

Do the Biblical Qualifications for Elders Insist on Only Men and Not Women?

1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9

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Introduction

Does the New Testament really teach that church elders must always and only be men?
To set the scene for this question, we need some context.

In first-century culture, women were not secluded in the way that some moralists thought they ought to be. There were women magistrates, priestesses, and business-owners. Women had already been leaders among God's people in Old Testament times (think of Deborah and Huldah). And in the new gatherings of believers in Jesus, there was a new status for women. In Galatians 3:28, Paul taught there was no longer male and female, because all became one in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:27-31 Paul urged his readers, who were both men and women, to earnestly desire the higher gifts of being apostles, prophets and teachers.

In this real-life context, it could not be assumed that only men should be elders. If there was to be a rule excluding all women from eldership, it needed to be said with explicit clarity.

In two of his letters, the apostle Paul wrote about qualifications for appointment as elders or overseers. One letter was to Timothy in Ephesus. The other was to Titus in Crete.¹ First Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 are the only two passages in the Bible which give guidance on who may be appointed. Our task is to see whether these passages lay down with explicit clarity a rule which excludes all women.

I proceed on the basis of treating the terms 'elders' and 'overseers' as meaning the same thing. They are people tasked with overseeing and shepherding a particular local community of believers (compare 1 Peter 5:1-5; Acts 20:17, 28). While some scholars argue that not every elder was an overseer, the identification seems right and is sufficient for the purpose of this article.

The landscape of interpretation

While English versions vary in their presentation, many of them give the impression that an elder or overseer must be a married man. For example, the ESV of 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 says that such a person must be "the husband of one wife". That is a translation of the Greek phrase *mias gunaikos andra*.

But in a footnote, ESV offers the alternative: "a man of one woman", and that is how it is translated in DLNT and in Mounce.

So as not to prejudge the intent of this contested phrase, I will render it with a clunky word-for-word translation as "a one-woman man". (*mias gunaikos* means "of one woman" or "of one wife"; *andra* means "a man" or "a husband".)

Other translations include:

"faithful to his wife" (NIV and at least six other versions)

"married only once" (NABRE, NRSVUE)

"the husband of only one wife" (EHV, JUB, NCB)

"faithful to their spouse" (CEB)

"faithful in marriage" (CEV).

There is no agreement on what it is that Paul is concerned to avoid. Is it singleness? Remarriage after a spouse's death? Remarriage after divorce? Adultery? Polygamy?

Sexual immorality? Along with these issues, there is also disagreement on whether Paul's words indicate that every candidate must be a man and not a woman.

Mutualist scholars consider that the Bible permits and encourages both men and women to serve as leaders in God's church and that, when carefully read, the two passages do not mandate that elders must in all cases be only men.

Some prominent scholars who take a men-only position agree that the stated qualifications do not in themselves exclude women from being church elders. Their men-only position is therefore derived from their reading of *other* passages of Scripture – especially, a controversial translation and interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12, though that verse does not mention elders.

Thus, Douglas Moo says that the phrase “a 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.”²

And 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 necessarily in and of itself preclude women from serving as elders”³

Likewise, in the major work edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*), when 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 (see p74 in the 2021 reprint).

Similarly, the Danvers Statement, which codified the complementarian men-only position, does not place explicit reliance on 1 Timothy 3 or Titus 1 for its ban on women elders. The same is true of the men-only position adopted in the Calvary Chapel Association Statement of Faith.

However, there are scholars who consider that the phrase *mias gunaikos andra* (“a one-woman man”) in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6, read in context, establishes a men-only position.

An exemplar of this position is Robert Yarbrough. In his analysis, the word “man” is treated as an essential requirement in all cases (in the sense that the candidate must be male), while the description “one-woman” is not essential in all cases (he need not be married). Yarbrough's interpretation proceeds as if Paul had written “a man who, if married, is faithful to his wife”.⁴ Wayne Grudem expresses a variant of this view in a 2005 publication, where his interpretation proceeds as if Paul had written “a man who, if married, has only one wife”⁵

In these analyses, it seems inconsistent to insist that one part of the phrase “one-woman man” (man) applies in every case while saying that another part of it (one-woman) applies only in some cases.

Another eminent scholar who argues for a men-only position from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 is Gerry Breshears. In his view, Paul's words require that in all cases an elder

must not only be a man, he must also be married. He argued for this in a podcast hosted by Preston Sprinkle in August 2022 and raised it in public discussion with me at ETS in November 2023.⁶

To see whether there is solid support for a men-only position, we will first review the contents of the lists so as to understand the different kinds of qualifications that are included. We will discover that the lists as a whole cannot reasonably be read as mandatory requirements (legislative). Rather, they are intended as indicators of suitability.

We will then focus more closely on whether Paul requires all elders to be married and whether he requires that they all be men. Our conclusion will be that he does not require that they all be men. He does not exclude women from eldership.

The different kinds of qualifications

Taking both lists together, there are different kinds of qualifications which could be in view, either expressly or by implication: age, sex, marital status, character and conduct, household leadership, gifting, length of time since conversion to Christ, and reputation.

On comparing the two lists, we will see that the qualifications are indicative of suitability rather than legislative.

Age

The term “elder” is used in Titus 1:5. It is not in the list in 1 Timothy 3, though it is used later in the letter (1 Timothy 5:17, 19). It is imprecise, as regards age.

This contrasts with Paul’s language in 1 Timothy 5:9. For widows to go onto the church’s list, one of the requirements is a specific minimum age qualification of 60 years.

But for elders, Paul gives no specific guidance on age. He leaves this to Timothy’s and Titus’s good sense.

Gifting

In each list, there is only one mention of gifting. Different words are used, but in both cases teaching is in view. See 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9.

At first sight, the mention of teaching in both lists seems to indicate that the one ministry task which all elders will undertake is to teach.

But in 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul writes:

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” (ESV)

From this, it seems that elders will not all necessarily teach. So, Paul appears to envisage some degree of flexibility.

Godliness

The bulk of the qualifications relate to matters of character and conduct, which we can conveniently label as “godliness”. Leaving aside “a one-woman man” for the present, the godliness qualifications in the two lists are set out in the table below:

GODLINESS QUALIFICATIONS		
1 Timothy	Titus	Comparison of the two lists
3:2 <i>anepilēptos</i> above reproach	1:6, 7 <i>anekklētos</i> free from accusation	VERY SIMILAR
3:2 <i>nēphaleos</i> sober		NOT IN TITUS (but see “not drunken”)
3:2 <i>sōphrōn</i> self-controlled	1:8 <i>sōphrōn, enkratēs</i> self-controlled, self-controlled	SAME and SIMILAR
3:2 <i>kosmios</i> respectable		NOT IN TITUS
3:2 <i>philoxenos</i> hospitable	1:8 <i>philoxenos</i> hospitable	SAME
3:3 <i>mē paroinos</i> not drunken	1:7 <i>mē paroinos</i> not drunken	SAME
3:3 <i>mē plēktēs</i> not violent	1:7 <i>mē plēktēs</i> not violent	SAME
3:3 <i>epieikēs</i> gentle		NOT IN TITUS (but see “not violent” and “not quick-tempered”)
3:3 <i>amachos</i> disinclined to fight	1:7 <i>mē orgilos</i> not quick-tempered	SIMILAR
3:3 <i>aphilarguros</i> not loving money	1:7 <i>mē aischrokerdēs</i> not greedy for dishonorable gain	SIMILAR
	1:7 <i>mē authadēs</i> not self-willed	NOT IN 1 TIMOTHY
	1:8 <i>philagathos</i> a lover of good	NOT IN 1 TIMOTHY
	1:8 <i>dikaios</i> just	NOT IN 1 TIMOTHY
	1:8 <i>hosios</i>	NOT IN 1 TIMOTHY

	upright	
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On setting out the godliness qualifications in this way, we immediately notice that they are not standardized. In some respects, they are the same; in other respects, they differ. They present, in differing sets of words, two impressionistic sketches of godly character and conduct.

That confirms what we should expect from the nature of the letters. Neither of the letters is a general treatise, written at leisure. One can see in 1 Timothy the pressing sense of urgency at 1:3 and 3:14-15. And in Titus, the repetition in 1:6 and 1:7 may give a hint of Paul's hurry to dictate the short letter. This is not legislation. Paul is not stipulating precise and formal requirements for elders, to be put into a church constitution document. These are letters to close colleagues, who would be expected to understand Paul's intent and apply it sensibly in their local circumstances.

Reputation, and length of time since conversion

Further examining the lists, we see two striking differences between them, in regard to the presence or absence of requirements of good reputation, and of length of time since conversion. Those differences are accounted for by the differing contexts of the two letters.

In general, a requirement that an elder should have *a good reputation with outsiders* would be unwise. It would unduly limit the pool of candidates, because faithful Christian living and speaking may often lead to condemnation by outsiders.

Outsiders did not always think highly of Paul himself, or of Jesus, of Peter, or of John, yet that did not disqualify them from leadership of God's people! On the contrary, it was precisely because of their faithful actions as leaders of God's people that they were denounced.

Paul does not impose this requirement in his instructions to Titus.

But for Timothy in Ephesus, Paul states that the candidate must have a good reputation with outsiders (1 Timothy 3:7). In that context, this is a wise criterion. The gospel had provoked a major riot (Acts 19). Paul wants to keep things calm and have good relations with the city authorities (2:1-4). And this criterion may be of additional relevance if certain rich women desire to be teachers (1:6-7; compare 5:13)⁷ but have been dressing immodestly (2:9). Their reputation for immodesty would rightly disqualify them.

The second difference is that in 1 Timothy 3:6, the candidate must not be *a new convert*; but there is no such requirement in the corresponding list which Paul sent to Titus.

Again, that difference can be explained by the differing circumstances of the churches.

In Crete it appears that the churches where Titus was instructed to appoint elders were new, and Titus was to appoint their first elders (Titus 1:5). In that situation, it would be necessary to appoint new converts, contrary to 1 Timothy 3:6. Similarly, in Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas appointed recent converts, as the situation demanded (see

14:1-23). Interestingly, evidence from outside the Bible also indicates that the apostles' usual practice was to appoint church overseers and deacons from among their "first-fruits", that is, their first converts in each town (1 *Clement* 42.4).

But the church in Ephesus had been founded about AD 52 (Acts 18), Paul's famous farewell to the Ephesian elders was in about AD 57 (Acts 20), and his first letter to Timothy was written probably about AD 63-64. So, the church in Ephesus already had a functioning eldership and had been in existence for probably more than a decade. There would be mature Christian candidates available for new appointments as needed.

The need to appoint elders promptly in Crete (Titus 1:5) contrasts with Paul's instruction to Timothy in Ephesus not to lay hands on anyone hastily (1 Timothy 5:22; see v17-21 for context).

The nature of the lists and Paul's use of *dei*

From the above features, we conclude that Paul's lists are not precise, mandatory requirements which must be met in every case. Rather, they are indicators of suitability, which are adapted to the differing circumstances at the destinations of the two letters.

So, we cannot say simplistically: Paul lays down qualification X for Ephesus, therefore qualification X must necessarily be a requirement for all candidates in all times and places. Instead, we need to understand his true intent.

For example, we may feel confident that evidence of godly character must surely be required in all cases, though of course even that is a matter of degree, since perfection is not attained in this life, and what is expected of a mature believer will be greater than what is expected of a new convert.

But other qualifications will need to be considered even more thoughtfully. On the mission field in a previously unevangelized area, a ban on new converts would be quite inappropriate, since it would prevent the appointment of elders and leave new churches without local leadership.

The differences in Paul's instructions for the two locations shed light on how we should understand his introductory word *dei* in 1 Timothy 3:2 (repeated in 3:7 and in Titus 1:7).

This word is often translated as "it is necessary" or "... must ..." But some translations are gentler (NIV "the overseer is to be . . ."; JUB: "It is expedient . . .").

In English, the word "necessary" can extend over a range from "absolutely necessary" to "moderately necessary", depending on context. The Greek term *dei* covers a wide range of ideas. While it can be used in a strong sense, it also extends to what is fitting or appropriate (Luke 15:32; Romans 12:3; 2 Timothy 2:6).

Since the instructions for Ephesus differ materially from the instructions for Crete, it is plain that in the lists of qualifications this word does not carry a sense of absolute necessity or unvarying obligation. Instead, Paul is indicating what is fitting in the particular circumstances.

This understanding of *dei* fits exactly with the nature of the lists as indicative rather than legislative.

Suppose Paul had been thinking not merely about the circumstances of the particular churches to which he was writing. Suppose he had been intending to set out legislative requirements for appointing elders, which would apply as mandatory rules for all churches until the Lord returns. He would have needed to make a clear and careful decision on the essential requirements. And he would have needed to include the same essential requirements in both letters.

But that is not what he did. The lists vary significantly. They are indicative rather than legislative.

Throughout church history, and still today, that is how they have nearly always been read. We see further confirmation of that interpretation if we take household leadership and marital status as test cases.

Household leadership

In the list in 1 Timothy 3:4-5, Paul makes three points about household leadership (my translations):

- “leading their own household well”
- “having children in subjection with all dignity”
- “but if anyone does not know how to lead their own household, how will they care for God’s church?”

If someone has a track record of leading their own household well, that is a positive indicator. If someone has a track record of failing in that task, that is a negative indicator.

This indicator could be relevant to both men and women.

In Ephesus, there were wealthy young widows who were householders. Paul urges them not to be idle but to marry, bear children, and get on with ruling their households (1 Timothy 5:13-14, *oikodespotēō*). In other cities, as far as we can tell, Lydia, Nympha and Chloe were all leaders of households (Acts 16:14, 40; Colossians 4:15; 1 Corinthians 1:11).

Paul’s inclusion of this qualification in the list as an indicator makes good sense, since in his day churches met in homes. The householder in whose home they regularly met would be a prime candidate for eldership.

But does Paul require that a candidate for eldership must necessarily always be a householder?

Consider the position of a slave. A slave cannot be a householder, because a slave cannot own property. But is Paul intending to bar all slaves from eldership?

Imagine a wealthy landowner, converted to Christ. His most trusted slave, steward of all his estates, is also converted. The local church meets in the landowner’s house. In character and conduct, the slave is suitable for eldership. We remember that Paul

wrote: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28). The master understands that he must treat his steward no longer as a slave but as his brother (Philemon 16). Are we seriously to think that in the lists of qualifications for eldership, Paul intends to prohibit such a slave from being an elder, because he is not a householder? Such an interpretation might have got off the ground in the 19th century in the Southern United States, but not in Paul’s thinking, or in the early church,⁸ or today.

And what if a potential candidate for eldership, though free rather than slave, does not have a household to manage, because they are living with a senior relative or with a friend, or because they have been engaged in itinerant ministry? If a candidate must be a householder, such a person would not qualify, even if fully suitable in Christian maturity, godly character and spiritual gifting.

On such a reading Paul himself, the travelling apostle whose only household was the family of God, would not be fit to serve as an elder in a local church if he settled in one locality.

And what are we to make of the reference to having children (plural)?

If we read this as legislative, a person who is childless, or has only one child, cannot qualify. That makes little sense. Are we seriously to believe that Paul intended to lay down an arbitrary and inflexible criterion that in all times and places, without exception, a church elder must have two or more children?

It makes much more sense to read the household and children requirements as indicative. *If* a person is a householder, do they lead their household well? *If* a person has children, are the children believers, and well-behaved?

I am not aware of any major denomination or church group which requires that all elders must be householders, or must have children.

Marital status

In light of the above discussion, how should we understand “a one-woman man” in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6?

The word-for-word translation “a man of one woman” (DLNT, Mounce, ESV footnote) leaves it to the reader to interpret what this idiom means.

Let’s recall some varying translations that offer more specific interpretations and tabulate what they say or suggest about marital status, sex and godliness:

Translation	Marital status	Sex	Godliness
“married only once” (NABRE, NRSVUE)	married now, or married in the past but not remarried	unspecified	perhaps remarriage after divorce or after a spouse’s death is seen as ungodly

“faithful to his wife” (NIV and at least six other versions)	married	male	monogamous, not a fornicator or adulterer
“the husband of only one wife” (EHV, JUB, NCB)	married	male	not polygamous
“faithful to their spouse” (CEB)	married	unspecified	monogamous, not a fornicator or adulterer
“faithful in marriage” (CEV)	married	unspecified	not a fornicator or adulterer

Is Paul requiring that all elders be married, whether in the past or at the time of appointment?

If we are right that he is not requiring all elders to be householders, or to have multiple children, is there nonetheless some basis for thinking that the marriage qualification is a mandatory requirement, rather than an indicator?

Four facts stand out, which help us to answer this question.

First, most candidates would have been married. So, it makes sense for Paul to include a specific indicator of the holiness required in married persons.

Second, slaves were not legally able to marry, so a mandatory marriage requirement would rule out everyone like Onesimus. That seems improbable as Paul’s intent, for the same reasons as we have seen in relation to the householder qualification.

Third, most of the qualifications are about godly character and conduct. It makes sense to understand this particular qualification in light of this. Most of the interpretations which are offered see it in that light, at least in part. The candidate must be in compliance with the Christian ethic of sexual conduct, which requires sexual faithfulness in monogamous marriage and sexual abstinence outside the context of monogamous marriage.

Fourth, we know Paul’s view of the spiritual advantages of singleness for both men and women. He emphasizes how an unmarried person has greater ability to give priority to the Lord’s affairs because of their freedom from responsibilities as a spouse (see 1 Corinthians 7:7-8 and 32-35). Timothy was well aware of this teaching (see 1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10). As far as we can tell, Timothy himself was single, and so was Paul (1 Corinthians 7:7-8; 9:5). It would be surprising if Paul intended to lay down an inflexible rule that a chaste, unmarried person should never be appointed to eldership – a rule that would exclude anyone like himself or Timothy. On such an interpretation, our Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 5:4), was unfit to shepherd the flock, for he was certainly unmarried. That would be absurd. No, on the contrary, Paul would

expect that some unmarried people would be particularly suitable for the spiritual work of eldership.

Taken in combination, these four facts show us that the marriage requirement is not intended as mandatory in all cases.

In line with the above understanding, I am not aware of any major Christian denomination or church group which requires that church leaders be married.

Sex

Does the phrase “a one-woman man” require that the candidate must in all cases be male?

Or is Paul using the idiom “a one-woman man” either in a gender-neutral sense or simply because most candidates will be men?

Nijay Gupta explains the “most candidates” idea:

“... it is one thing to acknowledge that men commonly held these positions and another altogether to take this as *excluding* women. Imagine this: a golf club with a sign by the course that says “Golfers must have their facial hair properly groomed.” This statement presumes relevance for the vast majority of golfers (who are men), but by itself it does not prohibit women from golfing.” (*Tell Her Story*, 86)

If the phrases about *household leadership* do not require that in all cases the candidate be a householder, and if the phrase about *children* does not require that in all cases the candidate must have more than one child, and if the phrase about *marriage* does not require that in all cases the candidate be married, we would need strong reasons for inferring that the expression “one-woman *man*” requires that in all cases the candidate must be male.

The difficulties which a complementarian position faces at this point are severe.

They are well illustrated by the exposition offered by Andreas and Margaret Köstenberger in their book, *God’s Good Design* (219-220, 224). They acknowledge that the phrase “one-woman man” is an idiom, which cannot be translated word for word into English. They say it is clear that the phrase refers to *a husband*, with the result that an elder must be a man, but they also say that there is *no requirement to be a husband*, with the result that a single man may qualify. This interpretation is incoherent.

Alternative complementarian expositions are also unsatisfactory.

The approach perhaps most often adopted by complementarians is to admit that the qualifications for elders do not in and of themselves require that all elders be male. They obtain that requirement *from elsewhere*, specifically from 1 Timothy 2:11-15. But that approach lays bare a fundamental weakness in the complementarian position: Paul fails to lay down a clear rule on this, in the very places where he ought to do so, if he intends such a rule. I will come back to that and explain it more fully at the end.

There is another alternative for complementarians. Breshears adopts the unusual view that an elder must be both a man and married. But he also agrees that the qualifications are not legislative, which raises a further question: why does he believe that these particular requirements (male and married) are mandatory? I have not seen a clear answer to that question.

In his interview by Preston Sprinkle, Breshears was pressed on what he saw as the rationale for allowing women to lead in the life of the local church in any capacity except as elders and for allowing only married men to serve as elders. He candidly acknowledged that Paul offers no rationale for such a rule in the two passages that we have looked at. Breshears' interpretation leads to the remarkable conclusion that Paul would consider neither himself nor the Lord Jesus to be fit to serve a local church as an elder. The absence of a clearly expressed rationale makes that remarkable conclusion all the more implausible.

So far, we have seen that a non-restrictive position on women's eldership is supported by reading Paul's lists of qualifications as indicative rather than legislative.

There is also a *separate* line of support, which is the gender-neutrality of what Paul writes in the two lists. Among the many qualifications in both lists, the *only* male expression is "a one-woman man", and that expression can be understood gender-neutrally, as we shall see next.

Gender-neutrality in Paul's lists

To see the gender-neutrality in Paul's lists, we need to pay attention to some features of the Greek text.

Feature 1 – Paul's chosen pronoun: *tis*

The first feature to note is Paul's use of the Greek word *tis*.

The passage in 1 Timothy 3 begins: "If anyone (*tis*) desires to be an overseer ..."

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

Paul's use of the gender-neutral pronoun *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 primarily male meaning (as, "If a *man* desires to be an overseer ...").

In a similar way, in Titus 1, Paul's exposition of qualifications for elders commences with "If anyone (*tis*) ..."

Paul's use of *tis* is doubly important in 1 Timothy because of the context. If we look at Paul's immediate lead-in to what he says here, 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 to both men and women.

Similarly, part way through the list, in 3:5, as if to re-emphasize the gender-neutrality of his intention, Paul uses *tis* again: “For if someone (*tis*) ...”

This feature weighs against complementarian understandings of the previous chapter. There were no chapter divisions in the letter as originally written. Supposedly, Paul’s purpose in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 was to lay down an enduring and universal rule, based on a creation principle of men’s priority, that women must not teach and exercise authority over men – as an overseer in the church would do. If that were Paul’s real point in those verses, it would be exceedingly strange for Paul then to commence his statement of who may be elders with the gender-neutral statement “if anyone (*tis*) desires to be an overseer ...”, instead of saying “if a man desires to be an overseer”.

Feature 2 – the convention of using male terms for both sexes, so that the meaning must be determined from the context

To understand how the expression *mias gunaikas andra* (“a one-woman man”) could be used gender-neutrally, we must understand the Greek convention of using terms with male meaning for both sexes.

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 from the Greek for “sisters”) can be used to refer either to men only or to both men and women (see the latter, for example, in 1 Corinthians 10:1; 11:33; 12:1). Similarly, the Greek for “fathers” can be used to mean “parents”, as in Hebrews 11:23.

The same is true of the Greek for “man” (adult male, *anēr*), which is used in the expression “a one-woman man”. So, for example, it is used generically in Acts 17:22, 34 and James 1:8, 12, 20. Thus, in the lists for elders, Paul’s masculine expression “a one-woman man” could either refer specifically to a man who is a “one-woman” man or it could encompass also a woman who is a “one-man” woman.

The choice between the two meanings (male only, or generic) can only be made by attention to context.

In the 21st century, 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 another 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 (*ils* and *amis*, rather than *elles* and *amies*) 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, as he did in his instructions regarding widows in 1 Timothy 5:9 (“a one-man woman” – *enos andros gunē*). Breshears rightly mentions that the phrase I have rendered as “a one-man woman” in 5:9 is gender-specific. Words with female meaning cannot normally be used generically. But the male form (“a one-

woman man”) can work for men and women alike. When used generically, the meaning encompasses both “one-woman man” and “one-man woman”.

For confirmation that the male form of the idiom can be used to apply to women, we can turn to John Chrysostom, a native Greek speaker, educated both in the Greek classics and in the Scriptures, and a highly respected commentator on Scripture.

Near the end of the 4th century, Chrysostom was a firm believer in men-only leadership in the church. He regarded women as inherently unsuited to the task of leadership because of their defective, fickle and sinful nature, as compared with men. Accordingly, in his exposition of 1 Timothy, he does not argue that elders must be men; instead, he simply assumes it. So, his treatment of 1 Timothy 3:2 does not discuss whether the expression “one-woman man” could be understood generically, as a requirement applying to both men and women.

However, Paul uses the same expression again in the qualifications for deacons, in 3:12. And Chrysostom considers that women may be deacons. His exposition in regard to deacons provides us with an example of a native Greek speaker understanding this idiomatic expression generically.

In *Homily 11* on 1 Timothy, he explains 3:11 as referring to women deacons. He then moves on to 3:12, and cites Paul’s words “Let deacons be one-woman men”. He next explains: “These things also fittingly refer to women deacons”. That is, he indicates that what Paul has just said, in particular the character qualification “Let deacons be one-woman men”, applies to women as to men.⁹ This confirms that this idiom is capable of being understood generically. (For an example of a woman who was appointed as a deacon, we may recall Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2).

Feature 3 – the context

We must now do what Chrysostom, because of his unbiblical and defective view of women, did not do. That is, we must consider the context to see whether in the list of elders’ qualifications the expression *mias gunaikas andra* is used in a specifically male sense or generically.

What is the context that guides us here? In 1 Timothy, it includes at least

- (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 3:1,
- (c) the repetition of *tis* to continue the list in 3:5,
- (d) the absence of a plain statement that *only men* may be elders or that *women may not be*, and
- (e) the fact that the other fifteen desired qualities or behaviors in the list do not indicate any requirement of maleness but are all appropriate for both men and women.

In Titus, the context includes at least

- (a) the use of the word *tis*, which is gender-neutral in meaning, to introduce the list in 1:6,

(b) the absence of a plain statement that only men may be elders or that women may not be,

(c) the fact that the other fourteen desired qualities or behaviors in the list do not indicate any requirement of maleness but are all appropriate for both men and women.

While the context in Titus does not provide quite as many clues as in 1 Timothy that Paul is writing generically, those that are given are amply sufficient.

Some writers have drawn attention to a contrast with the list of qualities for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. Within that list, at verse 11, Paul refers to ‘women’ (*gunaikas*, plural of *gunē*). In the NIV, this verse says: ‘In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.’ It is argued that verse 11 refers to women deacons, and that *the absence of a corresponding verse in the midst of the requirements for elders* suggests that Paul expects elders to be only men.

While the meaning of verse 11 is much disputed among commentators. I consider it is right to understand it as referring to women deacons, as Chrysostom did. But this does not support the conclusion that Paul expects elders to be only men. We must consider Paul’s train of thought in the context and how he has used language generically in his list for elders.

In 1:7 he refers to the desire of those whom Timothy must correct because of their involvement in false teachings. What is their desire? They want to become teachers of the law. But we learn in 2:9 that certain rich women are misbehaving, dressing indecently and ostentatiously. They need to do good works (2:10) and to learn (2:11). If someone aspires to be an elder, and to teach (3:1–2; 5:17), they are indeed desiring a good work. But Paul’s indicators for eldership rule out the misbehaving women until their lives are reformed. They are not above reproach, not self-controlled, not respectable, not able to teach. Having completed his discussion of the indicators for elders in 3:7, he moves on, dictating to his scribe what we call verses 8–10. These three verses begin to lay out the indicators for deacons. At this date, Paul’s use of the term *diakonos* as a recognized position in the church is relatively new and uncommon. This sense of *diakonos* does not appear in Acts or in James or in any of Paul’s early letters. The only other fairly clear examples of deacons in the New Testament are in Romans 16:1 and Philippians 1:1. Greek usually treats this word as grammatically masculine. In grammatical agreement, the indicators in verses 8–10 are in grammatically masculine form. Since Paul does not begin with the gender-neutral pronoun *tis*, there is no signal for the reader whether he may be thinking of anyone other than men. Before he goes too far, he wants to give a positive indication that, as in the case of elders, women would be as eligible as men, but only if their character and behavior are suitable, unlike that of the misbehaving women. This is what he does in verse 11, which crisply covers in four points much the same ground that he has covered more fully in verses 8–10. Having signaled that he means women as much as men, so that the indicators for deacons should be understood as applying to both sexes, which rules out the misbehaving women until their lives are reformed, he goes on to complete his list. He does this in verses 12–13, which should be understood as applying to both sexes. This

includes the expression ‘one-woman men’ in verse 12, which Chrysostom explained applies as much to women as to men (see above).

Once this train of thought is traced, it is apparent that the absence of a corresponding verse in the midst of the requirements for elders does not suggest that Paul expects elders to be only men.

Feature 4 – the absence of male pronouns and possessives

Popular-level expositions of the qualifications for elders sometimes mistakenly rely on male pronouns and possessives seen in English versions, but they are absent from the Greek text.¹⁰

There is a difference between Paul’s Greek and those English translations which follow traditional renderings. Let’s take the ESV of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 as an example. 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 1 Timothy 3:4-5 into Greek, the expression “his own household” (ESV) would become (rendering word for word) “the own household of him” (*autou*). But Paul’s choice of words here is “the own household” (*tou idiou oikou*). The word “own” (*idiou*) indicates possession without using a personal pronoun.

ESV’s expression “keeping his children submissive” would become (rendering word for word) “having children of him (*autou*) in subjection”. But Paul’s choice of words here is simply “having children in subjection” (*tekna echonta en hupotagē*).

If Paul were thinking specifically of men only in these two lists, we may wonder why he does not use even one personal pronoun or possessive anywhere in the lists, which could convey a male meaning.

The male pronouns in modern English versions are the result of an interpretive decision that Paul is speaking only of males throughout these two passages, rather than speaking generically.

Some modern translations, such as CEB and CEV, accurately reflect the absence of clear indications in the Greek text that Paul is talking about men only. For an example, here is Titus 1:5-9 in the CEB:

⁵ The reason I left you behind in Crete was to organize whatever needs to be done and to appoint elders in each city, as I told you. ⁶ Elders should be without fault. They should be faithful to their spouse, and have faithful children who can’t be accused of self-indulgence or rebelliousness. ⁷ This is because supervisors should be without fault as God’s managers: they shouldn’t be stubborn, irritable, addicted to alcohol, a bully, or greedy. ⁸ Instead, they should show hospitality, love what is good, and be reasonable, ethical, godly, and self-controlled. ⁹ They must pay attention to the reliable message as it has been taught to them so that they can encourage people with healthy instruction and refute those who speak against it.

More on the meaning of “a one-woman man”

We can get more help on the meaning of this idiom by paying attention to how Paul uses the corresponding female expression in 1 Timothy 5:9, in the list of requirements for enrolling widows. This will confirm that it should be read not woodenly but idiomatically. And it will help us to understand the idiom with reasonable confidence.

Paul describes a qualifying widow as having been “a one-man woman” (*enos andros gunē*).

For what purpose does Paul include this expression in his requirements for widows?

Evidently, his purpose is not to lay down a requirement that the widow is a woman, or that she has been married, for in this context a widow is a woman who was previously married. The qualifying expression would add nothing useful to the term ‘widow’.

In addition, Paul cannot reasonably mean that she must have been faithful only during her marriage, while promiscuity since her husband’s death would be acceptable. Why? Because the Christian sexual ethic is that sexual intercourse is intended by God only within the marriage of one man and one woman, as taught in Genesis 2:24 and endorsed by Jesus (Matthew 19:4-5; Mark 10:6-8) and by Paul (1 Corinthians 6:13 – 7:2).

It must follow that Paul has in mind a requirement of Christian character in sexual matters: she has been chaste, and has remained so. In other words, she was faithful to her husband while he lived, and since his death she has abstained from sexual relations. Paul has in mind the Christian standard of chastity. He is not concerned with the number of previous husbands. To have remarried after an earlier widowhood, so as to be twice widowed, would not indicate a character defect.

Among Greek-speaking patristic writers we can find an understanding of 5:9 that is very close to this. Theodore of Mopsuestia (died 428/9) explained Paul’s expression as meaning: “If she has lived in chastity with her husband, no matter whether she has had only one, or whether she was married a second time.” (*Commentary on Timothy* 2.161, PG 66:944, trans. from Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 451).

While Theodore does not explicitly make the point that Paul requires chastity after the first or second husband’s death, his explanation of Paul’s thinking demands that meaning. Immediately before the quoted sentence Theodore explains that, because there had been abuses, the widows to be enrolled were to be defined by both age and virtue (Greek *aretē*). To violate the ethic of chastity at any time would show a lack of virtue, rendering the candidate unsuitable for enrollment.¹¹

Since “a one-man woman” is a requirement of chastity, we should interpret the expression “a one-woman man” in 3:2 similarly.

Paul’s point is not that the candidate for eldership be a man, but that the candidate be chaste, in line with the Christian sexual ethic.

On this view, the “one-man woman” qualification fully reflects the main thrust of the two lists for elders, which is mostly a concern with Christian character.

Conclusion

The above considerations lead us to conclude with a substantial degree of confidence that the expression “a one-woman man” does not require that in all cases the candidate for eldership be male or married.

That is for two main reasons, each of which is sufficient on its own.

First, the qualifications are not intended to be legislative. Instead, they are intended as indicative of suitability. And most candidates would be men. As we should expect, having carefully examined the texts, there are no major church groupings, irrespective of whether they restrict women’s leadership, who read the lists of qualifications so woodenly as to treat them as if they were legislative requirements. Paul gives indicators of what is fitting in the circumstances. He does not exhaustively define what would or would not be fitting.

Second, the expression “one-woman man” is an idiom which is directed to sexual chastity, and it is used generically, meaning that it encompasses both men and women.

If we are looking for an irreducible minimum to guide churches everywhere, we may safely infer that an elder should be of good Christian character. That would include good character in regard to sexual conduct as a follower of Jesus. In addition, we may take it that ability to serve by preaching and teaching is an essential ingredient in the eldership, though not essential for every individual candidate.

We conclude that the two biblical lists of qualifications do not mandate that elders or overseers must always be only men and not women.

This conclusion is fully in line with Paul’s and Peter’s teaching concerning spiritual gifts for leadership, in which they make no gender distinctions (see Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-31; Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Peter 4:10-11). Three crucial functions of eldership are shepherding, leading and teaching (*poimainō* in 1 Peter 5:2; *proistēmi* and *didaskalia* in 1 Timothy 5:17). Those functions correlate with the wording of the gifts of pastoring, leading and teaching (*poimēn* and *didaskalos* in Ephesians 4:11; *didaskō* and *didaskalia* in Romans 12:7; *proistēmi* in Romans 12:8). Paul emphasizes, especially in Romans 12, that spiritual gifts should be put into use. “If your gift is ... teaching, then teach. ... If it is to lead, lead with diligence.”

Fundamental weakness in the men-only position

This analysis brings into focus a fundamental weakness in the men-only position on eldership.

As we noted at the start, in the prevailing circumstances it could not simply be *assumed* that women should be excluded from eldership. If there were to be a rule excluding all women from church eldership, it needed to be laid down in definite terms and clearly communicated to all 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 eldership, this had to be made crystal 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, as we have seen, it is not explicitly stated that *women must not* be elders or that *only males* may be elders. The supposed rule is likewise absent from every other passage which mentions local church elders or leaders (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 5:17, 19; Heb. 13:17; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1-5). It is not stated anywhere in the New Testament.

I would invite all adherents to a men-only position to consider this question: Since the supposed rule is not clearly laid down in the lists of qualifications for elders, is it not possible that you are on weak ground when you insist on it?

¹ To be clear, I take the letters at face value, showing Paul to be the author. While many contemporary scholars deny his authorship, I firmly disagree with them and consider their reasoning unsatisfactory.

² Moo, 1981. 'The Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-15: A Rejoinder.' *TrinJ* 2, New Series: 198-222, 211.

³ Schreiner, 2010. 'Philip Payne on Familiar Ground: A Review of Philip B. Payne, *Man and Women, One in Christ*.' *JBWW* 15, no. 1:33-46, 35.

⁴ Robert Yarbrough, 2018. *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 195 and n. 384 (he seems to claim in his footnote to have a better knowledge of Greek than N.T. Wright, but though he is well qualified as Professor of New Testament he is under the misapprehension that NT Greek never uses the word *anēr* to refer to women).

⁵ Grudem 2004. *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: an analysis of 118 disputed questions*, 80.

⁶ The podcast is available at <https://theologyintheraw.com/podcast/995-women-prophets-teachers-and-preachers-but-not-elders-dr-gerry-breshears/> and at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVLX42SsN3s>.

⁷ In 5:13, the rich young widows are *phluaros*, which means 'talkers of nonsense', corresponding to 'meaningless talk' (*mataiologia*) in 1:6.

⁸ According to church tradition, the slave Onesimus (mentioned in Paul's letter to Philemon and in Colossians 4:9) became an overseer/elder (*episkopos*) in Ephesus. That is because a man named Onesimus is referred to by Ignatius in his Letter to the Ephesians as being *episkopos* in Ephesus.

⁹ The 19th century English translation of Chrysostom edited by Schaff, freely available online, is a little unclear at this point in Homily 11 and has a confusing footnote.

¹⁰ For example, by Mike Winger, as critiqued at <https://terranwilliams.com/what-winger-presently-gets-wrong-women-leaders-in-the-new-testament-part-a/>. Winger relies on the pronoun 'he', found four times in the ESV of 1 Timothy 3: 6-7. Note that in later, less reliable Greek manuscripts, scribes added into verse 7 the pronoun 'him' (*auton*).

¹¹ The usual translation of *chēra* as 'widow' appears correct in the context of 1 Timothy 5. However, if this word should be understood in a wider sense, as referring to any woman who lacks the support of a man, that would lead to the same conclusion that the expression 'one-man woman' is a requirement of chastity, not of prior marriage.