

THE QUESTION OF FEMALE ELDERSHIP

by

Dennis R. Lindsay



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## Female Leadership in the Church

It is quite clear from the New Testament record that women held a variety of leadership positions in the Church of Jesus Christ. From the day of Pentecost onward there is evidence of an attitude of openness to female leadership among God's people. The Apostle Peter in his Pentecost sermon affirmed the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that women, as well as men, would play a significant leadership role within the Christian community: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even upon my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).

Indeed the record of the Old Covenant itself is not without important instances of female leadership among the people of God. Deborah (Judges 4-5) held the position of judge over Israel - a position of both political and spiritual leadership. Hulda (II Kings 22; II Chronicles 34:14-28) was a prophetess, whom even Hilkiah the high priest consulted for spiritual guidance. Anna (Luke 2:36-38) was a prophetess in Jerusalem who virtually preached the gospel of Jesus "to all who were looking

## Eldership in the New Testament

forward to the redemption of Jerusalem". And so it is no accident that we find in the New Testament examples of women who performed ministries of leadership in the church. Philip the deacon had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, was an instructor of "the way of God" (Acts 18:26; cf. Romans 16:3-4). Phoebe is referred to by Paul in Romans 16:1 as a deacon<sup>2</sup> of the church in Cenchrea. It is also quite likely that "Junia" (or "Julia" in a very early Greek manuscript, p<sup>16</sup>) to whom Paul sends his greetings in Romans 16:7 was a woman. The form of the name itself is feminine. This Junia, or Julia, is referred to by Paul as "outstanding among the apostles".

Regardless of what view we may hold about the statements concerning women being silent in church services (1 Corinthians 14:34ff.) or women not being permitted to teach or have authority over a man (1 Timothy 2:12), it is impossible to deny the fact that in the church of the New Testament period there were women, as well as men, in positions of spiritual leadership - serving as deacons, prophetesses, instructors/teachers, and probably even apostles. The question then arises concerning the propriety (or impropriety) of Christian women serving as elders in the church. Putting aside all feminist or anti-feminist biases, we can only begin to formulate an answer to this question by first consulting the New Testament passages which deal with the position of eldership in the church.

There are three Greek words in the New Testament which refer to the office of leadership which we commonly refer to as "elder". "Presbuteros" (compare our English word "Presbyterian") literally means "one who is older". As in any leadership role, maturity and wisdom are prerequisites for candidates seeking to serve as elders in the church. "Episkopos" (compare the English "Episcopal") is generally translated "bishop" or "overseer". The latter is a more literal translation and describes an important responsibility of the elder. "Poimen", literally "pastor" or "shepherd", also refers to an important function of the Christian elder.

It would be helpful for our purposes here to arrange the eldership passages of the New Testament into three categories:

- 1) Those passages which directly and distinctly prohibit women from holding the office of elder;
- 2) Those passages which directly and distinctly permit women to be elders;
- 3) Neutral passages which neither prohibit nor encourage female eldership. A quick survey of the passages referring to elders, overseers, and shepherds will show that our first two categories must go without entries. This is not simply a "straw-man" argument. Rather it is highly significant that these first two categories are empty, for it underscores the silence of scripture with regard to the question of female eldership! There is nothing in the New Testament teaching

"The Husband of One Wife"

Only in 1 Timothy 3:2 and in Titus 1:6 do we find the express idea that the elder will be a man. One of the qualifications for a man to be an elder is stated in both of these passages that he must be the "husband of one wife. The most common objection to female eldership which I have encountered in Christian Church congregations where I have served is the conclusion, based upon these passages, that a woman cannot be the husband of one wife, and therefore cannot be an elder. This argument is actually a variation of the "argument of silence" which we shall deal with later, but at present we must address this assumption from 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 that the elder will be a man.

There can be little doubt from these two passages that the letters to Titus and Timothy assume a male eldership in their respective congregations. If we return to our original three categories of eldership passages in the New Testament, however, we must recognize that, while these passages do not directly and distinctly permit women to be elders, neither do they directly and distinctly prohibit women from being elders. The most we can say from these two passages is that female eldership is not an issue; it does not come into the question here. But does this necessarily mean then that female eldership is therefore entirely out of the question?

If we were to project the author's

about eldership which either specifically prohibits or specifically permits Christian women to hold the office of elder. On this score all of the eldership passages are neutral.

Of these passages, there are some that in the most general sense refer to the simple fact that there were elders (overseers, shepherds) in various churches. Paul, for example, addresses his Philippian Epistle: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons" (Phil. 1:1). The "elders" of the Jerusalem church are referred to in Acts 11:30; 15:2, 15:4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 21:18. James instructs the Christian who is ill to call upon the elders to come and pray for him or her and to anoint him or her with oil in the name of the Lord (James 5:14). Paul affirms that it was Christ who gave "some" to be pastors (shepherds = elders) and teachers in the church (Ephesians 4:11). As Paul and Barnabas returned to the churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, they appointed elders for them in each church (Acts 14:23). 1 Timothy 5:17-20 forbids that ungrounded accusations be entertained against elders of the church. In 1 Peter 5:1-4 elders are instructed to be responsible shepherds of God's flock under their charge. And in Acts 20:17-38 Paul summons the elders of the church at Ephesus and delivers to them his moving farewell address. In none of these passages is it spelled out that the elders, overseers, or shepherds were, or should be, specifically men or women.

personal opinion about female elders only on the basis of 1 Timothy 3:2 and its preceding context (especially 2:12ff.), we might well conclude that he was personally opposed to appointing women as elders. Statements such as "I want" (2:8) and "I do not permit" (2:12) do in fact have more the "ring" of personal opinion than of divine imperative. It is important at this point, however, to remember that this letter is addressed only to Timothy. When writing to the church of Corinth at large, for instance, the apostle Paul was very careful to distinguish between his personal opinion and what he received as divine imperative (see 1 Corinthians 7:10, 12, 25, 40; 9:14; 11:23; 14:37; 15:3). Since Paul (if we are to assume Pauline authorship for these letters) was writing in this instance to only one person - indeed to a person who knew him very well - it may not have been necessary for him to clearly note what was simply his own opinion and what was not.

This hermeneutical question concerning the two letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus is of utmost importance. Very few of us today carry the names Timothy or Titus. Even fewer of us have ever been in Ephesus or Crete, let alone having held ministries there. None of us has ever had any first-hand personal experience of the Mediterranean world of the first century A.D. And yet many of us are quick to latch on to these letters - letters which by their very nature are among the most personal writings in the Bible and the least general in regard to

situations addressed and directives issued - and use them as though they were written to you and me and everyone else in every church, in every place, and at every time.

Certainly, if we are going to maintain the general inspiration of these three letters, then we must take seriously the particular inspiration of the three verses 1 Tim.1:2, II Tim.1:2, and Titus 1:4, which read respectively: "To Timothy"; "To Timothy"; "To Titus"! These verses stand at the beginning of these respective letters and at once define certain limitations for interpretation. This is not to say that these letters are irrelevant for us and can simply be disregarded. The point rather is that we must use extra care to view the material presented in these letters within the limitations defined by the letters themselves in order to determine how this material does or does not relate to situations which lie outside the parameters of these letters.

With regard to female eldership there can be little doubt that this issue lies outside the parameters of 1 Timothy 3:2. Female eldership simply does not come into question at this point. While we may be tempted to project the Apostle Paul's opinion on the subject or what Paul would have said, the fact remains that he did not say it - a fact which in itself may be very significant if we take seriously the inspiration of scripture.

Moreover, the likelihood that the author is instructing Timothy (and Titus)

either according to his personal preference for male elders, rather than according to divine imperative, or according to what may have been appropriate only in a specific geographical and/or social context is underscored by his instructions concerning the deacons in 1 Timothy 3:12. Just as the elders, the deacons must be "husbands of one wife"; that is, it is assumed that the deacons in Ephesus will be men. Yet we have already noted from Romans 16:1 that the woman Phoebe held the office of deacon in the church at Cenchrea. It is very clear from this latter passage that Paul was indeed aware of and favorably disposed toward the fact that Phoebe was a deacon, and this in contrast to the assumption of a male deaconate in 1 Tim. 3:12. An elder as the "husband of one wife" in 1 Timothy (and Titus) must be seen as directly parallel to deacons as the "husbands of one wife". It is possible that Paul may similarly have recognized the validity of a female eldership in other settings in a similar contrast to the assumption of a male eldership in 1 Timothy 3:1 and Titus 1:6. On the basis of these passages we cannot conclude that the New Testament absolutely prohibits a female eldership.

#### The Argument of Silence

Given the explicitly-stated examples of women in other church leadership positions, the best argument that can be supported from the New Testament in

opposition to female eldership is the "argument of silence". According to this argument, since it is nowhere explicitly stated in the New Testament that there were female elders not explicitly permitted, then it is altogether wrong for us to consider Christian women as eligible for such a position. (This is not unlike the "argument of silence" which is used by some to defend the doctrine of not using musical instruments in worship!) We might rightly assume that most, if not all, of those ambiguously referred to in the New Testament as elders, overseers, and shepherds were indeed men. In light of this the argument of silence against a female eldership would seem to carry a good deal of weight.

On the other hand, if the argument of silence can be logically used as an argument against female eldership, can it not also just as logically be used in favor of female elders? Surely, if there were something spiritually or morally wrong with the notion that a Christian woman could hold the position of elder in the church, the Holy Spirit would have foreseen the future dilemma and would have prompted one of the New Testament writers to plainly spell out such a prohibition. This would have been particularly appropriate since it was the Holy Spirit who prompted these same writers to mention certain women in various roles of church leadership. As it is, the New Testament completely lacks any such distinct prohibition. Can this silence not just as well be interpreted as a license for women to

be elders?

At any rate, we must recognize that to argue solely upon the basis of the silence of scripture is to tread upon thin ice. There is always great danger of causing divisions in the church when church polity and church doctrine are built entirely upon either side of an argument of silence, and when such dogma is promoted as a test of faith and fellowship.

#### A Positive Note

On a positive note, however, there may be in the New Testament at least one passage that makes a step in the direction toward female eldership. Paul instructs Titus to "teach the older women (or "elder females" in the most literal sense of the term!) to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good" (Titus 2:3). It must be granted that Paul is not necessarily referring to a specific office of leadership in the church, but classifies these "older women" together in a list of exhortations concerning "older men", "younger women", "younger men", and "slaves". It is striking, however, that the requirements for this group of women are directly parallel to the requirements for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus 1: They must be reverent in the way they live, not slanderers, and not addicted to much wine. Indeed, they do have a leadership function: They are to be teachers of

what is good.

And is it not indeed "function" which is really of greatest importance in eldership? Our modern democratic practice of "voting" for elders has done a great injustice to the New Testament concept of eldership. I have known a number of men who have held the "office" of elder, but who could never have performed the "function". By the same token there are many "elders" in our churches who will never hold the "office" of elder. Thomas Thurman writes in an editorial for Restoration Herald: "Generally speaking, in function gender is not important, but in office it is".

Which is more important? The office of elder or the function of elder? In actuality, it is very difficult to separate function from office; for function, if it is to be effective, must be authorized function, and office is really little more than the authorization for the function! Even the function of "teaching what is good" cannot be carried out without some degree of authority. Not anyone and everyone can perform this function. In Titus 2:3 it is the "elder females" who are authorized to perform this function in the church!

Titus 2:3 is admittedly far from being conclusive on the question of female eldership, but in an arena of otherwise neutrality on the subject, this passage would at least seem to point in the direction of a possible female eldership.



## Conclusion

Obviously, female eldership would not be appropriate, and perhaps not even desirable, in every local church setting. In many instances the harm from dogmatic and divisive factions in the church might be greater than the positive contributions that qualified Christian women could make. We cannot, however, rule out the validity or propriety of female eldership simply upon the grounds that it may not be appropriate in our own particular church setting. There may be (and, in fact, are, in my estimation) church situations where female eldership is both desirable and necessary for the spiritual life of the church.

A great strength of the Restoration Movement has been the liberty and tolerance which it nurtures in matters where the Bible is silent. There is therefore room within this movement for varying opinions and varying practices with regard to such issues as the use of musical instruments in worship versus the non-use, or the direct support of missionaries versus support through a missionary society. There is room for diverse opinions and practices concerning church polity - concerning the selection and appointment of leaders in the local congregation. And so it is important that liberty and tolerance rule also in the present matter where the Bible itself is silent - the question of female eldership.

<sup>1</sup>Scriptures quoted from the New International Version.

<sup>2</sup>Not "deaconess"; Paul uses the masculine form of the Greek word, although the feminine form was available to describe very generally and simply a "female servant":

<sup>3</sup>Italics mine. Cf. Ray R. Schulz, "Romans 16:7: Junia or Junias?" in The Expository Times Vol. 98 No.4 (1987) pp. 108-110.

<sup>4</sup>These passages must indeed be taken seriously and not simply passed over. In order to avoid a lengthy discussion in this paper, however, I would refer the reader to a treatment of these "problematic passages" by S. Scott Bartchy, "Power, Submission, and Sexual Identity Among the Early Christians", in Essays on New Testament Christianity, ed., C. Robert Wetzel (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing, 1978), pp. 50-80 (esp. pp. 67 - 74). Also see T. David Gordon, "Wealthy Women at Ephesus: 1 Timothy 2:8-15 in Social Context", Interpretation, vol.xli., No. 1 (January, 1987), pp. 19-31.

<sup>5</sup>Editorial: "Gifts, not Gender?", Restoration Herald Vol. 62, No. 6, June 1988, p.2 .

**MAILING ADDRESS:**

**EUROPEAN EVANGELISTIC SOCIETY  
James L. Evans, Executive Director  
P.O. Drawer E  
Atlanta, GA 30364**