

## Ordaining Women as Deacons:

*A Reappraisal of the Anglican Mission in America's Policy*

---



## FOREWORD

Questions of importance that remain matters of controversy between believers should not be ignored or shelved out of politeness or from exhaustion, but rather addressed, until an agreement, in the light of Scripture, is reached.

We in the Anglican Mission in America conducted a study on the ordination of women and came to an agreement that most of us, by a large majority, did not think that women should be ordained to the presbyterate or episcopate. While a sizable majority did believe that women could and should be ordained to the diaconate, a substantial minority had serious doubts about that departure on our part from the practice of the Church during long stretches of Church history in which only men were ordained deacons.

It is perhaps important for me to reiterate the fact, as our study and report made clear, that the issue of women in historic orders is not an isolated matter touching only on the matter of ordained ministry. It raises connections with many of the doctrines of the Christian faith, rising even to our understanding of the nature of God and the Trinity. More is at stake than many suppose, and many have decided this issue based on inadequate study and reflection. Discernment by the uninformed is hardly what is intended when we speak of a period of ecclesiastical discernment and reception. It is clearly right and proper, therefore, to examine this issue with an eye to commending a solution. In fact it is our hope that the entire question of the ordination of women will remain a subject of

serious questioning and reflection all through the Church, during this period of the Church's discernment on the matter.

The Reverend Jason Patterson has addressed the question of women in the diaconate. He is persuaded that our present practice is not Scriptural or faithful to the way the Church has generally read the biblical material in regard to women in the diaconate. He is concerned that we depart from Anglican practice. He writes with verve, thoughtfully and as an advocate of a definite point of view. I suggest that we all read his careful examination and argumentation and also review what is found in the AMIA Report on the Ordination of Women, for this matter needs to be considered in the context of the whole biblical reflection on women in orders. Even if we do not come to a common mind on this matter, we owe it to one another and to the Lord to be as well informed as possible and to keep the Scripture before us on this matter.

The Rt. Rev. Dr. John H. Rodgers Jr., PhD

*Missionary Bishop of the Province of the Episcopal Diocese of Rwanda and Chairman of the Study Committee of the AMiA Study on the Ordination of Women*

## PREFACE

It is my hope that by the grace of God this paper will be used to give His church greater clarity as to the relationship of women and the diaconate, so that on the last day we might be found to have been faithful and unwavering Stewards of that with which we have been entrusted.

Thanks are owed to a number of individuals. Mr. Paul Schweiger, Mrs. Diane McTigue, the Rev'd Bill Kenney and the Rev'd Dr. Peter Toon each spent considerable time with early drafts of this essay and offered many insightful comments. I extend my sincere appreciation to them. Additionally, the Rev'd Phil Lyman supplied some much needed assistance and unwavering encouragement. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Mr. David Mills, whose editorial suggestions have significantly improved this essay. I am grateful for the combined input of these friends and colleagues.

O Gracious Father, we humbly beseech thee for thy holy Catholic Church; that thou wouldest be pleased to fill it with all truth, in all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, establish it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of him who died and rose again, and ever liveth to make intercession for us, Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord.  
*Amen.*

J. S. S. Patterson

*July 19, 2006*

*The Feast of Saint Macrina*

## CONTENTS

<b>I. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. The Cause and Goal of this Paper.....	1
B. How Important is this Issue? .....	3
1. The Ordination of Women is not a Matter of Adiaphora....	3
2. What Outside Pressures Bear on this Issue?.....	3
a) The Influence of Scientific & Technological Progress ....	3
b) The Influence of Modern Philosophy .....	4
c) The Secular World has “Evangelized” the Church.....	4
3. Conclusion.....	5
C. The 1662 Ordinal Must Shape Our Understanding of the Diaconate .....	6
1. The Ordinal Teaches that a Deacon is Distinct from a Diaconess.....	6
2. The Ordinal Teaches that the Diaconate is an Office with Authority .....	7
3. The Report Downplays the Deacon’s Authority .....	7
D. The Importance of the Ministry of Women.....	9
<b>II. AN APPRAISAL OF THE AMIA’S REPORT .....</b>	<b>11</b>
A. Introductory Comments.....	11
1. Approach and Presuppositions .....	11
2. Perceived Weaknesses of the Report .....	11
a) The Inherent Difficulties of Ordaining Women as Deacons But not as Priests .....	11
b) The Report Suggests a New Office.....	12
3. Some Unhelpful Presuppositions.....	12
B. A Response to Selected Texts within Part 4, Section 3 of the Report.....	14
1. Acts 6:1-6 .....	14
2. Romans 16:1-2.....	16

a) What did it mean for Paul to call Phoebe a <i>diakonos</i> ? ..	16
b) Phoebe as <i>diakonos</i> in Patristic Literature.....	18
c) The Significance of the Phrase “of the Church” .....	19
d) Phoebe as a <i>prostatis</i> to Paul and to Many .....	20
e) Conclusion .....	21
f) Addendum: Phoebe’s Ministry as an Example to All....	21
3. 1 Timothy 3:8-13.....	22
a) Introduction.....	22
b) Evidence that Paul’s use of <i>gunaikas</i> Does Not Refer to Female Deacons .....	22
(1) The Context & Flow of the Passage.....	22
(2) The <i>gunaikas</i> are Grammatically Separated from the <i>diakonos</i> ..	23
(3) No Mention of Marital Status & Fidelity.....	23
(4) No Mention of Being Tested & Beyond Reproach .....	24
c) The Comments of three Church Fathers’ on 1 Timothy 3:11 .....	24
d) Conclusion .....	25
<b>III. HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS: AN ABBREVIATED SUMMARY OF <i>DEACONESSES: AN HISTORICAL STUDY</i> BY AIMÉ GEORGES MARTIMORT .....</b>	<b>27</b>
A. Summary of Approach.....	27
B. Deaconesses in the Greek-Speaking Churches and the Churches of Oriental Languages.....	28
1. Deaconesses in the Churches in the East of the Roman Empire (3 <sup>rd</sup> – 7 <sup>th</sup> centuries) .....	28
a) The Didascalia of the Apostles.....	28
b) The Ordo & the Canons concerning Ordination in the Holy Church.....	29
c) The Apostolic Constitutions.....	30
d) The Didascalia in the Apostolic Constitutions.....	30

e) The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus in the Apostolic Constitutions .....	30
f) Deaconesses were not Universally Known.....	31
2. Deaconesses in the Other Churches of the Greek-Speaking and Eastern Regions of the Roman Empire (end of 4 <sup>th</sup> – 6 <sup>th</sup> centuries) .....	32
a) Deaconesses in Official Church Legislation .....	32
(1) The Council of Nicea .....	32
(2) The Canons of St. Basil.....	32
(3) The Council of Chalcedon .....	33
(4) The Novellae of Justinian .....	33
b) Deaconesses in Theological Treatises & Exegetical Commentaries .....	34
(1) St. Epiphanius .....	34
(2) Antiochian Exegetical Commentaries .....	35
c) Diversity in the Ministry of the Deaconesses in the Eastern Regions .....	35
(1) Deaconesses Did Not Assist in Baptismal Anointing in all Parts of the Church in the East.....	35
(2) The Service of Deaconesses in Convents .....	36
3. Evidence for Differentiation between the Deacon and the Deaconess in “Ordination” Rites .....	37
a) Forbidden to Genuflect.....	38
b) Not Allowed Access to the Altar or to Administer the Eucharist.....	38
4. The Disappearance of Deaconesses from the East .....	39
5. Conclusion .....	39
C. Deaconesses in the Latin Church.....	40

1. The First 5 Centuries: There Were No Deaconesses in the Latin Church .....	40
2. Deaconesses in the Latin Church: the 6 <sup>th</sup> – 13 <sup>th</sup> centuries ..	41
D. Summary of Martimort.....	42
<b>IV. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>43</b>



## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. The Cause and Goal of this Paper

In July 2003 a paper entitled “A Report of the Study Concerning the Ordination of Women Undertaken by the Anglican Mission in America: A Survey of the Leading Theological Convictions” (henceforth the “Report”) was made public.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently the Most Reverend Emmanuel Kolini (Archbishop of the Episcopal Province of Rwanda) and the Most Reverend Yong Ping Chung (Archbishop of the Episcopal Province of Southeast Asia) decided to allow only men to be ordained as presbyters (priests) and consecrated as bishops, but to permit both men and women to be made deacons.

The Report gives considerable attention to the question as to whether the Scriptures will allow women to be ordained as priests or consecrated as bishops, but only 9 of its 141 pages (a modest 6% of its length) are given explicitly to the question of the diaconate. I think there is more that must be said on this matter. This paper is intended to expand and deepen our discussion of the diaconate, thereby inviting further reflection upon the AMiA’s current practice.

By explaining the reasons that I am currently troubled by our practice in the AMiA, this paper is also an appeal to the AMiA to explain

---

<sup>1</sup> The Report was written by a committee of AMiA clergymen and laymen, chaired by the Rt. Rev. Dr. John Rodgers, for the Archbishops of Rwanda and Singapore prior to their judgment as to the legitimacy of the ordination of women to ecclesial office in the AMiA. The committee contained members who affirmed and rejected the ordination of women to the diaconate. It can be found on the AMiA website: [www.theamia.org](http://www.theamia.org).

the Scriptural basis for why we have adopted this position. Why is it that so much time has elapsed and there has been no theological rationale offered in explanation for why we have adopted the position which we currently hold? Is it not crucial for us to understand the theology upon which our leaders have based their decision?

When Paul and Silas went to preach and teach at Berea, the Bereans are because they were “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things (i.e. what Paul and Silas were teaching them) were so” (Acts 17:11).<sup>2</sup> This paper is written in the spirit of the Bereans. Just as those in Berea examined the Scriptures so as to evaluate the truthfulness of the apostle’s teaching, we should “test everything and hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). As I engaged in this examination, some of the presuppositions which I held before entering into it have been challenged by the Scriptures, while others have been confirmed.

This paper is not an exhaustive treatment of this subject, neither is it an attempt to explain a variety of positions (as Bishop Rodgers’ Report attempted to do). It is a position paper which seeks to explain some of the reasons that the ordination of women to the diaconate seems in tension with the Scriptures. I must remind the reader that the burden of proof for defending the ordination of women is the responsibility of those who are in favor of it (for when one considers the history of the

---

<sup>2</sup> The word translated “examining” is a form of the Greek word “ἀνακρίνω”, meaning “question, examine; judge, evaluate; sit in judgment on, call to account.”



Church, this is an innovative practice). The following quotation from Bishop Rodgers' Report itself states very well my perspective:

. . . the ministry of Word and Sacrament has until recently been exercised only by men. The ordination of women to any of these orders and offices is very recent and has not yet been permitted by the great majority of Christians. Especially it has not been permitted by most of those Churches ordered in the historic threefold ministry. We, therefore, approach this matter with the common conviction that the burden of proof falls upon the innovation; and we can approve of the ordination of women with a clear conscience only if it is not in contradiction to the principles and teaching of Holy Scripture (p. 132).

The central question before is: "Is allowing women to serve within the Church in the manner in which deacons are able to serve within Anglican churches consistent with the teaching of the Scriptures?" I invite you to consider this question with me, in light of the following discussion.

## **B. How Important is this Issue?**

### **1. The Ordination of Women is not a Matter of Adiaphora**

Some regard this question as a matter of “adiaphora,” that is, a matter not regarded as essential to the faith, on which diversity of practice might therefore be allowed. I maintain, however, that the ordination of women is not a matter of adiaphora, but rather is one of the most important theological issues facing the modern protestant Church, and the AMiA in particular.

This issue cannot be regarded as an isolated matter. In order to affirm the ordination of women to the diaconate, a particular way of interpreting and applying the Scriptures has to be embraced. When this interpretive strategy is employed consistently, the teaching of the Scriptures on many other important points is affected – the ordination of women to the priesthood being the most obvious example.

By approving of the ordination of women to the diaconate, our Mission has welcomed a Trojan Horse into our midst. We have given our approval not only to an unorthodox practice, but perhaps even more significantly have also lent credibility to a way of interpreting the Scriptures which is non-Anglican, non-Reformed and non-catholic. This interpretive approach is much indebted to certain societal and cultural changes which have characterized recent decades and as such is more in keeping with the sensibilities and concerns of post-modern, western society than with the church catholic.

## **2. What Outside Pressures Bear on this Issue?**

We must be cognizant of the manner in which recent societal and cultural developments influence our perception of this issue. It is especially important to notice how the following broad trends have influenced society, which in turn has shaped the manner in which this subject is commonly regarded.

### **a) The Influence of Scientific & Technological Progress**

The first pressure has been created by the technological advances of the last century, which have produced a sea change in the ordering and structure of western society, particularly with respect to sexual distinction.

Technological advancements make it easier for individuals, regardless of their sex, to advance and succeed economically and professionally. In this environment, individuals are rewarded for their own personal mastery of technology and specialized information. Because men possess no clear advantage over women in such skill mastery, women have been able to not only find a place in both the academy and the modern labor market, but to excel therein, making rapid and far-ranging inroads within every sector of secular society.

Because the ability to function as an economic provider conveys a sense of paternal moral authority, modern womanhood bears a far greater resemblance to traditional manhood than ever before in human history. At the same time, modern manhood is no longer regarded as the primary (if not sole) seat of paternal moral authority as traditional manhood was

regarded in the past. The psychological impact of this changed moral landscape results in it being harder for modern people to articulate why women should not perform the same duties as men in any sphere of human endeavor – including in the Church.

### **b) The Influence of Modern Philosophy**

The second pressure (which almost certainly was brought on by the first) is the pervasive influence of modern and post-modern philosophy in opposition to biblical, catholic, Christian doctrine concerning the nature of God and man. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the area of individual rights. Not only does our culture base its formulation of these rights upon numerous non-Christian presuppositions, but it often regards them as the absolute ethical benchmarks against which all other ethical assertions must be judged.

The “human freedom” movements that issued forth from the 1960’s represent the practical implementation of these concerns. This emphasis on rights was coupled with a particular worldview, which held that all of human history is inexorably progressing toward the liberation of all oppressed and marginalized groups, namely those constituted by class, race, gender, and increasingly, “sexual orientation.”

According to this liberationist view of history, ethical norms and individual liberties are not to be judged against an absolute standard of doctrine revealed by God. Instead, the prevailing assumption is that traditional Christian understandings about sexual distinction should be regarded with skepticism and suspicion. Those who hold this traditional

Christian perspective are continually called upon to re-defend these historic biblical formulations. The feminist and sexual-liberation movements have applied this thinking rather vigorously to all relevant topics under the headings of sexual distinction and ethics.

### **c) The Secular World has “Evangelized” the Church**

Liberationist arguments which were used in secular society have been echoed within many protestant churches with similar effects. A difference, however, is that in the churches God’s name was invoked as the endorser of this new thinking, and references to verses or themes of Holy Scripture were employed. Starting in the 1960’s and 1970’s, women came to assume (usually after vigorous debate) new roles and positions in the mainline denominations such as the Episcopal, Lutheran and Methodist churches.

For example, in 1970, the Episcopal Church, which had an order of deaconesses and a special service to use when making deaconesses, made the change to calling all the existing female deaconesses (who had been previously set apart by the laying on of hands) “deacons.” At this point they began to use the service for the making of deacons from the Book of Common Prayer (1928) for all women (until the new prayer book of 1979 was available).

By this action women who formerly were regarded as deaconesses became female deacons, and thus members of the Order of Deacons in the

threefold ministry.<sup>3</sup> A new Canon was created, “On Women in the Diaconate,” and the old Canon “Of Deaconesses” was repealed. This change was met with minimal debate because by the late 1960’s the Episcopal Church had already absorbed the effect of that revolutionary decade. Since few questioned why women should not perform the same duties and functions of men, it seemed logical and reasonable for deaconesses to become deacons immediately, without much concern over the witness of the tradition of the Church.

It is doubtful that more than a few persons in the Episcopal Church in the early 1970’s anticipated the wide-ranging implications of this seemingly reasonable change for such basic matters in the Church as: (a) the interpretation of the Bible in terms of the relation of man and woman and of the place of women in the church (b) the exegesis of those texts in the New Testament that declare or imply that a deacon is a man (c) the further demands that were inevitably set forth in the name of human rights and human fulfillment, not only for women but also for homosexual persons which would (i) change the ministerial order of the Church by admitting women as presbyters, and (ii) require that the Bible be interpreted in new ways for the use of the Bible to keep in line with the changing life of the (progressive) church, which claimed the Bible as its authority, while absorbing innovations of various kinds.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> David E Sumner, *The Episcopal Church History 1945-1985*, Harrisburg, PA; Morehouse Publishing 1987, chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> It was also in 1973 that the Episcopal Church changed its canon law with regard to the purpose and discipline of marriage, making divorce and then remarriage much easier, and placing it all within a “pastoral” rather than a

The examples of the decisions to make the deaconess into the deacon and to lower the standard for Christian marriage (see footnote 3) are useful to us in that they illustrate the possible or real effect of changing cultural norms and practices upon churches, which are placed in the culture and wish to serve the people who live therein. These examples make it clear that it is much easier to accommodate changing culture than to keep historic standards, which, within the modern ethos, are regarded as uninformed by modern ideas of love, dignity and equality.

### **3. Conclusion**

A pertinent question which must remain before us throughout this study is: “To what extent have Christians in general and Christian theologians in particular absorbed the presuppositions, beliefs and worldview of modern society?” For, in a real sense, these things have permeated the very air we breathe and thus are able to gain entrance into our souls, affecting our thinking, feeling and willing, in ways which we may hardly be aware.

In light of these considerations, is it not reasonable to suspect that the ordination of women in various protestant denominations, and now within the AMiA, has more to do with a sense of embarrassment with

---

biblical and disciplinary context. Since then, it has been assumed that divorce followed by re-marriage is generally acceptable both for church members and for those who are deacons, priests and bishops. Here again, since the church uses the Bible for its teaching about marriage and family, it has had to change its method of reading and interpreting the Bible in order for the Bible not to stand in judgment upon current church practice.

what is perceived of as an awkward circumstance, than with the merit of the arguments made in its favor?

In other words, in light of the fact that our Christian mothers, daughters and wives can and do excel within the workplace, even earning their family's primary income – some wonder how the Church could possibly maintain that they are not permitted to serve within the Church in the same manner as men.

In approaching this question, we must not be confused or baited into framing the discussion in terms of what women *can* do, but what they *should* do. Since we believe in a God who has created us with a purpose, we need to ask what that purpose is and how His creating us male and female might bear on that question.

For a church to follow the lead of secular culture on this matter and reorder her life and worship in keeping with the sentiments of the world, as opposed to those revealed in Scripture rightly interpreted, is an abnegation of our calling to defend the faith as we have received it. As such, this innovative theology and the ordination of women which it fosters, must be regarded as a *new theology* – not simply a new position.

We must resist the temptation to remake the Church in our image, that is, in keeping with the sensibilities of secular society. Rather, the Scriptures, read and interpreted according to their natural and traditional meaning must continue to shape our understanding of men and women and their respective callings within Christ's Church.

## **C. The 1662 Ordinal Must Shape Our Understanding of the Diaconate**

We engage this issue as Anglicans, for the sake of the Anglican Church, and more specifically for the sake of the AMiA. Article 3, Section 2a of the AMiA's *Solemn Declaration* reads: "The theology set forth in the 1662 edition of the Book of Common Prayer and Ordinal shall be the theology to which alternative liturgical texts and forms will conform." Thus the AMiA is officially bound to regard the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and Ordinal as authoritative theological standards. I maintain, however, that the practice of ordaining women deacons departs from the teaching of the Ordinal in at least two areas. It destroys the ancient distinction between the deacon and the deaconess and it departs from a Biblical understanding of authority within the church (thereby contributing to an erosion of Biblical sexual distinction).

### **1. The Ordinal Teaches that a Deacon is Distinct from a Deaconess**

In the collect for the ordering of deacons, the Ordinal indicates that the office into which a man is ordained a deacon is the same office first held by St. Stephen (cf. Acts 6:1-7).

Almighty God, who by thy divine providence hast appointed divers Orders of Ministers in thy Church, and didst inspire thine Apostles to choose into the Order of Deacons the first Martyr Saint Stephen, with others: Mercifully behold these thy servants now called to the like office and administration.

The theology of the Ordinal thus explicitly teaches that the office of the deacon is in continuity with St. Stephen's diaconate. In contrast, deaconesses were not considered to be in continuity with St. Stephen's diaconate, but were always their own distinct order.

By indicating that they understood the deacon to be members of the "like office and administration" of St. Stephen, the fathers of the Anglican reformation retained this ancient distinction. The Anglican church continued to maintain this distinction until 1970, when the Episcopal Church USA ceased making deaconesses and began using the Ordinal's diaconal liturgy (as found in the 1928 BCP) to ordain women as deacons.

The ordination of women deacons destroys the ancient catholic practice of distinguishing between the office of deacon and the order of deaconess which the Ordinal maintains. This practice (and the theology which under girds it) is thus not only a break with the catholic ordering of the church but also with what the Ordinal teaches about the nature of the diaconate.

By using "The Form and Manner for Making Deacons" from the Ordinal to ordain women to the diaconate, the AMiA has followed in the innovative footsteps of the Episcopal Church and thus in this area of her doctrine and practice has departed from the historic Anglican tradition found in the Ordinal.

## **2. The Ordinal Teaches that the Diaconate is an Office with Authority**

The Ordinal also clearly indicates that the office of the deacon is an office invested with authority. After laying his hands on the one being made a deacon, the Ordinal instructs the Bishop to say:

Take thou authority to execute the office of a Deacon in the Church of God committed unto thee; In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

*Then the Bishop shall deliver to every one of them the New Testament, saying,*

Take thou authority to read the Gospel in the Church of God, and to preach the same, if thou be thereto licensed by the Bishop himself.

The Ordinal teaches that the deacon, one of the three offices of the Church, has authority within the Church. If the Ordinal is allowed to guide us doctrinally, authority is an undeniable attribute of the diaconate.

The Scriptures teach that women are not to have authority over men within the church. Since according to the Ordinal the diaconate is an office of authority, it is not possible to affirm both what the Ordinal says about the nature of the diaconate and what the church catholic interprets the Scriptures to say about the nature of women's ministry, while simultaneously approving of the ordination of women to the diaconate.

## **3. The Report Downplays the Deacon's Authority**

The Report's description of a deacon's ministry does not adequately take into account the authority of the deacon's office. The

Report mainly describes the service-oriented nature of a deacon's ministry, describing it as "above all an assisting, supportive ministry, a focal symbol of servanthood in the Body of Christ" (p. 98). Though it is right to emphasize that the deacon (like the priest or bishop) is a servant, it is wrong not to mention that the deacon also holds an office with authority and may be authorized to preach (see above).

The Report summarizes the deacon's duties by noting that the deacon "is presently asked to serve in three broad areas: liturgical, pastoral and social/charitable" (p. 97). Nowhere in the entire section dealing with the diaconate does it mention that the Ordinal provides for the bishop to give a deacon authority to preach in the church. This seems a conspicuous omission, since one of the central reasons that (until recently) women have not been made deacons is that the Scriptures have been understood to confer the role of preaching and teaching within the church to men only.

The closest that the main body of the Report comes to acknowledging that deacons may be authorized to preach is in the last sentence of the subsection "In the liturgy," which reads "When a priest is not available, the deacon may preside at baptisms, weddings, and funerals and assist in other liturgical matters" (p. 97). The only explicit mention of teaching is: "*In the pastoral area*: The deacon may be called to instruct the youth in the congregation" (p. 97).

The vast majority of what the Report lists as the deacon's duties are not activities that require ordination, nor are they necessarily even aided by ordination. For example:

Typically charged to seek out the sick, poor and needy of the congregation, the deacon then makes those needs known to the Church, as well as helping the Church meet those needs ... The deacon is particularly oriented to the world, especially to the local society. It is the deacon's calling to see to the needs of the community, "churched and unchurched," and to interpret those needs to the congregation ... Since many deacons have full time jobs in the secular world, there is a natural link or bridge formed that enhances the deacon's work and gives opportunities to model servanthood to the lay members of the congregation. Informal evangelism takes place naturally in the work of a deacon (p. 97).

These are not activities for which one needs to be ordained. To varying degrees, these types of service are the vocation of any servant of Christ. One could replace every use of the word "deacon" with the word "disciple" or even "laymen" and not lose the sense of the paragraph.

But a deacon is not simply a layman with a servant's heart. For unlike a layman, a deacon may be given authority to preach. This vital aspect of the diaconate does not surface in the Report in an explicit manner until the delineation of a deacon's duties in Appendix #4. There we read: "The deacon, when the priest is absent, is to baptize and preach when licensed by the bishop" (p. 131).

While it is important to emphasize the servant nature of any clerical position, the potential authority of the deacon to preach is a central concern in deciding the legitimacy of ordaining women to this office. The Report's omission of the fact that a corollary of making a woman a deacon is that she may be authorized to preach is a significant oversight that fatally undermines the argument for women deacons.

In considering the legitimacy of making women deacons, we must operate within the parameters of the diaconate as it is expressed in the Anglican Church. If Anglicans understood deacons simply to be those who “serve the community” and “assist the apostolic leaders” (as those in favor of women deacons describe the diaconate, p. 100) there would be no need for this paper. But service is not all that the Anglican tradition (as expressed in the Ordinal) recognizes as being inherent in the office of the diaconate. The Ordinal assigns deacons certain functions that preclude women from serving in this office.

#### **D. The Importance of the Ministry of Women**

Though I do not believe that God calls women to be ordained to any of the three ecclesial offices, I am eager to affirm the importance of women being equipped and sent forth to minister in the many ways in which God does call them. The ministry of the laity is of vital importance to the Church, for all Christians are called to serve God and neighbor. The notion that one must be ordained to have a significant ministry in the Church is a fallacy. Throughout the ages women have played roles of vital importance in the Church, demonstrating great faith and giftedness. There is a strong Biblical mandate for the Church to equip and send all Christians into various fields of ministry, women not excluded.

Both men and women have equal standing before God. Contrary to the modern mind, however, this equality is not expressed in sameness and interchangeability. The following quote from the biblical scholar Robert Yarbrough states this position well:

In Paul’s understanding men and women, while equal in value and importance before the Lord, were not regarded as unisex components with swappable functions in home and church. In the overall scope of biblical teaching this was not, apparently, felt to be a penalty or restriction. Women’s gifts, callings, and ministries are delineated and even exalted in numerous passages both in Paul’s letters and across the whole of Scripture. Women are hallowed in the innumerable situations arising in home, church, and public life that call for those expressions of Christian graces that lie uniquely within the purview of regenerate female nature and competencies. But a corollary to this is that at certain points, women’s gifts, callings, and ministries were differentiated from



the gifts, callings, and ministries of men. The historic position of the church on the sanctity of motherhood (for married females only), fatherhood (for married males only), and certain church offices (only males were chosen as apostles and elders) recognize this.<sup>5</sup>

In God's economy of church and home, women assume certain roles and perform certain functions distinct from those which He has decreed for men. It is my view that the theological underpinnings for sexual distinction within the Church and the home are found in the Scriptures and are culturally transcendent through time and place. None of the forms of service to which God calls women requires ordination to the diaconate (see below).

That being said, I still feel free to encourage women to take on positions of leadership within their local churches, as long as the exercise of their duties is not in conflict with the whole teaching of Scripture as to the importance of maintaining sexual distinction between men and women. One aspect of this is that women are forbidden to "teach or have authority" over a man, which precludes a woman from preaching. But not every "leader" in the church is a preacher and not every "leader" in the church needs to lead in such a way as to disregard what the Scriptures command about male headship.

---

<sup>5</sup> Robert W. Yarbrough, "Progressive and Historic: The Hermeneutics of 1 Timothy 2:9-15," Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner editors, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 122.

I am in favor of women in ministry and am of the mind that to deny women the privilege of Godly service within the church is a great evil which will impoverish the church and distort the gospel. But the ordination of women to the diaconate is an error, transgressing the teaching of the Scriptures and historic Anglican doctrine.

## II. AN APPRAISAL OF THE AMiA's REPORT

### A. Introductory Comments

#### 1. Approach and Presuppositions

In this section I will interact directly with the Report's discussion of deacons. The Report begins with some comments on the history, nature, and duties of the diaconate. Brief arguments are then set forth in favor of and against making women deacons. It then asks the crucial question: "Is it appropriate to ordain women to the office of deacons, as Anglicans understand that office?" (p. 98).

In what follows I direct the bulk of my attention to the claims and comments made by those in favor of the ordination of women to the diaconate (the "pro" side).

#### 2. Perceived Weaknesses of the Report

The degree to which the Report specifically addresses the topic of women and the diaconate is relatively minimal. Consequently, the manner in which this issue interacts with the larger question of the Biblical legitimacy of ordaining women to *any* ecclesial office is left unexplored. For instance, the Report gives inadequate attention to questions such as the significance of the history of the church catholic's practice on this matter, the relationship of ordination and Biblical anthropology, and the far-reaching theological implications of adopting a hermeneutic that legitimizes what amounts to an egalitarian Biblical interpretation.

Another weakness of the Report is its assumption that the diaconate may be cordoned off from the other two offices and considered separately, as though the difference is not a question of degree only but also of kind and essential nature. The following statement made in the section on deacons is illustrative of this point:

We are considering this question somewhat separately from the question concerning the priesthood/presbyterate and episcopate because the diaconate is not an office of governance, nor do deacons preside over the Eucharistic celebrations of the congregations (p. 98).

This assumption finds further expression in the organization of the Report itself. After the episcopate and the presbyterate are considered together (in three major sections totaling approximately 84 pages), the question of the diaconate is entertained in a separate and comparatively short section (9 pages). The Report seems to miss or ignore the possibility that making women deacons while forbidding them to be priests or bishops seriously undermines the threefold order as historically understood by episcopally-governed churches.

#### a) **The Inherent Difficulties of Ordaining Women as Deacons But not as Priests**

The Report seems to anticipate the theological tension created by the decision to make women deacons but not priests or bishops. The opening comments in the Report's section on the diaconate could be understood as an attempt to alleviate this tension by suggesting the creation of a new office.

## **b) The Report Suggests a New Office**

The first sentence of the “General Comments” section in *Part 4* reads:

We currently have two types of deacons in the Church: the transitional deacon who is called to the priesthood and will eventually become a priest, and the ‘permanent’ or ‘vocational’ deacon who is called to this particular servant order and will remain a deacon. For the purposes of this Report, we are primarily concerned with the latter (p. 96).

Strictly speaking, the designation of the transitional deacon as a different “type” of deacon from the permanent deacon is inaccurate. Neither the Book of Common Prayer (1662) nor its Ordinal speaks of two types of deacons. There are only three ordained offices in the Anglican Church, one of which is the diaconate. Understood within the context of our standards, the diaconate is not divisible into different “types.”

That being said, the Ordinal does allow functional differentiation within the diaconate. For as has already been noted, not all deacons are automatically given “Authority to read the Gospel in the Church of God, and to preach the same,” only those who are “thereto licensed by the Bishop.”

The Report next suggests that:

It is best to retain the name ‘deacons’ for this abiding expression of the diaconate and to regard it as an office in itself, while finding some qualifying name for the diaconate as it is retained in the priestly and Episcopal orders (p. 96).

It is difficult to know exactly what is meant by “this abiding expression of the diaconate.” The nearest antecedent (from the preceding paragraph) is that of the “permanent/vocational” diaconate. If this is what the author means, an explicit claim is being made that the “permanent/vocational” diaconate be considered an order of its own, distinct from the “transitional” diaconate, which would be reassigned a new “qualifying name.”

The ancient threefold order of deacon, priest, and bishop is a unified and ancient mark of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, a mark the Anglican church has always maintained. An argument either to add to or subtract from these three offices would merit just as much (if not more) studious attention and explicit argument as the question of ordaining women. If women’s ordination to the diaconate necessitates the creation of a new office, it becomes all the more difficult to defend.

## **3. Some Unhelpful Presuppositions**

A number of the presuppositions articulated by those in favor of the ordination of women to the diaconate deserve comment.

Pro argument #2

Women are sensing the call to serve as deacons. They are coming forward for that call to be tested. They have gone through serious preparation and have met all of the stated standards. Women have been ordained as deacons in Anglican bodies and have shown themselves to be very effective. Unless there are serious biblical grounds for saying “no,” we must surely see the call of God and the work of the Spirit in these women and ordain them (98).

This comment begins on exactly the wrong footing. The “sense” or the feeling of a call must not be equated with the call of God. In any area of life, whenever anyone thinks that God is speaking to him or her, that God is calling him or her to anything, it is always imperative that this “sense” is submitted to the teaching of the Word of God.

We must begin first with the Scriptures, filtering all of our experiences and “senses” of what God is saying to us through them. In contrast to this, the above quoted paragraph begins its argument with an appeal to the phenomenon of experience. The fact that some women in some parts of the church believe that God is calling them to the ordained ministry is no certain indication that such a call exists.

Furthermore, the comment that “Women have been ordained as deacons in Anglican bodies and have shown themselves to be very effective” does very little to commend the pro ordination position for at least three reasons: (a) It should be quite clear to anyone acquainted with Anglicanism that the mere fact that “Anglican bodies” have been practicing something in no way commends it as biblical. (b) If this is a cloaked appeal to tradition or to the belief and practice of the Anglican Church, it is an empty one. The ordination of women to the diaconate is a terribly recent development. Even the liberally-minded Episcopal Church only began ordaining women deacons in 1970. (c) *Most importantly* – it is nonsensical to suggest that because women deacons have served in a “very effective” manner that therefore it is biblical to ordain women as deacons.

Proponents of the ordination of women to the diaconate would have the reader believe that the question which is before us as we consider

this issue is: “*can* women serve as deacons?” in the sense of gifting and capacity. There is no doubt that women are capable of functioning in the manner in which a deacon functions but this in no way means that they should be ordained to the diaconate.

Pro argument #3 states

By including women in the diaconate, we give visible witness to the fact that the gifts of God are given to the whole Body of Christ. They are not distributed according to gender (Joel 2:28, Acts 2:17) . . . This is particularly important if women are not ordained to the priesthood/presbyterate (98-99).

Ironically, the logic of this comment defeats its stated intent. This comment indicates that women should be ordained as deacons because their status as deacons will be a sign that God has gifted the entire Body of Christ. Does the author of this comment think that ordained people are more gifted than the laity? Why would ordaining a woman be a sign of her gifting? This is not what Paul teaches (see Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12).

Each member in the body of Christ has been given gifts, those who are called to the ordained ministry are gifted in keeping with their calling but their gifts are not entirely unique to the clergy. Those who are not called to be ordained might have the same gifts as a clergyman. Their gifting is no less substantial because they work in a context outside of the church. We must stop assuming that God’s call on an individual to enter the diaconate is synonymous with an individual possessing the gifts of the diaconate and/or the desire to be a deacon.

Our consideration of the legitimacy of ordaining women to the diaconate must not be shaped by such concerns. Rather, our decision should reflect the teaching of the Scriptures, the witness of the history of the Church, and the Doctrinal Formularies of the AMiA.

## **B. A Response to Selected Texts within Part 4, Section 3 of the Report**

Section 3 of Part 4 of the Report is entitled “Interpretation of the relevant texts concerning the diaconate” and addresses the following four Biblical texts:

- Acts 6:1-6
- Romans 16:1-2
- Philippians 1:1
- 1 Timothy 3:8-13

The Report’s treatment of each text is divided into three parts: “General Comment,” “Pro-Comments,” and “Con-Comments.”

### **1. Acts 6:1-6**

*“Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists<sup>1</sup> arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup> And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, brothers,<sup>1</sup> pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” <sup>5</sup> And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.”*

The following two sentences from this section of the Report warrant some comments. In the General Comment section we read:

The verb “serve” (*diakoneu*) and the noun “servant” (*diakonos*) give us both the name of deacon and the emphasis upon service and the meeting of needs that has remained central to the office of deacon ever since (p. 100).

The first “Pro Comment” in this section states:

It is important to note that this is a ministry that was called into being to serve the community and to assist the apostolic leaders who were overseeing the Church (p. 100).

Both of these statements orient the reader toward the servant nature of the diaconate. I do not dispute that servant-like labor is a central emphasis of this office. Indeed, this clearly stands out in the Greek, since the single Greek word *diakonos* at times means simply “servant” (we will call this the common meaning of *diakonos*) while at other times means “deacon” (we will call this the restricted meaning).

While the language of service, servanthood and assisting/assistance are not inappropriate descriptions of the diaconate (they reflect the language of the Book of Common Prayer itself), they do not fully express all that the Anglican tradition recognizes as being consonant with this office. To describe the nature of the diaconate exclusively or predominantly in these terms is to invite the misunderstanding that this office does not carry with it authority or that it is somehow less fully a clerical office than is the priesthood or the episcopate.

Every Christian (lay or clerical) is called to be a servant (*diakonos* – common meaning) though not all are called to be a deacon (*diakonos* –

restricted meaning). A deacon is something more than simply a Christian servant. But when the language of service so dominates a description of the diaconate, without a balanced reference to the authority bestowed upon the deacon, the distinction between the common and restricted meaning of *diakonos* becomes obscured.

The Report’s treatment of the diaconate in general and its section on Acts 6:1-6 in particular excels in reminding the reader of the service-oriented character of the diaconate. It does not, however, say enough about diaconal authority. As is argued elsewhere, one of the main reasons that this office should be occupied by men only is owing to the authoritative service which characterizes the diaconate.

Another claim of the pro commentator in this section must not go unchallenged. The final Pro Comment in this section reads: “There is nothing in this text (Acts 6:1-6) that would bar women from serving in the diaconate.” This is true, but it is also true that nothing in the text would bar a man living in adultery from serving in the diaconate. The commentator treats the absence of a prohibition as though it were an affirmation of his position. But given the type of text it is (narrative), why would the reader expect to find such content? Acts 6:1-6 is a description of an historical event, an event seminal in the life of the church. But it is not a description of the ministry of or qualifications for a deacon.

In conclusion, I think that neither this passage nor the Report’s commentary on it significantly contribute to answering the question whether women may be ordained to the diaconate in the Anglican Church.

## 2. Romans 16:1-2

*“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, <sup>2</sup> that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.”*

The “General Comments” for the Report’s treatment of Romans 16:1-2 reads:

At the conclusion of his letter to Rome, the Apostle gave special commendation to the bearer of the letter to the Romans. He refers to her as “our sister”, as “a deacon of the Church of Cenchreae” and as a “helper of many and of myself.” He asks the saints in Rome to stand by her and give her any help she needs. These are strong words (p. 101).

Characterizing Paul’s comments about Phoebe as “strong words” suggests to the reader that these verses should significantly influence our understanding of the diaconate. But I contend that the evidence indicates that Romans 16:1-2 contributes very little to the question at hand.

### a) What did it mean for Paul to call Phoebe a *diakonos*?

The first Pro Comment in this section reads:

The usual word for “deacon of a church” is used to refer to Phoebe. The word “deacon” (*diakonos*) can mean simply a servant, or a person who has a servant’s heart. However, when it is connected to “of a Church,” then that tends to point more in the direction of the deacons of that Church, a group in ministry (See Phil. 1:1) (p. 101).

Pro Comment #4 states:

If Phoebe is a deacon in the congregation in Cenchreae, then women can be deacons in congregations today (p. 101).

At first blush, this seems a strong argument: the Bible says Phoebe was a *diakonos* at a church; therefore, she was a deacon. If Paul commended Phoebe as a deacon, then there is no reason that the contemporary church should not welcome women into the diaconate. But because this line of reasoning takes too much for granted in terms of the meaning of the word *diakonos*, it is potentially misleading.

The Report is correct in noting that if Paul had desired to refer to Phoebe as a deacon, *diakonos* is the word that he would have used to describe her. But this is not to say that because he calls Phoebe a *diakonos*, he has called her a deacon. The word *diakonos* has a variety of meanings, thus the mere use of *diakonos* does not necessarily indicate that Paul had in mind the diaconate. Common definitions of *diakonos* include “servant; helper, minister; deacon; deaconess.” In light of this it is clear that the statement made in pro comment 1 (“The usual word for “deacon of a church” is used to refer to Phoebe.”) means very little. It would be just as true (or untrue) to write “the usual word for ‘servant’ (or deaconess) is used to refer to Phoebe.”

A survey of the ways in which Paul uses the word *diakonos* demonstrates this word's semantic flexibility within his letters. Paul uses *diakonos* 21 times in 19 verses in eight epistles.<sup>6</sup>

Twice *diakonos* refers to secular authorities.

**Romans 13:4** “for he is God’s servant (*diakonos*) for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant (*diakonos*) of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

*Diakonos* is used ten times by Paul in reference to himself and his co-workers.

**1 Corinthians 3:5** What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants (*diakonoī*) through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.

**Ephesians 3:7** Of this gospel I was made a minister (*diakonos*) according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power.

**Ephesians 6:21** So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister (*diakonos*) in the Lord will tell you everything.

**See also:** 2 Cor 3:6, 6:4; Col 1:7, 23, 25; 4:7; 1 Tim 4:6

---

<sup>6</sup> Rom. 13:4; 15:8; 16:1; 1 Co. 3:5; 2 Co. 3:6; 6:4; 11:15, 23; Gal. 2:17; Eph. 3:7; 6:21; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:7, 23, 25; 4:7; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12; 4:6.

In the following three examples, *diakonos* refers to an “office.” Because of its parallelism with the word *episkopos* (overseer; bishop) in these verses, *diakonos* should be understood in a hierarchical sense.<sup>7</sup>

**Philippians 1:1** Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons (*diakonoi*).

**1 Timothy 3:8** Deacons (*diakonous*) likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

**1 Timothy 3:12** Let deacons (*diakonoī*) each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.

*Diakonos* is used twice to describe Christ.

**Romans 15:8** “For I tell you that Christ became a servant (*diakonos*) to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs.”

**Galatians 2:17** “But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant (*diakonos*) of sin? Certainly not!

---

<sup>7</sup> Aimé Georges Martimort, Deaconesses: An Historical Study, trans. K. D. Whitehead (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 18.



*Diakonos* is even used in reference to those who are servants of Satan.<sup>8</sup>

**2 Corinthians 11:15** So it is no surprise if his servants (*diakonoī*), also, disguise themselves as servants (*diakonoī*) of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

These verses illustrate that Paul did not always mean “deacon” when he uses the word *diakonos*.

Pro comments 1 & 4 make false claims about the meaning of Romans 16:1-2 because they have assumed a false premise. The argument’s fundamental error lies in having invested the word *diakonos* with more weight than it can bear in this context. As we have seen, *diakonos* does not always refer to the office of deacon. When the rest of Paul’s writings are taken into consideration (where he forbids women to preach or have authority over men) his use of *diakonos* in Romans 16 cannot be understood to indicate that Phoebe held an ecclesial office which is consonant with what Anglicans understand to constitute the diaconate.

### **b) Phoebe as *diakonos* in Patristic Literature**

Though Phoebe’s designation as *diakonos* does not indicate that she should be regarded as a woman who was a deacon in the same way that men are deacons, she is nevertheless a very important figure who has abiding relevance for the ministry of women.

---

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Moo, The Epistle to the Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), footnote 7, 913.

The Orthodox Church, which does not ordain women to the diaconate, honors Phoebe by calling her “equal to the apostles” and regards her as the first deaconess of the Church. In their mind, St. Phoebe is to deaconesses what St. Stephen is to the diaconate. The Orthodox Church attributes significant authority to the teaching of the church fathers, especially those from the east. It is therefore significant that it is in the writings of the eastern church father Theodoret that Phoebe is referred to as a “deacon” and yet Theodoret has not been understood to be teaching that women were or should be included in the diaconate. Theodoret wrote:

Cenchreae is a great agglomeration adjoining Corinth. The effectiveness of the preaching is to be admired: in a very short period of time, not only were the cities filled with piety but the countryside around them as well. The Church assembly at Cenchreae was already so considerable as to have a woman deacon (*gunaika diakonon*), prominent and noble. She was so rich in good works performed as to have merited the praise of Paul (Martimort, 117).

It would be tempting for those who argue for the ordination of women to the diaconate to lift this patristic reference out of context and use it as patristic evidence of women who were deacons. But this would engage only a portion of the evidence at our disposal. Theodoret’s use the word “deacon” in reference to Phoebe needs to be read alongside what we know about the manner in which women served as “deacons.” As I point out in later sections, women were not understood to be deacons as men were understood to be deacons. Though this patristic text does refer to Phoebe

as “deacon”, when it is read alongside the other documents from the early church which are at our disposal, Bishop Theodoret’s comment does not indicate that he thought that Phoebe shared the same office as did St. Stephen (and subsequent male deacons).

### c) The Significance of the Phrase “of the Church”

Romans 16:1b

“ . . . a diakonos of the church at Cenchreae,”

How significant is it that Paul does not simply call Phoebe a *diakonos*, but modifies this word with the phrase “of the church at Cenchreae?” Proponents of the ordination of women often argue that Paul’s use of this phrase indicates that Phoebe held a position of ministry which (when combined with the commendation Paul gives her) provides an apostolic precedent for the ordained ministry of women in the contemporary church. Pro-Comment 1 articulates this position when it asserts that the phrase “tends to point more in the direction of the deacons of that Church, a group in ministry.”

Paul’s modification of *diakonos* with the phrase “of the church” does seem to indicate that Phoebe was a minister of some fashion in her church. But is there good reason to think that her ministry in Cenchraea lends Biblical support to the ordination of women to the diaconate? Not by any means.

If calling Phoebe a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchraea is not the same thing as calling her a deacon, do the Scriptures give us any clues as to the nature of Phoebe’s ministry? Because Paul does not explicitly

describe the nature of Phoebe’s ministry, we must look to the wider Pauline corpus to answer this question. Though he does not tell us exactly what Phoebe was or was not doing, the fact that he approves of her ministry is a hint as to the nature of her ministry. She must have been fulfilling her calling in ways consistent with his teaching, for Paul commends her to his readers and asks that they help her in whatever ways she needs assistance. This raises the question: What must Paul have thought was true of Phoebe’s ministry such that he would commend her to his readers?

Elsewhere in the Scriptures, Paul explicitly forbids women to exercise certain forms of ministry in the church. In 1 Timothy 2 for instance, he indicates that a woman is not to teach or exercise authority over a man.

Because Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in such chronological proximity to his writing of 1 Timothy, it stands to reason that the manner in which Phoebe functioned as a “deacon of the church” in Romans 16 must have been consistent with Paul’s teaching in 1 Timothy 2, or he would have opposed Phoebe rather than commend her as he did.

Whatever one’s conclusion is about the meaning of “*diakonos* of the church of Cenchreae”, it must be affirmed that Phoebe’s ministry was such that she did not teach nor exercise authority over men, but rather remained quiet (cf. 1 Tim 2:11-12).

#### d) Phoebe as a *prostatis* to Paul and to Many

Romans 16:2

“. . . that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron (*prostatis*) of many and of myself as well.”

What was Paul saying about Phoebe when he called her a *prostatis*? Does the fact that he calls her a *prostatis* indicate that she held a position of authority in the church such that her ministry substantiates the ordination of women to the diaconate? Such is the argument of pro comment 3 which reads:

Phoebe is referred to in verse 2 as a *prostatis*. While that is often translated ‘helper,’ it can also be translated as ‘benefactor or even leader.’ It seems that the Apostle is underlining her place in the Church (p. 101).

This comment argues the position that Paul’s designation of Phoebe as *prostatis* indicates that she was a leader placed in authority over others and even over Paul himself (“for she has been a patron [*prostatis*] of many and of myself as well”). There is ample reason, however, to reject such an interpretation of this verse.

The interpretation of this verse centers around the meaning of *prostatis*. Because it is not used anywhere else in the New Testament, we are unable to examine how it is used in other contexts. But it does occur in extra-biblical Greek writing from this time period. This is an important clue in determining what Paul likely meant when he used the word. In his

discussion of this verse Douglas Moo, an evangelical New Testament scholar, points out that when it appears in secular literature, *prostatis* typically means “patron, benefactor” (915-916). He goes on to comment that

A patron was one who came to the aid of others, especially foreigners, by providing housing and financial aid and by representing their interest before local authorities. Phoebe, then, was probably a woman of high social standing and some wealth, who put her status, resources, and time at the services of traveling Christians, like Paul, who needed help and support (915-916).

Another evangelical scholar, Thomas Schreiner, offers three reasons why *prostatis* does not indicate that Phoebe was a leader in the church based on the logic and context of this passage:

(1) It is highly improbable that Paul would say that Phoebe held a position of authority over him. He says that about no one except Christ, not even the Jerusalem apostles (Galatians 1:6-7, 11), so confident is he of his high authority as an apostle (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:37-38; Galatians 1:8-9; 2 Thessalonians 3:14).

(2) There seems to be a play on words between the word *prostatis* and the previous verb *paristemi* in 16:2. Paul says to help (*paristemi*) Phoebe because she has been a help (*prostatis*) to many, including to Paul himself. It fits the context better to understand Paul as saying “help Phoebe because she has been such a help to others and to me.”

(3) Although the related masculine noun *prostates* can mean “leader,” the actual feminine noun (*prostatis*) does not take the

meaning “leader” but is defined as “protectress, patroness, helper.”<sup>9</sup>

#### e) Conclusion

Romans 16:1-2 does not support the notion that the way in which Phoebe ministered at her church in Cenchraea was a forerunner to the diaconate. In light of the observations discussed above, I propose that a more accurate way to explain the relevance that Romans 16:1-2 has for our understanding of the diaconate is as follows.

The word *diakonos* used here in reference to Phoebe is the same word used elsewhere in reference to those who have official positions in the church (i.e. “deacons”, see Phil 1:1). It is also the same word which in other contexts means “servant” without having any official ecclesial office in mind. Because in this verse *diakonos* is modified by the phrase ‘of the church,’ it seems likely that Phoebe was in ministry at this church.

Our understanding of the term *prostatis* should take into account both what it is most likely for Paul to have been asserting about his relationship to Phoebe and also what we can glean about its meaning from other literature. These considerations do not support understanding *prostatis* to indicate that Phoebe was in a position of authority or leadership in relationship to Paul.

---

<sup>9</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “The Valuable Ministries of Women in the Context of Male Leadership: A Survey of Old and New Testament Examples and Teaching”, in Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism, John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 219-220.

Whatever kind of ministry Phoebe had within her church, surely it was such that she submitted to the God-given rules for church order communicated elsewhere through the apostle Paul and the ministry of women in the contemporary church should follow suit.

#### f) Addendum: Phoebe’s Ministry as an Example to All

We have no interest in overlooking the fact that Romans 16:1-2 clearly identifies Phoebe as a faithful minister of Christ at the church of Cenchraea. Paul’s approval of Phoebe’s service is an apostolic mandate for women to be faithful ministers within their churches (though without assuming positions of authority by being ordained to a clerical office).

Too often interpreters miss the point that Biblical examples of faithful (and gifted) women serving in a variety of ministries do not substantiate the claim that they did or ought now to hold ordained office in the church.

Our position, that Phoebe did not hold an ecclesial office, is not contradicted by her serving her church as a faithful servant (*diakonos*) or even by her being a servant-leader in the Cenchrean church. Even if Phoebe held an “official position” within the church, there is little reason to think that this position was a forerunner of or synonymous with what became the office of deacon later in the history of the church.

The pertinent question before us, in light of Romans 16:1-2, is “how can we equip women to serve in the church such that their ministry would be commended by Paul as was Phoebe’s?”

### 3. 1 Timothy 3:8-13

*“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. <sup>9</sup>They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. <sup>10</sup>And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. <sup>11</sup>Their wives (*gunaikas*) likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. <sup>12</sup>Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. <sup>13</sup>For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”*

#### a) Introduction

We have already noted that sometimes Paul uses the term *diakonos* to mean “servant” as opposed to a special, set apart order of ministers within the church (i.e. a “deacon”). This is not one of those times. The context of 1 Timothy 3 makes it clear that vv. 8-13 comprise a list of requirements for those who serve the church as deacons (note the unambiguous description of the *episkopos* in vv. 1-7).

Nowhere in this passage does Paul explicitly indicate that women were or should be included in the diaconate. Nowhere in this passage is the word *diakonos* used of women. This passage is relevant for the question at hand because in the middle of his discussion of the requirements which a deacon must meet, Paul uses the word *gunaikas* (wife, woman) in reference to a group of women (v. 11). The question before us is: “When Paul uses the word *gunaikas* in v. 11 does he mean the wives of the deacons or is he referring to women who were themselves deacons?”

#### b) Evidence that Paul’s use of *gunaikas* Does Not Refer to Female Deacons

##### (1) The Context & Flow of the Passage

Within the New Testament the term *gunaikas* is used to mean both “wife” and/or “woman.” In the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus) Paul uses it in both ways. This is especially the case in 1 Timothy (where its referent is “woman” in 2:9, 10, 11, 12, 14 and “wife” in 3:2, 12; 5:9).<sup>10</sup> The trouble with the use of *gunaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11 is that Paul does not explicitly indicate which of these two meanings he intends. Those in favor of women’s ordination to the diaconate typically argue that he means “women” and that therefore he is writing about women who were deacons.

Because the two uses of *gunaikas* closest to v. 11 clearly mean “wives”, for *gunaikas* in v. 11 to mean “women” it would require the term to change meaning twice in just a few verses (in 3:2 – “wives”, in 3:11 “women” and in 3:12 back to “wives”). This is a more difficult and cumbersome reading which mitigates against its likelihood.

Westminster Seminary’s Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Vern Poythress makes a similar observation:

A reference to wives would explain what would otherwise appear to be a seemingly abrupt statement in the midst of the passage but which, on such an understanding [if *gunaikas* refers to

---

<sup>10</sup> George W. Knight, III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Edited by I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 171.

wives], is but the first of several comments about the deacon's family.<sup>11</sup>

Poythress' argument is that the context and flow of the passage is significantly disrupted if *gunaikas* is made to mean woman deacons. But this is not the case if *gunaikas* refers to the wives of the deacons discussed in the rest of the passage.

## **(2) The *gunaikas* are Grammatically Separated from the *diakonoi***

Paul shows the reader that he is not writing about deacons in v. 11 by using the same word to distinguish between the deacon and the *gunaikas* as he does to distinguish between the bishop and the deacon.

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul is writing about bishops. In v. 8, he begins to write about deacons. One of the words that he uses to signal this shift in subject is the word  $\text{οὕτως}$  (*houtos*) ("likewise"). "Deacons likewise ( $\text{οὕτως}$ ) must be dignified" (3:8). He uses the word  $\text{οὕτως}$  a second time in v. 11 when he again shifts referents (subjects) and begins to write about the wives. "Their wives likewise must be dignified" (3:11). (This is not an uncommon way to write in Greek.) This grammatical clue

---

<sup>11</sup> Poythress, Vern, "The Family and the Church" in Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism, 353.

Knight concurs: "If it is wives that are in view, then the verse fits here as another qualification necessary for one who would be a deacon and who would conduct his ministry with his wife's assistance. Thus the wife's qualifications are part and parcel of his qualifications for the office of diakonos. And after giving the qualifications for the deacon's wife, Paul then goes on to the deacon's fidelity to his wife and children and thereby completes the picture of his family life (v.12)." (172).

points to the fact that when he writes about *gunaikas* in v. 11, Paul is introducing a different group of people from those he is writing about in vv. 8-10.

Even if *gunaikas* did mean "women deacons," they are still significantly distinguished from the *diakonoi* discussed in the rest of the passage. This is true because the requirements for the *gunaikas* in v. 11 are listed separately from those of the *diakonoi* explicitly mentioned in vv. 8-10 and vv. 12-13. Those in favor of the ordination of women to the diaconate seem to miss the fact that reading *gunaikas* as a woman deacon is an admission of their differentiation from a male deacon.

Thus even if this is a reference to women deacons, this verse still does not present women as having an office which is synonymous with the *diakonoi* who are written about in the surrounding verses. If v. 11 is about women deacons, those in favor of including women in the diaconate in the same manner as men must answer the question as to why Paul has not included them in his discussion of the requirements of deacon but instead has written about them separately.

## **(3) No Mention of Marital Status & Fidelity**

There are numerous similarities between the requirements of the *gunaikas* and that of the bishops and the deacons. But there are a number of significant points of dissimilarity, which undermine the assertion that *gunaikas* refers to female deacons. Notice what Paul does not say about the *gunaikas*. He says nothing about their marital state, though elsewhere in this letter, when he writes about bishops, deacons

and older widows he makes requirements about their marital status and fidelity (see Knight, 171).

A bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife . . . He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive (3:2, 4)

Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. (3:12)

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband (5:9)

Because he has made the issue of marital status and fidelity an explicit requirement for the bishop, the deacon and the widow, if Paul were writing about women deacons in v. 11 the reader would expect comments about the necessity of the woman deacon having a marital life that was above reproach. But Paul writes nothing along these lines when he writes about the *gunaikas*. These omissions are understandable if *gunaikas* refers not to women deacons, but rather to the wives of the deacons who are the subject of the surrounding verses.

#### **(4) No Mention of Being Tested & Beyond Reproach**

Unlike the bishop and the deacon, the *gunaikas* of v. 11 are not required to be tested and proven to be beyond reproach. In contrast, the bishop must be “able to teach” (3:2) and the deacon “must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove blameless” (3:10). Paul does not make this requirement of the *gunaikas* because they were not

office holders in the church and thus were not being called to assume positions of authority, teaching and defending the faith by their life and conduct.

#### **c) The Comments of three Church Fathers’ on 1 Timothy 3:11**

Some church fathers did not interpret 1 Timothy 3:11 to refer to the wives of deacons. Three patristic writers are especially important to read on this point, namely Theodore of Mopsuetia, St. John Chrysostom, and Theodoret. Theodore of Mopsuestia wrote:

Since Paul was speaking immediately before about deacons, and since this name applies also to women given to similar tasks, he quite logically added that the women also should be chaste. This does not mean that the wives of deacons were established in this service, but that any women who were established in it to exercise the same office as the deacons had to be as distinguished in their zeal for virtue as those same deacons ... After having mentioned cases of women given the responsibility of the diaconate, a mention which is explicable because of the similarity of the names, [Paul] went on to pick up the thread again of what he had been saying about deacons. And he added: “Let deacons be the husband of one wife” (Martimort, 117-118).

Chrysostom wrote:

“The women likewise.” He meant the [women] deacons. There are those who say he was talking about women in general. No, that is not the case. It would have made no sense to have inserted here something about women in general in this particular place. He was referring to those having the dignity of deaconesses. “Let deacons be the husband of one wife.” This too is appropriately

said also of women deacons, for this is necessary, useful and proper in the highest degree in the Church (Ibid., 118).

And Theodoret commented:

“The women likewise”, that is to say, the [woman] deacons (diakonous), “must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.” What he prescribed for men, [he prescribed] in similar terms equally for women. For just as he required deacons to be “serious,” so he required women to be serious. Just as he required deacons not to be “double tongued”, so he required the women to be “no slanderers.” Just as he required deacons not to be “addicted to much wine,” so he required the women to be temperate (Ibid.).

How should we interpret these references? Do these comments indicate that these church fathers knew of women who were a part of the diaconate such that women should be ordained to the diaconate today? Such a conclusion is not warranted by these simple references.

To understand whether or not these patristic comments indicate that the authors knew of and accepted the ministry of women deacons who served like a male deacon, we must consult other texts from this period of church history. The patristic comments quoted above must be read within the context of all that we know about the beliefs and practices of the church during this time.

The section below (based largely on Martimort’s work) discusses what such texts tell us about the manner in which men and women served as *diakonos*. Study of these texts leads to the conclusion that women were not understood to be members of the diaconate as were men. The church

called them by a different name (deaconess – not female deacon), had different liturgical rites for setting them aside for service from those used for the all-male diaconate and did not allow them to serve in the same manner as male deacons.

Therefore, the manner in which these church fathers interpreted 1 Timothy 3:11 is a prime example of the argument I make above. On the one hand they interpreted Paul to be writing about women called “deacons” but on the other hand the greater corpus of evidence at our disposal indicates that the fathers did not think that women (whether we call them “deacons” or “deaconesses”) were members of the diaconate in the same manner as men.

#### **d) Conclusion**

When this passage is read within the greater context of the whole of the Scriptures and in light of the manner in which other documents portray the ministry of women in the early church, it becomes very difficult to interpret this verse as referring to women who were deacons in the manner that men were understood to be deacons.

From other places in the Scriptures (even within 1 Timothy itself), we know that Paul understood men and women to fulfill their calling to ecclesial service in different ways. We also know that until the modern era, women were not ordained as deacons. Both of these observations, as well as the considerations discussed above, support reading *gunaikas* not as “female deacons” but either as “wives” or as “deaconesses.” It must be concluded that this is not a verse which supports the ordination of women to the diaconate.



As is demonstrated below, the most explicit evidence from the early church about the nature of a woman serving as a “deacon” indicates that the nature of her service was always differentiated from the manner in which men served as deacons.

### III. HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS: AN ABBREVIATED SUMMARY OF *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* by Aimé Georges Martimort

#### A. Summary of Approach

It is of central importance that the contemporary Anglican church consult the practices and doctrine of the historic Church as she attempts to make theological judgments. This is not a naïve appeal to tradition as a sufficient authority in and of itself. It is not the Anglican position that tradition is authoritative in the same manner in which the Holy Scriptures are authoritative. But the history of the church's interpretation of the Word of God must have a voice in our deliberations, including this discussion regarding the legitimacy of ordaining women to the diaconate.

It is sometimes argued that the practice of ordaining women to the diaconate has ancient precedent in the practice of the early Church. An examination of ancient extra-Biblical sources, however, demonstrates that this is not the case. In this section I interact with a book which constitutes the best historical treatment of deaconesses of which I am aware.

Aimé Georges Martimort's *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* interacts with many questions germane to the AMiA's continued reflection on the ordination of women to the diaconate. *Deaconesses* is arranged chronologically, beginning with a brief discussion of a few Biblical texts, then working systematically through what Martimort considers to be the major early Church documents that shed light on the manner(s) in which deaconesses have been understood through the ages.

What follows is mainly a presentation of what seems most helpful from Martimort's work, but it is not strictly a summary of the book, and some of the material that follows is not found in it. The section headings are closely related to those in Martimort's book (where these issues are more fully treated) so as to make it easier for the reader to do further reading.

After examining the following, it is my conclusion that where they appeared in the early Church (and they did not appear everywhere), deaconesses were understood to be strictly distinct from deacons. The deaconess was not a female deacon, but explicitly described as a wholly different type of servant.<sup>12</sup> Functionally, there was greater dissimilarity between the deacon and the deaconess than similarity. Indeed, the deaconess was not understood to be an order in the same manner as a deacon at all.

---

<sup>12</sup> Even the one ancient document (the *Didascalia*) that presented the deaconess "as a ministry in the true sense of the word ... (further indicated that the duties of the deaconess) could be carried out by a simple matron. [and] According to the *Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, it could equally be confided to those widows who had 'precedence'." Martimort, 242.

## **B. Deaconesses in the Greek-Speaking Churches and the Churches of Oriental Languages**

### **1. Deaconesses in the Churches in the East of the Roman Empire (3<sup>rd</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

#### **a) The Didascalia of the Apostles**

The oldest document using the term “deaconess” is the *Didascalia of the Apostles* (Didascalia Apostolorum), typically thought to have originated in the first half of the third century (p. 35). It mentions Deaconesses twice, in chapters 9 and 16. Chapter nine does little to further our study. Chapter 16 reads:

Wherefore, O bishop, appoint thee workers of righteousness as helpers who may co-operate with thee unto salvation. Those that please thee out of all the people thou shalt choose and appoint as deacons: a man for the performance of the most things that are required, but a woman for the ministry of women. For there are houses whither thou canst not send a deacon to the women, on account of the heathen, but mayest send a deaconess. Also, because in many other matters the office of a woman deacon is required. In the first place, when women go down into the water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman at hand, and especially no deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint her who is being baptized. But where there is a woman, and especially a deaconess, it is not fitting that women should be seen by men: but with the imposition of hand do thou anoint the head only. As of old the priests and kings were anointed in Israel, do thou in like manner, with the imposition of hand, anoint the head of those who receive baptism, whether of

men or of women; and afterwards – whether thou thyself baptize, or thou command the deacons or presbyters to baptize – let a woman deacon, as we have already said, anoint the women. But let a man pronounce over them the invocation of the divine Names in the water.

And when she who is being baptized has come up from the water, let the deaconess receive her, and teach and instruct her how the seal of baptism ought to be (kept) unbroken in purity and holiness. For this cause we say that the ministry of a woman deacon is especially needful and important. For our Lord and Saviour also was ministered unto by women ministers, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James and mother of Jose, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, with other women beside. And thou also hast need of the ministry of a deaconess for many things; for a deaconess is required to go into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in that of which they have need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness. But let a woman rather be devoted to the ministry of women, and a male deacon to the ministry of men.<sup>13</sup>

This text shows a clear functional differentiation between the ways in which the deacon and deaconess served. A deaconess present at a woman’s baptism would assist the priest by doing those things that it was indecent for a man to do (both men and women were baptized naked and their entire body was rubbed with oil). If there was no deaconess, another

---

<sup>13</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum: The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments*. XVI, iii. 12 – iii. 13, R. Hugh Connolly (Clarendon: Oxford Press, 1929), 146-147.

woman was permitted to serve in this way. The deaconess had no authority to actually perform the sacrament (her part was to finish the anointing which the celebrant started), neither could she pronounce the “invocation.” After the baptism, the deaconess had the task of discipling the newly baptized woman.<sup>14</sup>

Martimort summarizes their role as described in the *Didascalia*: “Deaconesses took no part in the liturgy ... In no way could they be considered on the same level as deacons: they were their auxiliaries” (p. 43). The general thrust of the entire passage is summed up by the final line of this portion of the *Didascalia*: “But let a woman rather be devoted to the ministry of women, and a male deacon to the ministry of men.”

Martimort comments that at the time that the *Didascalia* was written, “the installation of deaconesses was both a new and a rather unstable institution in the Church” (p. 41). He points out the relative newness of the institution of deaconess because the author of the *Didascalia* “seems strongly constrained to justify the existence of deaconesses at all, whereas the existence of deacons is taken for granted” (p. 43).

In contrast to many contemporary works, the *Didascalia* substantiates the existence of deaconesses by appealing neither to Phoebe nor the “women” of 1 Timothy 3, but to female followers of Jesus during His earthly ministry: “Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James

---

<sup>14</sup> Deaconesses were also charged with the visitation of the sick in households where women were present, though they never “fulfilled a role in carrying out the sacramental anointing of the sick.” Martimort, 247.

and mother of Jose, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, with other women besides.”

## **b) The Ordo & the Canons concerning Ordination in the Holy Church**

A document identified as “The Ordo and the Canons concerning Ordination in the Holy Church” is thought to have originated sometime before the fifth century. Canon 18 reads (in part):

The deaconess is brought into the diakonikon, or place set apart for deaconesses, and the bishop prays over her; when he has placed her before the altar and she has bowed her head, the bishop then lays his hand upon her head and prays using a prayer that is known and that in no way resembles the prayer used in the ordination of a deacon. The deaconess should not approach the altar; her task lies principally in assisting with the anointing at baptisms. When women are called to receive by baptism the seal of life, this should not give rise to any impurity which might soil or blemish the Church of God; on the contrary, everything should be carried out with good order, preserving purity and chastity. It is not fitting for deacons to anoint women and thus see their nudity ... Deaconesses, for their part, were instituted in order to anoint the women coming to receive the seal of baptism. Since it is not fitting that a priest who is baptizing women should see their nudity, he should extend his hand toward them from behind a veil serving as a screen. The deaconess brings forward a woman who is to be baptized to the hand of the priest, and he lays his hand on her head without directly seeing her; he then pronounces the threefold invocation in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ... Finally, it is the responsibility of the

deaconess to exhort the daughters of the covenant as well as lay women in general to behave themselves properly.<sup>15</sup>

As in the *Didascalia*, here we see deaconesses assisting in the baptism of women (so as to preserve the woman's modesty) as well as being called to instruct the women.

### c) The Apostolic Constitutions

The *Apostolic Constitutions*, written in the late fourth century, give us more information about the diaconate in the early Church, although the degree to which it can be relied upon as an accurate witness is a matter of some debate. Martimort notes that it should be regarded as a source only "if a watchful, critical spirit is also present." The initial sections "reproduce, develop and sometimes modify" the *Didascalia of the Apostles*, followed by versions of the *Didache*, Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*, and a number of canons (church laws) (p. 46, 59).

### d) The Didascalia in the Apostolic Constitutions

The version of the *Didascalia* in the *Apostolic Constitutions* was likely written in Syria in the early part of the third century, though the compiler does not strictly follow the *Didascalia's* text. By noting the differences, we see how one part of the church developed in its understanding of the diaconate.

---

<sup>15</sup> Rahmiani, I., *Studia syriaca*, fasc. 3, *Vetusta documenta liturgica*, Scharfe (1908), pp. 29-31, 60-62 as quoted in Martimort, 53-54.

The *Didascalia* typologically identifies the Old Testament's levitical order as deacons, priests, widows and orphans. In the *Apostolic Constitutions'* version, the list is lengthened and reads "bishops, priests, deacons, lectors, cantors, doorkeepers, your deaconesses, widows, virgins and your orphans" (p. 61). Despite this expansion, the work still distinguishes the functions of the deacon and the deaconess. Martimort notes that "Women were not permitted to teach nor, with stronger reason, to baptize. The practice of the Lord Jesus was taken as normative in this regard" (p. 63). The compiler indicates that these restrictions are consequences of the manner in which God has ordered nature ("the head of a woman is her husband" 1 Cor 11:3) (Ibid.).

### e) The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus in the Apostolic Constitutions

The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus of Rome, writes the respected patristic scholar Johannes Quasten,

"is, with the exception of the *Didache*, the earliest and the most important of the ancient Christian Church Orders" and "the richest source of information that we possess in any form for our knowledge of the constitution and life of the Church in the first three centuries. It was written about the year 215" (p. 181).

The version of the *Apostolic Tradition* contained in the *Apostolic Constitutions* is one of the only remaining versions of this work of Hippolytus. In this document no mention is made of deaconesses until the section on the Holy Communion in his description of the consecration of a bishop. It says that

the bishop should first take Communion himself; then come the priests, deacons, subdeacons, lectors, cantors, ascetics and, among the women, the deaconesses<sup>16</sup>, virgins and widows; then come the children and, after that, all the people with due order, reverence and decorum and without undue noise” (p. 68).

The conclusion Martimort draws from this is that deaconesses were not considered to be part of the clergy but were rather the first among women (p. 68).

Hippolytus clearly distinguished between bishops, priests and deacons as one group and all other ministerial orders in the church as another. The laying on of hands and the reading of an epiclesis was reserved for the threefold clerical order during the ordination liturgy. Hippolytus explicitly forbids the laying on of hands to accompany the installation of widows, lectors, and subdeacons.

In contrast to this, the compiler of the *Apostolic Constitutions*' version of the *Apostolic Tradition* indicates that both the laying on of hands and the epiclesis should accompany the ceremony in which an individual is made a deaconess, a subdeacon or a lector:

Eternal God, Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of both man and woman, you who filled Miriam, Deborah, Anna and Huldah with the Spirit, you who did not judge it unworthy for your only Son to be born of a woman, you who in the Tent of the Testimony and in the Temple designated women to guard your holy doors; let your gaze now fall upon your [female] servant here

---

<sup>16</sup> αἱς διακονοί, *ais diakonoi*

present, who has been designated for the diaconate<sup>17</sup>, and give her a holy spirit, cleanse her ‘from every defilement of body and spirit’ [2 Cor 7:1], that she may carry out in a worthy fashion the task confided to her, for your glory and for the praise of your Christ, with whom .<sup>18</sup>

However, the compiler notes the ministerial differences between the deacon and the deaconess: “No other category of clergy is allowed to carry out the functions of the deacon. The deaconess does not give blessings; in fact, she does nothing that the priests and deacons do” (p. 72).

#### **f) Deaconesses were not Universally Known**

Our survey of ancient church documents has already revealed a significant difference between deaconesses and deacons. Unlike the threefold office of deacon, priest & bishop, deaconesses were not universally known in the ancient church. The churches in some geographical areas knew about deaconesses, others did not.

Even in the East where deaconesses were established for a longer period of time and over a larger geographical area than in the West, there were large geographical areas in which there is no record of the existence of deaconesses. This is the case in Egypt and Ethiopia, about which Martimort writes:

we have never discovered any trace of the institution of deaconesses in any of the documents or inscriptions of the Church in Egypt. Nor can any of the deaconesses whose memory has

---

<sup>17</sup> εἰς διακονίαν, *eis diakonian*

<sup>18</sup> “*Const. apost.* VIII, 20, Funk, p. 524.” As cited in Martimort, 70.

been preserved in hagiography or in various inscriptions be identified as belonging to this particular region (p. 76).

## **2. Deaconesses in the Other Churches of the Greek-Speaking and Eastern Regions of the Roman Empire (end of 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

Numerous sources from the late 4<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries indicate that deaconesses were present in areas that Martimort characterizes as “the Greek-speaking and eastern regions of the Roman Empire” (p. 101ff.). These sources do not, however, indicate that deaconesses were universally present in the east nor that they enjoyed temporal longevity in relationship to the threefold office. These documents also indicate that in those parts of the eastern church in which deaconesses were found, they were not considered to be ordained in the same sense as were deacons, priests, and bishops.

The following is a summary of what some of these documents reveal about the nature of deaconesses in this part of the ancient church.

### **a) Deaconesses in Official Church Legislation**

#### **(1) The Council of Nicea**

The Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) uses the term *diakonissa* (a feminine form of the word *diakonos*), but the deaconesses mentioned are Paulianists (a sect comprised of those who left the church to follow a heretic named Paul of Samosata after he was deposed). The context in which the Paulianists are mentioned is that of the requirements which must be met for their repentant return to the one true church.

Canon 19 reads:

With regard to the Paulianists returning to the Catholic Church, it has been decided that they absolutely must be rebaptized. If some of them were formerly members of [their] clergy, they must be rebaptized and then ordained by the bishop of the Catholic Church, provided, however, that their lives are spotless and irreproachable. If inquiry reveals that they are unworthy, though, then they must be excluded from the clergy. The same thing must be done with respect to deaconesses and, in general, the same rule must be observed in the case of all those fulfilling an official role. We spoke about deaconesses enrolled in these ranks, since they have received no laying on of hands and are thus therefore to be counted among the laity (p. 101-102).

Martimort notes the continuity of Canon 19 with the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, commenting that the Nicean fathers “make clear exactly what deaconesses were, since they were really little known and hardly existed outside the eastern regions” (p. 103-104).

#### **(2) The Canons of St. Basil**

The Canons of St. Basil, dating from at least the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, give disciplinary counsel in regard to deaconesses who had committed sexual sin. St. Basil’s comments show that they were not regarded as members of the clergy (p. 105-106).

### (3) The Council of Chalcedon

In distinction from the *Apostolic Tradition* of St. Hippolytus, it seems that the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D) was in keeping with the later *Apostolic Constitutions* and allowed a woman being made a deaconess to receive the laying on of hands.

Canon 15. Deaconesses are not to be ordained (*diakonon mē cheirotoneisthai gunaika*) before the age of forty, and then only after a rigorous probation period. After receiving ordination (*tē cheirothesian*) and carrying out her ministry (*ten leitourgia*) for any period of time, if she then marries, thus spurning the grace of God, she must be anathematized along with the one she marries (p. 108).

This Canon is evidence that in some places a deaconess was set apart for service by the laying on of hands. What does this tell us about the relationship of the deaconess to the diaconate? Two contextual considerations point to the fact that though she received the laying on of hands, this Canon does not indicate that the deaconess was considered to be ordained to the diaconate.

Our first consideration deals with the meaning of the verb “to ordain” (*cherotoneisthai*). Other official church documents written at the same time as Canon 15 use *cherotoneisthai* in reference to a variety of church orders, not simply deacons, priests or bishops. Thus one could be “ordained” (in this sense) without being a member of the threefold order. The fact that this canon uses the word *cherotoneisthai* in reference to

deaconesses does not therefore indicate that she was thought to be a member of the diaconate.

Second, what can context tell us about the deaconess’ undefined “ministry” (*leitourgia*) of which Canon 15 speaks? There is nothing to suggest that the deaconess’ *leitourgia* was like that of the deacon. Canon 15 is distanced from canons dealing with the diaconate, the presbyterate and the episcopate. Canon 15’s instructions about deaconesses come just after canons on the non-clerical offices of lector and psalmist and just before a canon dealing with virgins. This is significant because it indicates that the order of deaconess was not considered to be a part of the threefold order, rather it was listed amidst various lay ministries.

### (4) The Novellae of Justinian

The Novellae of the emperor Justinian is a set of laws he published in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. Justinian’s comments about deaconesses indicate that he thought that they played an important part of the church’s ministry. Much like requirements laid out for widows, Justinian prescribes a minimum age for a woman to become a deaconess. He also allows them to draw a salary from their church’s budget if they were without independent financial resources (non-clerical orders such as monks were also permitted salaries from the church).

On a number of occasions, Justinian uses the phrase “male and female deacons.” Does this indicate that he regarded women as being female members of the diaconate? Because the rest of the early church documents at our disposal do not indicate that the deaconess was



considered to be a part of the diaconate in the same manner as a man, Justinian's use of this phrase (without elaboration) is not enough evidence to indicate that men and women were considered to be members of the same office.

The Novellae does not describe the ministry of the deaconess in great detail. It simply states that a deaconess should "exercise the sacred ministry, assist at the revered rites of baptism and participate in the other hidden tasks that they normally carry out in connection with the most venerable mysteries."<sup>19</sup> This description of the deaconess' ministry is consistent with what we learn about the ministry of deaconesses from other early church documents. The deaconess and her ministry were distinct from the diaconate.

## **b) Deaconesses in Theological Treatises & Exegetical Commentaries**

### **(1) St. Epiphanius**

Epiphanius (c. 315-403 A. D., Bishop of Salamis, 367 A.D.) is remembered as a keen defender of the Nicæan faith whose work *Panarion* (also know as the "Refutation of all the Heresies") attempted to identify and refute every unorthodox teaching of which he was aware.<sup>20</sup> He addresses the issue of deaconesses twice, the first in his treatment of the Collyridian heresy in *Panarion*:

---

<sup>19</sup> Canon 6 of the Novellae, as cited by Martimort, 112.

<sup>20</sup> Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 553.

There is in the Church, however, the order of deaconesses, *but it does not exist for the purpose of exercising priestly functions* or for the purpose of confiding certain tasks to women. It exists for the purpose of preserving decency for the female sex, whether in connection with baptism or in connection with the examination of women undergoing sufferings or pain, or whenever the bodies of women are required to be uncovered, so that they need not be exposed to the gaze of the men officiating, but instead be viewed only by the deaconess, who receives from the priest the order to take care of the woman at the time of her nudity. Thus it is that the ecclesiastical rule and discipline is wisely and solidly assured by this particular canon. It is for this reason too that *the Divine Word neither permits a woman to speak in the assembly nor allows her to exercise authority over a man*. There is a great deal to be said on this subject.

Furthermore, it is necessary to verify with some care that the ecclesiastical organization actually needed only deaconesses; the Church also has widows among whom the older ones are called, *but the Church has never admitted priestesses. Deacons themselves in the ecclesiastical order have not been given the charge of administering any sacrament, but only the charge of assisting those who do administer the sacraments.*<sup>21</sup>

In this passage, Epiphanius explicitly points to the Scriptures as forbidding a woman to exercise any duty that involves having authority over men. A deacon himself is differentiated from a priest in regard to administering the sacraments, with the implied point being that if a

---

<sup>21</sup> Martimort includes references to some Greek words which have been omitted from this quotation. Martimort, 112-113.

deacon may not administer the sacraments then surely a deaconess may not either.

The second place that Epiphanius mentions deaconesses is in his *Exposition of the Catholic Faith*: “Deaconesses are instituted solely for service to women, to preserve decency as required, whether in connection with their baptism or in connection with any other examination of their bodies” (p. 113). This fits what we have seen in the earlier *Didascalia*, although, as Martimort notes, Epiphanius “was even more limited in his conception of the role, since he said nothing at all about any catechetical role.”<sup>22</sup>

As we have seen in earlier texts, deaconesses were understood as necessary to preserve the modesty of other women. Epiphanius does not understand himself to be prescribing something new, rather upholding the “ecclesiastical rule and discipline” already embraced by the church catholic.

## **(2) Antiochian Exegetical Commentaries**

Martimort includes a brief discussion (pgs. 116-119) of the commentaries on St. Paul’s works by St. John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret. Theodoret makes note of Phoebe being called a *diakonos* in Romans 16:1 and all three of these church fathers

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 114. At this point Martimort raises the important question as to whether Epiphanius is describing the actual practice of the church at this time or whether he is simply expressing his theory as to what this practice should be.

commented on Paul’s use of *gunaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11. The significance of their comments is addressed on pages 25-27 above.

## **c) Diversity in the Ministry of the Deaconesses in the Eastern Regions**

### **(1) Deaconesses Did Not Assist in Baptismal Anointing in all Parts of the Church in the East**

The documents discussed above indicated that a major aspect of the deaconess’ ministry was that of anointing the bodies of women before they were baptized by either a priest or a bishop. As we have seen, some early Christian writers indicated that this was the central purpose of the deaconess’ ministry. St. Epiphanius, for example, comments that deaconesses were “instituted solely for service to women, to preserve decency as required, whether in connection with their baptism or in connection with any other examination of their bodies” (p. 127). Approximately 200 years later, Justinian’s *Novellae* echoed this description, reiterating that deaconesses “assist at the revered rites of baptism and participate in the other hidden tasks that they normally carry out in connection with the most venerable mysteries” (p. 127).

After hearing comments which so specifically tie the deaconess to the baptism of women, it may seem surprising that such descriptions are not accurate for all parts of the church in the east. But in places like Antioch, Jerusalem, Palestine and Constantinople, it was not customary

for deaconesses to assist in baptism. There is even evidence that such participation by a deaconess was not allowed in some of these regions.<sup>23</sup>

Baptismal catechisms from both Antioch and Jerusalem which were written at about the same time as St. Epiphanius' *Panarion* (the late 300's) make no mention of deaconesses playing any role in baptism, not even the baptism of women. Other church leaders who wrote about this sacrament, such as St. John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia and the bishop of Jerusalem (whether St. Cyril of Jerusalem or his successor) indicated that they expected baptismal candidates to fully disrobe so as to be anointed with oil before being baptized, though they make no mention of deaconesses assisting women candidates.

Some might argue that where no particular office is explicitly designated to perform the pre-baptismal anointing, deaconesses were in mind and were not explicitly mentioned simply because their presence was so regular as to be assumed. But other documents indicate that, to the contrary, in these regions the regular practice was for a woman's pre-baptismal anointing to be done by various members of the (all male) clergy.

In his work *Homélie catéchétique* Theodore of Mopsuestia simply writes that the anointing was to be done by those "designated for this

---

<sup>23</sup> Martimort cites a document which tells the story of a priest asking his archbishop to send a deaconess to assist with a woman's baptism which was to take place at a Palestinian monastery just west of the Jordan River. But the archbishop "did not do this because it was not permitted in that place." (Martimort indicates that this story is found in John Moschus' *Spiritual Meadow*. See his comments in footnote #76 (pg 132).)

service" and the reader is left to guess whether deaconesses were the referent (p. 129). Pseudo-Dionysius, who wrote about a century later but who is regarded as being very precise in his description of liturgical rituals, indicates that it is the deacons who were instructed to disrobe the candidates, after which the priests were instructed to do the anointing (p. 130). Documents from the church in Antioch, which again instructed that the anointing cover the entire body, indicate that both the disrobing and the anointing were to be performed by a deacon (p. 130).

These documents indicate that there was significant diversity among the churches in the east regarding the role of deaconesses in the administration of baptism. In places like Antioch, Jerusalem, Palestine and Constantinople, either priests or deacons anointed the candidates. In none of these churches are deaconesses mentioned as serving in this manner.

## **(2) The Service of Deaconesses in Convents**

Another type of service was that of providing leadership at a convent. A convent that was small and/or was located in an extremely rural location might not have a priest or deacon assigned to it to distribute communion to the women religious who were there. A document written by some Antiochian bishops (c. 532 A. D.) indicate that a deaconess who was the mother superior at such a convent was allowed to distribute communion to the women under her care, though not if a priest or deacon was available (p. 140). She was also permitted to do other things normally reserved for a priest or a deacon, such as "habitually read the Gospels and

the holy books in an assembly of women meeting in common” (p. 142). The documents are explicit in regard to the expectation that there were only women present when a deaconess performed such duties.

Though she was not permitted to do these things if a priest or a deacon was available, a deaconess who was the superior at a convent was allowed to assist a priest in her convent if there was no deacon able to be present. The exact nature of her assistance in the stead of the deacon is unclear, for the same documents which make such allowance also make it clear that under no circumstances was she allowed to minister from the altar, as a priest or a deacon would minister (pgs. 140-141).

These allowances were not normally a part of a deaconess’ ministry, but rather only for a deaconess who was in charge of a convent that was without a deacon or a priest. This is true not only in the early centuries of the church, but even as late as the 8<sup>th</sup> century when James of Edessa wrote his *Canonical Resolutions*. From this document is taken the following:

23. *Addai*: Does the deaconess, like the deacon, have the power to put a portion of the sacred Host into the consecrated chalice?

*James*: In no way can she do this. The deaconess did not become a deaconess in order to serve at the altar but rather for the sake of women who are ill.

24. *Addai*: I would like to learn in a few words what the powers of a deaconess in the Church are.

*James*: She has no power over the altar, because when she was instituted (mettasr<sup>ho</sup>: “ordained” or “instituted”), it was not in the name of the altar, but only to fulfill certain functions in the Church. If she is in a convent of women, she can remove the sacred Hosts from the tabernacle [= cabinet], only because there is no priest or deacon present, and give them out to the other sisters only or to the small children who may also be present. But it is not permitted to her to take the Hosts up off the altar, nor carry them to the altar nor indeed in any way to touch the altar. She anoints adult women when they are baptized; she visits women who are ill and cares for them. These are the only powers possessed by deaconesses with regard to the work of priests (pgs. 142-143).

These witnesses of the service of deaconesses in the churches of the east, though different from those churches which understood them to primarily exist so as to assist in pre-baptismal activities, support the position that the nature and ministry of the deaconess was different from the nature and ministry of the deacon.

### **3. Evidence for Differentiation between the Deacon and the Deaconess in “Ordination” Rites**

The liturgies used to institute/commission a deaconess make it very clear that the church understood the deaconess to be distinct from the deacon.

The ordination service for making a man a deacon and the service used to commission a woman to serve as a deaconess were not the same

service.<sup>24</sup> Martimort remarks: “[D]uring all the time when the institution of deaconesses was a living institution, both the discipline and the liturgy of the churches insisted upon a very clear distinction between deacons and deaconesses” (p. 247). The records give us several reasons to think this.

#### **a) Forbidden to Genuflect**

One aspect of the service for making a deaconess which clearly set it apart from the rites used to ordain a deacon or a priest was that she was forbidden to genuflect. In contrast, a deacon was permitted to genuflect on one knee during his ordination (a priest was allowed to genuflect on both knees). This difference points to the fact that the deaconess was not considered a deacon and therefore could not do that which was especially assigned to the diaconate. Martimort comments that:

According to Pseudo-Dionysius ... the fact that she was not permitted to genuflect was the sign that her role was not considered to be equivalent to that of the deacon; further the deacon genuflected on one knee, the priest on two, and these gestures were precisely intended to signify differences of order (p. 245).

From this we must conclude that the deaconess was a role subordinate to that of the deacon, just as the order of deacon is subordinate to that of the priest. (Martimort also notes that “deaconesses

---

<sup>24</sup> For instance: “In the Byzantine euchology ... The text for the ordination of a deacon was never used to ordain a deaconess; a very different text was used upon which we have already commented (see Chapter 7, IC in Martimort’s work).” pgs 146ff.

were never given grounds to hope, as were deacons, that they might aspire to a higher degree of ministry” (Ibid.)).

#### **b) Not Allowed Access to the Altar or to Administer the Eucharist**

Another clear indication that the deaconess was not considered a female deacon is that the deaconess was not permitted to have a sacramental ministry, though such was permitted for the deacon.

During the liturgy in which she was set apart as a deaconess, the ordinand (unlike a man being made a deacon) did not rest her head against the altar. This meant, Martimort explains, that “She received no power pertaining to the altar and, indeed, [she] did not even have access to the altar ” (p. 245).

Furthermore, the deaconess did not receive from the bishop the *rhipidion* [a large fan used to keep flies away from the Eucharistic elements], which was given to the deacon (p. 155). The deaconess did not receive it, Martimort argues, “because she could not serve Mass or even be present at the altar for such a service” (p. 245). And unlike a deacon, who after his ordination was given a chalice and sent to administer communion, a deaconess was not permitted to administer the chalice to anyone (p. 154).

This survey of liturgical rites supports the position that the deaconess was not considered to be a female deacon. She was not ordained in the manner that a deacon was ordained and did not function within the church in the manner that a deacon functioned.

#### **4. The Disappearance of Deaconesses from the East**

Unlike the threefold order, the institution of deaconesses was not accepted by all churches in the east and even in those areas in which it was most prevalent, it did not enjoy temporal longevity. Though it is not possible to ascertain a definite date, Martimort's summary of the scholars' position is that by the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, deaconesses were no longer present in the east (p. 183).

As we have seen, in some of the churches in the east (the extreme eastern regions of the Roman Empire as well as in Chaldea and Persia) the existence of deaconesses was closely related to the need to preserve the modesty of women being baptized. But as the baptism of adults became infrequent (replaced by the baptism of infants), deaconesses ceased to perform any functions related to baptism. Martimort does not give a precise date for when deaconesses stopped assisting with a woman's pre-baptismal anointing, simply writing that "this was a development that occurred quite early" (p. 183).

In other churches in the east, it seems that deaconesses never ministered in this way. In those areas deaconesses served at convents, usually as the leader of the other women. Convents in the east were typically located in remote places and therefore the deaconess in charge was given special permission to minister to the women in ways that were abnormal for deaconesses when a priest or a deacon was available. Eventually women who were not deaconesses began being placed in charge of convents and deaconesses ceased to serve in this manner as well (pgs. 182-183).

#### **5. Conclusion**

Though there was diversity of opinion among the churches in the east about how the deaconesses were to serve the church, they were not understood to be female equivalents of a deacon.

The picture of the deaconess which emerges from an examination of these ancient documents is dissimilar both in nature and in function to the type of service expected of a female deacon in the contemporary Anglican church. Thus, the ancient order of deaconesses cannot provide a true precedent for the ordination of women to the diaconate.

## C. Deaconesses in the Latin Church

A balanced view of the history of deaconesses will emerge only as we consider their ministry in both the east and the west. Bishops, councils and esteemed theologians from the eastern and western regions of the church (even in the early centuries of her life) differed as to the legitimacy and manner of service of the deaconess.

In previous sections I have discussed the manner in which deaconesses were present within the church in the east. The following is a summary of Martimort's presentation of the manner in which the church in the west regarded deaconesses.

### 1. The First 5 Centuries: There Were No Deaconesses in the Latin Church

Unlike the threefold order of deacon, priest & bishop, deaconesses were not accepted by the church catholic in all places and at all times. Martimort cites evidence that deaconesses were either not considered legitimate or simply not known within the church in the west during the first 5 centuries.

Some documents from the west (even documents that specifically discuss or list the various ministries of the church) are silent as to deaconesses. This most likely indicates one of two things: (a) the writer(s) knew of the existence of deaconesses but did not see them as being a legitimate ministry of the church such that they should be included on a list of ecclesiastical ministries or (b) the writer(s) were unaware of the

existence of deaconesses. Either of these possibilities is evidence that the order of deaconesses was not present universally in the early church.

Mention of deaconesses is also conspicuously absent in the works of some of the early Church's greatest Christian theologians. The works of St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (d. 258 A.D. ), the letters of St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) and the writings of St. Jerome (c. 345-420 A.D.) are all devoid of any mention of deaconesses (p. 188). Documents detailing the African councils, and African inscriptions are likewise silent.

Some documents from the western churches which do demonstrate knowledge of deaconesses in the east, mention them in a disapproving manner – either their very existence is decried or their manner of service and/or manner of “ordination” is regarded as unorthodox. This is the case, for instance, in Spain, Rome and Gaul, where deaconesses were not considered legitimate expressions of ministry in the church (p. 189, 190).

An important place to look to determine what ministries were active in the ancient church are documents which list the various offices and orders of the church. Martimort cites two such lists from the church in Rome. The first list was written in 251 or 253 A.D., shortly after Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*. The versions of the second list, which have been preserved, date from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries but are thought to reflect the structure of the church in Rome from much earlier. Though both lists name many different positions of service, neither makes any mention of deaconesses. It seems that the church in Rome did not think

that deaconesses played any part in church ministry and thus did not include them on these lists (p. 187-188).

We have already seen examples of early Christian theologians in the east who interpreted the Bible to support the manner in which women served as “deacons” in the churches in the east. But these interpretations were not universally accepted in the early church. Some theologians from the west specifically opposed them. For example, in his commentary on 1 Timothy, the fourth century writer Ambrosiaster clearly opposed the notion that Paul regarded women as deacons:

In their audacious folly, on the pretext that Paul addressed himself to women after having done so to deacons, they claim that deaconesses too must be ordained. They are nevertheless well aware of the fact that the apostles chose seven deacons. Is it plausible that at that time there were no women also capable of serving, especially considering that we read of the holy women who were present among the apostles? In the manner of heretics, whom we see trying to base their opinions on words and not on the profound meaning of the law, they employ the words of the apostle in order to go counter to his thought. The apostle commanded women to remain silent in church, but they claim for women the very authority that in the Church is conferred through the diaconate (p. 191).

More officially, at the Council of Nîmes in 396 A.D. the Bishops of Gaul condemned the ordination of women to the diaconate, which had been reported to them as present in the east:

Equally, it has been reported by some that, contrary to the apostolic discipline – indeed a thing unheard of until now – it has

been observed, though it is not known exactly where, that women have been raised to the ministry of deacons. Ecclesiastical discipline does not permit this, for it is unseemly; such an ordination should be annulled, since it is irregular; and vigilance is required lest in the future anyone should have the boldness to act in this fashion again (p. 193).

These observations call into question the “catholicity” of the presence of women deacons within the Church.

## **2. Deaconesses in the Latin Church: the 6<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries**

By the 6<sup>th</sup> century, deaconesses began to be present in the west. Martimort charts the development of the order of deaconesses in the church in the west from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries in chapter 10, which is entitled “The Uncertainties and the Various Forms of the Introduction of Deaconesses into the West.” The fruit of his research should be read by the reader interested in further detail about the history of deaconesses in the west, though a detailed summary of his findings is not directly related to the central concerns of this essay.

For my purposes here, it is sufficient simply to note that none of the documents that Martimort cites contradicts my thesis. The nature and ministry of deaconesses continued to be distinct from that of deacons. Just as in the churches in the east, the deaconess became increasingly associated with other types of service, especially leadership within convents. By the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, “the institution of deaconesses in Latin Christianity was very limited . . . only in central and southern Italy were deaconesses actually to be found” (p. 217). The historical record



further indicates that by the 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries deaconesses had “disappeared.”

#### **D. Summary of Martimort**

The picture of deaconesses which emerges from Martimort’s comprehensive study is that of divergent, non-universal, and transitory ecclesial practices which developed over time in response to particular pastoral needs (mainly assisting in the baptism of women and then later in providing oversight to convents). In other words, there were various ways in which deaconesses exercised their ministry in the early church. Martimort comments: “The Christians of antiquity did not have a single, fixed idea of what deaconesses were supposed to be” (p. 241). Based solely on the evidence of Church history, it is not possible to state with any real precision or confidence exactly what the office of deaconess was or what it ought to be. Nevertheless, it is possible to say with great confidence and precision just what the deaconess was *not*. She was not synonymous with what the ancient church understood as a “deacon”, nor with the manner in which the Anglican church has traditionally understood that office. Deaconesses were not women who had been made deacons and they were not ministers of word and sacrament.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

This essay has responded to the main points made by those in favor of the ordination of women to the diaconate, as found in the Report. I have found that the arguments made therein are not compelling biblical justification for the AMiA to condone the innovative practice of ordaining women to the diaconate.

Aimé Georges Martimort's book has served as our guide in surveying the history of deaconesses in the church. I have found that deaconesses were not considered to be female deacons. The ancient order of deaconess was a separate entity from the all-male diaconate. The presence of deaconesses in the life of the ancient church cannot substantiate the ordination of women to the diaconate.

I care deeply about this Mission and about the future of the Anglican Communion. Our church is experiencing the onslaught of a very different cultural mandate from that which we find revealed in the Scriptures. It is increasingly the case that arguments based on emotional, cultural, sociological and political premises are baptized and called "Christian." The voice of the "spirit of the age," which is shaped by secular

presuppositions, is confused with the Spirit of God. Innovations without any clear precedent or support in Holy Scripture or church history are being introduced into a largely unprepared and unsuspecting church.

It is my desire that our Mission conform to Scripture in everything, and that we "minister the doctrine and sacraments, and the discipline of Christ, as the Lord hath commanded, and as this Church hath received the same," as the Ordinal states. I believe that this requires the restriction of the diaconate to men as, in the Anglican tradition, an office sharing in that authority that the Scriptures give only to men. I believe that the Scriptures teach this, and that the practice of the early Church confirms that teaching.

This paper is offered to the end that we might "stir up one another to love and good works." It is my hope that the leadership of this Mission will respond to this study with a clear, substantive, and Biblical justification for allowing women to be made deacons. Failing that, I would humbly ask that my leaders in the Lord reconsider and reverse the AMiA's current policy.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A Report of the Study Concerning the Ordination of Women Undertaken by the Anglican Mission in America: A Survey of the Leading Theological Convictions
- Didascalia Apostolorum: The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments XVI, iii. 12 – iii. 13, Translated by R. Hugh Connolly. Clarendon: Oxford Press, 1929.
- Knight, George W. III. The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Edited by I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Köstenberger, Andreas J. and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds. Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Martimort, Aimé Georges. Deaconesses: An Historical Study. Translated by K. D. Whitehead. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986.
- Moo, Douglas. The Epistle to the Romans. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Pierce, Ronald W. and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds. Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy. Downers Grove: IVP, 2004.
- Piper, John and Wayne Grudem, eds. Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991.
- Quasten, Johannes Patrology Vol. II. Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1950, 1995.
- Sumner, David E, The Episcopal Church History 1945-1985. Harrisburg, PA; Morehouse Publishing 1987.
- The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. Edited by F. L. Cross, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Edited by E. A. Livingstone. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Yarbrough, Robert W. "Progressive and Historic: The Hermeneutics of 1 Timothy 2:9-15." Women in the Church: An Analysis and

Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner editors, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.