

Fathers and Brothers,

My effort was to consider the whole of Scripture and interpret arguable texts in the light of clear texts. It was also to be as comprehensive as possible with respect to Church history on deacons and deaconesses (we have included more history sources than any book that I've seen on the topic). I read through many books, but unless I couldn't find a primary source document, I used primary sources. I endeavored to let the sources speak for themselves, and keep my commentary limited. With that said, I have the following three concerns:

1. In general, the RPCNA is strong when it comes to exegesis. However, on this particular issue, we have a meaningful opportunity to carefully revisit the exegetical work, seeking to interpret the Scriptures as a whole while giving careful consideration to the continuity the Old and New Covenants, the context of passages, the analogy of Scripture, and how the obscure may be understood in light of the clear. When consistently applied, this methodology provides clear answers to questions regarding women and the diaconate.
2. It appears that the RPTS professors talked to the Synod of 1888 regarding early church history. Since many ancient documents had not yet been translated into English, they likely didn't have the breadth of knowledge available to us today. The sources available to us now clearly show that the presence of deaconesses in church history was a phenomenon that began in the late third century at earliest and only in the Eastern church. Ordaining female deacons as peers of the male deacons was a novel development in the nineteenth century, and the RPCNA was an early adopter of the position.
3. The RPCNA's interpretation of female deacons ultimately relies on three men in the Eastern Church: Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodore. Pelagius and the Montanists shared their opinion. All of the reasoning done in the 1800s on deaconesses ultimately relied on their views, Pliny the Younger, and the Apostolic Constitutions. After his death, Theodore fell into disgrace because his writings encouraged Nestorianism. Theodore was excommunicated because he tried to compromise with the Monophysites. All of their ideas on deaconesses were rejected by the Council of Chalcedon. But even with their views, their churches did not have female deacons. They had a separate order of deaconesses, as deacons could serve at the altar. Deaconesses were not allowed to do that as women could not do that; typically they only helped with baptizing women. For more details, read my supplementary document entitled "Historical Digest on Women and the Diaconate."

Thanks for your consideration.

In Christ,



David J. Merkel

Fathers and Brothers,

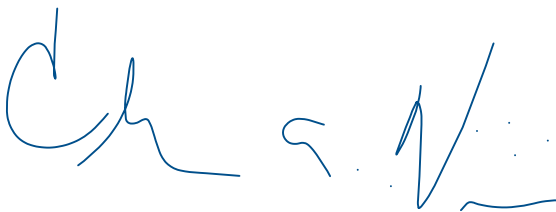
Because the following is a research paper in which we have sought to write formally and avoid first person references, I thought it would be nice to begin with a personal note that explains my intentions and heart in this matter, as well as my approach.

First, it is important to note that the matter of women and the diaconate is a topic I found interesting enough to research, primarily for the purpose of developing my own understanding. When I first began working on the paper in 2013, I was a student at the seminary, and a student under care. The original work was done as a research paper for a class at RPTS. I chose the subject, because I was truly neutral on the matter, having not previously studied it to any meaningful degree. With that in mind, my determination was to research the topic honestly and without bias and to objectively include as many authors and commentators from all sides of the issue as possible. Given this approach, you will not find a defined thesis to be proven in the introduction to the paper. Instead, you will find a question that the paper seeks to answer, namely “Does the diaconate include women?”

Having done the research, written the paper, subsequently expanded it beyond the original class limit, and engaged Bob Concoby and David Merkel, I was able to draw some conclusions. You will find that, as an analytical-minded engineer, my approach is intended to be methodical and thorough. Four positions are presented, compared, and evaluated throughout the paper on the basis of Scripture, church history, and ordination and authority. At the end, my conclusion is that there is enough ambiguity in Scripture (and history) that each of the views may be considered as possible, yet all are not equally plausible.

Although we conclude that “women as non-ordained diaconal assistants” is the most plausible and biblical position by a significant margin (see pp. 27-29) – substantial enough to justify a change in our position – I do not regard our current position (women deacons) as completely implausible. In my judgment, it is a possible (but much less plausible) position. For this reason, I do not take an exception to our current position on women deacons and am willing to lay hands on a woman to ordain her as a deacon. Nevertheless, I believe that the findings of our research were clear enough to warrant a recommendation to change our position to align us even more closely with Scripture. With that in mind, it is my sincere prayer that our work will be of benefit to the denomination as we seek to be as faithful to Scripture as possible.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Chris A. Villi'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'C' and a distinct 'V' at the end.

Chris A. Villi

Recommendations

For Presbytery

1. That the Presbytery of the Alleghenies forward this paper to the Synod for consideration at the 2023 meeting of Synod

For Synod

2. That the RPCNA cease the practice of ordaining females as deacons
3. If recommendation #2 passes:
 - a. That the Synod thank the women who have served as deacons and continue to recognize the ordination/office of women who are currently serving as deacons
 - b. That the following changes be made to the Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America

Reference	Current (2021 Update)	Proposed Revision
Testimony 25:8 (A-87)	The permanent officers to be set apart by ordination are elders and deacons. The office of elder is restricted in Scripture to men. Women as well as men may hold the office of deacon ...	The permanent officers to be set apart by ordination are elders and deacons, both of which are restricted in Scripture to men ...
Directory for Church Government 3.III.A.1 (D-22)	Be communicant members in good standing of the Reformed Presbyterian Church.	Be male communicant members in good standing of the Reformed Presbyterian Church.
Directory for Church Government 3.III.D.1.a.(2) (D-24)	A judgment of the session that there are qualified persons in the congregation, and an increase in the number of deacons is necessary.	A judgment of the session that there are qualified men in the congregation, and an increase in the number of deacons is necessary.

- c. That the Synod consider whether it would be necessary and/or helpful to make any other changes to the Constitution of the RPCNA.
 - d. That the Synod further study and develop a proposal for how best to structure the service of women as non-ordained diaconal assistants (e.g., establishing guidance for an order of widows).
4. If recommendation #2 fails: That the decision to ordain women as deacons that was made in 1888 be sent down in overture.

WOMEN AND THE DIACONATE

An Examination of Scripture, History, Ordination, and Authority

**Prepared for the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North
America (RPCNA); Presented to the Presbytery of the Alleghenies
November 2022**

**Chris Villi
David Merkel
Bob Concoby**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction.....	1
II. The Testimony of Scripture	2
A. Old Testament Redemptive-Historical Context.....	2
B. Acts 6:1-6.....	4
C. 1 Timothy 3:11.....	5
1. The Adverb “Likewise”	6
2. The Placement of Verse 11	7
3. The Term <i>gynaikas</i>	9
D. 1 Timothy 5:9-10	11
E. Romans 16:1-2	15
F. Synthesis of Scriptural Testimony	18
III. The Testimony of Church History	19
A. Patristic History	19
B. Reformation History	22
C. Modern History	23
IV. Ordination and Authority	25
V. Conclusion	27
A. The Cumulative Case	27
B. Significance of Ordination	29
C. Moving Forward	30
VI. Appendix: 1888 RPCNA Synod and Aftermath.....	33
VII. Bibliography	38

LIST OF FIGURES

I. Parallels between Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:8-9	5
II. Parallel requirements for elders, deacons, and widows	13
III. Passages in parallel demonstrating corresponding qualifications	14
IV. Verbal parallels in qualifications for marital fidelity	14
V. Comparison of the four main positions regarding women and the diaconate	28
VI. History of Overtures through 1944	34

Does the diaconate include women? If so, to what degree are they to be involved? In contemporary Reformed and Evangelical thought, there are four main positions, with some variations and overlap, regarding women and the diaconate.

Some believe that women ought to be ordained as deacons alongside men in the same office (hereafter the “female deacon view”). This view was held by the great Princeton Presbyterian theologian B. B. Warfield and has been officially adopted by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). Christian Adjemian, a former pastor in the RPCNA, writes, “the office of deacon, properly understood, includes the office of deaconess.”¹

Others agree that women ought to be ordained but understand the office of deaconess to be a separate but parallel office to that of deacon (the “deaconess view”). John MacArthur summarizes, “We see, then, three distinct church offices ... elders, deacons, and deaconesses.”²

Still others, including Ligon Duncan, Dan Doriani, and George Knight, have argued that women may be non-ordained assistants to the deacons. This view includes those, such as John Calvin, who have associated these helpers/deaconesses with the order of widows described in 1 Timothy 5. The *Book of Church Order* (BCO) of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) states: “the Session of a church should select and appoint godly men and women of the congregation to assist the deacons ... These assistants to the deacons are not officers of the church (BCO 7-2) and, as such, are not subjects for ordination (BCO 17).”³

Finally, some, such as Alexander Strauch and Donald Thomas, understand there to be no ordained diaconal office or non-ordained order for women.

As can be seen on the basis of the variety of positions within the Reformed and Evangelical world, the subject of women and the diaconate is not as unified and straightforward as one might hope. The topic of women’s roles in ministry is an emotional one for many people, so it is difficult to separate from personal feelings, cultural influences, and individual biases. Yet, the Christian’s task is “simply to follow the clear teaching of Scripture, rather than to respond (whether by reaction or adaptation) to our present cultural context.”⁴

With that said, the goal of this paper is to examine the issue from a variety of different angles. The paper begins, first and foremost, with a focus on the testimony of Scripture – from Old Testament to New – to understand what our Lord has said regarding women and the diaconate. Secondly, church history throughout the ages is examined in corroboration of the Scriptures. The final section of the paper takes a closer look at the biblical understanding of ordination and authority. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to conclude that the full weight of this paper hinges upon every detail of its analysis. Total agreement must be distinguished from substantial agreement, stressing the latter as the chief goal of the paper. While some may respectfully disagree with certain minor or peripheral aspects, the overall whole sufficiently demonstrates that the RPCNA’s current practice of ordaining female deacons lacks clear divine warrant and therefore ought to be reformed according to the Word of God.

It is important to begin with a brief comment on nomenclature. The use of the term “deaconess” by authors throughout history has varied. A few have used the term as a reference

¹ Christian Adjemian, “On Women Deacons,” (Cambridge, MA: First Reformed Presbyterian Church, 2008), http://www.reformedprescambridge.com/articles/women_deacons.pdf (accessed September 28, 2022), 1.

² John MacArthur, *The Master’s Plan for the Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2008), 240.

³ Presbyterian Church in America, *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, Sixth Edition (2012 Reprint), 9-7.

⁴ Ligon Duncan, “The Case for Our Current Policy on Female Deacons,” *byFaith*, August 25, 2008, <http://byfaithonline.com/the-case-for-our-current-policy-on-female-deacons/> (accessed September 28, 2022).

to a female ordained to the office of deacon alongside men.⁵ Some others have used it in the way it is used throughout this paper to refer to women occupying an ordained office separate from but parallel to male deacons.⁶ Still others have used “deaconess” as a reference to non-ordained diaconal assistants such as those of the order of widows.⁷ For clarity, the term “deaconess” is employed throughout the paper as a reference to a female in a third ordained office, and the term “female deacon” is used to refer to a female that shares a singular office with males. When quoting authors who use the term otherwise, clarifying comments are inserted in the footnotes. A second term that varies in its usage is “office.” Some writers use the term to designate an ordained office while others also use it to designate a non-ordained order (e.g., the order of widows). Throughout the paper, the context should make it clear how the term is being used, and clarifying comments are added where needed.

THE TESTIMONY OF SCRIPTURE

Reformed and Evangelical believers agree that the Christian is tasked with following Scripture’s clear teaching. The difficulty regarding women and the diaconate is that the New Testament data is quite sparse and ambiguous. According to H. Wayne House, “The office of ministry of deaconess ... is poorly established in the New Testament. Only two passages might suggest the office of deaconess, and both are obscure.”⁸ Ligon Duncan agrees and adds that “the biblical evidence for the ordination of women as deacons is slender and weak, at best.”⁹ In the estimation of B. B. Warfield, an advocate of women deacons, only one passage applies.¹⁰ In fact, to be even more precise, he speaks of only one phrase: “When we seek Biblical warrant, we have only the isolated phrase, ‘Phebe, the deaconess ;’ ... We have no Biblical account of the qualifications for the office or its duties.”¹¹

To cover all Biblical ground, four New Testament passages must be considered: Acts 6:1-6, 1 Timothy 3:11, 1 Timothy 5:9-10, and Romans 16:1-2 (and Philippians 1:1 as it applies to them). Before doing so, one must first consider the redemptive-historical context.

Old Testament Redemptive-Historical Context

In the Old Covenant, all regular ecclesiastical offices of the church – elders, priests, and Levites – were held by males.¹² Judges and prophets were irregular offices, and as such were very infrequently held by females, sometimes to show that the men were not stepping up to their

⁵ See, for example, footnote #1 above. Note that Christian Adjemian used the terms “women deacon” and “deaconess” interchangeably. For example, his article is titled “On Women Deacons,” yet in the quote he refers to them as deaconesses. See also footnotes #38 and #73 below re: B. B. Warfield’s use of the term.

⁶ See, for example, footnote #2 above.

⁷ See, for example, footnote #65 below.

⁸ H. Wayne House, *The Role of Women in Ministry Today* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 144.

⁹ Duncan, “The Case for Our Current Policy on Female Deacons.”

¹⁰ Benjamin B. Warfield, “Presbyterian Deaconesses,” *The Presbyterian Review* (1890): 283.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 286.

¹² George Gillespie, “An Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland,” in *The Points of Ruling Elders, and of the Authority of Presbyteries and Synods* (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1846), 13-14; D. S. Faris, “The Female Deacon. Animadversions on the Argument of Synod’s Committee,” *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* 27, no. 5 (1889), 137-138.

responsibilities.¹³ Even civil rulers were normatively male. These examples of male leadership reflected the creational order of authority established in the Garden of Eden.

Reformed hermeneutics demands the assumption of continuity between Old and New Covenants in the absence of a clearly communicated change (i.e., abrogation or fulfillment).¹⁴ If leadership in all regular offices was limited to males in the Old Covenant, then, unless otherwise stated, the same should be assumed for the New Covenant, especially since male headship was something set at Creation. God clearly communicates when He makes changes across the Covenants.¹⁵

Regarding regular ecclesiastical offices, there is continuity from Old to New Covenant for the office of elder, because the need to rule over God's people continues, though the civil functions of the elders diminish, and the religious functions grow (Acts 14:23; 15:2-16:4; Titus 1:5). Since sacrifices have come to an end, but there remains a need for preaching and shepherding, the priesthood expires and the pastorate continues (Malachi 2:7; Romans 15:16; Ephesians 4:11). What happens to the Levites, the helpers of the priests?

Just as the fleshly sacrifice of animals gave way to preaching about the one completed sacrifice of Christ, and elders transitioned from being rulers of the local area to rulers of the local congregations, one finds a correspondence between Old Testament (OT) Levites and New Testament (NT) deacons. As the Levites of old were responsible for managing the affairs of the Temple and its property, deacons in the New Covenant are to take care of the spiritual Temple, God's people. Both Levites and deacons "are essentially offices of service, being the 'ministers of mercy,'"¹⁶ and the "property dedicated to ecclesiastical purposes, was always committed for safe keeping and distribution, to the Levites."¹⁷ For these reasons, men from the early church to John Calvin and George Gillespie did not object to referring to deacons as Levites.¹⁸ Because the Levitical office was restricted to men, as were the analogous *chazanim* of the Synagogue and the first deacons of Acts 6:1-6, one would not expect to find ordained women deacons in the New Covenant era.¹⁹ Considering that women never held a regular ecclesiastical office in the OT and given the continuity of redemptive history, the ordination of women officers requires an explicit and clear NT command indicating a change in the structure of the offices. As will be seen below, there is no such command in the NT.

¹³ See Gordon J. Keddie, *Even in Darkness: Judges and Ruth Simply Explained* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1985), 54.

¹⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1950), 134-137. Infant baptism is a good example. Due to the continuity between circumcision and baptism and the absence of a clear command to cease applying the sign of the covenant to infants, the church ought to confidently continue to do so.

¹⁵ See footnote #95.

¹⁶ Daniel R. Hyde, "Rulers and Servants: The Nature and Qualifications for the Offices of Elder and Deacon," in Michael Brown, ed., *Called to Serve: Essays for Elders and Deacons* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2007), 6.

¹⁷ James M. Willson, *The Deacon: An Inquiry into the Nature, Duties and Exercise of the Office of the Deacon in the Christian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: William S. Young, 1869), 58.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 2:1480 (4.19.32); George Gillespie, "An Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland," 13-14.

¹⁹ Brian M. Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons* (Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness, 1998), 6, 95.

Acts 6:1-6

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution (*diakonia*). ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables (*diakoneo*). ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men (*andras*) of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty (*katastesomen epi ho chreia*). ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:1-6, ESV)

In this passage, the twelve apostles, realizing that they are the ministers of the New Covenant, find themselves stretched, and realize that they need a formal class of helpers, much as the priests had with Levites in the Old Covenant, so that they can focus on the ministry of the Word. They call on the people to elect males (Greek: *andras*), seven honest, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. The wording of the passage is unambiguous and clear.

According to John Calvin, the “origin, institution, and office [of deacon] are described by Luke in The Acts [Acts 6:3].”²⁰ Most commentators throughout church history have agreed with Calvin on this point.²¹ A slim minority has objected, but “Very little can be said in favor of the pet idea of some critics that the diaconate was not developed until later.”²² Even though the noun *diakonos* is not found in the text, both the noun *diakonia* (v. 1) and the verb *diakoneo* (v. 2) are present. Furthermore, “the function described has all the marks of church office (prerequisites, 6:3, 5; election, 6:3, 5; ordination, 6:6; a responsible task, 6:3) and therefore cannot refer only to some informal or unofficial service.”²³ Additionally, Acts 6:3 parallels 1 Timothy 3:8-9 (see Figure 1 below).

Another consideration pertains to the use of the Greek phrase *katastesomen epi ho chreia* in verse 3 (KJV: “appoint over this business;” NASB: “put in charge of this task;” Wycliffe Bible: “ordain on this work;” Young’s Literal: “set over this work”). Some lexicons indicate that *katastesomen* implies assigning to a position of authority (BDAG) or putting in charge (Thayer).

The RPCNA has spoken definitively that Acts 6 pertains to the ordination of the first deacons. The Constitution of the RPCNA cites Acts 6 twice in reference to the diaconate (RP Testimony 25:11; Directory for Church Government 3.III.A.2). When considering the biblical basis for the diaconate, the Synod of 1964 concluded:

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:1061 (4.3.9). See also Calvin’s Commentary on Acts. John Calvin, *The Commentaries of M. John Calvin Upon the Actes of the Apostles*, vol. 18., Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 234-236.

²¹ See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 586; Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, 66.

²² Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 587. See also Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, 68-69.

²³ George Winston and Dora Winston, *Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women: An Exegetical Response to Traditionalism and Feminism* (Np: Xulon Press, 2003), 453.

Another truth shown by this passage in Acts 6:1-6 is that the deacons were ordained. The people elected them, brought them before the apostles, and they were ordained with prayer and the laying on of hands. Here we have grounds for the election and ordination of deacons.²⁴

Category	Acts 6:3	1 Timothy 3:8-9
Behavior	Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation,	Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money,
Faith	full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;	holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience.

Figure 1: Parallel between Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:8-9

It is noteworthy that all of the first ordained deacons were men. In fact, the apostles required as much “by using the word *andras*—the plural masculine for adult males (not the generic plural of *anthropos*—which can be used for men and women). Surely, if ever there were an occasion that called for women to serve as deacons (in order to minister to needy women), it was this. But the express command here is for males to lead in this diaconal service.”²⁵ By ordaining Greek men, the Levitical/diaconal office expanded from Jews to Gentiles, but the requirement to be men gives definitive indication that it had not been expanded to women. Thus, Acts 6 is an unambiguous text with regard to the requirement that the diaconate consist of men only. In fact, it is the primary text pertaining to women and the diaconate on its own merit and because 1 Tim. 3:11 and Rom. 16:1-2 are fraught with ambiguities, as demonstrated below.

1 Timothy 3:11

⁸ Deacons (*diakonoi*) likewise (*hosautos*) must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons (*diakonoi*) if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹ Their wives (*gynaikas*) likewise (*hosautos*) must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons (*diakonoi*) each be the husband of one wife (*mias gynaikas andres*), managing their children and their own households well. ¹³ For those who serve well as deacons (*diakonoi*) gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 3:8-13, ESV)

1 Timothy 3:11 is one of the two verses in the New Testament used to potentially present a positive case for either female deacons or ordained deaconesses. According to Peter DeJong, it is “the chief text on which women would be allowed to assume the office of deacon ... And if this were a completely unambiguous text, the issue could be settled once for all.”²⁶ The problem

²⁴ Minutes of the One Hundred Thirty Fifth Synod of the RPCNA (Wapello, Iowa: Louisa Publishing Co., 1964), 53.

²⁵ Duncan, “The Case for Our Current Policy on Female Deacons.”

²⁶ Peter Y. DeJong, “Women as Deaconesses? A Response,” in NAPARC Conference on Office (Pittsburgh: n.p., 1977), 3.

is that the verse is fraught with ambiguity.²⁷ Alexander Strauch believes that there are at least three possible interpretations of Paul's referent in this verse: "(1) women who are deacons, (2) women who assist deacons, or (3) wives who assist their deacon husbands."²⁸ To this list, Doriani adds (4) deaconesses,²⁹ and Hurley adds (5) wives of the elders and deacons and (6) women in general.³⁰ On top of these six possible interpretations, there are three critical interpretive issues: the use of the adverb "likewise," the placement of verse 11, and the significance of Paul's choice of the term *gynaikas*, each of which will be considered below.

The Adverb "Likewise"

There is undoubtedly a grammatical parallel between verses 8 and 11. After addressing elders beginning in verse 2, Paul transitions to deacons with the words, "*deacons likewise must be dignified*" (v. 8). Then, in verse 11, he says, "*women likewise must be dignified*."

Most commentators agree that the term *hosautos* (i.e., "likewise") in verses 8 and 11 provides a link between the qualifications of elders (vv. 1-7), deacons (vv. 8-10), and *gynaikas* (v. 11). People on all sides of the debate assert that the verbal parallel "introduces a fresh category of people and compares them with the preceding group."³¹ Given that this group is found in the midst of qualifications of male deacons, and that the four qualifications given are parallel to those found in verses 8-9,³² some assert that they "are closely associated with deacons."³³ However, because these *gynaikas* are set apart by the term "likewise" and have their own list of qualifications somewhat parallel to the deacons, it is likely that these women are not part of the general order of deacons along with men.³⁴

Could the *gynaikas* then represent a third ordained office parallel to the office of male deacon (i.e., ordained deaconess)? Ironically, pressing the verbal parallel idea too hard is somewhat problematic due to its *lack* of parallel. If Paul's ambition was to present a group that is truly parallel to the others in view, then, since the other two offices are named, one would have to assume that the title of the third group of officers listed is "women" not "deaconesses."³⁵ If this is not the case, then their designation is not truly parallel to elders and deacons. Furthermore, the verbal parallel does not imply a categorical parallel. Paul used the Greek word *hosautos* four times in 1 Timothy (2:9; 3:8; 3:11; 5:25) and twice in Titus (2:3, 6). In every case, he simply used the term to identity continuity by drawing attention to conceptual similarity with what was previously addressed. It does not imply or necessitate a parallel between that which comes before and after. Beyond the Greek structure of the passage, Hurley offers three reasons

²⁷ D. S. Faris writes, "The passage of 1 Tim. 3:11, I call circumstantial evidence, because it admits a very grave doubt, as able expositors take different sides ... the proof is by no means conclusive." D. S. Faris, "The Female Deacon. Animadversions on the Argument of Synod's Committee," 139.

²⁸ Alexander Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon: The Church's Minister of Mercy* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1992), 114.

²⁹ Dan Doriani, *Women and Ministry: What the Bible Teaches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 181-182.

³⁰ James Hurley, "The Office of Deacon: Women Deacons?" in NAPARC Conference on Office (Pittsburgh: n.p., 1977), no page number.

³¹ Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon*, 121.

³² Parallels include: (1) "men of dignity" (v. 8) and "dignified" (v. 11); (2) "not double-tongued" (v. 8) and "not malicious gossips" (v. 11); (3) "not ... addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain" (v. 8) and "temperate" (v. 11); (4) "holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience" (v. 9) and "faithful in all things" (v. 11).

³³ Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon*, 113.

³⁴ Doriani, *Women and Ministry*, 181.

³⁵ There would be no better place to use a technical than in the description of the office and its qualifications, yet the word is conspicuously absent.

to believe the text is *not* suggesting a third office. First, there is no mention of a third office elsewhere in Scripture. In fact, Philippians 1:1 definitively limits the ordained offices to elder and deacon. Hurley notes that widows are mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:9-10 but argues that they are not parallel to elders and deacons. Second, he observes that Phoebe is called a *diakonos*, which would seem to contradict a third office. Third, the address to *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3 is in the midst of the section addressing deacons.³⁶

The Placement of Verse 11

Situated within a section on church officers, the placement of the text dismisses the view that it pertains to women in general. Given that Paul regularly inserts parenthetical statements, it is possible that he did so in 3:11 to address the wives of both deacons and elders (Calvin's position). However, the parallel between the qualifications of the *gynaikas* and the male deacons makes this position less plausible.

According to Christian Adjemian, "The very fact that Paul teaches about 'women' in the middle of the passage in which he teaches about deacons is itself an indication that the apostle has one office of deacon – male and female – in mind."³⁷ To the contrary, fellow female deacon advocate B. B. Warfield asserts: "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."³⁸ In fact, Paul clearly excludes women deacons in the very next verse – "Those with whom the [*gynaikas*] are compared and from whom they are distinguished are designated [*diakonoī*] in v. 8 and again in v. 12 and are assumed to be men ... The 'women' are, therefore, distinguished from the deacons."³⁹ If this was not the case, and the phrase "the husband of one wife" (v. 12) could be understood to mean "the wife of one husband" then the same logic could be applied to verse 2 to argue for women elders.⁴⁰ Of course, one would also be left to wonder – if indeed Paul is presenting one office of deacon containing both males and females – why he would present two different sets of virtues. A singular office would have a singular set of qualifications. To the contrary, Robert Strimple offers the following argument:

In vv. 8-10 Paul sets forth the requirements that apply to deacons in general, whether men or women. Since he then wishes to accent matters which apply to men deacons only (v. 12, that they be husbands of only one wife and that they direct their children and their households well), he first emphasizes that the qualifications he has mentioned (vv. 8,9) apply to women deacons as well as to the men.⁴¹

³⁶ Hurley, "The Office of Deacon: Women Deacons?," no page number.

³⁷ Adjemian, "On Women Deacons," 16.

³⁸ Warfield, "Presbyterian Deaconesses:" 283. Warfield's reference is to ordained female deacons.

³⁹ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 170.

⁴⁰ Paul demonstrated that there is no need to assume that "husband of one wife" could be applied to women, because he explicitly used the "wife of one husband" in 1 Timothy 5:9. See Figure 4 below.

⁴¹ "Report of the Minority of the Committee on Women in Church Office," *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1988), 362. See also Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 233.

Although Strimple's argument is intriguing, it has several weaknesses. First, if Paul wanted his reader to clearly see this sort of structure, he could have easily referred to "women deacons" in verse 11 and "male deacons" or even "men" in verse 12 rather than contrasting "women" (v. 11) with "deacons" (v. 12). Second, verse 12 applies an additional command specifically to men, but verse 11 does not say anything specific to women that has not already been stated in verses 8-10 (see Figures 2 and 3 below). This repeat/parallel in language would sooner lead one to believe that the "women" of verse 11 are distinct from the deacons of verses 8-10, 12-13 and conclude it to be unlikely that Paul is referring to women deacons.

It is also unlikely that he was referring an office of ordained deaconess, because "If Paul truly meant to refer to a third office, it would seem that he would have done so after he finished his section on deacons."⁴² It would be odd to introduce an office in one verse (v. 11) and continue on with the prior office in the next verse (v. 12). Due to the structure and flow, inserting it in the middle of the deacon section would detract from the office. Additionally, it would be the only place in Scripture where such scant attention is paid to an office over the church of God, having a fraction of the requirements for elders and deacons with no reference to their husbands, children, or many of the other matters listed for elders and deacons.⁴³

William Hendriksen concludes, "The simplest explanation ... 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."⁴⁴

Strauch opts for an even simpler solution: "If Paul is referring to female deacons or women who help deacons, we'd expect him to list additional and unique requirements, such as 'wife of one man' or having obedient children. (See 1 Timothy 5:9,10). Instead, he adds nothing new. If these women are wives, nothing new needs to be added."⁴⁵ In this line of thinking, the character of their "wives" (3:11) may be an illustration of the fruit of a home that is managed well (3:12). Even more, the qualification of marital faithfulness is absent from verse 11, because it would be redundant with verse 12 otherwise. This argument is by no means a "slam dunk," though, because it would be somewhat unnatural for Paul to illustrate his point about management in the home *before* making his point. Adjemian notes, "if Paul were singling out deacons' wives, it would have been more in keeping with his purpose for him to reverse the order of verses 11 and 12 ... Reversing the order ... would have created a much clearer statement. The ambiguity of verse 11 would be resolved."⁴⁶

It is important to remember that the verse is found in the greater context of a section of the letter comprised of 2:1 – 3:16 of which the fundamental focus is how people are to conduct themselves in the church (3:15). In this section, Paul gives clear instruction that women are not permitted to teach or exercise authority over men in the church (2:12). Immediately following this command are the qualifications for elders (3:1-7) and deacons (3:8-13) then the controlling statement of the section (3:15). So the qualifications for both elders and deacons are sandwiched between the bookends of 2:12 and 3:15. Within this overall structure, both elders and deacons

⁴² "Report of the Committee to Respond to Communication #01-3: Namely, the Report of the Study Committee of the Great Lakes/Gulf Presbytery of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America To examine the Question of the Ordination of Women Deacons," *Minutes of the One Hundred Seventy First Synod of the RPCNA* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2002), 118.

⁴³ Compare to Figures 2 and 3 below.

⁴⁴ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1957), 133.

⁴⁵ Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon*, 123.

⁴⁶ Adjemian, "On Women Deacons," 6.

are commanded to manage their households well (vv. 4, 12), and clear connection is made between leadership/authority in the home and leadership/authority in the church (v. 5). Thus, the OPC study committee on women in church office concluded:

Certainly the sphere of ministry assigned to each is different, nonetheless there is a parallel between the authority of the eldership and that of the diaconate ... What in effect is the topic sentence for the entire section (2:1-3:16) is found in 3:15: “how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household.” The location of this paragraph sentence, occurring immediately after the qualifications for deacons, confirms that the family-church analogy, as that analogy involves the exclusion of women from special office, still controls the argument to that point. The exercise of authority over men prohibited to women in 2:11, apparently, includes the office of deacon as well as that of overseer. Nothing in this section of the text offsets these ... observations, unless we insist, without adequate warrant as we have seen, that 3:11 by itself demands a reference to women deacons.⁴⁷

The Term *gynaikas*

The third ambiguity regards Paul’s choice of the term *gynaikas*, which may be properly translated as either “women” or “wives.”⁴⁸ Although the use of the term appears to be ambiguous in 3:11, its meaning is obvious the eight other times Paul used it in 1 Timothy.⁴⁹

If Paul had been more specific with this one word, all debating and contemplation would cease. The Winstons speculate that Paul stayed away from a more specific designation in order to not “give the impression that there is some kind of separate, exclusively female office in the church, distinct from the others.”⁵⁰ Adjemian argues that “he calls them ‘women’ to distinguish male from female deacons,”⁵¹ but why do they need to be distinguished if they are in the same office? Furthermore, why wouldn’t he write “women deacons” or “women who serve as deacons?”⁵² Duncan observes, “this passage provides Paul with the perfect opportunity ... to employ a technical term for ‘female deacon’ or ‘deaconess,’ and he doesn’t do it. Instead he uses the generic ‘women’ or ‘wives’ even though the context is loaded with technical terms for elders, deacons, and widows.”⁵³ Could it be that Paul’s use of *gynaikas* indicates their lack of a specific title? Of course, even if Paul were referring to diaconal assistants or helpers, he could have easily used more precise language.

On the other hand, there is a chance that he actually did use precise language – if the proper translation of *gynaikas* is indeed “wives.” Strauch contends that “In all three cases [vv. 2, 8, 11], Paul plainly identifies who he is referring to: overseers, deacons, and wives.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, the same exact word is unambiguously translated “wives” twice in the immediate

⁴⁷ “Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 333-334.

⁴⁸ The word can, and is, translated both ways in Scripture, depending on context. For example, the word is properly translated as “women” in 1 Timothy 2:9 and “wives” in Ephesians 5:25.

⁴⁹ It is rightly translated as “woman/women” in 2:9, 2:10, 2:11, 2:12, and 2:14 and as “wife/wives” in 3:2, 3:12, and 5:9. Given the pattern of usage throughout the epistle, it could be argued that Paul transitioned from using the general term “woman/women” in chapter 2 to the more specific term “wife/wives” in chapter 3 and following.

⁵⁰ Winston and Winston, *Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women*, 455.

⁵¹ Adjemian, “On Women Deacons,” 8.

⁵² For example, Paul could have used *diakonoι* with the feminine article: *tas diakonous*. See Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon*, 116-117.

⁵³ Duncan, “The Case for Our Current Policy on Female Deacons.”

⁵⁴ Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon*, 121.

context. Knight writes, “Here it seems likely that the term [*gyne*] is used in v. 11 in the same way that it is used in the immediately following verse, and as it was used in the preceding occurrence in v. 2, i.e., as ‘wife.’”⁵⁵ This argument is further bolstered by the fact that Paul lists qualifications that mirror those of the deacons but does not mention marital status. It is also noteworthy that some of the oldest Protestant translations rendered it as “wives,” including the Tyndale New Testament (1534), Bishop’s New Testament (1595), Geneva Bible (1599), and King James Version (1611).⁵⁶

Some disagree that Paul is referring to wives, because “he used no pronoun to refer to them. He doesn’t say *their* wives or *their* women. Also, since there are no comments about the wives of elders, why would there be any comments about the wives of deacons?”⁵⁷ Yet, it perfectly consistent with Paul’s style,⁵⁸ and verse 11a follows in parallel structure with verse 8a.⁵⁹ Why would Paul mention the wives of deacons and not the wives of elders? One cannot be absolutely certain that he is speaking of the wives of the *deacons* only. This assumption is typically made, because the statement is found right in the middle of the section addressing deacons. However, it is clearly parenthetical, regardless of where it is placed. Given this, it is possible that Paul here inserts a statement pertaining to the wives of both the deacons *and* the elders that ties back to his other parenthetical statement in the section to elders (v. 5), which is also generally applicable to both offices.⁶⁰ If verse 11 does not apply to the wives of both elders and deacons then there is no specific mention of the godliness of officers’ wives; there is explicit mention of children apart from managing the house (vv. 4, 5, 12) but no mention of wives. Yet, as Calvin points out in his commentary, the wives are to be a positive help to their husbands: “*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 behavior excel that of others.”⁶¹ Despite all of this, it is nevertheless not unreasonable to assume that Paul would include requirements for the wives of deacons but not the wives of elders due to the nature of the office. Tim Keller explains: “the deacons’ wives were being screened with selection criteria because they were going to be appointed to do diaconal work in the congregation alongside their husbands, while the elders’ wives were not sharing in the husbands’ work of discipline and oversight.”⁶²

⁵⁵ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 171. See also Doriani, *Women and Ministry*, 182.

⁵⁶ Calvin understood them to be the wives of the elders and deacons.

⁵⁷ MacArthur, *The Master’s Plan for the Church*, 239.

⁵⁸ He does not always use the possessive (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:10b).

⁵⁹ “*diakonos hosautos semnous* [likewise, deacons must be dignified]” (v. 8a) vs. “*gynaikas hosautos semnas* [likewise, women/wives must be dignified]” (v. 11a).

⁶⁰ The majority of English translations include parenthesis around verse 5 (e.g., NASB, KJV, NKJV, YLT). In this case, it may be understood that Paul included two parenthetical statements that apply to both offices – one in the midst of the requirements for elders (v. 5) and the other in the midst of the requirements for deacons (v. 11). Both parenthetical statements pertain to the orderliness of officers’ families.

⁶¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, tr. William Pringle, vol. 21., Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 87.

⁶² Tim Keller, “The Case for Commissioning (Not Ordaining) Deaconesses,” *byFaith*, August 25, 2008, <http://byfaithonline.com/the-case-for-commissioning-not-ordaining-deaconesses/> (accessed September 28, 2022).

1 Timothy 5:9-10

⁹ Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband (*enos andros gyne*), ¹⁰ and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. ¹¹ But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry ¹² and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. ¹³ Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. ¹⁴ So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. ¹⁵ For some have already strayed after Satan. (1 Timothy 5:9-15, ESV)

Many people fail to consider the possibility that the apostle Paul's ambiguous reference to *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 may be further explained in the same letter. Paul speaks of widows in 1 Timothy 5:3-16. Who are these women? John Stott believes Paul speaks of two categories of widows in this passage – widows to be supported (5:3-8) and widows to be registered (5:9-16). Said another way, the verses may distinguish those identified for the church to serve (5:3-8) from those identified to serve the church (5:9-16). Stott writes:

Coming to 1 Timothy 5, we notice at once that the section on widows appears to be divided into two paragraphs, each of which is introduced by a different main verb ... ('honour' and 'register'), but also by the different conditions for admission into the two groups. In the first case it is destitution and godliness, while in the second it is a combination of seniority, married faithfulness and a reputation for good works.⁶³

Hendriksen agrees.⁶⁴ These women did not hold an office in the church but were “*to be put on the list*” (5:9) to serve in an official capacity. Calvin spoke of deaconesses “who had devoted themselves to the care of the poor and sick. Of this sort were the widows whom Paul mentions to Timothy [1 Timothy 5:9-10].”⁶⁵ Adjemian concedes that “this is a common assumption among commentators (even Calvin)”⁶⁶ but argues that there is no indication of this being the case. Ryken, like Stott, Hendriksen, and Calvin, notices that “[The widows] seem to have had some special ministry in the church.”⁶⁷ Along their line of thinking, Schwertley asserts that the “qualifications given in verses 9 and 10 clearly point in the direction of service.”⁶⁸ That Paul refers to widows devoted to a life of service in the church seems evident on the basis of the qualifications listed. These qualifications go beyond that of standard church membership.⁶⁹

⁶³ John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 129.

⁶⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*, 172.

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:1061 (4.3.9). Note that Calvin used the term “deaconesses” here as another title for non-ordained widows.

⁶⁶ Adjemian, “On Women Deacons,” 9.

⁶⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 208.

⁶⁸ Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, 119.

⁶⁹ For example, it is unlikely that the church would refuse to care for a legitimately needy widow who is currently a church member in good standing but had not previously “*assisted those in distress*” (v. 10). However, it may be the case that the character qualities listed in 5:9-15 are not qualifications for a particular service/function in the church. Perhaps they are ideals for believers in general and serve as a general description of what it means to be

Additionally, the “*previous pledge*” mentioned in verse 12 likely refers to the covenant they made to remain single for the purpose of devoting the remainder of their lives to service in the church. This type of pledge would not be required for a widow to simply receive care.

Even though the order of widow-servants did not comprise a church office, Paul enumerated specific qualifications for them to be placed on the list. Given that these are the only other qualifications in the letter, and that they are specifically directed to women, it is plausible that Paul, in 3:11, parenthetically addresses these widows as a precursor for what he expands on in chapter 5. Nevertheless, some contend that “nothing in the context of 1 Timothy provides support for linking ‘the women’ of chapter 3 with ‘the widows’ of chapter 5.”⁷⁰ Others see the evidence as inconclusive.⁷¹ Yet, because the requirements for widows given in 5:9-10 follow a similar pattern to those of elders and deacons and complement those of the *gynaikas* in 3:11, “Some have thought that the widows referred to in 1 Timothy 5:3-10 may be synonymous with deaconesses”⁷² and that the women of 3:11 are to be identified with the widows of 5:9-10.

The plausibility of the relationship is strengthened by the fact that the qualifications in 3:11, in combination with those listed in 5:9-15, parallel those of the elders and deacons in six key categories: (1) above reproach; (2) faithful in marriage; (3) self-controlled; (4) dignified; (5) faithful at home; (6) tested and approved (see Figure 2 below). Even more, 3:11 only parallels the qualifications for elders and deacons in two of the six key categories (i.e., dignified and self-controlled), and 5:9-15 parallels them in five of the six (i.e., all but dignified). When combined, however, these two passages complement each other, providing what the other is missing.

There is another key factor which ties them together and is unique to their category – the specification of faithfulness (Greek: *pistos*). In 3:11, Paul writes, “*Women must likewise be...faithful in all things.*” Then, in 5:10, he elaborates on what this means: “*having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints’ feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work.*” This relationship provides a unique connection between the two passages (see the gray shading in Figure 3 below).

A last significant point of connection between 3:11 and 5:9-15 is the explicit mention of marital fidelity. When examining the qualifications for elders and deacons, marital fidelity is universally accepted as one of the key and defining qualifications. In both descriptions, the same Greek phrase is used (3:2, 12). This phrase, often translated “*husband of one wife*,” is literally rendered “one woman man” or “one wife husband.” Given the prominence of this requirement, one would expect to see a parallel in 3:11 but does not find one. However, in 5:9, an exact verbal parallel is found in Greek and English: “*wife of one husband*,” literally “one man woman” or “one husband wife” (see Figure 4 below).

a member in good standing in the church. After all, Titus 2:2-3 gives similar standards for older men (2:2) and older women (2:3).

⁷⁰ Aime Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, tr. K. D. Whitehead (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986), 24.

⁷¹ Hurley, “The Office of Deacon: Women Deacons?,” no page number.

⁷² Donald F. Thomas, *The Deacon in a Changing Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 111-112.

Category	Elders (3:2-7)	Deacons (3:8-10, 12)	Widows (3:11, 5:9-15)
Above Reproach	An overseer, then, must be above reproach ... (3:2)	These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach . (3:10)	having a reputation for good works; <i>and</i> if she has brought up children ... Therefore, I want younger <i>widows</i> to get married, bear children, keep house, <i>and</i> give the enemy no occasion for reproach ; (5:10, 14; cf. 5:7)
Faithful in Marriage	An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife ... (3:2)	Deacons must be husbands of only one wife ... (3:10)	A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man , (5:9)
Self-Controlled	An overseer, then, must be ... temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. (3:2-3)	Deacons likewise <i>must be</i> ... not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, (3:8)	Women <i>must</i> likewise <i>be</i> ... not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. (3:11) At the same time they also learn <i>to be</i> idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper <i>to mention</i> . (5:13)
Dignified	<i>He must be</i> one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (3:4)	Deacons likewise <i>must be</i> men of dignity ... (3:8)	Women <i>must</i> likewise <i>be</i> dignified ... (3:11)
Faithful at Home	<i>He must be</i> one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity ⁵ (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?) (3:4-5)	Deacons must be husbands of <i>only one</i> wife, <i>and</i> good managers of their children and their own households. (3:12)	having a reputation for good works; <i>and</i> if she has brought up children , if she has shown hospitality to strangers ... Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house (5:10, 14)
Tested	<i>and</i> not a new convert , so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. (3:6)	These men must also first be tested ; then let them serve as deacons (3:10)	A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old ... But refuse to put younger widows on the list , (5:9, 11)

Figure 2: Parallel requirements for elders, deacons, and widows

<p>1 Timothy 3:2-7 An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. ⁴ <i>He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity</i> ⁵ (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), ⁶ and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. ⁷ And he must have a good reputation with those outside <i>the church</i>, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.</p>	<p>1 Timothy 3:8-12 Deacons likewise <i>must be</i> men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, ⁹ <i>but</i> holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.</p> <hr/> <p>¹¹ Women <i>must</i> likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.</p> <hr/> <p>¹² Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.</p>	<p>1 Timothy 5:9-15 A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, ¹⁰ having a reputation for good works; <i>and</i> if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, <i>and</i> if she has devoted herself to every good work. ¹¹ But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, ¹² <i>thus</i> incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. ¹³ At the same time they also learn <i>to be</i> idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper <i>to mention.</i> ¹⁴ Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; ¹⁵ for some have already turned aside to follow Satan.</p>
---	---	--

Figure 3: Passages in parallel demonstrating corresponding qualifications

<p>1 Timothy 3:2 ... <i>mias gynaikas</i> <i>andra</i> ... One woman/wife man/husband</p>
<p>1 Timothy 3:12 ... <i>mias gynaikas</i> <i>andres</i> ... One woman/wife man/husband</p>
<p>1 Timothy 5:9 ... <i>enos andros</i> <i>gyne</i> ... One man/husband woman/wife</p>

Figure 4: Verbal parallels in qualification for marital fidelity

Romans 16:1-2

¹ I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a (*ousan*) servant (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae, ² that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help (*parastate*) her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron (*prostatis*) of many and of myself as well. (Romans 16:1-2, ESV)

According to B. B. Warfield (who advocated women deacons), Romans 16:1 is the singular verse in the entire Bible which speaks of women deacons, yet it is utterly ambiguous:

[We] find indication of the existence of women-deacons in the New Testament only in Romans xvi. I ... This is no doubt a narrow, not to say a precarious foundation on which to build much of an ecclesiastical structure. The term here employed [*diakonos*] is of very broad connotation; and Phebe might conceivably have been only a humble “servant” of the Cenchrean church, or indeed, for all that the term itself declares, only a Christian belonging to that church ... Nor is there any compelling reason apparent in the context, shutting us up to the technical sense of “deaconess.”⁷³

The Greek noun *diakonos*, which is masculine in form, can be either masculine or feminine. Its primary meaning is “servant.” Of the 28 other uses of this noun in the New Testament, it clearly means “servant” 25 times and deacon 3 times (only in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8, 12). Although at least nine people/groups are specifically named as servants,⁷⁴ no one in Scripture is specifically named as a deacon.⁷⁵ Additionally, no major English translation has historically translated *diakonos* as “deacon” in Romans 16:1 until the Revised Standard Version did so in 1952. Prior to the 21st century, very few translations did the same.⁷⁶ Others have historically translated it according to its primary meaning, “servant.”⁷⁷

What about the fact that Phoebe is not simply called a *diakonos* but a “*diakonos* of the church?” Some believe the “phrase [*diakonos* of the church which is at Cenchrea] has an official sound to it ... suggesting ecclesiastical office.”⁷⁸ Commentator C. E. B. Cranfield argued that it

⁷³ Benjamin B. Warfield, “Presbyterian Deaconesses,” *The Presbyterian Review* (1890): 283-284. Note that Warfield uses the term “deaconess” in reference to ordained female deacons who share in the singular diaconal office with males.

⁷⁴ Those named as “servants” include the disciples (Mark 9:35), waiters (John 2:5), rulers (Romans 13:4), Christ (Romans 15:8), Apollos (1 Corinthians 3:5), Satan’s servants (2 Corinthians 11:15), Paul (Ephesians 3:7), Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21), and Epaphras (Colossians 1:7).

⁷⁵ The seven men appointed to manage the distribution of food in the early church (Acts 6:1ff) are believed by many to have been the first ordained deacons. They are named in the text (v. 5) but are not specifically called “deacons” (although the cognate *diakoneo* is used in 6:2). Given that they were all *men* and the only two spoken of (i.e., Stephen and Philip) were miracle workers (6:8) and preachers (8:4-5), this passage is not helpful to the female deacon or deaconess positions.

⁷⁶ New Revised Standard, JB Phillips New Testament, Contemporary English Version.

⁷⁷ Some commentators have interpreted Romans 16:1-2 through the lens of Pliny the Younger’s letter to Emperor Trajan (Book 10, epistle 96). They claim to know that there were female deacons or deaconesses because of what Pliny said. However, the Latin *ministrae* is similar to *diakonos* in the Greek in that the semantic range is wide for both. Pliny also admits that he doesn’t know much about Christianity. Pliny the Younger should have no impact on the interpretation of the Bible. Biblical exegesis and the analogy of Scripture are sufficient for interpreting this and other passages (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:9).

⁷⁸ Winston and Winston, *Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women*, 456.

is conceivable that the reference is to Phoebe as a servant but believed that it is more natural to understand it as indicating a formal office.⁷⁹ The 1888 RPCNA Synod committee writes:

Now, we hold, that the word deacon is used here of Phoebe, not in its primary or ordinary sense, but in its appropriated sense of a church officer, because *she is spoken of in church relation*. Had it been “a servant of God, or a servant of the Lord,” it would have proved nothing as to her holding office, because these expressions are applicable to all who are of the household of faith. But we are not aware that “*servant of the church*” or any similar expression, is ever used of persons except in official positions.⁸⁰

Edmund Clowney argues, “The present participle of the verb ‘to be’ is regularly used to identify an office (Jn. 11:49; Acts 18:12; 24:10).”⁸¹ Robert Strimple offers the same three verses in his Minority Report and quotes the National Assembly of the Netherlands Reformed Churches study report, which asserted that such a participial phrase is “consistently used to identify the function someone has at a particular time, his or her performance of ‘office’.”⁸² On the surface, their argument appears to be a convincing one. However, the present participle of *eime* is even more frequently used to refer to someone who is part of a general population (Luke 13:16; 20:36; 23:7; John 4:9; 10:33; Acts 9:2; 24:24; Romans 1:7; 11:17; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 2:20; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 4:11). For example, Jesus refers to the woman in Luke 13:10-17 with the disabling spirit for eighteen years as one “who is (Greek: *ousan*) a daughter of Abraham” (v. 16). The grammatical construction is parallel to Paul’s reference to Phoebe as one “who is (Greek: *ousan*) a *diakonos* of the church.” Thus, Clowney’s and Strimple’s arguments prove too much by being needlessly narrow and ignoring many significant parallels.⁸³

Because the exact phrase “*diakonos* of the church” is found nowhere else in Scripture, it is important to cross-reference as much other scriptural data as possible to let the clear shed light on the unclear. The closest similarity in the New Testament is found in Colossians 1:24-25, where Paul speaks of “the church, of which I became a *diakonos*.” Here, Paul states that he was a *diakonos* of the church, and he clearly was not an ordained deacon. The OPC study committee on women in church office concluded:

But there is nothing in the passage that demands an official sense. Nor is there anything - in either the syntax or the reference to Phoebe as *prostasis* - that makes it unnatural to take *diakonos* here in the less specific, nonofficial sense it has elsewhere in the New Testament ... the passing, ambiguous reference to Phoebe as *diakonos* in Romans 16:1 must give way to that more substantial New Testament teaching that women are not to serve in the office of deacon.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 2:781.

⁸⁰ James Kennedy and T. P. Stevenson, “Women and the Deacon's Office,” *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* 26, no. 11 (1888): 387-388.

⁸¹ Clowney, *The Church*, 232.

⁸² “Report of the Minority of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 358-359.

⁸³ One of the three passages they cited was Acts 24:10, where Paul speaks of Felix who was a judge over the nation. However, only 14 verses later, we read of Felix's wife Drusilla “who was Jewish” (v. 24). In the first instance, the *eime* present participle refers to someone in a formal office; in the second, it refers to someone who is part of a general population.

⁸⁴ “Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 332, 334.

The word *prostatis* in verse 2 has a range of meanings.⁸⁵ It is possible that the term implies that Phoebe was a “patron” or “benefactor,” a woman of wealth and social influence who has shown hospitality and helped those in need, but not necessarily as an ordained deacon.⁸⁶ Some have taken it to indicate rule and authority, as of a presiding officer.⁸⁷ However, given the use of the word *diakonos* in the context, as well as the cognate verb *parastate* (that you ... help her), it is more likely meant to convey help/service. In the context, if Phoebe was an authority or presiding officer, then she would have had authority and presided over Paul (“she has been a *prostatis* of many and of myself as well,” v. 2),⁸⁸ and Paul would be commanding the church in Rome to preside over her (*parastate* her in whatever she may need from you,” v. 2).

Furthermore, it is dangerous to draw hasty conclusions from a narrative description of Paul’s brief comments about his friends. For instance, a few verses after mentioning Phoebe, Paul writes, “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me” (Romans 16:7). Some would allege that Junia, a woman, was an Apostle. Just as we would never dare to take such a brief mention and make it into a doctrine, we must be extremely cautious about doing the same with the brief mention of Phoebe here, given the lack of scriptural precedent and explicit instruction to do so.

In the final analysis, even the 2002 RPCNA synod committee in defending ordained female deacons concluded, “Romans 16 is inconclusive on its own as to whether Phoebe was a woman deacon.”⁸⁹ Similarly, Hendriksen concludes that “no adequate reason has been given to prove that there the term used in the original does not have its far more usual meaning *servant*.”⁹⁰ Even if the phrase “*diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae” is taken to imply a recognized position of service in the church, there is no definitive reason why one ought to assume that Phoebe was an ordained female deacon, rather than a non-ordained diaconal assistant.⁹¹ John Murray notes, “there is neither need nor warrant to suppose that she occupied or exercised what amounted to an ecclesiastical office comparable to that of the diaconate ... there is no more warrant to posit an *office* than in the case of the widows who, prior to their becoming the charge of the church, must have borne the features mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:9, 10.”⁹² In fact, some, including Calvin believed that Phoebe belonged to the order of widows as described in 1 Timothy 5.⁹³ Being of the order or widows would have given her the freedom to serve alongside Paul. It is by no means clear or certain that Phoebe was an ordained deacon.

⁸⁵ Translated as “succourer” in the KJV, “patron” in the ESV, “helper” in the NKJV and NASB, “benefactor” in the NIV, and “leader” in the YLT.

⁸⁶ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 2:227.

⁸⁷ Kennedy and Stevenson, “Women and the Deacon's Office,” 388.

⁸⁸ See “Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 337.

⁸⁹ “Report of the Committee to Respond to Communication #01-3,” *Minutes of the One Hundred Seventy First Synod of the RPCNA*, 117.

⁹⁰ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*, 133.

⁹¹ D. S. Faris writes, “Phoebe’s relation to the church at Cenchrea proves that a woman did deacons’s work, but it does not prove that she was set apart by ordination vows.” D. S. Faris, “The Female Deacon. Animadversions on the Argument of Synod’s Committee,” 139.

⁹² Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2:226.

⁹³ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, tr. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1960), 321. See also Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, 99.

Synthesis of Scriptural Testimony

It is clear from the Old Testament redemptive historical context that there is continuity between Levites and deacons. In fact, Reformed hermeneutics demands continuity except where otherwise noted. While there are changes in duties and an expansion to the Gentiles, there exists no indication that the office has opened to women. The two most unambiguous New Testament texts make it clear that there are only two offices, elder and deacon (Philippians 1:1) and that deacons are to be males only (Acts 6:1-6). It is not at all certain that Paul in Romans 16 is calling Phoebe a deacon or that he is referring to women deacons or deaconesses in 1 Timothy 3:11. Furthermore, correspondences between 1 Timothy 3 and 5, together with the possibility of Phoebe belonging to the order of widows, as Calvin asserts, makes both the women deacons and deaconess positions far from an open and shut case. Following the hermeneutical principle that the clear (i.e., Acts 6) should interpret the unclear (e.g., Romans 16 and 1 Timothy 3), combined with the Regulative Principle that positive and unambiguous prescription is required, especially in the case of a monumental historical change, leads to a strong biblical preference toward the non-ordained diaconal assistant position.⁹⁴

By way of comparison, changes of significance in the New Covenant receive substantial and meaningful attention in the New Testament.⁹⁵ Imagine, for example what sort of New Testament evidence would be necessary to ordain women as teaching or ruling elders. What would the Word of God have had to say to convince and compel us of such an idea? It would have had to radically reshape the pattern established from creation to show that a woman could hold a regular office in the Church. For this reason, the arguments that the RPCNA has made in support of female deacons must be deemed insufficient. There are only two verses to support the case, and as seen above, neither provide clear and substantial support. Even the 2002 RPCNA Synod Report on Female Deacons, while defending the current denominational position, stated that “1 Timothy 3:11 is the clearest and most decisive text for the question of women deacons.” Shortly thereafter, they used the word “seems” 10 times and “may” 5 times (a total of 15 indecisive assertions in slightly over 3 pages) in their section dealing with 1 Timothy 3:11.⁹⁶ They then capped off the section with a less-than-confident conclusion that “the exegetical considerations are balanced among the various views ... Nevertheless, overall, it seems to us that the balance comes to rest in favor of women participating in the work of the diaconate by ordination.”⁹⁷

Ordination ought to be considered with the utmost seriousness and reverence. Given the lack of support for, combined with the strength of evidence against ordaining women, it is a more conscientious and biblically faithful practice to refrain from the ordination of female

⁹⁴ See “Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 313.

⁹⁵ For example: Gentile inclusion in the church (Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 10:12; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 3:1-9); baptism replacing circumcision (Colossians 2:11-12; Galatians 3:27-29); the Lord’s Supper replacing the Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7-8; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Gospel accounts of the Last Supper); no need for priests, but ministers (Hebrews 7:26-28; 9:24-28; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Romans 12:7); no more sacrifices or ceremonial law (Acts 15; Hebrews 9:24-28; 10:12-14); the Saints are now the Temple (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21); the Promised Land is Heaven (John 14:2-4; 2 Corinthians 5:1-2; Ephesians 2:6; Philippians 3:20; Colossians 1:5; Hebrews 10:32-34; 11:16; 12:22-25; 1 Peter 1:3-5; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 3:12; 21:3).

⁹⁶ “Report of the Committee to Respond to Communication #01-3,” *Minutes of the One Hundred Seventy First Synod of the RPCNA*, 117-120.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

deacons. Women were never ordained to a regular office throughout redemptive history. The Regulative Principle requires that a *substantive positive case* be made to ordain women deacons in the New Covenant Church. Since the positive case for explicit change cannot be confidently made, women ought not to be ordained.

THE TESTIMONY OF CHURCH HISTORY

The continuity between the Old and New Covenants has been considered, as well as the testimony of the New Testament itself. As demonstrated above, women never held a regular ecclesiastical office in the OT, and no explicit and clear NT command exists to indicate a change in the structure of the offices. The only two verses that potentially speak to the matter of women deacons (1 Timothy 3:11 and Romans 16:1) are both sufficiently ambiguous.

Although the focus of redemptive history on the clear teaching of the Old and New Testaments is authoritative and sufficient, it is helpful to also consider and learn from further eras of redemptive history, three of which are briefly examined below: patristic, reformation, and modern church history. In doing so, the following questions must be considered with regard to those historically referred to as “women deacons” or “deaconesses:”

1. Were they ordained?
2. What scripture passage or passages formed the basis of their role? 1 Timothy 3 or 1 Timothy 5? For example, were there age limits? Did they only work with women? Were they the order of widows?
3. Were they peers with the deacons? Were they regarded as being in the same office?

Patristic History

There are some indicators in patristic history that the diaconate was restricted to men. One of these indicators is found in *the Didache*, which is one of the earliest preserved writings after the completion of the New Testament. Although its exact date is unknown, some believe that it “may have been put into its present form as late as 150, though a date considerably closer to the end of the first century seems more probable. The materials from which it was composed reflect the state of the church at an even earlier time.”⁹⁸ In chapter 15 of *the Didache*, we find the following command: “There appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are humble ...”⁹⁹ The Greek word for men here is *andras*,¹⁰⁰ the exact same word as is used in Acts 6:3. This is the earliest Patristic mention of the sex of deacons, and it proves two things: (1) The author was using Acts 6:3 as a proof-text for deacons;¹⁰¹ and (2) Deacons were

⁹⁸ “The Didache” in Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 337.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 367.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 366.

¹⁰¹ Many other overt references to the establishment of the diaconate in Acts 6 exist in the patristic writings. For example, see Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926), 1:434, 3:650, 5:115, 5:366; Philip Schaff, ed., *The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers Collection* (London, England: Catholic Way Publishing, 2014), 14:95. In the western church, Ambrosiaster rebuked the Montanists for using 1 Timothy 3:11 to assert that women ought to be ordained as deaconesses and defended a male-only diaconate on the basis of Acts 6. Ambrosiaster, *Commentaries on Galatians—Philemon*, ed. Timothy Oden and Gerald Bray, Ancient Christian Texts (Westmont, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 128.

understood to be male. Another indicator is found in the letter of Ignatius of Antioch to Polycarp and in Polycarp's letter to the Philippians, where they state that the members of the church should be submissive/obedient to the presbyters and deacons as to God and Christ.¹⁰²

Although the views of the early church are somewhat clear-cut, patristic history, in general, is a bit challenging with respect to women and the diaconate. Some claim that the patristic fathers believed in women deacons or deaconesses, but it is imperative to properly understand how they actually defined and implemented the role of what they referred to as "deaconess." Doing so is not completely straightforward. Warfield writes, "He who tries to thread his way among the conflicting notices of 'virgins' and 'widows' and 'deaconesses' which the earliest fathers have preserved for us, will find himself much among the thorns."¹⁰³

In 1986, Aime Georges Martimort wrote one of the most detailed, comprehensive historical studies of deaconesses. He explains that many in the early church defined the title of deaconess on the basis of 1 Timothy 5:9-10 due to the "unresolved difficulties of 1 Tim 3:11."¹⁰⁴ For this reason, deaconesses were required "to be no less than sixty years of age and the wife of only one husband."¹⁰⁵ This body of diaconal widows stretches back to the writings of Ignatius, Polycarp, and Tertullian.¹⁰⁶ Anthony Cowley adds that these widows were not ordained.¹⁰⁷ Later, at the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), "these deaconesses are considered laity."¹⁰⁸ Two hundred years later, the Second Council of Orleans (533 A.D.) made reference to 'widows who are called deaconesses.'¹⁰⁹ The ministry of these lay "deaconesses" only appeared in the third century "in a limited number of churches"¹¹⁰ in the east and none in the west until the sixth century.¹¹¹ Martimort points out that "during all the time when the institution of deaconesses was a living institution, both the discipline and the liturgy of the churches insisted upon a very clear distinction between deacons and deaconesses."¹¹² This differentiation can be seen in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (c. 380 A.D.), which depicts deaconesses as being subordinate to the

¹⁰² "The Letter of Ignatius to Polycarp" in Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 267; "The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians" in Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 287. Similarly, Tertullian refers to deacons as "persons in authority." Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, eds., *Ante-Nicean Fathers*, 4:122. Cyprian speaks of both presbyters and deacons ruling the members of Christ. Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, eds., *Ante-Nicean Fathers*, 5:283.

¹⁰³ Warfield, "Presbyterian Deaconesses:" 284.

¹⁰⁴ Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 23.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Stott, *Guard the Truth*, 132-133; Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*, 173. Clement of Alexandria refers to widows as "chosen persons" who receive commands, along with presbyters, bishops, and deacons. Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe, eds., *Ante-Nicean Fathers*, 2:294. Without mention of deaconesses, Tertullian specifically refers widows as an order and mentions them in the same context as bishops, presbyters, and deacons. Ibid., 4:67. Hippolytus of Rome, in the early third century, stated that the diaconate was not open to women as was the order of widows, which was not an ordained office. Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 30-31.

¹⁰⁷ Anthony A. Cowley, "Women Deacons: The Record of the Early Church," *Cornerstones*, September/October 1989, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 8. See Canon 19 of the Council of Nicaea. Schaff, ed., *The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers Collection*, 14:58. Seventy-one years later in 396 A.D., the Council of Nîmes, in canon 2, strongly protested the ordination of women into the diaconate and proclaimed that it should be undone. "Canons of the Synod of Nîmes," tr. John Wijngaards, <https://www.womendeacons.org/minwest-canons-of-nimes/> (accessed September 24, 2022). Canon 26 of the Council of Orange (411 A.D.) declared, "In no way whatsoever should deaconesses ever be ordained." Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 193.

¹⁰⁹ See Thomas, *The Deacon in a Changing Church*, 112.

¹¹⁰ Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 24-25.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 187. Augustine mentioned virgins and widows but never deaconesses per Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 192.

¹¹² Ibid., 247.

deacons and exercising authority over women only.¹¹³ The title of deaconess “died out in the Eastern Church by the eighth century even though the title continued to be given to certain nuns.”¹¹⁴

All in all, there is no indication from the early church accounts (prior to 300 A.D.) that a woman was ever ordained to the diaconate or that a third *ordained* office of deaconess existed. Although there is mention of virgins and widows, there is no mention of ordained deaconesses. Deacons were always male, were viewed as leaders in the early church, and had some level of authority while being subordinate to the bishops and presbyters. The virgins and widows were not ordained.

Beyond the early church period, the east and west, though united, had different practices. The east had sometimes in some places ordained deaconesses as well as subdeacons, lectors, and singers.¹¹⁵ Those referred to as “deaconesses” were distinct from the deacons¹¹⁶ and subordinate to them, being appointed to aid and assist women.¹¹⁷ They were sometimes separate from and sometimes identified as widows, often with a minimum age limit.¹¹⁸ Given the fact that the Latin translation of the New Testament used a different word to describe Phoebe (*in ministerio*) than what is found in Philippians 1:1 (*diaconis*) and 1 Timothy 3: 8, 12 (*diaconos, diacones*), it is not a surprise that the Western Church did not have deaconesses or female deacons. In fact, they vehemently denied the ordination of deaconesses through the middle of the sixth century. After this point, the historical information gets spotty until the Reformation era.¹¹⁹ In the east, the lack of adult female converts to baptize essentially erased the position of deaconess. Women who wanted to dedicate their lives to God were absorbed into monasticism. The mention of the term deaconess after the sixth century is rare and vague.

A study of the history shows with certainty that there were no deaconesses who were peers of the deacons in the pre-Reformation Church. Ordaining females into the diaconate with males is a relatively recent innovation that did not exist in the historical records of the church. During the patristic era, deaconesses received definition from 1 Timothy 5 rather than Acts 6, 1 Timothy 3, or Romans 16.¹²⁰ Deaconesses were in a distinct and different office/order from deacons, were most often not ordained, ministered to women only, and were subject to the deacons.

¹¹³ Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, 8:3:28, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.ix.ix.iii.html> (accessed September 28, 2022); See also Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, 27.

¹¹⁴ Thomas, *The Deacon in a Changing Church*, 113.

¹¹⁵ See, for example, the preface and chapters 3, 15, and 16 of *Didascalia Apostolorum* in Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac* (London, England: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1903), 1, 17, 75, 78; see also Enactments of Justinian, Novel 3, Chapter 1 in S. P. Scott, “The Code of Justinian: Book 1,” https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Anglica/CJ1_Scott.htm (accessed September 24, 2022), Title 3.9.

¹¹⁶ Martimort summarizes, “However solemn may have been the ritual by which she was initiated into her ministry, however much it may have resembled the ritual for the ordination of a deacon, the conclusion nevertheless must be that a deaconess in the Byzantine rite was in no wise a female deacon. She exercised a totally different ministry from that of the deacons.” Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 156.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Epiphanius’s Panarion 79.3.6 in *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, tr. Frank Williams, Books II and III. De Fide, 2nd ed. (Leiden, The Netherlands: BRILL, 2012), 639-640.

¹¹⁸ See, for example, the requirement for deaconesses to be either widows or virgins in Enactments of Justinian, Novel 6, Chapter VI. S. P. Scott, “The Novels of Justinian: Novel 6,” https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Anglica/N6_Scott.htm (accessed September 24, 2022) Section 6.

¹¹⁹ See Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 197-240.

¹²⁰ One manifestation of this was an age requirement.

Reformation History

The Reformation was a time of renewal and realignment to Scripture. Warfield notes, “The Scriptural form and the Scriptural offices of the church were re-established at the Reformation; but no attempt was made then to revive this woman’s office [i.e., women deacons].”¹²¹ Although women were not ordained with men as deacons, some men, such as Calvin, “established an order of commissioned (not ordained) women who did diaconal work.”¹²² In fact, Calvin equated deaconesses to widows. In 4.13.18 of the *Institutes*, he writes extensively about the widows of 1 Timothy 5, “who were received into public ministry.”¹²³ He proceeds in the next article to write, “But how is it lawful to apply this passage of Paul [1 Timothy 5] to nuns? For deaconesses were created ... to discharge the public ministry of the church toward the poor ... 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].”¹²⁴ Thus, for Calvin, as for the early church, the function of “deaconess” was founded upon 1 Timothy 5:9-10, not Acts 6:1-6.¹²⁵

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.”¹²⁶ The matter was brought to the Synod of Middleburg in 1581 and it was decided that the church should not have deaconesses except in emergency situations, such as plagues.¹²⁷ During the brief time that these Reformation churches ordained deaconesses, the office was understood to be distinct from the office of deacon, and the church quickly had second thoughts, which led them to cease the practice.¹²⁸

It has been argued that none of the Westminster Assembly of divines believed in ordaining women as deacons¹²⁹ and that early Presbyterians, including George Gillespie and Samuel Rutherford, commonly held to the view that 1 Timothy 5:9-10 describes widows set apart for service in the church.¹³⁰ In his *Notes of Debates and Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines and Other Commissioners at Westminster*, George Gillespie records, “That widows,

¹²¹ Warfield, “Presbyterian Deaconesses,” 286. Martin Luther, for example, understood Acts 6 to be the institution of the diaconate. See Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” http://uploads.worldlibrary.net/uploads/pdf/20110830030704babylonian_captivity.pdf (accessed September 25, 2022), 67-68.

¹²² Keller, “The Case for Commissioning (Not Ordaining) Deaconesses.”

¹²³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:1273 (4.13.18). It is important to recognize that Calvin was not asserting that those in the order of widows were ordained female deacons or ordained deaconesses. Though Calvin was willing to use women as non-ordained assistants to the deacons, to aid in the personal ministry to those who were sick or otherwise troubled, he left the management of that ministry to the deacons. He did not put women in a role that was even remotely authoritative. See *Ibid.*, 2:1061 (4.3.9).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:1274 (4.13.19).

¹²⁵ See “Communication #01-3: Report of the Study Committee of the Great Lakes/Gulf Presbytery of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America To examine the Question of the Ordination of Women Deacons,” *Minutes of the One Hundred Seventieth Synod of the RPCNA* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2001), 271.

¹²⁶ “Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 341.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, 36-37.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

which we read of 1 Tim. v. 3, and elsewhere, are included under the name deacons.”¹³¹ The Assembly debated this proposition regarding servant-widows and approved it by one vote. However, during editing, the reference to widows was removed. At the end of the day, they relied on Acts 6:1-4, 1 Timothy 3:8-15, and 5:3 to conclude that deacons are male and consider the propriety of servant-widows. They decided against Romans 16:1-2 as a proof text.¹³²

The beliefs of John Knox and others can be discerned from the First and Second Books of Discipline of the Scottish church. The Second Book of Discipline lists four ordinary officers in the church: pastor/minister/bishop, doctor, presbyter/elder, and deacon. No mention of deaconess is made. Willson notes that this was the case from the beginning: “The first reformed congregation in Scotland, was organized in Edinburgh in the year 1556, or 7, by the election and ordination of elders and deacons.”¹³³ Willson goes on to point out that in the Rotterdam congregation “deacons sat in consistory with the ministers and elders;”¹³⁴ In describing the work of the deacons, he explains that “The pastors, elders, and deacons, in the Scottish church met together. Discipline was managed by the pastor and elders alone, – the other affairs by the joint action of all.”¹³⁵

Modern History

Although it was foreign in times past, there is a “small, but growing trend ... to assign to the deaconesses the same functions as the deacons in all of their duties.”¹³⁶ Thirteen conservative, confessional American denominations which find their roots in the Zwinglian/Calvinist (a.k.a. “Reformed”) branch of the Reformation, have joined the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC). Of them, “only the RPCNA historically ordained women to any office.”¹³⁷

When RPCNA pastor James M. Willson wrote his book on deacons in 1869, he did not see the need to make even a single mention of female deacons or deaconesses. Why? Because the debate on this topic did not begin in the RPCNA until the 1880s.¹³⁸ During this time, “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

¹³¹ George Gillespie, *Notes of Debates and Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines and Other Commissioners at Westminster, Feb. 1644 to Jan. 1645*, ed. David Meek (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1846), 5.

¹³² Wayne R. Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity in Religion: The Influence of the Scottish Commissioners upon the Ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 120-121.

¹³³ Willson, *The Deacon*, 11.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 47. Note that the Belgic Confession (1561) states that deacons, along with pastors and elders “make up the council of the church” and “faithful men” are to be chosen as officers of the church (Article 30).

¹³⁵ Ibid., 49.

¹³⁶ Thomas, *The Deacon in a Changing Church*, 114.

¹³⁷ Anthony A. Cowley, “Women Deacons: In the Reformed Presbyterian Church,” *Cornerstones*, March/April 1989, 6; “Communication #01-3,” *Minutes of the One Hundred Seventieth Synod of the RPCNA*, 258-259, 262. Note that the ARP began allowing females to be ordained as deacons much later in 1969. Historically, the RPCNA has continued to confidently uphold distinctive convictions growing out of a biblical understanding of the mediatorial kingship of Christ and the purity of worship. It is possible that the impact of our witness against unbiblical worship practices is, to some degree, undermined by our willingness to ordain female deacons without positive scriptural warrant and that our NAPARC brothers would give us a better hearing on matters such as a cappella psalmody if our ordination of female deacons ended.

¹³⁸ Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, 1.

(RPCNA).¹³⁹ Schwertley asks, “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.”¹⁴⁰ He notes that the debate over women deacons began shortly after the rise of “Christian Feminism.”¹⁴¹ It is likely that cultural factors influenced the exegesis and application of Scripture.¹⁴² In the June 1889 edition of the *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter*, Thomas Wylie wrote, “Why stop, when in Christ Jesus there is neither ... ‘male nor female,’ ... 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 ... I have seen some women in the pulpit, and could not raise any valid objection ...”¹⁴³ Cultural influence is certainly a temptation that is faced in every day and age.

Theodor Fliedner was a Lutheran Pastor in the state Church of Prussia.¹⁴⁴ He set up a series of charitable efforts using single women that he called “deaconesses.” Since they were not part of a congregation but were more of a parachurch organization, they weren’t truly deaconesses. Their second “mother house” was built in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1849. Did it have an impact on the RPCNA? Perhaps, but there is no record of it influencing the appointment of the first female deacon in the McKeesport congregation in the 1880’s.

The RPCNA’s move to officially ordaining women as deacons occurred at the Synod of 1888 under less-than-ideal circumstances.¹⁴⁵ The discussion was prompted by the fact that a woman had already been elected as a deacon. Instead of correcting or even disciplining the session under which the unconstitutional election occurred, the synod committee concluded that “such ordination is in our judgment in harmony with the New Testament and with the constitution of the Apostolic church.”¹⁴⁶ The Synod voted strongly in favor of the ordination of women to the diaconate but never sent this change to the law and order of the church down in overture. As a result, it was never properly declared to be adopted by the church. Something similar occurred a century later, when Synod acted to correct an error from 58 years prior: “The Synod determined in 1997 that the ‘Queries for Ordination and Installation’ had never been sent down in overture and were not therefore a part of the Constitution. It was deemed this situation needed immediate correction so the Queries were subsequently sent down in overture ...”¹⁴⁷

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 1.

¹⁴² Joe Smith, “The Wonderful Advance: An Examination of the Cultural Influence upon the Decision to Ordain Women Deacons in the RPCNA” (paper presented for Reformed Presbyterian History class at RPTS, April 16, 2022).

¹⁴³ Thomas Wylie, “Ordination of a Female-Deacon,” *The Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* (June 1889): 194.

¹⁴⁴ Much of this paragraph is taken from Jeannine E. Olson, *One Ministry Many Roles: Deacons and Deaconesses through the Centuries* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 201-234.

¹⁴⁵ See the appendix for a more detailed account of the Synod and debate that followed.

¹⁴⁶ “Minutes of the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. Session LIX,” *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* 26, no. 7-8 (1888): 287. The actions of the Synod of 1888 were radical in that they added women to an office they had never occupied in recorded church history (i.e., into the ordained office of the deacon alongside men). As detailed above, at various points in history, the church recognized deaconesses. The office/order was always distinct from the deacons and subject to them and was most often not an ordained office. It was often patterned after the order widows, as described in 1 Timothy 5.

¹⁴⁷ The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2021), I-4. The queries were adopted by a simple majority at the 1939 Synod. See “Report

ORDINATION AND AUTHORITY

One of the pressing questions related to the issue at hand is the nature of ordination. Does ordination itself confer authority or is authority dependent on the role of the office? Christian Adjemian argues that “ordination is not the granting of authority to exercise authority. Rightly understood, ordination is setting someone apart and granting that person the authority to exercise a particular office.”¹⁴⁸ George and Dora Winston, who also advocate women deacons, disagree. They rhetorically ask, “What would be the point of their being elected (Acts 6:2-3, 5) and ordained by prayer and laying on of hands (Acts 6:3, 6) if they were not leaders? Does such a thing as a non-authoritative church office exist?”¹⁴⁹ The Great Lakes/Gulf Presbytery of the RPCNA explained that this authority, which is bound up in the concept of ordination itself, is traceable to the Old Testament and represents mediation between the authority who ordains (i.e., God) and the people being served by the office-bearer:

A survey of the Old Testament material involving ordination, office and authority yields the following conclusions: 1. Office is conferred by a higher authority. 2. The one upon whom office is conferred is ordained, or set apart by that higher authority. 3 Those ordained to office by a higher authority are regarded as mediators between the authority who ordained them and the people, in regard to whatever pertains to their specific office. 4. As mediators, those ordained to office by a higher authority stand in the place of that authority before the people, representing him in whatever pertains to their specific office. 5. This mediatorial function of office reflects the ultimate authority of Christ, who is the Head over all things. 6. The concept of ordination to office which does not involve the exercise of authority, finds no support in the Old Testament Scriptures. 7. Because of the representation of the Headship of Christ inherent within ecclesiastical office, these offices were properly reserved to male members of the covenant community ... There is simply no Biblical support for the view that ordination somehow grants the authority to exercise office, while excluding the authority to exercise authority.¹⁵⁰

The question of diaconal authority is pertinent, especially if authority is assumed to be bound up in the particular office rather than with ordination itself. Do deacons, who are servants, really exercise authority? Cowley, who supports women deacons, concedes that “the office of deacon does involve an oversight and authoritative function.”¹⁵¹ The RPCNA synod committee in 2002 agreed that deacons have administrative authority to carry out their responsibilities.¹⁵²

of the Judicial Committee re: communication 97-4,” *Minutes of the One Hundred Sixty-Seventh Synod of the RPCNA* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 1997), 89-90.

¹⁴⁸ Adjemian, “On Women Deacons,” 13-14.

¹⁴⁹ Winston and Winston, *Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women*, 460.

¹⁵⁰ “Communication #01-3,” *Minutes of the One Hundred Seventieth Synod of the RPCNA*, 265-266, 268.

These points align with “Informatory Vindication” of the Covenanters in which “our faithful forefathers emphatically declare that the authority of officers in the church comes down from Christ through ordination.” D. S. Faris, “The Female Deacon. Animadversions on the Argument of Synod's Committee,” 140.

¹⁵¹ Anthony A. Cowley, “Women Deacons: The Record of the Early Church,” 9.

¹⁵² “Report of the Committee to Respond to Communication #01-3,” *Minutes of the One Hundred Seventy First Synod of the RPCNA*, 115-116. See also “Report of the Minority of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 369.

More than merely serving and administrating, the deacons lead, direct, and manage the mercy ministry of the church, as well as make decisions that affect the church.¹⁵³ As noted above, Acts 6:3 may indicate that the deacons' ordination implied being assigned a level of authority.¹⁵⁴ The Belgic Confession and Books of Discipline of the Scottish Church indicated that deacons sat on the council/consistory with the pastors and elders and participated in decision-making. The Directory of Church Government of the RPCNA also calls for the deacons to be a sounding board for the elders.¹⁵⁵

Stott believes that deacons also have a teaching function: "But the requirement of verse 9 [of 1 Timothy 3], that the deacons have a strong and steadfast grasp of the revealed faith, suggests that they were expected to teach it."¹⁵⁶ Although this at first may seem like an overstatement, it is feasible to see some level of teaching connected to the responsibilities of deacons. For example, the Directory of Church Government of the RPCNA includes duties such as "training the congregation in the use of the members' gifts in the ministry of mercy"¹⁵⁷ and "teaching principles of giving."¹⁵⁸

Perhaps one of the clearest passages in Scripture pertaining to teaching and authority is found in 1 Timothy 2:11-12, where the Lord clearly forbids women to teach or exercise authority over men in the context of the church (1 Timothy 2:11-12). As seen in the previous two paragraphs, there is some degree of both teaching and authority associated with the office of deacon. Although Strimple sees the authority of the office as a "delegated authority" from the elders,¹⁵⁹ R. B. Kuiper rightly understands the deacon's authority as coming from Christ: "Deacons represent Christ in His office of mercy ... There is a measure of authority bound up with this office. By Christ's authority the deacons are to remind the members of the church of their duty to help the needy. And in Christ's name the deacons are to give aid to those who need it."¹⁶⁰ Deacons possess moral authority as a result of being elected to the office by the congregation. They are officers of the Church who, along with the elders, have taken vows to uphold the Constitution. When they train and teach the congregation, members should respectfully and carefully consider what they say, and if it agrees with the Scriptures, heed what is said. Given this authority granted to the deacons, admission of women to the office places the church at great risk of violating the clear scriptural injunction of 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

¹⁵³ See Directory of Church Government 3.III.B.3-4 in *The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*, D-23.

¹⁵⁴ See comments on the use of the Greek phrase *katastesomen epi ho chreia* on page 4. Additionally, the word *bathmos* in 1 Timothy 3:13 can imply rank and authority. The Winstons argue that "Standing, position, rank, station, or precedence is an integral part of formal, authoritative church leadership." Winston and Winston, *Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women*, 460.

¹⁵⁵ See Directory of Church Government 3.III.B.2 in *The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*, D-23. One of the duties listed is, "Meeting jointly with the session periodically for prayer, evaluation and growth in their *respective* ministries" (emphasis added).

¹⁵⁶ Stott, *Guard the Truth*, 100.

¹⁵⁷ Directory of Church Government 3.III.B.3.c in *The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*, D-23.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 3.III.B.4.g.

¹⁵⁹ "Report of the Minority of the Committee on Women in Church Office," *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 370.

¹⁶⁰ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 154. Richard Gaffin similarly concluded, "Nothing here even suggests that the authority of the deacon, unlike that of the minister or elder, is *delegated* authority; rather, deacons, equally with ministers and elders, have their authority to minister from Christ." "Women Deacons? Focusing the Issue," *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 353.

CONCLUSION

The topic of women and the diaconate is a debatable, yet highly important issue. In contemporary Reformed and Evangelical thought, there are four main positions: (1) women as ordained deacons alongside men; (2) women as ordained deaconesses parallel to male deacons; (3) women / wives / widows as non-ordained diaconal assistants/helpers; (4) women serving apart from ordination, office, or order. After examining Scripture, church history, and the nature of ordination and authority, several conclusions may be made. Before doing so, it is helpful to rehearse the difficulties and challenges involved.

Due to the degree of ambiguity, the subject of women and the diaconate is not as unified and straightforward as one might hope; there are only a few relevant New Testament texts. Unfortunately, differences in language, time, and culture have made it difficult to definitively interpret some of these key texts. DeJong writes, “What may have been perfectly clear and patent to Paul’s first readers does not appear to be so for us today.”¹⁶¹ Furthermore, church history does not provide a clear-cut, unified approach: “The Christians of antiquity did not have a single, fixed idea of what deaconesses were supposed to be.”¹⁶²

The Cumulative Case

Since some degree of ambiguity is found in Scripture and church history, one cannot be rigidly dogmatic about any of the four positions. All four are possible interpretations. However, the cumulative weight of evidence differentiates between positions that are merely possible versus those which are plausible. See Figure 5 below.

Figure 5 contains a compilation of the most substantive arguments enumerated throughout the paper. Less weighty assertions are not included.¹⁶³ The seventeen arguments are each marked as either favorable (**green**), neutral (**yellow**), or unfavorable (**red**) for each of the four main positions. Favorable indicates that the argument supports the position, unfavorable that it refutes/contradicts the position, and neutral that it is not applicable to the particular position under consideration. For example, Paul’s mention of a list or order of widows with qualifications for service in the church (1 Timothy 5:9-10) supports the non-ordained diaconal assistant position, refutes/contradicts the position which assumes no recognized role for women, and neither supports nor refutes the possibility that Scripture may allow for female deacons or ordained deaconesses.

Figure 5 visually demonstrates the improbability/implausibility of the female deacon position. It is unfavorable in ten of the fourteen applicable biblical categories, and the only two categories which support the position also support the non-ordained diaconal assistant position. Furthermore, it is unfavorable in all four historical categories and both ordination/authority categories. Due to the fact that the only two verses that potentially speak to the matter of women deacons are both sufficiently ambiguous and there is a substantial weight of evidence against the position, it is not advisable to ordain women to the diaconate.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ DeJong, “Women as Deaconesses? A Response,” 3.

¹⁶² Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 241.

¹⁶³ For example, the argument that Paul did not use the possessive when referring to the *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 is not substantive, because Paul did not always use the possessive (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:10b).

¹⁶⁴ D. S. Faris argues the following concerning the 1888 Synod committee and their conclusion that women ought to be ordained as deacons: “The effort is great but the proof is small. The proof is in the inverse ratio to the effort.” D. S. Faris, “The Female Deacon. Animadversions on the Argument of Synod’s Committee,” 137. See also footnote #198.

Substantive Argument	Ordained Female Deacon	Ordained Deaconess	Non- ordained Diaconal Assistant	No Official Role
OT Redemptive-Historical Context → No women in regular ecclesiastical office in OT; correspondence between OT Levites and NT deacons	UNFAV	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT
Acts 6:1-6; Philippians 1:1 → Only two ordained offices in view. No third ordained office mentioned.	NEUT	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT
Acts 6:1-6 → Explicit command to appoint males (Greek: <i>andras</i>) as ordained deacons	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT	NEUT
Acts 6:1-6 → the Greek phrase <i>katastesomen epi ho chreia</i> implies authority	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT	NEUT
1 Timothy 3:11 → High degree of ambiguity in the text. Six possible interpretations.	UNFAV	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT
1 Timothy 3:11 → The adverb “likewise” introduces a new group, different from the elders and deacons, with its own qualifications, similar, but not completely parallel, to those of the deacons.	UNFAV	FAV	FAV	UNFAV
1 Timothy 3:11 → The verse is placed in the midst of the section on officers and sub-section on deacons.	FAV	UNFAV	FAV	UNFAV
1 Timothy 3:11 → The group is called <i>gynaikas</i> instead of a more official or precise technical term	UNFAV	UNFAV	FAV	UNFAV
1 Timothy 3:11 → Paul excludes women from the diaconate in the next verse (1 Timothy 3:12)	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT	NEUT
1 Timothy 3:11 → Greater context of 2:1-3:16 creates parallel between the authority of elders and deacons	UNFAV	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT
1 Timothy 5:9-10 → Paul mentions a list or order of widows with qualifications for service in the church	NEUT	NEUT	FAV	UNFAV
1 Timothy 5:9-10 → Parallel requirements to elders and deacons, in combination with 3:11	UNFAV	UNFAV	FAV	UNFAV
Romans 16:1 → High degree of ambiguity in the text. <i>Diakonos</i> is primarily used generically in the NT.	UNFAV	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT
Romans 16:1 → Phoebe is referred to as a <i>diakonos</i>	FAV	UNFAV	FAV	NEUT
Patristic History → No women deacons; deaconesses subordinate to deacons and not ordained; correspondence between deaconesses and widows	UNFAV	UNFAV	FAV	UNFAV
Reformation History → No women deacons or ordained deaconesses; correspondence between deaconesses and widows	UNFAV	UNFAV	FAV	UNFAV
Reformation History → Deacons in consistory with elders in Scottish church and Belgic Confession	UNFAV	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT
Modern History → No female deacons until 1888, shortly after the rise of “Christian Feminism.” No deaconesses in modern history.	UNFAV	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT
Ordination/ Authority → Ordination in the OT represents mediation between God and man	UNFAV	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT
Ordination/ Authority → Authority is bound up in the office of deacon due to representation of Christ; diaconate includes teaching and training	UNFAV	NEUT	NEUT	NEUT
Total Favorable	2	1	8	0
Total Neutral	2	5	12	13
Total Unfavorable	16	14	0	7

Figure 5: Comparison of the four main positions regarding women and the diaconate

Similarly, since there is even less positive support and because Scripture is abundantly clear that the Lord has established only two ordained New Covenant offices (i.e., elder and deacon), it is *not* advisable to ordain women to a third office of deaconess.

Likewise, the testimony of Scripture and history clearly refutes the idea that there is no role of service for women.

The only position that proves to be plausible, if not substantially probable, is the one which allows for women to serve as non-ordained diaconal assistants. In Figure 5 above, it is favorable in every applicable category. For the following five reasons, appointing women as non-ordained diaconal assistants is consistent with Scripture, history, and the nature of ordination and authority:

1. All regular religious offices in the Old Covenant were held by men. In all three divine institutions – family, church, and state – male headship has always been the rule. We have no clear indication in the New Covenant of any change to that rule.
2. The clearest passage of New Testament (Acts 6:1-6) teaches that only males were to be ordained as deacons, and the only two verses (1 Timothy 3:11 and Romans 16:1) that potentially form a positive case for female deacons are substantially ambiguous, leaving no strong positive case for female deacons.
3. That Phoebe was a servant of the church (Romans 16:1) combined with the record of exegesis and application of 1 Timothy 5:9-10 throughout church history points in the direction of women serving in roles that may be formally recognized but do not involve ordination or authority.
4. Church history has no examples – aside from Wesel, independents, and heretics – of women deacons that are peers of the male deacons until the nineteenth century.
5. The Synod of 1888 did not take due care in reaching its decision, nor did it send the decision to ordain females as deacons down in overture.

Whether or not these women should be called “deaconesses,” as in the early church, is insignificant as long as they are never viewed as ordained officers of the church and are clearly distinguished from, and subordinate to, the deacons.¹⁶⁵

Significance of Ordination

Unfortunately, some endorse the ordination of women deacons or deaconesses even though they lack the confidence that is truly necessary to support such a monumental change in the historical nature of ordination. After concluding that “the explicit evidence ... is inconclusive,”¹⁶⁶ Anthony Cowley voices his support for the ordination of female deacons: “But the whole record is spotty. The biblical record seems hard to read ... It would have been comforting to draw more dogmatic conclusions than I have. I believe that the evidence presented here favors the ordination of women as deacons.”¹⁶⁷ Similarly, the 2002 RPCNA committee, in response to a report against women deacons, notes, “the exegetical considerations are balanced among the various views ... Nevertheless, overall, it seems to us that the balance comes to rest in

¹⁶⁵ Schwertley notes, “The deaconesses in the early church had different qualifications (widows over sixty), different functions (primarily to women), different authority (they submitted to the male deacons) and a different office than the male deacons.” Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, 128-129. It is worth noting that by “office,” he is referring to a non-ordained rather than ordained appointment.

¹⁶⁶ Cowley, “Women Deacons: The Record of the Early Church,” 9.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 10.

favor of women participating in the work of the diaconate by ordination.”¹⁶⁸ However, as demonstrated above, the key considerations are less than balanced (see Figure 5). Warfield more accurately admits that “the Biblical warrant for it is of the slenderest” yet still concludes that “the office of deaconess is a Scriptural office.”¹⁶⁹ Not only is it true that the evidence is slender; it is also true that there is reasonable weight of evidence to the contrary.

DeJong touches on a key point in saying, “Scripture itself does not seem to give us clear-cut warrant [to ordain women to office]; something which I believe too many churches are doing too lightly and irresponsibly in our day.”¹⁷⁰ Ordination ought to be considered with the utmost seriousness and reverence. Given the lack of support for and strength of evidence against ordaining women, it is a more conservative and better practice to refrain from the ordination of female deacons or deaconesses. In fact, given that women were not ordained to a regular ecclesiastical office throughout redemptive history, the Regulative Principle requires that a *substantive positive case* be made to ordain women deacons or deaconesses in the New Covenant Church. Since the positive case cannot be confidently made, women ought not to be ordained.

By way of comparison, there are three clear references to evangelists in the New Testament (Acts 21:8; Ephesians 4:11; 2 Timothy 4:5), yet many agree that there is not enough of a basis for ordination to an office of evangelist in the church. Given that there are only two potential verses that support the female deacon / deaconess views, and both are significantly unclear, there is simply not enough of a Scriptural basis to substantiate the practice.

Moving Forward

Perhaps the most interesting fact pertaining to the topic of women and the diaconate is that, regardless of which of the four positions one finds to be most faithful to Scripture, everyone seems to agree that women ought to be involved in the ministry of mercy.¹⁷¹ Unfortunately, for this reason, some have minimized the importance of adopting the correct and most biblical position. For example, after skillfully advocating the non-ordained diaconal assistant view, Dan Doriani concludes, “Whatever view of 1 Timothy is correct, all four views agree that women should be involved in diaconal work. As long as we do not see deacons as authorities on a par with elders, there is little to quarrel over ... If we view deacons this way ... it matters little precisely how we label the women who work hard at diaconal ministry, as long as they stay involved.”¹⁷²

Although there is great benefit in recognizing agreement with regard to the type of work to be done, as has been demonstrated above, there is danger in minimizing the significance of ordination. After the decision to ordain women as deacons in 1888, T. P. Stevenson and James Kennedy noted that a late moderator of an RPCNA Synod applied the ideas of prejudice and the

¹⁶⁸ “Report of the Committee to Respond to Communication #01-3,” *Minutes of the One Hundred Seventy First Synod of the RPCNA*, 120.

¹⁶⁹ Warfield, “Presbyterian Deaconesses,” 283. By “deaconess” Warfield refers to women ordained into the office of deacon alongside men (the female deacon view).

¹⁷⁰ DeJong, “Women as Deaconesses? A Response,” 4.

¹⁷¹ See, for example, Proverbs 31:20 and Acts 9:39 for non-ordained women who exercised a ministry of mercy. In fact, all Christians are called to do the same (Acts 20:34-35; Job 31:16-22; Psalm 41:1; 112:9; Proverbs 19:17; 22:9; Ephesians 4:28; and Hebrews 13:16). Promoting a culture of service in our members aids love and unity in the church and builds a strong congregation. One need not be in an ordained office to make a big difference in Christ’s kingdom!

¹⁷² Doriani, *Women and Ministry*, 182-183.

equality of men and women to ordination,¹⁷³ as if God could not use women in the ministry of mercy and advance His cause through them unless they were ordained to office. As we have seen with women and the diaconate, the question is not whether women can or do have the giftedness for the ministry but whether God has given positive warrant for women to be ordained to the office of deacon.¹⁷⁴ Therefore, the importance of holding the most biblical position ought not to be minimized. At the same time, it is important to consider appropriate function within the biblical position. Ligon Duncan summarizes well:

There is no directive for the ordination of women to the diaconate in the New Testament, and no unambiguous witness to or example of women holding the office of deacon. That women assisted the deacons in their ministry is uncontested and incontestable, and is corroborated by patristic and reformation era testimony. So the real question we ought to be asking is not “Should we have ordained female deacons, or deaconesses?” but rather “What kind of deaconess, or female diaconal assistant, does the New Testament authorize and the best testimony of church history and historic Reformed polity confirm?”¹⁷⁵

Within the non-ordained diaconal position, there is room for discussion regarding what type of women ought to be non-ordained deaconesses (i.e., diaconal assistants). As has been seen, some believe that 1 Timothy 3:11 specifies that the wives of deacons be placed into this role. Others believe that 1 Timothy 5:9-10, by itself or in conjunction with 1 Timothy 3:11, indicates that those in the order of widows are to serve as the diaconal assistants / deaconesses. In fact, some additionally contend that Romans 16:1-2 is consistent with 1 Timothy 3:11 and 5:9-10: “All the indicators within Romans 16:1-2 support the interpretation that Phoebe was in the order of widows (cf. 1 Tim. 5:9ff.) ... Calvin explicitly says that Phoebe belonged to the order of widows.”¹⁷⁶ Schwertley concludes:

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? ... The New Testament gives clear qualifications for servant-widows (i.e., deaconesses) in 1 Timothy 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

¹⁷³ Smith, “The Wonderful Advance: An Examination of the Cultural Influence upon the Decision to Ordain Women Deacons in the RPCNA”, 8. D. S. Faris states that he agrees that “women performed services that some men were under ordination vows to render” but goes on to state that the “inference that they were ordained when they engaged in the work, is not sound. The same argument will bring women into the pulpit.” D. S. Faris, “The Female Deacon. Animadversions on the Argument of Synod's Committee,” 138. See also footnote #143.

¹⁷⁴ Stevenson and Kennedy turn the regulative principle on its head, asserting that “To a woman belong all corporate rights in the church, *unless specially excepted*” in Kennedy and Stevenson, “Women and the Deacon's Office,” 392. Strimple argues the same, claiming that “the full equality of the sexes before God would seem to require a *clear* Biblical prohibition if women are to be excluded from a particular role or office in the church” in “Report of the Minority of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 364. To the contrary, see the sections of this paper titled “Old Testament Redemptive-Historical Context” (pp. 2-3), “Synthesis of Scriptural Testimony” (pp. 16-17), and “Significance of Ordination” (pp. 28-29). See also “Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office,” *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 324-326.

¹⁷⁵ Duncan, “The Case for Our Current Policy on Female Deacons.”

¹⁷⁶ Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, 99. Cf. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, 321.

authorization. The simple fact is that having deaconesses in the church is biblical as long as the church defines deaconesses biblically.¹⁷⁷

Although appointing this type of non-ordained deaconesses may be argued biblically, it is by no means a simple matter to implement such a structure. Martimort argues:

For the fact is that the ancient institution of deaconess, even in its own time, was encumbered with not a few ambiguities, as we have seen. In my opinion, if the restoration of the institution of deaconesses were indeed to be sought after so many centuries, such a restoration itself could only be fraught with ambiguity. The real importance and efficaciousness of the role of women in the Church has always been vividly perceived ... as much more broad than the historical role that deaconesses in fact played. And perhaps a proposal based on an “archeological” institution might even obscure the fact that the call to serve the Church is urgently addressed today to *all* women.¹⁷⁸

Martimort’s concern is valid. Restoring this ancient non-ordained office of deaconess carries a real risk. However, Schwertley makes a good point in stating that there are “no passages in the New Testament that indicate that the college of widows was a temporary institution ... 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.”¹⁷⁹

At the end of the day, there are two important questions which must be addressed: (1) Which of the four positions is biblical? (2) How should the biblical position be implemented in the church today? The evidence suggests that, although all four positions are possible, the non-ordained diaconal assistant view is by far the most probable and plausible of the four. Thus, the church ought to work hard to determine how best to implement this view today.¹⁸⁰ We in the RPCNA, who having been ordaining women to the diaconate, ought to be especially careful to rethink the validity of our position, as well as the best course of action for transitioning from ordained women deacons to non-ordained diaconal assistants. This type of transition will no doubt require much care, along with diligent study and prayer. Nevertheless, it will be well worth the effort for the sake of the glory of God and the good of His people.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 155. Similar to footnote #165, he uses the term “office” here in reference to a non-ordained rather than ordained appointment.

¹⁷⁸ Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 250.

¹⁷⁹ Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, 128, 150.

¹⁸⁰ For example, 1 Timothy 5:9-10 requires those enlisted as servant-widows to be at least 60 years old. Consideration should be given to whether this requirement is a biblical non-negotiable or if it was culturally conditioned and may be adapted as the early church did when they set the age limit variously at 40 and 50. S. P. Scott, “The Code of Justinian: Book 1,” https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Anglica/CJ1_Scott.htm (accessed September 24, 2022), Title 3.9; “Chalcedon - Canons of the 451 Council,” https://earlychurchtexts.com/public/chalcedon_canons.htm (accessed September 26, 2022), Canon 15.

APPENDIX: 1888 RPCNA SYNOD AND AFTERMATH

Pretend for a moment that you are at the Synod of 1888 as a delegate. You're in Allegheny City, at that time a separate city north of downtown Pittsburgh, in present day Pittsburgh. It's a little before 5PM in the afternoon on June 5th on the last day of Synod. There's a huge docket in front of you, and like at many Synods, you're wondering how we are going to get all of this done. What remained on the docket?

1. Committee on Discipline with respect to the Pittsburgh Presbytery over the election of a female deacon at McKeesport in late 1887.
2. 5-7PM Recess for dinner
3. Approval of the Afternoon's minutes
4. Committee for Systematic Beneficence (3 items)
5. Committee on the Jury Question
6. Committee on Unfinished Business (2 items remaining)
7. Committee on Foreign Correspondence
8. Continuation of Committee on Discipline with respect to the Pittsburgh Presbytery
9. Committee on Discipline report as a whole (2 items)
10. A special resolution on dissenting from the US Constitution
11. Committee on Theological Seminary and Education (5 items)
12. Report of the Seminary Board
13. Report of Geneva College
14. Report of the Corporators
15. Committee on the Record of the Kansas Presbytery
16. Special Committee to consider the action of Synod in 1885
17. Another special resolution: on purity
18. Thanks
19. One (seemingly special) final motion passed limiting the reports of Standing Committees to 1200 words.
20. Sing Psalm 133A, Benediction, Adjournment at 10PM¹⁸¹

That's a big final agenda, including the surprises that will happen at points 10, 17, and 19. The discussion begins regarding what had happened at McKeesport where a woman had been elected deacon, and a complaint was filed with the Pittsburgh Presbytery, which does nothing but forwards it to Synod. The discussion runs into the order of the day at 5PM. As it says in the minutes: "The special order of the day, an item in the report of the Committee on Discipline relating to a reference from Pittsburgh Presbytery, was read. While a motion to postpone to next meeting of Synod was under discussion, the hour for adjournment arrived."¹⁸² It had originally been set as the order of the day for Monday afternoon, and then postponed to Tuesday morning as the second order of the day. The minutes do not record why it was not taken up in the morning, but rather late in the afternoon. Given the importance of the matter, it is not surprising that at least some people thought that it deserved more time and a more thorough analysis.

Under considerable time pressure, when the Committee Report was brought back, possibly in the 8 o'clock hour, the minutes read as follows:

¹⁸¹ "Minutes of the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. Session LIX," *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* 26, no. 7-8 (1888): 278-292.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 278.

The motion under discussion at the hour for recess was taken 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.

James Kennedy and T. P. Stevenson were appointed to prepare an argument on the question of ordaining a woman, and publish it in the magazines.¹⁸³

When dissents happened at Synod in that era, it was normal for Synod to appoint a committee to reason with the dissenters. And then at the end of the Committee report, the action of Synod reads as follows:

3. Pittsburgh Presbytery refers the question of the right of women to ordination to the office of Deacon from McKeesport congregation, to Synod.

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.¹⁸⁴

The Pittsburgh Presbytery did no work and passed the discipline matter on to Synod. The Synod disciplinary committee uses what would be a disciplinary action and amends the action to use it as an opportunity to change the Law and Order of the Church. Then, it did not get sent down in overture as a significant modification to the form of church government. There had been five overtures previously. It wasn't frequent, but it did happen, even for some matters less serious than female deacons. (Overtures became common after 1944.)

1843	Sending down in overture a renewal of the Covenants
1862	Amending the Book of Discipline to restrict appeals from Presbytery to Synod
1862	Repealing the law requiring the banns of marriage, but ministers must exercise caution before solemnizing marriages
1870	Approving the form of the Covenant of 1871, and sending it down in overture; rules on overture procedure
1883	Expanding the Testimony with an anti-alcohol section and sending this expansion down in overture
1925	Sending down in overture part of a new doctrinal portion of the Testimony; rewriting the historical portion; publishing all church standards in a single volume
1926	Sending down in overture more parts of a new doctrinal portion of the Testimony
1937	Sending down in overture new Terms of Communion and Covenant of Church Membership
1944	Urging delegates to study proposed new Book of Discipline, and lacking objections, sending the Book down in overture

Figure 6: History of Overtures through 1944

¹⁸³ Ibid., 286.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 287.

Why did it not go down in overture? It likely would have lost. At that time, the RPCNA had 116 teaching elders, 100 of which were at Synod, and 503 ruling elders of which 76 were at Synod. 23 of the 121 congregations had no representative at the Synod. There was a great sentimental overflow at the 1888 Synod for female deacons, leading to 93-24 victory. Note that 59 members of the assembly had left by that point, or did not vote, which was discouraged by the rules of Synod at that time. As Synod Rules of Order said: "Members ought always to vote except for valid reasons." That so many had left probably had an impact on the debate, due to the lateness of the hour, and continually putting an important matter to the back of a crowded agenda. No substantive scholarly cases were made for or against the question at the Synod. If they were to get away from the emotionalism and try to make biblical arguments among their own sessions, it likely would not pass.

D. S. Faris wrote a short article in the October 1888 Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter "The Female Deacon and the Sentimental Overflow of Synod." He had two main points: 1) The Synod rushed to judgment, and 2) It did not go down in overture.¹⁸⁵ Faris said that the word "overflow" came from Dr. Kennedy to describe what was happening at Synod. He added that the only substantive arguments came from Dr. Stevenson, talking about a few New Testament passages and allusions to the matter in the early Fathers. D. S. Faris said that no one could argue against the patristic argument.¹⁸⁶ No one was ready for it. Dr. Stevenson used his credentials as an expert to persuade the Synod on that count, because there is no case historically for deaconesses until the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and there is no significant case historically for female deacons as peers of the deacons at all until the nineteenth century. Faris said of Kennedy:

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 Acts 16:15.¹⁸⁷

Faris noted that Acts 6 did not come into the arguments of those favoring female deacons. He added:

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.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ D. S. Faris, "The Female Deacon and the Sentimental Overflow of Synod," *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* 26, no. 10 (1888): 357.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 358.

The original motion had been “That we find nothing in nature nor in the word of God, to prevent a woman from holding the deacon's office.”¹⁸⁹ After Faris objected, saying that a positive case had to be made, it was changed to: “That we find it is agreeable to nature and the word of God that a woman should be ordained to the office of deacon.”¹⁹⁰ Faris adds:

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.¹⁹¹

Kennedy and Stevens replied in the November 1888 Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter in the article, “Women and the Deacon's Office.”¹⁹² They use a lot of words to say little. They dismiss Acts 6 as a historical accident. They make the following statement regarding Rm 16:1: “And it is worthy of remark that almost all expositors, ancient and modern, with hardly any exceptions, are of the opinion that the passage here implies that the sister here certified, was in some position in the church in Cenchrea other than that of mere private membership.”¹⁹³ To the contrary, prior to the nineteenth century commentators rarely used Rm 16:1 to say Phoebe was a deacon. The Antiochan Fathers in the late fourth and early fifth centuries are an exception, and they were imitated by none after them. The early church frequently cited Acts 6 as the creation of deacons. Kennedy and Stevens also cite Pliny the Younger, and the current interpretation of 1Tim 3:11 that the RPCNA uses, shared by the Antiochan Fathers. They comment on the two “likewises.” They talk about the concept of ordination. Then they say: “And nothing is more historically certain than at the close of the apostolic age, women in office, and generally styled deaconesses, were to be found in all the churches.”¹⁹⁴ Again, their statement is patently false. There is no mention of deaconesses until the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. Those close to the apostolic era – the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, and Irenaeus never mention deaconesses. The common offices are mentioned; even virgins and widows occasionally receive mention – but no deaconesses. Perhaps if they had waited four years, they could have read J. B. Lightfoot's *Apostolic Fathers*,¹⁹⁵ and they would have seen they were incorrect.

D. B. Willson also replied in the November 1888 Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter in the article, “Should a Woman be Ordained a Deacon?”¹⁹⁶ This was a speech he delivered at the Seminary. It was a fluffy speech that appealed a lot to the idea of progress. Much of the speech used logic that could be applied equally well to female elders and pastors. His arguments proved too much, and as such were false. He eventually offers scant analysis of Rm 16:1 and

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 358-359.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Kennedy and Stevenson, “Women and the Deacon's Office,” 383.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 389.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 393.

¹⁹⁵ Joseph Barber Lightfoot and John Reginald Harmer, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987). Reprint of the original 1891 edition.

¹⁹⁶ D. B. Willson, “Should a Woman be Ordained a Deacon?” *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* 26, no. 11 (1888): 394.

1Tim 3:8-13. He brings up 1Tim 5:3-12 only to discard it. He mentions a commentator who says: “It is clear that in the Greek church of the second century, the female diaconate was a most active and useful ministry.”¹⁹⁷ As we have seen, there is simply no proof for this assertion.

Finally, D. S. Faris briefly replies to Kennedy and Stevenson in the May 1889 Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter in the article, “The Female Deacon – Animadversions on the Arguments of Synod’s Committee.” He says:

The committee have but two or three texts of Scripture which they rely on as ground for an inference, to sustain Synod's position. They must bear the burden of proof. If it is not sufficient, then the case fails. It is not necessary to say that they have no evidence, but that they have not enough—they have not the right kind. From the word of God they bring only circumstantial evidence. More is required, for they have to overcome a probability on the other side.¹⁹⁸

He then makes the argument that women were never admitted into regular religious offices under the Old Testament, pointing out that the New Testament offers no language indicating a change. He appeals to Acts 6, pointing out that only men were appointed. He appeals to creational differences between men and women and accepts the possibility that widows and elderly maidens may have done some diaconal work. He points out that it would be unlikely for Paul in 1 Tim 3 to shift from male deacons to female deacons and back to male deacons.¹⁹⁹ Highlighting one more thing Faris said:

The committee in their disposition belittle the significance of ordination. There was a doctrine of laying on of hands. Heb. 6:2. In other words, ordination is a matter of solemn import and not a mere ratification. The laying on of hands contains at least three things:

1. Consecration or setting apart to a certain work in the name of Christ.
2. Conferring the gifts of the Holy Ghost needed in doing that work.
3. A solemn vow on the part of the person to exercise these gifts as a life work.

The statement of the committee that election confers the office is all wrong. This will be new light to those familiar with the history of the persecuted Covenanters. In the “Informatory Vindication,” our faithful forefathers emphatically declare that the authority of officers in the church comes down from Christ through ordination.²⁰⁰

And that is where the debate ended.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 405.

¹⁹⁸ D. S. Faris, “The Female Deacon. Animadversions on the Argument of Synod's Committee,” 137.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 139.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 140.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adjemian, Christian. "On Women Deacons." Cambridge, MA: First Reformed Presbyterian Church, 2008. http://www.reformedprescambridge.com/articles/women_deacons.pdf (accessed September 28, 2022).
- Ambrosiaster. *Commentaries on Galatians—Philemon*. Edited by Timothy Oden and Gerald Bray. Ancient Christian Texts. Westmont, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009.
- Berkhof, Louis. *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1950.
- _____. *Systematic Theology*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005.
- Brown, Michael, ed. *Called to Serve: Essays for Elders and Deacons*. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2007.
- Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*. Translated by William Pringle. Vol. 21. Calvin's Commentaries. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003.
- _____. *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*. Edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance. Translated by Ross Mackenzie. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1960.
- _____. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006.
- _____. *The Commentaries of M. John Calvin Upon the Actes of the Apostles*. Vol. 18. Calvin's Commentaries. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003.
- "Canons of the Synod of Nîmes." Translated by John Wijngaards. <https://www.womendeacons.org/minwest-canons-of-nimes/> (accessed September 24, 2022).
- "Chalcedon - Canons of the 451 Council." https://earlychurchtexts.com/public/chalcedon_canons.htm (accessed September 26, 2022).
- Clowney, Edmund P. *The Church*. Edited by Gerald Bray. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995.

“Communication #01-3: Report of the Study Committee of the Great Lakes/Gulf Presbytery of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America To examine the Question of the Ordination of Women Deacons.” *Minutes of the One Hundred Seventieth Synod of the RPCNA*. Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2001, 258-273.

Constitutions of the Holy Apostles. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.toc.html> (accessed September 28, 2022).

Cowley, Anthony A. “Women Deacons: In the Reformed Presbyterian Church.” *Cornerstones*, March/April 1989.

_____. “Women Deacons: The Record of the Early Church.” *Cornerstones*, September/October 1989.

Cranfield, C. E. B. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986.

DeJong, Peter Y. “Women as Deaconesses? A Response.” In NAPARC Conference on Office. Pittsburgh: n.p., 1977.

Doriani, Dan. *Women and Ministry: What the Bible Teaches*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003.

Duncan, Ligon. “The Case for Our Current Policy on Female Deacons.” *byFaith*, August 25, 2008. <http://byfaithonline.com/the-case-for-our-current-policy-on-female-deacons/> (accessed September 28, 2022).

Faris, D. S. “The Female Deacon and the Sentimental Overflow of Synod.” *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* 26, no. 10 Pittsburgh, PA: Myers, Shinkle & Co., 1888, 357-359.

_____. “The Female Deacon. Animadversions on the Argument of Synod's Committee.” *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* 27, no. 5 Pittsburgh, PA: Myers, Shinkle & Co., 1889, 137-140.

Gibson, Margaret Dunlop. *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac*. London, England: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1903.

Gillespie, George. “An Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland.” In *The Points of Ruling Elders, and of the Authority of Presbyteries and Synods*. Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1846.

_____. *Notes of Debates and Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines and Other Commissioners at Westminster, Feb. 1644 to Jan. 1645*. Edited by David Meek. Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1846.

- Hendriksen, William. *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1957.
- Holmes, Michael W. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.
- House, H. Wayne. *The Role of Women in Ministry Today*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990.
- Hurley, James. "The Office of Deacon: Women Deacons?" In NAPARC Conference on Office. Pittsburgh: n.p., 1977.
- Hyde, Daniel R. "Rulers and Servants: The Nature and Qualifications for the Offices of Elder and Deacon." In Michael Brown, ed. *Called to Serve: Essays for Elders and Deacons*. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2007.
- Keddie, Gordon J. *Even in Darkness: Judges and Ruth Simply Explained*. Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1985.
- Keller, Tim. "The Case for Commissioning (Not Ordaining) Deaconesses." *byFaith*, August 25, 2008. <http://byfaithonline.com/the-case-for-commissioning-not-ordaining-deaconesses/> (accessed September 28, 2022).
- Kennedy, James and T. P. Stevenson. "Women and the Deacon's Office." *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* 26, no. 11 Pittsburgh, PA: Myers, Shinkle & Co., 1888, 383-394.
- Knight, George W. III. *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992.
- Kuiper, R. B. *The Glorious Body of Christ*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006.
- Lightfoot, Joseph Barber, and John Reginald Harmer, eds. *The Apostolic Fathers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987.
- Luther, Martin. "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church." http://uploads.worldlibrary.net/uploads/pdf/20110830030704babylonian_captivity.pdf (accessed September 24, 2022).
- MacArthur, John. *The Master's Plan for the Church*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2008.
- Martimort, Aime Georges. *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*. Translated by K. D. Whitehead. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986.
- Minutes of the One Hundred Thirty Fifth Synod of the RPCNA. Wapello, Iowa: Louisa Publishing Co., 1964.

“Minutes of the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. Session LIX.” *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenant* 26, no. 7-8. Pittsburgh, PA: Myers, Shinkle & Co., 1888.

Murray, John. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997.

NAPARC Conference on Office. Pittsburgh: n.p., 1977.

Olson, Jeannine E. *One Ministry Many Roles: Deacons and Deaconesses through the Centuries*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House: 1992.

Presbyterian Church in America. *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, Sixth Edition (2012 Reprint).

“Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office.” *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*. Philadelphia, PA: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1988, 310-352.

“Report of the Committee to Respond to Communication #01-3: Namely, the Report of the Study Committee of the Great Lakes/Gulf Presbytery of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America To examine the Question of the Ordination of Women Deacons.” *Minutes of the One Hundred Seventy First Synod of the RPCNA*. Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2002, 114-122.

“Report of the Judicial Committee re: communication 97-4.” *Minutes of the One Hundred Sixty-Seventh Synod of the RPCNA*. Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 1997, 89-91.

“Report of the Minority of the Committee on Women in Church Office.” *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*. Philadelphia, PA: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1988, 356-373.

Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. *Ante-Nicean Fathers*. Vols. 1-5. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926.

Ryken, Philip Graham. *1 Timothy*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007.

Schaff, Philip, ed. *The Complete Ante-Nicene & Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers Collection*. Vol. 14. Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers 2. London, England: Catholic Way Publishing, 2014.

Schwertley, Brian M. *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*. Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness, 1998.

Scott, S. P. “The Code of Justinian: Book 1.” https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Anglica/CJ1_Scott.htm (accessed September 24, 2022).

- _____. "The Novels of Justinian: Novel 6." https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Anglica/N6_Scott.htm (accessed September 24, 2022).
- Smith, Joe. "The Wonderful Advance: An Examination of the Cultural Influence upon the Decision to Ordain Women Deacons in the RPCNA." Paper presented for Reformed Presbyterian History class at RPTS, April 16, 2022.
- Spear, Wayne R. *Covenanted Uniformity in Religion: The Influence of the Scottish Commissioners upon the Ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013.
- Strauch, Alexander. *The New Testament Deacon: The Church's Minister of Mercy*. Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1992.
- Stott, John. *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*. Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2021.
- The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*. Translated by Frank Williams. Books II and III. De Fide. 2nd ed. Leiden, The Netherlands: BRILL, 2012.
- Thomas, Donald F. *The Deacon in a Changing Church*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969.
- Warfield, Benjamin B. "Presbyterian Deaconesses." *The Presbyterian Review* (1890): 283-293.
- Willson, D.B. "Should a Woman be Ordained a Deacon?" *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* 26, no. 11 Pittsburgh, PA: Myers, Shinkle & Co., 1888, 394-407.
- Willson, James M. *The Deacon: An Inquiry into the Nature, Duties and Exercise of the Office of the Deacon in the Christian Church*. Philadelphia, PA: William S. Young, 1869.
- Winston, George and Dora Winston. *Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women: An Exegetical Response to Traditionalism and Feminism*. Np: Xulon Press, 2003.
- "Women Deacons? Focusing the Issue." *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*. Philadelphia, PA: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1988, 353-355.
- Wylie, Thomas. "Ordination of a Female-Deacon." *The Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter*. (June 1889): 194.