

DEACONESSES

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

INTRODUCTION

The chapter will contain a discussion of and consideration of the evidence for the existence of an office in the Lord's church called "deaconess." The various arguments (both pro and con) on the existence of an office of "deaconess" will be considered in this Chapter. Both sound hermeneutics and logic will be applied to the question of whether or not there exists an office of "deaconess."

USAGE OF THE GREEK WORD TRANSLATED "DEACON"

The Greek word *διακονος* (pronounced *diakonos*) is found 30 times in the Greek N. T. This word is translated: minister(s) (20 times in the KJV), servant(s) (7 times in the KJV), and deacon(s) (3 times in the KJV). This word has two basic uses in the N. T. First, it is used generically for one who serves (either in an office or not in an office). Second, it is used specifically for an office. This word is unquestionably used for an office in: Phil. 1:1, 1 Tim. 3:8, and 12. Most of the passages where this word is translated "servant(s)" or "minister(s)" are clearly not referring to an office in the church. One passage is asserted (by some) to be referring to an office (Rom. 16:1). We will consider Rom. 16:1 in this chapter.

It is evident that the word *diakonos* is used generically most of the time in the N. T. With this in mind, the word should be interpreted generically unless there is something in the context to force us to the conclusion that it is used specifically (for an office). Note the following rule of hermeneutics: *A word is to be used in its broadest sense, unless there is something in the context to limit the meaning of the word.* With this in mind we ask the following question: "How do we know that a word is used specifically (for an office)?" Unless there are qualifications for the office, there cannot be an office. There are qualifications for: apostles (Acts 1:21-22, etc.),¹ elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7, Tit. 1:5-9, etc.), and deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13), but where are the qualifications for deaconesses? Some answer this question by claiming that 1 Tim. 3:11 constitutes the qualifications for a deaconess, others claim that 1 Tim. 5:3-16 are the qualifications for a deaconess, still others claim that both 1 Tim. 3:11 and 5:3-16 are the qualifications of a deaconess. We will consider the claim that 1 Tim. 3:11 refers to the office of deaconess in this chapter. We have considered 1 Tim. 5:3-16 in another chapter in this volume (Chapter 31). Note the following argument:

First Premise: If there are qualifications for the office of deaconess, then there is an office of deaconess.

Second Premise: There are qualifications for the office of deaconess. (Assertion of some in the church - they use 1 Tim. 3:11 and/or 1 Tim. 5:3-16 as their proof-texts for this claim.)

Conclusion: There is an office of deaconess.

In order to prove that there exists an office of deaconess (from this argument), they must prove that 1 Tim. 3:11 and/or 1 Tim. 5:3-16 constitute qualifications for this office. This question will be considered in the following portions of this chapter and in Chapter 31 (along with other questions). Note the following argument:

First Premise: If there is an office of deaconess, then there are qualifications for the office of deaconess.

¹ For a more thorough discussion of the "signs of an apostle" refer to Fox, 2005, pp. 467-470.

Second Premise: There is an office of deaconess. (Assertion of some in the church. Note that this premise “begs the question.”)

Conclusion: There are qualifications for the office of deaconess. (1 Tim. 3:11 and/or 1 Tim. 5:3-16)

Note the dilemma that those who claim that there exists an office of deaconess:

Disjunction: Either those who claim that there exists an office of deaconess must assume that the office exists to prove that 1 Tim. 3:11 and/or 1 Tim. 5:3-16 constitute qualifications for the office or they must assume that 1 Tim. 3:11 and/or 1 Tim. 5:3-16 are sets of qualifications for the office of deaconess to prove that the office exists.

First Premise: If they assume that the office of deaconess exists to prove that 1 Tim. 3:11 and/or 1 Tim. 5:3-16 constitute qualifications for the office, then they are begging the question.

Second Premise: If they assume that 1 Tim. 3:11 and/or 1 Tim. 5:3-16 are sets of qualifications for the office of deaconess, they are begging the question that 1 Tim. 3:11 and/or 1 Tim. 5:3-16 constitute qualifications for the office.

Conclusion: Either option they take constitutes “begging the question.”

Clearly, they are engaging in circular reasoning in their argumentation. This is evident from the fact that the word “deaconess” is not employed in either 1 Tim. 3:11 and/or 1 Tim. 5:3-16. We will consider the possibility that other passages prove that an office of “deaconess” exists in the following portions of this chapter.

ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF AN OFFICE OF DEACONESS

The first argument for the existence of an office of deaconess is that some translations of Rom. 16:1 translate the Greek word *διακονος* (pronounced *diakonos*) as: “deaconess.” Note that the ASV footnote is: “deaconess.” The appeal to translations is an appeal to human authority. (The appeal to human authority was demonstrated to be unsound in Fox [2003, Vol. I, Chap. One].) Difficulties with various translations were set forth in Fox (2005, Vol. II, Chap. Fourteen). The Greek word *diakonos* is found about 31 times in the Greek N. T. It is translated: “deacons” 3 times, “minister” 14 times, “ministers” 6 times, “servant” 5 times, and “servants” 3 times. The verb form of this word is found about 37 times in the Greek N. T. It is clear that the word *diakonos* is used for an office in 1 Tim. 3:8-13 and Phil 1:1. It is also clear that it is not used for the office of a deacon in Rom. 13:4, 1 Cor. 3:5, Eph. 3:7, etc. This demonstrates that it is not possible to prove anything about this word only from how the various translators rendered the word.

The second argument for the existence of an office of deaconess is that the Greek word *γυναικας* accusative plural of *γυνη* (pronounced *gynē*) is translated “women” (1 Tim. 3:11) in the following translations: ASV, NASB, NRSV, etc. It is translated “wives” in the: KJV, NKJB, NIV, NERV, etc. The word *gynē* is discussed in (pp. 165-166, 255, and 265). It is evident that the context determines whether this is translated “wives” or “women.” If it were to be translated “women,” this would be saying that women: “... must be grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.” There is no rational reason to give the qualifications of women during the listing of the qualifications of deacons, unless the word “women” is a figure of speech (a synecdoche) where the word “women” represents something else (possibly a deaconess). This forces the language to be figurative language, but figurative language is not the rule in biblical interpretation. (cf. CHART RW-35) To interpret this as “wives” does not require this to be figurative language, but it is literal language. In order to prove that the word *gynē* must be interpreted to mean “deaconess” two things must be proven:

1-Those making this claim must prove that the word *gynē* must be translated as “women.”

2-Those making this claim must prove that the word *gynē* must be interpreted as a figure of speech that equates the word *gynē* to the elliptical word “deaconess.”

The third argument for the existence of an office of deaconess was made by Nichol:

If you hold this view, you are confronted with the question: “Why is it that Paul makes reference to the wives of the deacons, making certain qualifications necessary for one to be a deacon; when in the same connection he had been discussing the bishops, but make no reference to the qualifications of the wife of a man who could be a bishop?”

To me it seems absurd to contend that Paul when discussing the qualifications of a deacon would turn aside abruptly and mention the character of the deacon’s wife; but makes no reference to the character of a bishop’s wife, when in the same connection he had discussed the qualifications of bishops, but did not say one word about the qualification of the bishop’s wife. In truth verse eleven in the passage does not have reference to the wife of a deacon. (pp. 160-161)

Allow me to put brother Nichol’s argument into logical form:

First Premise: If Paul had intended for 1 Tim. 3:11 to refer to the wives of the deacons, then Paul would have explicitly given qualifications for the wives of the bishops.

Second Premise: Paul did not explicitly give qualifications for the wives of the bishops. (*Modus tollens*)

Conclusion: Paul did not intend for 1 Tim. 3:11 to refer to the wives of the deacons.

The first premise is not sound because the consequent is not a necessary condition for the truth of the antecedent. Neither is the antecedent a sufficient condition for the truth of the consequent.

Note how this argument can be converted into a categorical proposition:

Major Premise: All qualifications that Paul intended to bind upon deacons are qualifications that Paul explicitly bound upon the bishops (elders).

Minor Premise: No qualifications of the wives are things that Paul explicitly bound upon the bishops (elders).

Conclusion: No qualifications of the wives are things that Paul intended to bind upon deacons.

Let us test this major premise in the following argument:

Major Premise: All qualifications that Paul intended to bind upon deacons are qualifications that Paul explicitly bound upon the bishops (elders).

Minor Premise: No qualification of “not being double-tongued” is a thing that Paul explicitly bound upon the bishops (elders).

Conclusion: No qualification of “not being double-tongued” is a qualification that Paul intended to bind upon deacons.

It is clear that this conclusion is untrue because Paul wrote:

1 Tim. 3:8 Deacons in like manner *must be* grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; 9 holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. 10 And let these also first be proved; then let them serve as deacons, if they be blameless.

Note that there are at least three qualifications that are explicitly given for the office of a deacon that are not explicitly given for the office of a bishop (elder):

1-A deacon must be: “... not double tongued,”

2-A deacon must be one who is: “...holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.”

3- A deacon must: “... also first be proved; ...”

It is evident that none of these three qualifications is explicitly given to the bishops (elders). The *a fortiori* principle (that I set forth in Fox [2003, Vol. I, Appendix B]) demonstrates that these qualifications apply to the office of a bishop (elder). This principle was also discussed in: Fox (2005, Vol. II, pp. 6, 36, 55, 124, 204, 252, 265, 351, 353, 361, 466, 497, 543, 572, and 666), this present Volume p. 330, and Fox (2007, pp. 98 and 133). This principle is succinctly set forth in the following statement: “Whatever is true of the lesser is true of the greater.” Note my argument:

First Premise: If the lesser office (deacon) must have qualification “x”,² then the greater office (a bishop) must have qualification “x.”

Second Premise: The lesser office (deacon) must have qualification “x.”

Conclusion: The greater office (a bishop) must have qualification “x.”

This point was set forth in Fox (2003, Vol. I, p. 596).

The fourth argument is that women labored with Paul (Phil. 4:3), therefore must have been preachers, deaconesses, etc. (Schubert, p. 229). This argument is an enthymeme where the major premise is omitted. Note the argument:

Major Premise: Omitted

Minor Premise: Women are those who labored with Paul (Phil. 4:3).

Conclusion: Women are those who were either preachers or deaconesses or both.

The major premise required to complete this enthymeme (to make this argument valid [properly constructed]) is: “All those who labored with Paul are those who were either preachers or deaconesses or both.” This major premise “begs the question.” (It assumes what the one making it is trying to prove.)

The fifth argument for the existence of an office of deaconess was made by some preachers who quote (mishandling) Thayer. He wrote:

διακονος (pronounced *diakonos*): “-ου, ό, ή,³ ... *one who executes the commands of another, esp. of a master; a servant, attendant, minister ... 2. a deacon, one who, by virtue of the office assigned him by the church, cares for the poor and has charge of and distributes the money collected for their use ... a deaconess [ministra, Plin. Epp. 10, 97], a woman to whom the care of either poor or sick women was entrusted, Ro. xvi. 1 ... 3. a waiter, one who serves food and drink ... represents the servant in his activity for the work; not in his relation, either servile, as that of δουλος, or more voluntary, as in the case of the θεραπων to a person ...*” (Thayer, p. 138)

I caution the reader to be aware that Thayer is nothing more than a commentator when he interprets any passage of Scripture. The usage of Thayer’s commentary (above) to prove that there exists an office of deaconess is a sophomoric and unscholarly act and is unworthy of anyone who knows how to use authorities (cf. Fox, 2003, Vol. I, Chap. 1).

The sixth argument was set forth by Roy Deaver, when he wrote:

² Where qualification “x” is: (1) not double-tongued, (2) holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience, (3) also first be proved, and (4) “ Even so *must their wives be* grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things.”

³ The reader should note that the entry in Thayer’s lexicon begins: “-ου, ό, ή, ...” The -ου, entry gives the genitive-ablative case ending (singular). The ό, entry gives the nominative case masculine article (singular). The ή, entry gives the feminine gender article (singular). The reader should note that this demonstrates that this noun is either masculine or feminine. The -ος ending is either masculine or feminine (the student should consult a lexicon to determine which it is). The context (either an article, adjective, or participle may also reveal which gender is being contemplated). In some instances (as with διακονος or θεος) it can be either masculine or feminine (with the same word).

To say that Phoebe was “our sister” was to say that she was a Christian, and to say that she was a Christian was to imply that she was a servant in the general sense. The fact that Paul refers to Phoebe as being a “sister” and a “servant” would seem to suggest something in addition to that denoted by “our sister,” and so possibly is used in its technical sense. (pp. 601-602)

This argument is based upon pure assumption. I admit that he is correct to say: “... so possibly is used in its technical sense,” but I also point out that it is possible that it is not used in its technical sense. There is nothing in this construction that answers whether or not it is used in its technical sense. In the absence of other evidence, this argument does not prove anything. It is entirely possible that Phoebe was a servant in the sense set forth by the word: “... succourer” (KJV) or: “... helper” (ASV) in Rom. 16:2 (cf. below [the eighth argument] for a further discussion of this word). That is, Phoebe served the church by contributing to the support of those who were preaching the gospel.

The seventh argument is the claim that the word translated: “... in like manner,” (ASV) “even so” (KJV) in 1 Tim. 3:11, (ὡσαυτως – pronounced *hōsautōs*) proves that this is an office. *hōsautōs* is defined as: “(ὡς and αὐτως), adv. ... *in like manner, likewise*” (Thayer, p. 682) “adv. ... (*in the same way*), *similarly, likewise*” (BAG, p. 907) It is pure assumption (begging the question) to draw the conclusion that the word “likewise” proves that this is introducing a new office (deaconess). It could easily mean that the wives are to have qualifications, just as their husbands are to have qualifications. The word “*hōsautōs*” could be just setting forth the qualifications of three classes of people: (1) elders (verses 1-7), (2) deacons (verses 8-10 and 12), and (3) deacon’s wives (verse 11).

The eighth argument is based upon the claim that the word helper - succourer – KJV, proves that Phoebe had an office in the church.

προστατις pronounced *prostatīs* “(fem. of the noun προστατης, fr. προιστημι); **a.** prop. *a woman set over others.* **b.** *a female guardian, protectress, patroness*, caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources ...” (Thayer, p. 549)

Kittel wrote:

How significant the idea of care is in NT προισταμαι may be seen from the fact that προστατις is the word for “protectress” or “patroness” in R. 16:2. Similarly προστατης, which does not occur in the NT, means “protector” ... (TDNT, p. 703)

BAG wrote: “*protectress, patroness, helper ... she has been of great assistance to many, including myself ...*” (p. 726)

Let us assume that the first definition given by Thayer is correct. If it is correct, then Phoebe had been set over many in the church (this is possible, if she had been set over women and/or children). However, it is not possible for her to be set over an apostle (Paul). Note how this passage reads:

Rom. 16:1 I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church that is at Cenchreae: 2 that ye receive her in the Lord, worthily of the saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever matter she may have need of you: for she herself also hath been a helper of many, and of mine own self.

The following argument proves that this is not true:

First Premise: If Phoebe was a *prostatīs* and the word *prostatīs* means “one set over others,” (in Rom. 16:1) then Phoebe was set over an apostle.

Second Premise: Phoebe was not set over an apostle.⁴

⁴ No person (except Jesus) is over an apostle in the Lord’s church.

Conclusion: Phoebe was either not a *prostatis* or the word *prostatis* does not mean “one set over others” (in Rom. 16:1).

The following disjunction clarifies my argument:

First Premise: Phoebe was either not a *prostatis* or the word *prostatis* does not mean “one set over others” (in Rom. 16:1).

Second Premise: Phoebe was a *prostatis* (in Rom. 16:1).

Conclusion: The word *prostatis* does not mean “one set over others” (in Rom. 16:1).

The reader should note that Phoebe was a helper (ASV) or succourer (KJV) of many (including Paul). From all appearances, Phoebe was a wealthy woman who gave freely of her wealth to support the preachers of the gospel. There is no one over an apostle (in the Lord’s church), except Christ. There were women who gave of their substance to the Lord (Mk. 15:40-41) and others who gave of their substance to support Paul and Silas (Acts 16:15). Vine gives the following definition:

PROSTATIS (προστατις), a feminine form of *prostatēs*, denotes a protectress, patroness; it is used metaphorically of Phoebe in Rom. 16:2. It is a word of dignity, evidently chosen instead of others which might have been used (see, e.g., under HELPER), and indicates the high esteem with which she was regarded, as one who had been a protectress of many. *Prostatēs* was the title of a citizen in Athens, who had the responsibility of seeing to the welfare of resident aliens who were without civic rights. Among the Jews it signified a wealthy patron of the community. (pp. 1111-1112)

Souter defines προστατις as: “(a development of the political sense of προστατης [patronus], a political sponsor of resident aliens), protectress, patroness.” (p. 221)

The ninth argument is based upon the expression: “... servant of the church” in Rom. 16:1. The claim is made that the expression: “... of the church” makes the word *diakonos* to be specific (the technical usage – deaconess). However, Paul was a: “... servant (*diakonos*) of the church” (Col. 1:24-25). This argument is an enthymeme with the major premise unstated. Note the form of the argument:

Major Premise: Unstated

Minor Premise: Rom. 16:1 is an instance where the word *diakonos* is linked with the words: “... of the church.”

Conclusion: Rom. 16:1 is an instance where the word *diakonos* means “deacon (deaconess)” of the church.

From this minor premise and conclusion we derive the following major premise: “All instances where the word *diakonos* is linked with the words “of the church” are instances where the word *diakonos* means ‘deacon (deaconess)’ of the church.” Now let us use this major premise with another minor premise:

Major Premise: All instances where the word *diakonos* is linked with the words: “... of the church” are instances where the word *diakonos* means “deacon (deaconess)” of the church.

Minor Premise: Col. 1:24-25 is an instance where the word *diakonos* is linked with the words: “... of the church.”

Conclusion: Col. 1:24-25 is an instance where the word *diakonos* means “deacon (deaconess)” of the church.

Since Paul was single, how could he be a deacon in the church (1 Tim. 3:12)? It is evident that the major premise is untrue. Therefore, this argument is unsound.

The tenth argument is from extra-biblical sources. There are two basic sources that are appealed to by those making this argument: (1) commentaries and/or lexicons and (2) non-religious sources. The mishandling of lexicons has been considered in detail in Fox, 2003, Chap. 1. The mishandling of commentaries constitutes an appeal to a non-inspired authority and is unworthy of a Christian. The usage of non-religious sources can be seen in the appeal to a quote by Thayer:

“...ἡ διακονος *a deaconess* [*ministra*, Plin. Epp. 10, 97], a woman to whom the care of either poor or sick women was entrusted, Ro. xvi. 1 ...” (Thayer, p. 138) The reader should note that Thayer reveals that this quote of Pliny was written in Latin (not Greek) and the translation of the Latin word: “*ministra*” is unclear and this proves nothing about the offices in the Lord’s church. For example, I have been called: “a pastor” by various people (even when I was a young preacher), before I was appointed as an elder. Whatever terminology the world uses to refer to God’s people proves nothing about the reality of the offices in the Lord’s church!

ARGUMENTS MADE BY SOME AGAINST THE EXISTENCE OF AN OFFICE OF DEACONESS

The first argument made against the existence of an office of deaconess is that it would have women in authority over men. The argument is based upon 1 Tim. 2:12 (... not usurp ...). The problem with this argument is that it ignores the fact that women were in a higher office than that of a “*deaconess*.” Women served in the office of prophetess (Lk. 2:36, Acts 2:17-18, and 21:9). I do not believe that an honest person (who is rational) can read my writings and draw the conclusion that I support women having authority over men either in spiritual matters or in the family. I write this because certain men have taken things that I have written, out of context, to make it appear that I teach something that I do not teach.

Even if one were to prove that an office of “*deaconess*” existed in the New Testament, it would not prove that the women in that office exercised authority over men. There were women prophets (prophetesses) and they were forbidden to exercise authority over men. Note the *a fortiori* principle⁵ applied to this situation:

First Premise: If prophetesses were forbidden (not permitted) to take leadership roles over men in the New Testament, then the lesser offices (assuming⁶ there is an office of “*deaconess*”) are forbidden (not permitted) to take leadership roles over men in the New Testament.

Second Premise: Prophetesses were forbidden (not permitted) to take leadership roles over men in the New Testament.

Conclusion: The lesser offices (assuming there is an office of “*deaconess*”) are forbidden (not permitted) to take leadership roles over men in the New Testament.

Obviously, a *deaconess*⁷ could have authority over women and/or children in their roles, but she could not have authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12). I realize that some of the change-agents in the Lord’s church have a concept of a *deaconess* that would have women to be in authority over men (violating 1 Tim. 2:12).

The second argument made against the existence of an office of *deaconess* is that there is no historical evidence for the existence of an office of “*deaconess*.” In fact, this argument may not even be true because there is some historical evidence (from the apostate church [of the third⁸ and fourth centuries] and other false religions that there were women who functioned in the role of a *deaconess*). It seems to be true that there is little (if any) evidence in the first two or three centuries after the establishment of the church for an office of *deaconess*. This argument is based upon the “traditions of men” and does not prove that the office is not biblical in nature.

⁵ Cf. Fox, 2003, Vol. I, Appendix B.

⁶ This assumption is only made for the sake of argument.

⁷ Assuming there exists an office of “*deaconess*” (which remains to be proven).

⁸ Cf. the Syrian: *Didascalia Apostolorum* (late 3rd century A. D.). This is the earliest document that I (M. Fox) have found to support the office of *deaconess*. In addition, I refer the reader to various Bible dictionaries and history books.

The third argument made against the existence of an office of deaconess is that there is no biblical evidence for the existence of an office of “deaconess.” This argument is certainly sound. I call upon the readers of this Volume to demand that those who claim that there is an office of deaconess set forth biblical evidence for the existence of such an office. In the absence of biblical evidence, we cannot support such an office.

The fourth argument made against the existence of an office of deaconess is that 1 Tim. 3:11 (the supposed qualifications of a deaconess) is inserted within the qualifications of the deacons. There are no words (in 1 Tim. 3:12) to send one back to the deacon’s qualifications. There is no good reason to interpret 1 Tim. 3:11 as the qualifications of a deaconess. It is irrational to argue that 1 Tim. 3:11 gives the qualifications of a deaconess, then argue that there must be an office of deaconess because 1 Tim. 3:11 gives the qualifications of the office. This is irrational because one must assume that there exists such an office to draw the conclusion that 1 Tim. 3:11 gives the qualifications of the office. (This is circular reasoning!)

ADDITIONAL REMARKS ON 1 TIMOTHY 3:8-12

It is clear that Paul is writing about deacons in 1 Tim. 3:8-10 and 1 Tim. 3:12. Does the apostle go from deacons to deaconesses (in verse 11) and then back to deacons (without warning) in verse 12?

Why did Paul not just deal with deacons (verses 8-10 and 12) together and then begin a new section with verse 11 (assuming that verse 11 relates to deaconesses). Paul could have easily started verse 11 (in this new arrangement) with the feminine form of *diakonos* (by using either a feminine article or a feminine adjective with the word *diakonos*).⁹ This same line of argumentation could be applied to 1 Tim. 5:3-16: Why did Paul not just call these women “deaconesses” rather than calling them “widows indeed?” It is manifest that this (1 Tim. 3:11) is more reasonably interpreted as “wives” as the KJV renders this verse.

SUMMARY

The word *diakonos* is used in both a specific and a generic manner. There is no evidence that the word *diakonos* was ever used (in the N. T.) for an office that could be styled “deaconess.” Every argument, that I have encountered, to prove that such an office existed is either hermeneutically or logically unsound.

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⁹ The word *diakonos* could be either masculine or feminine (we only know from the context, or from modifiers [adjectives, pronouns, or participles]).

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