



ANTIOCH

GOING DEEPER: I TIMOTHY 3.1-7 & TITUS 1.5-9

Women in Leadership Roles?

Qualifications for Elders

Most of our English translations of these two lists include numerous male pronouns that make them seem to exclude the possibility of women serving as elders. But these male pronouns are not found in the original Greek; rather, they are inserted by translators who bring to the text their own biases on this question. The passage in I Tim. 3 begins with “If anyone desires to be an overseer,” using a gender-neutral, all-inclusive term, and everything that follows should be read as pertaining to that “anyone.” 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).

All of the criteria and behaviors laid out in I Timothy 3:1-7 apply to women as well as men. The same is true for the characteristics listed in Titus 1. In fact, for most of these criteria, there is a directive elsewhere in this letter (or in Titus) that is applied specifically to women. (For example, in 3:2, elders must be “above reproach,” and in 5:7, women should be “without reproach.”)

There is one apparent exception to what I have just written. There is in both lists a criterion that reads something like “the husband of one wife.” Doesn’t this criterion narrow the field to “men only?” No, this phrase (Grk. *mias gunaikos andra*; literally, “one-woman man”) should also be understood in gender-neutral terms, in keeping with the rest of the paragraph and thought. That is, it should be understood to encompass also “one-man woman,” and its purpose is to require faithfulness to the Christian sexual ethic. It should not be used either to

require an elder to be a man or to be married; rather, if married (or widowed or divorced), a man or woman qualified to be an elder must be (or have been) monogamous and faithful to his or her spouse. (If we read this passage as requiring an elder to be married, neither Paul nor Jesus himself could have qualified.)

So, the vocabulary and grammar of I Tim 3 and Titus 1, properly translated and understood, do not support a ban on women serving as elders or in any other function in church leadership. But there are other contextual and historical considerations that support the conclusion that these roles are open to believers without respect to gender. Here are a couple.

First, the entirety of Paul's teaching stresses the equality of women in the church and the new kingdom, and this teaching is in part why women made up such a prominent portion of the early church. (Paul's understanding was an extension of our Lord's, as Jesus himself was radically countercultural in his reaching out to women and including them among his closest disciples.) Paul speaks highly of women who were prominent in his own ministry and that of the early church, stresses the equality of all believers in Christ, and nowhere directly bans women generally from any leadership or teaching roles.

There is a continuity of thought throughout Paul's first letter to Timothy, and between the immediately preceding verses (2:9-15) and the list of qualifications for elders. In that preceding section, he is addressing a particular problem in the Ephesian church, and the behavior and immaturity of certain wealthy, prominent newly believing women there. Regarding this specific group of women, Paul insists that Timothy prevent them from continuing to dress immoderately or to teach until they had learned proper behavior and doctrine. As he turns (in 3:1) to the qualifications for elders, 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 a simple matter for him to do that here. But he did not. Indeed, he includes in his criteria several that disqualify these particular women but not all women. These particular women lack self-control (2:9), whereas an elder-qualified individual (man or woman) 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). Of the 17 criteria for elders listed in I Timothy 3:1-7, only three are not directly applied to women elsewhere in this letter. Those three are to be gentle, not violent, and not quarrelsome. Obviously, these three characteristics can be found in women. For Paul, it was not their gender that disqualified the particular women in the Ephesian church, but their behaviors and characters.

As followers of Christ, we should be guided in our policies and practices by the Scriptures. On this issue, it is our commitment to the authority of Scripture and to rightly dividing the Word that should lead us to change our policies and practice. Failure to make those changes would (in my mind) entail an ongoing commitment to a tradition of biased translation and misreading of the relevant Scripture passages.