

## CHAPTER XVIII ELDERS—WIVES OF ONE HUSBAND?

When I first taught this material, I passed out a survey on questions involving the role of women. After the class had finished with the survey, I asked, “Which question was the hardest?” A godly woman said, “Whether a woman can be an elder.” A number of other women, good, submissive, dedicated, hard-working lovers of the Lord, nodded their heads. I was surprised, but they were right, and they were well ahead of me in their understanding of scripture.

The issue arises because the lists of elder qualifications in 1 Timothy and Titus require an elder to be the “husband of one wife.” Admittedly, it would be hard for a woman to meet this standard. The question, however, is whether the reference to an elder being male is intended to be an eternal requirement or whether it is limited to the culture and time in which Paul wrote. Plainly, in First Century Grecian and Jewish society, a woman would not have been accepted in such a position—and very few women would have been suitable for the role in any event. And so, did Paul refer to elders as male because all First Century elders were male, or because male elders were God’s eternal plan?

Before we delve into the lists of elder qualifications found in 1 Timothy and Titus, some other key verses should be considered:

**Elders and Deborah.** Deborah ruled the nation of Israel as spiritual and civil leader. She was a prophetess and a judge. Thus, Deborah’s position was far more authoritative than our elders today. Therefore, the notion that there is an eternal law that prevents women from having spiritual leadership is plainly false. God called Deborah, and God cannot sin.

Also, it’s clear from numerous Old Testament passages that, going back to the Egyptian captivity, men called elders governed the ancient Israelite cities. Plainly, then Deborah was over the elders of Israel. While we don’t know that much about the exact role or authority of the Old Testament elders, they evidently served a role in the ancient cities comparable to the role of elders in the modern church. If not, why did the New Testament writers choose to use this term for certain church leaders?

There are numerous other examples of female leaders in the Old Testament, which we’ve discussed previously. If Miriam was a “leader” of Israel, then she had a higher position than the elders of the day. If the king was answerable to Huldah, then the elders of the day were that much more so.

Plainly, there is no eternal law of male headship that prevents a woman from having authority over a man. God would not have set these examples for us otherwise.

**New Testament prophets and elders.** A similar argument is apparent in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, Paul lists the church offices in order of rank, listing apostles first, prophets second, and elders (pastors) beneath both (neither list includes deacons). But we have seen Junias, a woman, counted among the apostles in Romans 16:7. We see many women counted as prophets in the New Testament. In fact, Paul’s discussion of prophets in 1 Corinthians 12 follows closely after his discussion of women prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11. Surely he still had women in mind. We have seen the evidence for women deacons. And so what eternal principle decrees that women may be above and below the elders in rank but not be an elder?

We must also take note of what prophets do. They are not soothsayers, predicting the future as a curiosity. They foretell the future as a warning. Prophets foretell and forthtell. The forth-telling involves warning, instructing, exhorting, and rebuking. When the New Testament calls a woman a prophet it does so with 1,500 years of history of prophecy, and the New Testament does not make a distinction between the First Century prophets and the Old Testament prophets. Read a few books of Old Testament prophecy and imagine a woman uttering those words. It will expand your horizons.

Note also Joel's prophecy of the coming of the Christian Dispensation that was quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17-18—

*(Joel 2:28) And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. 29 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.*

God spoke through Joel to declare that both sons and daughters would be prophets. Twice He emphasizes that the gift will fall on both men and women. Since the coming of the Spirit on women in the Old Testament was less common than for men, a sign of the coming of the Messiah would be the equality of the sexes in terms of gifts of the Spirit. Therefore, there can be no argument whatsoever that the female prophets of the New Testament were in any sense inferior to the prophets of the Old Testament. And, of course, it is the New Testament itself that places prophets above elders.

Now one might dispute this by arguing that the gift of prophecy is a miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit, and only due to the special inspiration given women prophets are they higher than elders. But this argument fails to consider that 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and other passages tell us that even non-miraculous gifts, like the gifts of leadership and administration, are gifts of the Holy Spirit. In other words, if a woman has the gift of leadership or pastoring, it's because God gave her that gift, and she is just as entitled to use it in God's service as the gift of prophecy.

**Can a woman be an elder?** The questions thus presented are:

1. Is the apparent prohibition of a woman being an elder evidenced in 1 Timothy and Titus, as well as early church history, a temporary cultural matter only or an eternal ordinance of God?
2. Are the qualifications described in 1 Timothy and Titus intended as laws or as wise counsel, with the true test being to whom God has given the gift of leadership?

An affirmative answer to *either* question would permit many women gifted to lead to serve as elders.

**1. Is the apparent prohibition of a woman being an elder evidenced in 1 Timothy and Titus, as well as early church history, a temporary cultural matter only or an eternal ordinance of God?**

We have covered the ground surrounding culture versus an eternal command at length. The case has already been made, and there is no reason to go through the motions of restating it. Certainly, for the same reasons that women were not allowed to teach men in Ephesus, no women were going to be appointed elder by Timothy or Titus. The possibility is eliminated by the commands in 1 Timothy 2. But we have shown that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is culturally limited (just like most of the rest of the chapter). It is certainly reasonable to conclude that the qualifications listed in the Pastoral Letters<sup>182</sup> are also limited based on cultural conditions insofar as they relate to the gender of the elders.

This cannot be proved or disproved by reference to the qualifications themselves. Rather, with the justification for the discrimination against women no longer applicable today, we must look to God's eternal principles as they apply to men and women and husbands and wives. When in doubt, go with the larger, eternal principles. In the absence of the qualification lists in 1 Timothy and Titus, what principle would deny a congregation the right to appoint as elder a woman with the talent to serve as elder?

Some would argue that allowing a woman to serve as elder would prevent her from being submissive to her husband, if her husband were a member of the congregation—as he surely would be. But this argument represents a worldly view of the eldership that is all too common. Jesus explains things very differently:

*(Mark 9:33-10:45) They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.*

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "

What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

"We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Men, if we are called to leadership, then we are plainly taught that we may not "lord it over" the women and must instead become their "slaves." Women elders would also become the slaves of all members, men and women alike. (The word translated "slave" really means slave, not servant.) An elder follows the example of Christ by becoming slave to all. This is much the same lesson that Paul taught husbands in Ephesians 5. And when women ask to serve in any office, any office at all, they are not asking for power to exercise authority. They are asking for the opportunity to serve, using the gifts God gave them. They are asking to be suitable complements.

This is the spiritual understanding of being an elder or deacon. We must learn to think in spiritual terms—that is, in terms of service and gifts, not authority and laws.

## **2. Are the qualifications described in 1 Timothy and Titus intended as laws or wise counsel, with the true test being to whom God has given the gift of leadership?**

Objectively viewed, it is hard to argue that the qualification lists in 1 Timothy and Titus are "laws." As we have discussed in the context of Galatians, Paul has very principled reasons for not making himself into the next Moses. Moreover, there is internal evidence that these are not laws.

First, why are the lists in Titus and 1 Timothy different? Is God's eternal law of who can be an elder different in Crete (the destination of Titus) than in Ephesus (the destination of 1 Timothy)? It would appear so. While the lists are similar, Titus and Timothy were working out of two different rulebooks, if rulebooks they are.

(Titus 1:6-9) An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.

Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

(1 Tim. 3:1-7) Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

The following chart compares the two qualification lists:

*Titus 1*

blameless  
husband of one wife  
  
self-controlled  
upright  
hospitable  
hold firmly to sound doctrine  
not given to much wine

not quick-tempered  
not pursuing dishonest gain

children not wild and disobedient

children believe  
not overbearing  
loves what is good  
holy  
disciplined

*Timothy*

above reproach  
husband of one wife  
temperate  
self-controlled  
respectable  
hospitable  
able to teach  
not given to drunkenness  
not violent  
gentle  
not quarrelsome  
not a lover of money  
manage own family well  
children obey with proper respect  
not a recent convert  
good reputation with outsiders

As the table demonstrates, the two lists are very similar, but different. For example, we in the Churches of Christ have customarily held that an elder must have at least one (some say two) Christian children. That limitation is from Titus. But Paul told Timothy that it is enough if an elder has children who obey with proper respect, a very different thing indeed. A child may be obedient and yet be too young to be a Christian. And Paul told Timothy to ordain no recent converts, and yet Titus was given no such instruction. Do these inconsistencies threaten the inspiration of the passages? Not at all, but they tell us much about their nature.

Second, the test for who could be a deacon in Acts 6 is simply “full of the Spirit and wisdom.” Why is this rule different from the rules laid out by Paul regarding deacons and elders? Indeed, Paul told the elders in Ephesus that the Holy Spirit had “made them overseers.” The most natural interpretation of this statement is that the elders were made overseers by the Spirit by being filled with the Spirit—that is, by receiving the gifts of the Spirit associated with being an elder, such as the gifts of administration and leadership. Could it be that the rules are not different at all? Maybe what Paul is saying in the Pastorals is, “Timothy and Titus, these are the characteristics that you look for to determine who has wisdom and is filled with the Spirit.”

As numerous commentators have pointed out, the characteristics of an elder or deacon are characteristics that *all* Christians *should* have. The exceptions to this rule are the apparent requirements that elders and deacons be married and fertile (and have fertile wives).

But Paul and most (if not all) the apostles were single. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:

*1 Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. ... 7 I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. ... 32 I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. 33 But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—34 and his interests are divided. ... 35 I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.*

If Paul believes that marriage is required for a man to be a deacon (so he can lock doors, keep the building maintained, handle the treasury) or an elder, then he certainly changed his tune from 1 Corinthians 7. But I have too much respect for inspiration to believe that Paul changed his mind or exaggerated his recommendation of celibacy. He was quite sincere when he wrote 1 Corinthians 7, and he never changed

his mind. There is no imaginable reason why a man must be married and have children in order to be a deacon. Paul would agree. He says that a man is a *better* servant of God if he is single! And he truly wishes that *all* men were single so they could better serve God!

Does Paul wish that there were no elders or deacons? And if an apostle is a better apostle for being single, how can we conclude that the man locking the building (or waiting on tables) must be held to some supposedly *higher* standard?

The only conclusion we can reach and still take Paul at his word is that the lists in 1 Timothy and Titus are not laws but wise counsel on how to tell who is full of wisdom and the Spirit—at the time and place the letter was written. In fact, Paul characterizes his own statements as “a trustworthy saying” (1 Tim. 3:1), hardly the language of a lawgiver. Any other interpretation causes Paul to contradict himself—and requires a man to be married and fertile in order to wait on tables!

Third, there are other verses that specify the qualifications of elders, and they speak in terms of gifts, not sex, marital status, or fertility.

*(1 Cor. 12:28-30) And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?*

The Greek word translated “administration” literally means “(a) steering, pilotage; (b) metaphorically, governments or governings, said of those who act as guides in a local church.”<sup>187</sup> This is certainly an apt description of the eldership. And yet Paul’s discussion is in terms of spiritual gifts. Paul points out—

*(1 Cor. 12:18-21) But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”*

The gift of administration is from God, and it is a sin to tell anyone with the gift that the church does not (or cannot) use that gift.

*(Eph. 4:7, 11-13) But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ... It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

We next see that being a pastor (elder) is a gift from God. The only qualification mentioned is whether a Christian has been so gifted.

Rom. 12:6-8) We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; *if it is leadership, let him govern diligently*; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

“Govern” is defined in *Strong’s Dictionary* as “to stand before, i.e. (in rank) to preside, or (by impl.) to practise—maintain, be over, rule.” It is the same verb used by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:4 and 12 with respect to elders and deacons “ruling” their households well. And yet, in Romans, the only requirement for leadership is having the gift to lead. Moreover, the language is a command. If one has the gift to lead, one *must* lead and lead diligently. The command applies to women as well as to men.

Realize that 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Romans were all written well before 1 Timothy or Titus. How were the Christians who received these letters to understand them? Surely, each Christian had to understand that he or she should humbly determine his or her gifts and then use those gifts in God's service. Paul did not tell the Corinthians, Ephesians, or Romans that his teaching only applied to men! It would have been the rarest of women in the First Century world who had the ability to lead. This is just not so today. If a woman has the gift, we are commanded to let her use the gift.

### **A. Conclusion**

Galatians 3:28 ("neither male nor female") states the general rule. The same principle is found in 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and Romans 12, along with the Parable of the Talents. When Paul is speaking of the church and the Spirit's gifts in general terms, he makes no distinction based on sex.

Paul, however, wrote Titus and 1 Timothy, at a time and place when women could not exercise their gifts freely. It was unthinkable in First Century society that a woman would assume authority over a man, and women were rarely educated or even literate. It would have been the rarest of women who had the gift to be an elder. For the same reason that Paul denies women the role of teacher in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, Paul could not allow women to be elders. But Paul no more makes this a rule for all eternity than he approves slavery for all eternity by his commands to slaves to obey their masters.

To determine the more general rule, we must look to God's plan for men and women as revealed in other scriptures. We quickly find that there is no eternal rule denying women authority over men. Deborah, Miriam, Huldah, and countless First Century prophetesses make any such an argument frivolous. Moreover, nowhere in the Law of Moses do we find any prohibition on women having authority over men.

Genesis 3 states that husbands will rule over their wives—but this is sin allowed into the world by God's curse on Creation. It is hardly a command or even good advice (no more commendable than pain in childbearing or weeds in a garden).

Genesis 1 and 2 tell us that wives are to be suitable complements to their husbands, but we see from numerous other Old Testament verses, that "help meet" is not a term of submission or subjection. Women fill up that which is incomplete or lacking in their husbands, and all married men know it.

The fact that women are "complements" no more disqualifies them from the eldership than the fact that men without women are "not good" and incomplete without women disqualifies them from the eldership. Indeed, the most logical conclusion from the Creation accounts is that an eldership without both men and women will be incomplete. "It is not good for man to be alone."