

Considering Women Deacons Jim Samra

For many years we have talked about the need to have a women's advisory board at Calvary Church. The impetus for this was the recognition that while the Scriptures forbid women from exercising final spiritual authority over men in a church, all recognize the importance of having women involved with leadership and serving wherever possible and in whatever ways the Bible encourages.

Along the same lines, when we changed our organizational structure from being a board-led church to being an elder-led church, this opened up the possibility of considering women participating as deacons. We didn't take a stand on this one way or another simply because we had not had the time to study and pray through the matter.

Reading through Judges, I was struck afresh by the role that Deborah played in helping to lead Israel and bring God's people back to him. A number of things stood out to me. First, that Scriptures said, "Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time" (Judges 4:4). This is the first time anyone is called a prophet since the time of Moses. Second, Deborah was instrumental in helping Barak fulfill God's command to him to lead Israel into battle. Third, it was stunning to me to read the Holy Spirit say in Judges 5:6-7: "In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned; travelers took to winding paths. Villagers in Israel would not fight; they held back until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel. God chose new leaders when war came to the city gates." Something was amiss in Israel *until God raised up Deborah*. What might be missing from Calvary of the work that God wants us to do? Or what work might we be able to do better making use of the women like Deborah that God will raise up?

I also came across a verse in Micah 6:4 that reinforced the need to think this through. God says, "I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam." Moses is the highest spiritual authority, but right below Moses we find not only Aaron but Miriam as well. We have something like this in practice with regard to the pastoral staff. The highest authority on our pastoral staff, the senior pastor, is restricted to men only, but right beneath that level we have both men and women who are serving alongside one another on our pastoral staff. When I think about our elders and deacons, the highest spiritual authority – the elders – are all men, but right beneath the elders, the deacons also are male only. Is this right?

All this led me to study the concept of female deacons. The following are the fruits of that study along with some conclusions as to how Calvary might make use of such a study.

Biblical Data

Although I have already mentioned Deborah and Miriam, there is no need to do an in-depth study of women leaders in the Bible. God clearly affirms the significant role that women play in helping lead his people. Mary, Dorcas, Priscilla, Lydia, Euodia and Syntyche are just a few of the women highlighted as leaders in the New Testament. But this is not a question of leadership. It is a much more specific

question: can women hold the office of deacon? The Biblical data that is relevant to this question is much narrower. Two major texts need to be considered: Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11. Three additional texts might also be relevant and should be considered: Acts 6:1-6, 1 Timothy 2:11, and Philippians 4:2.

Romans 16:1-2

According to the NIV translation, Romans 16:1-2 says, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon (διάκονος/*diakonos*) of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.”

By choosing to translate διάκονος/*diakonos* as “deacon,” the NIV gives the impression that Phoebe is a female holding the office of deacon in the church of Cenchreae. This translation is affirmed by others (e.g. RSV, NRSV, GW, NEB). But still others choose to translate διάκονος/*diakonos* as “servant” (e.g. ESV, NIV1984, NET, HCSB, NKJV, NASB). Such a translation leaves open the question as to whether Phoebe should be thought of as a deacon or not.

A few things should be considered. First, many people are hesitant to translate *diakonos* as deacon because they are not convinced that the office of deacon had emerged yet in Christianity. It is true that defined church structure was still emerging and if Phoebe is being identified as a deacon it may be the first mention of such an office in the New Testament. However, Philippians 1:1 clearly mentions “deacons” as an office of the church and Romans and Philippians are close contemporaries. So it is possible that the word was already in use as a title at the time Romans was written.¹

Second, while *diakonos* is often used simply to describe someone who serves, the designation of Phoebe as a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchreae is noteworthy because it is written much more like a title. Translated more literally, she is introduced as “our sister Phoebe, being a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchreae.” The use of the participle “being” is unusual and indicates more of a title.² When Paul wants to simply describe someone as a servant he either uses no verb (e.g. Col. 4:7) or says something like “who is a faithful *diakonos* of Christ” (e.g. Col. 1:7; 1 Tim. 4:6).

Further, Phoebe is a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchreae. When *diakonos* is used as a description connected to something, it is always connected to something universal like God (e.g. Rom. 13:4); Christ (2 Cor. 11:23; Col. 1:7; 1 Tim. 4:6); the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6); the gospel (Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23); Satan (2 Cor. 11:15); righteousness (2 Cor. 11:15); the Jews (Rom. 15:8); or – most importantly for our discussion – the universal church (Col. 1:25). I say most importantly because if Paul

¹ A question relevant to us as a church which modern scholarship shies away from asking, is: what are we supposed to make of the fact that God calls her a *diakonos* in Romans 16:1 knowing full well that within the canon of Scripture this word would indicate the office of deacon?

² This is the only time *diakonos* is used with a participle in Paul. The participle οὖσαν gives the sense of it being a title as it does in Acts 13:1, 19:35 (and perhaps Luke 13:16).

had written that Phoebe is a *diakonos* of the Church, we would have understood him to be saying – like he does of himself in Colossians 1:25 – that she serves Christians. But this is the only instance where someone is a *diakonos* of a localized entity.

Third, Paul is writing a letter of recommendation about Phoebe to the church at Rome. These letters of commendation often had standardized forms (just like our current references do).³ Analyzing what Paul has written in Romans 16 we note that it breaks into three sections: who Phoebe is, what Paul wants the church in Rome to do for her, and a description of why she deserves to have this happen. In this format, Paul's statement that she is a *diakonos* is connected to who she is, not the description of what she does. In other words, if *diakonos* appeared with the phrase "has been the benefactor of many people" it would be more of a description. But Paul places it with "our sister Phoebe," making it sound much more like a title. This would make sense since we believe that Phoebe is actually delivering the letter of Romans to the church in Rome. As such she is acting in an official capacity and we would expect Paul to list her credentials.

Fourth, comparing how Paul speaks of Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 with how he talks of other women and men in the rest of Romans 16 highlights the uniqueness of how Phoebe is being labeled. Priscilla (and Aquila and Urbanus) are identified as co-workers; Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis have worked hard in the Lord; others are dear friends, etc. But no one else is labeled *diakonos*. If it was merely a description, we might have expected others to be described that way – especially Priscilla. Yes, it is an argument from silence, but it is clear that Paul is differentiating Phoebe from everyone else on the list. It can hardly be because Phoebe is a better servant than these other women (and men) are.

For these reasons, it seems best to conclude with most commentators that Phoebe holds an official position at the church in Cenchreae. If that position is not yet a deacon as it will come to be understood later does not nullify the fact we can still identify Phoebe as a "deacon" in some sense. Doug Moo summarizes the point well: "Phoebe held at Cenchreae the 'office' of 'deacon' as Paul describes it in 1 Tim. 3:8-12 (cf. Phil. 1:1). We put 'office' in quotation marks because it is very likely that regular offices in local Christian churches were still in the process of being established, as people who regularly ministered in a certain way were gradually recognized officially by the congregation and given a regular title."⁴

³ On this, see Efrain Agosto, "Patronage and Commendation, Imperial and Anti-Imperial" in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, edited by Richard Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2004), 103-125; and Efrain Agosto, "Paul and Commendation" in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*, edited by J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2003), 101-133.

⁴ Doug Moo, *Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 914.

That Phoebe is a “deacon” is the view of most Romans commentators today.⁵ Calvin also affirmed that Phoebe held a public office in the church,⁶ and others in the reformed tradition after him identified this office as that of deacon.⁷ The view that Phoebe was a deacon is found very early in the church, though mostly in the East.⁸ For example, Origen writing about 246 AD in the earliest extant commentary on Romans says,

“this text [Rm 16:1-2] teaches with the authority of the Apostle that even women are instituted deacons in the Church. This was the function which was exercised in the church of Cenchreae by Phoebe, who was the object of high praise and recommendation by Paul...And thus this text teaches at the same time two things: that there are, as we have already said, women deacons in the Church, and that women, who have been given that assistance to so many people and who by their good works deserve to be praised by the Apostle, ought to be accepted in the diaconate.”⁹

⁵ E.g. Leon Morris, *Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 528-529; William Hendrickson, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 499-501; F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 252-253; Tom Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 787; C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans* Vol. 2, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 781; Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 447; James Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 886-887; Charles Talbert, *Romans*, SHBC (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 332-333; Frank Matera, *Romans*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 338-339; Grant Osborne, *Romans*, IVPNT (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2004), 402-403; James Boice, *Romans* Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 1913-1915; but it is not unanimous as seen in Robert Mounce, *Romans*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 272.

⁶ John Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians* in Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 320-321. Calvin identifies Phoebe with the widows of 1 Timothy 5 and considers them a second sort of deacon, holding public office in the church. For further discussion on this see Elsie A. McKee, *John Calvin: On the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1984), chapter 9.

⁷ E.g. Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1835), 447; Adolph Schlatter, *Romans* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995 translated from 1935 German), 272; Benjamin B. Warfield, “Presbyterian Deaconesses” in *The Presbyterian Review* 10.38 (1889), 283-293.

⁸ Pelagius, writing before AD 410 and commenting on Romans 16:1 tells us that, “even today women deaconesses who live in the east are known to minister to their own sex in baptism.” Theodore de Bruyn, *Pelagius’s Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 151.

Likewise John Chrysostom writing in the late 300s says,

“See how many ways he takes to give her dignity. For he has both mentioned her before all the rest, and called her sister. And it is no slight thing to be called the sister of Paul. Moreover he has added her rank, by mentioning her being “*deaconess*.”¹⁰

All in all, there are substantial exegetical reasons for understanding Phoebe as holding a public office in the church on the order of what will ultimately be known as deacon.

1 Timothy 3:11

We now turn to the second major passage for consideration: 1 Timothy 3:11. First Timothy 3:1-13 addresses the offices of the church, namely that of elder and deacon. In the midst of the discussion of deacons, Paul adds verse 11: “In the same way, the women (γυναῖκας) are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything” (NIV).

The word Paul chooses γυναῖκας/*gunaikas* can either be translated “women” or “wives.” This leaves interpreters of this verse four choices as to who these women are: 1) they are all Christian women; 2) they are female deacons; 3) they are those who assist the deacons in their work, being similar to but distinct from them, whether identified as “deaconesses” or not; 4) they are wives of the deacons.

Although some have argued for the first option, given the fact that verse 11 comes in the middle of instructions to deacons and contains qualifications similar to that of elders and deacons it is highly unlikely that Paul stops for a moment to address all females and then returns to a discussion of deacons.

That leaves options 2, 3 and 4. The important points to consider are:

- 1) When Paul says, “in the same way” at the beginning of verse 11 he is using the same word as in verse 8 to introduce deacons. Both of which are tied back to verse 2 so that Paul is saying “Now the overseer is to be...in the same way deacons are to be...in the same way women are to be.” This is a strong argument for women being a distinct group who are either a part of the deacons or working alongside of them. The fact that Paul goes back to talking about deacons in verses 12-13 might suggest that they are not actually deacons but only strongly associated with the

⁹ Translation is from Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, “The Nature and Characteristics of the Order of the Deaconess” in *Women and the Priesthood*, edited by Thomas Hopko (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1999), 95.

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Homily 30 in Nicene and Post-Nicene Father, First Series, Vol. 11, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 549. See also Theodoret of Cyrus who says of Romans 16:1, “And so large was the congregation of the church of Cenchreae that it even had a woman deacon, one both famous and celebrated.” Robert Charles Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus, Commentary on the Letters of St. Paul*, Vol. 1 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross, 2001), 135.

deacons. Or it may suggest that they are themselves deacons since they are discussed in the section on deacons.

- 2) When Paul uses the word *gunaikas* in 3:2 and 3:12 he is clearly talking about wives. However all uses of *gunaikas* in chapter 2 (verses 9, 10, 11, 12, 14) refer to women and not wives.¹¹ Looking more closely at the times where *gunaikas* refers to wives in 1 Timothy, it is very clear that it must refer to wives because of the construction Paul uses. In each case he literally says “a husband of one wife” (or “a man of one woman”) (1 Tim 3:2, 12) or a “wife of one husband” (1 Tim. 5:9). This means that all of the truly ambiguous uses of *gunaikas* refer to women and not wives. And the use in 1 Timothy 3 is ambiguous because Paul doesn’t say, “in the same way *his* wife is to be worthy of respect.” If *gunaikas* referred to the wives of the deacons, one might expect a link making that explicit.
- 3) Paul does not discuss the qualifications of elders’ wives in 3:2-7. If he doesn’t talk about elders’ wives, why would he be discussing deacon’s wives?¹² It does seem odd that hypothetically a man’s wife could disqualify him from being selected as a deacon but the same person with the same wife could conceivably be chosen as an elder.
- 4) Along the same lines, the character qualities of the women discussed in 3:12 could only be filled by someone who is a Christian. But many men come to faith after they get married, especially in the majority world. In some of those cases their wives do not come to faith. Would we think that God would be prohibiting these men from serving as deacons? On this point, it is worth noting that Titus 1:6 only says that an elders’ *children* must believe. It says nothing about his wife, which is a very interesting omission.
- 5) The fact that verse 12 is about a deacon’s family life makes it more likely that verse 11 is also about the deacon’s family life, which would argue for deacons’ wives being in mind here. However, it could also be argued that what Paul is doing here is addressing deacon character qualities, the character qualities of those women who serve with/as deacons, and then proceeding to talk about the sphere where that character is lived out, namely at home.

¹¹ Paul doesn’t use *gunaikas* in 2 Timothy and in Titus it only appears in the qualifications of elders which is basically a repeat of 1 Tim. 3:2

¹² Some have argued that deacons were more visible and therefore their wives were more visible, but this is far from certain. Elders must be able to teach (3:2), and a teaching ministry would make the elder quite visible. Some have argued that deacons’ wives were more involved with them in their ministry and therefore needed their own qualifications. This is more likely, but elders were required to be hospitable (3:2) and this seems to be a ministry that elders would be doing with their wives. If it does indicate that deacon wives were more involved in ministry this does affirm some role for deacons’ wives alongside of their husbands in the office of deacon.

- 6) The qualifications for women in verse 11 are similar to those of deacons. Women and deacons are to be “worthy of respect.” Deacons are to be “sincere” and women are not to be “malicious talkers.” Deacons should “not indulge in much wine;” women must be “temperate.” Deacons should not pursue dishonest gain and keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience;” women are to be trustworthy in everything. The similarity of requirements points to these women being deacons. However, this begs the question if the women are deacons, why are there separate requirements for them?

All in all, commentators for the most part favor seeing these women as deacons or deacon assistants,¹³ but there is more dissent over this than over Phoebe as a “deacon” or office holder.

Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 are the two most relevant and important passages for this discussion. Both point to women being deacons or involved in serving with the deacons.

There are two other passages that may have some relevance: Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 2:11.¹⁴

¹³ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC (Nashville: Word, 2000), 203 indicates that “most argue for the translation ‘deaconess,’” although he disagrees, but even he says, “While 1 Tim. 3:11 was interpreted above to refer to deacon’s wives, it is also possible that it refers to deaconesses, not so much as an established order but as women involved formally and officially in serving the church” (p. 210). Interestingly, J. L. Reynolds, a Baptist professor and pastor writing in 1849 says, “The Greek term which our translators have rendered ‘wives’ is supposed by the best interpreters to refer to deaconesses, and should have been rendered ‘the females’ in “Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ” reprinted in Mark Dever, *Polity: A Collection of Historical Baptist Documents* (Center for Church Reform, 2001), 360. See also Jeannine Olson who says, “Throughout the centuries, exegetical issues in this text centered on the women. The majority of scholars consider the women in v. 11 to be deacons” in *Deacons and Deaconesses Through the Centuries* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 26. Some examples of modern commentators who take it this way include: Luke Timothy Johnson, *1 and 2 Timothy*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 228-229; Jennifer Stiefel, “Women Deacons in 1 Timothy” *New Testament Studies*, 1995, 442-457; Quinn and Wacker, *1 and 2 Timothy*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 285-286 think they are single women serving as ministers; interestingly Samuel Ngewa writing in an African context argues that these are women deacons in *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, African Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 76-77; Philip Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 265-267; Philip Ryken, *1 Timothy*, REC (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 130-133; I. Howard Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 492-494; Lea and Hayne, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 119-121. Others who disagree include George Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 170-171.

Acts 6:1-6

In Acts 6, the apostles are faced with the problem of being distracted from their primary task of prayer and the ministry of the Word. In response they direct that seven men should be chosen to help them.

Nowhere in this passage are these seven men identified as deacons, but the related noun “service” (*diakonia*, not *diakonon*) is used in verse 1 and the verb “to serve” (*diakoneo*) is used in verse 2. Some in church history saw this as the creation of the office of deacon.¹⁵ However, there are number of factors which mitigate against this.

First, the word *diakonia* is also used of the apostles in this passage to talk about “the ministry of the word” in verse 4. If Luke intended to introduce the office of deacon, this would become highly confusing. Plus, it is difficult to introduce the office of deacon if you never use the word “deacon.”

Second, two of the men here, Stephen and Philip, are important for Luke in chapters 6-8 of Acts, yet neither one is doing diaconal ministry in those chapters. Both are engaged in the ministry of the word. If Luke wanted to introduce the concept of deacon it seems odd that he would highlight the non-diaconal ministry of these men.

Third, there is no other mention of deacons in Acts. The place where you might expect deacons, Acts 11:30 where the collection for the poor is being received, we find elders instead.¹⁶

Therefore, the best thing to say about these seven men is that they are a prototype from which the office of deacon will arise.

But for the purposes of our study we have to ask the question, why were no women chosen?

The answer seems to come from observing what happens with Stephen and Philip in Acts 6-8. The pivotal role both of them play as authoritative teachers of the Word means the selection of the Seven was not so much to have them fill the office of deacon, but to appoint assistants for the Apostles. These assistants would broaden the number of people in leadership so that more leaders for the ministry of the Word and prayer could be raised up.

¹⁴ One might have also included 1 Tim. 5:3-16 (and Acts 9:36-43) since some in church history recognized in this passage the creation of an order of widows and these widows in some cases became intertwined with the concept of diaconess (see below). But most do not see the creation of an order of widows in 1 Tim. 5 and it is highly unlikely that these widows in 1 Tim. 5 are the women being referred to in 1 Tim. 3:11.

¹⁵ For example, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.26.3. If someone argues that Acts 6 is the creation of the office of deacon, this lends more credence to Phoebe filling the office of deacon in Romans 16:1 since Acts 6 happens years before Romans 16 is written.

¹⁶ Peterson, Acts, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 235.

An interesting parallel to this is Jesus' choice of the Twelve. On one hand the twelve gathered around Jesus are a prototype of a local church, even though they are not yet a church – Jesus never calls them one and they do not function like a church. As a prototype for the church, one would have expected there to be women among the Twelve since there would be women in local churches once they formed. But the Twelve were not only a prototype for the church, they were also the future spiritual authorities for the church and as such Jesus did not choose any women.

In Acts 6 the Seven are both a prototype of the future office of deacon and a place where God raised up future ministers of the Word. Women were not selected because deacons are male-only, but because the future planned for some of this group involved teaching with authority reserved for men-only.

1 Timothy 2:12

1 Timothy 2:12 says, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man.” One possible objection to women functioning as deacons or in association with deacons is that it could be a violation of 1 Timothy 2:12 since deacons exercise some level of authority.

Below I provide an explanation for my understanding of what 1 Timothy 2:12 is saying. The summary is that “to teach” and “to exercise authority” are mutually interpreting. They are not separate injunctions. Paul is referring to only that kind of teaching that is authoritative and the exercise of authority that is for enacting and evaluating the teaching of the Word.

Therefore a woman who is serving on the deacon board and shares a devotional with male deacons present would not be violating 1 Tim. 2:12. Likewise, a woman who participates in making a decision that a van should not be purchased for facilities is not violating 1 Tim. 2:12. Furthermore, given that the role of deacon is essentially that of helper or assistant or one who serves, there is nothing in the position of being a deacon that is at odds with what Paul is saying in 1 Tim. 2:12.¹⁷

Further to this point is the recognition that in 1 Timothy 3 Paul conspicuously drops the term “able to teach,” which is present for elders (3:2) showing that he doesn't see any contradiction between what he is saying in 2:11 and the role of deacon.

¹⁷ Consider this position paper adopted by the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board in 2004 and entitled Ecclesiological Guidelines to Inform Southern Baptist Church Planters by Stan Norman, which says, “If a church, however, does not ordain its deacons, then the authority-oversight prohibitions [from 1 Tim. 2:11] would not apply. In that case, the generic meaning of the term ‘deacon’ (Greek: diakonia) is that of a servant or a table waiter. Thus, any member of the congregation is qualified to serve.” Cited by Charles DeWeese, *Women Deacons and Deaconesses: 400 Years of Baptist Service* (Macon, GA: Mercer Press, 2005), 15. The Southern Baptist Convention is perhaps the least egalitarian major denomination that there is today.

Philippians 4:2-3

A third, potentially relevant passage is Philippians 4:2-3. In this passage, Paul lists two women, Euodia and Syntyche. Though it is not explicit, there are strong reasons to consider that both of these women are deacons in the church in Philippi.¹⁸

First, Paul refers to these two women as “co-workers” (*sunergos*). This is a term that is never used for Christians generally, but only for those who are associates of Paul in Christian ministry.¹⁹ While this term is often used for itinerant missionaries, in this case (along with Philemon) it refers to people resident within a particular local congregation.

Second, since the letter of Philippians is addressed to “all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus in Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons” and these two women are in leadership, it seems reasonable to assume that they are deacons rather than overseers. It is possible that they hold neither position, but given the size and relative youth of the church of Philippi, it seems unlikely that two of Paul’s co-workers would not be involved with local church leadership in Philippi.

Third, it is likely that the person Paul is addressing with the anonymous phrase “my true companion” is an overseer and that Paul is encouraging him to help these two women deacons reconcile.

Fourth, we know that the church in Philippi began with Lydia and other women (Acts 16). The church met in Lydia’s home (Acts 16:40) and therefore it would not be surprising to see women involved in leadership in the church in Philippi. In addition, we have evidence of two women deacons at the church of Philippi in the fourth or fifth century²⁰ showing continuity with the role of women from the very founding of the church of Philippi.

Women Deacons/Deaconesses in the Early Church

Having examined the relevant Biblical data, it is worth looking briefly at how the early church understood the idea of deaconesses.²¹ By doing so we guard

¹⁸ The best articulation of this position comes from Davorin Peterlin, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians in the Light of Disunity in the Church* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

¹⁹ E. Earle Ellis, “Paul and His Co-Workers,” *New Testament Studies*, Vol 17, 1970-71, page 440. In 1 Cor. 3:9 and 2 Cor. 8:23, the term “co-worker” is explicitly differentiated from general congregant.

²⁰ Peterlin, 109, who makes the point that both women are referred to as diakonos not diakonissa, the more common term at that point in history. Using the older, Biblical term might indicate that there is a reason for sticking with the older term, including the possibility that there was a long tradition of women deacons in Philippi.

²¹ The term “deaconess” is a tricky term in church history. It can refer to women deacons. It can also refer to a group of women who act alongside of deacons but are a separate group from them.

against the idea that considering women as deacons is part of the spirit of the age in which we live in North America.

The following are some of the earliest known sources we have that acknowledge women deacons in the church:²²

- 1) Pliny the Younger, who was not a Christian but was a persecutor of Christians. Pliny wrote to Emperor Trajan around AD 112 saying, “this made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract truth by torture from two slave-women, whom they call deaconesses.”²³ It is quite significant that a non-Christian who is investigating Christianity when it is less than a hundred years old has come to realize that there is an office of deaconess.
- 2) Clement of Alexandria, writing between AD 190 and 215 speaks first of the apostles taking their wives with them not as spouses but as Christian sisters to help with teaching women. He then says, “We know the dispositions made over women deacons by the admirable Paul in his second letter to Timothy.”²⁴
- 3) Origen, mentioned above.
- 4) The Ecclesiastical Canons of the Apostles
- 5) The Didascalia of the Apostles (c. 250).
- 6) Council of Nicaea (325). This is especially important given that it is the first worldwide council of the church and all Christians adhere to its pronouncements on the Trinity. “In this way one must also deal with the deaconesses or with anyone established in the ecclesiastical office.”
- 7) Epiphanius of Salamis (315-403)
- 8) Basil of Caesarea (329-79)
- 9) John Chrysostom, mentioned above.²⁵

²² The following list was compiled in part from John Wijngaards, *Women Deacons in the Early Church* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2002).

²³ Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 10.96 translated by Betty Radice in *The Letters of Pliny the Younger* (London: Penguin, 1963), 294. B. B. Warfield makes much of this fact along with Romans 16:1 for establishing the position of deaconess in the earliest church. Benjamin B. Warfield, “Presbyterian Deaconesses” in *The Presbyterian Review* 10.38 (1889), 283-293.

²⁴ Clement means 1 Timothy. Clement, *Stromateis*, 3.6.53 translated by John Ferguson in *Fathers of the Church, Vol. 85* (Washington: CUA Press, 1991), 289. He also is probably not referring to 1 Tim. 3:11 but to 1 Tim. 5:9-15 and its discussion of widows. That is because things begin to get confusing in the early church between a discussion of deaconesses and widows, but for our purposes these still all point to a recognition of women holding positions in the church.

- 10) Gregory of Nyssa (335-94)
- 11) Apostolic Constitutions (c. 380).²⁶
- 12) Emperor Theodosius (347-95)
- 13) Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-429)
- 14) Sozomenos (c. 443)
- 15) Theodoret of Cyrrhus, mentioned above.
- 16) Council of Chalcedon (451).
- 17) First Synod of Dvin in Armenia (527)
- 18) Severus of Antioch (465-538)
- 19) Code of Emperor Justinian I (529-564)
- 20) Council of Trullo (692)

In total, we have at least 107 inscriptions or references to women deacons before the seventh century.²⁷

The purpose of mentioning these references from the first few centuries of the early church is to help show that this idea of women in such positions is not a novel invention of our modern culture. However, it should not be thought that these ancient references reflect a uniform understanding or acceptance of the role of deaconess. Examining the historical record can be quite confusing in trying to unravel the relationship between deaconesses and widows; furthermore there is no agreement on exactly what the roles of deaconesses were and what their relationship to elders and deacons were; and there are varying opinions about whether or not they were to be ordained. Finally, deaconesses were much more

²⁵ “Letters to Olympias” translated by W. R. W. Stephens in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 9 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 299. For more on named deaconesses in history see Cecelia Robinson, *The Ministry of Deaconesses* (London: Methuen, 1898).

²⁶ *Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions* 8.19 and 8.28, translated by James Donaldson in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 492, 494. The prayer is beautiful: “O eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the creator of man and of woman, who didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah; who didst not disdain that thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, didst ordain women to be keepers of thy holy gates – do thou now also look down upon this thy servant, who is to be ordained to the office of deaconess, and grant her thy Holy Spirit, and cleanse her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to thy glory, and the praise of thy Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to thee and the Holy Spirit forever.”

²⁷ Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, Johns Hopkins Press, 2005.

common in the East than in the West²⁸ (but again this is complicated by the role that widows played in the West.²⁹)

Conclusion

What are we to make of these things? First, I believe that there is strong warrant for considering women participating with/as deacons. Although Romans 16:1-2, 1 Timothy 3:11 and possibly Philippians 4:2-3 do not constitute a large body of evidence in favor of women deacons, it should be remembered that God clearly wants women participating in every area of church except that which he expressly forbids. As such, in the absence of anything which forbids women participating as deacons, Romans 16:1-2, 1 Timothy 3:11 and Philippians 4:2-3 constitute a strong, positive push in this direction. In addition, our brief investigation into early church history assures us that we are not alone in thinking this.

One thing that is not clear is whether we should be talking about women being deacons or women participating with deacons in their ministry. This is a matter for discussion and prayer. Many details would have to be worked out.

We as elders have found great blessing in leading our church into areas like casting lots for elders and elder prayer for the sick. These are things that we came to through a close and careful reading of the Bible and following where the Spirit led us. While there are always some who believe that every decision is a slippery slope towards something else, we have steadfastly maintained that we are going to do what we think the Spirit is guiding us to do through His Word. This is another of those opportunities.

Furthermore, as those entrusted with the ministry of the Word and prayer, it is our responsibility to take the lead on things like this and not wait for people to ask us to look into these things. As far as I know, there are no women in our church clambering for a role with the deacons. Nor is this a matter of capitulating to the whims of society. We are not discussing women elders or ordaining women. Secular society has long since moved on with regard to the issue of women in leadership and there is far greater pressure to give way on sexual ethics.

²⁸ For some discussion of deaconesses in the first few centuries, see Aime G. Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (San Francisco: Ignatius Pres, 1986), 241, who concludes “The Christians of antiquity did not have a single, fixed idea of what deaconesses were supposed to be. See also G. W. H. Lampe, “Diakonia in the Early Church” in *Service in Christ*, edited by McCord and Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 62-64; Jeanine Olson, *Deacons and Deaconesses*; Warfield, “Presbyterian Deaconesses;”

²⁹ See for example, Tertullian, *To His Wife*, 1.7, who speaks about widows in holy orders and priesthood in fulfillment of 1 Tim. 5:9-10. So while he doesn’t use the term deaconess, it is clear he envisions women participating in the orders of the church.

Additionally there is the added responsibility of looking out for the women who have been entrusted to us by God. Given that they have a harder road to walk (as 1 Peter 3:7 reminds us), it is our responsibility not to place unnecessary burdens or restrictions on them but to seek to encourage them in every way possible.

Excursus: Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12

One of the major issues at stake in our understanding of 1 Timothy 2:12 is the relationship between “to teach” and “to exercise authority.” Do these express the same idea, so that God is forbidding a woman from authoritative teaching? Do they express two different ideas, so that God is forbidding a woman to teach at all or have any level of authority whatsoever? Or do they express overlapping ideas, so that God is prohibiting a woman from more authoritative teaching and from exercising authority with regard to the doctrine of the church?

As with all of the words in this verse, there has been much discussion of the use of *oude*³⁰, which connects the two verbs in Greek.³¹ In this discussion, two major questions have arisen: 1) does *oude* connect two positive or two negatives only or can it mix positive and negative verbal elements and 2) what is the relationship between the two verbal elements connected by *oude*?

The first question need not concern us here. I accept as correct that ‘exercising authority’ as opposed to ‘be domineering’ is the right way to understand the word ‘*authentain*’ and so see it as connecting two positive elements (which all agree is possible). It is the second question, the relationship between the two verbs denoted by *oude* that bears further comment.

The Use of *Oude* with Verbal Elements in the New Testament

In studying the use of *oude* in the New Testament where it connects two verbs,³² one instance is rather striking and provides an opportunity to understand an important way the word functioned in the New Testament.

In Hebrews 10:5-6, the author quotes Psalm 40 saying, “sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased; then I said, ‘here I am it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, my God.’” The two lines of Hebrew poetry: “sacrifice and offering you did not desire” and “with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased” are very typical Hebrew parallelism. But what is fascinating is what the author of Hebrews does to bring these two parallel lines of poetry

³⁰ By *oude*, I am referring to the construction *ou...oude* as well as the similar form *mē...mēde*. *Oude* and *mede* are two forms of the same word.

³¹ See Andreas Kostenberger, “A Complex Sentence: The Syntax of 1 Timothy 2:12” in *Women in the Church*, 2nd Edition, edited by Kostenberger and Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 53-85; [Add more here]

³² For the list of these instances, as well as the argument for why examining *oude* in this way is important, see Kostenberger, “A Complex Sentence.”

together. In verse 8 he writes, “First he says, ‘sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire *nor (oude)* were you pleased with them.’”

The important observation is that *oude* allows the author to express the parallelism present in Psalms in a shorthand way. “You did not desire” and “you were not pleased” are two parallels that function together in Psalm 40. The author of Hebrews chooses *oude* as the word that continues to express the parallelism between these two statements. This points to the fact that *oude* is at home in the world of Hebrew parallelism. This is easily confirmed by looking at the use of *oude* in the LXX where it is regularly used in the context of Hebrew parallelism.

Therefore it is not surprising that when New Testament authors use *oude*, it often sounds like the parallelism that is so common in the Old Testament and the ancient near east in general.³³ For example:

- Matt 6:20: “Where thieves do not break in and [*oude*] steal”
- Matt 7:6: “Do not give to dogs what is sacred [nor] throw your pearls to pigs”
- Matt. 7:18: “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and [*oude*] a bad tree cannot bear good fruit”
- Matt 13:13: “they do not hear or [*oude*] understand”; cf. Mark 8:17)
- Luke 6:44: “People do not pick figs from thornbushes or [*oude*] grapes from briars”
- John 14:17: “it neither sees him nor knows him”
- Romans 9:16: “the man who wills or the man who runs”³⁴
- Phil 2:16: “I did not run or labor in vain”
- Hebrews 13:5: “Never will I leave you nor forsake you.”³⁵
- 1 Peter 2:22: “He committed no sin and [*oude*] no deceit was found in his mouth.”
- 1 Peter 3:14: “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.”³⁶
- 1 John 3:6: “Either seen him or knows him.”

That these show signs of Hebrew parallelism is not surprising since some of these are actually quotes from the Old Testament (Matt. 13:13; Heb. 13:5; 1 Pet. 2:22; 3:14). Even more importantly, Hebrew parallelism is the world in which these NT authors existed. Their minds were shaped by this style of speaking and thinking.

³³ On the pervasive nature of parallelism in the Bible, Adele Berlin comments, “It should not surprise us that the Bible contains so much parallelism, for in the ancient near east milieu from which it emerged most formal verbal expression was parallelistic.” *Dynamics*, 140.

³⁴ The NASB shows the parallelism of the two participles a little more clearly.

³⁵ ESV. The NIV shows the parallelism more strongly, but it leaves the *oude* untranslated.

³⁶ ESV.

The connection to Hebrew parallelism opens up the possibility that the use of *oude* in 1 Timothy 2:12 reflects the parallelism of Paul's Jewish background.³⁷ The possibility of parallelism in 1 Timothy 2:12 is heightened by the observation that in 1 Timothy 2, "Paul seems to have a propensity to use pairs of largely synonymous words to say just about everything important twice."³⁸ Understanding Hebrew parallelism, therefore, may be the key to understanding what Paul means with regard to teaching and exercising authority.³⁹

In her excellent book, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, Adele Berlin presents a linguistically-oriented study of Biblical parallelism. Importantly for our study of 1 Timothy 2, Berlin argues that parallelism is a mark of the biblical style as a whole and can be found in prose as well as poetry, although it is more predominant in poetry. By coming at parallelism from a linguistic point of view, Berlin helps us to see that it can occur in smaller segments like words and phrases.

With regard to parallelism between words, Berlin argues that parallel ideas in the mind of the author activate the parallel words that are used through word association. While these can be somewhat fixed word pairs (like man-woman, or silver-gold) they can also come out of conceptual ideas that are parallel in the mind of the author. They do not have to be fixed parallels documented in the extant literature. Recognizing this, it becomes the task of the interpreter to "see how a given author or verse uses a specific pair for his own purpose – to create his own emphasis or meaning."⁴⁰ This is important because while "teaching" and "authority" may not be fixed parallels, they are clearly connected to each other in Paul.

Berlin then identifies the main semantic function of parallelism: disambiguation and ambiguity. One of the purposes of the second element in a pair is to make clear the first; it "directs the interpretation."⁴¹ But there is another role

³⁷ It has long been noted that Hebrew parallelism is a feature of Paul's style of writing. E.g. Moulton and Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek: Vol. 4 – Style* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 96-97.

³⁸ Craig Blomberg, "Women in Ministry: A Complementarian Perspective" in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 169. His examples are in verses 1, 2a, 2b, 3, 4, 7a, 7b, 8, 9, and 11.

³⁹ Linda Belleville comments that *oude* is a "poetic device that normally sets in parallel two or more natural groupings of words, phrases or clauses." She then goes on to list different categories of usage and then opts for "purpose" as the function in 1 Tim. 2:12. But a better understanding of parallelism is needed in order to understand what Paul is saying. "Women in Ministry: An Egalitarian Perspective" in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 98.

⁴⁰ Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, Revised and Expanded (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 79.

⁴¹ *Dynamics*, 96.

for the second element in the pair. It “may introduce an element of ambiguity into the first. The first line takes on a new shade of meaning when it is read in terms of the second.”⁴² Importantly, she points out that, “both disambiguation and ambiguity coexist in parallelism.”⁴³ “A parallel line does both; it insures the delivery of the information in the first line and, even in the context of that first line, it encourages a second view of things, as alternate interpretation. Redundancy and ambiguity (disambiguation and polysemy) are locked in eternal struggle in parallelism. To choose one is to lose the other, and thereby lose the major dialectic tension of parallelism...Like human vision it superimposes two slightly different views on the same object and from their convergence it produces a sense of depth.”⁴⁴

Looking at other uses of *oude* in the New Testament, we can see examples of how this might function.

Matthew 10:14: “if anyone will not welcome you or [*mēde*] listen to your words leave that home or [*ē*] town and shake the dust off your feet.” The difference between *mēde* and *ē* is clear here. With *ē* there is no interplay between “home” and “town.” The home may be in the town, but the word “home” doesn’t interpret town nor “town” interpret “home.” It is different with “welcome you” and “listen to your words.” If someone is extremely hospitable to a visiting disciple sharing food and home with them but won’t listen to their teaching about the kingdom of God that’s not what Jesus has in mind. Likewise someone who is willing to hear what the apostles are saying but not welcome them into their lives is not what Jesus has in mind. The meaning comes in the interplay between “welcome” and “listen”

Or consider Acts 16:21: “These men are Jews and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or [*oude*] practice.” There are some ritualistic religious practices that are not really accepted as having any real value, and there are some things that can be intellectually accepted but don’t really affect what people do. But here the complaint lodged against Paul and Silas is at the intersection of the two: things that are accepted and practiced. In other words, those who are complaining are saying that Paul and Silas are presenting a fundamentally different approach to life.

Finally, 1 Timothy 6:17: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant or [*mēde*] put their hope in wealth.” Arrogance is a broad idea but its interpretation is constrained by “put their hope in wealth.” Paul’s concern is not simply boasting about how much money one has. Rather it is arrogantly thinking that money will solve all problems. Likewise putting one’s hope in something doesn’t automatically signal arrogance, but in this construction it is that aspect of putting one’s hope in something is being emphasized.

This is what *oude* represents: the dynamic interplay between two elements that mutually interpret one another.

⁴² *Dynamics*, 97.

⁴³ *Dynamics*, 97.

⁴⁴ *Dynamics*, 99.

Oude in 1 Timothy 2:12

Applying these insights on Hebrew parallelism and *oude* to 1 Timothy 2:12 means that “to teach” and “to have authority” mutually interpret one another.⁴⁵ This means that they are not two completely separate activities, nor are they exactly identical with each other. Rather, it means that you cannot read the prohibition against teaching except in light of the prohibition on authority and vice versa. Only in the interplay between the two does the meaning come to the surface.

For this reason, it is unlikely that Paul is forbidding every form of teaching activity that a woman might be engaged with. That might be the interpretation if the parallel idea of exercising authority were not present. But its presence helps us to understand teaching as that kind of teaching that is connected to the exercise of authority. For example we are told that Jesus taught with authority (Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32; John 7:25) and he was questioned as to by what authority he was teaching and doing such things (Matt. 21:23; cf. John 14:10). Paul was given authority for building up the church at Corinth (2 Cor. 10:8), which included, among other things, both the letters that he wrote to them and the teaching that he did among them. Titus is told that he should teach, encourage and rebuke with all authority (Titus 2:15).⁴⁶ This represents the kind of public, authoritative teaching, which should be differentiated from the mutual instruction we all receive from each other.⁴⁷

For this reason, it is also unlikely that Paul is forbidding every form of exercising authority. Rather, what is in mind is the kind of public exercise of authority over teaching, in relation to teaching, or that can happen through teaching. This connection between authority and its exercise in relation to teaching seems to be the connection that Paul is drawing with the story of Adam and Eve in 1 Timothy 2:13-14. Eve was deceived by Satan who tricked her into exercising authority over the instructions communicated to her through Adam.⁴⁸ The point of Eve’s deception

⁴⁵ This is in contrast to the claim of Doug Moo who says, “While the word in question, *oude* (‘and not,’ ‘neither,’ ‘nor’), certainly usually joins ‘two closely related items,’ it does not usually join words that restate the same thing or that are mutually interpreting, and sometimes it joins opposites.” Doug Moo, “What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men?” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by Piper and Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 187.

⁴⁶ See discussion of this verse in Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 766-767.

⁴⁷ The fact that teaching that is connected to authority is in mind here can be seen in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 where Paul is concerned that women who are prophesying in church might be seen to be teaching with their own authority and therefore some sign is necessary to show that this is not what they are doing.

is not that Satan tricked her into ordering Adam around but it comes in relation to the instructions about eating the fruit of the tree. Satan deceived Eve into exercising authority over the instructions from God so that she essentially declared them null and void.

Likewise, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, though a very difficult text to understand, seems best as taken as a prohibition of women exercising public authority in evaluating the prophecies presented in the worshipping assembly.

Priscilla and Aquila taking Apollos aside to instruct him (Acts 18) seems to fit with this pattern of women not exercising authority with regard to the proclamation of the word. By taking him aside and instructing him in private, not only were they being kind, but this also doesn't seem in any way to violate teaching with authority nor exercising authority with regard to teaching. Priscilla's involvement in Apollos' education means that Paul is not prohibiting women from instructing and correcting.

So "to teach" and "to exercise authority" cannot be read separately but only together.

Conclusion

In 1 Timothy 2:12 "to teach" and "to exercise authority" form a mutually interpreting pair of instructions. Reading them as separate injunctions does not do justice to the Greek word, *oude*, that Paul has used to connect them. Likewise one cannot simply be subordinated under the other. Rather they must stand together. In this dialectical interplay there is room for disagreement and discussion about how and when teaching and authority interact.

Practically speaking, 1 Timothy 2:12 is not talking about the situation where a woman stands up in the worship assembly, shares a testimony and as a result men learn something about the nature and character of God. Nor, do I think, it is talking about a woman teaching men in a mixed-gender Bible study. I don't think it is prohibiting a woman from teaching sessions in our Leadership Development Forum that men are present at. Nor is it talking about men reporting to women on our pastoral staff or women running committees that men are serving on. It does not prohibit a woman from leading the church in worship, or advising the elders on various policies.

The most important thing to remember is that within the dynamic interplay between "to teach" and "to exercise authority," there are some gray areas, but God has provided His Spirit to guide and direct us.

⁴⁸ On the view that what is going on in these verses is related to the issue of male headship, see Tom Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15" in *Women and the Church*, 111-115.