

Women Elders? Galatians 3, 1 Timothy 2

Turn to Galatians 3. Does the New Testament make room for women to be elders? Or does the New Testament say “no” to women elders? That’s what we’re looking at today. Nowhere does the Bible say directly that women elders are fine, though some places get close. Nowhere does the Bible say that women cannot be elders, although some places get close.

I believe the New Testament comfortable with women elders. When this church began I did not think that, but I have changed my mind. I want to explain that to you.

How will we decide these things? We will read different New Testament teachings. What we will *not* do is change the Bible’s teaching because of cultural differences. We will not say, “that was then and this is now, so that part of the Bible does not count.” Ancient society was very different from ours, that is for sure. But we will not dismiss any Scriptures because our society is different. We will go by what the Bible says.

Why are we talking about this? Because a small number of households feel strongly that we *should* have women elders, and a small number feel strongly that we should *not*. The elders are fine to include women elders.

I am not one of those that feels strongly about this. I’m biblically comfortable with women elders. We’ve had women elders in the past. But for my part, if everyone was satisfied with only male elders, you would not be hearing this. If everyone was satisfied to include women elders, you would not be hearing this. But neither of those are the case, so we’ll cover it again. And I hope to lead you into better ways of reading the Bible.

We’ll begin with two one-line Bible solutions to our question. These two Bible lines take us in opposite directions. Both Scriptures speak of men and women in the church.

1 “There is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” – Galatians 3:28

At first glance, this line solves the matter completely. Because we are in Christ Jesus, male or female does not make any difference, so of course women as well as men should be elders. Good Bible believing Christians take this as the Bible’s bottom line on our question.

I don’t think this is right because of the context, because what is going on in that part of Galatians. Paul is explaining inheritance. Who will inherit God’s great eternal blessing? That’s the question Paul answers in these verses. Galatians 3:27–29:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

If you belong to Christ, then you are heirs according to the promise. That's the bottom line. Gentiles could not inherit God's promised land, but in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile. Slaves never inherited anything, but in Christ there is no slave or free. Ancient inheritance customs favoured sons over daughters, but in Christ there is no male or female. If you belong to Christ, you are heirs according to the promise.

This is about who inherits God's great eternal blessing, which is a different question than who will lead the church. So I am reluctant to make Galatians 3:28 the bottom line on this. Here is the second deciding line:

2 “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man” – 1 Timothy 2:12

About 30 years ago a church in Winnipeg asked me to speak on whether or not churches should have women elders. They were divided on this and had speakers come in to teach them. I read to them from 1 Timothy 2:12 - *I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.*

I told them that this was the Bible's bottom line, so no women elders. I knew that other NT Scriptures seemed to support women elders. I read some of these Scriptures to that group. But, I said, 1 Timothy 2 was the Bible's basic teaching on this, so we should not have women elders.

Marilyn came along, and I remember her gently asking me afterward about this. “Ed, you dismissed those other scriptures so easily. Was that right? Why don't those other scriptures count?” I did not have an answer for her. Since then I've been reading the Bible, and trying to sort things out, and I have slowly changed my mind about 1 Timothy 2 based on other Scriptures.

We can't just hang on to one line when the Bible has other things to say on the same topic. Here's an example: Jesus tells us in Matthew 6 that when we pray, we should go into our room, close the door, and pray alone there. But in this church, we pray in front of each other all the time. Why do we do that? He says to pray alone in a small room. So why do we pray in front of each other? Because in the rest of the Bible, many important prayers were open prayers. So we don't require closet praying, even though Jesus is clear in that section. We read the whole Bible.

Here's another example that's a little closer to home. In 1 Timothy 2 and 5, Paul says he wants younger widows to marry, have children, and be home-makers. That's clear. The Bible tells us what young widows should do. But in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul tells widows that they can marry if they want to, but he thinks they'd be better off if they did not. That's clear too. People have preached on both of these, as if the other did not exist. Let's not hang too hard on one line when the Bible has other teachings on the same topic.

So, Galatians says that in Christ there is no male or female. 1 Timothy says a woman should not teach or have authority over a man. Both Scriptures are about men and women in the church, both are clear, and they take us in opposite directions. So we need to stand back a bit.

Turn to Matthew 28. God sometimes tells women to tell men what to do.

3 God Uses Women to Give Messages to Men – Matthew 28:7, 10; Acts 2:17–18

An angel of the Lord met the women at the tomb of Jesus on resurrection Sunday. He said to the women, “Go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

This angel has clear instructions from God to tell the women to tell the men what to do, and not just ordinary men but the chosen apostles. So the women started running to do this.

Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Same thing here. Jesus also has a clear message for the apostles, and he sends it by telling women to tell the apostles what to do. You might say that these were exceptional cases. So we’ll turn to Acts 2:17, and see that the women at the tomb were not exceptional cases.

The crowd in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost was wondering about the gift of tongues. Peter explained it to them: *This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.*

Back in Numbers 11, Moses said to Joshua, “I wish all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them.” “I wish all the Lord’s people were prophets.” The prophet Joel predicted exactly what Moses wished for. God would pour out his Spirit and there’d be a lot of prophecy. Joel went out of his way to include both genders; he says it and repeats it: sons and daughters, my servants both men and women. Peter quotes it just like that.

There were a few women prophets in the Old Testament, but God told Joel that this would change. In the last days, there would be many prophets both men and women.

In the Old Testament, prophets were God’s most compelling voice to Israel. They called the Old Testament “The Law and the Prophets,” but Moses, who wrote the Law, thought of himself as a prophet. Prophets do exactly what the women at the tomb did: prophets get a message from God for his people. What happened at the tomb was to be normal after the Spirit came at Pentecost. In Acts 2, when it comes to God’s compelling voice, there is no male or female. This means we need to pull back from making 1 Timothy 2 the key teaching on women in church leadership.

You might say, “but these women are prophets not elders.” True. But when Paul writes that a woman should not have authority over a man, we don’t know that he’s talking about elders there.

1 Timothy 2 gives instructions for public worship, what we call our church service, our worship service. The context suggests that we look for something wrong happening in the actual worship service in Ephesus, not in who they selected as elders.

4 Authority: Do Church Leaders Ever Assume Authority?

Paul says he does not permit a woman to assume authority over man. Does he mean that a man may assume authority over a woman? Is it right for men take authority over women? Does Paul mean that? Let's talk about elder authority. Short story: the Lord Jesus does not want authority.

Jesus said, "*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.*" Not with you, says Jesus, no exercising authority among you. Matthew 20:25–26. Peter says the same thing to elders: "*Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, ... not lording it over those entrusted to your care, but being examples to the flock.*" 1 Peter 5:3. Jesus and Peter both call God's leaders away from using authority.

Paul has a long speech to Ephesian elders in Acts 20, and he never talks about authority. He calls them to be guards and shepherds. At the end of Hebrews, that writer tells congregations to trust their leaders and obey them, but he does not talk to leaders about authority.

It's the same with marriage. The Scriptures urge wives to submit to their husbands, but they call husbands *away* from authority over their wives. Paul says husbands are to *love* their wives as Christ loved the church, and *love* their wives as their own bodies. Peter tells husbands to be *considerate* and *respectful* toward their wives.

The New Testament is big on submission, but does not want husbands or leaders of God's people using authority. If Paul means in 1 Timothy 2 that it is right for a male elder to assume authority over his flock, *it is the only place in the New Testament to say that.*

"I do not permit a woman to have authority over a man." For years I assumed that Paul was saying something he does not say. I assumed he meant a man *could* have authority over a woman. He did not say that a man can authority over a woman. We need to be careful when we assume something that the Bible does not actually say.

The rest of the New Testament discourages husbands from exercising authority over their wives, and discourages elders from exercising authority over the flock. This all means that I need to stop assuming that 1 Timothy 2:12 is the Bible's key line on this.

We should consider a different possibility: perhaps some believing women, in the church at Ephesus, were being loud and bossy during the worship service, contradicting the leaders. This humiliated the men and turned their worship into chaos.

I have shown why I question my earlier understanding of 1 Timothy 2. Now I will build another picture of what was happening in Ephesus where Paul had sent Timothy. We will talk about what happened in the church service.

Here's some cultural background that we should know. There was, in New Testament times, a feminism of sorts, a kind of women's liberation. Women were not after the same things, but they were rebelling against similar things. Greek women were supposed to be quiet and modest and stay at home. They were prized for this. Men of course could visit a prostitute or have a mistress, but good women never did that. There were men's clubs that did not allow women. Women got tired of this, and in New Testament times they were acting out against this in different ways. We'll see it in Corinth, as well as Ephesus: trouble during public worship.

5 Corinth and Ephesus: Marriage and Public Worship

The Corinthian and Ephesian churches had similar problems. The Corinthians had wrong teaching about marriage, teaching against marriage. Paul takes this up in 1 Corinthians 7. Some in Corinth were teaching that in a truly godly marriage, there would never be sexual intimacy between wife and husband. False teaching said it was more holy to stay away from that. So Paul corrects that in 1 Corinthians 7.

Now we go to women's head coverings in their public worship. In those days, the head covering was how women dressed when they were married. So now these Corinthian women are going to church. Their society has a voice that says women should act on their own, be bold and independent, and there is teaching in that church that separates wives from their husbands.

So when the Corinthian wives go to church, they take off their head covering. They were saying, "in church we are single women, we're not married." Their husbands were there beside them, and the husbands were humiliated and embarrassed that their wives dressed like single women.

What I want you to see is that a particular message from society went together with wrong church teaching about marriage, and this produced something in the Corinthians church service that should not have been happening.

Ephesus was similar. In 1 Timothy 4, we read that some teachers in Ephesus forbid marriage. This is why in 1 Timothy 2 and 5 Paul strongly encourages marriage. In Ephesus, young widows were listening to this wrong teaching against marriage, and these bored and energetic young women were wandering around Ephesus and getting into all kinds of trouble (1 Tim. 5:11–15).

In 1 Corinthians 7:8, 40, Paul advises widows to stay single. The single women in Corinth were not getting into the same kind of trouble, so then it was good to stay single. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul tells single women that would be happier not marrying, because then they could serve the Lord and not be so anxious about the things of this world.

Detour: there are two kinds of teaching about how wives and mothers should live. Both are wrong and destructive. One wrong teaching says that a wife and mother should also be working outside the home in a career of some kind. If she's satisfied to be a wife and mother and homemaker, she's not earning her keep, she is underperforming. She's not reaching her potential. That's common in the world around us, and it's awful. Let's have nothing to do with that.

The second is opposite and probably comes from inside the church. This teaching says that if a wife and mother works *outside* the home, she is failing God and her family. This also is wrong and destructive. Proverbs 31 describes the ideal woman. She is a devoted wife and a devoted mother, and she also has business interests outside her home. She has her own money, and she looks around out there, she invests and sells wisely. She's an effective business woman. Jesus had many Galilean followers who were women. They left home to follow Jesus, and quite a few of these women had considerable money of their own (Mt 27:55–56; Lk 8:1–3). Lydia in Acts 16 is like that as well.

Let's not have either one of these teachings in our midst, about women at home or not at home. The kind of loyalty and faithfulness that God wants wives and husbands to show to each other is plenty difficult enough all on its own. Let's not add to it. Detour is over.

Back to Ephesus. In 1 Timothy 2, Paul teaches about orderly public worship. He wants men to pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or disputing! We need to imagine angry men quarrelling and carrying on during the worship prayer time. That needs to stop.

Then he speaks about how women dressed. Part of this women's movement included dressing up to put yourself out there. Be bold, make sure everyone notices you. Paul says that this kind of dress is not suitable when believers gather for worship.

And then let's imagine that while a man is teaching, a woman would feel free to stand up and interrupt and correct the teacher in a loud and bossy way. That's why Paul would say that women should not teach or have authority over men, but learn quietly.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul gives instructions on how men and women should pray and prophesy. Women were not silent; they could speak to the men. In 1 Cor 14 he teaches them that everyone can prophesy, one at a time, so that everyone can learn and be encouraged. Paul tells them how men and women can speak in an orderly way, so that everyone can learn and be encouraged. Women prophesying included everyone learning and being encouraged.

So when Paul writes, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet," it makes more sense that he's dealing with some misbehaviour *in that church in Ephesus*, rather than giving a broad rule for church leaders.

6 What About Elder Qualifications? They Assume Male Elders – 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1

When Paul writes about the kind of person that should be an elder, he assumes that the elder/overseer is a man. That's clear. (Elder and overseer are interchangeable terms.) He also assumes that the man is married and has children. If a husband and wife had no children, would we say that the man could not be an elder? There are godly couples in the Bible that do not have children. Yes we would have an elder without children. The qualifications are about character.

If a man was single, no wife or children, would we say that the man could not be an elder? No. Such a man could be an elder. Jesus was single. Paul was single. Paul thought one of the advantages being celibate was that you could be more devoted to the Lord. So we need to be careful in these qualification lists what we take to be essential.

So then, must the elder be a man, as opposed to a woman? Is that what these qualifications mean? The most common way the New Testament believers spoke about each other was "brothers and sisters." That's the most common term, by far. We are brothers and sisters to each other about 180 times in the New Testament. Do you know how many of the 180 it actually says "brothers and sisters"? None. Zero. Every time it just says "brothers," without exception. "Sisters" are never included, they are always assumed.

I don't think it ever occurred to any believing woman in the first century to be insulted by that. "The brethren" meant women and men equally. That's how they spoke. So I put a question mark over assuming that the elder would be a man, as I question him being married and having children. If we are always congregations of brothers, must the elder be a man? I don't know!

I'm not one of those who think there is no difference between men and women. The marriage instructions speak differently to men than they do to women. And when Jesus picked his apostles, they were all men. Some say he was just accommodating the culture, but not a chance. Jesus was setting up the kingdom of heaven, and he did not bend to fit culture. But we're not talking about apostles. We're wondering about women as elders and overseers.

7 Final Thoughts

If we could call up one of the apostles and ask them what they thought about this, what would they say? I don't know. Because the question never comes up in the way we are asking it. That already might be telling us something.

But this I know: in the Bible, gender in leadership does not really matter. We should be so fortunate as that the only thing the Lord had against this church was that we had godly women as elders, and to the Lord that was not right. The Bible speaks plainly about what God's people shall pursue. The Bible speaks plainly about what we shall avoid. Gender in leadership does not come up in those contexts. It is a non-issue.

In Revelation 2–3, the Lord has a message for seven different churches. I always picture KCC being the 8th church. What would he say to us? Of this I am sure: he will not mention the question we've been asking today. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, equip our church with everything good for doing you will, and work in us what pleases you. Make our love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.