

Paul's Epistle to the Romans

LESSON **XXIV**: APPENDIX: THE ROLE OF WOMEN AS DEACONS

Putting the Lid on a Can of Worms ... The time given for our final Romans Sunday School lesson ended before the lesson did. That was a frequent problem and because I did not want to overburden the class with an “endless study,” we continued on regardless of where we stopped the week prior. But the final lesson contained a topic of considerable controversy and I have felt burdened since the end of that class to return to this topic. I thank Pastor for graciously consenting to give me this evening to attempt to “close the can of worms” that I opened during the final lesson.

A BASIC BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE — *Whether we realize this or not, all of us make a distinction between what the bible commands and what we follow from the bible through principles and / or examples.* To illustrate the difference between these two thoughts, consider the following example:

<i>Bible Commands</i>	<i>Biblical Principles and Examples</i>
we are to be a missionary-minded people: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:19,20 NASB)	how are we to accomplish this missionary activity? — one example: “Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers ... While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.” (Acts 13:1-3 NASB)
Note this is not a choice but a direct command from Jesus Himself. There is no room for debate; we either obey or disobey this command.	Here we see the church at Antioch sent out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries. <i>Important for our discussion is this: notice that throughout these verses we see no command on how we are to send out missionaries, only an example of how one early church sent out missionaries.</i>

Following the early church’s example, some Baptist churches to this day send out missionaries without the aid of mission agencies. Other (most?) churches rely heavily upon mission agencies such as Baptist Mid Missions or ABWE (Association of Baptists for World Evangelism) to aid the missionaries. Great works of God has been done through these missionaries regardless of their method of getting to the field.

The reason I use this example is that there are those Baptists who probably would consider themselves “purists” (“*We only take the Bible for our authority*”) who would argue against using mission agencies. Their argument runs something like this: “*The early church did not use Mission agencies. We are following the Bible alone and refuse to compromise our principles with modern liberal thinking that accepts non-biblical methods.*” But are mission agencies violating any command of scripture? Is it sin to organize to help missionaries onto their fields? Is it anti-biblical to relieve the missionaries of some of the mundane work (travel planning / arrangements, retirement concerns, newsletters, etc) to allow the missionary to concentrate on the reason they were sent?

The point I am making is this: ***There is a difference between a Bible command and a biblical example. While we cannot ignore a teaching simply because it is an “example / principle” only, we must also realize they are different than a direct command. Wisdom is needed as to when to apply and not apply these examples / principles.*** If we were honest and really gave it a whole lot of thought, I think we’d find much of what people argue about cannot be directed back to a direct bible command but rather how we understand the principles and examples found in Scripture. Some of these things we are right to stand upon and we must not yield; in some areas however we should be a little more gracious to those who differ to our understanding.

Prior to continuing, a word concerning the “purists.” Without doubt the “purist” mindset has appeal: we should all desire to be absolutely biblical in all our decisions. But the “purists” are incredibly inconsistent by their picking-and-choosing of what they will follow and what they will reject. For example, can anyone give me a direct Bible command for any of the following:

- church buildings (the NT churches met in houses)
- Sunday School (Robert Raikes is traditionally credited as pioneering Sunday Schools in the 1780s)
- musical instruments used in worship (from “no instruments” to our traditional piano / organ to our modern praise bands)
- Sunday AM / Sunday PM / Wednesday PM church schedule

The list could go on but you see the point. These items were thought of without any effort. How many more items could be added if we really took time to consider every aspect of our modern Christian life?

A QUICK LOOK AT CHURCH GOVERNMENT — As we consider the church government, our church (as most of our sister churches of like faith) has a church government composed of the following:

- without question the head of every church is Jesus Christ (Eph 5:23; Col 1:18)
- the Lord gives (a) Pastor(s) to shepherd the flock (Eph 4:11,12; Phil 1:1; 1 Pet 5:1-4; note that even in larger congregations with a pastoral staff, there is still the need for one man to be the leader). Some churches have pastoral staffs or elder boards that assist in spiritual leadership.
- deacons to help relieve the Pastor of every-day burdens to allow the Pastor time to study / pray (Acts 6:2-4; Phil 1:1). In many churches the deacons also compose a board which assists the Pastor in spiritually leading the church (instead of the aforementioned board of elders). This is a departure from the original intent of the deacon (as we will see below), but it is here that our first point becomes so important: is it an error to have such a board of deacons? Is it a sin or a violation of scripture?

Very little is directly commanded concerning this topic and (again, whether we realize it or not) much of what we determine here is based on biblical principles and examples. Several principles to consider:

- **No Pastor is to be a dictator, “lording it over” their local church (1 Pet 5:3).** A Pastor is to lead and guide, not rule as an authoritarian. Yes, God did call rogue, loner prophets to confront His people but our modern Pastor is more of a teaching Rabbi of the Jewish synagogue than a John the Baptist or Elijah.
- **There is wisdom in the multitude of counselors (Prov 11:14; 15:22; 24:6)** This is also part of the wisdom behind a congregational church government. Any individual might be misled spiritually, and it is true even entire congregations might err as an entire body, but the likelihood of an individual going astray is much greater than a larger body of people.

So most of our modern Baptist churches are composed of some sort of board to help the Pastor in spiritual decisions. Some churches call this a board of elders and make them separate from the deacons. In our church this board consists of the deacons themselves. Regardless of how this is done, the principles are the same. Bringing these first two points together we can see the following:

Q: *Are there direct scriptural commands which support our modern usage of the deacons?*

A: *To my knowledge there is not any direct command which would support our current deacon board having a role of spiritual leadership.*

Q: *Is that to say our deacon board is unscriptural?*

A: *I do not believe our deacon board is unscriptural; as shown above, there are bible principles which are being followed and I believe support the practice of our modern churches.*

In making such a statement, I recognize there are “purists” who will consider my stand anti-scriptural or extra-biblical. I remind the reader that all such “purists” pick-and-choose when to be “pure.”

WHAT THE NT SAYS CONCERNING WOMEN DEACONS — This brings us to the reason for this evening’s lesson. The can of worms opened during our final SS lesson had to do with Phoebe (Romans 16:1). Discussion was began of who this Phoebe was and some of the historical / scriptural evidence of her role as mentioned by Paul. But then the class ended without any closure on this subject ... a subject which is hot in many areas of our country today. Lest I be misunderstood as to my stand concerning this topic, I thought it best to clarify what I believe the Bible teaches concerning this matter.

THE WORD “DEACON” MEANS SERVANT, MINISTER — “The concept of serving is expressed in Greek by many words which are often hard to differentiate even though each has its own basic emphasis.

δουλεύω [douleuō] means to serve as a slave, with a stress on subjection.

θεραπεύω [therapeuō] emphasises willingness for service and the respect and concern thereby expressed (esp. towards God).

λατρεύω [latreuō] means to serve for wages. In NT days it had come to be used predominantly for religious or cultic duties.

leitourgeō [leitourgeō] denotes official public service to the people or to the state, being used in the LXX for service in the temple and in Christianity for service in the church.

ὑπηρέτης [hupēretēs] means at root to steer. In terms of service, it signifies esp. the relation to the master to whom the service is rendered....

As distinct from all these terms, διακονέω [diakoneō] **has the special quality of indicating very personally the service rendered to another.** It is thus closest to ὑπηρετέω [hupēreteō], but in διακονέω [diakoneō] **there is a stronger approximation to the concept of a service of love.** [Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, vol 2 pg 81] TDNT also notes the basic usage of the word outside of the NT was **“to wait on a table; to provide or care for”**

The Greeks thought serving others undignified. “How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?” was the sophist formula. Judaism had a much deeper understanding of the meaning of service and was an acceptable status, especially in consideration to God (TDNT notes the LXX does not use the Greek word for deacon when translating the Hebrew; rather they use *douleuein*, *leitourgein* and *latreuein*).

In the NT: “Jesus’ view of service grows out of the OT command of love for one’s neighbour, which He takes and links with the command of love for God to constitute the substance of the divinely willed ethical conduct of His followers. In so doing, He purifies the concept of service from the distortions which it had suffered in Judaism. Jesus’ attitude to service is completely new as compared with the Greek understanding. The decisive point is that He sees in it the thing which makes a man His disciple.” [Kittel, *TDNT*, vol 2 pg 84]

The Greek word (and its cognates) used in the NT for “deacon” is as follows: diakoneō, used 37x and translated ‘minister, serve, administer, deacon;’ diakonia, used 34x and translated ‘ministry, service, minister, office, administrations;’ diakonos, used 30x and translated ‘minister, servant, deacon.’ That being so, it is not unusual to find the usage in its normal sense of “to wait at table”

“Which of you, having a slave [doulos] plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come immediately and sit down to eat’? But will he not say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink’?” (Luke 17:7,8 NASB)

“But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the servicing alone? Then tell her to help me.’” (Luke 10:40 NASB)

“So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was servicing; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him.” (John 12:2 NASB)

“Now Simon’s mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever; and immediately they spoke to Jesus about her. And He came to her and raised her up, taking her by the hand, and the fever left her, and she waited on them.” (Mark 1:30,31 NASB)

This also is used in a wider sense of “to be serviceable”:

“Soon afterwards, He began going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing [lit. were ministering] to their support out of their private means.” (Luke 8:1-3 NASB)

“Many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee while ministering to Him.” (Matt 27:55 NASB)

Note in the following verses the service rendered includes clothing, feeding, ministering, providing shelter, visiting the sick and prisoners:

“Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’ Then they themselves also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’” (Matt 25:41-44 NASB)

Note in the following verses Peter speaks of our spiritual gifts being given for us to be servants (deacons) towards one another:

“As each one has received a special gift, employ it in servicing one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (1 Pet 4:10,11 NASB)

The same comment might be made by Paul:

“if service, in his servicing; or he who teaches, in his teaching” (Rom 12:7 NASB)

Paul uses the word to describe himself taking the offering to Jerusalem:

“but now, I am going to Jerusalem servicing the saints.” (Rom 15:25 NASB)

THE WORD “DEACON” WAS WIDELY APPLIED TO THOSE WHO SERVE — In regards to the work of a deacon, all believers are to be “deacons”:

“But the greatest among you shall be your servant.” (Matt 23:11 NASB)

Governmental authorities are referred to as “deacons”:

“for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.” (Rom 13:4 NASB)

Paul states he is a “deacon”:

“Are they servants of Christ? — I speak as if insane — I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.” (2 Cor 11:23 NASB)

“but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses” (2 Cor 6:4 NASB)

“of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God’s grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.” (Eph 3:7 NASB)

“if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.” (Col 1:23 NASB)

Paul called all ministers “deacons”:

“What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.” (1 Cor 3:5 NASB)

“who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” (2 Cor 3:6 NASB)

Satan is said to have “deacons”:

“No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.” (2 Cor 11:14,15 NASB)

Individuals are named as “deacons”:

“And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith” (1 Thes 3:2 KJV)

“But that you also may know about my circumstances, how I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will make everything known to you.” (Eph 6:21 NASB)

“just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf” (Col 1:7 NASB)

Jesus Himself was called a “deacon”:

“For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers” (Rom 15:8 NASB)

THE ORIGINAL OFFICE OF THE DEACONS WAS ONE OF SERVICE, NOT SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP — From those beginnings of the act of serving came the office of deacon: “Members of the community who are called deacons in virtue of their regular activity are first found in Phil. 1:1, where Paul sends greetings to all the saints in Philippi [with bishops and deacons]. *Already in this phrase there emerges a decisive point for our understanding of the office, namely, that the deacons are linked with the bishops and mentioned after them. At the time of this epistle there are thus two co-ordinated offices.... That the diaconate stands in the closest relationship to the episcopate is confirmed by 1 Tm. 3:1ff. Here an account is first given of the way in which a bishop must conduct himself (vv. 1-7), and this is followed by a list of the requirements for a deacon (vv. 8-13).*” [Kittle, TDNT, vol 2 pg 89f]

WHILE WE MUST REMEMBER THE “OFFICE” OF THE DEACON WAS IN A STATE OF FLUX AT THIS TIME, PAUL’S PHRASEOLOGY SEEMS TO INDICATE PHOEBE HELD SUCH AN “OFFICE” — “*But Phoebe is more than an ordinary believer; she is a ‘servant,’ or ‘deacon.’ The word Paul uses here, diakonos, is one that is applicable to any Christian, for every Christian is a ‘servant’ or ‘minister’ of the risen Christ and of other Christians Paul may, then, simply be highlighting the fact that Phoebe has effectively ‘served’ the church to which she belongs. Others, noting that Paul often applies the term to himself and his coworkers, think that the title here marks Phoebe as the leader and preacher of the church. But the qualification of diakonos by ‘of the church’ suggests, rather, that 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. Moreover, the NT furnishes little basis on which to pinpoint the ministries carried out by deacons. But based partially on hints within the NT and partially on the later institution of the diaconate, it is likely that deacons were charged with visitation of the sick, poor relief, and perhaps financial oversight. ... See especially the cognate verb διακονέω [diakoneō] in 1 Pet. 4:10. Paul uses the word διάκονος [diakonos] 20 other times. Twice he uses it to refer to secular rulers (Rom. 13:4) and twice to describe Christ (Rom. 15:8; Gal. 2:17). Paul uses it especially often to refer to himself and his coworkers (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; Eph. 3:7; 6:21; Col. 1:7, 23, 25; 4:7; 1 Tim. 4:6) or to those who sought a position similar to his (2 Cor. 11:15 [twice], 23). Only in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8, 12 does the word denote an ‘office.’ ... We use the term ‘semi-official’ because evidence for a fixed ‘office,’ with a definite ‘job description,’ is*

lacking for this early period. We must recognize something of a transitional phase, in which people who regularly involved themselves in certain ministries were beginning to be recognized by the church as more-or-less permanent ‘servants.’ A few commentators use the term ‘deaconess’ (see RSV); and, at a later date, when the office was officially recognized, the feminine term διακόνισσα [diakonissa] was used of ‘female deacons’ (cf. *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.19, 20, 28). But διάκονος [diakonos] is used of female officeholders in the early church (cf. the texts cited in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* 2.193-94; 4:239-41); in this period, it was clearly used of both men and women.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 913f]

“It is perhaps just conceivable that the word διάκονος [diakonos] should be understood here as a quite general reference to her service of the congregation; but it is very much more natural, particularly in view of the way in which Paul formulates his thought, to understand it as referring to a definite office. We regard it as virtually certain that Phoebe is being described as ‘a (or possibly “the”) deacon’ of the church in question, and that this occurrence of διάκονος [diakonos] is to be classified with its occurrences in Phil 1.1 and 1 Tim 3.8 and 12. And, while it is true that the functions of a διάκονος [diakonos] are not expressly indicated in Phil 1.1 or in 1 Tim 3.8ff or in the present two verses, there is nothing in any of these passages in any way inconsonant with the inherent probability that a specialized use of διάκονος [diakonos, noun: ‘servant, deacon’] in NT times will have corresponded to the clearly attested specialized use of διακονεῖ [diakonei, verb: ‘she serves’] and διακονία [diakonia, noun: ‘ministry, serving, attendance’] with reference to the practical service of the needy, and there are some features, for example, what is said about Phoebe in v. 2b, which would seem to afford it some support. That a port would provide plenty of scope for the practical expression of Christian compassion and helpfulness is hardly to be doubted.” [Cranfield, *Romans*, vol 2 pg 781]

“Paul begins his final section by commending Phoebe to the Roman churches. She was a lady of some stature who had acted as patron or protector for many, that is presumably mostly, but not necessarily exclusively Christians, including Paul himself. She was also deacon of the nearby church at Cenchreae and must have used some of her means and influence in the service of the Christians there.... [Diakonos] (which can serve either as masculine or feminine – BGD) could be understood simply in terms of a regular pattern of service undertaken by Phoebe on behalf of her local church; but this would probably have been expressed by use of [diakoneō] or [diakonia]; so NIV’s ‘servant’ is inadequate. [Diakonos] together with [ousa, ‘being a servant...’] points more to a recognized ministry or position of responsibility within the congregation.... At the same time it would be premature to speak of an established office of diaconate, as though a role of responsibility and authority, with properly appointed succession, had already been agreed upon in the Pauline churches. We are still at the stage of ministry beginning to take regular and formal shape, and the form in each case would depend very much on the context and needs of particular congregations.... *It is significant that one of the earliest of the diverse roles within the Christian churches to begin to gain a more formal status was that of ‘servant.’ Lagrange notes a sixth century inscription found on the Mount of Olives which describes a deaconess called Sophie as ‘the second Phoebe.’*” [Dunn, *Romans*, vol 2 pg 887, 890f]

OTHER RESPECTED OPINIONS CONCERNING PHOEBE’S ROLE AS A DEACONESS — Allow me to clarify the purpose of this list. Bible doctrine is not a matter of “voting” nor is the correct view on scriptures determined by the number of men one can muster to his side. Rather the purpose for this list is to show the reader the number of conservative voices who consider Phoebe to have been a deaconess. I was literally *shocked* by the agreement among those whom I consider ultra-conservative! My point is this: **accepting Phoebe to have been a deaconess does not automatically relegate one to the liberal camp.**

● “Were women deacons? Very probably yes.” [Piper, article: ‘What Did Deacons Do?’, 3/8/87]

● “We regard it as virtually certain that Phoebe is being described as ‘a (or possibly “the”) deacon’ of the church in question, and that this occurrence of διάκονος [diakonos] is to be classified with its occurrences in Phil 1.1 and 1 Tim 3.8 and 12.” [Cranfield, *Romans*, vol 2 pg 781]

● “The case of Phoebe in connection with hints here and elsewhere, particularly 1 Timothy 3:11, sandwiched between verses 10 and 12, seems to prove the office of deaconess in the apostolic churches, of the propriety and apparent necessity of which there can be no question.” [B. H. Carroll, *Interpretation of the English Bible: Galatians, Romans, Philippians, Philemon*, vol 5 pg 205]

● “We need now to consider only one other sentence: ‘Women in like manner must be grave, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.’ As this verse is sandwiched between two paragraphs on the deacon’s office, and is a part of the section on church officers, it would be out of all connection to interpret it of women in general. And as there is no similar requirement concerning the pastor’s higher office, we should not render it ‘wives’ meaning the wives of deacons. The context requires the rendering: ‘women deacons.’ This rendering not only has the support of Romans 16:1, commending Phoebe as a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea and as doing work supplemental to the preacher and the administrator of charity help, but meets a need as obvious as the need of a male deacon. In every large church there is deacon’s work that cannot be well done except by a female deacon. In the administration of charity in some cases of women — in the preparation of female candidates for baptism, and in other matters of delicacy there is need for a woman church official. The Waco church of which I was pastor for so many years, had, by my suggestion and approval, a corps of spiritually minded, judicious female deacons who were very helpful, and in some delicate cases indispensable. In churches on heathen mission fields the need is even greater than in our country. Many an embarrassment did the worthy deaconess save me from, even on the subject of visitation. In some cases appealing for charity, only these women could make the necessary investigation.” [B. H. Carroll, *Interpretation of the English Bible: The Pastoral Epistles of Paul, and 2 Peter, Jude, and 1, 2, and 3 John*, vol 6 p45f]

- “The deacons’ wives, mentioned in 1 Tim. 3:2, were probably not the wives of deacons, as has usually been inferred, but deaconesses or female assistants, appointed by the churches to minister to the sick and perform other services to those of their own sex, which could with more propriety be done by them than by the deacons or other male members. A few churches retain the practice; and since female members in all the churches are the more numerous, and as a rule, the more efficient in charitable ministrations, it is difficult to see why such a class of helpers, more or less formally designated for Christian work, should not be continued in our churches.” [Edward T. Hiscox, *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches*, pg 115f]
- “Of this church Phoebe was a servant, or, as the word signifies, a minister or deacon; not that she was a teacher of the word, or preacher of the Gospel, for that was not allowed of by the apostle in the church at Corinth, that a woman should teach; see 1 Cor. xiv. 34, 35; and therefore would never be admitted at Cenchrea. Rather, as some think, she was a deaconess appointed by the church, to take care of the poor sisters of the church; though as they were usually poor, and ancient women, that were put into that service, and this woman, according to the account of her, being neither poor, nor very ancient; it seems rather, that being a rich and generous woman, she served or ministered to the church by relieving the poor: not out of the church’s stock, as deaconesses did, but out of her own substance: and received the ministers of the Gospel, and all strangers, into her house, which was open to all Christians; and so was exceeding serviceable to that church, and to all the saints that came thither: though it is certain that among the ancient Christians there were women servants who were called ministers. Pliny, in an epistle of his to Trajan the emperor, says, that he had examined two maids, *who were called ministers [deacons]*, to know the truth of the Christian religion.” [John Gill, *Gill’s Commentary*, vol 6 pg 141]
- “The word ‘servant’ is the feminine of deacon, and some students believe she was a ‘deaconess’ in the church. This is possible, because there were women in the early church who served by visiting the sick, assisting the young women, and helping the poor.” [Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol 1 pg 565]
- “‘Servant’ translates *diakonos*, the term from which we get deacon. The Greek word here is neuter [*Editor’s note: MacArthur is the only author I read which states this word is neuter; all other commentators that referred to this stated the word was feminine or neuter – MSM*] and was used in the church as a general term for servant before the offices of deacon and deaconess were developed. It is used of the household servants who drew the water that Jesus turned into wine (John 2:5, 9), and Paul has used the term earlier in this letter (Rom. 13:4, twice) to refer to secular government as ‘a minister of God to you for good’ and even of Christ as ‘a servant to the circumcision,’ that is, to Jews (15:8). When *diakonos* obviously refers to a church office, it is usually transliterated as ‘deacon’ (see, e.g., Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:10, 13).

In 1 Timothy 3:11, Paul declares that ‘women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.’ Some argue that he is referring to wives of deacons, rather than to an office of women deacons. But it makes no sense that high standards would be specified for the wives of deacons but not for wives of overseers (or bishops, who are also called elders, see Titus 1:5), whose qualifications he has just given in verses 1-7. In this context (3:1-10, 12-13), the office of deaconess is clearly implied. The ‘likewise’ in verse 11 ties the qualifications of these women to those already given for the offices of overseer and deacon. In verse 11, Paul did not refer to those women as deaconesses because *diakonos* has no feminine form [*Editor’s note: MacArthur here contradicts others knowledgeable in Greek – MSM*].

During the first few centuries of the church, the role of a woman servant (*diakonos*) was to care for the fellow believers who were sick, for the poor, for strangers passing through, and for the imprisoned. They also were responsible for helping to baptize and disciple new women converts and to instruct children and other women.

Whether or not Phoebe held some official title or not, Paul commended her as a highly-proven servant of Christ and implored the church at Rome to receive her in the Lord.” [MacArthur, *Romans*, vol 2 pg 360]

- “She was a *diakonos*, ‘a fellow-Christian who holds office in the congregation at Cenchreae’ (NEB); in a church context the word should be rendered ‘deacon’, whether masculine or feminine. That the duties of a deacon could be performed by either men or women is suggested by 1 Timothy 3:11, where ‘the women’ are to be understood as ‘deacons’ (like the men of verses 3-10).” [Bruce, *Romans*, pg 252]
- “The latter was called Cenchrea, where a church had been organized, of which Phoebe was a servant, i.e., deaconess. It appears that in the apostolic church, elderly females were selected to attend upon the poor and sick of their own sex. Many ecclesiastical writers suppose there were two classes of these female officers; the one having the oversight of the conduct of the younger female Christians; and the other, whose duty was to attend to the sick and the poor.” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 447]
- “Alongside the deacons there were also deaconesses. Their history begins with R. 16:1 where Paul describes Phoebe at [our sister, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea]. It is, of course, an open question whether he is referring to a fixed office or simply to her services on behalf of the community. Similarly, there is no agreement whether 1 Tm. 3:11 refers to the wives of deacons or to deaconesses. It is indisputable, however, that an order of deaconesses did quickly arise in the Church. A particular part was played here by widows who, on the strength of their chaste conduct on the one side and their loving service on the other, already received official recognition in 1 Tm. 5:3ff.” [Kittle, *TDNT*, vol 2 pg 93]
- “Paul mentions two titles which point her out for the interest of the Christians of Rome; she is a sister, and, moreover, a servant of the Lord, invested consequently with an ecclesiastical office. It has been denied that at so remote a period the office of deaconess could already be in existence. But why, if there were deacons (xii. 7; Acts vi. 1 et seq.; Phil. I. 1), should there not have been also from primitive times a similar office discharged by women, members of the church? With what right can we allege that

the office mentioned xii. 8 belonged only to men? It seems to us impossible to think that the widows spoken of, 1 Tim. v. 3 et seq., were not persons invested with an ecclesiastical office. And in any case, the ministrations of beneficence of a private nature, mentioned in our Epistle (xii. 7), must have been carried out in good measure by sisters. And why should not a rich and devoted woman, who had for a time occupied herself with such work, have borne, even without ecclesiastical consecration, the title of deaconess? If our passage had a later origin than the first century, there would certainly have been introduced here, instead of the word [deakonos, deacon], which is the masculine term originally applied to both sexes, the feminine title [diakonissa, deaconess], already in use in the second century. Comp. the letter in which Pliny relates that he has been obliged to torture two of those servants who are called ministre (evidently a translation of deaconess). There were so many services to be rendered to the poor, to orphans, to strangers, to the sick, which women only could discharge! As is observed by Schaff, the profound separation between the sexes in the East must also have contributed to render a female diaconate altogether indispensable.” [Godet, *Romans*, pg 488]

- “The place was the port of Corinth, some nine miles away from the city, and the word rendered ‘servant’ might also be translated ‘deaconess,’ though it is hardly possible that the term had a technical meaning so early as this date. That there were women and officebearers afterwards is evident (1 Tim. iii. 8), and of course it is possible that the necessity was found as early as the time now in question. There was much that a woman alone could do for women, especially in view of the Eastern separation of the sexes.” [Griffith-Thomas, *Romans*, pg 417]

- “The etymology of *diakonos* we have had repeatedly. The only question here is whether it is used in a general sense or in a technical sense as in Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8-13. In favour of the technical sense of ‘deacon’ or ‘deaconess’ is the addition of ‘*tēs ekklēsias*’ (of the church). In some sense Phoebe was a servant or minister of the church in Cenchreae. Besides, right in the midst of the discussion in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 Paul has a discussion of *gunaikas* (verse 11) either as women as deaconesses or as the wives of deacons (less likely though possible). The *Apostolic Constitutions* has numerous allusions to deaconesses. The strict separation of the sexes made something like deaconesses necessary for baptism, visiting the women, etc. Cenchreae, as the eastern port of Corinth, called for much service of this kind. Whether the deaconesses were a separate organization on a par with the deacons we do not know nor whether they were the widows alluded to in 1 Timothy 5:9f.” [Robertson, *Word Pictures*, vol 4 pg 425]

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE OF DEACONESSSES — As with the previous section, a word of clarification: history and tradition should not be nor ever has been the rule of faith for Baptists. However, there are those who will make statements such as, “The acceptance of women as deacons is a modern liberal trend which relies upon cultural peer-pressure rather than the scriptures.” The point of this section is to show that the acceptance of deaconesses is not merely a modern movement.

- A SHORT CONFSSION OF FAITH IN TWENTY ARTICLES BY JOHN SMYTH, 1609 — “Article 16: The ministers of the church are, not only bishops (episcopos), to whom the power is given of dispensing both the word and the sacraments, but also deacons, men and widows, who attend to the affairs of the poor and sick brethren.”

- A DECLARATION OF FAITH OF ENGLISH PEOPLE REMAINING AT AMSTERDAM, 1611 — “Article 20: That the Officers of every Church or congregation are either Elders, who by their office do especially feed the flock concerning their souls, Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2,3. or Deacons Men, and Women who by their office relieve the necessities of the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies, Acts 6:1-4.”

- PROPOSITIONS AND CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING TRUE CHRISTIAN RELIGION, 1612-1614 — “Proposition 76: That Christ hath set in His outward church two sorts of ministers: viz., some who are called pastors, teachers or elders, who administer in the word and sacraments, and others who are called Deacons, men and women: whose ministry is to serve tables and wash the saints’ feet (Acts 6:2-4; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2,3,8,11; and chap.5).”

- CONFESSON OF FAITH AND ECCLESIASTICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE EVANGELICAL ASSOCIATION OF FRENCH-SPEAKING BAPTIST CHURCHES — “Part 2, Article 2: In addition to pastors or elder, the local church may have other responsible servants, for example deacons and deaconesses whose role it is to assist the pastors or elders in their ministry, by assuming especial responsibility for everything that relates to the material interests of the congregation.”

BRINGING CLOSURE: SHOULD THERE BE WOMEN DEACONS? — Hopefully this will close the can of worms I left open in the previous study. Should there be women deacons? Let’s break the answer to that question down into finer points:

ANSWER #1 – Were there deaconesses in the NT? Probably yes. — The important word in that answer is “probably.” After 2000 years, I do not think anyone can say definitively whether there were or were not deaconesses. Testimonies from sound, conservative scholars have been given above. Most note the following: *the office itself was in a state of transition; the office was not one of spiritual leadership but of service; and probably women were given these roles to serve as well as men.* After consideration of the arguments on both sides of the aisle, I agree most with the words of John Piper: “*Were Women Deacons? Probably yes.*”

ANSWER #2 – Should there be deaconesses today? That answer depends upon the role of deacons in each church. — As noted above, the original deacons (/deaconesses) fulfilled a role of service. In the churches that retain this emphasis (making a separation between service and spiritual leadership) I cannot see any scriptural or logical reason as to why a woman could not be a deaconess. In other churches where the deacons both serve and help in a role of spiritual leadership, I would reject the notion of having deaconesses for the reason stated by Paul of a woman not having headship over a man (1 Tim 2:12). So my answer to the

question of deaconesses would depend upon the governmental structure of each individual church. As mentioned above in the second point, assigning the deacons spiritual leadership does not violate scriptural principles in my understanding. ***If that limits women from the “official” office of the deacons, that would never stop anyone (male or female) from fulfilling the role of a deacon / deaconess in its original intent. Does one “need” the recognition of the title? — that in itself disqualifies one as a deacon / deaconess!***

Hopefully one can see why I began as I did with tonight’s lesson. Conservative Baptist churches still believe the command of Paul for a woman regarding headship over a man. But many of our modern Baptist churches also have deacons which fulfill a spiritual leadership role. Working backwards then, one can understand why, when the question of deaconesses arises, the good conservative Baptist immediately responds with *“Impossible! That would be against scripture!”* And considering the duties of our modern deacon, I would be in agreement. ***But to ignore the principle with which I began and then state that there never were deaconesses is, I believe, an error. Or equally an error would be to assume that every church functions the same; I believe it would not be improper to have a woman deacon as long as the principles concerning the roles of men and women were not violated. Our correct response therefore should be to understand the transition that has taken place concerning the role of the deacon and respond accordingly.***