

5 Reasons Women Can Be Leaders at Church

“This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife... (1 Tim. 3:1-2, NKJV).

Among the criteria that Paul lists for anyone serving as a bishop-overseer is that they must be “the husband of one wife.” This has been used by many to exclude women from functioning in this role of oversight, for only a man could be the husband of one wife.

In teaching “The Pastoral Epistles” (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) at various educational venues for many years, I had come to accept the view of Dr. Gordon Fee, who says that just because most of the overseers in Ephesus (Timothy’s location at the time of Paul’s writing) happened to be men, that should not be taken to mean they all have to be men.

Fee’s commentary was helpful but did not completely satisfy my heart. Then one day, while thinking on 1 Timothy 3:1-7, I had a eureka moment in which I clearly saw why Paul’s requirement that an overseer be “the husband of one wife” does not exclude women from functioning in leadership roles of oversight. Here are the reasons.

Reason #1: Throughout this discussion Paul uses gender-inclusive language.

Nowhere in this passage does Paul use the Greek word for man, *aner*, but instead uses the gender inclusive personal pronoun *tis*, which means “someone” or “anyone.” For example, in 3:1 it is not, “if a man” as the KJV and NKJV have it, but “if someone” (NLT) or “whoever” (NIV, NRSV).

This is also true of verse 5, where Paul again uses *tis*,

not *aner*, to confirm that oversight is not restricted to males. If Paul had wanted to exclude women from this function of oversight, he could have easily done so by using male-specific language. Instead, he uses gender-inclusive language throughout the discussion.

Reason #2: Women were known to be heads of households, which Paul says is a proving ground for serving as an overseer (3:5).

Verse 5 says, "If a man [anyone] does not know how to manage their own household..." As in verse 1, Paul here purposely uses the gender-inclusive personal pronoun, *tis* in this verse. As in the former verse, it is not "if a man," as the KJV and NKJV have it, but if someone (NRSV) or if anyone (NIV).

Managing a household was not the province of the male in Paul's world, for in his travels he had encountered women who were heads of households. In Philippi, he and his team were received by Lydia, and she and her household were baptized (Acts 16:15), and her estate became the base for Paul's ministry in that city.

In 1 Corinthians 1:11, Paul mentions those of Chloe's household who had brought him unfavorable news about the Corinthians. Chloe too is a feminine name and is further proof that women managed households in the ancient world, which qualified them to serve as overseers in the church.

Reason #3: In the pagan, patriarchal society of the Greco-Roman world, men could divorce, remarry, keep mistresses and still be respectable, but women could not, which is the reason for this requirement being included.

This is where I had the eureka moment that highlighted and underlined for me the fact that Paul was not excluding women from oversight when he said the overseer must be the husband of one wife.

Because there is not a separate word for “husband” in Greek, this passage literally reads that the overseer must be “a man of one woman.” Again, this particular criterion would not relate to a woman for women did not have the legal right or the cultural freedom to divorce and remarry and carry on illegitimate relationships as did the men.

Women would be considered promiscuous if they carried on in this way, but for men it was acceptable in that culture. It was necessary, therefore, for this condition that relates particularly to men to be included in this list of criteria for *tis* (anyone) who would serve as an overseer.

Reason #4: This is not an office but a “work” (i.e.: a Responsibility).

The word “bishop” or “overseer” in this passage is a translation of the Greek word *episcopas*, which literally means to “watch over.” It is not unique to the New Testament, but is actually a secular word that Paul and other New Testament writers borrowed.

It was used in the ancient Greco-Roman world of teachers who had the responsibility to “watch over” the academic progress of their students, of the superintendent of a building project, of watchmen stationed on a city wall, and of army scouts. Paul used it to designate the responsibility of elders to “watch over” the affairs of the congregation.

Paul does not use the word “office” or “position” in this passage (nor anywhere in the New Testament). Such words were added by the translators who thought they were helping clarify the passage. I am convinced, however, that they actually skew the meaning of the passage, which should be left as actually stated by Paul.

What Paul is referring to is not an office, but a “work” (a function or responsibility). He literally says in 3:1, “This is a faithful saying, If anyone aspires to oversight, they

desire a good work.”

Writing in the 5th century, the famous African church father, Augustine, noted that a mark of the true church is that its leaders are servants. He then went on to explain that the original meaning of *episcopas* is related to responsibility, not authority. “Therefore,” said Augustine, “He who loves to govern rather than do good is no bishop” (Hyatt, *Paul, Women and Church*, 46).

Reason #5: Women can serve and do good.

I suggest to you that Paul had no problem with women serving and doing good, which is what New Testament leadership is about. We have been so brainwashed in an official, institutionalized, hierarchical form of Christianity that we have a hard time grasping the open, free-flowing nature of New Testament Christianity.

But if we can catch the vision of what the Spirit is saying in this regard and move from gender-determined roles to Spirit-guided functions in all areas of church life, who knows what exploits may be wrought for God in the days ahead! {eo}

This article is derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt’s book, Paul, Women and Church, available from Amazon and his website at . Dr. Hyatt is the co-founder, along with his wife, Dr. Susan Hyatt, of the International Christian Women’s Hall of Fame in Grapevine, Texas, whose purpose is to write God’s women back into history and ignite Spiritual awakening by mobilizing every member of Christ’s body according to their gifts and callings. Check out the Hall at