

### **Doesn't the Bible state that elders are only supposed to be men?**

For some people, this seems like an odd conversation because they are familiar with some specific passages in the Bible that clearly describe elders as only being men. To address the question most directly, the answer is yes, the Bible only ever speaks of elders in reference to them being men. Any scriptures that describe elders, their roles, responsibilities or qualifications only ever do so identifying them as men. Nowhere does the Bible explicitly communicate the open door to women serving as elders.

### **So, if the Bible is our ultimate authority, why isn't that the end of the discussion?**

First of all, God's word was never intended as a tool to discourage his people from asking questions or sharing in discussion, but as a pathway to understanding and discovery for righteous living (Psalm 119).

Over the course of 4 weeks, we came to appreciate that any scripture reference can become a very dangerous weapon if taken carelessly out of context or misused in application, so trying to simplify this discussion to "it's what the Bible says" is often not helpful.

Furthermore, we were reminded that the Bible also includes statements about other matters that the church today does not practice (Old testament laws on property, penalty for rape, New Testament standards on slavery).

The critical part of our study is not simply knowing what the New testament says about elders, but sorting out how we will collectively agree that those Biblical **principles** should be **practiced** in our church.

### **Apart from discussion about gender, what are the qualifications for one to be an elder?**

The most helpful place for us to start when defining the qualifications for elders is 1 Tim 3. In this letter, we find the model for leadership principles. Elders should be people who:

- live an honourable lifestyle, gain a reputation of trust, dignity and honesty (v 2)
- are faithfully committed to their spouse (if married) (v 2)
- keep a level head in the midst of conflict, tension or difficult matters (v. 2)
- can communicate and articulate the gospel and apply biblical truths (v 2)
- maintain healthy self control in life practices, generous (v 3)

- have shown evidence of raising a household of faith (v 4)
- have sufficient life experience and commitment in Christian faith (v 4)

These are foundational qualities that we begin with, and as we identify people who strive to these standards, we would also be watching that they:

- are active members in ministry, and have a respectable history within the church
- express and give evidence of the willingness and ability to commit to leadership responsibilities, the sacrifice of time, attention and practicing of their spiritual gifts

**If we use 1 Tim 3 as a reference for qualifications for an elder, does that mean the person has to be married?**

No. The emphasis of attention is not the elder's or deacon's marital status, but their moral and sexual purity. The imperative meaning of "husband of one wife" is not that a deacon or elder must be married, because in the Greek, the phrase "husband of one wife" literally reads "one-woman man." For a man to be considered for a position of elder, and he is married, then Paul is making the point that he must be committed to his wife.

The passage is highlighting the commitment one must have to their spouse and family, not a requirement of marriage. The best way to understand this section is: If a man is married, he must be faithful to his wife, and if he has children, he must care for his family well.

**What is the role of an elder's spouse, and why is that relevant?**

The NIV translation of 1 Tim 3:11 is "likewise the women", but in some others it's "also, their wives...". Commentators widely agree that the reference may very well be to the spouses of deacons, if not also (by implication) that of elders. If that's true, it is worth noting that the passage requires character qualities of leaders spouses that are very similar to those of the leaders themselves.

Practical experience may be our best guide in this matter. If elders may be tasked with thinking soundly and carefully on a wide spectrum of concerns for the church, it is understandable that their spouses need to be trustworthy in everything as their partner in life. As we consider that there may be times in which an elder must keep information strictly confidential, perhaps even from their spouse, it stands to reason that their spouses need to be respected, respectful and well tempered.

## **What is the process by which elders are chosen?**

Our new by-law will provide this information in detail, but the process needs to allow for things like:

- Suggestions of potential elders from the congregation brought to elders or pastors attentions at any time throughout the year.
- An approach and request for a person to pray and consider serving as an elder within a couple months of annual nominations / election.
- An interview with a committee similar in purpose to that of a search committee for a pastor - selection of elders is no less important for the church.
- presentation of names considered, interviewed and "approved" by that committee to the membership for a vote at annual meeting.

## **If the office of elder is limited to men...**

- Women who share the same kinds of spiritual gifts (potentially that of leadership, teaching, compassion...) are not excluded or prevented from sharing those gifts within the life of the church. The spiritual gifts that an elder may be given are not unique from those that many others may also have, and they are all needed in many areas or facets of the church.
- How do women have a voice in the concerns and decisions of elders? The opportunity for the congregation to interact with the elders must be an open door regardless of who may sit on that board. An Elders board of men only will have the added responsibility to seek out the council and insights of godly women in the congregation in the appropriate situations.
- The pastors are elders of the church. They may be unique in calling or gifts, but their role is not something independent from the elders. Therefore, if the church determines that the elders will be only men, it would also mean that women would not serve in pastoral positions. However, that would not preclude them from serving as heads and directors of ministry areas.

### **If the office of elder is open to women as well...**

- Won't qualified men sit back and let them do it? The question is a bit of a dichotomy, because if any person is truly qualified to serve as an elder, they will not refrain from serving in such a way if the opportunity presents itself (1 Tim 3:1). Our church, like many, is richly blessed by the dedication and participation of women, and it would not be accurate to say that their participation would cause men to remain inactive.
- To have women serve as elders would clearly be something beyond the practice defined by biblical text. Our choice to do so then would have to be measured by a conviction that the New Testament instruction on the gender of elders (specifically 1 Tim 3) was intended as a practice that was limited to the time, culture and circumstances of its original audience and context.
- As has been the case with women serving on our deacons board, the inclusion of women in the elders group would simply require that our board be considerate and sensitive to social protocol with respect to gender relations. How and when the board would meet together would be practised with wisdom and common sense so as to ensure that all interactions remain fully above reproach.

### **How can the church make a good decision about this without alienating people and causing division?**

The issue is divisive, there's no two ways around that. No matter what a church practices (women in leadership or not), it is a difficult topic for discussion, often filled with statements made without adequate caution or sensitivity.

However, it is very important that we not conclude that the church actually causes division by talking about this. Your church leadership is raising the issue specifically because we seek to generate a greater understanding across our congregation for this issue. We can't guarantee that people won't be upset by the issue, but we can work to mitigate that frustration by encouraging each other to do exactly what you're doing right now - take the time to seek, listen and understand.

Whatever decision we eventually get to, it must come only after everybody has shared in this discussion with an attitude of gentleness and patience, and the discipline of prayer. We can make every effort to keep from alienating people or causing division if we make the primary focus of this exercise that our church body grows in understanding and appreciation of each other.

### **How many elders will the church need, and given how hard it is to get volunteers now, where do we find them?**

The minimum number we will need to serve on a Board of Directors for the purposes of the church Incorporation will be 3, but the ideal for a Board of Elders would be more like 5-8.

The greatest challenge that churches have in finding next generation of leaders is primarily because they don't intentionally plan ahead to prepare people for the role ahead of time. We will be working to change that pattern by consistently seeking out people who could potentially serve in the church, perhaps even as much as 2-3 years in advance.

### **Don't the significant changes in cultural realities affect how we view these 1st century passages about male headship?**

Absolutely. It would be a mistake for us to imagine we receive the scriptures about male and female relationships within the church with the exact same filter as the 1st century church. So much has changed about our cultural realities, and when we seek to understand not only what our Bible says, but what it means for us, we must always do so in light of our current context. As we noted earlier, this is not as simple as "this is what the Bible says". The question underlying this discussion is: Is male headship (elders in the church) a time and culturally bound **practice**, or a Biblically established **principle**?

Although we must consider our current cultural realities, we must also remember that any given Biblical text cannot say something different for us today than it did for the original audience. Applications may differ from one context to another, but if there is a foundational Biblical **principle** being expressed, it will remain consistent from one generation to the next.

### **Does the sordid history of male headship, both inside and outside of the church, that has led to corruption and abuse have any bearing on this discussion?**

Without a doubt, our own experience and historical context shapes our views, choices and even the way we talk about this. The repeated offences that have happened inside and outside of the church at the hands of men who have violated the Biblical standards of self-sacrificing, compassionate, others-oriented leadership (the standard that Christ requires), has a HUGE impact on how we answer the question: should certain leadership roles only be given to men? **That sordid history is what fuels the controversy.**

Imagine how less threatening the question would be if our churches and culture had first hand experience with male leadership that was defined by words like: compassionate, selfless,

humble, sacrificial, caring, empowering to others, sensitive to those in need, seeking to protect others...

There is no way we can deny that the historical patterns of male leadership are deeply tainted with corruption. The BIBLICAL description of what male leadership is supposed to look like as per Ephesians 5 is not. So, does the tainted history prove that the practice of male leadership is wrong absolutely, or does Ephesians 5 stand as the principle that is supposed to be practiced, by which both church and culture could find healing?

**Doesn't the Gospel of Jesus change everything in relation to the leveling of all people, whether race, class or gender? What about his high value placed on women in trusted roles ministering to him?**

There has been nobody else in all history that has "levelled the playing field" like Jesus Christ. The church must NEVER forget that we all find equal standing at the foot of the cross, especially when we meet others there who are nothing like us. Yes, the gospel of Jesus Christ changes everything we think naturally about social structures. His gospel turns everything upside down as compared to what we think is rational and logical - the LAST will be first.

Although he chose 12 men as his disciples, he undoubtedly established a standard for the inclusion of women to his ministry that was far beyond the cultural norms of the time. This is one of the supporting points to the Redemptive Hermeneutic Argument (see session notes #3).

**What about Gal 3:26-27? Doesn't this mean there should be no separation based on gender?**

This is an excellent question that highlights for us again the importance of knowing not only what the Bible says, but how context and principle are so important.

The letter of Galatians was written because those who were deeply entrenched in Jewish traditions were making demands of those coming to faith in Christ that their new "salvation by faith" had to be accompanied by the traditional Jewish customs in order to be valid. There was a clear distinction being made between "us" and "them", "you're in" or "you're out", and it was based on long held values on Jewish traditions.

So, when Paul writes "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ", he is rebutting the false argument that Jews are superior by virtue of their traditions and practices. He is arguing that the gospel of Jesus has superiority over Mosaic law. He is NOT making any commentary on how the church should or should not form itself in

structure. We do not ignore the "oneness" that this passage identifies, but we would not conclude that Gal 3:26-27 demands female elders any more than we would conclude that 1 Cor 11:3-10 or 14:33-35 demands male only.

There are two helpful practices when it comes to healthy and consistent scriptural understanding.

1. CONTEXT IS KING - before we conclude any given passage provides insight for us, we ALWAYS seek to appreciate the original context.

2. THE BIBLE IS ONE WORD - rarely does any one text fully answer life's tough questions, so we do the hard work of seeking to understand the overall message of our Bible, not just single passages.

**When discussing headship/marriage/ order in church, both Jesus and Paul refer to the creation account before and after the fall. What significance has this on roles in the church context?**

What impact did the fall have on God's intended design for man / woman relationships?

What was God's intended design for man / woman relationships?

The injection of sin that came by way of pride through BOTH Adam and Eve, corrupted the original intent absolutely - there is no facet of human experience or relationship that has not been corrupted by that sin nature. As a result, the man / woman relationship is irreversibly ruined (Gen 3:16).

This means that BOTH men and women are equally blinded to rightly understand it. Some men demand their place to rule by quoting Eph 5:22-24 and ignoring the rest of that passage, and some women refuse to embrace the same passage on the basis that it is untenable to be accepted by any modern standard. Both perspectives are undeniably tainted by the curse of Gen 3:16.

God's original design was that man and woman would rule over creation together (Gen 1:27-31). How the partnership was to function was never defined in Genesis, but the Biblical standard that our culture rages against is this: men and women are NOT the same person, unique in emotional, physiological, chemical, and Godly ordained ways. There is NO separation of **value** between men and women in Gods original design or the Gospel, but they are not identical in all ways. Each are capable and divinely crafted for specific purposes and intentions.

How might this apply to the church? This cannot be understated - roles within the church HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH A PERSON'S VALUE OR STANDING IN THE GOSPEL. EVERY ROLE IS EQUALLY NEEDED IN THE BODY IF IT IS TO BE HEALTHY, and it is a mistake for us to imagine that any given role within the church operation or structure is a statement of one person's value over another. Elders have a specific responsibility, but their role does NOT make them of greater value than any other.

Subsequently, a church that opens eldership to women cannot be carelessly accused of being unbiblical, and one that limits eldership to men cannot be fairly accused to devalue women.