

# Does the Bible Allow for Female Overseers?

by Raymond C. Faircloth

The Greek terms for overseer, elder, and pastor (spiritual shepherd) are all synonymous. This means that they are all fulfilled in any one person as a teacher, a leader, and a counsellor. Now as shown in the previous two studies qualified women certainly can be teachers within the Christian community. However, does this mean that they can be leaders of a community in the sense of having been appointed as overseers?

## The Older Women Were Not Elders but Were Deacons

Indeed the “older women” were to be teachers in a Christian community. Yet some truth-seekers have thought that because the Greek word for older women is *presbytis*, as the feminine counterpart to *presbyteres* the masculine word for older men, that this must mean that these women were also officially appointed ‘elders.’ Is this a correct view?

In fact, these Greek terms do not refer to elders in a congregational sense i.e. in an official appointment sense for which the Greek word is *presbyteros*—“elder.” In the occurrence of *presbytidas* in Titus 2:3-10 Paul gives admonition to different groups based on age and gender:

❖ “**Older men** (Gk *presbyteres*) are to be clear-headed, dignified, and self-controlled. They should be healthy in their faith, self-sacrificing love, and patience. Similarly, **older women** (Gk *presbytis*) are to exhibit behaviour fitting for those who are dedicated: not slandering, not slaves to excessive drinking, but teachers of what is good. In this way they may show the **younger women** how to love their husbands and their children, and how to be self-controlled, virtuous, good homemakers, kind, and willingly submissive to their own husbands. This is so that the message of God may not be spoken of badly. Similarly, keep on encouraging the **younger men** to be self-controlled in everything.

Try to show yourself as a model of good deeds. In your teaching you must show integrity, dignity, <sup>8</sup> and healthy speech that cannot be criticized so that any opponent will be ashamed, since he has nothing bad to say about us.

**Bond-servants** should yield to the wishes of their masters in everything. They must do what is required without being argumentative, or pilfering anything. They must show complete fidelity, so that they may make the teaching of God our saviour attractive in every way” (*Titus 2:3-10*).

So, the most that we could say about these older women is that they could have served the community as deacons. Furthermore, the single occurrence of *presbyteras* and rendered as “older women” or “elderly women” in 1 Timothy 5:2, refers to them in the context as a body of them as mothers (Gk *meteras*) and not as female community elders.

## 1 Timothy 3 Shows Overseers to Be Male

- ❖ “An *overseer* must be...**husband of one wife**...able to teach...He must manage **his** own household well...he must not be a recent convert...” (*1 Tim. 3:1-7*).
- ❖ “That you might appoint *elders* in every town...the **husband** of one wife, and **his** children are not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For *an overseer*, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant...” (*Titus 1:5*).

Anyone who is a husband is obviously male, and so the only descriptions available in the Scriptures concerning overseers, shows them always as male. Indeed both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 speak of overseers/elders as “husbands.”

The requirement that an overseer should be able to teach obviously does not mean that others, both men and women, were not allowed to teach. So, as seen above, this does not restrict women as being teachers of the truth to anybody, including Christian men. However, above all of these is Jesus as “*the shepherd and overseer of your souls*” (1 Peter 2:28).

## Does the Polygamy Argument Allow Women to Be Overseers?

It has been proposed that, in the qualifications for elders and those for deacons, the phrase “*husband of one wife*” is used because only men could practice polygamy in the Jewish culture. So it is reasoned that this phrase cannot be used to exclude women from being appointed as elders.

However, the premise is incorrect because in the very same letter Paul notes that a widow who is to be enrolled must have *“been the wife of one husband”* i.e. “a one-man woman.” This would not have needed to be said if it was the case that no women had practiced polygamy. Therefore this argument does not in itself remove the application of 1 Timothy 3 as being a reference to men only.

### Doesn't the Argument that “Managers of Households” Is Common to Wives As Well As to Overseers Mean That Women Can Be Overseers?

Just as a male overseer in 1 Timothy 3 is required to *“manage his own household well,”* so too, wives are to “manage their households” (1 Tim 5:14). However, as was stated earlier all of the qualities and qualifications for an overseer are applicable to all Christians as the ideal. The requirement does not equate women with male overseers, but simply points out that both should be good managers of their households in their respective roles of husband and wife. So this is not a sound argument for there being female overseers.

### Does the Argument that “There Is No Longer Male and Female” Allow Women to Be Overseers?

- ❖ “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer **male and female**; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28 NRSV).

Literal translation: *“There is not Jew but not Greek, there is not slave but not freeman, there is not male and female, for all you are one in Christ Jesus.”*

In analyzing this text one must take into account the considerable restrictions and very bad attitudes that Jewish male freemen of the time had toward Gentiles, slaves and women. And so Paul's point concerns the rebalancing of **the ‘worth’ of people** from oppressed backgrounds so that God sees them as all of equal worth. Their nationalities as Jew/Gentile or roles as husband/wife or social status as slave/free does not necessarily change. So James Dunn makes the comment on this verse to the effect that:

“these distinctions have been relativised, not removed. Jewish believers were still Jews (Gal. 2:15). Christian slaves were still slaves (1 Cor. 7:21)...wives were still wives. These racial, social, and gender differentiations, which as such were often thought to indicate **relative worth** or privileged status before God, no longer had that significance. But, as so often with Paul's vision of ministry, the social realities conditioned the practice of the principle,” *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* p.593.

Even changes in culture have not meant that today there is no such thing as a wife/husband distinction or a Jew/Gentile distinction. Even slavery exists in many countries because of ‘the trading in humans’ albeit mostly hidden away. Nevertheless, prejudicial attitudes to these groups have changed radically so that women have vastly more rights than in first century Jewish or Gentile circles. This means that many of the privileges previously and traditionally only granted to men in the Christian congregation during the dark ages are now granted to women, but still noting the **different emphasis** a Christian woman would bring to the ministry. Certainly Paul, in following Jesus, raised the status of women compared to the Jewish and Gentile systems of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. However, this did not change the emotional and hormonal makeup of the two sexes. There are things which women deal with better than men and visa versa. So the argument that Paul's words that *“there is no longer male and female”* do not apply to the situation concerning the overseership of a congregation.

### There Is No Example in the Bible of a Female Elder

Coupled with the fact that the three previously expressed arguments are not sound, is the fact that, unlike the single example of Phoebe as a deacon (and possibly some of “the older women”), there is no example in the New Testament record of a woman serving as an overseer or elder or pastor even though many were teachers. Neither is there anything descriptive that indicates that any woman ever served in such a capacity. So for the weakness of the previous arguments and the strength of these last facts *it does not seem to be the biblical position that there would be women overseers/elders/pastors in the modern-day Christian congregation.*

### Summary

From the above examination of the Scriptures, their language and their background the best view of the status of women shows that men and women are equal in God's eyes but have different yet complementary roles in all aspects of life including that of the Christian Congregation.

However, if one treats ‘ministry’ and ‘teaching’ as concerning only the role of male elders/overseers/pastors, then women would be seen as having no ministry. This is also true of other men who are not in leadership. Surely this is an incorrect approach because women are shown to be teachers of biblical truth, both outside and inside of the Christian congregation as well as Phoebe being an example of a female deacon.

So although the biblical pattern shows women as teachers of biblical matters and as deacons, it seems that there is little information to show them as being overseers. So it seems best at this time to arrange for women to teach but under the guidance of a male overseer, these being those who have the ultimate authority for decisions affecting the Congregation. So the women, as with the men who are not in leadership, would have to defer to the final decisions made by those who are overseers.

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