

The Issue of Women Leaders in the Church, in Relation to 1 Timothy 3
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So as not assume any particular background, we need to realise that the New Testament does not specify one type of church government structure. I am a Baptist, because I believe that the closest model to Scripture is congregational church government, but this is by no means the only option in Scripture.

Those who would want to restrict all church offices to males only, using 1 Timothy 3 as a basis, use the following arguments:

- (i) the entire chapter (except 3:11) refers to "men" and uses the term "him" a lot, indicating that males are in mind;
- (ii) 3:12 (and 3:2) states that a deacon must be the "husband of but one wife";
- (iii) 3:11 is a specific instruction regarding the wives of the deacons, thus (it is said) indicating that deacons must be men.

I would like to answer these each in turn.

- (i) 1 Timothy 3 (except verse 11) refers to "men" and uses the term "him" a lot, indicating that males are in mind

Those who would argue that the use of the gender-specific title of "men" in chapter 3 (e.g. 3:4, 8) is a reason to exclude women from the diaconate (and also from the eldership) need to consider how they would interpret other such gender-specific passages in 1 Timothy. For example, 1 Tim. 2:4, 4:9 (are only males going to be saved?), 2:5 (does Jesus mediate for males only?), 2:6 (did Jesus die for males only?), 2:8 (does God only want males to pray?), 4:6 (should women not be taught about spiritual things?), 5:24 (are female's sins not obvious, as male's are?), 6:11 (should only males pursue righteousness?). I trust that this will indicate that the use of the terms "men" and "him" are used in the general way that we might use the term "mankind" or even "man" in the sense of all "men" (meaning "everyone"). The Greek words for "man" allow this implication.

- (ii) 1 Timothy 3:2 and 3:12 state that an elder and deacon must be the "husband of but one wife"

The phrase "husband of one wife" is literally "one woman man" (compare to 1 Tim. 5:9, where it is "one man woman"). The only exegetical options of interpretation available for the phrase "husband of (but) one wife" (3:2, 12) are, that a church officer is required to: (a) be married; (b) have only one wife his entire life; (c) be monogamous; or (d) be faithful in the marital and sexual realm (cf. Knight Commentary on the Greek Text of The Pastoral Epistles, 1992).

In response to each option, Knight says the following:

- (a) "is exceedingly doubtful" that this verse and 3:4 and 3:12 (children plural), restrict the offices to married men with two or more children.

(b) "it would be strange if the apostle of liberty, who considered widows and widowers 'free to be married. ., only in the Lord' (1 Cor. 7:39) and who used this principle of freedom to illustrate his teaching on the law (Rom. 7:1 - 3), to deny this freedom to a potential church officer whose spouse had died", or when the potential officer was the "innocent party" in a divorce (as per Matt. 19:9, and our own church's policy on divorce), or when an unbelieving spouse has abandoned a believing spouse (cf. 1 Cor. 7:15, and our own church's policy on divorce).

Considerations surrounding remarriage and divorce must always be applied, obviously, but this interpretation does not do justice to the sense of 1 Tim. 3:2, and therefore "having one wife all his life" cannot be what is meant by this verse.

(c) Polygamy is certainly ruled out by the sense of the verse. But the construction of the Greek is not usual, and indicates more than just one husband having one wife. Although it covers polygamy, this qualification must extend beyond simply restricting polygamy. It would therefore seem to refer to sexual fidelity within marriage, by husband and wife. Many commentators have argued that because no woman was allowed to take more than one husband, there was no need to express these commands in any other way than a man taking more than one woman for a wife. In relation to this phrase, it has also been argued that these verses can be understood to refer to having only one wife at a time (so called, "serial monogamy") - the verse is not clear on this point, and therefore, again, we are pointed to the correct emphasis, i.e. general sexual fidelity (and therefore not necessarily a masculine marital command).

(d) Knight (a very conservative scholar who has also written a book in which he says no women should lead in the church) argues strongly for this interpretation of the original Greek phrase - i.e. pointing to marital and sexual fidelity, on the basis of the arguments in (c) above, and the fact that this phrase is analogous to "You shall not commit adultery". This sixth commandment is also phrased in marital terms, although it is clearly taken to encompass all sexual sins (not only "adultery" - i.e. marital unfaithfulness) (cf. Ex. 20:14; Matt. 5:27 - 32). Similarly, the correct emphasis of this phrase in 1 Tim. 3:2, 12, is to ensure that the prospective church officers have been sexually faithful and moral since their conversion. Paul has simply used the most common situation of a marriage relationship, with a husband and wife, to state his point about sexual fidelity. This is borne out by the fact that we know that single people were church leaders.

It cannot, therefore, in any way, be used to restrict women from serving as church officers. Again, we must look elsewhere for gender restrictions on service.

(iii) 1 Timothy 3:11 is a specific instruction regarding the wives of the deacons, thus (it is said) indicating that deacons must be men.

3:11 says, "in the same way, their wives are to be women. . ." (NIV). It will be useful to understand the etymology (linguistic development) of the terms that we translate "man" and "woman" in the NIV NT. Greek is like English (or, more correctly, English is like Greek) in that the term "man" can be used generically for "mankind", thus including both male and female. In addition, the Greek word for "woman" and for

"wife" are exactly the same, and similarly, Greek only has one word for "man" and "husband". The correct translated term is discovered only on investigation of the context. So, any time The NT NIV has "woman", it could also mean "wife" (especially when it says, "his woman" or "the man and woman and their child").

Thus this verse could equally be translated "their women must likewise be..." . However, in the original Greek, the word "their" is not there (no pun intended). Thus the NASB translates it "Women must be...". How did it get into the NIV then? A very good question.

There are many possible interpretations of this phrase (3:11), the most common being that the women concerned are: (a) all the (adult) female members of the church; (b) the wives of the deacons; (c) a third class of church officer (i.e. there are elders, deacons and female deacons); (d) the deacon's (female) assistants; or, (e) female deacons.

These options are assessed below:

(a) This option is obviously not permissible in the context of the passage, due to the restricted nature of the offices of overseer and deacon, whom the women are to be like (i.e. not *all* men can be elders).

(b) This is not an option, based on the context. The use of the word "likewise" would be strange if this were referring to deacon's wives, as it would be a break in the flow of the passage, rather than a development in it. In the Greek, there is no possessive pronoun or definite article connecting the women to the deacons. There is also no reference to the wives of the overseers. It seems strange that the wives of deacons are specifically instructed, but not the wives of the overseers.

(c) The use of the word "likewise" to introduce these women is the same word used in 3:8 to introduce the deacons. This Greek preposition refers the women to the deacons in 3:11, just as it refers the deacons to the elders in 3:8. Thus, it is possible that this is a separate class of church officer. It is argued that Rom. 16:1 seems to indicate some evidence of this. However, in Rom. 16:1, Phoebe is referred to as a "deacon", in the masculine (technical) sense. It would also seem that in 3:12, Paul goes back to talking about deacons - thus indicating that 3:11 is not separate, but included in the office of deacons (see (e) below). In Phil. 1:1, where Paul refers to the officers of the church, he mentions only overseers and deacons.

(d) There is no reference in 3:11 to assistance or service to the deacons by these women. It would be strange that the deacons would have assistants, and the elders not. Why is there no reference to those who assist the elders? Therefore, the women are to be like the deacons in that they serve the church. This is not a reference to deacon's assistants, but rather a reference to a class of women, analogous to deacons.

(e) John MacArthur (Different by Design) and other conservatives argue convincingly for this interpretation. They are not "deaconesses" as there is no Greek word for that position, and therefore the only way Paul could make specific comments about women deacons (as opposed to male deacons) was to refer to them as "women". The qualifications of these women exactly parallel those of the male

deacons. Thus, Paul introduces a new category of deacons (i.e. women), who are distinct from male deacons only because of their gender. They are thus equal in their status, function and authority. If Paul had intended these women to be distinguished, would he not have specifically stated this fact at this point in his instructions regarding qualifications for service?

Thus, 3:11 is clearly concerned with female deacons. The function of the deacons was to serve the congregation. It seems unlikely that males would be the best people to serve in every situation, for instance, caring for widows (bathing them, clothing them, etc.), or preparing female candidates for baptism (these are Guthrie's examples, in his commentary on the Pastoral Epistles). The deacons were to serve in very practical ways, and it only makes sense that Paul would specifically address the women who were involved in serving in this way in the church. 1 Tim. was written in Rome, where Phoebe was known as a deacon (Rom. 16:1). It would be inconceivable for Paul to prohibit something he has already commended. .

If, then, 1 Tim. 3 supports female deacons, and the key phrases used to try to show that all church leaders are male do not stand up to investigation, we can put 1 Tim. 3 aside as a proof text for male only church leadership. I am not saying that this is now the final word on the issue. There are other relevant verse, but I have said enough (and am very surprised that you have hung in there and are still reading this VERY long mail). What I am saying is that 1 Tim. 3 supports both male and female church leadership.

I would also like to say that the same can be said for Gal. 3 - "there is neither male nor female". This verse has absolutely nothing to do with function at all, and cannot be used as a proof text to show that women ARE eligible for church leadership.

So, we must look elsewhere in Scripture to find restrictions on women church leaders. I wait anxiously for your responses.

Finally, if the issue of women serving as deacons is an absolutely vital issue for the spiritual health and vitality of a church, we would expect that the all-sufficient, infallible Word of God would clearly and conclusively deal with the issue. Thus, issues such as homosexuality, abortion, adultery, immorality, deception, and the like are clearly prohibited in Scripture. The issue of women in leadership in the local church is not. Neither is there a definitive description of church government and structure. Although an argument from silence can be dangerous, I trust that God's Word has dealt with everything that I need for faith and practice. If it is unclear on certain points, I therefore believe I may assume that these are not "faith critical" issues.