To Whom is 1 Timothy 3:11 Referring

By Pastor Randy Smith

*Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.* 1 Timothy 3:11 NASB

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of *gunikos* in 1 Ti. 3:11 has been of much debate throughout the history of the church. Conservative evangelical scholars have adopted a variety of possibilities (some with sound biblical support) that will be presented in this paper. The primary issue under consideration deals with the role of certain women within the church. Based on this verse, I do not believe that there is any justification to elevate a woman to an authoritative role of leadership (as the early heretic Montanus suggested—c.f. 2:12). However, depending upon the interpretation, a woman's role as a "deaconess"/deacon's wife or a man's role as a deacon will be affected. A brief exegetical overview will be followed by a summary of the hermeneutical considerations. My conclusions and interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:11 will culminate the paper.

Exegetical Overview

- The Greek word *gunikos* Feminine/Plural/Accusative-Noun) is found in this form in 11 verses in the New Testament (Mt. 19:8; Ac. 8:3; 9:2; 13:50; 22:4; 1 Cor. 7:29; Eph. 5:25, 28; Col. 3:19; 1 Ti. 2:9, 3:11). In the NASB the word is translated "women" 6 times and "wives" 5 times (it could also be translated "widow," "bride," or "any adult female"). Both times in 1 Timothy (NASB), the Greek word is translated "women."

- In the lexical form (*gune*) is primarily translated "woman" (95 times), "wife" (72 times) and "women" (33 times). Context must determine which translation is appropriate.

- The word occurs two other times in 1 Timothy 3 (vs. 3, 12) and context necessitates the translation "wife."

- The general context is 2:8-3:16 where Paul is discussing, "how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). The two sections are not to be isolated or allowed to contradict (remember the NT did not originally have chapter notations). The specific context is 3:1-3:13 where Paul is discussing church officers (elders and deacons).

- The following versions have chosen these translations of *gunikos* in 1 Tim. 3:11: (KJV-"their wives," ASV-"women," NIV-"their wives," NASB-"women," RSV-"the women," NKJ-"their wives," YLT-"women," NLT-"their wives," NJB-"women"
Possible Interpretations

1. The women are unmarried female assistants to the deacons (i.e., singles/widows)
   Though this view (see George Knight-NIGNT, The Pastoral Epistles and Robert Lewis-BibSac-V136#542-*they are unmarried women committed unconditionally to the service of the church and who in meeting certain character qualities, have been enlisted to aid the deacons in the outworking of their office.*), has been suggested (married women are to devote themselves to the home (1 Tim. 2:9-15; 5:8, 14, 16; 2 Tim. 3:14-15; Tit. 2:3-5) and make their involvement in the church a "branch" of her primary home ministry—single women have more time to be devoted to the church (1 Cor. 7:32-35) and meet the demands of deacon work) it carries little weight when one considers Paul's desire for purity in the church. It is very unlikely that Paul would provide an opportunity for unmarried couples to intimately engage in on-going corporate ministry (see 1 Tim. 2:9; 5:6, 11, 15).

2. The women are women in general in the church
   The context appears to clearly rule out this option. Why would Paul senselessly interrupt his orderly discourse on deacons (3:8-10, 12-13) to instruct women in general in the church? His instructions to women are found in 1 Ti. 2:9-15.

3. The women are deaconesses
   As mentioned in the introduction, I have already ruled out this interpretation in relation to a third office of church leadership ruling on par with the male deacons and elders (see 1 Ti. 2:11). Within this argument, some believe that 1 Tim. 3:8-13 speaks to male and female deacons together as a whole. However, this interpretation holds no weight (Why did Paul wait until the end to mention women? Why are the qualifications in 3:11 almost parallel to those of a male deacon...is that not redundant?)

   The other option is to present this class of women as those who function as "deaconesses" without any leadership responsibilities (John MacArthur-MacArthur NT Commentary Series, 1 Timothy and Ronald Ward-Ronald Ward Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, C.E. Cerling-JETS, 19/3 (Summer, 1976), 212). There is good support for this position:

   o There is no "their" (possessive pronoun) in the Greek preceding the word "women." This seems to rule out "their women" (used by some biblical translators) in reference to the deacon's wives. Furthermore there is no definite article (the) before "women" in the original language either.

   o Verse 3:11 is introduced with the word "likewise" (semnos). This sets apart a third distinct group to be considered for an office. Paul set a precedence for this in 1 Tim. 3:8 when he contrasted deacons from elders.

   o Phoebe in Romans 16:1 is identified as a diakonos ("servant"). This is the same Greek word used for deacons in 1 Ti. 3:11. It is very probable that Phoebe, who was entrusted with a important task, was a deaconess.

   o There was no NT word in the Greek language for deaconess at the time. However, the word does appear later in post-biblical literature (diakonos), the First Council of Nicea, (A.D. 325). Since Paul had no options available, he was forced to go with the generic term for women (gunikos) to distinguish them from the male deacons. Furthermore, this is why he was forced to go with the masculine form of the word in Romans 16:1.

   o If this refers to character qualifications for deacon's wives, why does Paul not give any qualifications for elder's wives (in either Timothy or Titus)? Surely one would be more
concerned with their conduct as the wife of a pastor/overseer/elder of the church.

- There were deaconesses in the early church (though they were never considered to be equal in status with the male diaconate). Though deaconesses began to demise near the end of the first millennium (Western church-8th century, Eastern church-10th century), we do have mention of "deaconesses" in the early church (the Syrian Didascalia Apostolorum (third century) and the Apostolic Constitutions (fourth century). Earlier than this, the only evidence comes from a questionable document written by a secular authority (Pliny, governor of Bithynia in his letter to Trajan) in A.D. 111.

4. The women are wives of the deacons

Rebuttal against the views for deaconesses:

- There is no definite article (the) or possessive pronoun (their) before the word "women" which would qualify these women as wives. But this argument goes both ways. Why didn't he say, "Women who serve as deacons?" (That one is more difficult to explain!). Additionally, the verse is sandwiched between information on male deacons. Why would he have to add "their?" Doesn't the context clearly specify them as "their wives?" In reference to the definite article, Paul in this whole section refers to people anarthrously (without the definite article). See 3:2 (husband, wife), 3:4 (children), 3:8 (deacons) and 3:12 (deacons, husbands, wife and children). The only exception is 3:2 where the definite article is before "oversee." Omission of a definite article in 3:11 is not a case for deaconesses; it is a case for consistency in Paul's grammatical usage.

- Verse 11 begins with the word "likewise." This argument holds no ground. It can simply mean that deacon's wives were to be dignified similar to their husbands (Strauch says "likewise actually works for all...views" (except #2). When Paul uses the word "likewise" (hosaautos) in the Pastoral Epistles it does not always refer to an office, it simply indicates the change of focus to a new people group (1 Ti. 2:9, 5:25; Tit. 2:3, 6). If the "likewise" refers to a new office (deaconsesses), verse 12 (returning to male deacons) would have to be viewed as an after-thought in Paul's mind. But that verse contains important qualifications, qualifications required for elders as well (1 Ti. 3:2, 4; Tit. 1:6).

- Phoebe was identified as a deaconess in Romans 16:1. First, the Greek word under consideration (used 29 times in the NT-based on the lexical form diakonos) is always translated "servant" (with the exception of three obvious occurrences when it speaks of the office-Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12). There is no contextual evidence in 16:1 to suggest that diakonon be translated "deaconess." Second, Paul forbid women in the church from holding leadership positions of authority (1 Ti. 2:12). Third, Phoebe's reception in Rome had nothing to do with her office. She was to be "received...in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints." Paul urged the church to receive her as a "saint," not as a "deaconess." Paul's whole point is that she is worthy to be served because of her service, not because of her office. Fourth, Paul description of Phoebe's service is not that of deacon-like like duties, but rather faithful service. When Paul says, "For she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well," he is most likely speaking of her service to him as a "servant," not a "deaconess" (some argue that prostatsis means "ruler" or "leader" (which it can), but it can also mean "patron" or "helper." Context must determine. If we think Phoebe was a "ruler," are we to believe that she exercised rule over an Apostle ("she herself has also been a helper (prostatsis) of many, and of myself as well"-Rom. 16:2) Finally, diakonos is used of (Christ-Rom. 15:8) other servants, clearly identified with a church and Bible translators never refer to them as "deacons." Additionally, what we know about these individuals makes it very unlikely that they were deacons (see 1 Tim. 4:6-Timothy, Col. 1:7-Epaphras). Therefore the word diakonos in reference to an individual does not necessitate a reference to the office of
o There was no NT word available for "deaconess." Yes, but this never stopped Paul in the past. Often in the Pastoral Epistles and elsewhere Paul shows a readiness to create his own words to meet his pressing needs. If he was speaking of a different office (deaconesses) he probably would have come up with a different word to prevent confusion. Also he could have put the feminine article (tas) before the word (diakonos) to prevent any misunderstanding. He used a specific title for the office of "overseer" (3:2) and "deacon" (3:8, 12), why not a specific title here-especially if they were church officers?

o No qualifications are provided for elder's wives. This is an argument from silence and assumes that 1 Tim. 3 is a formal list. In listing these qualifications in 1 Ti. 3, Paul was developing an ad hoc list related to specific problems in Ephesus. The list in Titus is similar, but partially different in some qualifications. Most likely, deacons' wives were listed because the deacon's responsibilities (visitations, etc.) directly involved their wives more than an elder's role (there is sound biblical support that an elder's wife cannot directly support the elder in the work of teaching and leading, however the same is not true for the duties of a deacon and involvement of their wife). It is also common for Paul to go on "parenthetical tangents" in his writings. I believe the thought of deacons' wives came to his mind at the spur of the moment when he considered the role of a deacon. He spoke of the wives in one verse and then concluded well by combining the general context of deacon's qualifications (3:8-12) and the specific context of deacon's wives (3:11) together in 3:12.

o There were deaconesses in the early church. We know that there were deaconesses in the church in the later centuries, but it is debatable if they were present in the first century. Regardless, church history tells us nothing about this verse. The post-apostolic church fathers were neither divinely inspired nor inerrant in their practices. Therefore, the existence of deaconesses in later centuries is not proof that this office has apostolic sanction. Church history scholar, Roger Gryson, concluded, "The beginnings of a feminine diaconate are indeed in shadow and darkness, and difficult to perceive with any exactness."

Support for this position:

o Barring the slim exception in Romans 16:1, there are no references to deaconesses in the whole Bible. Basing a theology on one verse (and a very debatable verse at that) is unwise.

o If 3:11 does speak of a third office, one would expect more detail, especially since women were involved in the heresy in Ephesus mentioned throughout the letter. Would their requirements be lighter? Furthermore, all three lists (1 Ti. 3:2, 12; Tit. 1:6) in the Pastoral Epistles for an office speak of marital fidelity (as does the widow list in 1 Ti. 5:9), but no comments are made for this supposed category of women.

o The word gune, is always translated "wife" in 1 Timothy 3. Even context in the next verse (3:12) demands this translation. o Why did Paul not greet the "deaconesses" in Philippians 1:1 (beyond 1 Ti. 3, the only other occurrence of the word "deacon")? Why would he slight this office of women?

o Often people claim that women are specifically needed to oversee/help the affairs of other women, hence the biblical office of a "deaconess." This may be true from a practical argument, but not a biblical argument. It is germane to note that when the Apostles needed individuals to care for the Hellenistic widows, they appointed 7 men
(Ac. 6:3).

- The specific qualifications seem indicative of the deacon's wives' role in minor assistance to their husbands. Also, their qualifications do not call for them to be "tested" and "above reproach" (elder/deacon qualifications) since, unlike their husbands, they are not elected to an office.

- The context, both before and after 3:11, is the qualifications of a male deacon. The character of a man's wife and children are essential to evaluate his ability to manage his household. The issue is "character," not "office." His wife should not receive any more consideration for an "office" than his children.

- Since verse 11 is sandwiched between Paul's discussion of male (3:12) deacons (3:8-10, 12-13) it seems natural that he is speaking of their wives. Anything else would be an awkward switch of discussion. Verse 11 simply goes with verse 12 and spells out what should be true of a deacon's home life. After giving the qualification of his wife (vs. 11), Paul goes on to discuss the deacon's fidelity to his wife and control of his children (in some ways then, like an elder's children, they have qualifications too), concluding with the summarizing statement of overall family/household control (vs. 12).

**Supporting Comments**

- "The arguments for such an office, and for Phoebe being the only "deaconess" ever named in the New Testament are few and far from convincing." (Bob Deffinbaugh- Was Phoebe a Deaconess? Personal Paper, www.bible.org) B "It seems more likely that the wives of deacons are covered by the requirement that the deacon should superintend over his own household." (Homer Kent- Commentary, The Pastoral Epistles)

- "It seems doubtful to this writer that Paul used the word deacon in the official sense when speaking of these women. Phoebe was a helper of the church but not a member of an order of deaconesses. The women mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:11 are probably the wives of the deacons who helped the men with their work." (Charles Ryrie- Bibliotheca Sacra, #457, Jan 58-63)

- "The fact that no special and separate paragraph is used in describing these necessary qualifications, but that these are simply wedged between the stipulated requirements for deacons, with equal clarity indicates that these women were not to be regarded as constituting a third office of the church...endowed with authority equal to that of the deacons." (William Hendrickson-NT Commentary, 1 Timothy) B "In spite of this weight of scholarly opinion, we are still inclined to favor the idea that the reference is to "their wives." (Ralph Earle-Expositors Bible Commentary-1 Timothy)

- "If we accept the interpretation that the women are "deacons' wives," then we see that verse 11 is not an awkward interruption of thought in the midst of male deacons' requirements...Therefore, we can conclude that Paul is referring to wives who help their deacon husbands." (Alexander Strauch- Emmaus Journal, Vol. 1:3, Fall 1992, 199)

- "The office or ministry of deaconess...is poorly attested in the New Testament. Only two passages (Rom. 16:1; 1 Tim. 3:11) might suggest the office of deaconess, but both are obscure." (Wayne House-Bibliotheca Sacra, #581, Jan 89)

- "Verse 11 looks like an interlude, and some have suggested that it points to an order of deaconesses. Although such an order is not impossible, the primary reference is probably to deacons' wives (as the NIV)." (D.A. Carson-The New Bible Commentary)
• "One has to be cautious today about shifting how the church should look just because of society's critical evaluation of us. The world has always been critical of the church; and, although we don't wish to cause unnecessary offense, we must never violate our conscience nor our understanding of Scripture. I may be well wrong with my interpretation of this particular issue (that 3:11 does not refer to "deaconsesses"), but I am sure of one thing: the only arguments that will convince me otherwise must resonate with the Word of God." (Daniel Wallace-Personal Paper, www.bible.org)

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<td>• Based on the evidence, I favor the view which suggests these women were the wives of deacons. They were not deaconesses nor were they elected/appointed to an office of leadership like their husbands. Rather, the qualities are specifically (and ultimately) identified as a means to evaluate a man's character in managing his own household well (as based on the context in the section).</td>
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<td>• Since the elder's wife is not specifically mentioned earlier, I believe the deacon's wife needed special attention due to the responsibilities of her husband and her potential minor assistance in some areas. One can easily see the upheaval if a deacon's wife was not above reproach in the four qualifications in 1 Tim. 3:11 (gossip, faithfulness, temperance, dignity) since the work of a deacon involves finances and assisting personal needs.</td>
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<td>• I do not believe the text is limiting feminine &quot;deacon work&quot; (i.e. areas of practical service) only to the deacon's wife, but rather assuming they will have some minor role due to the proximity with their husbands.</td>
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<td>• Furthermore, I have no problem with a special set of women (in a non-office setting...related/not related personally to the deacons...under the authority of the deacons) that can minister to other women and needy people in the church (like those in the early church who visited the sick, distributed provisions among the poor, aided women in baptismal ceremonies, visited Christian women in pagan households, assisted the ill, comforted the lonely, visited those in jail and prayer). Without any doubt, there are practical, spiritual and emotional needs women can meet better than men. However, I believe that Paul is not referring to this ministry in 1 Timothy 3:11 and we should not call this particular group of ladies &quot;deaconsesses&quot; (anything else is acceptable!) to prevent confusion.</td>
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<td>specific categories as the position becomes further developed. If the interpretation carries one to believe that the role is an office or that the women (wives or not) function similar to the male deacons, the women should likewise be voted into office. All of these options are worthy of consideration and supported by conservative evangelical scholars with reasonable support, except two ... first, it is difficult to suggest that the role of deaconess is an official church office of leadership (what I mean by the designation &quot;Leadership Office&quot;) on par with deacons (some say that Deaconesses are an office, but not in a leadership capacity--that is much different). Second, context makes the third option (every woman's character) very unlikely as well. Another point to consider is the essence of male deacons. Some (not I) believe that they are merely servants in both function and essence, whereas they do not constitute the leadership of the church alongside elders. Regardless of what we choose to call them, women throughout church history have provided special service needs within the church and should continue in those valuable roles today where they can supplement, compliment and even exceed what the male deacon could provide (ministry to the sick and widowed, hospitality, fellowship functions, women baptisms, etc.).</td>
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