

THE QUESTION ABOUT 1 TIMOTHY 3

Some believe 1 Timothy 3 prohibits women from serving in pastoral ministry. A study of the Greek will clarify the opposite. First of all, this passage is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. The entire letter is written about leadership issues in the church at Ephesus. Here Paul may well be responding to a question Timothy may have asked him about a man who aspired to become an overseer/bishop (*episkopos*). The passage does NOT say that only married men can serve as overseers. If that were the case, even Paul could not have applied, because he was single! It just says that if a man wishes to serve as the overseer, he should be a man of good repute who demonstrates his Christian character in the way he leads his own family. It is interesting that the Greek term used for his role in the family is not the same word used for his role in the church; there the term means ‘to take care of’, which is what pastors do – take care of the flock. Also, note that women deacons are addressed in v.11; it can also refer to deacons’ wives, because the Greek for wife and woman is the same word, but the list of qualifications applies to women who serve the Lord.

Ruth Tucker addresses this passage in her book, *Women in the Maze*.¹ After quoting 1 Timothy 3:1-4 (NIV), she says this:

The King James Version and other translations have rendered the second phrase of this passage: “If a man desire the office....” This has given strength to the argument that this passage applies explicitly to the male gender. “But the Greek pronoun *tis* refers either to a male or a female.” Thus, the rendering of this word as “anyone” or “whoever” is more accurate.

But if this pronoun does not restrict women, so the argument goes, surely the specification that an overseer be “the husband of but one wife” points exclusively to a male. Since a woman cannot be husband of one wife, it naturally follows that she cannot be an overseer. But the matter is not quite that simple. We must determine whether being a husband of one wife is actually a qualification or whether it is rather an assumption that Paul makes.

It would seem that Paul is assuming that the individual who desires this office is a man, that he is married, and that he has children. Assuming then that the man is married, he must be “the husband of but one wife”; and assuming he has children, they must “obey him with proper respect.” It is unlikely that being a male, being married and having children are qualifications for leadership, since Paul himself probably could not have met two of those three. Furthermore, Paul placed high value on singleness, actually referring to it as a “gift” in 1 Corinthians 7:7.

Those who argue that being a male is a qualification for overseers are inconsistent, if they do not also insist that marriage and parenthood be qualifications—which places them in opposition to 1 Corinthians 7...”

¹ Ruth A. Tucker, *WOMEN IN THE MAZE: Questions & Answers on Biblical Equality* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, , 1992), pp. 119-120.

Also of interest is this passage from Karen Jo Torjesen's book, *When Women Were Priests*.² Torjesen provides archeological evidence of at least one female bishop or overseer, Theodora Episcopa.

“Under a high arch in a Roman basilica dedicated to two women saints, Prudentiana and Praxedis, is a mosaic portraying four female figures: the two saints, Mary, and a fourth woman whose hair is veiled and whose head is surrounded by a square halo—an artistic technique indicating that the person was still living at the time the mosaic was made. The four faces gaze out serenely from a glistening gold background. The faces of Mary and the two saints are easily recognizable. But the identity of the fourth is less apparent. A carefully lettered inscription identifies the face on the far left as Theodora Episcopa, which means Bishop Theodora. The masculine form for bishop in Latin is *episcopus*; the feminine form is *episcopa*. The mosaic's visual evidence and the inscription's grammatical evidence point out unmistakably that Bishop Theodora was a woman. But the 'a' on Theodora has been partially effaced by scratches across the glass tiles of the mosaic, leading to the disturbing conclusion that attempts were made to deface the feminine ending, perhaps even in antiquity.”

History contains evidence that women did serve as priests and pastors. After the church was made the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 300's, basilicas were built and the church moved out of homes into the public arena. Since the Roman culture allowed women to exercise leadership only in the home, not in public, women who had served as ministers (*diakonos*) of the churches that met in their homes were pressured out of serving in the same role in public churches. That doesn't mean they had not already been serving as ministers/pastors for some time; see Phoebe (Romans 16:1). Paul commends her as a deacon of the church at Cenchreae; she probably hand-delivered the letter of Romans to the church in Rome. The term translated 'deacon' in the NRSV is the Greek *diakonos*, a term with no gender at all. That same word is translated into the English word 'minister' when Paul describes himself as a *diakonos*. Phoebe was probably the deacon/minister who served the church at Cenchreae. So, even the Bible does have examples, but they are made not obvious, due to the variations in translating certain Greek terms into English words. The variations reflect the gender-based bias of the translators.

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²Karen Jo Torjesen, *WHEN WOMEN WERE PRIESTS: Women's Leadership in the Early Church & the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 9-10.