

## INTRODUCTION

On 16 May 1999 I took this passage and preached on it at the recognition service that our church had for Tom when we appointed him as our first deacon. On that occasion I very carefully side stepped the difficult verse 11, as I did not think it was relevant to that particular evening. So I want to come to it this morning and try to deal with some of the controversy surrounding it. Then I want to try and make some final comments and observations about the role of deacons in general and their relationship to the Elders, before we move on to verses 14-16 next week.

### 1. THE DIFFICULTY WITH THE VERSE

It has to be said that the controversy surrounding verse 11 is no where near the same sort of intensity as the one surrounding women Elders and Ministers, but nevertheless there is genuine disagreement among conservative Christians about what verse 11 really means. As we read that verse you might be thinking that it is pretty clear what it means, deacons' wives must display these qualities that are listed.

But the problem is that the translation of this verse is generally not a good one in the AV or NIV. For the word that is translated "their wives" probably should be translated "the women." This is because the Greek word can mean either women or wife and the word "their" is not in the Greek at all. The NASV translates the verse like this "Women must likewise be dignified not malicious gossips but temperate, faithful in all things." In my NIV bible after the word 'wives' it has a letter 'b' and if you look at the bottom of the page you will find an alternate reading of deaconesses. Therefore the translators are suggesting that Paul could be referring to a third office in the church, as well as Elders and deacons; there is an office or role of deaconess. One problem with the word deaconess is that in the Greek, there is no such word, the word deacon is always masculine Paul would simply say women deacons if that is what he meant to say. So what does verse 11 mean? Does Paul mean to say the deacons' wives, or the woman deacons or even something else?

I personally think it is unlikely that Paul is talking about women deacons because why would he need to even mention the women in a special category for surely the qualifications necessary for carrying out the duty of a deacon would be the same for men and women. Therefore the word 'women' in verse 11 would be unnecessary. All that Paul says in verses 8-13 would surely apply to all deacons whether men or woman. One of the qualifications for a deacon is that they should be a one-woman man and must manage his children well. Paul simply would not say that if he were talking about both men and women.

So if he is not talking about women deacons, is the translation 'their wives' correct? Again there are difficulties with this translation for why should he outline the qualifications that a deacons' wife must have and not do so when it came to the qualification of the elders' wives. After all I think there is evidence within the New Testament to show that the role of elder was a much more important role in the life of the early church. The Apostles appointed Elders as soon as they could after the formation of the church but they did not appoint deacons. I think the role of the deacon developed as the church grew and as the church needed to provide practical help for its members. Yet we do not have any qualification for the wives of elders.

So why should it be necessary for deacons to have wives like this but not necessary for the elders. Also Paul's word structure is a strange one if he meant the deacons wives. If he meant the deacons' wives why not say that clearly, he could have easily said 'wives of the deacons in Greek, but instead he says 'likewise the women or the wives' So there are problems with thinking that Paul is talking about Women deacons or deacons' wives. Is there another possibility?

I think there is and this is the one I prefer. I think Paul is referring to another group of people OK but not another office in the church. I think he is referring to women who would be helpers of the deacons; these women could and in many cases probably were their wives but also there would be other women who would help in the diaconal care of the church. As the church grew there would be great a need for practical care of its members. Widows would need to be cared for and those who were persecuted because of their faith might also be in great need of practical help. There would be many situations were a deacon would feel it necessary to take his wife along or to send another woman in the church along to bring the necessary help. In such cases it is wise that they choose the right people, people who have the qualities that are listed here. They go as representatives of the church, probably sent by the elders or deacons in order to meet the practical needs of some women within the church.

Therefore I think verse 11 should be translated as the NASV has done so and that Paul is talking about women who the church recognises as having the necessary qualifications for helping the deacons with the practical needs of the church. We could call them helpers, church workers, assistants to the deacons or some other name. They might well be and probably in many cases will be the wives of deacons or wives of elders but they could and ought to be other spiritual women who are able to give the help that is needed.

You might well disagree with me and if you did you would be in very good company, but I do think that, my understanding of this verse is reasonable and is an honest attempt to deal with the difficulties of the verse. Let's assume my understanding is right. What practical lessons can we draw from our conclusions?

## 2. PRACTICAL LESSONS

i) There are certain people who accuse Paul of being anti women because of what he says about forbidding them to teach. However we must realise that Paul's teaching here would have been seen as extremely radical in his day. Christianity gave women dignity which they did not have in the first century, it saw women as equal with men as far as their status was concerned which as we said many weeks ago was not how they were seen or treated in first century society. Although they were not permitted to do the public teaching within the church, Paul's teaching here clearly gives women a very important role within the life of the church, a role that they were never given within society. Christianity always gives true freedom to people so that they can fulfil the roles that they were intended to fulfil within society in general and within the church.

How can we make this more practical? Well I think that we need to think more carefully and creatively as a church as to how we can use women in helping to meet the needs of those within our church. I think this is especially important for helping other women. The church needs to be looking out for women within our fellowship who possess these qualifications so that we can use them in meeting the needs of our fellow members. They would go as representatives of the church being recognised by the leadership of the church with both the gifts and graces necessary for carrying out their task.

I think it is time that the church of Jesus Christ did some serious thinking about women ministries, we have to get them out of the kitchen and find them tasks that help to meet the needs within our church. When a church is growing; so do the needs and therefore the need for women like this increases. The question for all our ladies this morning is, are you like this? If the elders or deacons wanted to use you to meet a specific need of one of our members would we be able to ask you because you display these qualities. These qualities are not exceptional; they are simply what we ought to find in every Christian woman or man who is serious about walking with the Lord.

### 3. WHAT DO DEACONS DO?

I want to finish off this section on elders and deacons by asking what did deacons do in the first century and once we have worked that out then we will be able to see what they are to do today. However once we ask this question we begin to discover that the role of a deacon is not as clear within the New Testament as we would have hoped. The very word that is used gives us some idea of their role, for the word deacon is the word serve. So a deacon is a servant of the church. When we look at the places in the bible where the word deacon is used as an office in the church we discover that there is no indication of their function.

When we considered the role of elders in the church we saw that their function was twofold, to direct the affairs (rule) of the church and to teach (1 Timothy 5:17). But when we search for similar instructions for the role of deacons we search in vain. A helpful passage is found in Acts 6:1-7 and although this passage does not mention deacons the word is used in verse 2 "serve at tables"

I don't think that this incident gives us the first deacons of the church, but I think that what we have here is probably a model on which we can base the function of deacon upon. It is sheer speculation I know but I do wonder if the office of deacon came into the church as a result of this incident. It became clear that as more people became Christians then the physical needs of the church increased and if these needs were going to be met then they would need to appoint men to take care of this matter so that the elders of the church could get on with their function of teaching and ruling the church.

So as a general rule the function of a deacon is to do whatever they can so that the elders can get on with what they are called to do. In many ways the deacons are assistants to the elders, they fulfil whatever tasks they are able to do so that the elders can have the time to get on with directing the affairs of the church and teaching.

Let me try and give a summary of what I have said over the last number of weeks concerning the role of elders, deacons and women.

1. Elders are called by God to rule and teach the church. This involves regular preaching and teaching, decision-making, planning and implementation of those plans.
2. Deacons are to give help to the elders in whatever way is seen fit by the eldership and church. This will vary from church to church depending on gifts, needs and size of the church. They are to serve the church in various ways. This could include administration, pastoral visitation, practical work on the building, and helping to meet the practical needs of the members to name just a few.
3. There is a clear distinction in the church between Elders and deacons, elders do have ruling authority over the church whereas deacons do not have this authority and elders are called to be able to teach whereas the deacons do not have to possess that gift or exercise that ministry.
4. The women who are approved by the leadership are able to help the deacons in all of the above areas and in whatever other ways the leadership sees fit.
5. Both Deacons and their female helpers if I can put it that way are subject to and accountable to the church and the elders as they are given by God and the church the authority to rule over the church.

I trust that these sermons on the role of leadership within the church will have been helpful to you and we need to pray that God will help us as a church to remain biblical in all our practises within the church.

Amen