She Desires A Noble Task

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> ***It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.***
> *(1 Timothy 3:1, NASV)*
>
> ***This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work.***
> *(1 Timothy 3:1, NKJV)*
>
> ***Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task.***
> *(1 Timothy 3:1, NIV)*

Have you ever wondered how chapter divisions came to be in the Bible? They were not in the original documents. They did not come in until the 1200s, in fact. When they did become a part of the text, it helped to change the way we read and interpret the Bible. After all, we often study the Bible in chapters. We start and finish between chapter numbers. Some of the decisions about where a new chapter begins have been seen to be rather strange, even mistaken. Colossians 4:1 really should have gone with chapter 3, for example. Other possible mistakes are not so obvious but should be noted.

The Interesting Case of 1 Timothy 3:1

1 Timothy 3:1 serves both as a conclusion to chapter 2 and as a segue into chapter 3. Because this verse is talking about *elders* in the church, many see 3:1 primarily as the logical start to the rest of chapter 3, which contains a long discussion about elders and deacons. However, I would argue it actually belongs as a conclusion to chapter 2, even more than an introduction to chapter 3. This is of significance for women in church because it would mean verse 1 encourages *both* men and women to aspire to be elders. If it concludes chapter 2, Paul is seen to be supportive of both genders serving God in leadership roles, so long as they are trained up and mature in the faith. Yes, he has put some restrictions on women in the Ephesian church for the moment, but he does not want that to be seen as his “end game.” Rather, he adds more generally that it is a good thing for men and women both to aspire to be elders.

The Problem of Immature Leadership in Chapter 2

To understand why I suggest this, we must consider also what comes *just before* 3:1: chapter 2:8–15. (*That* passage, the controversial paragraph that is often used to suppress the ministry and leadership of women in the church.) Chapter 2:8–15 has traditionally been interpreted to keep women out of church leadership and ministry, but this is a flawed interpretation. At the very least, we can say that there are other equally valid (even more valid) ways of understanding that passage. The key difference between these interpretations is whether we see this passage as some kind of universal command for all time, on every Christian in every culture and nation of the world, or if we see it as addressing a contemporary issue in Ephesus in the late first century AD. In other words, is it like “love God and love your neighbor,” or is it more like “treat your slaves well, and slaves—work hard for your masters”?

1 Timothy 2:8–15 is about certain wealthy women in the church—probably newly converted from the Ephesian community—wanting to be leaders in the church before they are properly trained or mature in the new faith.[1] They want to be elders who can teach and have authority in the church (2:12). Paul makes it very clear that he wants women to be trained up correctly (2:11). That verse, interestingly, holds the only imperative verb used in the paragraph. That means verse 11 is the closest thing we have in the paragraph to a command by Paul: he insists that women be trained. It is a high point in his mind and writing. That is indeed the key to the paragraph: Paul wants all the members of churches to be trained up properly in the faith. Not just men, but men and women both. After being properly trained and matured, then teaching and leadership positions will be options for women and men alike.

Another word that Paul uses twice in *that* paragraph (1 Tim. 2:8–15) to specifically address women is the word often translated (I would argue *mis*translated) "propriety" in verses 9 and 15.[2] That word actually means "clear headed, mature, and rational in thinking; not muddled in thought." Sometimes it can be combined with other moral qualities, but to leave it to only mean a specific moral quality is to rob it of its essential meaning. Paul wants women in the church to be clear thinking and proper in their understanding (in verse 9 to do with modesty and choice of clothing; in verse 15 to do with maturing and remaining in the faith) before they assume leadership positions in the church.

What If 1 Timothy 3:1 Was Directed Toward Those Women?

Then we come to chapter 3 verse 1. What does it say exactly? Well one thing it does *not* say is that "it is a good thing for *only men* to seek to be elders." No. It *might* be a reference to just men. However, it equally could be a reference to *just women*. Or, quite probably, it is a reference to *both* men and women. The NIV has done the better translation here. The text says, "Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task."

Some translations have inserted the English word "man" into 3:1 because of 3:2–14 (male elders, male deacons, female deacons or deacons' wives, male deacons). Because of this decision many Christians have concluded that while there might be an argument for women deacons, there is no place for women elders. This might appear reasonable on the surface, but it is a flawed argument. In verse 1 the Greek for "men" or "man" is not used. Nor is the stand-alone word for "he." The Greek word *tis,* however, is used. This same word is used for men and women. Similarly, the word for "he or she desires" is a verb stem for the word "desires" with the ending "he, she, or it" attached. Context has to decide who this verb is referring to.

If we group 1 Timothy 3:1 as the conclusion of 2:8–15, that verse then becomes a strong supportive comment affirming women's leadership in the church. Because, as noted, the words used can be about men or women, it is possible that 3:1 might simply mean "if any women desire to be an overseer, that is a good thing she desires." This means Paul could be communicating something like, "despite my insistence that women be trained up and that they can't teach or have authority until they are mature and competent—it is a good thing for a woman to desire to be an elder."

Finding Women in the Rest of Chapter 3

Chapter 3:2–7 then goes on to address elders, thinking of them in terms of the current male majority that they are made up of. My suggestion that verse 1 is a conclusion to the previous material and verse 2 really starts a new thought for Paul is supported by the opening words of verse 2 in the Greek: "it is

necessary" (or "it is proper"). It can be translated as "then," "now then," "consequently," or "therefore." It is of course linked in thought to the previous, *but it is a change of tack.* Paul has just talked about training up women for ministry and not permitting them to be in authority until they are properly trained and mature in the faith, and he concludes by reminding everyone that it is not a bad ambition to hope to be an elder in the church. He then pauses, and then he addresses other issues relevant right then and there. "Okay . . . now then, concerning our elders right now . . ." This next material (3:2–7) is about the current or soon to be appointed elders in the church.

It is certainly reasonable to see 3:2–7 as a gender inclusive conversation if we can deal with the phrase, elders should be "the husband of one wife" or "be faithful to his wife" (as some translate it). Paul is likely using a "gender-generalisation" here. If the majority of the elders at the time were men, then it might be a way of saying "be faithful to your one partner." I recall when I was lecturing in a Bible college in Melbourne during the 1990s; all but one of the faculty were men, and the one woman was part time. When we had special events of a social nature, it was common for the letter to go to all staff to include, "and bring along your wives." Not only was the one woman arguably left out by that phrase, but the one single male lecturer felt overlooked too. I shudder when I think back to those kind of gender-generalizations. As much as I feel uncomfortable with them, it does not mean that we only had *married male* lecturers. Furthermore, considering this statement here ("be the husband of one wife"), if we were strict with such an interpretative method, then the commandment "do not covet your neighbour's wife" only applies to men and has nothing to say to women

Rethinking 1 Timothy 2–3

So rather than the divisions of 1 Timothy 2:8–3:14 which we often see:

- Women and men in church (2:8–15)
- Male elders (3:1–7)
- Male deacons (3:8–10)
- Female deacons (or male deacons wives) (3:11)
- Male deacons again (3:12–14)

We should see the movement of the letter this way:

- Women and men in church (2:8–3:1).
- The current situation: addressing the current leadership in a gender stereotyping way (3:2–7).
- Male deacons (3:8–10).
- Female deacons (3:11).
- Male deacons (3:12–14).

However you interpret 3:2–7, the emphasis of this article has been to highlight 3:1. When seen as a conclusion to 2:8–15, it reminds women that if any woman desires to be an elder that is a good thing. Even if you disagree, this verse *is* gender inclusive: if *anyone*, male or female, aspires to church leadership, it is a good thing! Even if you leave it at the start of chapter 3, it is still gender inclusive and would then point to the whole paragraph being gender inclusive as well. To see 1 Timothy 3:1 as a gender inclusive invitation to aspire to be leaders in the church is a most affirming aspect of the apostle Paul's teaching.

Women have been deeply hurt by interpretations of Paul's teaching in this part of the Bible. But I would suggest that with this alternative understanding of the passage, we can make peace with Paul on this account. He wasn't the chauvinist that some people have accused him of being. He was someone willing to have women as well as men minister in the church.

This article appeared in "Making Peace with Paul," the Spring 2021 issue of Mutuality *magazine.*

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this article are taken from the NIV 2011 translation.

Notes

1. To unpack the alternative view of this passage, see *Women: Leadership & the Church,* Melbourne: Acorn Press, 2006, pp.85–93. See also Judy L. Brown, *Women Ministers According to Scripture,* (Kearney: Morris Publishing, 1996), 279–312; and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 209–229
2. Walter Bauer offers the first and most obvious meaning of this word as "reasonableness, rationality, mental soundness." He offers a second meaning of "good judgement, moderation, and self-control." Gerhard Kittel likewise explains that when that secondary meaning comes into play, it is always because of sound thinking at work. The form used in 1 Timothy 2:9, 15 is only used in one other place in the New Testament: Acts 26:25. There it is always translated as "clear thinking" or "reasonable." See William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 802; G.W. Bromiley and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1097–1104.