

Deaconess or Deacon's Wife

Word Study

The term deacon, δίακονος / diakonos, is translated in various ways since it means “table-waiter,” “servant,” “minister” and is also transliterated as deacon. How it is translated depends on the context and traditions of the translator. It is an interesting word group in that there is no feminine form of the noun for the person who is a δίακονος / diakonos. At the same time, the act or role of that service is feminine, διακονία / diakonia, - serve, help, assist, ministry. Since there is no Greek word for a female deacon, that was not an option for Paul in 1 Timothy 3:11 (more on that later). (See: [Deacon Qualifications & Word Study](#))

Romans 16:1

Phoebe is specifically referred to as a δίακονον / diakonon in Romans 16:1. This word refers to a person with a position / title / designation of some sort. While there is no feminine form of this word, Paul could have avoided any confusion by using the verb or the feminine noun form of what she did - minister / serve. If either διακονεω / diakoneō or διακονία / diakonia had been used, the verse could have been translated as “*who serves (is serving) the church which is in Cenchrea*”). Instead, Paul uses the masculine term and specifically designates her as a δίακονον / diakonon - *a servant in the church at Cenchrea*. The question is why Paul did that since there were other options for him to be clear if he was not referring to any sort of office in that church?

1 Timothy 3:11

If there was a feminine form of δίακονος / diakonos, Paul could have used it in 1 Timothy 3:11, but since there is not, it was not an option. The term he did use, γυναικας / gunaikas is the generic word for woman with context determining if this woman was being referred to as a wife or not (a husband's woman). The context here is ambiguous only in the sense that Paul does not specifically designate this woman as the wife of a deacon which he could have done very easily. Translators divide on the issue - woman (NASB, LSB, NIV, Young's Literal, etc.) wife (NKJV, ESV, Holman, etc.)

Here are the arguments pro and con whether 1 Timothy 3:11 is referring to a deacon's wife or to a deaconess.

Interpreting 1 Timothy 3:11

- 1 Timothy 3:11 (DARBY), *The women in like manner grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things.*
- 1 Timothy 3:11 (YLT), *Women—in like manner grave, not false accusers, vigilant, faithful in all things.*
- 1 Timothy 3:11 (NASB95 & LSB), *Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.*
- 1 Timothy 3:11 (ESV), *Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.*
- 1 Timothy 3:11 (NKJV), *Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.*

1 Timothy 3:11 (NA27) γυνακας ὡσαύτως σεμνάς μὴ διαβόλους
 Women likewise dignified not slanderers / malicious
 gossip

νηφαλίους πιστὰς ἐν πᾶσιν
 Temperate, faithful in all

1) Wives

PRO

- A) The mention of these women comes in the midst of, not after, the qualifications of deacons. The character of deacon's wives is an integral part of the deacon's qualifications (Cook, p. 777)
- B) The office of deacons involved much more of the lay element and by its nature would involve more assistance from a wife (e.g. in the distribution of alms) (Cook, p. 777)
- C) Cf. CON B below. Overseer's wives cannot participate in their husband's official service the way deacon's wives can (Fairbairn, p. 150).
- D) One part of a deacon's office could be carried out more effectively by deacon's wives (i.e. care of the sick and destitute)
- E) The use of γυναῖκας / gunaikas rather than αἱ διάκονοι / hai diakonoi favors a reference to deacons' wives (Huther, p. 152)

CON

- A) The qualifications contain no reference to domestic duties (Cook, p. 777). There are only those which qualify for confidential ministry (Fairbairn, p. 150).
- B) Wive's qualifications were not given in connection with Overseers (Cook, p. 777; Ellicott, p. 49)
- C) No article or possessive pronoun is found to connect these women with the deacons just described (Fairbairn, p. 150); Ellicott, p. 47). If Paul wanted to make it clear that he was referring to wives of deacons, he could have easily done so by using an article, a possessive pronoun, or the genitive of deacon.
- D) The mention of deacon's domestic responsibilities in vs. 12 make it probable that the women's domestic duties would have been mentioned if these were deacon's wives (Ellicott, p. 48).
- E) Cf. PRO A above. If the character of a deacon's wife is integral to a deacon's qualifications, the character of an overseer's wife would also have to be integral to his qualifications especially since counseling is part of teaching. Since an overseer is also an elder, he and his wife will generally be older with his wife involved in teaching younger women (Titus 2:3-5).
- F) Cf. PRO A above. Since the qualifications occur in the midst of the qualifications of a deacon, it designates those who *likewise* have an office of ministry as do deacons with specific qualifications set out for them.
- G) Cf. PRO B, C, D above. Acts 6 is often referred to as evidence of Deacons handling "lay" and "domestic" responsibilities, but the seven men chosen were charged with carrying out a specific responsibility of "table waiting" on behalf of the apostles. This only sets a precedence for those who would later have an office of Deacon to carry out tasks as assigned on behalf of the Elders. There are no restrictions in Acts 6 on what

either Deacons or Elders can do. Philip was an evangelist (Acts 8; 21:8), and Stephen was a teacher / apologist (Acts 6:8-7:60). Pastors / teachers (Eph. 4:10-11) have a primary responsibility in preaching, teaching and prayer, but they also equip the saints for the work of ministry in many areas while counseling, carrying for the sick and dying (James 5). The Pastor's wife, especially in a small church, is often involved in helping him these later responsibilities as well carrying our her own ministries in the church.

H) Cf. PRO E above. Using a feminine article with a plural of a masculine noun, deacon (αἱ διάκονοι / hai diakonoi) would have caused confusion , not clarity. See CON C above.

2) A Female Deacon responsible to assist in ministry

PRO

- A) Paul would hardly omit an order which, in the case of Phobe in Romans 16:1, appears to have existed at Cenchrea (Cook., p. 777). Cf. CON A & C below Paul specifically commends her as a διάκονον / diakonon when he could have easily commended here simply as someone who serves (διακονία / diakonia or verb form) in the church.
- B) “Likewise” (ὡσαύτως / hōsautōs) in 3:11 was also used in 3:8 to introduce a new office.
- C) The same verb (δεῖ / dei - *must be*) used in 3:2 governs here in 3:11 as in 3:8
- D) This is the same grammatical construction used for transitions to new groups in 2:9 and in Titus 2:3, 6 (Fairbairn, p. 150)
- E) There is a parallelism of qualifications between v. 8 and v. 11 (Ellicott, p. 47; Lock, p. 40)
- F) Cf. Con E below. These changes are consistent with the ways women's roles differ from men's (Ellicott, pg. 47)
- G. Instructions throughout this section are guidelines for qualification for office, not exhortations to govern lifestyle (Huther, p. 152)
- H. Cf. CON D below. One could hold that Paul was already speaking of deaconesses before limiting his remarks to male deacons beginning in vs. 12 (Dibelius - Conzelmann, p. 58).
- I. Cf. CON D below. The listing of qualities within the deaconess' list could indicate another office closely related to that of a deacon (διάκονον / diakonon)
- J. Cf. CON B below. A catalogue of widows eligible to be supported by the church is irrelevant to a separate office of females who minister that are not necessarily widows
- K. CF CON F below. Since there are no qualifications set for an Overseer's wife, it is difficult to reason that there must be qualifications set for a Deacon's wife. An ungodly Overseer's wife can do much more damage to the church ministry than an ungodly Deacon's wife.

CON

- A) Evidence for existence of such an office at this early date is far from clear (Cook, p. 777).
- B) A class of female ministers is indicated by the Catalogue of Widows in 5:9. Another order of female ministers here is unnecessary (Cook, p. 777)

- C) Cf. PRO A above. Romans 16:1 can be taken in a more general sense to mean Phoebe was “a servant” or “an assistant” (Hendrikson, p. 133)
- D) Cf. PRO B & C above. Even though there is structural similarity to the other lists, there is also dissimilarity in that the present list is “parenthesized” within the list for deacons, indicating that they are “deacon’s assistants” (Hendricksen, p. 133).
- E) Cf. PRO E above. There is a change from “not double tongued” to “malicious gossip” and from “not fond of sordid gain” to “faithful in all things”
- F) Cf. PRO G above. These are not guides to lifestyle, but qualifications of deacons as to the kinds of wives they have.

To these arguments I will emphasize two very practical problems. The text only allows for this to be either wives of deacons or a female counterpart to Deacons - a Deaconess. If this is taken as deacon’s wives.

- 1) A man cannot be a deacon unless his wife meets these qualifications.
- 2) Unless a woman is married to a man who is currently a deacon, she is excluded from this ministry even if she meets the other qualifications. The wife of an overseer / elder would also be excluded by this.
- 3) If this is the wife of a deacon, her ministry is in assisting him in his service and not forming a separate ministry council.

Is Paul seeking to limit ministry to this degree or only ensure that those in such church positions of ministry meet some basic standards of godliness?