



## BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION FOLLOW-UP

### **WHAT WE DISCOVERED**

In the *Biblical Interpretation Guide* we provided, we asked the congregation to study ten key passages of Scripture pertaining to the relationship of men and women. As elders and pastors, we also spent time studying these passages, and in this follow-up paper we'd like to summarize what we discovered in our study that led us to reconsider our position on the roles of men and women in church leadership.

In summary, we found that, while there is always more understanding and insight to be gained regarding any part of the Bible, our basic interpretative conclusions remained largely unchanged for seven out of the ten passages. That is to say that as we studied each of these passages in their biblical, literary, historical, and cultural contexts, we did not come across any new insights or information that caused us to rethink our fundamental understanding of the meaning of the passages from Genesis, Acts, 1 Corinthians, or Galatians.

On the other hand, in carefully examining the remaining three passages, we did come across some insights and information that caused us to rethink our basic interpretive conclusions. In other words, our study of these passages brought us to a place where we are convicted that faithfully interpreting these texts would lead us to a position different than the one we previously held.

In this paper we will focus on the three passages that we have come to understand differently than we used to: 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, and 1 Timothy 2:9-15. This paper serves as a concise summary of our findings. For a more in-depth explanation of our interpretive process and conclusions, please see the paper *Going Deeper: 1 Timothy 2:9-15*.

For context, here is the position that Antioch has held until now: *both men and women are made in the image and likeness of God and therefore are equal in value, worth, and dignity, and while both men and women, as co-heirs and co-laborers in Christ, may be called to be pastors, to speak, pray, teach, and preach in the church, the role of elder is reserved for men.*

### **IF ANYONE ASPIRES TO BE AN ELDER**

1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 are similar passages and we encourage you to read both in their entirety, but here is 1 Timothy 3:1-3 in the English Standard Version:

*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.*

Most of our English translations of these two passages include numerous male pronouns that make them seem to exclude the possibility of women serving as elders. The problem with this understanding - and the view that Antioch has traditionally held - is that these male pronouns are not found in the original Greek; rather, they are inserted by translators. The passage in 1 Tim. 3 begins with "If *anyone* desires to be an overseer," using a gender-neutral term, and everything that follows should be read as pertaining to that "anyone." That is, wherever pronouns are needed, those pronouns should be "he or she," "his or her," or "him or her". In Paul's theology, anyone—man or woman, Jew or Gentile, slave or free—can aspire to leadership in the church, because all are equal in the new kingdom ushered in by Christ; the distinctions that formerly divided people are done away with in Christ (Gal. 3:26-29).

### **HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE**

In light of Paul's original gender-neutral terminology, what we have in these two passages are lists of moral character traits, all of which should be applied to women as well as men. But what about the criterion in both lists that says "the husband of one wife"? Doesn't this narrow the field to men only?

When taken at face-value in our English translation, it would seem so. But in the original Greek, this phrase (*mias gunaikos andra*; literally, "one woman man") should be understood

as a statement that applies to both men and women. In keeping with the rest of the paragraph and thought, the criterion should be understood to encompass also "one man woman." The purpose of the statement is not to require elders to be men, but to require elders to be faithful to the Christian sexual ethic, specifically monogamy in marriage.

Therefore, we have come to believe that the vocabulary and grammar of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, properly translated and understood, do not prohibit women from serving as elders or in any other function in church leadership.

### **I DO NOT PERMIT A WOMAN TO TEACH**

1 Timothy 2:9-15 is another of the ten passages that we asked the congregation to study, and the third in which our understanding has changed. When we believed that 1 Timothy 3:1-7 prohibited women from serving as elders, we found support for this in 2:12: "I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man." Because in other epistles, Paul encourages and commends women for teaching, we previously understood 1 Timothy 2:12 as a description of the role of elder, not a general prohibition against women teaching in the church. This is, in part, how Antioch arrived at its unique position of welcoming women to serve as pastors and preachers, but not as elders.

Here, in brief, is how we now understand it, which in turn results not only from a different understanding of 3:1-7 but also from new information about the specific cultural context of the 1st-century church at Ephesus.

In 1 Timothy 2:9-15, Paul is addressing a specific problem in the Ephesian church, and the behavior and immaturity of certain prominent, wealthy, newly-believing women there. Regarding this specific group of women, Paul insists that Timothy prevent them from continuing to dress immodestly or to teach until they had learned proper behavior and doctrine. As he turns to the qualifications for elders in 3:1, he uses language that allows all believers (regardless of gender) to aspire to this role. Had he intended to prohibit women, it would have been simple for him to do that here. But he did not. Instead, he includes several criteria that disqualify these specific women, but not all women.

- These particular women lack self-control (2:9), whereas an elder must have self-control (3:2);

- they wear gold, pearls, and expensive clothes (2:9), whereas an elder will not be a lover of money (3:3);
- these women were neglecting to rule their households (5:14), but an elder should be a good household manager (3:4);
- these particular women should turn from their ways and do good works (2:10), as is characteristic of an elder (3:1).

For Paul, it was not their gender that disqualified these particular women in the Ephesian church from teaching or holding authority, but their behaviors and characters. Therefore, we no longer see this passage as a *prescription* for gender roles within church leadership, but rather as a *description* of how early church leaders dealt with a problematic situation in their local church.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

In summary, we no longer believe that 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, and 1 Timothy 2:9-15 can in good conscience be used to support all-male eldership, and we find no other teaching of the sacred Word that would prohibit women from being a complementary part of that church leadership role.

Therefore, as the pastors and elders at Antioch, we have come to believe that, rightly translated and understood, Paul's discussions of the qualifications for eldership were intended to encourage both men and women to aspire to and attain the role of elder in the local church.

Again, for in-depth explanation of our interpretive process and conclusions, please see the paper *Going Deeper: 1 Timothy 2:9-15*.