

Biblical Notes — 1 Timothy 3:11

11 – Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. (11. γυναῖκας ὡσαύτως σεμνάς, μὴ διαβόλους, νηφαλίους, πιστάς ἐν πᾶσιν)

In response are five arguments: (1) If women deacons are in view in v. 11, it seems rather strange that they should be discussed right in the middle of the qualifications for male deacons, rather than by themselves; (2) Paul indeed seems to go out of his way to indicate that women are NOT deacons in the very next verse, for he says “Deacons must be husbands of one wife”; (3) as to why he didn’t mention wives in the section on elders, there are one of two possibilities that come to mind: (a) since Paul was addressing some real problems in Ephesus, it may well be that the deacons’ wives had been a major concern; (b) concomitantly, since deacons’ duties involved taking care of physical needs, they would have been in control of the mercy funds in the church—and, if so, it would be imperative for their wives to be ‘dignified, not scandalmongers, but sober, and trustworthy in everything’ (REB). One can readily see the psychological realities of such instructions to deacons’ wives: they must be tight-lipped when it came to discussing the very personal needs of the body. (4) Again, if v. 11 is addressed to women deacons, why are most of the qualifications not listed—that is, the only qualifications that pertain to the women would be the four items listed in this verse. But would they be allowed to be addicted to strong drink? Wouldn’t they have to prove themselves blameless before serving as deacons? Wouldn’t they have to hold fast to the mystery of the faith in a good conscience? The very fact that all these requirements seem so universal and yet are given specifically only to the men seems to argue against women deacons being in view in v. 11. (5) Finally, the original manuscripts of the New Testament were not divided by chapters and verses. And sometimes our divisions get in the way of seeing the overall context. There seems to be an unnatural break between chapters 2 and 3—or, at least, one that is too abrupt. I take it that 2:8 through 3:16 are all addressing conduct in the church. The issues revolve around men and women throughout these two chapters. And the very fact that Paul says in 2:12 that women were not to teach or exercise authority over men seems to govern what he says in chapter 3 as well. Thus, if deacons are in a role of exercising authority, then I would argue that Paul implicitly restricts such a role to men. As I read the NT, I do see deacons functioning in an authoritative capacity. If my understanding is correct, then the only way for one to see women deacons in 1 Tim 3:11 is either to (a) divorce this verse from the overarching principle stated in 1 Tim 2:12 or (b) reinterpret 2:12 to mean something other than an abiding principle for church life. On the other hand, if deacons were not in roles of leadership, then what is to prevent women from filling such a role? To be sure, there are some who believe that women can be deacons, but who also believe that a female deacon functioned on a different level than a male deacon. If such a qualification is made, then I have no problem with the category.