

The Rooted Church

A Position Paper on Deacons

Part 1: Leadership in the Local Church¹

The Scriptures are clear that Jesus Christ is the head of the church.² Jesus is the Apostle who plants a church.³ Jesus is the Leader who builds the church.⁴ Jesus is the Senior Pastor and Chief Shepherd who rules the church.⁵ And it is ultimately Jesus who closes churches down when they have become faithless or fruitless.⁶ Therefore, it is absolutely vital that a church loves Jesus, obeys Jesus, imitates Jesus, and follows Jesus at all times and in all ways, according to the teaching of his Word.⁷

Human leadership in the church is little more than qualified Christians who are following Jesus and encouraging other people to follow them as they follow Jesus. Because of this, church leaders must be good sheep who follow their Chief Shepherd Jesus well before they are fit to be shepherds leading any of his sheep. This is in large part what Paul meant when he told Christians in various local churches to “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” While it may seem obvious to insist that any discussion of church leadership begin with the centrality and preeminence of Jesus, sadly, many churches omit him from their organizational charts altogether. At the risk of stating the obvious, every church must place Jesus Christ in the position of highest authority and devotion in both the organizational chart and the life of the church.

Serving under Jesus are elders, deacons, and church members. Philippians 1:1 illustrates this church leadership structure: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.” Packed in this verse we discover the three kinds of leaders who take responsibility for the health and progress of the local church. We will spend some time investigating each of their roles. First, there are elders (“overseers” in this verse), who are the senior leadership in the church. Second, there are deacons, who function as pastoral assistants by also leading the church alongside and under the direction of the elders. Third, there are “saints,” or Christians, who love God and help lead the local church by using their resources (time, talent, and treasure) to help build up their church as church members.

Elders

Elders are the male leaders of the church who are synonymously called pastors, bishops, and overseers throughout the New Testament.⁸ While the various words are used interchangeably, they each refer to a different aspect of the same role in the same office. As an elder, a man has rank and authority to rule and govern a church. As a bishop, he has the responsibility before God to rule and protect a church. As a pastor, he has the high honor of caring for Christians and evangelizing non-Christians. As an overseer, he has the responsibility before God of leading and managing the church.

The elders are men chosen for their ministry according to clear biblical requirements after a sufficient season of testing in the church.⁹ Elders are nearly always spoken of in plurality because God intends for more than one man to lead and rule over the church, as a safeguard for both the church and the man.

¹ Part 1 is excerpted from Mark Driscoll, *On Church Leadership* (Crossway, 2008).

² Eph. 1:9, 22–23; 4:15; 5:23.

³ Heb. 3:1.

⁴ Matt. 16:18.

⁵ 1 Pet. 5:4.

⁶ Rev. 2:5.

⁷ Col. 3:16.

⁸ Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:2

⁹ 1 Tim. 2:11–3:7; Titus 1:5–9.

The Bible defines the qualifications of an elder in two primary places (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9), and the lists are virtually identical. For more on the role of elder at the Rooted, you may consult our Pastor/Elder development process and its related documents.

Deacons

It did not take long for the senior leaders in the early church to become overextended, too distracted, and ineffective. In Acts 6:1–7 we learn that the apostles became over-burdened with the ministry of caring for needy widows, which resulted in a racist neglect of non-Hebrew widows while the Hebrews were being favored. Apparently, the apostles were willing to do the work of feeding widows but were not particularly adept at it, and they were torn between that need and their other pastoral duties, particularly prayer, Bible study, and teaching. Therefore, it was decided that the apostles would appoint pastoral assistants to care for the widows, thereby enabling the apostles to focus on prayer and Scripture.

Because this section of Scripture is descriptive and not prescriptive (it tells us what happened but does not tell us exactly what we should do) and does not explicitly mention deacons, we must be careful not to read too much into the text. For example, seven men were appointed to feed Grecian widows, but that does not mean that a local church is in sin if it does not appoint exactly seven men to make sandwiches for Grecian widows. But from this section of Scripture we can extract the biblical principle that when senior spiritual leadership is overburdened to the degree that they do not have time for prayer, Bible study, and teaching, they are free to appoint pastoral assistants to help alleviate some of their burden.

This simple pattern of senior leaders doing a work until it becomes too large and burdensome for them to continue is the pattern of the New Testament—elders are continually appointed first in local churches, and once they are overburdened then they appoint pastoral assistants to aid them. These pastoral assistants are called “deacons.” They are mentioned on two occasions in the New Testament. Both occasions are in relation to elders because the two groups of leaders work so closely together.¹⁰ Practically, elders and deacons work together like left and right hands, with elders specializing in leading by their words and deacons specializing in leading by their works.

Deacons are the servants of the church who are also qualified for the ministry of overseeing and caring for God’s people by qualifications that are nearly identical to the elders—minus the teaching and preaching abilities. They must have theological convictions that are true to Scripture.¹¹ Deacons occupy the second-highest position of leadership in the church, and serve as helpers to the elders in a manner similar to how wives serve in the home alongside their husbands who lead the family. Deacons are appointed only after they have proven themselves to the elders as faithful and mature church members.¹²

1 Timothy 3:8–13

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

Twelve Requirements and Two Rewards of a Deacon from 1 Timothy 3:8–13

1. Dignified: worthy of respect, without any character defect, holy
2. Not double-tongued: sincere, heartfelt, earnest, honest, authentic
3. Not addicted to much wine: without addictions, self-controlled

¹⁰ Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–13.

¹¹ 1 Tim. 3:9.

¹² 1 Tim. 3:10.

4. Not greedy for dishonest gain: not a lover of money, financially content and upright
5. Hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience: sound biblical theology held with deep conviction
6. Tested: proven worthy over time
7. Husband of one wife: a one-woman man, sexually pure
8. Manages his children and household well: godly husband and father who leads, manages, and provides for his family

Additional Requirements for women/wives¹³

1. Dignified: honored by both men and women as exemplary Christians, without any character defect
2. Not slanderers: not malicious talkers, not prone to sins of the tongue such as gossip, slander, lying, etc.
3. Sober-minded: temperate, not prone to emotionalism
4. Faithful in all things: trustworthy in everything, faithful in all life roles (e.g., wife, mother, daughter, sister)

Rewards for Faithful Deacons

1. A good standing for themselves: honored and respected by God's people in the church
2. Great confidence in the faith: assurance in their faith, a deep confidence in the power of the gospel and the security of their relationship with God

While the duties of an elder are clearly articulated throughout the New Testament, the same cannot be said for the duties of deacons. The Greek word for "deacon" simply means "servant," and beyond that title we are given little indication of what a deacon should do. This is because while the duties of an elder are universally constant in every church in every place in every age, the duties of deacons vary according to the needs of local churches and their elders. In this way, the Bible brilliantly establishes a theologically grounded, morally qualified group of senior leaders, and grants them the freedom to appoint whatever deacons are needed to help them lead the church in whatever areas they deem require a deacon to lead. From the qualifications, we can infer that deacons will generally be handling church money, managing church systems, and meeting mercy needs, and that they will be privy to the most intimate details of people's lives.

Part 2: Two Views on Female Deacons

In 1 Timothy 3:8–13, Paul lists the qualifications needed for a man to become a deacon. In verse 11, however, he introduces the requirements needed for "women": "Their wives (or simply *wives*, or *women*) likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things." The question is whether Paul is speaking of the requirements for the wife of a deacon, for a woman deacon, or for something else. According to the NRSV, Paul states, "Women likewise must be..." The ESV, on the other hand, reads, "Their wives likewise must be..." Paul's language in the original Greek of this verse is, admittedly, complicated. Historically, two positions have been put forth as it relates to women and the role of deacon:

1. The role of deacon is open to both men and women, and Paul is speaking in verse 11 of women who are deacons.
2. The role of deacon is limited to men only and Paul is speaking in verse 11 of women who a) assist male deacons or b) are the wives of male deacons.

¹³ The language used here is dealt with in Part 2, below.

In the following pages, we will consider the most common arguments on both sides of the issue.¹⁴ It's important to note that this debate goes back at least to the Greek fathers (2nd century)—a very important point. If the church as a whole has not been able to settle this conclusively, we should exercise tolerance toward those who disagree with our opinion instead of calling our opponents chauvinists or feminists as is often done. Our desire as a church is to be utterly faithful to what the Scriptures teach, allowing God's wisdom – as counter-cultural as it may be (and contrary to our preconceived ideas!) – to direct our practice in all areas of our life as a local church.

Support for Deacons as Both Male and Female

Many faithful, Bible-believing Christians conclude that the Bible speaks to and allows for both men and women to function in the same deacon role. This position is held by many who take the relevant texts seriously and labor to interpret them faithfully. The main arguments in favor of this position include:

1. The Greek term *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 can either refer to “women” or more specifically to “wives”—the distinction can only be determined by the context. If Paul was referring to the wives of the deacons, he could have indicated his intention by adding the word “their” (“*Their* wives likewise...”). Because the Greek does not contain the word “their” (although it is included in many English translations), it is best to translate the original text simply as “women.” Therefore, Paul is introducing another office and is not merely referring to the wives of deacons.
2. Why would Paul give qualifications for deacons' wives but not for elders' wives (there is no similar requirement for the wives of male elders in 1 Timothy 3)? It is unlikely that male deacons would be given a higher standard to meet than male elders, considering that elders hold the highest position of authority in the church. Therefore, 3:11 cannot logically be accepted as an additional requirement for the wives of male deacons.
3. Verses 8 and 11 begin in similar manner. In verses 1–7, Paul identifies the qualifications needed for anyone aspiring to the office of overseer. When Paul begins the next section which introduces the office of deacon, he states, “Likewise deacons...” (v. 8). Verse 11 then begins in the same manner, “Women likewise...”, which suggests that another office (that of female deacon, sometimes referred to as “deaconess”) is being introduced. The flow of Paul's writing then becomes evident: “...an overseer must be (v. 2)...deacons likewise must be (v. 8)...women (deacons) likewise must be (v. 11)...”.
4. Verse 11 may simply serve to list the additional requirements for female deacons, while verses 12–13 list the additional requirements for male deacons. Practically this makes sense, as Paul is indicating that a male deacon is most vulnerable to sexual sins, while a female deacon is most vulnerable to emotional and verbal sins.
5. For those who appose the appointment of female deacons by stating that Paul just previously had forbidden women from teaching or having authority over a man (1 Tim. 2:12), the teaching he refers to is in reference to the teaching or preaching done during the gathered worship service of the church, which is clearly reserved for the male elders.¹⁵ Women are permitted to teach in contexts that are not related to the position of elder.¹⁶ Therefore, Paul does not forbid a woman from all teaching and authority, but rather from teaching and ruling as an elder. Since being a deacon does not involve teaching or ruling, women as well as men are eligible to serve in this capacity.

¹⁴ For a primer on the difficulties encountered on this issue, see Ligon Duncan & Tim Keller, “The PCA Debate on Commissioning (Not Ordaining) Female Deacons”, available at <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/deacons.html>.

¹⁵ 1 Tim. 5:17.

¹⁶ For example, Titus 2:3–5.

6. In Romans 16:1–2, Paul commends Phoebe to the church at Rome and calls her a “*diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae.” This should be translated “deacon,” referring to an office-holder, and not merely one who is a “servant” for three reasons.¹⁷ First, Paul uses the masculine form *diakonos* to refer to a woman. Thus, it can be argued that Paul is not using the term generally, referring to one who is a servant, but rather has a specific office in mind. The masculine form of *diakonos* used of a woman suggests that the term became standardized when referring to an office. Second, when the generic meaning of *diakonos* (“servant”) is intended, the text usually reads, “servant of the Lord” or something similar. This is the only place Paul speaks of someone being a *diakonos* of a local church. Tychicus is called a “servant in the Lord” (Eph 6:21), Epaphras is named a “servant of Christ” (Cor 1:7), and Timothy is labeled “a servant of Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 4:6). Because only Phoebe is specifically said to be a servant of a local congregation (the church at Cenchreae), it is likely that she was in an official deacon role in her church. Third, Phoebe is sent to perform an official task on behalf of the Apostle Paul and her church. Paul commends her to the church at Rome and urges the Roman Christians to aid her since she is about the important business of the church. He asks that they “welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need..., for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well” (Rom 16:2). Thus, it is argued that such an official task requires an official office.

Support for Deacons as Male Only

In contrast to the above view, many faithful, Bible-believing Christians conclude that the Bible allows only men to serve in the official role of deacon. This position is held by many who take the relevant texts seriously and labor to interpret them faithfully.¹⁸ The main arguments in favor of this position include:

1. If Paul is singling out female deacons in 1 Timothy 3:11, why does he use *gynaikas* (which translates “women/wives”) instead of *tas diakonous* (“deaconess”)? He could have and likely would have chosen much clearer language if his intention was to affirm women in the official role of deacon.
2. In referring to the two official leadership roles (elder and deacon), Paul uses the specific titles of “overseer” (v. 2) and “deacons” (v. 8, 12) but uses neither when discussing women in verse 11. We may conclude, therefore, that he is not speaking to women in the office of deacon but something else, likely women serving as assistants to or as wives of male deacons. Furthermore, when Paul uses the word “deacons” again in verse 12, he is alerting the reader that he is resuming his subject of deacons’ personal qualifications and that his sidebar regarding women in verse 11 described something other than this office.
3. The placement of verse 11 is in the middle of a paragraph on male deacons’ qualifications. Verse 11 is an aside which speaks to the qualifications of their assistants or wives, but should still be viewed in the context of qualifications for male only deacons.
4. Paul says: “Let deacons be the husband of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.” If women served in the same office as men, Paul’s statement that deacons must be husbands doesn’t make any sense. The same language is also used when referring to elders, an office clearly reserved for men.
5. How does one reconcile the idea of women officials in the church with Paul’s prohibition against women taking authority over men in the church (1 Tim 2:12)? Deacons hold an official position of authority. They do not simply provide private, individual help but guide and direct ministries within the church. That is, they make decisions that affect the whole church body and serve as the

¹⁷ Affirmed by complementarian commentators such as Douglas Moo (NICNT) and Thomas Schreiner (BECNT).

¹⁸ See Alexander Strauch, *Minister of Mercy: The New Testament Deacon* (Lewis & Roth, 1992).

church's official managers or representatives in many respects. In other words, in contrast to those in favor of female deacons (specifically point 5 above), it is not a question of teaching but of authority, and therefore women are excluded from the role of deacon.

6. The term "likewise" in verse 11 does not support the case for female deacons but actually rules out the possibility. If Paul regarded the women of verse 11 as belonging to the same office as male deacons, he would have addressed them together and not separately. The third use of the term "likewise" indicates that Paul was referring to a distinct third category of servants – they are a group by themselves. After all, if some women were deacons, further qualifications would be unnecessary. One does not state the qualification of a United States Senator and then add something additional for red-haired senators, western senators, or women senators.¹⁹
7. In Acts 6 we see the apostles establish the first team of deacons, all of whom were men. This is important especially when considering that the need at hand was ministry to widowed women – a ministry perfectly tailored to the appointment of female deacons (and there were certainly hundreds of qualified women considering the size of the early church when this took place), yet for which the apostles still chose a team of all men.
8. Romans 16:1 and that fact that Phoebe is referred to as "deacon" is inconclusive. The Greek word *diakonos*, used by the early church as a title of a specific church office (deacon), was also used to describe virtually every form of Christian ministry, including table waiters,²⁰ servants of sin,²¹ servants of the gospel,²² a servant of the church,²³ Paul and Apollos who are servants of both God and the church,²⁴ Epaphras who is a servant of God,²⁵ and Tychicus who is a servant of the Lord.²⁶ Of the more than thirty occurrences of *diakonos* in the New Testament, only four occurrences refer to a specific office/title.²⁷ Quite simply, the word is used so often to describe people who are not official deacons that we cannot conclude on its usage alone that the official role of deacon is in view.

Part 3: Our Church's Position – A Third Way²⁸

Up to this point, we have contrasted two opposing viewpoints: either 1 Timothy 3:11 allows for both male and female deacons or it is speaking of women as assistants to or wives of male-only deacons. The elders of The Rooted Church see a third alternative to be most convincing: ***1 Timothy speaks to and allows for women who serve the church but are not in the same office as male deacon.***

Deaconing Women in 1 Timothy 5:9-10

Something often overlooked in this discussion is the broader context of 1 Timothy. Paul's letter to Timothy is about how the gospel necessarily leads to practical, visible change in the lives of those who believe it. Part of this change involves the establishment of healthy local churches and qualified men and women

¹⁹ Gordon Clark, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Trinity, 1992), p. 61.

²⁰ Lk. 10:40; Jn. 2:5, 9.

²¹ Rom. 15:8.

²² Gal. 2:17.

²³ Rom. 16:1; Col. 1:25.

²⁴ 1 Cor. 3:5.

²⁵ Col. 1:7.

²⁶ Col. 4:7; Eph. 6:21.

²⁷ Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12, 13.

²⁸ See Brian M. Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, available at <http://www.reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/deacon.htm>. Specifically see the sections on Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 and 5:9-10 under "Part II. The Biblical Evidence". Many lines of argumentation cited here are taken from Schwertley's work.

who joyfully serve within those churches. In other words, in contrast to the false teaching present within the church at Ephesus, true Christianity is evidenced by lifestyles shaped by the gospel.

One of the ways this evidence is seen is in the faithful service of godly women. In the New Testament, women were clearly recognized for their diaconal work. Besides Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2, Tabitha is noted for her work with the poor and widows,²⁹ and it was women who served Jesus' disciples as they traveled, literally "deaconing them out of their own means."³⁰ Most interesting of all, 1 Timothy 5:3-16 describes an order of widows who were financially supported and who were "devoted to all kinds of good deeds" and dedicated themselves to "helping those in trouble."

Honor widows who are truly widows. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 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. But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. 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. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. For some have already strayed after Satan. If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.

What we see in 1 Timothy 5:3-16 is Paul instructing Timothy regarding the proper treatment of five types of widows:

1. In verse 4 Paul tells Timothy that widows who have children or grandchildren should be provided for by them. Children and grandchildren have a biblical responsibility to honor their parents and "make some return to their parents."³¹
2. In verse 5 Paul discusses true widows – those who do not have any family to support them. These widows can only turn to God and his people for help. They should be supported by the church.
3. In verse 6 Paul mentions widows who should not receive church support. These widows are false Christians who dedicate their lives to pleasure rather than Christ. The church should never subsidize the wicked.

²⁹ Acts 9:36-40.

³⁰ Luke 8:2-3, also see Dorcas in Acts 9:36.

³¹ Under such circumstances it is neither the state's nor the church's responsibility but the family's responsibility to provide for their parents and grandparents. This teaching is so important it is reported by Paul two more times: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8), and "If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows" (1 Tim. 5:16).

4. In 5:11-15 Paul says that young widows should get married, have children, and manage their homes. Strong Christian families are vital to the church and society.
5. After Paul instructs Timothy regarding how widows are to be provided for, he lays down various requirements for the widows who serve the church in 5:9-10:

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 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.

These widows are "enrolled". They are placed on a list. They are publicly set apart from other women in the church. The question is this: are these widows placed on a list in order to receive aid or in order to serve the church? Though the most common assumption is the former, the evidence indicates that what Paul clearly had in mind was what has historically been called an "order of widows" set apart in order to serve the church.

There are a number of reasons why this interpretation is superior. Why would Paul give Timothy a set of requirements regarding which widows were to receive aid after he had just done so in verses 4 through 8? Also, the qualifications given in verses 9-10 clearly point in the direction of service. The church elder and deacon must be the husband of one wife. The widow who serves must have been the wife of one man (v. 9). Only women who first had proven themselves as good and faithful wives could be admitted to the order. Would it make sense to deny women material support because they had never married, or if *before* their conversion they had been unfaithful to their husbands? And what about the age requirement? The idea that women under sixty would be denied food and clothing simply because of their age is strange at best. On the other hand, if Paul is speaking not to receiving service but about *servicing*, the age of sixty makes perfect sense. Widows over sixty (whose children had grown) are free from family responsibilities. The temptation to remarry is remote and they are beyond the childbearing age. Furthermore, women over sixty were accorded a certain respect in Greek society. For example, it would have been considered improper for young women to travel or be apart from their families. Older women could act independently and travel without causing a stir. Phoebe is an excellent example of such independence (Rom. 16:1-2).

Paul stipulates that only women who have raised children can be placed on the list. This requirement echoes the qualification to both elders (3:4) and deacons (3:12). If Paul were giving a prerequisite for those widows who were to receive aid, then we would expect the very opposite. Women without children and relatives were often the most destitute. Would it be fair to deny widows aid solely on the basis of being unable to bear children? The reason Paul gives such a requirement is that one of the responsibilities of these servant-widows was to instruct and aid young mothers. Older women who had been faithful wives and who had brought up children were experienced in applying biblical truth to family living. Their experience was essential in training the younger women in godliness.³²

In verse 10 Paul sets forth a number of requirements all dealing with reputation. Once again the requirements for the servant-widows echoes those for both elder (3:2) and deacon (3:10). The member of the order of widows must have "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." What if a widow was a recent convert and did not have such a stellar reputation? Is Paul telling Timothy to let such women beg on the street? What about widows that were from poor families? Some families, due to conditions beyond their control, are not able to be as hospitable as they desire. It is clear that Paul is setting forth requirements for service. This explains the similarities between the qualifications for elders, deacons, and the servant-widows.

³² Titus 2:3-5.

Returning to Paul's qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, we see now that he is making a parenthetical remark in verse 11 to a third category of servants. The only female category of servants in the entire New Testament is the servant-widows mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:9-10. Since they are the only third category mentioned, and since their duties are diaconal in nature, it is quite natural that Paul would mention them in his comments regarding deacons. The reason they do not receive a separate paragraph in chapter 3 with detailed qualifications like the elders and male deacons is because Paul goes into greater detail regarding their qualifications in 1 Timothy 5:9-10.

According to this interpretation, if Paul was in fact addressing women who were in the same office with the same qualifications as male deacons in 1 Timothy 3, then the book of 1 Timothy contains a serious internal contradiction. In 1 Timothy 5 Paul forbids women under sixty to hold a church office (or to be separated to official service), telling them instead to get married and manage the home. If at the same time married women with children who were under sixty were official deacons, Paul's comments in 1 Timothy 5:9-14 could not have been written. The word of God cannot contradict itself. If, rather, 1 Timothy 3:11 refers to a category of servant-widows who assist the deacons, then both passages are in complete harmony. Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 is also best understood as an older widow serving in the order of widows.³³

Even if we are wrong in our interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:11 and Paul is not referring to servant-widows who assist the deacons by ministering to the needs of women, we are not left to conclude that the only alternative is female deacons in the same role as male deacons. Rather, the next best alternative is to view Paul's remarks to women in 3:11 as applying to the wives of both the male elders and deacons.³⁴

Conclusion

So what does all this talk from 1 Timothy mean? It means that ***Paul is speaking to three roles within the local church: two that are offices reserved only for men, and one role specific to older widows serving the needs of women within the church.***³⁵ Our modern day cultural assumptions might lead us to say that it is perfectly permissible for women who are married, who have dependent children, and who are under sixty to be deacons. Yet such thinking clearly contradicts Paul's command to the younger widows in 1 Timothy 5:11-14, 'But refuse to enroll younger widows...I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households...' So Paul lovingly liberates "modern" and "liberated" women from their "liberation" by encouraging them to return to the role that God has created them for, namely, being happy as faithful Christians serving God according to their gifts and not despising the noble roles of wife and mother.³⁶

³³ For more on this see Schwertley, *A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons*, specifically the section on Romans 16:1-2.

³⁴ John Calvin held the same interpretation: "Likewise the wives. He means the wives both of deacons and of bishops, for they must be aids to their husbands in their office; which cannot be, unless their behaviour excel that of others" (John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Epistle to Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), p. 87.). Paul's counsel is necessary considering the number of pastors whose ministries have been destroyed by the conduct of their wives. To argue that Paul's insertion to the wives of elders and deacons appears out of place is weak considering the manner in which Paul suddenly switches to another thought in his other epistles.

³⁵ The interpretation that 1 Timothy 5:9 is speaking of a distinct group of women set apart in the church for service was common among early Reformers. It was held by John Calvin, George Gillespie, and Samuel Rutherford, among others. As one historical example, John Calvin saw the qualifications for membership in the "order of widows" so approximating an office, as well as a close connection between the work of the diaconate and the 1 Timothy 5 widows, that he actually established two "orders" of deacons: the *procurers* (administrative workers who collected and managed funds) and *hospitaliers* (actual care-givers to the poor and sick). The latter order included women, the first did not.

³⁶ Mark Driscoll, *On Church Leadership*, 46.

Practically this means that to be a wife and a mother is the primary domain of the woman, an area in which no man can compete with her. This work is of such greatness and importance that it should be held up as a woman's divinely intended sphere, in which all her qualities and gifts find their fullest expression. The woman who is married with children has a job that is so important and time consuming that God wants her wholeheartedly focused on her task of managing the household. Paul says that young women are not permitted to serve in the role of deacon (or even among the servant-widows – one had to be over age sixty) not because they lack the gifts or skills, but precisely because their gifts and skills are so unique and so strongly suited to the biblical roles of wife and mother that such roles must be protected from competing interests and expectations. In other words, faithfully serving as a wife and mom is enough! And such roles are so important that they must be esteemed and safe-guarded.

Should the church have women who serve in a sort of official capacity? Yes, absolutely! And historically, this is what we have seen throughout the life of the church.³⁷ But their qualifications, roles, and activities should be patterned after the servant-widows in 1 Timothy 5:9-10 and not the male deacons of 3:8-13. To summarize what we've seen:

1. The official role of deacon described in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 is limited to men only.
2. Paul's remark regarding women in 3:11 is not in reference to the wives of elders and deacons or to women who assisted male deacons, but to a category of servant-widows more fully explained in 5:9-10.
3. Young women should rightfully pursue marriage, have children, and manage their homes. Their focus and labor in these areas must not be divided among deacon roles within their local church. Of course they should love and serve their church according to the gifts God has entrusted to them,³⁸ but this service should not be separated to an official role and the expectations and workload that result.
4. Older widowed women may serve the church in an official capacity, particularly in ministry to women, provided they meet the requirements of 1 Timothy 5:9-10.
5. As a complementarian church, we must focus intently on raising up men, particularly young men, to be responsible, loving leaders in their families and churches. Simply put, one of the kindest things we can do for women and children is to raise up men who are good Christians, husbands, fathers, elders, and deacons.

Part 4: A Final Word of Encouragement to Our Women

Our conclusion may not fall where you had hoped it would. In fact, our conclusion did not fall where we thought it would! We must always be careful not to impose our ideas on the Bible, reading it in such a way that it can do nothing but support the opinions we already have. Rather, we must be diligent to set aside our preconceived ideas and study the Scriptures first, allowing them to shape our thinking and form our conclusions, whatever they may be. We pray for continued insight and wisdom in our study and in dealing with issues such as this one. As leaders, we truly seek to lovingly instruct both men and women in their God-ordained, equal, and complementary gender roles so that they can experience the joy and fulfillment that only comes through humble obedience to God.

³⁷ This order of servant-widows in early churches (sometimes referred to throughout history as “deacons” or “deaconesses,” though not referring to the official office of deacon – which admittedly adds to the confusion) had different qualifications (widows over sixty), different functions (service primarily to women), different authority (they submitted to the male deacons) and a different office than the male deacons.

³⁸ 1 Cor. 12:7; Heb. 10:24-25.

In all the texts we've looked at, please don't miss this simple but important point: *women serve the church!* 1 Timothy 3:11 is there because, whatever it looked like, women were being screened to serve. Mary, Priscilla, Euodia, Syntyche, Lydia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Phoebe all actively served their churches. And not only their congregations but the faithful record of Scripture recognizes and honors their contributions. However it was done, they were doing it!³⁹

The unique and important roles God has given to both men and women are there for a reason – a good and loving reason. God in his infinite wisdom and infinite love has chosen to create boundaries that some feel are unjust. In the same way that we ask our young children to obey us because we are often able to see what is in their best interest when they can't, so our loving Father is able to see what is in our best interest even when we think that we are smarter than he is. If God has created a boundary, it is not because of a lack of love on his part or a hope that his daughters will be frustrated and unhappy. It is because of His eternal love and unerring perspective, even if we can't see or understand exactly what he is doing.

Finally, many say that if a woman is not permitted to function in the exact same roles and in the exact same ways as men, she must be perceived as less smart, less worthy, or less human. In other words, a difference in role must equal a difference in value.⁴⁰ But the nature of God himself shows us that this is not true! Bruce Ware says it like this:

Christians have long affirmed that there is one and only one God, yet there are also three equal, eternal, and individual personal expressions of the one undivided and eternal nature of God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each fully God, each equally God, each possessing fully the one and undivided divine nature. *Yet each person of the Godhead is different in role and position in relation to each other.* The Father is supreme in authority, the Son is under the Father, and the Spirit is under the Father and the Son. Yet there is also a full harmony in their work, with no jealousy, bitterness, strife, or discord...Unity of purpose and harmony of mission, yet with differentiation in lines of authority and submission within the Godhead – this truly is a marvel to behold.⁴¹

God intends that his very nature be expressed in his people through our human relationships. If we are to represent God and who he is by how we relate to each other, we should expect and, yes, even embrace the different roles and responsibilities among us – all as a way to express unity, harmony, and love as the redeemed community that belongs to our great Trinitarian God!

Role relations in the church (as well as in the home) are important according to the Bible because they are meant to reflect the more ultimate reality of Christ's headship over humanity and of the Father's headship over the Son. If Jesus does not despise his role under the Father, women, *please do not despise your role under godly male pastors and deacons.* There should be no chafing or resentment, but rather an acceptance and embrace of the good design of God. After all, in living out your biblical roles and responsibilities with joy in your relationships, your marriage, and in your church, you get to be a living parable of both the equality and diversity within God himself.

³⁹ See "Chapter 3: Women in Ministry" in Mark Driscoll, *On Church Leadership*.

⁴⁰ You might hear it stated more officially as, "Economic subordination necessitates ontological inequality."

⁴¹ Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Crossway, 2005), 131. The final chapter entitled "Beholding The Wonder Of The Triune Persons In Relational Community" is well worth reading in light of this discussion.