Should Women Serve in an Eldership?

Some Suggested Resources

The main passages that churches consult to determine the criteria for who may formally serve as an elder are **1 Timothy 3:1-7** and **Titus 1:5-9**. These texts yield a combined list of more than 25 personal characteristics. To determine the tasks and responsibilities of elders, churches usually expand the passages they consult to include **1 Peter 5:1-4** and **Acts 20:17-35**. These texts show that the writers use the terms "*elders*" (= "presbyters"), "*shepherds*" (= "pastors"), and "*overseers*" (= "bishops") interchangeably.

The current discussion focuses particularly on the question of whether a church's eldership must be limited to men only. This is part of the traditional interpretation of these passages, and many works that discuss Christian elders do not devote any significant space to argue the point. Those that do address it often link their interpretations to biblical teachings regarding marriage and "male headship" in God's design of the family (see **Gen. 2:18-25** and **3:16**; **1 Cor. 11:2-16**; **Eph. 5:21-33**; **1 Tim. 2:8-15**); therefore, we also include some resources dealing with that topic.

1. **The Traditional Interpretation** of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9

The **traditional interpretation** is typically summarized in three points:

(1) The (English translation) grammatical forms (pronouns, nouns, verbs) used in these instructions are masculine throughout, indicating that only males are to be considered

*(2) The specific criteria that an elder must be "**a husband of one wife**," "**a man whose children believe**," and one who "**manages his own family well**" can apply ONLY to husbands/fathers*

(3) All elders named in the NT and early church are male

The second point has prompted much discussion about what Paul intends by these criteria, beyond the fact an elder must be male. Some think Paul is concerned to exclude a polygamist (or a man with a wife and concubines), others that he excludes those who have remarried after divorce or the death of a first wife, and others that a man must be a married man (not currently single for any reason). There have been similar discussions about the number of children a man must have to be qualified. (Must he have more than one?) A growing number regard these criteria as personal moral qualities, rather than "legal" designations (see 2a. below).

For some examples, see:

https://www.compellingtruth.org/women-elders.html

http://www.creekwoodcc.org/scriptural-qualifications-of-elders/

http://gravelhillchurchofchrist.com/sermons/elders14.pdf

http://springerroadchurchofchrist.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Husband-of-One-Wife.pdf

2. **The Gender-Neutral interpretation** of **1 Timothy 3:1-7** and **Titus 1:5-9**

The gender-neutral interpretation typically involves four principal points; two points arise from these passages, the third is derived from other references to "shepherds" and "deacons," and the fourth is circumstantial.

*(1) The masculine forms used in these passages reflect standard Greek style for speaking in generic terms about males and females alike (see **Matt. 5:27-30**; **Rom. 4:8**; **Eph. 4:13**)*

*(2) The expression "**a husband of one wife**" identifies a personal moral quality – faithfulness in marriage – in a long list of moral qualities; this expression does not point to a numeric qualification or a legal marital designation; therefore, like the other virtues, it is understood to be gender-neutral*

*(3) The assumption that "elder" and "deacon" designate "offices" in a church comes from later in Church history; in the NT, these terms appear in lists of spiritual gifts that Christ gives to build up his body (**Eph. 4:11-13**; **Rom. 12:4-8**); other spiritual gifts are given to males and females alike*

(4) The great majority of leaders – including elders – in the NT and the early church are male, which is consistent with Greek and Roman culture in general; Christian (and Jewish) communities do not vary from the cultural norm in this regard

As in the traditional interpretation, the second point has prompted the most discussion. This discussion proceeds along two paths.

2a. The "qualifications" of elders are personal moral qualities – virtues to embrace and vices to reject – not "legal" designations. Paul begins with "above reproach" (**1 Tim. 3:2**) and "blameless" (**Titus 1:6-7**), setting the tone for the qualities that follow. Statements about family – such as "a husband of one wife" – also identify moral qualities. The parallel feminine expression used with widows ("a wife of one husband" – **1 Tim. 5:9**) is often cited as evidence, and very similar Roman descriptions of virtuous women support this view. The 2011 edition of the NIV reads "faithful to his wife" / "faithful to her husband" in **1 Timothy 3:2**; **5:9**; and **Titus 1:7**.

2b. Paul's list of moral qualities for deacons includes "a husband of one wife" (**1 Tim. 3:12** = "faithful to his wife," 2011 NIV). There were female deacons in the NT and the early church (**Rom. 16:1-2** and, probably, **1 Tim. 3:11**); therefore, we cannot insist that Paul intends to exclude women from serving as deacons when he says a deacon must be "a husband of one wife" (**1 Tim. 3:12**). To be consistent, we also cannot insist that Paul intends to exclude women from serving as elders when he uses the same language in **1 Timothy 3:2** and **Titus 1:7**.

For fuller treatment of these points, see:

https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/husbandof-one-wife.pdf

https://www.walkingtogetherministries.com/2013/05/27/on-the-meaning-of-husband-of-one-wife/

http://believersweb.org/"The-Husband-of-One-Wife"-Requirement-in-1Timothy/

3. **"Male Headship" in Marriage and the Church**

Interpreters on both sides of the discussion often place their views on church structure and the authority of elders in the broader context of biblical teachings on marriage and "male headship" in a Christian family. The passages most frequently discussed are **Genesis 2:18-25** and **3:16**; **1 Corinthians 11:2-16**; **Ephesians 5:21-33**; and **1 Timothy 2:8-15**. For typical designations and definitions of the main "camps" – complementarian and egalitarian – see:

https://biblereasons.com/egalitarianism-vs-complementarianism/

https://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/2014/march-week-4/complementarian-versus-egalitarian.html

For a contrasting pair of Church of Christ writers who engage in this discussion see:

https://wineskins.org/2015/01/06/he-will-rule-over-you-three-views-of-what-god-was-telling-eve-in-the-garden/#more-2912

https://wineskins.org/2015/01/09/he-will-rule-over-you-an-egalitarian-perspective/

3a. Those who adopt the traditional interpretation on elders appeal to some form of the complementarian view on Christian marriage and church structure. This view sees a divinely ordered hierarchy, proceeding from God to Christ to the husband to the wife (**1 Cor. 11:3**; **Eph. 5:23**). This wise ordering was established at Creation (**Gen. 2:18-25**) and is essential to the health and flourishing of the household. The authority ("headship") assigned to each level is to be exercised with love and grace, not dictatorial power. The principles inherent to this household structure are applied in the church by restricting certain roles of authority to men only (teachers/preachers and elders – **1 Tim. 2:11-15**; **3:1-7**; **Titus 1:5-9**). There are differences of opinion regarding the extent of these roles of authority in churches.

https://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement

A recent and thorough treatment of this perspective comes from Kevin DeYoung, *Men and Women in the Church* (Crossway). For reviews of his work see:

https://knowingscripture.com/articles/book-review-men-and-women-in-the-church-deyoung

https://earnestlayman.wordpress.com/2021/06/20/book-review-men-and-women-in-the-church-by-kevin-deyoung/

3b. Those who adopt the gender-neutral interpretation on elders appeal to some form of the egalitarian view on Christian marriage and church structure. This view sees mutuality in marriage as God's original design (**Gen. 2:18-25**). The fallen state of humanity includes a power struggle in marriages (**Gen. 3:16**), which NT writers teach Christians to resist in their own marriages. Paul calls for mutual submission (**Eph. 5:21**) and interdependence (**1 Cor. 11:8-12**) in marriage, and Christ gives spiritual gifts to men and women, Jew and Gentile, slave and free as he sees fit (**Gal. 3:28**; **Eph. 4:2-13**; **1 Cor. 12:1-31**).

https://cmmtheology.org/the-gender-debate/

https://juniaproject.com/5-myths-of-male-headship/