

Fighting for Phoebe: The Widow-Deacon and the Westminster Assembly's Concept of an Alms-Based Women's Ministry

By Nathan Eshelman

The Westminster Assembly's most controversial disagreement was related to church government. Was the English church to be governed by an independent or a presbyterian ecclesiology? The "grand debate" is the moniker given to this. In the midst of the grand debate, the validity of the office of deacon was proven from the Scriptures. Debates concerning the office of deacon continued from December 5, 1643 into January of the next year. The following resolutions were passed¹ between December 5, 1643 and December 22, 1643:

1. That the Scriptures do hold out deacons as distinct officers in the church.
2. It belongs to the office of deacon to take special care in distributing to the necessity of the poor.
3. The office of deacon is perpetual.
4. That 1 Timothy 3:8–15 and Acts 6:1–4 prove this.
5. That it does not pertain to the office of a deacon to preach the word, or administer the sacraments.

Flowing from this discussion on the diaconal office, the assembly turned its attention to the question of the widow-deacon. Who is the widow mentioned in 1 Timothy 5 and what is the extent of her work and ministry? It must be noted that the material concerning widow-deacons, as understood by the assembly, is limited. Not all questions are answerable, as some of the answers have been hidden in the annals of history. Van Dixhoorn, in the *Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly* notes, "Sessions 120–154, forming an entire fascicle of the minutes, are missing.... Some of the events in the period from 21 December 1643 to 14 February 1644 can be reconstructed."² Through the collation of available papers and assembly-consulted writers, the question of the widow-deacon of 1 Timothy 5 will be explored, as well as her qualifications, her limitations, and her purpose according to the Westminster Assembly.

A FAVORABLE VOTE

December 29, 1643 was a day in which the assembly's prolocutor, William Twisse, was not in his chair. Not only was Twisse the moderator of the assembly, but also "one of the most respected theologians in England, admired at home and abroad."³ Anthony Burgess sat in as moderator for the day. Burgess was an "assembly member from 1643 to 1649 ... a key committee member for the Confession of Faith."⁴ Under Burgess's moderatorship, Session 123 of the Westminster Assembly debated the following proposition: "That widows, which we read in 1 Timothy 5:3, and elsewhere, are *included under* the name deacons."⁵ John Lightfoot, "an Hebraist and authority in Jewish traditions"⁶ records it a bit differently, wrongly citing the debated text. Lightfoot says, "That the widows that we read of in 1 Timothy 5:2, and elsewhere, are *comprehended* under the name of deacons."⁷

THE AUTHOR: Nathan Eshelman is pastor of the Los Angeles Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPCNA), clerk of the Pacific Coast Presbytery, and president of the RPCNA's Home Mission Board. He is an M.Div graduate of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary and a D.Min graduate of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Currently he is pursuing a Th.M in historical theology at his alma mater, PRTS. Nathan is married to Lydia and they have five children: Anna, Owen, Watson, Calvin, and Ruth. He also co-hosts The Jerusalem Chamber, a podcast discussing the Westminster Confession of Faith.

1. George Gillespie, "Votes Passed in the Assembly of Divines in Westminster, Concerning Discipline and Government", in *Works of Mr. George Gillespie*, 2 vols., The Presbyterian's Armoury: in three volumes (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1844), 2.5.
2. Chad Van Dixhoorn, *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly 1643–1652*, 5 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.488.
3. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.140.
4. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.110.
5. Gillespie, *Works*, 2.5 (emphasis mine).
6. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.127.
7. John Lightfoot, *Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines*, in *The Whole Works of John Lightfoot*, 13 vols. (London: J. F. Dove, St. John's Square, 1824), 13.92.

Of course, the Scripture that was debated was 1 Timothy 5:3: “Honor widows who are truly widows.”

“Included” rather than “comprehended” was the language of the assembly, as the *Votes of the Assembly* recorded the proposition: “That Widdows, which we read of <I> Tim. 5:3 and elsewhere, are included under the name Decons” [sic].⁸ The word “include” means that the diaconate would “contain, comprise, and embrace”⁹ the widow-deacon. “Include” shows something of the widow-deacon’s work and service; i.e. the functional office is categorized under the diaconate.

As Burgess moderated, the committee recommendation to debate widow-deacons went forward. The debate wore on through the day and into the evening; the question was called, and the votes were cast. Lightfoot, also opposing the proposition from the beginning, called the widow-deacon, “far different from my judgment,”¹⁰ obviously thinking that the proposition was unable to be defended from the Scriptures. He wrote in his journal, “This debate, held exceedingly long, and was much canvassed for and against, at last it was called to the question and was voted affirmatively, only by one voice odds: when it was my unfortunacy to be called into the city before it came to the vote.”¹¹ The Westminster Assembly had voted in favor of widow-deacons; by one vote. The widow-deacon was to be included under the office of deacon.

The language of “office” may seem peculiar to the modern ear when considering the role of the widow in 1 Timothy 5. The primary usage of the word office merely means “performance of function” or “service of duty.”¹² Performance of function is how the assembly of divines were accepting “the office” of widow-deacon. This is illustrated by Thomas Goodwin, who, wrote about the widow-deacon’s qualifications, “For many women will not nurse, though God gave them breasts; they will not have their sleep broken, neither can they tarry so long at home; but if a woman cannot endure to do servile offices to her own children, she will never endure to do service [to the church].”¹³ The functional office of service

to children in the home is shown to be a prerequisite to the ability to serve functionally as a widow-deacon in the church. Under the deacon, in the debate, meant serving the diaconate.

SCOPE AND LIMITATION OF TERMS

What did the assembly mean when they said the widow was included under the deacon? Who was the widow-deacon? What was her function? Is it eisegetical to assume that when the assembly promoted the widow-deacon as an office, they meant categorically the same office as deacon? Widow-deacon and deacon were not synonymous. The original question debated was “whether the widows were included under the name deacon.” The question was not whether widows were deacons; but were to be included *under the name* deacon. This is an important distinction. The function of the widow-deacon was specific, as well as her qualifications. The Westminster Assembly was promoting the concept that the widow-deacon was to be included as a subset of the service or function of the office of deacon. The frequent use of the term “under the deacon” points to this distinction. John Calvin’s understanding of the widow serves to clarify that “under the deacon” categorizes her work under the authority of the diaconate.

During the debate, John Gibbon, “assembly member ... deeply interested in church government”¹⁴ argued, “widows are comprehended *under* the deacon’s title.”¹⁵ George Gillespie, Scottish commissioner noted for “clarity, wit, and promptness in speeches,”¹⁶ said, “That widows, we read of [in] 1 Timothy 5:3, and elsewhere, are included *under* the name deacons.”¹⁷ These arguments are consistent with the original question which, when read in the context of the historical interpretations of the 1 Timothy passage, clarify that *under* relates to her being a servant of the diaconate, rather than an authoritative member of it. She was a widow being publicly supported by the church’s alms and therefore was serving in diaconal ministry. Calvin points to this office of function which was to be included under the diaconal ministry of the church. He said,

... for, being supported at the public expense, it was proper that they should have already reached old age. Besides, there was another and stronger reason; for they consecrated themselves to the ministry of the Church, which would have been altogether intolerable, if there were still a likelihood of their being married. They were received on the condition that the Church should relieve their poverty, and that, on their part, they should be employed in ministering to the poor, as far as the state

8. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 2.12. Spelling original unless otherwise noted.

9. *Oxford English Dictionary*, definition 2.

10. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 96.

11. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 96.

12. *Oxford English Dictionary*, entry 1 concerning “office.”

13. Thomas Goodwin, *The Government and Discipline of the Churches of Christ* (London: John Clark, 1722), 79. Italics mine.

14. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.119.

15. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 96. Italics mine.

16. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.120.

17. Gillespie, *Notes on the Assembly*, 5. Italics mine.

of their health allowed. Thus there was a mutual obligation between them and the Church. It was unreasonable that those who were under that age, and who were still in the vigor of life, should be a burden to others.¹⁸

Calvin was not an innovator concerning his understanding of the role of women deacons in the life of the church. Calvin, as an avid student of the early church, understood that the debates surrounding the woman deacon were not new to the reformation. The early church frequently questioned the role of the widow of 1 Timothy 5 and her connection to the women of 1 Timothy 3. So, as the Westminster Assembly debated Phoebe and the feminine labor that would fall under the title of deacon, they were participating in a discussion over a millennium old.

In antiquity, women set apart for women's ministry was part of the milieu of ideas being discussed as pastors and theologians sought to understand the role of women, especially in light of 1 Timothy 3; 1 Timothy 5; and Romans 16:1. Aimè Georges Martimort, who wrote the *magnum opus* concerning women deacons, acknowledges "the title of deaconess is unknown to the New Testament."¹⁹ Despite the title not being used in the New Testament, and the entire second century following the close of the canon being silent on 1 Timothy 3:11 and Romans 16:1, the deaconess or the widow more than occasionally appears in the ancient literature of the east as well as the west. "We are permitted on the basis of the title to associate them with the women who are themselves associated with deacons in 1 Timothy 3:11, but in doing we must not lose sight of the fact that this association remains a very fragile and contingent one."²⁰ Many questions remain when examining the first several centuries of church history evidence. "It is not enough to merely take note of their existence. Considering the vary great differences in discipline that existed from one local church to another, we must carefully examine the situation on a case-by-case basis."²¹ The case for the widows and women deacons has no clear consensus in church history.

Besides the lack of clarity concerning their association, there is further difficulty in understanding the widow or the deaconess due to the fluidity of function that we see from the office. This will be the same problem found in the Westminster Assembly as well—who is she? What is her function? Is she ordained?

When the deaconess appeared in the post-apostolic church, she met the widow qualifications of 1 Timothy 5. "Entry into membership in this group was not merely the result of some spontaneous personal decision to

join it; rather one had to be designated, 'enrolled' in the group."²² This continuity is where the agreement ended—the widow deacon needed to be a widow.

In some regions of the church, the widow deacon served much like a male deacon, only focusing instead on the nuances of women's ministries: "Their activities were limited to what a priest requested them to carry out..."²³ In other parts of the church, the widow deacon performed liturgical functions with the priest's permission and when it was necessary to have a woman present.²⁴ For those who promoted the widow-deacon for her liturgical function, it was limited to service for women. In 375, St. Epiphanius argued, "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."²⁵

As the scale of widow-deacon function slid between tasks assigned by the priest to administering sacraments to females, St. Chrysostom must also be considered. His position was that the women deacons provided no function at all but were merely an institution of mercy—mercy administered to them because of their destitution and poverty. "The ... widows performed no functions, but they did receive a subsidy from the church that was supposed to enable them to live a contemplative life," said Chrysostom, referring to them as the "choir of widows."

As the literature contains a breadth of function for her labor—or non-labor—so too is there a variety of views as to whether she was ordained or unordained. Among those who argue for her ordination, we must understand that the best scholars who speak favorably for the ordination of widow-deacons highly doubt the Greek and Latin words for her "consecration" constitutes an ordination. Martimort said, "The first liturgical or rite created to consecrate women into a special religious state of life could have well been 'the blessing

18. John Calvin on 1 Timothy 5:9, *Commentaries* (Calvin Translation Society), vol. XXI, p. 128.

19. Aimè Georges Martimort, *Les Diaconesses: Essai* (Roma: Edizioni liturgiche, 1982); *English translation, Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, translated by K. D. Whitehead (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 19.

20. R. Gryson, *Première Apologie* (Paris: Picard, 1904), 65.

21. Martimort, 119.

22. Martimort, 23.

23. Martimort, 114.

24. For a fascinating look into the liturgical function of the deaconess in one region of the church, see "The Case of Deaconess in the Monasteries of the Region of Edessa, 4th to 6th century" in Martimort, 139–143.

25. Martimort, 127.

of the widow' ... this institution was certainly different from ordination, which was conferred only upon the bishop, the priest and the deacon, but it was something more than an administrative act."²⁶

These discussions, which quietly carried on for centuries—well into the middle ages—were part of the backdrop for Calvin's discussion of the deaconess and whether she would find a place in the Genevan order. So too, at Westminster, the widow-deacon, complete with discussions concerning office, function, and role were part of the debates at the assembly—and due to the theologians and churchmen at Westminster being serious students of the Word and church history, this discussion naturally found its way into the question of the deacon and whether the widow-deacon was included under the title of deacon.

In the debates of the assembly, her work would be called an office, yet this must be understood as function, rather than authority. Her work—or office—was functional. This is important to understand as her qualifications and roles are unfolded.

Another question that is important in the scope and limitation of terminology is the question of ordination. Ought the widow-deacon be ordained in order to do the work? Nowhere in the discussion concerning the widow-deacon do any of the theologians at Westminster discuss her as being an ordained officer. This was not on the agenda of discussion as they thought of her by way of the office of function rather than an office of authority. The deacons, on the other hand, were to be ordained, and there was much discussion surrounding the ordination of those who held authoritative office.

For example, Herbert Palmer, a frequent speaker at the debates of the Assembly,²⁷ when discussing the perpetuity of the diaconate was emphatic that they were to be ordained to the office when he said, "I grant it is the same office mentioned in Acts 6 because it is certain

they did apoynt persons to take care of the poore. Ther was that necessity in all other churches and they war ordained *eis Diaconian*."²⁸ Ordination of deacons was taken seriously, and that ordination was considered a solemn ordination—to that office—and that office alone. If a deacon left the diaconate for another office, another ordination would be required. The ordination of deacons, and the ordination of "other church governors" (i.e., elders); and the ordination of preaching elders, (i.e. pastors), were all different ordinations according to the outworking of Westminster theology. Palmer later would comment, "I conceive the ordination of deacons is not good to all purposes without a new ordination."²⁹ In all the discussion concerning the diaconal ordination and its scope and limitations, not once did any Westminster theologian on any side of the debate argue that the widow-deacon ought to be ordained. Her office was an office of function that was under the stewardship of the deacons, hence the assembly's question whether widows are included *under* the deacon.

THE PARTIES IN THE DEBATE

The widow-deacon debate, did not, for the most part fall along party lines. The grand debate between independents and presbyterians was set aside. Wayne Spear notes, "The independents, especially Simpson and Bridge, argued most strongly in the assembly for the inclusion of deaconesses in the church."³⁰ Spear goes on to say, "The position taken by the independents was supported among other leading men of the assembly only by Lazarus Seaman and George Gillespie."³¹ Seaman was a member of the presbytery in London. Van Dixhoorn notes that Seaman "ranks as the second most frequent speaker in the assembly with over 400 speeches."³²

As the widow-deacon was debated and affirmed, both those from the independents and from the notable presbyterians came together to promote her as under the deacon's office. Others debating against the widow-deacon included, "Herle, Marshall, Palmer, Temple, and Burgess."³³

The debate dragged on from Friday into Monday. The scope of the debate including various topics, the scriptural evidence for and against the widow-deacon was considered; the qualifications of the office were debated and decided upon; the role and function of the widow was determined. On Monday, January 1, 1644, the assembly then turned its attention to Phoebe, of Romans 16, and attempted to determine whether she was a deaconess in the church of Cenchrea.

The widow-deacon was determined to be an eleemosynary³⁴ ministry. It was a ministry that was related

26. Martimort, 126.

27. According to Van Dixhoorn, Palmer made just under 400 speeches at the Assembly, the 4th most frequent of the speakers. See *Minutes and Papers*, 1.131.

28. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 2.480.

29. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 3.456.

30. Wayne Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity in Religion: The Influence of the Scottish Commissioners on the Ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 119.

31. Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity*, 120.

32. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.136.

33. Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity*, 120.

34. From the Greek, *eleemosuna*, "to give alms." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, eleemosynary first appeared in the English language in 1630 and was a reference to "eleemosynary acts." This usage is "of or pertaining to alms or almsgiving; charitable. One

to and supported by the mercy ministry of the church. The widow-deacon was intended to be a service that focused on mercy towards women especially, and several assembly members would have her also to be supported financially by the mercy ministry of the church. She would receive an honor, or wage, from the alms of the church and she would be employed to serve those who were poor and in need.

THE HISTORICAL-THEOLOGICAL MILIEU OF THE DISCUSSION

Reading through the pieced-together debate, it is clear the assembly of divines was rooting their argumentation in the Scriptures. 1 Timothy 5:3–16 is the controversial text from which the divines affirmed this theology. Both parties, those in favor of widow-deacons and those opposed to widow-deacons, used 1 Timothy 5:3–16 as their defense, some seeing the widow merely as the provider of mercy and the other party seeing the widow as the recipient of mercy. The debated text reads:

Honor widows who are really widows. But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives. And these things command, that they may be blameless. But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work. But refuse the younger widows; for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry, having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith. And besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not. Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully. For some have already turned aside after Satan. If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows.³⁵

The milieu of theological interpretation concerning this text was diaconal in the reformation and Calvinistic tradition. Calvin himself promoted a variation on the idea of a widow-deacon:

The care of the poor was committed to deacons, of whom two classes are mentioned by Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, "He that giveth, let him do it with simplicity;" "he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness" (Rom. 12:8). As it is certain that he is here speaking of public offices of the Church, there must have been two distinct classes. If I mistake not, he in the former clause designates deacons, who administered alms; in the latter, those who had devoted themselves to the care of the poor and the sick. Such were the widows of whom he makes mention in the Epistle to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:10). For there was no public office which women could discharge save that of devoting themselves to the service of the poor. If we admit this, and it certainly ought to be admitted, there will be two classes of deacons, the one serving the Church by *administering* the affairs of the poor; the other, by *taking care* of the poor themselves.³⁶

In Calvin's understanding, there are two classes of deacon. One being authoritative, including administrative authority. The other class is strictly service-oriented, "devoted ... to the care of the poor and the sick."³⁷ Calvin saw the widow-deacon in this servant class, serving and taking care of the poor. Women were able to devote themselves to the serving class of deacon, the widow-deacon—but not the administrative class of deacon. Calvin would use the term "steward" and "hospitalier" to distinguish between the authoritative deacon and the functioning deacon who was set apart to care for the poor and the sick. This distinction is seen in the "Fourth Order of Ecclesiastical Government: Namely Deacons." Commenting upon his own ecclesiastical practices, Calvin said,

There were always two kinds of deacons in the early Church. The one kind was deputed to receive, dispense,

established for the distribution of alms. The word also has a later usage, which is the one who is "dependent on or supported by alms." This usage came into the English language in 1654, a decade after the debate at Westminster. An earlier usage, that is not pertinent to the widow-deacon, is "one dependent upon alms, a beggar." That usage came into the language in 1620; although "beggar" is not a part of the discussion here.

35. New King James Version.

36. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Beveridge translation, 4.3.9.

37. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.9.

and keep the goods for the poor, not only daily alms, but also possessions, revenues, and pensions; the other kind to care for and remember the sick and administer the allowance for the poor, a custom which we still retain at present. And in order to avoid confusion, since we have stewards and hospitaliers,³⁸ one of the four stewards of the hospital shall be the receiver of all its bounty and shall be adequately paid so that he may the better fulfil this office.³⁹

In the *Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, we learn that “The one kind [of deacon] was deputized to receive, dispense, and keep the goods for the poor, not only daily alms, but also possessions, revenues, and pensions; the other kind to care for and remember the sick and administer the allowance for the poor.”⁴⁰ Under the Genevan church’s order, the widow, upon election, would be called to serve as a hospitalier.

Among the independents, Henry Barrowe’s⁴¹ ten page tract on church government was frequently cited. Barrowe, a separatist, taking a four-office view of the church, in the tradition of Calvin, lists shepherds, elders, doctors, and deacons as the offices of the church. Calvin earlier wrote, “There are four kinds of offices that the Lord instituted for ruling of his church.”⁴² He would go on to list pastors, doctors (teachers), elders, and deacons. Barrowe, following this fourfold division of authority would include the widow as one functioning under the office of deacon. The “reliever or widow”⁴³ is categorized as an office that serves the diaconate. The deacons are male according to Barrowe, and the relievers, the servants of the deacons, may be widows. Barrowe writes:

Their relievers or widows must be women of 60 years of age at the least, for avoiding of inconveniences: they must be well reported of for good works, such as have nourished their children, such as have been harborous to strangers: diligent and serviceable to the saints,

38. Some translations use “procurers” and “hospitaliers”.

39. Phillip E. Hughes, *Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* (1966; repr. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 42.

40. Hughes, *Register of the Company of Pastors*, 42.

41. Henry Barrowe or Barrow (1550–1593).

42. Hughes, *Register*, 14.

43. Henry Barrow, *A True Description out of the Word of God of the Visible Church*, Early English Books. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A05126.0001.001> (accessed August 2, 2018). Spelling modernized.

44. Barrowe, *True Description*, 4 (original work not paginated).

45. Gillespie, *Works*, 2.70.

46. Gillespie, *Works*, 2.85.

47. Gillespie, *Works*, 2.85.

compassionate and helpful to them in adversity, given to every good work, continuing in supplications and prayers night and day [1 Tim 5:9, 10].⁴⁴

Barrowe went on to say, “these officers must first be duly proved.” It was clear that Barrowe, and later a certain group of independents following Barrowe and Calvin, would consider the widow-deacon an officer, but she was an officer of function rather than an officer of authority. She was included under the office of deacon.

George Gillespie, promoting the widow-deacon as well, demonstrated the need for the office among the presbyterian side of the Calvinistic churches. In *Miscellany Questions*, Gillespie was answering a question about furthering reformation in the church and how certain practices creep into the church exhibiting the need for reform. He cited a number of examples of backslidings in the church; among them, “that young women should be no longer admitted to serve the church in the attending the sick, and that such widows must be at least sixty years old and the like.”⁴⁵ Later Gillespie would discuss the New Testament “doctrine of faith and practical duties of the Christian life.”⁴⁶ Flowing from that section is a list of the officers of the church. Among them Gillespie lists the widows.⁴⁷ It is clear that Gillespie, following Calvin, considered the widow-deacon a consistent outworking of reformation ecclesiology.

As the debate raged on from the morning of December 29, 1643 into Monday, January 1, 1643 (with the Lord’s Day being a sabbath rest, of course), two claimants of Calvin’s ecclesiology, independents and presbyterians, joined together to promote the widow-deacon in the Westminster Assembly. For the most part, independents and presbyterians disagreed on church polity issues at the assembly. In the promotion of the widow-deacon, party lines were set aside for the sake of the argument. Both were fighting for Phoebe.

QUALIFICATIONS

What requirements did the Westminster Assembly see for the office of widow-deacon? What reasons did they present to defend that she was a servant, rather than merely a widow?

At the center of the debate was the question concerning her ministry, being one that was eleemosynary. She was an alms-related servant of the church, eleemosynary relating to alms from as well as alms towards. The question was whether she was dependent upon alms for her living, due to her widowhood, or whether she was one that earned her living from the alms of the church because she was an officer. This was central to

Westminster’s debate. Of Stephen Marshall, it was said that while he “at times was willing to paper over the cracks in the assembly, he was as likely to expose differences among his fellow presbyterians in order to delay decisions unpopular with the congregationalists.”⁴⁸ In this debate he did not “paper over the cracks” when he said that she was a recipient of alms, rather than a distributor. Lightfoot notes, “Marshall proposed these doubts against it; and proved here is meant a widow that was to live on alms ... he does not so much describe what she is now, but as she has been hereto.”⁴⁹

Gillespie disagreed with his fellow presbyterian brother. He claimed that “there were some widows that were eleemosynary, and not church officers; and there were those that were both.”⁵⁰ But how does one decide whether the widow described in 1 Timothy 5 was a widow-deacon, an officer of the church, or whether she is the recipient of diaconal ministry due to her poverty brought on by widowhood?

For the Westminster divines who voted up the proposition, the answer was found in the word καταλέγω.⁵¹ “To be enrolled, or taken into the number” requires an election, according to the favorable arguments of some of the divines. Sidrach Simpson, a former episcopalian who became congregationalist,⁵² argued, “She was an officer because she was reckoned among the church officers; there is her election, a special register.”⁵³ John Gibbon would say that *katalego* proves she was elected: “This catalog was of the officers.”⁵⁴ Gibbon, referencing 1 Timothy 5, argued that the chapter speaks only of those who are holding office: elders and widow-deacons.⁵⁵

Her registration or election set her apart as eligible for the widow-diaconate and this would require—by good and necessary consequence—a vote to elect her to the office. But what are the qualifications that the assembly saw in the New Testament concerning her?

First, and most obvious, is that she is to be a widow. All who would serve as widow-deacons must be a woman who has lost her husband to death. During this debate, Anthony Burgess noted that she is “a widow indeed... such a one as God had made a widow, and not one that was divorced or had divorced their husbands.”⁵⁶

Why are the theologians at Westminster so concerned that her husband is dead? It is because they argued exegetically rather than pragmatically. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul is interested in her widowhood as the first of the qualifications that would set apart the widow-deacon. “Honor widows who are truly widows” (1 Timothy 5:3). The apostle Paul would continue to give thirteen qualifications for the widow-diaconate

Qualification for a Widow-Deacon	Biblical Reference
Committed to celibacy following the death of her husband	1 Timothy 5:3, 9; 11
Dignified, not a slanderer, sober-minded, faithful in all things	1 Timothy 3:11
Must be above reproach	1 Timothy 5:8
Hope is set on God	1 Timothy 5:5a
Continues in prayers and supplications day and night	1 Timothy 5:5b
At least sixty years old	1 Timothy 5:9a
Widow of one husband	1 Timothy 5:9b
A reputation of good works	1 Timothy 5:10a
Must have children she has raised	1 Timothy 5:10b
Be known for her hospitality	1 Timothy 5:10c
Lovingly served the saints (i.e., washed their feet)	1 Timothy 5:10d
Administered care for the afflicted	1 Timothy 5:10e
Devoted herself to every kind of good work	1 Timothy 5:11

in 1 Timothy 5. The section flows from the qualifications of elders and deacons (chapter 3) and then goes on to give instruction concerning how the church is to interact with those who hold office (chapter 5). The widow-deacon comes briefly into the list of the chapter 3 qualifications for deacons, given as a one verse excursus (3:11) and then more in depth in 1 Timothy 5. The Westminster divines would have all these qualifications met for one to serve as widow-deacon. In the **Table above**, notice the extensive qualifications that the apostle Paul puts forward:

WIDOW-DEACON QUALIFICATIONS (1 TIMOTHY)

These were the qualifications that the Westminster theologians were committed to as the requirements for the office. Gillespie earlier noted, when a congregation falls

48. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.128.

49. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 95.

50. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 95.

51. Hereafter, *katalego*, to enroll or take into the number.

52. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.137.

53. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 95.

54. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 95.

55. This is disputable, of course, as verse 1 lists elders, young men, older women, and young women. Gibbon may be under the impression that “women” is a reference to the widow, as 1 Timothy 3:11 is, by assemblymen, the widow-deacon, but under the name “wife or woman.”

56. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 96.

away from the specific requirements for widow-deacon, it is in need of further reformation. Gillespie, of course, gleans that teaching from the apostle Paul who warns against the admission of young widows into the office of deacon-widow. The young widow is barred from the office by her age. The apostle's encouragement was that she would marry and leave the widow-deacon ministry to those who met the qualifications listed above (1 Timothy 5:14). For those Westminster theologians favorably arguing for the widow-deacon, the biblical requirements that stand behind her service were of utmost importance.

ROLE AND PURPOSE

The Westminster Assembly upheld the very strict New Testament qualifications for the widow-deacon in their affirmative vote on the proposition that the widow-deacon is a New Testament office of function. While this was the case, they saw Scripture as being less perspicuous on the role of the office; therefore, the role and purpose were more fluid.

Romans 12:8 stood as central to the debate on her role as a functional officer of the church. This verse has been frequently understood as a direct imperative to those who hold office, not merely a directive to the church in general.⁵⁷ The Authorized Version reads, "Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness." A word to preachers. A word to ruling elders. A word to deacons.

Arguing in favor of her office, both Gibbon and Simpson would cite this text in the debate as proof of her ministry. Wayne Spear comments that this evidence was put forward "with a curious change of gender."⁵⁸ This curious change of gender, "he" in the Greek New Testament and AV, and "she" in the widow-deacon debate, was a logical conclusion as the deacon-widow was a practitioner of mercy whose office served as a

function of the diaconate. Her main role in serving the stewarding deacons of the church was one of mercy, a hospitalier, in Calvin's earlier terminology. The text's gender did not make it an invalid argument since she was included under the office of deacon in her practice of mercy. This was her service.

The deacon-widow was employed, or honored, by the church to focus on mercy ministry. The word "honor" carries the connotation of payment for labor, such as an honorarium. The Greek word used in 1 Timothy 5:3 for "honor", τιμάω (*timao*), means to "fix the value to" something. It is a word that carries financial implications. Lazarus Seaman, assembly member and London presbyterian said, "She is to have an honorable salary."⁵⁹ Her work was especially to that segment of the church that the all-male diaconate or session of elders would have difficulty ministering to in a modest way. Gibbon argued that the widow-deacon ought "to keep women, sick and with child."⁶⁰ This shows that the widow-deacon's function included mercy towards women in time of sickness and when they were with child. This was an aspect of public mercy that was on the minds of the assembly as the *Book of Common Prayer* was being revised.

The "churching of women" was a ministry that the Anglican communion had set apart for the service of the church. The 1559 *Book of Common Prayer* contains a ceremony for a woman's welcoming into the communion of the body following the giving of birth. In that ceremony, the priest would pray:

O Almighty God, which hast delivered this woman thy servaunte from the great paine and peril of childe birthe: Graunt we beseche thee most mercifull Father, that she through thy help may bothe faithfully live, and walke in her vocation, accordyng to thy wil, in this lyfe present, and also may be partaker of everlastyng glory in the lyfe to come, throughe Jesus Christ our Lorde. Amen.⁶¹

The postpartum communicant, following this prayer would be welcomed back into the communion of the church. The ministry to women was an important component in Anglican worship, especially in an era with as high as a 13% infant mortality rate:

Demographers estimate that approximately 2% of all live births in England at this time would die in the first day of life. By the end of the first week, a cumulative total of 5% would die. Another 3 or 4% would die within the month. A total of 12 or 13% would die within their first year.⁶²

57. Calvin, "Of whom he speaks here, he did not understand those who gave of their own property, but the deacons, who presided in dispensing public charities." *Commentaries*, 19.463. Hodge, "This direction, considered in reference to the deacons..." Geneva Series of Commentaries, *Romans* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 392. Brown, it is "the duty of the church by her deacons to relieve these [suffering]." John Brown, *Analytical exposition ... to the Romans* (1857), 454.

58. Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity*, 120.

59. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 92.

60. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 95.

61. *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. Brian Cummings (Oxford University Press, 2011), 176.

62. The demographics are taken from *Plymouth Ancestors*, Plimoth Plantation, http://www.plimoth.org/sites/default/files/media/pdf/edmaterials_demographics.pdf [accessed: July 3, 2017].

As Westminster reformed, or was in the process of reforming, worship in the English church, the ceremony of “churching women” was removed; yet the need for ministry to postpartum women remained a necessary component of the service of the church. The showing of mercy remained essential, as in Romans 12:8. The church’s ministry needed to determine when it was right for a postpartum woman to return to worship. As the “churching of woman” liturgy was removed under Westminster, the widow-deacon would be able to assist in that time of transition back into the fellowship of the church and community.

Her ministry was to be beyond just to postpartum and sick women. She also was a practitioner of mercy in distribution to the poor. Not all Westminster assemblymen who affirmed the office of widow-deacon agreed that she was to collect alms, as many believed that was the responsibility of the stewards of the church, but it was agreed that she was to distribute alms to the poor at the discretion of the diaconate. Gibbon argued that she was to collect as well as distribute alms. He says she was to “gather the alms of the church ... and to distribute these.”⁶³ William Bridge, called “perhaps the most able speaker among the congregationalists,”⁶⁴ said she was to be about “attendance of the poor.”⁶⁵

The attendance upon the poor underscores the necessity of meeting the qualifications that the apostle Paul puts forward. Ministry to the poor requires mercy, wisdom, and delicate application to not injure the poor through fostering entitlement or breaking confidence. Much wisdom would be needed for this office as the widow-deacon ministered to the “least of these” among the churches of the three kingdoms. Wisdom from the congregation and leadership in putting forth a widow-deacon would also be essential.

Bridge said, “The attendance of the poor by the widow is not fixing to attend any in their chambers...”⁶⁶ What Bridge was arguing was that her ministry was one of that was responding to the work assigned to her, not necessarily going around looking for ministry. Her office functions as a response to the deacons’ call for her ministry.

Besides ministry to sick, postpartum women, and to the poor, the widow-deacon was also to be one who would devote time to prayer for those who were in need. Thomas Goodwin, a “formidable debater”⁶⁷ and the member “most often called to order,”⁶⁸ said that she was to “attend on God in devotion in some singular way and her waiting on supplication and prayer.”⁶⁹ He would go on to compare this to the priesthood’s “burden of service.” She carried a special burden to pray for those to whom she was given the ministry of mercy.

Does the church need those who set aside time for prayer? That is without question. For the Westminster Assembly, the preaching elder was one who prayed as an aspect of his vocation (Acts 6:4), but the widow-deacon was set apart to pray specifically for the women of the church, the children, the sick, and the poor. The marginalized of the congregation would have a servant to assist them, to minister to them as the diaconate would deem appropriate. Gibbon said she was “to show mercy ... in attending ... with words of piety.”⁷⁰ This was no small office, but one of great importance to the ministry of the church.

The assembly also saw her role as one of hospitality and care for the persecuted. Anthony Burgess (who was against the proposition) said that she was nevertheless a servant who “at the church’s command, [was] to entertain strangers and the persecuted.”⁷¹ In this model of functional office, the widow-deacon’s home could serve as a safe house for those who were in need, including abused women needing a haven from persecution. Her home would also guarantee that those traveling would enjoy ministry and respite at the home of the widow-deacon.

The following list shows the work of the widow-deacon that was discussed during the course of the debates concerning her function:

The Work of the Widow-Deacon

- Administer mercy
- Minister to and visit the sick
- Minister to postpartum women
- Distribute alms to the poor
- Attendance on the poor
- Prayers and supplications for those under her care.
- Entertain strangers (hospitality)
- Care for the persecuted

WIDOW-DEACON DUTIES PROMOTED DURING THE ASSEMBLY’S DEBATE

The labors of her office are varied yet focused on women’s ministry and those who are in great need of mercy. The concept of the widow-deacon was affirmed by

63. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 95.
 64. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.110.
 65. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 95.
 66. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 96.
 67. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.120.
 68. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.120.
 69. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 96.
 70. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 95.
 71. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 96.

Westminster. This unordained office of function, in the tradition of Calvin and the early church, affirmed by both independents and presbyterians, was to be included in the final documents of Westminster. The proposition was sustained, even if by one vote only. “At last it was called to the question,” according to Lightfoot, “and was voted affirmatively, only by one voice odds.”⁷²

Now for the Assembly, only one more proposition would need to be voted upon and then the widow-deacon could make her way into the final documents as being “under the name deacon.” The debate now rested on Phoebe.

WAS PHOEBE A WIDOW-DEACON?

The final proposition that needed to be determined for the inclusion of the widow-deacon under the office of deacon was the question of the best exegetical evidence for that approved proposition. If the widow-deacon was to be included as one of the offices of the church, what would be the best scriptural proofs to determine this?

Monday, January 1, 1644 began with a sermon by a theological student, a “probationer.” Following the morning devotions, the Westminster Assembly turned its attention to the question of Phoebe. Lightfoot says, “then we fell upon Romans 16:1–2.”⁷³ Bridge argued that Phoebe was the same widow-deacon that was found in 1 Timothy 5. He proved this in part by citing church fathers, Calvin, and others who claimed that Phoebe was an officer of the church.

Thomas Temple, called “the least known among the assembly’s leaders”⁷⁴ disagreed that Phoebe was a widow-deacon, as the widow-deacon lives off the eleemosynary service of the church. He said, “She carried Paul’s epistle. Now it is strange a poor old woman should be sent with that epistle!”⁷⁵ On whether Phoebe was a widow-deacon, the Westminster Assembly was more unified than the question of whether widow-deacons were included under the name deacon. The assembly voted that it could not be proved from Scripture that Phoebe held an office or was included in the widow-diaconate. John Lightfoot noted, “After a very long debate the business was put to the question and voted negatively, that [Phoebe] shall not be brought

to prove the proposition; and so we adjourned.”⁷⁶ Phoebe, the servant commended by Paul to the Roman church, was not enough evidence to support the concept of an eleemosynary women’s ministry. The proposition failed.

LASTING LEGACY

Without Phoebe being upheld as a widow-deacon, what did the Westminster Assembly have to favorably show that the concept of a widow-deacon from 1 Timothy was more than theoretical? There was no New Testament evidence that the assembly could agree on that would defend the apostle’s widow of 1 Timothy 5 as being a widow-deacon, rather than merely a poor widow lived off church alms because she was unable to support herself. In history, it seems that without Phoebe, the widow-deacon would not be included under the office of deacon in the reformation churches.

Wayne Spear says:

In the process of editing, the only significant change that was made in the section was that this reference to widows was quietly dropped. Although technically this amounted to changing a previous vote of the Assembly, it was not objected to, undoubtedly because of the divided opinion in the assembly when the proposition was originally passed. As far as can be determined, the existence of deaconesses in the church was no more than a matter of theory, even for the advocates of their inclusion.⁷⁷

Without Phoebe as a positive demonstration of the widow-deacon, 1 Timothy 5 did not provide a New Testament example. This put the assembly in a difficult situation, as they would have to affirm a functional office but not have exegetical evidence to defend the proposition.

It appears that quietly—and without dissent—the widow-deacon would remain in the historical record as a debate that happened and was affirmed; yet never brought beyond “a matter of theory.” Specific women’s ministry would continue to be a need in the churches in the reformation and presbyterian tradition, but there would be no eleemosynary officer under the name deacon to function in the formal role of hospitalier. The proposition was essentially overturned in the fight for Phoebe. Specific ministry to women would have to be fulfilled in some other way. ■

72. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 97.

73. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 97.

74. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers*, 1.139.

75. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 98.

76. Lightfoot, *Journal*, 98.

77. Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity*, 121.