

IN DEFENCE OF THE DEACONESS

Introduction

The debate over who can hold ‘office’ in the church has long been a point of contention in the West, particularly since the rise of feminism and the ‘tolerance and equality’ movements whose subversive misandry has invaded secular and religious communities through media, legal challenges and intellectualism. Whilst this has led to a response from the church which presents a solid theology of the Biblical position of complementarianism, the tendency within Christian circles is to overcompensate. I posit that such an overcompensation has developed with regards to the complementarian view of refusing to allow women to serve within the church by holding the office of Deacon.

Methodology

In this position paper, I will present the argument that women can hold the office of Deacon by using the Biblical texts to affirm that this was a known office in the early church. Firstly, I will explain the context of 1 Timothy and refute the argument often given from 1 Timothy 2:12; in doing so I will present my thesis that the office of Deacon is an office that has authority with regards to practical details that assists the body in corporate gatherings whilst the office of Elder has the higher authority, including the highest calling of teaching. Secondly, by appealing to 1 Timothy 3 it will be shown that Paul has an expectation that the office of Deacons is an office for both male and female. Thirdly, this essay will respond to common arguments given from 1 Timothy 3 before finally arguing for the thesis mentioned above by explaining how complementarianism actually encourages female Deacons by its very nature and elucidating how practical care differs from pastoral care.

What does Paul actually say?

Context

The first question to be considered, therefore, is ‘What does Paul actually say in the texts that both sides of the argument appeal to?’ It will be worthwhile quoting the primary passage in full:

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 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 Jesus Christ.¹

This text ought not be brought out of its natural context. Paul’s intention in the letter is not simply, even primarily, ecclesiological; rather, he states that, ‘The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.’² He then engages in preparing Timothy for an ecclesiological structure that will encourage this love, making clear that the unity of the body in their Gospel commitment and love is his primary focus. The opposite of this love is seen when, ‘Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding what they are saying, or the things about which they make confident assertions.’³ This warning ought to be applied to those of us in each side of the Diaconal debate. We are not immune to getting weighed down by the intricacies of theological contemplation that eventually misses the forest because of the trees. Nevertheless, Paul’s emphasis on sound doctrine is clear, even in this first chapter of the letter, so we cannot ignore the need to have a sound doctrine; but we must remember, therefore, that although this argument may be pertinent, it should not be divisive for a church – that would be contrary to Paul’s intention and would qualify as ‘vain discussion’.

¹ 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

² 1 Timothy 1:5.

³ 1 Timothy 1:6-7.

One critical verse that underpins the discussion on whether women can serve as Deacons or not is found in chapter 2, where Paul states, ‘I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.’⁴ A word of caution must be made here: Paul does not forbid women to teach in certain circumstances, such as other women or children, for elsewhere he commends this and indeed has an expectation that this is going on. The doctrine of complementarianism does not say that women are in any way of less value or use to the body of believers than men. Rather this doctrine affirms the vital role that women have for the body as well as teaching that women are equal with men in worth and value, but different in roles. Nevertheless, this verse alone seems clear – women are not to ‘exercise authority’ over men. However, the context of the chapter is describing what is to happen when the church is gathered. Therefore, with that context in place, Paul’s admonition is that women are not to teach Scripture or exercise leadership or pastoral authority over men when the church is gathered. This would immediately rule out women holding the office of Elder, for as Paul makes clear in Titus, the Elder is tasked with defending the flock from evil teaching, and to preach the Gospel with all that accords with sound doctrine. However, as an argument that women ought not to be Deacons, this verse does not adequately speak, as shall be shown below.

In Acts 6, the responsibility of the men chosen was to serve (lit. to ‘deacon’) tables so that the Elders and Apostles were able to devote their time to praying and ‘deaconing’ the Word. Therefore Acts 6 does not constitute true deacons in the sense of an established office (note, for example that the criteria in Acts 6 doesn’t match), but nevertheless this chapter does highlight the way in which the eventual office was to function. The very purpose of the Deacon, therefore, was not to exercise a teaching responsibility or pastoral authority over the body; rather, Deacons were required to streamline the hospitality and service of the church body so that the Elders were not devoting energy and effort to those tasks rather than their other responsibilities. This does not relegate these tasks to being unimportant (for the Elders prior to this circumstance were

⁴ 1 Timothy 2:12.

doing them), but rather allows those who are able to serve to bear this particular burden of responsibility and service, and enables the primary ministry to be given a much fuller focus by the men called to be Elders. It is clear, therefore, that 2 Timothy 2:12 ought not to be used as an argument against female Deacons because the context of chapter 2 is the church gathered together for corporate worship, thereby implying women are not to teach doctrine. With regards to ‘Deaconing’, it is clear from Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 2:12 the purpose of the Deacon is not to exercise *pastoral* authority, but to exercise *practical* authority. This theological framework is key to the argument, and the thesis of this paper: Deacons are given authority over the practical care and ministries of the church, but pastoral responsibility and authority belongs to the Elders.

1 Timothy 3

With the context now established, and the thesis given, it must be tested against the passage quoted above. In this discussion it is often argued that the onus must be on the one arguing *for* female officers to present the burden of proof. However, I submit that this begs the question. The text clearly has three sections: the Elder, the male Deacon and the wife/woman (the Greek word can be used interchangeably). This can be discerned by the use of the word ‘likewise’ which introduces the second and third sections. The literary structure is key to understanding the Biblical text, and Paul clearly intends for the ‘likewise’ to function as a section break, similar to my own use of ‘1 Timothy 3’ above. As evidence of how Paul uses this to delineate groups, consider the ‘parallel’ passage in Titus 2, where he writes: ‘Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love and steadfast. Older women *likewise* are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine.’⁵ Here the word ‘likewise’ expresses that women are to be considered as separate from the men in their ministry. Ergo they are a group distinct from the older men, with a distinct ministry also.

⁵ Titus 2:2-3. This is also seen in verse 6 when Paul mentions younger men. He does not use this word when he mentions bondservants.

In verse 8 of 1 Timothy 3 the ‘likewise’ introduces the Deacon, which is an office that differs from that of the Elder by one primary criterion: a Deacon is not required to teach (although must be a Godly individual). As noted above, the very purpose of the office of Deacon is to serve practically, not pastorally, and therefore this difference is not an inhibitor for women to serve in the role, but rather serves to undergird the difference in responsibilities.

In verse 11, therefore, it can be concluded that the word ‘likewise’ introduces a new section. This is the purpose of the literary structure. The question comes then becomes, ‘Is this wives or women?’⁶ It would seem unlikely that it means ‘wife’ for the following two reasons: (1) no such secondary, marital, emphasis is presented for the higher office of Elder and (2) there is not much rationale for Paul to give a list of qualifications for the wife if she were not to be involved in the ministry of the Deacon. If women were not expected to participate in this ministry, then the inclusion would appear to be unnecessary, and out of place, especially given that he has already explained that office holders must be in control of their own household. Consequently, it is a logical conclusion that the inclusion of both genders in this discussion of the office of Deacon strongly suggests that women can hold the office.

Counter-Arguments and Refutations

One counter-argument available to the ‘men-only’ position would be that this list is an extension of Paul’s command that officeholders ought to run their own household well and be a ‘husband of one wife’ (v. 12). However, this is an argument from silence, ignores the ‘likewise’ section-markers within the text and does a disservice to the idiom which in the Greek literally means ‘a one-woman-man’. Rather than being an *expectation* that the Elder and Deacon be *married men*, the idiom implies that the officeholder must be *monogamous* (this cannot, however, be used to permit female elders for Paul makes clear that this office is male-only). This

⁶ The Greek word can be used interchangeably, requiring an accurate translation to be dependent upon context. Consider 1 Corinthians 11:5-13 where *gyne* must mean ‘wife’ and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 where it is understood to mean ‘women’.

correct interpretation would logically be the same for either gender,⁷ and a correct understanding of the idiom undermines the argument that the role is for men only, because it does not imply ‘maleness’ but marital purity in accordance with the stipulation that the Elder be ‘above reproach’ and the Deacon be ‘dignified’. Our English translations fail to encapsulate the purpose of the idiom, which is a cultural metaphor.

For some commentators, the difficulty resides in the fact that Paul seems to place the list for wives into the stream of the text quite randomly; that this inclusion is out of place if it speaks to women who are to be Deacons. They argue that Paul’s linear logic flows like this: Overseers → Male Deacons → Wives of Deacons (v. 11) → Male Deacons (v. 12). This argument stems from two points: (a) a misunderstanding of the idiom ‘one-woman-man’ used to express monogamy and (b) that the burden of ‘manag[ing] their children and their own households well’ is a masculine prerogative.⁸ This is not correct. I have explained the error regarding the idiom above. The second issue, that it is the prerogative of the men to manage their household well, is actually a pagan philosophy. It was not in the theology of the family in Old Testament Israel but in Old Testament pagan cultures, and it is not the case in the New Testament church. In Proverbs, Solomon exhorts his son to, ‘Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching.’⁹ The parents, male and female, train the children in Godliness and in character. Unlike in most cultures throughout history where training sons to be men is the responsibility of the father, in God’s design for the family the burden falls upon both parents. Regarding how to manage a household, consider the ‘righteous wife’ in Proverbs 31: ‘She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her

⁷ There is an idiom for the reverse position – a ‘one-man-woman’ – which is used by Paul in 1 Timothy 5:9. Although it is speculation, it seems logical to assume that the use of one of these idioms would serve to explain both, rather than being more cumbersome and including both. The same reasoning is applied to the fact that women are not told to avoid drunkenness (for example), yet this is surely an expectation. Repetition of this kind is not necessary; it should be obvious.

⁸ 1 Timothy 3:12.

⁹ Proverbs 1:8. 6:20 has a very similar command.

tongue,¹⁰ and ‘She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her.’¹¹ Women are Godly when they manage their household well, and are worthy of significant praise. This is exactly what Paul suggests in 1 Timothy 3:12-13. Indeed, to underscore the point that this is not solely the prerogative of the man of the household, consider what Paul commands young widows to do two chapters later: ‘So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, *manage their households*, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.’¹² Clearly, therefore, the sentiment that Paul’s logic is Male Deacon → Wives of Deacons → Male Deacon does not do justice to the text, but is a clear example of how those of us in evangelical circles overreact and overcompensate to maintain a doctrine we feel is under attack. The way Paul has written is logical, and unlike the force *schema* mentioned above which would call Paul’s logic into confusion (why mention wives for the lower office and not the higher office?), it would be more accurately presented like this: Male Deacon → Female Deacon → Deacons. This is the natural reading of the text, but expects the leader to understand the idiom and have in place an accurate theology of the family. Verse 12, therefore, when understood correctly is not a return to the male Deacon, but is now a gender-neutral conclusion to the requirements before Paul concludes with the blessings.

A third counter-argument available to the ‘men-only’ position is that the inclusion of the woman/wife in this section implies that married couples can ‘share’ the office. This has some weight to it as it would seem to explain why Paul has included this list of qualifications for women. However, there is no textual warrant for this interpretation, except that it appears to answer the dilemma; a dilemma which itself is only brought about by the presupposition that women cannot serve as Deacon. If one begins objectively, then the simplest reading suggests

¹⁰ Proverbs 31:26.

¹¹ Proverbs 31:27-28.

¹² 1 Timothy 5:14, emphasis mine.

that both men and women can serve in the office of Deacon. Nevertheless, in many instances it might be a worthwhile and profitable endeavor to elect couples to share in the role of Deacon, but not with the intention of using this passage as a textual warrant to circumnavigate the issue.

Commonly the argument is given that, as women cannot *exercise authority* over men, a woman cannot serve over men in the role of Deacon. With this premise the argument continues that women can only be Deacon over other women, or in very, painfully delineated circumstances, over men where she gives no command. This circumstance, however, I submit, is part of the evangelical tendency to overcompensate and borders on legalism, while misinterpreting the context of 2 Timothy 2. Consider the purpose of the Deacon again; it is to exercise practical authority to unburden the leadership from practical matters. With that definition, therefore, the female Deacon can ‘teach’ a man how to make tea and coffee, to set up a room for a meeting, to oversee childcare or a host of other practical things without imposing herself upon the gathered church as a teacher or usurper of male authority.

As shown above, the context of Paul’s commands in 1 Timothy 2 refer specifically to the gathered body, and thus it is illogical to presume that women cannot ‘teach’ men in some circumstances. Any husband will readily admit that their wives are often wiser and more sensitive to certain situations than they themselves are. In such a situation it would be imprudent, even potentially harmful, to not listen to those words. This in no way undermines the leadership role of men, but rather adds to it, for it allows a fuller picture and will present more information (from a different perspective) from which the leader can then make a more balanced decision. Likewise, in the church, an eldership that does not interact with the women in the group, but only speaks to the men, will possibly end up only ever serving bacon and curry at potlucks, hosting sports fellowship events and preaching against sexual temptations! Women are also image bearers, and we are dangerously close to being too arrogant to presume that we cannot learn from them in matters of Godliness and holiness; a circumstance which is not Biblical, nor Paul’s intention. Paul’s teaching, when read in context, concerns the gathered body, not other instances when men and women could learn from each other. Women are not permitted

to be elders, they cannot teach the entire body and are not permitted to hold pastoral authority over a man. This does not mean that a woman cannot ‘teach’ a man. Consider the way Apollos was disciplined by both Aquila and Priscilla in Acts, Phoebe’s commendation in Romans 16 (who was called a deaconess) or the training of Timothy by both his mother and grandmother.

An argument not often dealt with by those who presume women ought not to serve is that such a system undermines the role of the Elder. In that *schema* it is argued that the Elder is solely (or at least distinctively primarily) responsible to teach the Word and pray. However, although that is the primary responsibility given in Acts 6, the Elder is responsible for pastoral care of the body as well. Consider 1 Peter 5 where Elders are called to, ‘shepherd the flock that is among you, exercise oversight...not domineering...but being examples to the flock.’¹³

Shepherding means to care for, to guide, protect and lovingly discipline. The role of the elders is to be under-shepherds, which makes it clear that they are to bear the responsibility of protecting and caring for the flock pastorally. It is they who will give an account for how they have led and cared for the congregation,¹⁴ therefore it is they who must bear the responsibility for the teaching of the Word *and how that teaching is applied* in the lives of the flock. This is seen in 2 Timothy 2 where Paul exhorts his protégé that, ‘The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness...’¹⁵ Pastoral ministry requires a Biblical response to false teaching, confusion and dangers to the faith of the flock, such as temptation, sickness, immaturity and vain discussion. This is what Paul has been preparing Timothy for, and has been the responsibility of the elders ever since. Indeed, in James 5 it is even clearer that the elders have pastoral responsibility, for he writes, ‘Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him,

¹³ 1 Peter 5:2-4.

¹⁴ 1 Peter 4:5.

¹⁵ 2 Timothy 2:24-25.

anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.’¹⁶ The Elders, not the Deacons bear the responsibility of pastoral care for the sick. Too many churches place this vital part of the Elders’ obligations on the Deacons which adds much confusion for it crosses the Biblical delineations and blurs the given framework for the ecclesiological structure.

Indeed, those who argue for the ‘men-only’ position must answer the question, ‘Why does Paul bother to mention wives here at all?’ Firstly, he hasn’t mentioned the importance of wives having a Godly character for the higher office and secondly, it is an unlikely place to insert this requirement, particularly if v. 12 is read to be a return to the male Deacon. Rather than our interpretation appearing forced, to answer this requires a great deal of complicated reasoning that is not in the text and exceptionally speculative.

Within Complementarianism

When understood correctly, the practical function of the Deacon arguably ‘suits’ women better than men in the sense that complementarianism promotes women as being ‘helpers’ to men in their headship role. Consider that the ‘deacons’ in Acts 6 were ‘helping’ the Apostles as wives ‘help’ their husbands. The corollary must surely be that the Deacon today assists the Elders by bearing the practical burdens that would otherwise inhibit them giving their full devotion to the ministry of the Word; and therefore by its very nature the doctrine of complementarianism lends itself to permitting female Deacons, when the office of Deacon is correctly understood to be practical not pastoral.

Following this, therefore, it will be worthwhile to consider what exactly is meant by practical care. In Acts 6 the Deacons were called to literally act as waiters. They were to ensure the widows and members were fed fairly and indiscriminately. In that situation the practical care was ‘pastoral’ in the sense that they were protecting other members from abuse. But their ministry was practical – they were serving practically so that the meals were fairly distributed. By this example it is clear that the role of the Deacon is to ensure that the practical needs of the

¹⁶ James 5:14.

membership is met. In a modern context this could mean that the Deacon organizes lunches and dinners for families who have just had a child or who are suffering bereavement or struggling through ill-health. It could mean that the Deacon serves or coordinates a work day to help out older members in maintaining their properties. It could mean that Deacons are responsible for the audio-visual equipment, the nursery, the finances, the administration, the music or any other ministry now deemed 'vital' to ensure the gathered assembly can be as focused on the ministry of the Word as possible. All of these important ministries which appear pastoral are actually under the remit of the Deacon because they are practical, and are ministries at which both women and men can excel.¹⁷

With regards to the office of Deacon, therefore, we must be continually reminded that this office is not pastoral. If there are concerns that a woman cannot hold the office because it borders on pastoral responsibility, it follows that the issue isn't with the office, but the expectation placed upon it. Correct application of the pastoral/practical framework is essential to practicing the offices correctly. Pastoral care is the remit of the Eldership, not the Diaconate. As this is the case, the Deacons, male or female, can only give pastoral support as *members* can.¹⁸ All members have some level of pastoral responsibility for each other to exhort, encourage, lovingly rebuke, pray with, and for, each other to name but a few. This ministry is for all members and does not require an office, except that of member.

Authoritative and pastoral decisions must, therefore, be taken by the Eldership, not the Diaconate. A common example that breeds confusion and dissension in congregations today is ascribing 'member care' to the Diaconate. Some argue this trespasses on the territory of the Eldership. If by 'member care' it is meant that the members are taught and disciplined, this qualifies as either a membership responsibility that the entire body has an obligation to undertake

¹⁷ Although note that the lists of qualifications for both Elder and Deacon primarily deal with character, not ability. The church is to elect Elders and Deacons who are faithful examples of Godliness rather than seeking only someone who could 'fill the position'.

¹⁸ James 5:19-20.

regardless of gender (with appropriateness being considered), or an Eldership issue. Others argue that this is the correct ministry for the Deacon, but because it is primarily a *pastoral* ministry women are not allowed to hold the office. This reasoning is flawed and fails to correctly apply the framework established above. Rather than starting with the premise that Deacons can have this pastoral responsibility but then rule out women from the Diaconate because of the pastoral nature, the starting point ought to be the *type* of ministry, which in this case is pastoral. Therefore the remit of authority is not Diaconal but the Eldership.

As already stated, ‘member care’ is an obligation for every member who has covenanted together in the body. What the Deacon is called to do is to ensure that the body can be as effective, efficient and well-equipped as possible in terms of practicalities. This may mean giving guidance and oversight, but not in matters that pertain to pastoral care and teaching. Rather, that responsibility is always under the remit of the Eldership and then the membership as a whole, male and female. The Deacon, therefore, is to be responsible for the coordination of service and assistance, which follows exactly the pattern in Acts 6. If our expectations are that the Deacons are to care for the members pastorally, the issue isn’t whether women can serve as officers, but rather that we are misunderstanding the office of Deacon itself.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has explained the context of 1 Timothy, noting that Paul’s intention was to ensure that the church was pure in its love for one another, and set about creating an ecclesiological structure that would enable that to be possible. It was shown that the correct understanding of the context of chapter 2 rendered verse 12 superfluous to the debate about female officers. Furthermore, it was shown from Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3 that the office of Deacon concerns practical matters and not pastoral. As such it was demonstrated that our modern propensity to ‘protect’ doctrine in the face of external philosophy has led to an overcompensation with regards to the valuable role women can give to the church as elected Deacons. By considering the implications of a correct understanding of what the role of the

Deacon ought to be it was argued that women are not only eligible for the office of Deacon, but in fact are perfectly suited to it by their role as helpers. Finally this essay argued that our understanding of what a Deacon should do is often incorrect, and that our presuppositions ought to begin with the type of ministry, and apply the framework of the pastoral/practical delineation, rather than assume a non-teaching responsibility must fall on the Diaconate, which would thereby preclude women from serving.