

WHAT WINGER PRESENTLY GETS WRONG:

WOMEN LEADERS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

26 November 2022

PART A

Complementarians deny that women house-church hosts were probably overseers. A few interpret 1 Timothy 3:1-13 as Paul's barring of women overseers. Can this be defended?

This article responds to Mike Winger's video 'Women in Ministry Part 4: Women Leaders in the New Testament: Were Women Overseers, Elders or Deacons?'.¹

Please do not misunderstand our title 'What Winger Presently Gets Wrong' as implying any personal criticism of Mike. On the contrary, by including his name in the title, we are acknowledging the prominence of the ministry to which the Lord has called him. His Bible teaching is often of good quality and of much benefit to many people. He is a valued brother in Christ. But on this topic of Women in Ministry we are convinced that he has made mistakes and has misread Scripture.

Of course, Mike tries hard to think clearly and teach biblically. But if you think that Mike consistently succeeds in that aim, this article will give you reasons to reconsider.

Who are we, and why are we responding to Mike Winger?

Andrew Bartlett is based in the UK. He is the author of [Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts](#) (2019). He has been studying Scripture for nearly 60 years. In his day job as an international arbitrator and judge, he specializes in dispassionate analysis of texts, evidence and arguments. He has a degree in theology and has served in lay leadership in several churches.

Terran Williams is a South African pastor-teacher, with a ministry of planting and nurturing churches. He is the author of [How God Sees Women: The End of Patriarchy](#) (2022) and a number of other books.

'Complementarianism' subordinates women under men's authority in the church and in the home. When Andrew and Terran wrote their books, Andrew was a member of a complementarian church and Terran had just completed his long tenure as a leading pastor of a complementarian church. They each engaged with leading scholarly complementarian works and independently concluded that God's word does not subordinate women under men.

Mike Winger started releasing his video teachings on 'Women in Ministry' soon after Terran's book was published. Because Mike's lengthy videos have been watched by many thousands of

¹ The video can be found on Mike's own site biblethinker.org and on YouTube.

people, he has emerged as one of the world's most influential complementarian teachers. On reviewing Mike's videos, Andrew and Terran found that there were substantial inadequacies in Mike's research, reasoning, and handling of Scripture.

Since the ordinary believer is more likely to get their information about Scripture from free online resources than from scholarly books, Andrew and Terran decided to team up and write some freely available responses to Mike's teaching. Terran credits Andrew with doing the lion's share of the work.

We love Mike's heart. He says: 'If you're a scholar who's really studied in this area and you want to give me pushback, I really would like to read it now. If I'm wrong, I want to know it. Love to see that pushback.' [Part 8 video, 0hr6mins] We commend Mike for his openness, and we thank him for his invitation.

This article takes up his invitation. We are hopeful that his engaging with our feedback will result in a good conversation in which we all make progress in our understanding of God's word.

Because of its length we have divided this article into a Part A and a Part B.

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What did NT women do or not do?

Near the end of his discussion of New Testament women, Mike says there is-

‘a need for women’s ministry throughout the church. If male pastors are going to fulfil all the roles that, all the needs that, women have in the church, that’s going to create all sorts of problems and affairs and insufficient ministry, as men try to understand the needs of women’ (1hr59mins).

We agree with him that there is a need for women’s ministry throughout the church.

But Mike goes wrong many times in his Part 4 video on New Testament women.

The video is over 2 hours long. We will be selective and discuss five important topics where there are major errors in what he says. We say this with a mixture of surprise and sorrow. The errors are so big that we should probably use capital letters and call them MAJOR ERRORS. That is not just because we disagree with some of his conclusions. It is because there are big and sometimes elementary errors in his research and reasoning and he has misunderstood and misrepresented what other scholars have written.

Here is a quick summary of Mike’s views on the five topics. We will use true and false to show which statements are reasonably justified and which are unjustified.²

According to Mike:

1. Qualifications for elders

- 1 Timothy 3:1-7, where Paul sets out the qualifications for church elders, is ‘the ultimate elder passage’. True.
- The qualifications include ability to teach. True.
- *The qualifications are masculine. They plainly require that all elders be men.* False.
- *They constitute ‘a very strong argument’ against the egalitarian position that women may be elders.* (1hr11mins to 1hr14mins). False.

2. Qualifications for women deacons

- 1 Timothy 3:11 is a statement of qualifications for women deacons (2hr00mins). True.
- *Understood in that way, this verse proves that only men could be elders, because there are no qualifications for women elders* (2hr02mins). False.

3. Church hosts

- *The egalitarian claim that women who hosted churches became church elders is ‘not true’* (0hr15mins). *It is ‘completely false’* (0hr24mins). *It is a ‘serious, egregious scholarly error’* (0hr13mins). False.

4. Priscilla

- Priscilla, with her husband Aquila, taught Christian doctrine to a man (0hr36mins). True.
- *Priscilla did not teach him with authority like an elder* (0hr37mins). False.

² This article draws especially from Andrew Bartlett, *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts* (IVP, 2019).

5. Phoebe

- Phoebe carried Paul's letter to Rome (Romans 16:1-2). True.
- Despite the ESV's translation as 'servant', Phoebe was probably a deacon (1hr39mins). True.
- Paul did not describe Phoebe as his or anyone else's 'leader' (1hr51mins). True.
- *The idea that the letter carrier would explain the letter to the recipients was not a real custom in the ancient world (1hr20mins). There is no evidence for it and Phoebe would not have acted as an authorized teacher explaining Paul's letter to the Romans. The idea is 'weird' (1hr23mins). False.*

Faults in Mike's reasoning and research

The mistakes apparent from his Part 4 video include:

- too-superficial examination of the Bible text being interpreted (topics 1, 2, 4),
- inadequate attention to literary and historical context (1, 2, 3, 4, 5),
- insufficient familiarity with New Testament Greek (1, 2, 5),
- unskilled use of Greek lexicons (5),
- inadequate research (1, 3, 4, 5),
- omitting to consider important opposing arguments (1, 2, 3, 5),
- mis-reading and misjudging what other scholars have said and written (3, 5),
- flawed logic or flawed reasoning from the text (1, 2, 3, 5),
- over-simplification (4),
- misapprehending the chronology of events in the New Testament (1, 3, 4), and
- unevicenced or mistaken assertions about the historical realities of life in New Testament times (1, 3, 5).

It is painful to set out his mistakes like this. But the topic of women's ministry is important. We owe it both to Mike and to you, the reader, to identify the errors.

However, Mike deserves a word of mercy about his mistakes. There are powerful factors that drive them, as we shall explain.

Human fallibility and partisan mindsets

Mike makes severe criticisms of some things written by egalitarian scholars. He speaks with emotion and eloquence, using words such as 'completely false', 'bogus', 'weird', 'egregious scholarly error'.

We agree that what egalitarian scholars write is sometimes incorrect. The same is true of complementarian scholars. Things have been said or written which on close examination turn out to be wrong.

This should not be too surprising. James' authoritative word is realistic:

'Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect ...' (James 3:1-2, NIV)

This important Scripture reminds us that all Bible teachers are fallible, and stumbles are to be expected.

In discussions of the topic of women's ministry, on top of the ordinary fallibility of human teachers, there are additional factors which make the mistakes particularly frequent and particularly hard to correct.

The discussion has become polarized, with most participants being in one of two opposing camps, complementarian or egalitarian. And in the United States especially, the discussion has become mixed up with a culture war in a time of rapid social change. This tends to generate heightened emotions and a partisan mindset, *us versus them*.

It is an observable fact of life, confirmed by studies of cognitive bias, that a partisan mindset tends to magnify misperceptions of evidence, absence of good listening, reliance on weak arguments, and other misjudgments.

What makes it even harder is that many scholars and pastors have heavily invested in publicly promoting a particular viewpoint, or are in seminaries or churches where any questioning of the accepted view would result in dismissal from employment. In such circumstances it is very, very hard for people to examine Scripture without being strongly influenced by partisan preconceptions.

These difficulties are sometimes further aggravated by conscious or unconscious feelings about the direct, personal implications of what is taught. Men can feel insecure and defensive. Women can feel belittled or patronized.

All of these human realities need to be kept in mind when we are assessing scholars' or pastors' arguments on the topic of women's ministry. Here are some reminders that may be useful:

- In this climate it becomes all the more important to take great care in using sound methods of reasoning, basing one's conclusions squarely on the words of the Bible's text, assisted by relevant historical evidence. This is what Mike tries to do.
- There is a pressing need for humility and calm. We all have much to learn. We cannot always be sure. We may be wrong. 'We *all* stumble in many ways.' So, we must listen to one another very carefully, and judiciously weigh what is said. 'Everyone should be quick

to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry' (James 1:19, NIV). Mike tries to do this also.

When one is assessing controversial claims, partisan argumentation produces a particular practical difficulty which has had a noticeable, adverse influence on Mike's videos. Derived from Andrew Bartlett's experiences as a lawyer, Judge and international arbitrator, he gave the following brief explanation in his 2019 book:

'Appreciation of the other side's point of view is made much more difficult when they deploy weak arguments. Because of their firm belief in their own position, they tend to underestimate the weakness of their poorer arguments. Accordingly, they overlook the negative impact of those arguments, *which is to make it hard for the opposite side to hear their better points.*

A judge needs to be on the alert when what is served up for consideration is unpersuasive. The fact that someone presents poor arguments does not show that they are in the wrong. Their position may be justified by good reasons which they have not thought of, or which have become obscured among the dross. In the same way, when wrestling with the interpretation of Scripture *we must not let the weakness of scholars' poorer arguments distract us from seeing the force of their stronger ones.*³ (emphases added)

In short, people arguing a partisan case often state an argument badly. That makes it easy to reject it, because the argument is obviously false. But this should not lead to the automatic rejection of the partisans' position. Sometimes a better argument would establish it.

Several times in his series, Mike states candidly that he saw so many weak arguments on the egalitarian side that their poor handling of Scripture depressed him. It is clear that this made it hard for him to hear their better points. The weak arguments have distracted him. The adverse effect of this phenomenon was further increased by occasions when he mistakenly thought that their arguments were poor because he misunderstood what he was reading.

In his Part 1 video 'Why We Can't Think Biblically About It', Mike identified what he called seven 'huge mistakes' that people make in the way they approach the question of Women in Ministry. Disappointingly, he overlooked a number of mistakes which he himself has made, including the mistake of being influenced by the fact that in a partisan debate people use poor arguments. Throughout his series to date, he is not successful in guarding against this.

We emphasize again that we are neither making nor implying any criticisms of Mike's character as a person and as a dear brother in the Lord; our criticisms are only of his reasoning. Nor are we criticizing the spirit in which Mike approached his task. We gladly acknowledge that Mike knows he is fallible, and he repeatedly indicates that he is willing to receive pushback from his audience. And he tries hard to be dispassionate in his analyses. That is clear from his frequent

³ *Men and Women in Christ*, 365.

and carefully explained disagreements with poor arguments put forward by other complementarians. We commend him for all of that.

Like Mike, and like every other scholar or teacher, we remain learners. If you find some mistakes in what we write here, we will be pleased to receive correction. Please write to us at terranwill -at- gmail.com.⁴ Please put these words in the subject-line: Winger Part 4.

Now we turn to the five topics, in order to explain what Mike has got wrong.

1. Qualifications for elders

We'll begin with a quick summary of where we are heading with 1 Timothy 3:1-7:

<i>Mike's view</i>	Our comment
<i>Paul sets out here the qualifications for elders. It is the ultimate elder passage. (1hr10mins)</i>	We agree that these are the most complete and explicit instructions about appointing church elders.
<i>The qualifications are masculine. They plainly require that all elders be men. (1hr12mins)</i>	This is a common misconception, derived from the influence of traditional English translations. It is not correct.
<i>The qualifications include ability to teach. (1hr13mins)</i>	Correct, but the qualifications are not compulsory requirements. They are indicators of suitability.
<i>The qualifications constitute a very strong argument against the egalitarian position that women may be elders. (1hr14mins)</i>	Not so. The reverse is the case. If Paul had meant to specify that elders must be men, he would have said so plainly. He did not, whether in this passage or anywhere else. (Nor did Peter or any other NT apostle or teacher.)

Mike proceeds on the basis of treating the New Testament terms 'elders', 'overseers' and 'pastor-teachers' as for practical purposes all meaning the same thing – people tasked with overseeing and shepherding a particular local community of believers. While there are nuances that could be explored, this is good enough for the purposes of the present discussion.⁵

⁴ You'll need to replace “ -at- ” with “@”.

⁵ It seems reasonably clear that every overseer (*episkopos*) is an elder (*presbuteros*), but there are differing views on whether every elder is an overseer. And it may be that a pastor-teacher could be either a locally-based elder or itinerant.

Before we look at Mike's reasoning, it's helpful to know about four features of the Greek in 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

Feature 1 – the use of 'tis'

The passage begins: 'If anyone (*tis*) desires to be an overseer ...'

The word '*tis*' is the indefinite pronoun. It is usually translated as 'anyone' or 'someone', and sometimes as 'a certain person'. In regard to men and women, it is entirely gender-neutral in meaning.

This use of *tis* is important. If Paul had meant to specify that only men could be elders, it would have been natural for him to have started with a word with a male meaning (as, 'If *a man* desires to be an overseer ...').

Paul's use of '*tis*' is doubly important because of the context. If we look at Paul's immediate lead-in to what he says here, in 2:8 Paul is talking about men, and in 2:9-15 Paul is talking mainly about women. Given this context, it would have been not only natural, but almost essential, for Paul to commence with a clear signal that he was switching to talking about men and only men, if that had been his intention. But he continues in 3:1 with 'If anyone [*tis*] ...'. Thus, it sounds as if he is *intentionally introducing the qualifications for eldership with a word that applies both to men and to women*.

Similarly, part way through the list, in v 5, as if to re-emphasize the gender-neutrality of his intention, Paul uses *tis* again: 'For if someone (*tis*) ...'

Feature 2 – the idiom, 'one-woman man'

The second qualification mentioned in v 2 is that an elder must be a *mias gunaikos andra*. This is a Greek idiom. Literally, it reads: 'a one-woman man'. It refers to sexual chastity, that is, compliance with the Christian ethic of only engaging in sexual intercourse within the marriage of one man to one woman. It is not a requirement of maleness and of being married. This will become clearer below.

Feature 3 – the convention of using male terms for mixed meaning

Where a Greek writer wishes to refer to both men and women, a standard way of doing so is to use an appropriate noun for males. For example, the Greek for 'brothers' (which differs in form from the Greek for 'sisters') can be used to refer either to men alone or to both men and women. The same is true of the Greek for 'man' (adult male), which is used in the expression 'one-woman man'.⁶ So, here, Paul's masculine expression 'a one-woman man' could either

⁶ The primary meaning of *anēr* is a male adult, but in Acts 17:22 Paul uses the plural expression *andres athēnaioi* ('men of Athens') to address a mixed audience at the Areopagus, for in verse 34 Luke reports that a woman named Damaris was among the *andres* ('men', plural of *anēr*) who believed Paul's message. The same word *anēr* is used gender-neutrally in the singular in James 1:8, 12, 20 (for the gender-neutral context, see 1:5 *tis* and 1:7 *anthrōpos*). For further discussion, see *Men and Women in Christ*, 319-321.

refer specifically to a man who is chaste or it could encompass also a woman who is chaste. We must be guided by context.

English-speaking Bible readers sometimes struggle to comprehend this convention of using language that has a primarily male meaning in order to refer to both men and women. So, perhaps an example from a modern language may help to make it clear. In France, if we have a group of five male friends, we refer to them as *ils* ('they', masculine) and as *amis* ('friends', masculine). If we have a group of five female friends, we refer to them using different words: *elles* ('they', feminine) and *amies* ('female friends'). But if we have a group of friends consisting of five men and five women, the correct way of referring to them is as *ils* ('they', masculine) and as *amis* ('friends', masculine). The use of the male terms does not tell the reader whether the friends are all males or are a mixed group. Only clues in the context can answer that question. The Greek of the Bible works in a similar way.

So, here, if only women had been in Paul's mind, then he would have used the female version of the same idiom – a 'one-man woman' – as in 1 Timothy 5:9. But the male form ('one-woman man'), intended generically, works for men and women alike.

What is the context that guides us here? It includes (a) the fact that Paul was talking mainly about women in 2:9-15, (b) the use of the gender-neutral word *tis* to introduce the list in v 1, (c) the absence of a plain statement that only men may be elders, (d) the repetition of *tis* to continue the list in v 5, (e) the fact that the other sixteen desired qualities or behaviours do not indicate any requirement of maleness but are all appropriate for both men and women, and (f) Paul's avoidance of male pronouns and possessives, which we explain next.

Feature 4 – the apparently deliberate absence of male pronouns and possessives

There is an important difference between Paul's Greek and those English translations which follow traditional renderings here. We'll take ESV as an example.⁷ In these verses we read: 'he ... He ... his ... his ... his ...he ... He ... he ... he ... he ...' (seven male pronouns and three male possessives). None of those is in Paul's Greek. There are precisely zero male pronouns or possessives in this passage.

If one were back-translating the ESV of verses 4 and 5 into Greek, the expression 'his own household' (ESV) would become (rendering literally) 'the own household of him'. But Paul's choice of words here is 'the own household'.

And ESV's expression 'keeping his children submissive' would become (rendering literally) 'having children of him in subjection'. But Paul's choice of words here is 'having children in subjection'.

⁷ We often refer to or quote the ESV in this article. We do this simply because it was produced by complementarians and is a favorite among complementarians. Our use of it does not imply endorsement of it as a version or preference over other versions.

It seems that Paul is actively avoiding male pronouns or possessives, because he is thinking of both male and female candidates for eldership.⁸

Some modern translations accurately take into account the above features of the Greek text. The result is that there is no indication in those translations that an overseer/elder (or 'supervisor' or 'church official') must be male. Here is the CEB:

'... if anyone has a goal to be a supervisor in the church, they want a good thing. ² So the church's supervisor must be without fault. They should be faithful to their spouse, sober, modest, and honest. They should show hospitality and be skilled at teaching. ³ They shouldn't be addicted to alcohol or be a bully. Instead, they should be gentle, peaceable, and not greedy. ⁴ They should manage their own household well—they should see that their children are obedient with complete respect, ⁵ because if they don't know how to manage their own household, how can they take care of God's church? ⁶ They shouldn't be new believers so that they won't become proud and fall under the devil's spell. ⁷ They should also have a good reputation with those outside the church so that they won't be embarrassed and fall into the devil's trap.'

And here is the simpler English of the CEV:

'... anyone who desires to be a church official wants to be something worthwhile. ² That's why officials must have a good reputation and be faithful in marriage. They must be self-controlled, sensible, well-behaved, friendly to strangers, and able to teach. ³ They must not be heavy drinkers or troublemakers. Instead, they must be kind and gentle and not love money.

⁴ Church officials must be in control of their own families, and they must see that their children are obedient and always respectful. ⁵ If they don't know how to control their own families, how can they look after God's people?

⁶ They must not be new followers of the Lord. If they are, they might become proud and be doomed along with the devil. ⁷ Finally, they must be well-respected by people who are not followers. Then they won't be trapped and disgraced by the devil.'

Is the list legislative or indicative?

The next important matter for consideration is the nature of the list that we are reading. We customarily describe it as a list of 'qualifications'. But that description could be understood in different ways. We need to address the question whether the qualifications are definitive or indicative. In other words, is Paul meaning to lay down absolute requirements, which are compulsory, or is he giving indicators of the kind of people who are suitable for appointment?

Evidently, the crucial character qualities in verses 2-3 are not to be read in an absolute sense, since no candidate for eldership is ever 100% perfect in being 'sober-minded, self-controlled,

⁸ This is not the only example of Paul choosing his words to make inclusivity clearer: see his addition of 'and daughters' to his Old Testament citation at 2 Corinthians 6:18.

respectable, hospitable ... gentle' (ESV). And the gift of being 'able to teach' (v 2) is a matter of degree.

Then what about the more circumstantial factors in verses 4-7? Being a recent convert is a contra-indication in this list (v 6). Yet in Acts 14:23 Paul appoints recent converts, as the situation demands (see 14:1-23). And 'outsiders' (v 7) did not always think highly of Jesus, Peter, John, Paul and other apostles. But that did not disqualify them from leadership of God's people.

Through church history and still today, the list has been read as *indicative* of suitability. This is a letter written by Paul to a close colleague, who would be expected to understand Paul's intent and apply it sensibly. This passage is not a church constitution, setting out in a legal document a list of mandatory requirements for appointment to the eldership.

Attempts to read the list as definitive (that is, as legislative) lead to absurdities.

Consider verse 4: 'They should manage their own household well—they should see that their children are obedient ...' (CEB).

If we read this as definitive, a person with only one child cannot qualify (because the word 'children' is plural, in Greek as in English). Nor could an unmarried person qualify, if they follow the Christian sexual ethic, because they will be childless. Yet in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul emphasizes how an unmarried person can give priority to the Lord's affairs because of their freedom from responsibilities as a spouse. And what if they do not have a household to manage, because they are living with a senior relative, or with a friend, or have been engaged in itinerant ministry? Such a person also would not qualify.

On such a reading, Paul himself would not qualify, nor even the Chief Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Similarly, if 'one-woman man' were a definitive requirement to be male and married, neither Jesus nor Paul would have the qualities required for eldership.

We are not aware of any major church groupings, irrespective of whether they permit or restrict women's leadership, who read these qualifications in such a wooden way as compulsory requirements. As a reminder of the indicative nature of the list, it can be helpful to call the listed factors 'indicators' rather than always describing them as 'qualifications'.⁹

⁹ Some may wonder, then, why Paul uses in v 2 the Greek word '*dei*'. This is regularly translated as 'it is necessary', but the degree of compulsion which it connotes is variable. An example may help. The same word is used in John 4:4, where John writes that it was necessary for Jesus to go through Samaria. Just possibly this could allude to a sense of divine compulsion, although there is no indication of that in the text; rather, it appears to be simply a way of saying that Samaria was *en route* between Judea and Galilee. In a literal sense, it wasn't 'necessary' for Jesus to go through Samaria, because Jesus could have travelled via the Jordan valley instead, as some Jews did in order to avoid Samaria; but the more direct route was via Samaria.

Scholars agree that women not excluded

Prominent *complementarian* scholars, who understand New Testament Greek, accept that the indicators in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 do not exclude women from being elders. The same applies to the parallel passage in Titus 1:5-9.

Complementarian Douglas Moo says that the phrase ‘one-woman man’-

‘may mean . . . that the male elder/overseer must be faithful to his wife, without excluding unmarried men or females from the office. . . . [I]t would be going too far to argue that the phrase clearly excludes women.’¹⁰

Complementarian Tom Schreiner says:

‘The requirements for elders in 1 Tim. 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9, including the statement that they are to be one-woman men, does not in and of itself preclude women from serving as elders.’¹¹

In the big book edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*), they address the question ‘Where in the Bible do you get the idea that only men should be the pastors and elders of the church?’ *Their answer does not mention 1 Timothy 3 or Titus 1.*¹²

Similarly, the Danvers Statement (published 1988), which codified complementarian thinking, does not place explicit reliance on 1 Timothy 3 or Titus 1 for its ban on women elders.¹³

The same is true of the Calvary Chapel Association ‘Statement of Faith’.¹⁴ We understand this to be the association to which Mike’s own church in Bellflower, California, belongs.

Let’s now consider Mike’s three explanations for disagreeing with all of the above.

Mike’s first explanation

First, Mike describes the list as ‘the exact, specific requirements’ (1hr12mins). It sounds as if he understands the list as strict legislation.

¹⁰ Moo, 1981. ‘The Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-15: A Rejoinder.’ *TrinJ* 2, New Series: 198-222, 211. Our agreement with Moo on this conclusion should not be misunderstood as implying agreement with the details of Moo’s reasoning.

¹¹ Schreiner, 2010. ‘Philip Payne on Familiar Ground: A Review of Philip B. Payne, *Man and Women, One in Christ.*’ *JBMW* 15, no. 1:33-46, 35. Our agreement with Schreiner on this conclusion should not be misunderstood as implying agreement with the details of Schreiner’s reasoning.

¹² John Piper & Wayne Grudem (eds), *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (reprinted 2021), 74. Grudem in *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: an analysis of 118 disputed questions* (IVP, 2005), 80, offers a different view on 1 Timothy 3, but without providing any satisfactory reasoning. See the discussion in *Men and Women in Christ*, 323-324.

¹³ The Danvers Statement is promoted by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.

¹⁴ ‘MALE LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH We believe in the pattern and principle of male leadership and responsibility in both the home and the church, according to the sacrificial example of Jesus. We believe this limits the roles of pastoral leadership and doctrinal authority to qualified men (I Corinthians 11:1-12; I Timothy 2:1-15).’ <https://calvarycca.org/statement-of-faith/> [accessed 19 November 2022].

But this is mere assertion; he does not provide any reasoning in support. Nor does he address the solid and widely-accepted reasons for regarding the list as indicative, which we have briefly laid out above. Are all elders and pastors at Calvary Chapel churches (like Mike's) required to be householders, to be married and to have two or more well-behaved, believing children? Does Mike seriously regard Jesus and Paul as lacking the qualities that are needed in a church elder? We infer that he has not yet given serious thought to this question.

Mike's second explanation

Second, Mike notes that some say that the whole list is gender-neutral, and he offers in rebuttal that the requirements are masculine. He says:

(A) He (the elder) is to be husband of one wife.

(B) He is to be one who rules his own house well, or manages his own household, which is specifically male in the text and in the culture.

(C) In verses 6 and 7, the text indicates 'he', which is masculine.

(D) While many requirements are character-related, and are also needed for other roles, the unique requirement for elders is 'able to teach', because elders are the official teachers in the church. (1hr12mins to 1hr14mins).

But Mike's rebuttal does not hold water.

(A) He does not discuss the meaning of the idiom which CEB translates as 'faithful to their spouse'. And he shows no awareness of the Greek convention of using male terms to refer to both men and women. He does not engage with the questions which the Greek text raises for us.

(B) Both of his points about the ruling of households are mistaken. In the Greek text, there are no masculine pronouns or possessives. And in the culture, there were households ruled by women (especially, wealthy widows). As far as we can tell, Lydia, Nympha and Chloe were all heads of households (Acts 16:14, 40; Colossians 4:15; 1 Corinthians 1:11). In any event, Paul specifically refers in the same letter to women ruling or managing their households (1 Timothy 5:14). Mike's knowledge of the culture is deficient and he has failed to take these scriptures into account.

(C) Mike's reliance on the word 'he', found four times in the ESV of verses 6 and 7, is an elementary error. It is hard to explain how this error arose, particularly since Mike indicates his awareness of scholars saying that the whole list was gender-neutral. To rely on the word 'he' in English translations of these verses, one would have to be unfamiliar with New Testament Greek, or would have to forget to consult the Greek text, and would have to simply disregard or close one's eyes to what scholars have written about it.

(D) Mike's point about the responsibility to teach is unexplained and lacks supporting reasoning. If he is relying on his commitment to the idea that only men can be teaching elders, his argument is circular.

In any event, he does not show that he has considered 1 Timothy 5:17:

‘Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.’

This implies that not all elders are active in teaching ministries.

Even if Mike were somehow right that a particular kind of authoritative teaching has to be by men, the qualifications for elders still do not rule out women who are ‘able to teach’, since they could be elders who do not undertake that kind of teaching.

Moreover, the biblical example of Priscilla, which we will consider in Part B, will show that ability and responsibility to teach do not require maleness.

Mike’s third explanation

Third, Mike says that the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 constitute a very strong argument against the egalitarian position that women may be elders. He mentions several further points for supporting this.

He says that 1 Timothy 3 can’t be explained away by special circumstances, or by women’s lack of Christian education, or by women being looked down on.

But these remarks do not appear to relate to any of the actual reasoning relied on either by egalitarians or by complementarian scholars who acknowledge that 1 Timothy 3 does not lay down a requirement for male elders.

Mike asserts that Priscilla (who did not lack Christian education) was in Ephesus. But he offers no evidence that she was there when Paul wrote 1 Timothy. She had left Ephesus in the previous decade, no later than AD 57. (Priscilla is discussed in topic 4, in Part B of this article.) And there does indeed appear to be a shortfall in women’s Christian education in Ephesus, for in 1 Timothy 2:11 Paul instructs that women should learn.¹⁵

What should we conclude?

Superficiality and lack of research

The basic problem here is that Mike has not done sufficient research. He has not given close consideration to the Greek text. He appears unaware that prominent complementarian scholars do not rely on the list of qualifications for eldership as a sufficient basis for excluding women. He shows no knowledge of the widely accepted understanding that the qualifications must be understood as indicative rather than definitive. He has not understood or sufficiently examined the reasons why many scholars regard the list as gender-neutral.

¹⁵ For information, Mike takes all the NT letters attributed to Paul to be genuine. So do we. Many contemporary scholars believe that 1 Timothy and even Ephesians were not written by Paul. We firmly disagree. We agree with the early Church Fathers, who were close in time, in geography and in culture; they read those letters in their native language and decided that they were genuine.

It is disappointing that Mike's consideration of this centrally important passage is so superficial and so full of elementary errors. In his video, he spends less than five minutes on it (1:10:55-1:15:15). In contrast, he spends nearly seven hours in another video, trying to interpret what Paul says about men's and women's head coverings or hairstyles in 1 Corinthians 11.

Even Schreiner and Moo concede that Paul's lists of qualifications for eldership do not exclude women.

Fundamental weakness

This brings into focus a fundamental weakness in any complementarian position on women's ministry.

In New Testament times, it could not simply be *assumed* that women should be excluded from eldership or other forms of leadership. Consider these factors:¹⁶

1. Even under the old covenant, some women were called by God into leadership of his people (for example, Deborah).
2. Jesus contravened cultural conventions in his dealings with women and valued them as disciples. When he was raised from death, he revealed himself first to a woman (Mary Magdalene), whom he chose to be the first person to announce his resurrection, and he trusted her to make this announcement to his male disciples.
3. At Pentecost, the Spirit was given to both men and women, in fulfilment of prophecy to that effect.
4. The apostles taught the equality of men and women in Christ.
5. The apostles' conduct after Pentecost appears to have been predicated on the equality of women with men. For example, when Paul first entered Europe with the gospel, against convention he began his evangelistic work among a group of women (Acts 16:9–15). This was a remarkable action in ancient society. It affirms the value of women in the new Christian movement. Similarly, in his letters Paul commends named women for their work, using the same terminology that he uses when commending some well-known male leaders such as Timothy.
6. After Pentecost, the apostles taught that ministry was gift-based, and that spiritual gifts were distributed among God's people (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:1–30; Eph. 4:11–13; 1 Pet. 4:10–11). There is no statement in the New Testament that certain gifts were reserved for men.
7. Churches initially met in homes. This raised the question whether the householder (who might be a woman) should be an elder. We will consider this below, in topic 3.
8. While first-century cultures regarded leadership by men as the general norm, we should not make the mistake of thinking that this was an inflexible rule. Even in wider society the

¹⁶ For details, see *Men and Women in Christ*, 309-312 (chapter 14, under 'What would be assumed about whether women could be elders?').

prevailing cultural assumptions about leadership by men alone were far from absolute at any level. There were women who were exceptions to the usual practice. Women were leaders of local organizations, of provinces and even of empires. So, even outside the church it was possible for some women to exercise leadership. Indeed, some who responded to the gospel were leading women of high standing (Acts 17:4, 12).

In these circumstances, if there was to be a rule excluding women from eldership, it needed to be laid down in definite terms and clearly communicated to the churches.

Something so fundamental to the on-going leadership of churches could not prudently be left to hints or ambiguities. If around 50% of believers were to be ineligible for local church leadership, this had to be made very clear.

Where better to communicate with clarity a definite rule, than in the lists of qualifications for eldership in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus? If we were going to find it anywhere, would it not be precisely there? But it is absent. The qualifications are indicative, rather than definitive, and (as prominent complementarian scholars candidly acknowledge) they do not exclude women.

The rule is likewise absent from every other passage which mentions local church elders or leaders.¹⁷ The rule is not stated anywhere in the New Testament.

If such a rule were clearly stated somewhere, we would not be having this discussion.

Because there is no definite and clearly communicated statement in the New Testament that women cannot qualify as elders, the only way of constructing a case for restrictions on women's ministry is by artificially 'joining the dots' from controversial interpretations of disparate passages, none of which is directly addressing the question of qualifications for eldership or pastoral oversight.

The problem can be understood visually like this. Scripture does not provide a box which keeps women under restriction and prevents them from being appointed as elders. There is no such passage. So, complementarians usually take several passages which are not about eldership-

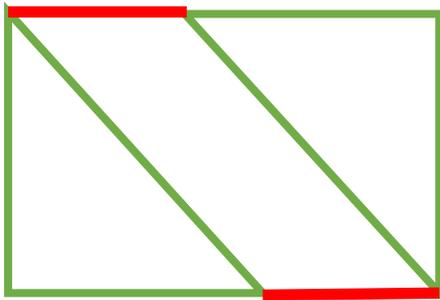
Passage A

Passage B



¹⁷ See in particular Acts 14:23; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-5.

and they join them together to make the box-



Sometimes, they do not even do this, but instead concentrate on just one passage, and argue that the restriction on women is *implied* from it. When they do, it is not 1 Timothy 3 or Titus 1 on which they rely.

Complementarian scholars have devoted a whole book to the single question of whether women may teach or exercise authority in the context of a local congregation. The third edition is 411 pages long. The title is instructive: *Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*. Eldership involves teaching and exercising authority in the context of a local congregation. But in this book, instead of relying on the qualifications for eldership in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, complementarian scholars labor to present an argument by implication from their controversial interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 (which is not a passage that is directly about eldership). They do that because the qualifications for eldership do not provide the needed support for their position.

We invite all complementarians to consider this question: Since the supposed rule is not clearly stated in the lists of qualifications for elders, is it not possible that you are on weak ground when you insist on it? Seriously, are you likely to be right when you imagine it to be *implied* from other passages which are addressing different topics?

This fundamental weakness is one of the reasons why so many Bible-affirming Christians and Christian scholars are unpersuaded. If the apostles intended to ban women from eldership, they would have said so unmistakably, in plain terms. The ban is notably absent from the most relevant teaching, the teaching which expressly lays out the qualifications for eldership. On the contrary, the wording of the qualifications appears designed to open the door to women as well as men. The complementarian case does not appear realistically credible.

2. Qualifications for women deacons

In 1 Timothy 3, the qualifications or indicators for suitability for appointment as an elder are immediately followed by the qualifications or indicators for suitability for appointment as a deacon.

1 Timothy 3:11 stands in the midst of the indicators for deacons, which commence at v 8 and finish at v 12. Verse 11 says (in NIV):

‘In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.’

There is considerable disagreement among scholars over the meaning of this verse. Who are the ‘women’? Are they (1) women deacons, or (2) believing women generally, or (3) the wives of deacons, or (4) the wives of both deacons and elders, or (5) deaconesses whose responsibilities differ from those of male deacons?

The full discussion is complex. In this present article, because we are specifically addressing Mike Winger’s argument that church elders must be male, we will proceed on the assumption that Mike is correct in his interpretation that the ‘women’ in verse 11 are women deacons.¹⁸

Mike considers that, understood in this way, verse 11 proves that only men could be elders (2hr02mins). His reasoning is crisply stated in his notes:

‘... if we see women deacons in 1 Tim 3 then how much MORE do we NOT see women elders in 1 Tim 3?

- The deacon passage is so obviously about men that Paul must mention women separately.
- But it’s the same sort of language that Paul used earlier for elders. Masculine. Without any mention of women.’

But this reasoning is faulty.

It repeats the mistakes about Paul’s use of masculine language for elders. He has misread the qualifications for elders, in reliance on some English versions, without closely considering the Greek text. He has not noticed the word choices and contextual indications which we have discussed above, which should signal to Greek readers that the elders passage (verses 1-7) applies to men and women. So the elders passage does not need an equivalent of v 11 to show that it applies to women.

And if Paul is meaning to speak of women deacons in v 11, it is not hard to see why he mentions them separately in v 11.

Let’s employ some disciplined historical imagination, remembering that Paul is dictating. When he dictates, he sometimes momentarily interrupts his flow when he wants to provide clarity on something he has just said – as he does, for example, in 1 Corinthians 1:16.

The starting point of the deacons passage is not the same as the starting point of the elders passage. In the elders passage the indefinite pronoun *tis* precedes the word ‘overseer’, indicating gender-neutrality. But the deacons passage starts in verse 8 with the word ‘*diakonous*’ (deacons, plural of *diakonos*, usually meaning ‘servant’), without any gender-neutral indicator, and proceeds to list some qualifications. This word for deacons is

¹⁸ For fuller discussion and differing views, see *Men and Women in Christ*, 325-326 (in chapter 15, under ‘Do Paul’s requirements include or exclude women?’) and *How God Sees Women*, Appendix 5.

grammatically masculine (and so also the qualifications are expressed in grammatically masculine form). In Greek, the fact that a word has a grammatically masculine form does not of itself indicate that the meaning of the word has to do with males. But grammatically masculine words which refer to people do often have a primary male meaning, such as *adelphos* (brother) and *anēr* (man). And this use of *diakonos* as a designation of a recognized church office was a recent development in the churches.¹⁹ Perhaps because of the newness of the term, it seems Paul wants to make clear that he is talking about both male and female deacons. He therefore breaks into his list by indicating in v 11 that what he has been saying applies to women as much as to men. He does this by repeating in summary form, as applying to women, the points he has made in vv 8-10. (Mike's own analysis deftly shows that this is the nature of the contents of v 11: see at 1hr55mins.) Paul then continues and completes his list in v 12 (which is intended to apply to both men and women), adding an encouraging comment in v 13.

So, assuming that Mike is correct that verse 11 is referring to women deacons, that verse does not provide any support for a conclusion that elders must be men.

Moreover, we should pay attention to the wording of v 12, which Paul evidently intends to apply to both men and women. This verse contains a second use of the expression 'one-woman man' (this time, in the plural, 'one-woman men'). This use reconfirms that Paul is using this expression in 1 Timothy 3 in a sense which indicates a criterion of sexual faithfulness for both male and female elders and deacons. This is because, after what Paul has said in v 11, both men and women are in view in v 12.

This has extra significance because of the parallel passage about elders in Titus 1:5-9. There is no mention of deacons there. The list for elders in Titus starts gender-neutrally with *tis*. If, as we understand, the 'one-woman man' idiom is properly understood as applicable to both men and women, then there is nothing left in the Titus passage which a complementarian interpreter could rely on as providing any indication at all that elders should only be male. (Similarly, there is in Titus no equivalent to 1 Timothy 2, which complementarians rely on so heavily.)

Near the end of his Part 5 video on women apostles, Mike revisits 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (1hr11mins to 1hr14mins). He says this language is not gender-neutral.

That is formally correct, but it misses the point. It seems that Mike has still not understood the Greek convention that male terms can be used to refer either to men only or to a mixed population of men and women. Paul's language here indicates that the qualifications apply to both men and women. Having provided the clue in v 11 that he is talking about women, not

¹⁹ There are pagan precedents from the third century BC onwards for applying this term to an attendant or official in a temple or religious guild (see LSJ). But the only known possible uses in the New Testament of *diakonos* as meaning 'deacon' rather than 'servant' in a church context, earlier than in Paul's first letter to Timothy, are in Romans 16:1 (if Phoebe was a deacon, which is debated) and perhaps in Philippians 1:1 (if Philippians is earlier than 1 Timothy, which is also debated). This sense of *diakonos* does not appear in Acts or in James or in any of Paul's early letters.

only about men, Paul can use male language in v 12 in the expectation that he will be understood as indicating qualifications for deacons irrespective of their sex.

3. Women church hosts as elders

Let's be clear first about how this claim should be understood. When egalitarian scholars say that women who hosted churches became elders, are they claiming certainty? Or do they mean that it is probable that this was so?

When they merely state the claim, without explaining it, we cannot tell. But when they set out their reasoning, it is clear that they are talking about a probability.

They do not claim that it is expressly stated in the New Testament that particular women hosts became elders. They argue, rather, that this is to be inferred from what is in the text and from historical knowledge of the responsibilities of householders in Greco-Roman culture.

The question, therefore, is whether the claim is *probably* right or *probably* wrong.

Mike very firmly rejects the egalitarian claim that women who hosted churches became elders. He judges it is 'not true' (0hr15mins). It is 'completely false' (0hr24mins). It is a 'serious, egregious scholarly error' (0hr13mins).

We gently suggest that Mike was here overwhelmed by the difficulty of overcoming the distraction of poor arguments. His perception was that the case for women church hosts as elders was poorly argued. So he rejected it. But his perception was to a considerable extent mistaken. And he appears to have lost sight of the possibility that the case might be valid if explained to him more fully or argued more judiciously.

He gives nine reasons for his conclusion. We will look at each one.

His reason 1. The Bible text is not explicit about hosts becoming elders

Taking the example of Nympha, the text says: 'Give my greetings ... to Nympha and the church in her house.' (Colossians 4:15, ESV).

This text does not say that Nympha was an overseer/elder of the church in her house.

Reason 1 is correct as far as it goes. It is the agreed starting point for the discussion. The egalitarian argument draws inferences from the fact that *in Greco-Roman culture a householder carried a heavy responsibility for what went on in their own house.*

His reason 2. It is untrue that 'most commentators' say Nympha was a leader

Mike cites egalitarian scholar Lynn Cohick, who says:

‘Because the church met in her house, most commentators correctly conclude that she held some sort of leadership role within the church.’²⁰

Mike says he looked at 18 commentaries, of which only three gave some support to the idea of Nympha’s leadership. He puts this forward as proof that Cohick’s statement is wrong. He says ‘this is questionable scholarship’ (0hr12mins).

It is fair to say that Cohick’s statement could have been more fully explained. But it is Mike who has gone wrong here; he has misunderstood what Cohick writes.

First, let’s notice that, while Cohick refers to ‘commentators’, Mike refers to ‘commentaries’.

Mike has experience of using Bible commentaries. He knows that Bible commentaries mostly do not say much, if anything, about the names at the end of a letter, especially if (as in the case of Nympha) the name is mentioned only once in the New Testament. Only a minority of commentaries will discuss the significance of such a name, and only a small proportion will say more than a few sentences. No Bible scholar would expect to find in most commentaries a discussion and conclusion on whether Nympha, being a church host, was a leader in the church.

Indeed, that is exactly the picture that Mike found when he looked at his 18 commentaries. Very few of them explicitly address the question whether Nympha, as a host, was a leader or was not a leader.

Moreover, Cohick’s expression ‘most commentators’ cannot sensibly be intended to refer to most commentators as compared with *all* commentators. Those commentators who do not address the specific question, whether being a church host made Nympha a leader, are simply not relevant here. Common-sense tells us that Cohick must be intending to refer to *most commentators who address the question whether being a church host made Nympha a leader or not*.

Therefore, Cohick is indicating that most commentators who have written on that question have correctly concluded that Nympha had some sort of leadership role.²¹

The truth of Cohick’s statement is consistent with Mike’s own survey.

There were three commentaries in his survey which explicitly addressed the question whether Nympha was a leader in the church which she hosted. In varying degrees, they were all either positive about it or open to it. According to the details in Mike’s written notes, none of the 18 commentaries explicitly addressed the question and then went on to reach a negative

²⁰ In the video, it sounds as if he is citing Linda Belleville, but this is actually Lynn Cohick, in Pierce, Westfall, McKirland (eds), *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural & Practical Perspectives* (3rd edn, 2021), 186.

²¹ We contacted Lynn Cohick. She said this was what she meant.

conclusion that Nympha, though a host, was not a leader. So, Mike's survey shows some positives and zero negatives.²²

On this evidence, Cohick's statement is correct. And there is no shortage of other commentators who mention Nympha's leadership, either positively or as a possibility.²³

The mistake is Mike's. In fairness to Lynn Cohick, Mike would do well to issue a correction.

His reason 3. It would make rich people the leaders

Mike says that the early church tended to gather in wealthy homes but did not show favoritism to the rich. Church leaders 'are not necessarily wealthy, that is more rare' (0hr15mins).

Mike is right to say this (see further 1 Corinthians 1:27 and James 2:1-5), but it is not a valid reason against women hosts becoming overseers.

First, the villas of the wealthy were not the only meeting places for churches.²⁴

Second, and more importantly, whenever we have a clear New Testament glimpse of local church leadership in a particular place, it is always plural, never a single person. The egalitarian claim should therefore be understood to mean that the householder would become one of the elders in a particular place. To have one or more wealthy persons included in the eldership would not be in conflict with anything that we see in the New Testament.

Third, the result of Jesus' teaching about leadership and status (for example, Mark 10:42-45) was that a householder who hosted a church inverted their status and became the slave of all, making their home and resources available to serve the believing community.

Before proceeding further, we need to note the limitations of the available evidence about the organization of the churches at the time when Paul was writing. In what we may call the 'house model' of eldership, we can envisage a plural eldership leading the assembly that meets in a particular house. In what we may call the 'city model' of eldership, we can envisage each home meeting being overseen by the householder host, with the plural eldership comprising all the overseers in the city. Of course, a mixture of the two models is also possible.

²² At 0:12:02 Mike says: '14 of the 18 said that they don't conclude that she was a leader or so, like, they actually deny it, she was not a leader or they just don't even acknowledge it.' We have not examined the 18 commentaries. However, judging from Mike's written notes, he mis-spoke here. His written summary says: '14 don't conclude she was a leader or don't seem to think it warrants acknowledgment even though they do speak in some detail about Nympha and the meaning of the greeting.' *His notes of what is in the individual commentaries do not identify any commentary which gives consideration to whether Nympha was a leader and then arrives at a negative conclusion.*

²³ For example, Tom Wright (Paul for Everyone, 2002); Todd Still (Expositor's Bible Commentary, 2006); Jerry Sumney (New Testament Library, 2008); Dennis Hamm (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, 2013); David Pao (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; 2013); Paul Foster (Black's New Testament Commentaries, 2016).

²⁴ For example, Priscilla and Aquila, who hosted a church, probably lived not in a villa but in an *insula*. Such a property would have downstairs rooms for business which opened onto the roadway, and rooms upstairs for habitation: *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 2nd edn (2005), 375. See further *Men and Women in Christ*, 167 n14, referring to work by Osiek, by Brookins and by Adams.

So, for example, when we read Philippians 1:1 and see Paul's greeting to the overseers in Philippi, we do not know whether those overseers were organized according to the house model, the city model, or a mixture of the two.

His reason 4. It is absurd to imagine a rule that, if a group meets in my home, that makes me automatically the leader of the group

Mike makes this point because Linda Belleville, after citing what Colossians 4:15 says about Nympha, continues:

'While the reference is brief, the implications are noteworthy. Patronage of a house church was an authoritative role. The householder in Greco-Roman times was automatically in charge of any group that met in his or her domicile.'²⁵

We agree the rule as baldly stated by Mike would be absurd. Mike points out how ridiculous it would be if the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner became automatically the leader of Jesus's group. And he gives other examples of the absurdity.

It is fair to say that this particular passage of Belleville's writing could be more fully explained. But the seeming absurdity could usefully have made him pause to reconsider whether he had correctly understood what Belleville means.

We suspect Belleville would have the same view of the absurdity. If Mike had read more closely how her words continue, he would have seen the point which she is leading to in this particular paragraph, namely, because of the complex nature of first-century households, a female head of household would have needed good administrative and management skills, and 'Paul thus places great emphasis on a person's track record as a family leader, as it is a definite indicator of church-leadership potential (1 Tim 3:4-5; 5:14).'

As we understand it, therefore, Belleville is saying that Nympha became an authoritative patron (which is obvious from the NT text, being the provider of the venue for the church) and *as a householder Nympha had church-leadership potential*. Those are the 'implications' that are 'noteworthy'.²⁶ In other words, the householder is a leading candidate for appointment to eldership.

We will come back to Nympha later, to see how her particular case can give us more help in assessing the claim that women church hosts became elders.

What about Lydia? Mike indicates the unlikelihood of Lydia, a householder and businesswoman, becoming an elder of the church on the day she was converted (Acts 16:15). But he does not consider how matters may have progressed if the group of believers started to

²⁵ *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 87.

²⁶ This passage was written by Belleville in 2021. Elsewhere in the video (0hr13mins), Mike cites a claim by Belleville that Mary, Lydia and Nympha were 'overseers of house churches (Acts 12:12; 16:16; Col 4:15)'. This was from *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (2005), 54. We agree that, stated in this form, the claim goes beyond the evidence which is cited. But there is more to say about Nympha.

meet regularly at her house – indeed, the growing number of believers who gather at her home appear to be the genesis of the Philippian church (Acts 16:40).

There is nothing absurd about inferring that a regular host of a community of believers would become an elder of that church community. If, because of lack of good character or some other reason, a person who was willing to host a church in their house was unsuitable for eldership, it is reasonable to suppose that such a person would not be appointed and the church would not regularly meet in their house.

Mike does not cite any egalitarian who actually says, or means, that a host would be appointed as overseer instantly and automatically. By misunderstanding Belleville, he sets up a straw man for knocking down.

His reason 5. Why would Timothy and Titus need to appoint elders, if the hosts of the church immediately became elders upon their conversion?

This is a poor reason. We are not aware of any egalitarian scholar stating that a host would become an elder immediately upon conversion.

Further, this reason presupposes that Timothy needed to appoint elders because there were none already in post.

That is historically incorrect.

Paul's first letter to Timothy is written in about 63/64 AD. But the Ephesian elders are already a recognized and functioning group before Paul meets with them at Miletus, in AD 57 (Acts 20:17-38).

There are two factors which drive Paul to give written instructions to Timothy about appointing elders. They are both connected with the crisis of false teaching which Paul returns to Asia to deal with, when he is released from his first Roman imprisonment in about AD 62.

At Ephesus, there are people in the church who desire to become recognized teachers, but who are unsuitable (1 Timothy 1:3-7). So, Paul sets out written instructions about suitability, to strengthen Timothy's hand in dealing with them.

In addition, Paul has excluded two men who had been teaching falsely, who had probably been Ephesian elders (1 Timothy 1:19-20), so it is possible that some new appointments are needed for that reason also.

In Ephesus, the church has been in existence for a decade, so it is appropriate to say that elders should not be recent converts (1 Timothy 3:6). (A timeline of the Ephesian church can be seen in our discussion of Priscilla under topic 4 in Part B of this article.)

There is a different situation in Crete, where Titus is working. It appears that elders are needed in new churches (Titus 1:5). The luxury of not appointing relatively recent converts is not available, so, Paul's instructions to Titus do not include anything about avoiding such appointments.

This practice is consistent with other evidence. In Acts 14:23 we see Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in new churches where no one had been a believer for more than a matter of months (see Acts 14:1-23; around AD 47-48). And historical evidence suggests that the apostles' usual practice was to appoint church overseers and deacons from among their 'firstfruits', that is, their first converts in each town.²⁷

None of this diminishes the practical pressures to appoint hosts as elders, which we will explain below.

His reason 6. It is impossible that the host automatically became the overseer of the church if the host was an unbeliever.

In principle, we agree with Mike on this. *If* churches met in households where the householder was not a believer, it would seem obvious that the householder would not be either the sole overseer or part of a plural eldership.

Whether there were in fact any such churches is another matter. Mike cites Romans 16:10, 11, 14 and 15, and Philippians 4:22, but he rightly does not claim that any of these verses actually shows that a church was meeting in the house of an unbeliever.

So, this is a theoretical point rather than a substantial one.

We are not aware of any egalitarian author claiming that unbeliever hosts became overseers.

His reason 7. There is a difference between having 'some authority' and being overseer of the church

Belleville writes:²⁸

'Offering one's home as a meeting place involved more than cleaning the house and making coffee. Homeowners in Greco-Roman times were in charge of all groups that met under their roof. This was essential, since they were legally responsible for the group's behavior (see, e.g., Jason's responsibility to post bond [Acts 17:7]) – not unlike the fiduciary responsibilities of the chairperson of a board today.'^{38'}

Mike examines Belleville's footnote 38, which refers to a book by Wayne Meeks. Meeks writes:²⁹

'The head of the household, by normal expectations of the society, would exercise some authority over the group and would have some legal responsibility for it.'

Mike makes a correct point that the phrase 'some authority' does not necessarily mean becoming a church overseer. There are various possible degrees of authority.

²⁷ See *Men and Women in Christ*, 37, referring to 1 Clement 42.4 (written about 30 years after Paul's letter to Titus).

²⁸ *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 37-38.

²⁹ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (2nd edn, 2003), 76.

Nonetheless, it becomes clear that Mike has not understood the full intent of Meeks' statement.

Mike says that the responsibility of the householder is like that in today's culture, by which he means in the contemporary Western world (0hr22mins). This is historically wrong. The expectations of Greco-Roman societies were very different. Christian origins specialist Brian Capper says: 'The conventions of reciprocity and hospitality would have been broken if women householders were denied authority in the gatherings which took place in their own homes.'³⁰

The extent of Mike's misunderstanding will become clearer in our discussion of the next reason.

His reason 8. The normal expectation of the host's authority did not apply in the Christian church

Mike turns to the next page of Wayne Meeks' book and says that the following is the most important quote:³¹

'That hierarchy [of Greco-Roman households] offers *no clue* to the source of the kinds of power and leadership that *rival and prevail over the position of householder*, either in the person of the itinerant apostle and his fellow workers or in the charismatic figures in the local group ... Apparently *there were other models and social ideas at work*.' (ellipsis by Mike, emphases added by Mike)

Mike regards this quote as a knockout blow. He takes it to mean that Wayne Meeks refutes outright the egalitarian position that women householders who hosted churches probably became elders of those churches. Mike states with emphasis and repetition that the egalitarian claim is 'completely false' (0hr24mins).

Mike's message is that Linda Belleville has radically misunderstood Meeks' book.

However, it is Mike who has radically misunderstood.

Inadequate research has led him to misunderstand what Meeks is saying. Meeks certainly does not mean what Mike takes him to mean.

How do we know this? There are two reasons.

First, we should pay attention to the words which Mike omits from the quotation (the omission is indicated by the dots):

'It leaves unexplained not only the occasional expression of antihierarchical sentiments but also the sense of unity among Christians in the whole city, the region or province, or even beyond.'

Meeks is painting on a broad canvas. He is not confining his remarks about power and leadership to the context of an individual assembly in one household. He is concerned to

³⁰ Cited at *Men and Women in Christ*, 308.

³¹ Mike says it is page 87. This is a slip; it is from page 77.

understand how leadership functioned so as to produce a sense of unity in a whole city or even more widely.

In this context, Meeks is flagging up that, in addition to the responsibilities of the householder, there were other factors at work, which helped to shape the forms of leadership found across the churches. The leadership function fulfilled by a single householder host does not explain the sense of unity in a whole city or more widely.

Second, Meeks provides a cross-reference to his own writings elsewhere, where he concludes from the available evidence that women mentioned by Paul were *in positions of leadership in local congregations*. He mentions Priscilla, *who was a church host*, and says that *with her husband she presided over house churches*. He adds that in Pauline circles ‘women could enjoy a functional equality in leadership roles that would have been unusual in Greco-Roman society as a whole and quite astonishing in comparison with contemporary Judaism’.³²

Therefore, Meeks certainly does *not* mean to contradict the idea that church hosts became elders. He gives Priscilla as an example of a woman host who, with her husband, presided over the church in her house.

Out of fairness to Linda Belleville, Mike would do well to issue a correction of his portrayal of her understanding of Meeks’ scholarship as radically defective, making clear that the radical defect of understanding was his own.

His reason 9. The example of Jason (Acts 17:5-9) shows only that society holds the householder to be responsible for the group; it does not show that the householder is truly the leader of the group

Again, Mike makes the elementary mistake of thinking that in the relevant respects Greco-Roman culture was similar to today’s Western culture (0hr26mins).

Jason had received Paul and Silas into his house in Thessalonica. Having given them hospitality, he was held legally responsible for their behavior when they preached in the synagogue and persuaded some of those who heard. Jason had to post a bond to guarantee their good behavior (17:9).

Such a scenario is inconceivable in modern Western culture. If we host two travelling evangelists in our house, and they go out and address a crowd somewhere in the town, and their message upsets someone, there is a possibility that the evangelists themselves might incur some legal liability under laws against hate speech or public order laws. But there is no possibility that we thereby incur some legal liability on the ground that we hosted them in our house.

³² Meeks, *In Search of the Early Christians: Selected Essays* (2002), 19-20. This republishes a 1974 article, ‘The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity’ HR 13:165-208. The article is cited in footnote 40 to page 81 of *The First Urban Christians*. That is in the same chapter as the quotation relied upon by Mike Winger. The footnote relates to Meeks’ observation in the text on page 81 that the role of women in the Pauline movement is nearly equal to that of men.

The relevance of what happened to Jason is that it shows the heavy weight of responsibility placed on the householder by Greco-Roman society. Of course, it does not show Jason as the leader; but it shows why it would be natural for a householder host to be a leader of the hosted church.

The hosting of the assemblies of a church week by week would involve potentially far greater legal responsibility than Jason incurred by providing temporary bed and board to two visiting preachers.

That responsibility would create a powerful practical imperative for the host to be an elder (whether on the house model or on the city model). To host the group regularly, without retaining influence over what would be done, would be to invite disaster.

Moreover, the expectations of the patronage system should be kept in mind. The very fact of providing the venue would create a strong social obligation, owed by the group to the host as patron, to accept guidance from the host.³³

Those practical pressures would be the same for a woman host as for a male host. For practical reasons, the woman host would need to be an elder. We are not suggesting that this must inevitably have led to an invariable practice. Rather, there is a high probability that the host, whether man or woman, would become an elder.

Results of examining reasons 1-9

We have now reviewed Mike's nine reasons for saying that the egalitarian claim about church hosts is 'not true', 'completely false' and a 'serious, egregious scholarly error'.

Reason 1 is common ground on both sides of the argument; it is merely the starting point for the discussion.

Reason 6 is irrelevant. Reasons 2, 4, 7 and 8 are based on misunderstandings by Mike. Reasons 3, 5 and 9 are also wrong.

We have noted some shortcomings in egalitarian scholars' explanations. But our conclusion is that it is Mike who has made substantial errors here. He has misunderstood Cohick. He has mistakenly depicted Belleville as misunderstanding Meeks. Through inadequate comprehension and inadequate research, he has unwittingly ascribed to Meeks an understanding of women's participation in first-century church leadership that is the opposite of Meeks' actual understanding. And Mike shows insufficient historical knowledge of first-century culture.

³³ For a detailed description of the patronage system in both Roman and Greek culture and its relevance to understanding what we read in the New Testament, see David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, Purity: Unlocking the New Testament Culture*. A second edition of this important book was published in October 2022.

The above discussion shows that there is a strong historical probability that householders who hosted church gatherings, whether men or women, became members of a church eldership team (whether on the house model or on the city model).

Women who hosted churches would have been excluded from eldership only if the apostles laid down and clearly communicated a definite and binding rule that no woman could become an elder. For only such a rule could realistically outweigh the powerful practical pressures which we have identified. But the apostles did not do so (see topic 1 above).

And there is another piece of historical evidence which supports the conclusion that women church hosts probably became elders, but of which Mike makes no mention.

Nympha again

Let's look in a little more detail at Nympha, who hosted a church (Colossians 4:15). She was probably a wealthy widow.

In the Greek text of Paul's letter to the Colossians, the grammatical form of her name could be that of either a man (Nymphas) or a woman (Nympha). Older English versions showed her name as masculine (Nymphas) and referred to the church in *his* house. That was because many Greek manuscripts referred to the church in *his* house, and scribes added accents indicating that the name was masculine rather than feminine.

However, we now know that she was a woman, because the best extant Greek manuscripts of Paul's letter to the Colossians refer to the church in *her* house. This textual evidence is recognized in most modern versions of the Bible, including ESV, NIV, NET and NRSV. That is because a change in the manuscripts from 'his' to 'her' is highly improbable, while a change from 'her' to 'his' is easily explained.

How did it come about that the earliest manuscript copies of Paul's letter said 'in *her* house', but some slightly later copies said 'in *his* house'? How did she suffer this involuntary gender reassignment?

A probable reason is not hard to find. Early scribes were well versed in Greco-Roman culture. They lived in it themselves, albeit after Nympha's time. It is overwhelmingly likely they knew that if someone hosted a church in their house, it would follow that the host was a church leader. But they believed that women could not be church leaders. So they 'corrected' the original '*her*' to '*his*'. In Capper's words, the scribes 'found Nympha's evident leadership role so scandalous that she was turned into a man (Nymphas) in parts of the textual tradition'.³⁴

So, scribes who lived relatively close to Nympha in time and in culture found her leadership position evident. But Mike Winger in 21st century California does not find her leadership position evident. What do you think? Who is more likely to understand what it would mean to

³⁴ See *Men and Women in Christ*, 303.

host a house church in the culture in which Nympha lived and in which Paul's letter was written?

In this Part A we have considered Nympha and Lydia. In Part B we will go on to consider Priscilla and Phoebe, who are both named in Romans 16, before summarizing our conclusions. These women are just a selection of those who are named in the Scriptures as God's servants.

We draw this Part to a close by noting a remarkable imbalance in Romans 16. Among the many greetings to the Roman Christians, Paul commends for their work four named men and *seven* named women.³⁵ Did he intentionally commend more named women than men as pushback against some in Rome who were reluctant to recognize the value of women's ministry? We do not know. But the disproportionate naming of so many women in a letter that became Holy Scripture reminds us that God honors those who honor him. We should honor them, too.

We gladly acknowledge the honor that is due to all those Spirit-gifted and qualified women who presently serve as elders, pastors or teachers in Bible-affirming churches around the world.

<https://terranwilliams.com/what-winger-presently-gets-wrong-women-leaders-in-the-new-testament-part-a/>

[Part B commences on next page]

³⁵ Pairs: Prisca and Aquila (co-workers, risked their necks), Andronicus and Junia (fellow-prisoners, outstanding among the apostles). Women: Phoebe (deacon, patron of many and of Paul), Mary (worked very hard), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (workers in the Lord), Persis (worked very hard in the Lord). Men: Urbanus (co-worker), Apelles (approved in Christ).

WHAT WINGER PRESENTLY GETS WRONG: **WOMEN LEADERS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

PART B

Is there evidence of women pastors and teachers in the New Testament?

This is part B of an article responding to Mike Winger's video 'Women in Ministry Part 4: Women Leaders in the New Testament: Were Women Overseers, Elders or Deacons?'.

CONTENTS OF PART B

4. Priscilla

5. Phoebe

Conclusions to Parts A and B

Postscript: Is deacon Phoebe a 'leader' in Romans 16:2?

4. Priscilla

Priscilla is another church host.

Mike makes an important and accurate observation about Priscilla. He says that, with her husband Aquila, she teaches Christian doctrine to a man (Apollos) who became a prominent Christian leader.

However, Mike misdescribes Priscilla's (and Aquila's) ministry. Referring to their teaching of Apollos, he says: 'it's just two well-educated Christians helping a less educated but gifted person to get better theology' (0hr37mins).

Mike's approach here is disappointingly superficial. He would have gained a more secure understanding if he had closely examined the whole context and had considered a timeline of the relevant events.

The story of Priscilla and Aquila

Here is the story of this remarkable couple, Priscilla and Aquila, and their relationship with the apostle Paul, in a timeline with approximate dates:¹

PRISCILLA AND AQUILA IN ROME

- 49 The Emperor Claudius expels the Jews from Rome. Among those expelled are Aquila and Priscilla,² who are tentmakers. (Acts 18:2-3)

PRISCILLA AND AQUILA IN CORINTH

- 50 Paul arrives in Corinth and meets Aquila and Priscilla. He stays with them at their house and works with them there as a tentmaker. He also evangelizes in the synagogue. (Acts 18:1-3)
- 50 When Silas and Timothy arrive in Corinth, Paul stops his tentmaking and devotes himself exclusively to preaching. After hostility in the synagogue, he stops speaking there and instead teaches in the house of Titius Justus. Many respond to the gospel. (Acts 18:5-8).
- 50-52 Paul continues his ministry in Corinth for about a year and a half. When he leaves in order to preach somewhere new, he takes Priscilla and Aquila (and not Silas or Timothy) with him. Paul's intended destination is Syria. (Acts 18:11-18)

PRISCILLA AND AQUILA IN EPHESUS

- 52 *En route*, Paul, Priscilla and Aquila arrive in Ephesus. Paul immediately speaks in the synagogue, where his message receives a favorable reception. (Acts 18:19-20)
- 52 The new believers want Paul to stay, but he declines. He cannot guarantee that he will return. He leaves Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus, and travels on (Acts 18:19-21).
- 52 While Paul is travelling, Apollos arrives in Ephesus. He is a learned or eloquent man, well versed in the Scriptures (see Acts 18:24, NIV, ESV, NRSV; Greek *dunatos* – 'able/powerful/mighty' in the Scriptures). Apollos teaches about Jesus with great fervor and speaks boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila hear what he says, they take him aside, probably to their house, and explain to him the way of God more accurately. (Acts 18:23-26)
- 52 After being instructed by Priscilla and Aquila and welcomed into the Ephesian church, Apollos is sent out with a letter of recommendation to Corinth, in Achaia, where he has a very prominent and powerful ministry, building on what Paul had done earlier

¹ There are numerous sources where estimated dates can be found. Here, dates are mainly taken from *Men and Women in Christ*, with invaluable assistance from the very thorough analysis in Martin Mosse, *The Three Gospels: New Testament History introduced by the Synoptic Problem* (Paternoster, 2007).

² Properly, her name is 'Prisca', as in Paul's letters (1 Corinthians, Romans, 2 Timothy). 'Priscilla' is a diminutive, an affectionate nickname – this is how Luke refers to her in Acts and is probably how she was referred to in personal conversation.

(Acts 18:27-28; 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:4-6). A group in Corinth even come to prefer Apollos over Paul (1 Corinthians 3:4).

52 Paul returns to Ephesus (Acts 19:1).³ He stays for three years. It appears to have been during this period that he ‘fought wild beasts’ in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 15:32).

55 Paul writes from Ephesus to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:8). He includes a greeting from Aquila and Priscilla and the church which meets in their house in Ephesus: ‘Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.’ (1 Corinthians 16:19, ESV)

55 Paul leaves Ephesus after the riot. (Acts 19:20-21; 20:1, 31)

PRISCILLA AND AQUILA IN ROME AGAIN

57 Paul is back in Corinth, near Cenchreae. He writes his letter to the Romans. (Romans 16:1-2, 23, plus the further information about Gaius in 1 Corinthians 1:14)

57 By this time Priscilla and Aquila have returned to Rome. Here is Paul’s greeting to them in the letter which he writes from Corinth to Rome (Romans 16:3-5, ESV): ‘Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. Greet also the church in their house.’

57 Paul meets with the elders of the Ephesian church at Miletus (Acts 20:13-38).

63/64 Paul writes to Timothy in Ephesus, perhaps from Macedonia (1 Timothy 1:3). He makes no mention of Priscilla and Aquila in the letter, so it is probable that they have not yet returned to Ephesus (see next entry).

PRISCILLA AND AQUILA IN EPHEBUS AGAIN

66 Paul is in prison in Rome. He writes to Timothy a second time (2 Timothy 1:17; 4:21). Timothy is still in Ephesus (2 Timothy 1:16-18, 4:9, 12, 19). At this time Priscilla and Aquila have returned to Ephesus (2 Timothy 4:19).

There is much to be learned from this story, if we consider some simple questions.

Interrogating the story

When Paul leaves Corinth in 52 on a missionary journey, going initially to Ephesus, why does he take Priscilla and Aquila along with him?

Probably, in the course of a year and a half associating with Paul, they had become co-workers with him in the gospel.⁴ Later, Paul expressly describes them as his co-workers (Romans 16:3).

³ There is no need to be puzzled by Acts 19:1. If one imagines Ephesus as a small town, it might sound as if Paul were arriving at Ephesus for the first time. But Ephesus was a substantial city – the leading city of the richest region of the Roman Empire.

⁴ We do not know when they first became Christian believers. It may have been much earlier, in Rome or elsewhere. Acts 18:2 could mean either that Paul happened to meet Aquila, or that he deliberately looked for

Luke mentions Aquila before Priscilla in Acts 18:2, when Paul first meets them. Why does Luke reverse the order of names in 18:18 when Paul and the married couple set out together from Corinth?

This needs an explanation, for Greek and Hebrew custom, when naming a couple, was to state the man's name first.⁵

Acts 18:2 on its own is neutral. It could be that Paul met Aquila first (so that the order of names is chronological) or it could simply be the customary order, man's name then woman's name, at their first meeting. Why the reversal in v 18?

On reviewing the other occurrences of their names, the likely reason is apparent: Priscilla was regarded as more prominent in the church as Paul's co-worker than Aquila. Four mentions of their names in a context of Christian ministry or Christian fellowship have Priscilla's name first (Acts 18:18, 26; Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19).

The only other mention of their names is in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:19). There, the order of names is not dependent upon how other people view the couple. This is their own greeting, sent to others, and they use the ordinary convention of stating the man's name first: 'Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.' (ESV)⁶

We may notice that upon initial arrival in Ephesus, it is only Paul who goes and speaks in the synagogue (Acts 18:19). However, Mike agrees that Priscilla and Aquila labored with Paul in church planting and evangelism (0hr46mins). (Compare Romans 16:3 'my fellow workers'.) This is supported by an expositor much closer than us in time, geography and culture, John Chrysostom. (Chrysostom became Archbishop of Constantinople; he died in 407.) He had access not only to the New Testament writings but to historical tradition by word of mouth or in writings now lost. He says that Priscilla's 'business ... was to spread the word'.⁷

When Paul leaves Ephesus in Acts 18:20-21, what then? A ministry team of three had arrived. Only two are remaining behind. So, who will now lead and guide and teach the new group of

him and found him. Paul may have heard about Aquila as a Jewish Christ-follower in Corinth who could help him.

⁵ Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (2009), 64.

⁶ Another explanation has been offered: perhaps Priscilla's social status was so much higher than Aquila's that it was socially appropriate to mention her name first. But this does not fit comfortably with 1 Corinthians 16:19. Moreover, the listing of names in the order of prominence in ministry or prominence in the church is a common feature in the New Testament. Peter is named first in the lists of apostles in Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:12-16; and Acts 1:13. In the context of the church in Antioch, Barnabas is named before Paul (Acts 11:30; 12:25-13:1-2, 7), but when they hit the missionary road and Paul becomes more prominent than Barnabas in his preaching and miraculous ministry, from then on Luke names Paul first (Acts 13:43 onwards). Similarly, in the Old Testament, Deborah, as leader of God's people, is named before her husband Lappidoth (Judges 4:4), and Huldah, as God's prophet, is named before her husband Shallum (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22). So, there is good reason to infer that Priscilla was more prominent in ministry and in the church than Aquila.

⁷ Homily 73 on Matthew 23:14.

believers? Will it be some unknown new converts whom Luke does not mention? Or will it be the couple whom Paul had brought with him as co-workers?

Luke's language in Acts 18:19 – 'he left them there' (ESV; Greek verb, *kataleipō*, 'leave behind') – implies that they are commissioned to this task by Paul. And irrespective of the particular language, the situation demands that Paul delegates the teaching and pastoral care of the group to Priscilla and Aquila.

This understanding also finds support in Chrysostom. In Homily 40 on Acts, he says:

'these [Priscilla and Aquila] he [Paul] left at Ephesus. With good reason, namely, that they should teach. For having been with him so long time, they were learning many things ...'

The weight of this testimonial from Chrysostom is magnified by the fact that he was firmly opposed to women leaders in his own day, so we can be confident that he is not over-egging Priscilla's ministry.

The next event provides further corroboration of the inference that Paul leaves them there to be teachers of the nascent Ephesian church.

After Paul has left, Apollos arrives. He is a forceful public exponent of the gospel. His preaching is enthusiastic about Jesus, but incomplete. Who in Ephesus is in a position to exert some authority over him, take him in hand, and teach him the way of God more accurately? Who has authority to represent the existing Christian group in Ephesus and its apostolic founder, Paul, and to challenge and instruct Apollos?

Rather obviously, only the believers whom Paul had left in charge of the new church. Who is that? Priscilla and Aquila. That is why they challenge and instruct Apollos.

When the couple are named in Acts 18:26, whose name is mentioned first, and why?

Again, it is Priscilla, probably because she is more prominent than Aquila in leading and teaching.

Where did they take Apollos, in order to instruct him? Did they just have a quick chat with him outside the synagogue?

The ESV says that they 'took him aside'. The NIV says that they 'invited him to their home'. The Greek verb describing what they did is *proslambanō*. It is made up of the verb *lambanō*, which means 'take' or 'receive' and the preposition *pros*, which conveys the ideas of 'to', 'towards', or 'with'. ESV translates this word as 'welcome' in Romans 14:1, 3; 15:7; and in Acts 28:2 where, after the shipwreck, the islanders showed great kindness in making a fire and hospitably 'welcoming' those who came on shore wet and exhausted.

An appropriate translation here in Acts 18:26 is 'they took him in'.

Although the ESV and NIV translations seem superficially very different, in practical terms they probably amount to the same thing. If (per ESV) 'they took him aside' in order to get to know him and teach him, where would they have taken him? They would have extended hospitality

to him and invited him to their home.⁸ That would enable them to have the lengthy discussions which would be needed in order to instruct him in a more accurate understanding of the apostles' teaching. Their home is probably also where the Ephesian believers meet (1 Corinthians 16:19). In their home they can introduce him to the other believers.

The next verse shows they are successful in drawing him into the fellowship of the small church. Indeed, Apollos so impresses the community that they write a letter of commendation for him to take with him to the Corinthian church. Given Priscilla's and Aquila's established relationship with their former church in Corinth, we may infer that they have a prominent role in the writing of the letter of commendation (Acts 18:27).

What do we learn about Priscilla and Aquila from what is said about them in Paul's letter to the Romans?

When Paul returns to Ephesus, things do not go smoothly. We do not know who or what the 'wild beasts' are that Paul fights with in Ephesus, whether literal beasts in the arena or opponents who try to get Paul killed, or both. But we know that about two years after leaving Ephesus he publicly thanks his fellow workers, Priscilla and Aquila, for risking their own necks to save his life (Romans 16:3-4). That highlights their prominence as co-workers who shared in Paul's troubles and danger.

When Priscilla and Aquila moved back to Rome, they again hosted a church in their house (Romans 16:5). In the personal greetings in the last chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul gives them the honor of being the first named people to be given a greeting. It is quite likely that this was appropriate because of their prominence in the church in Rome.

What can we learn from how Paul starts his farewell address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus?

He commences: 'You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia' (Acts 20:18, ESV). It seems that at least some of the elders present stem from the very first crop of converts from Paul's visit to the synagogue in Acts 18:19, that is, from the people that Paul left in the care of Priscilla and Aquila. This suggests that Priscilla and Aquila have not only cared for them as new believers but have contributed towards their becoming elders.

Assessment

Having examined the context and the chronology, we are in a position to assess Mike's view on Priscilla and Aquila. He says their ministry is:

'not formal or institutional, it doesn't appear to be connected to authority at all; it's just two well-educated Christians helping a less educated but gifted person to get better theology so he can do better ministry' (0hr37mins)

⁸ For scholarly references and further discussion of the terminology in Acts 18:26, see <https://margmowczko.com/at-home-with-priscilla-and-aquila/>.

That view is not consistent with the overall picture that we get from the New Testament text.

Mike's terms 'formal or institutional' are anachronistic. In those early days the churches were not formal or institutional. They were groups of believers meeting mainly in homes. In AD 52 the church in Ephesus had only just come into existence. To understand the nature of Priscilla's and Aquila's ministry, we need to consider the functions which they performed and the responsibilities which Paul gave them.

Mike's assessment 'it doesn't appear to be connected to authority at all' is unrealistic. Even Calvin, who was firmly opposed to women's leadership and teaching, admitted in his Commentary on Acts: 'we see that one of the chief teachers of the Church was instructed by a woman'. If Priscilla and Aquila had no standing as leaders of the existing Christian group, why should the learned and forceful Apollos take any notice of them? He needed to know that what they said to him was true apostolic doctrine and ought to be accepted by him. He was able to know that because of their standing as Paul's delegates and leaders of the group of new believers.

Mike views Priscilla and Aquila as 'just two well-educated Christians helping a less educated but gifted person'. When we have read the text closely and have understood what is happening, the scenario imagined by Mike is not credible. He appears to have overlooked here that Priscilla and Aquila were two-thirds of Paul's church-planting team in Ephesus and, when Paul quickly left, they alone were responsible to continue the work. Paul may well have planned it that way, for when he left Corinth his destination was not Ephesus but Syria (Acts 18:18): if he could garner some quick fruit in a major city *en route*, he would leave Priscilla and Aquila to continue the work while he travelled on.

Luke considers their instruction of Apollos to be of sufficient importance for him to include it in his short and carefully selective history of the early years of the Christian church. As Mike says, 'this example is here for a reason' (0hr38mins). But Mike misses the full reason.

One of Luke's particular emphases is the word, the apostolic message (Acts 6:7; 8:4; 12:24; 13:49; 18:11, 19:20 and many other references). The relatively unusual verb which Luke uses in Acts 18:26 to describe Priscilla's and Aquila's teaching (*ektithēmi*) is the same word which he uses of the apostle Paul's expository teaching in Acts 28:23, in the passage where he brings his whole narrative to an end.

This is significant. From Acts 16 onwards, Luke's focus is on Paul's ministry, so why this one seeming deviation in chapter 18 in order to narrate what Priscilla and Aquila did in Ephesus? It is because even this story is about Paul's ministry. It shows how the reach of his ministry and expository teaching was extended through co-workers whom he trained. We know that some in the early church saw Apollos as a rival to Paul (1 Corinthians 3:4). Luke probably knew of that. But this story shows that Apollos is not really Paul's rival, since it is Paul's own trainees and co-workers, Priscilla and Aquila, who expound the Scriptures and the apostolic message to Apollos and set him up for a fruitful teaching ministry in Corinth.

If, as complementarians claim, there is a special category of Christian teaching which is 'authoritative', Priscilla and Aquila do it.

Imagine how Luke's text would have been expounded if all the biblical facts that we have about Priscilla and Aquila had mentioned *only Aquila*. Commentators would have said:

'Here is an early example of a pastor-teacher in the primitive church: he arrives with and assists Paul and helps nurture the new community of believers. When Paul promptly leaves, he is the leader who remains. He hosts them in his house. And his interaction with Apollos gives a vivid insight into his work as Paul's approved pastor of the fledgling church, in particular his responsibility to preserve and teach apostolic doctrine. Notice how similar he is to Timothy as a pastor: he is trained up by Paul, he travels with Paul, Paul leaves him in charge at Ephesus, and he undertakes authoritative doctrinal instruction.'

The functions of elders or pastor-teachers are to lead and shepherd the flock and to teach apostolic doctrine. Those are the functions which Priscilla and Aquila perform in Ephesus.

We may connect this with what Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, written perhaps AD 57-59, some two to four years after he had left Ephesus in AD 55.⁹ In Ephesians 4:11-12 he speaks of Christ's gifts to his church, which include evangelists and pastor-teachers, to equip God's people for service and build up the body of Christ. These are people with particular God-given callings. Paul gives no hint of any gender distinction in this passage. That is as we might expect, after seeing the responsibilities which he hands over to Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus.

Paul expected a gifted woman, Priscilla, to teach with authority in order to maintain the apostolic doctrine. She fulfilled his expectation.

A word about gifting

Three crucial functions of eldership are shepherding (pastoring), leading and teaching (*poimainō*, 1 Peter 5:2; *proistēmi, didaskalia*, 1 Timothy 5:17). These functions correlate with the wording of the gifts of pastoring, leading and teaching (*poimēn, didaskalos*, Ephesians 4:11; *didaskō, didaskalia*, Romans 12:7; *proistēmi*, Romans 12:8). Paul stresses, especially in Romans 12, that gifts should determine who does what. 'If your gift is ... teaching, then teach. ... If it is to lead, lead with diligence.' The abiding principle is that gifting is a crucial indicator for who leads.

It should interest us, though not surprise us, that the three churches which received Pauline letters that included a list of spiritual gifts – the churches in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome – are the same churches where it appears Priscilla served successively on the basis of her God-given gifting.

⁹ Another view is that Ephesians was written in 60/61. For present purposes, we do not need to decide when in the period 57-61 it was written.

Complementarians try to sidestep this principle. For example, Kevin DeYoung first acknowledges, ‘Women have vital spiritual gifts, including gifts of teaching and leadership.’ But then he ushers the benefit of these gifts away from men:

‘Women can, and should, exercise powerful gifts of teaching, provided it is not over men. Surely teaching children and other women is not a waste of a woman’s gifts?’¹⁰

But Paul’s teaching about humbly receiving the contributions of other believers warns us against those damaging sentiments:

‘The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”’ (1 Corinthians 12:21, ESV)

Thus far in Parts A and B, we already have enough basis for women exercising pastoral and teaching authority today. Nonetheless, we should move on to Phoebe, because Mike’s lengthy discussion of her contains some major mistakes. We will find, contrary to Mike’s view, there is good evidence that she was probably authorized by Paul to teach Scripture to a church, including to the men.

5. Phoebe

In his introduction, Mike plays a clip of N. T. Wright (Tom Wright) talking about Phoebe.

Wright is the best-known New Testament scholar in the world today. After studying Greek and Latin literature and history at Oxford, he moved into theology and into church leadership. He has devoted his life to serving the Lord both in the academy and in the church. He has written more than 70 books. He affirms the truth of the Bible. He understands the Bible as not placing any restriction on the ministry of women as compared with men.

In the video clip he says: ‘The probability is that the first person to expound Paul’s letter to the Romans was a woman, a deacon, from the church in Cenchreae.’ (0hr2mins)

This woman is Phoebe.

Here are the words of the apostle Paul, as rendered by the ESV:

‘I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.’ (Romans 16:1-2)

The recipients are being asked to welcome Phoebe because she is the bearer of the letter. Scholars are in general agreement on this.

However, there are three points on which scholars do not agree:

¹⁰ ‘Let Us Reason Together About Complementarianism’, May 26, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/complementarianism/>.

- whether she was probably the first person to expound Paul's letter to the Romans;
- whether in v 1 Phoebe was a 'servant' of the church at Cenchreae (as in ESV) or whether she was a 'deacon' of the church (as Wright says, and as in NIV);
- whether in v 2 she had been a 'helper' (ASV), a 'benefactor' (NIV), a 'patron' (ESV) or a 'leader' (CEV) of many and of Paul.

We will look at these three questions.

Q1: Did Phoebe probably expound Paul's letter? Mike's objections

Wright believes that Phoebe, as the letter-carrier, probably expounded the letter to the recipients in Rome.

Mike contests that idea. It would make her a teacher approved by Paul. Such a view of Phoebe would collide with the complementarian belief that only men can be approved teachers of the church (despite the example of Priscilla's teaching authority which we have considered above).

He raises two objections, which we will consider.

His first objection is that *there is no evidence for a custom that letter-carriers explained letters; it did not exist.*

We believe that Mike's familiarity with Greco-Roman languages, literature and culture is not comparable with Tom Wright's. It may seem a little surprising that Mike is contradicting Wright on a matter of Greco-Roman practice in the first century AD.

However, if mistakes are made in scholarship, they should be corrected, irrespective of who makes them. Wright welcomes correction. In the preface to the first volume of his magisterial series on Christian Origins and the Question of God he writes:

'a final word of warning. I frequently tell my students that quite a high proportion of what I say is probably wrong, or at least flawed or skewed in some way which I do not at the moment realize. The only problem is that I do not know which bits are wrong; if I did I might do something about it. ... since I am aware of the virtual certainty of error in some of what I write, I hope I shall pay proper attention to the comments of those – and no doubt there will be many – who wish to draw my attention to the places where they find my statement of the evidence inadequate, my arguments weak, or my conclusions unwarranted.'¹¹

In this instance, Mike's comment is about the inadequacy of the evidence.

In the clip, Wright does not cite any evidence to show that a letter-carrier such as Phoebe would have explained the letter. The clip is taken from an interview. We assume that he was not asked about the supporting evidence, else Mike would have identified Wright's evidence and would have considered it.

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), xvii-xviii.

Mike turns to something written by another well-known scholar, Craig Keener. in a chapter in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*. Keener states:

‘The chapter opens with mention of Phoebe, who carried Paul’s letter to Rome, hence plainly functioning as Paul’s agent. Given his commendation, it is possible Paul expects her to be able to explain to the Roman Christians details of his letter if she is questioned (vv. 1–2), as letter bearers sometimes were.’¹²

Mike notes the softness of what is claimed here (‘it is *possible* ...’), in distinction from Wright’s firmer claim of probability. Then he examines Keener’s footnote, which says:

‘See, e.g., Xenophon, *Cyr.* 4.5.34. Bearers might also communicate a letter’s spirit (e.g., 1 Macc. 12:23; Cicero, *Fam.* 12.30.3; Eph. 6:21–22; Col. 4:7–8).’

He says these ancient sources are Keener’s defense of what he says (1hr17mins).

Examining the passage from Xenophon, Mike says that the text shows a special command to the carrier about answering questions in accordance with the letter, but that does not evidence a *custom* of giving explaining powers to the carrier. He concludes:

‘I don’t think that this is a real custom. I think that this is something that scholars just say.’

Then, just like Tom Wright, he winsomely invites correction. He says,

‘Maybe I’m wrong you guys, and hopefully I’m sharing enough of my details here that you could notice where I’m wrong. I’m trying to be as transparent as possible.’ (1hr20mins)

He then dismisses Keener’s further references as not relevant. We comment at once: of course, they are not relevant. Keener supplied those further references for a different point, about communicating a letter’s spirit rather than about explaining the letter.

In this part of the video, we see some elementary errors in Mike’s research.

Elementary errors

First, Mike has not noticed that Keener’s footnote starts with ‘See, e.g.’ This means ‘See, for example’ (*e.g.* is an abbreviation for the Latin *exempli gratia*). Keener is putting forward the Xenophon reference merely as one example. This is not Keener’s list of sources in support of what he says.

Second, as regards sources of evidence, here is what Keener says in the first footnote on the first page of his chapter:

‘Because this essay is intended for a more general audience and because I have provided detailed documentation for most of my points elsewhere (see my *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* [Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1992, rev. with new introduction, 2004]; articles on gender roles in *InterVarsity’s Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*; *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*; and

¹² *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 216.

Dictionary of New Testament Background [esp. "Marriage," 680-693], I document relatively lightly in this essay.'

Contrary to Mike's assertion, the one footnote which mentions Xenophon is not Keener's defense of what he says. Mike does not say whether he has examined any of the materials listed by Keener in his first footnote.¹³

Third, Mike ignores how Keener's text continues. On the same page and the next page (216-217), Keener discusses whether Phoebe, in her capacity as a deacon, would be expected to explain Scripture. Mike does not comment on Keener's argument.

Fourth, Mike jumps to his conclusion without appropriate research.

After mentioning two sentences written by a single scholar (Keener), and misunderstanding one footnote, which gave one example, Mike dismisses the idea that letter-carriers explained letters as just something that scholars say. He says: 'I spent some time on this. I can't find anything that supports it in any strong way at all.' (1hr22mins)

It would appear that he did not look in the right places.

The practices involved in writing and sending letters are referred to in scholarship as 'epistolary practices'. A good place to look would be the work of scholars who have studied ancient epistolary practices.

One such scholar is Peter Head. Over a number of years, Head has carried out in-depth research into evidence of both Jewish and Greco-Roman epistolary practices, in order to seek a better understanding of New Testament letters.

In an article on Jewish letter-writing, Head concludes:

'It is clear that the letter carriers do sometimes have an important role in the communication process (esp. when named, where it is generally assumed that they will have a larger role). ... we do find letter carriers involved in reinforcing and supplementing the message of the written letter and thus facilitating the communication process envisaged by the author and sender of the letter.'¹⁴

He carried out extensive new research into letters written in Greek from 200 BC to 200 AD. From this, he concludes:

'Perhaps the crucial point for our thinking about the delivery of Pauline letters is the understanding that the trusted letter-carrier often has an important role in extending the communication initiated by the letter. The letter-carrier thus brings fuller personal knowledge into the communication process, which is only partly embodied in the letter. ... It is generally accepted that the Pauline co-workers who functioned as letter-carriers had

¹³ Keener's article 'Man and Woman' in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* discusses Phoebe and (at 589) refers the reader to his 1992 book (*Paul, Women and Wives*) pages 237-240 for fuller details.

¹⁴ *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon* (eds. C.A. Evans & H.D. Zacharias; SSEJC 13; LNTS 70; London: T & T Clark / Continuum, 2009), 203-219, 219.

an important role in the communication strategy of Paul, offering a personal representative to present his letter (already a speech which substitutes for the apostolic presence). *The papyrological evidence surveyed here supports the further idea that in the Pauline tradition the accredited letter-carriers functioned not only as personal private postmen, but as personal mediators of Paul's authoritative instruction to his churches, and as the earliest interpreters of the individual letters.* They related the specific material in their letter to what they knew of Pauline teaching more generally.

This model suggests that the earliest reception of specific Pauline letters would have been accompanied by a Pauline representative who could relate the specifics of the letter to the general Pauline tradition known to him (or her).¹⁵ (emphasis added)

If we apply Head's conclusion to the letter to the Romans, it would follow that *Phoebe probably functioned as the personal mediator of Paul's authoritative instruction and as the first interpreter of the letter.*

Moving our focus onwards by several centuries, other scholars have noted abundant evidence that bishops made use of deacons as letter-carriers (in Latin, *tabellarii*), many of whom are known by name. Such *tabellarii* 'were usually briefed on the contents of the letters entrusted to them and often made supplementary reports on matters that were not set down in writing.' However, the use of *tabellarii* was not new – it was already a practice of wealthy people in the late Republic and early Empire, before Paul's time.¹⁶

Head's article on letters written in Greek does not specifically say whether he considers his conclusion to be applicable to Paul's letter to the Romans. But he has also written a blogpost, commenting on Wright's views. Head expressly agrees that *Phoebe would have had a role in 'explaining the contents of Romans'*.¹⁷

Mike has not considered this relevant scholarly evidence, which is based on close study of ancient primary sources. He has no sound basis for his conclusion that Paul's letter-carriers did not explain the letters.

Mike's second objection to Wright's view is based on a consideration of the practicalities. He considers them from the point of view of the sender and from the point of view of the recipient.

If letter-carriers were really relied on to explain letters, how could correspondence take place in the ancient world? When sending a letter, you would need to find someone (1) who is willing to travel, (2) who can carry the letter, (3) whom you can trust, and (4) who is capable of interpreting and teaching your letter. Mike imagines Paul would have to say: 'OK, this letter's

¹⁵ 'Named Letter-Carriers among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31.3 (2009), 279-299, 298.

¹⁶ Martin R. P. McGuire, 'Letters and Letter Carriers in Christian Antiquity' (contd), *The Classical World*, Vol 53, No 6 (1960), 184-185, 199-200, 185.

¹⁷ <http://tychichus.blogspot.com/2012/11/nt-wright-on-phoebe.html> (published November 27, 2012; accessed 31 October 2022).

got to go to Rome, but I need to wait until somebody who's skilled enough to teach Romans shows up and they can carry it over to Rome.' He suggests that life doesn't work that way; in real life it would be: 'Hey, are you going to Rome? Hey, I trust you. OK, take my letter with you.' (1hr22mins)

And what about the receiving of a letter? Mike suggests that upon Phoebe's arrival, the first thing a church leader in Rome would do would be to 'grab it themselves and read it themselves'.

He concludes that the whole idea of a letter-carrier being the official teacher of the letter to the Romans is 'so weird, so weird' (1hr23mins).

We commend Mike for using his imagination in order to try to better understand Romans 16:1-2. In principle, this is the right thing to do. To enter into the meaning of Scripture and truly understand it, we have to use our imaginations.

But uninformed speculation is of no value. What is required is disciplined historical imagination.¹⁸ Our use of imagination must be constrained and directed by the text itself and by the available historical and cultural evidence. Lack of this discipline has led Bible scholars into many errors.

Mike's imaginations about the sender's difficulties, and about how the recipients would read, do not take into account the historical evidence. We have already seen that Head's detailed research substantially confirms Tom Wright's judgment about the likelihood that Phoebe was authorized by Paul to explain the letter to the recipients.

Moreover, the historical evidence shows that getting private letters delivered was indeed not easy, and was often extremely difficult.¹⁹ For example, the problem of finding a suitable person to take a letter is visible in ancient letters:

- Senders mention that they are writing now because they found or happened upon someone who was going to the desired destination:
 'Since Achillas was going downstream I decided that I must greet you in writing ...'
- Or else they excuse themselves for not having written earlier because of the difficulty of finding someone:
 'Don't think that I neglect to write to you; we don't have anyone with whom to send (a letter)'²⁰

To consider how recipients dealt with a letter that they received, we must also keep in mind the method of writing.

¹⁸ We learned the phrase 'disciplined historical imagination' from the writings of N. T. Wright.

¹⁹ Martin R. P. McGuire, 'Letters and Letter Carriers in Christian Antiquity' (contd), *The Classical World*, Vol 53, No 6 (1960), 184-185, 199-200, 185.

²⁰ Peter M. Head, 'Named Letter-Carriers among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31.3 (2009), 279-299, 284, where multiple examples are given.

In our world, we are accustomed to the use of punctuation, including spaces between words, in order to reduce ambiguities, as illustrated by *apandagoesintoabareatsshootsandleaves*.²¹

But in Paul's world, the words of the letter were run together as a continuous string of capital letters, and punctuation would have been minimal, if there was any at all. Here are the first few lines of Paul's letter to the Romans in English (ESV):

PAULASERVANTOFCHRISTJESUSCALLEDTOBEANAPOSTLESETAPARTFORTHE
GOSPELOFGODWHICHHEPROMISED BEFOREHANDTHROUGH HISPROPHETS
INTHEHOLYSCRIPTURESCONCERNINGHIS SONWHOWASDESCENDED FROM
DAVIDACCORDINGTOTHEFLESHANDWASDECLAREDTOBETHESON OFGODIN
POWERACCORDINGTOTHE SPIRITOFHOLINESSBYHISRESURRECTIONFROM
THEDEADJESUSCHRISTOURLORDTHROUGHWHOMWEHAYERECEIVEDGRACE
AND APOSTLESHP TOBRINGABOUTTHEOBEDIENCEOFFAITHFORTHE SAKEOF
HISNAME AMONGALLTHENATIONSINCLUDINGYOUWHOARECALLED TO
BELONGTOJESUSCHRISTTOALLTHOSEINROMEWHOARELOVEDBYGODAND
CALLEDTOBESAINTSGRACETOYOUANDPEACEFROMGODOURLFATHERAND
THELORDJESUSCHRISTTFFIRSTOTHANKMYGODTHROUGHJESUSCHRISTFOR

Making it even harder to read, some words would probably not be spelled in full, but abbreviated.

In the Roman Empire, 'most people were functionally illiterate'.²² And while some of the educated minority were able to read silently, the normal method of reading was to read out loud.

So, a letter to a group of people would not be passed around; it would be read out to the assembled gathering by a skilled lector. We see glimpses of this in the New Testament:

'After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.' (Colossians 4:16, NIV)

'I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.' (1 Thessalonians 5:27, NIV)

'Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.' Revelation 1:3 (NIV).

Now, let's get some historical context for *the kind of letter* that we are concerned with here – Paul's letter to the Romans.

Most letters in the ancient world were very short – *rarely more than 200 words*. But a few people wrote longer letters. Here are some statistics for the great letter writers Cicero (1st century BC) and Seneca (1st century AD):

Cicero's known letters range from 22 words to 2,530 words (average 295).

²¹ Adapted from Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (2009).

²² Keener, 'Man and Woman' in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 589.

Seneca's known letters range from 149 words to 4,134 words (average 955).

Let's compare the apostle Paul:

Paul's known letters range from 355 words (Philemon) to 7,101 words (Romans).²³

We could reasonably suppose that an elite, educated man in Rome would be comfortable reading a letter of 200 words out loud to himself or, after examining it carefully, reading it out to others. Now imagine the Roman church receiving Paul's epistle, of more than 7,000 words. That may have been longer than any letter that they had heard in their whole lives. Without help, the epistle would be 'just a bewildering maze of letters that could be parsed in various ways. Texts in an oral culture do not function like texts in our world.'²⁴

To a member of that church, Mike's twenty-first-century idea that a church leader would grab Paul's letter and read it to himself, and would not have expected to receive explanations from Paul's authorized representative, would have sounded (if we may gently re-use Mike's own words) 'so weird, so weird'.

Phoebe probably explained the letter to the Romans

From the totality of this evidence, what should we conclude? Phoebe, as the letter-carrier, was probably authorized by Paul to explain his exceptionally long and complex letter to the assembled church in Rome.

Mike has wrongly claimed the idea that letter-carriers like Phoebe explained letters to the recipients is 'just something that scholars say', unsupported by evidence. Out of fairness to Tom Wright and Craig Keener, Mike would do well to issue a correction.

So far in our analysis, we have concluded that Priscilla (almost certainly) and Phoebe (very probably) were authorized by Paul to teach and explain doctrine to men. They stand as early examples of the 'reliable people' that Paul refers to when he says to another of his trainees: 'And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others' (2 Timothy 2:2).²⁵ Having taught Priscilla and Phoebe the apostolic doctrines, Paul evidently wants them to teach others, including men in Ephesus and in Rome.

Q2: Was Phoebe a 'servant' of the church at Cenchreae (as in ESV) or was she a 'deacon' of that church?

On this question, certainty is impossible. We can only judge what was probable.

²³ Martin R. P. McGuire, 'Letters and Letter Carriers in Christian Antiquity', *The Classical World*, Vol 53, No 5 (1960), 148-153, 148.

²⁴ See Witherington, cited at *Men and Women in Christ*, 298.

²⁵ The NIV correctly translates these individuals as 'people' not 'men' (ESV) because the meaning of the Greek word '*anthrōpos*' is not specifically male.

Probably she was a deacon, for the reasons explained by Mike. On this, Mike agrees with Tom Wright, and also with complementarian scholars Craig Blomberg, Tom Schreiner and Douglas Moo (1hr39mins).

It follows that the term 'deacon' is capable of applying to a woman.²⁶

However, Mike's discussion of deacons is marred by some misconceived criticisms of egalitarian writings. He cites Linda Belleville on page 47 of *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, who states:

'Women are readily labeled "deacons" in the NT. Phoebe, for example, is applauded by Paul as a deacon.⁶¹

Mike then spends seven minutes taking Belleville to task for saying this. He complains that she is pluralizing a single event (from just one woman to multiple women). He complains that her footnote 61 does not support her text. He expresses his deep concern over the perceived egalitarian misuse of Scripture.

Mike thinks that Belleville's footnote 61 is supposed to be the support for her statement that women are readily labeled deacons in the New Testament. In that state of mind, he reads out the three Scripture passages in her footnote, and expresses his bafflement. (He does not look at the article by Belleville which she cites in her footnote for further explanation of her thinking.) He makes Belleville look careless and foolish.

Again, it is Mike who has made the mistake here. He radically mis-reads what Belleville has written. His bafflement is easily explained. It would have been useful if he had thought to himself: 'This seems to make no sense at all, have I misunderstood something?'

Had he looked more closely at the footnote, he would have seen that it starts with 'Cf.'. This is an abbreviation of the Latin word *confer*, which means 'compare'. It signals to an academic reader that this footnote is not support for the proposition in the text, but is other material which is interesting to consider in the discussion.

Had he looked more closely at Belleville's main text on page 47, he would have realized that her support for the proposition that women were readily labelled deacons is not in the footnote, but in the main text. Belleville first gives the example of Phoebe, and explains why she understands that Phoebe was a deacon, not merely a servant. Then Belleville *specifically explains why she pluralizes*: 'The list of qualifications for women deacons in 1 Timothy 3 makes it plain that this was not an isolated case'. She cites 1 Timothy 3:11 and explains why she interprets it as referring to women deacons.

²⁶ In Romans 16:1, the word *diakonos* is used to refer to Phoebe, in the accusative case (*diakonon*). It may be helpful to know that there is some possibly controversial parsing of the Greek shown on Bible Hub and on Step Bible. On those two websites, it is parsed as grammatically feminine in that sole instance, but the form is the ordinary grammatically masculine form, just as in Romans 15:8, and in every other use of the word in the New Testament. If someone reading this knows why they have parsed it differently in 16:1, we would be pleased to enlarge our understanding.

The irony of all this is that Mike agrees with Belleville's interpretation of Romans 16:1, that Phoebe was a deacon. And Mike agrees with Belleville's interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:11, that it states qualifications for women deacons. By mis-reading what Belleville wrote, he has wasted seven minutes of his video and has unwittingly misled thousands of listeners as regards the quality of Belleville's scholarship. Out of fairness to her, Mike would do well to issue a correction.

(Why didn't Mike discover his elementary mistake here? We are confident it was not because of any lack of intelligence. We would guess he was distracted by seeing weak egalitarian arguments during his studies of the topic of women in ministry. He did not guard against the negative impact of poor arguments. He may even have been caught in a sort of vicious spiral, in which he came to each further egalitarian argument with an ever-increasing expectation of finding fault. Cognitive bias of this kind is a regular feature of a partisan approach to interpreting the Bible.)

Q3: Was Phoebe commended by Paul as a 'helper' (ASV), a 'benefactor' (NIV), a 'patron' (ESV) or a 'leader' (CEV)?

In Romans 16:2, Paul commends Phoebe, stating that she has been a *prostatis* of many and of himself.

There are at least four competing translations of the Greek word *prostatis* in Romans 16:2. Which is most likely to be correct?

Our initial consideration of this question will involve identifying some further elementary errors made by Mike, due to inadequate research and unskilled use of Greek lexicons.

Mike's main focus here is on criticizing Philip Payne's view that the correct option in Romans 16:2 is 'leader' (1hr48mins to 1hr53mins).²⁷

Mike says it is a 'significant error' for Payne to rely on the LSJ Greek lexicon for concluding that *prostatis* means 'leader'. He says that LSJ does not focus on the kind of Greek found in the New Testament but on classical Greek 'and other stuff'; LSJ, in its long article on the meaning of *prostates* (the masculine form of the same word), does not mention the New Testament.

Instead, Mike recommends BDAG, a lexicon which focuses on NT Greek.²⁸ He reads out the entry on *prostatis*:

'a woman in a supportive role, a patron, a benefactor. The relationship suggested by the term is not to be confused with the Roman patron-client system, which was of a different order and alien to Greek tradition.'

²⁷ Mike cites Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (2009), 62.

²⁸ To be more precise, the title of this lexicon is: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

On this basis Mike concludes, regarding Payne's view: 'This is bogus. This is bogus. ... I think this is just bogus'.

Then he describes his checks to see if there are any English versions that actually translate *prostatis* as 'leader' in Romans 16:2. He says that 12 major translations have terms like 'patron', 'helper', 'benefactor', and so on. He says he could find *only one* translation that says 'leader', TPT (the Passion Translation). He pauses and smiles, because his audience knows that he has made a number of videos strongly criticizing TPT as seriously defective.

However, Mike has made mistakes in every step of this argument. If he had taken the precaution of looking at Philip Payne's academic pedigree at TEDS, Tübingen, Cambridge, Gordon-Conwell, Bethel and Fuller,²⁹ he might have thought to himself: 'it looks like Phil has been a student of NT Greek for five decades, and he has a better knowledge of NT Greek than me; I wonder if I should look at this more closely before I describe his conclusion as bogus, bogus, bogus?'

Mike makes five mistakes here.

First, it is right to say that LSJ has much broader coverage of Greek than BDAG. But LSJ's coverage includes the New Testament. Moreover, it can be particularly helpful for study of the New Testament, for the very reason that it is a secular lexicon. It reports the meanings and usages found, without being influenced by any particular theological agendas. So, contrary to Mike's view, Philip Payne was totally correct to consult and cite LSJ as a useful aid.

Second, Mike has misunderstood the reason for LSJ not citing the New Testament in its entry on *prostates* (the male form of *prostatis*). The reason cannot be that the LSJ omits consideration of the New Testament, for the LSJ gives substantial consideration to the New Testament. The LSJ's coverage of the New Testament is so useful that it is used as a primary reference source by Step Bible (stepbible.org). The true reason is that the word *prostates* (the masculine form) does not occur in the New Testament.

Third, Mike's approach here is illogical. It does not make sense to insist that one ought to consult BDAG for the meaning of *prostatis* on the ground that BDAG concentrates on the New Testament. That word occurs only once in the NT. There are no other NT uses of it to consider. So, the only possible places for examples of usage are outside the NT. A secular lexicon is therefore an obvious place to look.

Fourth, the BDAG entry is an example of why caution is required in the use of the BDAG lexicon. BDAG is a massive undertaking, representing many years of work and great learning and expertise. But the editors do not claim to be infallible. And the explanations of words provided in BDAG inevitably reflect in some degree the theological opinions of the editors, simply because those opinions will have some influence on their reading of Scripture. In our own research, we have noticed a tendency in BDAG to minimize women in accordance with

²⁹ See www.pbpayne.com/about/.

traditional views. The BDAG entry on *prostatis* appears to reflect the editors' understanding of Romans 16:2 – that Phoebe, as a woman, would have been in a junior, supporting role.

The editors are aware of possible views that Phoebe might be a person of importance as a patron. With this in mind, they assert that the relevant meaning in v 2 is 'not to be confused with the Roman patron-client system, which was of a different order and alien to Greek tradition.'

We believe that the editors here reveal an insufficient or outdated knowledge of Roman and Greek patronage in New Testament times. There was indeed a period when Greek customs were sharply distinguished from the Roman patronage system. That was in the distant past, in the time of the Athenian democracy. (Hence the editors' reference to 'Greek tradition'). But from the fourth century BC onwards, Greek patronage resembled the Roman system more and more closely. In Paul's time, under the Roman Empire, they were almost indistinguishable.³⁰

The BDAG editors' outlook is the same viewpoint that gave rise to the traditional weak English translations along the lines that Phoebe was a 'helper'. From that traditional viewpoint, a woman was very unlikely to be in a powerful position, such as a first-century patron. However, modern translations have tended to abandon that old translation, which does not adequately reflect the meaning of *prostatis*.

Fifth, Mike's examination of other translations is inadequate. If he had looked on Bible Gateway, in a few seconds he could have examined over 50 English versions to see whether they used the word 'lead' or 'leader'. He would have discovered that the translation 'leader' is used in YLT – Young's Literal Translation (3rd edition, 1898, originally 1862). It is certain that Robert Young (author of an analytical concordance of the Hebrew and Greek of the whole Bible) was uninfluenced by 20th or 21st century egalitarianism. Mike would also have discovered that the CEV, a widely used, scholar-based, modern translation, renders the contested phrase as 'she has proved to be a respected leader for many others, including me.'

Mike has no valid grounds for describing Payne's preferred translation as 'bogus'.

So, is 'leader' right or wrong for Phoebe in Romans 16:2?

On balance, our own view is that it is more likely that the translation 'patron' or perhaps 'benefactor' is correct. But a reasonable case can be made for 'leader', as we will show. At the end of this article, we include a postscript assessing the pros and cons of the competing arguments for 'leader', 'patron' and 'benefactor'.

³⁰ This is well explained in David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, Purity: Unlocking the New Testament Culture* (1st edition 2000), 102-104. This book is essential reading for every expositor of the New Testament, unless they have already read more widely on the same subject. There is now a revised and expanded second edition (published in October 2022).

Conclusions to Parts A and B

The Lord has entrusted to Mike an important teaching ministry. He is still developing his skills, knowledge, experience and understanding. We commend Mike for his transparency and his modesty. He winsomely invites correction, in case he has made errors.

His video on Women in the New Testament is marred by major errors of research and reasoning, which lead him to unjustified conclusions. Disappointingly, he repeatedly misunderstands, and hence misrepresents, the views of egalitarian scholars.

Contrary to Mike's view, the qualifications or indicators for church elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 do not clearly exclude women from eldership, as prominent complementarian scholars fairly acknowledge.

Mike's consideration of this central passage is superficial. It contains elementary errors. We have laid out how the Greek text of Paul's list of qualifications contains indications of gender-neutrality and is capable of applying to women, as is apparent from closely examining it, which Mike omits to do.

The errors which infect Mike's consideration of the qualifications for elders are carried through into the topic of women deacons. Contrary to Mike's view, interpreting 1 Timothy 3:11 as a statement of qualifications for women deacons does not provide any support for a restriction of eldership to men.

Contrary to Mike's view, the egalitarian claim that women who hosted churches in the New Testament period became church elders is probably true.

It is well supported by historical and cultural considerations. Mike mis-reads and misunderstands the work of Lynn Cohick, Linda Belleville and Wayne Meeks, and approaches the matter as if considering what arrangements would be likely in 21st century California.

Contrary to Mike's view, Priscilla and Aquila were trained and authorized by Paul to engage in ministry as pastor-teachers overseeing the fledgling church in Ephesus.

Mike's examination of the biblical evidence about Priscilla is superficial and his interpretation is unrealistic.

Contrary to Mike's view, Phoebe, as Paul's authorized representative, was very probably the first person to explain to an assembled church Paul's letter to the Romans.

This probability is supported by serious historical research based on study of primary sources – research which Mike did not consider. Mike's understanding of how a long letter would be sent and received in the ancient world is deficient.

Finally, returning to the qualifications for elders, we have noted the *absence* of a definite and clearly communicated rule that women should not be elders or pastors *from precisely the places where we would expect to see such a rule if it existed* (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

This is a fundamental weakness in any complementarian position on women's ministry. It is a weakness that Mike fails to address; it seems he is not aware of it.

With this in mind, let's zoom out on the question of women elders or pastors.

Some complementarians are willing to affirm openly that women are *capable of* the tasks required of church elders.³¹ Many complementarians readily admit that there were definitely women evangelists and church planters, women prophets, women teachers, women church hosts and women deacons in the New Testament.

But then it makes little sense, as Jamin Hübner says:

'To relegate "eldership" or "the pastoral office" to a separate, special category from these other functions—such that one sex could be automatically, universally, and permanently excluded from it and yet fulfill all the other functions'³²

Short of a clear biblical prohibition against it, it is reasonable, not unreasonable, to affirm women elders in those situations where God raises them up and where it is advantageous to the mission—which is certainly the case in egalitarian cultures today. This is especially true when there is no explicit ban on women's eldership in the New Testament; and when we can be confident that Priscilla functioned as an elder or pastor-teacher, and that Phoebe, though not necessarily a leader, was most probably an authorized teacher of Scripture to a church.

Postscript: Is deacon Phoebe a 'leader' in Romans 16:2?

Paul describes Phoebe in Romans 16:2 as a *prostatis*. Should that word be translated as 'leader', 'patron' or 'benefactor'? Lexically, all of these three words express possible meanings of *prostatis*.

Which meaning of *prostatis* is the best fit for the particular context of Romans 16:2? This is a difficult question, because what is said about Phoebe is so brief.

There are reasonable points which can be made in support of 'leader':

1. In the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament), the masculine form (*prostates*) is used of superintendents of works (1 Chronicles 29:6; 2 Chronicles 8:10) and of an officer of the chief priest (2 Chronicles 24:11).
2. Outside the Bible, uses of the masculine term include presidents of associations and of synagogues.

³¹ Graham Beynon and Jane Tooher, *Embracing Complementarianism: Turning Biblical Convictions into Positive Church Culture* (2022), 73.

³² Jamin Hübner, 'A New Case for Female Elders: An Analytical Reformed-Evangelical Approach' (PhD thesis), 171. Accessed at

https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/14128/thesis_h%C3%BCbner_ja.pdf.

3. Since the noun *prostatis* does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament, we should consider the cognate verb *proistēmi*, which occurs eight times in the NT. In six of the eight occurrences, the sense has to do with ruling or leading (Romans 12:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:4, 5, 12; 5:17).³³

4. Paul was cautious about accepting financial or material help (Acts 18:3; 1 Corinthians 4:11-12; 9:1-27; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8-9). This counts against the alternative meanings 'patron' or 'benefactor'.

5. We need not hesitate too long over the idea of Phoebe giving leadership to Paul in some particular context, of which details are not given. The apostle who taught mutual submission in Christian relationships (Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 5:21) presumably practiced what he preached.

There is weight in these points. Philip Payne's view is supported by responsible reasons, which are worthy of careful consideration. Mike's description of his view as 'bogus' is ill-judged. 'Bogus' means 'a sham', 'a counterfeit', 'not genuine'. By faulty reasoning, Mike has incorrectly misled thousands of listeners into thinking that Payne's translation 'leader' is bogus. Out of fairness to Phil Payne, a correction to that description would be appropriate.

However, the various arguments for 'leader' do not finally persuade us.

The expression 'for she has been a *prostatis* of many and of me' does not sound quite right if *prostatis* means leader or president. It sounds, rather, as if Paul has had some dealings with her as a *prostatis* in the same way that others have done, separately from him. This would fit some kind of patronage or benefaction. Nevertheless, this first consideration is mere impression and does not take us far.

Paul employs a little word-play in verse 2. If we adapt the Greek words to function like English words so as to show up the word-play, Paul is asking the Roman believers to *para-stat* her (stand by her, that is, help her), for indeed she became a *pro-stat* (one who stood before) to many and to him.

If this is nothing more than a use of related *words*, then the meaning 'leader' remains possible. But it seems better to read it as a play of related *ideas* also. For there is then a balance not only in the form of Paul's words in the two clauses, but also in the ideas conveyed. Paul is asking the Romans to be helpful (in an ordinary way) to Phoebe, because she has been helpful (in a prominent way) to many and to him. This is a suitable incentive for their desired helpful behavior towards her.

This would then support the meaning 'patron' or 'benefactor' (both of which are kinds of helper), rather than the meaning 'leader'.

Paul's frequent caution about accepting financial or material help does not rule out Phoebe's patronage or benefaction. We have no reason to believe that Paul was inflexible about this. He

³³ The other two occurrences are Titus 3:8, 14.

taught: 'the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel' (1 Corinthians 9:14, ESV).

We do not know for sure what form such patronage might have taken in Phoebe's case. As an example, it would not be hard to imagine Phoebe sponsoring his writing of his letter to the Romans by giving him hospitality in Cencreae and meeting his needs while he was preparing it and then dictating it to Tertius.³⁴

Some may be troubled by the idea of Paul accepting patronage, because of the social obligation of loyalty which he would incur to a patron. However, he may have had sufficient confidence in Phoebe's godly character and good judgment, not to be concerned about that. From our discussion above, he appears to have had sufficient confidence in her godly character and good judgment to give her the responsibility of explaining his letter to the Romans.

Can we decide between the translations 'patron' (ESV) and 'benefactor' (NIV)?

If Phoebe was merely a benefactor rather than a patron, the social obligation of loyalty would have been less marked. On the other hand, there is a different Greek word for 'benefactor', which is used in Luke 22:25 and is not used here.

As between 'benefactor' and 'patron', there is little to choose, and we suspect that most English readers will perceive little difference between them.

Theodoret of Cyrrhus (or Cyrus), writing his commentary on Romans 16 in the fifth century, understood Phoebe to be a patron and explained her patronage as involving giving protection and hospitality. So, on balance, we think that the ESV is probably justified in describing her as a 'patron' of many and of Paul.

However, having got this far, there is a further question to consider. Even if Phoebe is described as a patron rather than a leader, should we not consider the impact of her being a deacon? If she was a deacon, was she therefore a leader in that capacity?

Expressed like that, this further question is too vague to have a meaningful answer. The problem is twofold: in the New Testament, the responsibilities of deacons are not defined, and in English, the terms 'lead' and 'leader' are imprecise.

In a church today, someone might take a lead by organizing a rota of people who will provide refreshments after the worship service. Such a person could be described as doing deacon work and as a leader. But that is not usually the kind of leadership that complementarians are concerned to exclude women from. In discussions of leadership and of deacons, there is an ever-present danger of complementarians and egalitarians talking past one another with mutual incomprehension, owing to differing assumptions about deacons' duties and about what is meant by 'leader'.

³⁴ Compare Paul Gooder, *Phoebe: A Story* (2018).

So, we doubt that consideration of this further question concerning deacons' responsibilities will shed much useful light on the discussion of women in ministry.