of course, that most of this pressure to add women to the diaconate is found in urban churches where a larger number of professional women can be found.

On the other hand, the advocates for this change need honestly to face the fact that, no matter their assurances, many skeptics remain convinced that it will be deacons today and elders tomorrow. I'm not saying that our men who want women deacons are lying to us about their commitment to a male-only eldership and ministry, but our truest motives are not always known even to ourselves. The pressure for such changes from our feminist culture is relentless and the desire to conform almost inevitable.

One of the things that worries me, for example, is that so far as the evidence goes, while the early church had deaconesses, they never confused deaconesses with women deacons. The early church always distinguished the two orders or offices. The women were one thing, the men were another. But I have discovered in a number of conversations that most of our advocates of women deacons are not interested in reviving the ancient church's office of deaconess, which might, in my view, be a very good thing. They are not interested in looking again at 1 Timothy 5. They want women to be deacons in the 1 Timothy 3:11 sense. This has led more than one observer to think that the concern is not really in the first place to open to women avenues of service in the church, so much as it is to equalize men and women in church office, which aim would not be nearly so well served by a separate order of women workers such as Paul describes in 1 Tim. 5. But if that is so, isn't it very likely that upon ordaining women to the diaconate, the pressure will begin to mount to ordain them to the eldership and the ministry as well. This has, of course, happened again and again in other churches.

That is something we do not want to do not only because it violates the clear teaching of the Word of God and the historic practice of the Christian church but because *the churches that have done it are all dying!* If each side will take seriously the concerns of the other, the debate will more likely be fruitful instead of divisive. Some humility always helps as well. In my experience, virtually no one in these sorts of intramural debates in our church knows nearly as much as he thinks he knows!

I have often told young men who have been taught to think it right to ordain women deacons that they should expect the change to take some considerable time. You will not change the church's

mind overnight and shouldn't expect to. I remind them that I have been an advocate of child communion for years now in a church that does not allow the practice of children participating in the Lord's Supper on the strength of their baptism and before they have made a profession of faith. We must be prepared to wait and we must believe that, if our arguments are sound, they will persuade the church in time. If they are not sound, any faithful Christian should want them exposed so that he could change his mind.

I don't like the practice being followed in some of our churches, an end run around church law as it plainly is. The Lord will bless faithful submission, perhaps even more when it concerns a matter about which one strongly believes that the church is in error.

The fact is we have never had women deacons because we never thought them permitted by the Word of God. We thought the reservation of that office to men was plainly taught in the Bible and part of its general doctrine of male leadership in the church and the home. Little in the culture persuades us that the world has found a better way, and so it is natural to be cautious when Christians urge us to change in the direction of one of the world's new orthodoxies. Always "to the law and the testimony." What does the Word of God say? Obviously no woman deacon is going to gain a good standing and a great confidence by her work as a deacon if it is work that God has forbidden her to do!

This obviously was not a sermon about the gospel as the sermon on the next paragraph will be. But sooner or later one comes to every kind of issue in the Word of God, and this too is important. Get sexual differentiation wrong; ignore what God teaches us about men and women, and sooner rather than later, all hell will break loose. We, in the United States today, should be the last Christians to doubt that!