

**POSITION PAPER ON WOMEN IN ELDERSHIP**  
**DECEMBER 2015**



Over the last few months the elders of Fresh Hope Armidale have been revisiting the question of whether the bible supports women serving in the role of church elder. After much prayer, reading and discussion there is collective agreement among the elders to open up eldership to women in the church.

This change has occurred in the minds of the elders as a result of:

- Revisiting the biblical texts that were previously thought to exclude women from this role.
- Relooking at examples of women in the bible who held positions of church leadership and spiritual authority/responsibility in the early church and nation of Israel.
- Seeing this topic with greater flexibility and not as a central gospel issue.
- New reflections on the mutual accountability shared between elders in the church.
- Recognition of the character and giftedness of women in our church.
- A desire to remove any unnecessary impediments to a non-Christian's understanding of the gospel message.

In engaging with the scriptures and prayerfully discerning our church's situation, the elders put forward the following summary. An Appendix has also been included that discusses selective scriptures and potential objections in more detail.

**CONTEXT**

To start with, it is important to remind ourselves of the context of this topic. Very few theologians and Christian leaders believe that this doctrine is central to the Christian faith. There are many well-respected Christian leaders and scholars who come down on different sides of the issue. These are people who believe in the authority of Scripture, strive to correctly interpret the Word of God and are willing to do whatever it says. Their lives and ministries evidence the blessing of God.

Whatever our personal beliefs on this matter, they should be held humbly. Good, God honouring, Bible believing people often see this subject differently. There are legitimate arguments, and hard questions, for people on either side of the matter. Two main lines of thought exist on this topic. The *complementarian* (also known as *restrictionist* approach) proposes that men and women were created equal but have different roles. From this perspective, men have been given the responsibility of loving authority over the women, and women are to offer willing, glad-hearted and submissive assistance to the men. On the other hand, the *egalitarian* approach suggests a different understanding, emphasising not only that men and women have been created equal but that God has given them equal responsibility together.

From the outset it is important to acknowledge that it is that hard to make all Scripture fit neatly into either one of these positions. Having acknowledged this, the discussion of Scripture in the remainder of this document emphasises a more egalitarian understanding.

The diversity of opinions on this matter, along with Christ's call for love and unity amongst His followers, should powerfully affect the way we hold our position. Sexism, traditionalism and compromise of the gospel for the sake of culture sometimes exist in Christianity. However, people who limit a woman's role in the church are not necessarily sexist or traditionalists, and people who do not limit a woman's role are not necessarily caving in to cultural pressures. In this matter we should heed the words often attributed to the ancient Christian scholar Augustine:

*"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love."*

## **CREATION**

- Both man and woman were created in God's image, had a direct relationship with God, and shared jointly the responsibilities of bearing and rearing children and had dominion over the created order (Genesis 1:26-28).
- Man and woman were created for full and equal partnership with no implication of female subordination or inferiority.
- Man and woman were co-participants in the fall; Adam was no less responsible than Eve (Genesis 3:6; Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

- The rulership of Adam over Eve resulted from the fall and was therefore not a part of the original created order. Genesis 3:16 is thought to be a prophetic prediction of the effects of the fall rather than a prescription of God's ideal order. This text is interpreted this way because it occurs directly after Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit and God is outlining the consequences of this sin.

## **REDEMPTION**

- Jesus Christ came to redeem women as well as men. Through faith in Christ we all become children of God, one in Christ, and heirs to the blessings of salvation without reference to racial, social, or gender distinctive (John 1:12-13; Romans 8:14-17; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 3:6-28).

## **CHRIST-CENTRED COMMUNITY (CHURCH)**

- At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came on men and women alike. Without distinction, the Holy Spirit indwells women and men, and sovereignly distributes gifts without preference as to gender (Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:7, 11, 14:31).
- Both women and men are called to develop their spiritual gifts and to use them as stewards of the grace of God (1 Peter 4:10-11).
- Women had a key role in the ministry of Jesus and the early church in the book of Acts and were central to telling the good news of his resurrection (Acts 1:14; 18:26; 21:9; Mark 15:40-41, 16:1-7; Luke 8:1-3; John 20:17-18).
- Although men were most frequently the leaders in the male dominated societies of the Old and New Testaments, there are numerous examples of women holding positions of church leadership and spiritual authority/responsibility in the early church.
- Women are listed as Paul's female co-workers in Romans 16:1-7 (Phoebe, Junias and Priscilla) and Philippians 4:2-3 (Euodia and Syntyche) and hosts/leaders of the house church in Colossians 4:15 (Nympha).
- Also examples of women having significant leadership roles in the nation of Israel - Deborah (Judges 4:4-14), Huldah (2 Chronicles 34:22-28) and Miriam (Micah 6:4).
- In the New Testament church, women as well as men exercise the prophetic, priestly and royal functions (Acts 2:17-18, 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:5; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Rev 1:6, 5:10).

### **The notion of servant leadership**

- The Scriptures define the function of leadership as the empowerment of others for service rather than as the exercise of power or control over them (Matthew 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; John 13:13-17; Galatians 5:13; 1 Peter 5:2-3).

### **New Testament texts on church governance**

- Nowhere in the New or Old Testament does any biblical author attempt to outline a process for church governance covering titles, structure or gender to be applied to all churches at all times.

### **Biblical texts that restrict the role of women in churches (refer Appendix 1 for a more detailed discussion of these texts)**

- The few isolated texts that appear to restrict the ability of women to speak, teach and lead in church must not be interpreted simplistically and in contradiction to the rest of Scripture, but their interpretation must take into account their relation to the broader teaching of Scripture and cultural context of the churches they were written to (1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 14:33-36; 1 Timothy 2:9-15).
- A considerable gap exists between the records of what women did in the Bible and the passages that would seem to silence them and prevent their involvement in church leadership or teaching. A number of prominent New Testament scholars (including Gordon Fee and N.T. Wright) believe that this disconnect exists because of our lack of historical understanding of the particular circumstances informing these corrective letters written by the apostle Paul to specific churches (1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 14:33-36; 1 Timothy 2:9-15).
- Theologians on both sides of this discussion need to take care when using problematic passages<sup>1</sup> of scripture as a basis for theology.
- The churches to which Paul writes his corrective letters (1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy) dealing with women in the church clearly had problems with inappropriate behaviour of women and others in the churches and conflict within the church.

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<sup>1</sup> A problematic passage is a passage of scripture where there is obviously more going on in the context of the passage than we know about from the words recorded in the Bible and what is said in the passage does not line up with principles or ideas expressed in the rest of scripture. Obvious examples of problematic passages on the topic of women in the bible are 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 14:33-36; 1 Timothy 2:9-15 where we only have a very basic understanding of the issues occurring in these two churches that would lead Paul to write his letter in the way he did. Care needs to be taken when we consider the direct extension of what Paul wrote to these individual churches to our context 2000 years later.

- We encounter problems in the uniform understanding of Scripture when we attempt to take Paul's instructions to these specific churches and try and directly apply his teaching to gender issues in public worship services to all churches at all times. Such problems are increased when Paul's instructions are applied to churches that are not experiencing problems where women are being inappropriate in worship services or have different cultural background in terms of the relationships of men and women.
- The cultural relevance of certain biblical texts needs to be acknowledged and does not undermine the relevance of the Bible to us today (this is discussed in a later section).

### **CHRIST CENTRED FAMILY**

- The Scriptures teach that husbands and wives are heirs together of the grace of life and that they are bound together in a relationship of mutual submission and responsibility (1 Corinthians 7:3-5; Ephesians 5:21; 1 Peter 3:1-7; Genesis 21:12).
- The husband's function as "head" (*kephale*) is to be understood as self-giving love and service within this relationship of mutual submission. Thus, the leadership role of male headship in marriage is to ensure that the relationship remains in a healthy partnership of mutual love and respect (Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:19; 1 Peter 3:7).
- The Scriptures teach that both mothers and fathers are to exercise leadership in the nurture, training, discipline and teaching of their children (Exodus 20:12; Leviticus 19:3; Deuteronomy 27:16; Proverbs 1:8; Ephesians 6:1-4; Colossians 3:20; 2 Timothy 1:5; see also Luke 2:51).

## APPLICATION

### Cultural relativity of biblical texts

The bible is a complex book that interweaves God's story of redemption with human history. Trying to distinguish what parts of the Bible were only intended for the original recipients and what parts are directly applicable to us today over 2,000 years later is a difficult but important task. If not done sensitively it can result in questioning the very relevance of the Bible for us today. On this topic, Scott McKnight in his book "the Blue Parakeet" comments that Christians clearly do not live out everything that is written in the Bible word for word. An obvious example is the use of stoning as capital punishment (Deuteronomy 27:16); wearing of jewellery and hair styles (1 Timothy 2: 9), washing each other's feet (John 13:12-20), lifting up holy hands every time we pray (1 Timothy 2:8), greeting each other with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16) and the process for electing church leaders using lots (Acts 1:26). McKnight suggests that the method by which we work out what is for us today and what is not, should be by identifying a pattern of discernment:

*"The pattern of discernment is simply this: as we read the Bible and locate each item in its place in the story, as we listen to God speak to us in our world through God's ancient Word, we discern—through God's Spirit and in the context of our community of faith—a pattern of how to live **in our** world.....What is good for Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Ezra, Jesus, Peter, and Paul is also good for us. But, the precise expression of the gospel or the manner of living of Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Ezra, Jesus, Peter, and Paul may not be our expression or our manner of living. Living out the Bible means living out the Bible in our day in our way by discerning together how God would have us live." – p. 129*

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart in their book on "How to Read the Bible for all it's Worth" provide some helpful suggestions on how to discern cultural elements of the Bible. The following is a brief summary of some of the points Fee and Stuart suggest Christian's use in discerning what things in the bible are cultural and what are not:

1. *Distinguish between the core message of the Bible and what is dependent on or peripheral to it. For example, the fallen-ness of all humanity and redemption offered to us through Christ's death and resurrection are clearly part of this central core but*

*greeting each other with a holy kiss, women's head coverings in worship, or the need for men to always lift up holy hands when they pray are not.*

2. *Distinguish between what the New Testament itself sees as inherently moral and what is not. Paul's lists of sinful behaviors for example, never contain cultural items. Thus sexual immorality, adultery, drunkenness, homosexual practice, thievery, greed and the like (1 Corinthians 6:9-10) are always wrong.*
3. *Make special note of items where the New Testament bears uniform and consistent witness and where it reflects differences. Uniform witness exists in areas such as: having love as the Christian's basic ethical response, a non-retaliation personal ethic, forgiveness towards others, the wrongness of strife, hatred, murder, stealing, etc. On the other hand, the New Testament does not appear to be uniform on such matters as women's ministries in the church. This lack of uniformity suggests that the role of women in the Early Church differed depending on the context and culture where individual churches existed and any particular issues these churches were facing – p. 80 to 86.*

### **Contextualising the gospel**

The Church in each generation has been given freedom to express the unchanging message of the gospel within their context to serve the church and reach the lost. The increasing freedom of women to lead and influence our society needs to be taken into account when the question of women in eldership is raised. A church that does not allow women to share key leadership roles is likely to be seen by non-Christians as less relevant than one that does. It would be a shame if a non-believer refused to be open to the message of Jesus because they could not understand why the Church does not allow women to be in eldership.

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22 remind us of the freedom he felt in his ministry to contextualise the gospel without compromising it:

*To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.*

From this perspective, involving women in eldership removes a potential gender impediment to people's understanding of the gospel while at the same time enriching the eldership team of the Church to include the insights of gifted people who have already demonstrated significant leadership, biblical maturity and Godly character.

### **Collective eldership**

All references to eldership in the bible are in relation to a collective body or team of elders (Acts 15:4). It is important to note that spiritual authority and oversight is not vested in one individual but the group as a whole. Thus, in the event that a woman was to become an elder of our church she would be (as the other elders already are) accountable to each other and the church and be part of the collective spiritual authority structure rather than an individual holding authority in and of themselves.

### **IN SUMMARY**

Based on significant prayer, biblical study, additional reading and discussion, the elders have agreed that the Bible allows local churches the freedom to discern the role of women in eldership in a way that best serves the church and allows us to contextualise the gospel and our faith community to the culture in which we exist. As a result, the eldership at Fresh Hope Armidale Church of Christ will be open to men and women who have demonstrated Godly character and giftedness for this important role of servant leadership.

The elders welcome discussion around this issue. The elders are aware that a different perspective can be established from the Bible to support the view that women should not be elders. This paper is not an attempt to persuade everyone in the church to hold the same position but rather provide a solid biblical basis for the elders' conviction of opening up eldership in the church to appropriately gifted and spiritually mature women.

Moving forward, while it is unlikely that everyone in the church will see things in exactly the same way on this topic, let's remember we are to live in love at all times as a church family. Where there are differences of opinion, the elders urge individuals in our church to maintain a loving biblically-grounded position in a way that does not dismiss the views of others but rather acknowledges that even respected biblical scholars see things differently on this topic. Such a demonstration of love and unity becomes in itself an example to the world that attracts the



unbeliever (John 13:35 - your love for one another will prove to the world you are my disciples).

For a more in-depth discussion of selective scriptures that are frequently used to restrict women in eldership please see Appendix 1.

### **What next**

As of February 2016, eldership at Fresh Hope Armidale Church of Christ will be open to women who have demonstrated Godly character and giftedness for this important role of servant leadership. Church members will be asked to prayerfully consider and put forward names of women and men in our congregation who they think would be suitable for this role.

If you have concerns about the views and ideas contained in this document, please talk to Pastor Andrew on 0412 870 508 or one of the elders.

## APPENDIX 1 – LOOKING DEEPER AT OBJECTIONS TO THE ABOVE POSITION

***Note of thanks - much of the following has been adapted from Connections Community Church (<http://connectionscommunitychurch.org>) paper that details the role of women in the life of their Church.***

This wing appendix engages with some of objections that are frequently raised against an *egalitarian* view on the role of women in the Church. The objections to the above position, come from two lines of thought. First, that there are passages of Scripture that appear to specifically forbid women from teaching or having authority over men. Second, that the biblical qualifications for elders require that they be men only. This appendix will briefly address both of these objections.

But before we address these objections, it should first be noted that, if they are legitimate, we immediately have a theological problem. If women can't lead or teach, then why did God raise up, use and bless women of both testaments to lead and teach? Those who restrict people from certain ministries solely on the basis of gender must address this question.

### **Objection #1: The Bible forbids women to teach or have any authority over men.**

Those who say the Bible does teach gender restrictions do so based on two passages of Scripture. We shall address both.

#### 1st Timothy 2:11-15 (NIV)

*11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15 But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.*

If this passage is to be taken “literally” and at “face value” then the following things are true:

1. *Creation order determines superiority.* But if this is true, then plants and animals would be superior to men, for they were created first. Or maybe “first” means “from” or “out of” (as many rightly suggest it could be translated), meaning that men are superior because women

were created from men (God using Adam's rib to create Eve.) But if this is so, then dirt would be superior to men because Adam was formed out of dust!

2. *Women are saved through having children and perseverance.* But this can't be true, because the Bible clearly teaches that it is only by grace through faith that anyone is saved (Ephesians 2:8-9). Are childless women not saved? Are women with children not saved if they waiver in their personal faith, their love for others or their personal holiness? No one who believes the Bible teaches this.

What this passage reveals is that if one is to correctly interpret the Scripture, at least the more difficult or controversial ones, he or she must be able to consult the original languages (Greek in New Testament passages) and understand the cultural issues into which a passage of Scripture was written. It is important to remember that all of Scripture is situational (written to real people who lived at a certain point of time in history and that addresses real situations that were actually occurring.) It is critical to reconstruct, as much as is possible, the situation (historical context) that a particular section of Scripture is addressing. Let's dig into this passage with both these factors in mind.

First it is important to note that, in the Greek text, the only command in this passage is that "a woman should learn" (*manqanetw*). This is a counter-cultural command. Women were often excluded from educational opportunities in first century culture. But here Paul is clear that women must be given full and equal access to a theological education, just like men. Paul also addresses how women are to learn. Here, apparently, some of the women were being disruptive and argumentative during teaching times. So Paul corrects this, stating that they must learn with a quiet (*hsuxia* - having a calm spirit) and submissive (*en pash upotagh* – fully surrendered) spirit. In reality, all people should have this spirit in learning, not just women! But here it was women, probably taking their new-found freedom to learn too far, who were creating problems. This is corrected by reminding them to adopt the right spirit in learning the Bible.

Verse 12 continues Paul's thought. This verse is not a new sentence or a new idea, but rather a continuation of what he wrote in the first part of the sentence. It is at least interesting to note that Paul said, "I do not permit", which would open up the possibility that what follows was his personal practice in that culture rather than an authoritative command from the Lord. Notwithstanding, let's note several points about this verse.

- The word translated “assume authority” (*auqentein*) most commonly (70% of the time in classical Greek literature) carried a dark meaning of stealing, wrongfully using or usurping authority.
- The word “teach” is grammatically linked to “assume authority” (*didaskein oude auqentein*) in a way that where each word potentially (though admittedly, not necessarily) colours the other (In other words, they should be taken in light of each other).
- The word “quiet” (*hsuxiđa*), like the preceding verse, means to have a calm rather than agitating or argumentative spirit.

So one legitimate interpretation of this verse would be that Paul doesn't stand for women who are supposed to be learning to improperly assume authority and start teaching or refuting what was being taught. He is reinforcing and amplifying what he said in verse 11. This interpretation is supported by the recurrent theme in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy about combating false teaching, some of which comes from people who are deceived or not fully formed in their theological understanding.

Things take an unusual twist in verse 13 and 14. But with a little work, we begin to see that it makes perfect sense and fits perfectly with the point Paul is making. Here are the key components.

- “Formed” (*pla/ssw*) can refer to things other than physical formation. Adam was physically formed before Eve, but he was also theologically formed before Eve. Eve's instructions came from Adam. But Adam apparently did a poor job of instructing Eve, as she was off on what she thought God had said regarding the forbidden fruit (adding “you must not touch it”, which God never said).
- Paul isn't saying that Adam was alone responsible for sin coming into the world (See Romans 5). While Adam sinned through outright rebellion, Eve sinned because she was deceived, not fully understanding what God has said.

So the point in this? Women must be allowed to be fully and accurately theologically educated, so that they won't be open to deception. Men shouldn't be like Adam and settle for women who, like Eve, had flawed or incomplete theological education.

Now we come to the odd sounding statement made in verse 15. It is, admitted by all, a difficult passage to interpret, and various interpretations don't affect the flow of the passage. Here are some insights that might help.

- The phrase “women will be saved” is actually singular, referring to a single woman.
- The word “childbearing” has the definite article before it, meaning “the childbearing” (referring to a singular, specific childbirth, probably the most famous birth of all, the birth of Jesus Himself).
- The Greek work “if” can be translated “when”.

So the idea would be that a woman is saved through Jesus coming into the world. Not only are men saved the same way, but saying it this way is a “gentle jab” at men, reminding them that it was a woman who was responsible for bringing the Messiah into the world. This salvation through Jesus is confirmed when a woman lives a life that shows a genuine commitment to Jesus, again, just like men.

#### 1st Corinthians 14: 34-38 (NIV)

*34 Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says. 35 If they have any questions, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is improper for women to speak in church meetings. 36 Or do you think God’s word originated with you Corinthians? Are you the only ones to whom it was given? 37 If you claim to be a prophet or think you are spiritual, you should recognize that what I am saying is a command from the Lord himself. 38 But if you do not recognize this, you yourself will not be recognised.*

These verses appear to be straight-forward at first glance but closer investigation shows some interesting things.

First, the word silent (*sigaw*) means exactly that, to not say a word. This is strange, since Paul has already taught earlier in this very same letter that women can pray and prophesy publicly. So what he is saying here appears to be an outright contradiction of his earlier teachings. Second, the call to be silent and submissive at church is based on “what the Law says”. What’s being referred to here is the Old Testament Law. Here’s the problem. If you scour the Old Testament Law you will never find such a command. It is simply not taught anywhere in the Law.

Third, the statement is made that it is shameful (*aisxros* - a disgraceful, filthy act) for a woman to say anything at church. They are not to even ask a question. Again, how can this

be reconciled with Paul's other teachings that women are able to pray and prophesy and exercise their gifts of leading or teaching in the context of church gatherings?

Those who believe in the inspiration of the Bible should be rightly concerned with this passage. Paul appears to contradict himself and to teach error about the Old Testament. How do we reconcile this? Maybe this way:

### DOYOUWANTSOMEMONEY

We know what is meant by that last sentence, even though it's in all capital letters, has no spaces between words and no punctuation mark at the end. Our familiarity with our written language fills in all the gaps. The Greek language was written like the example English sentence. All caps and with no spaces or punctuation. The readers simply "filled in" what they knew to be needed.

What does this have to do with our text? Many scholars believe that Paul is using a form of sarcasm in verses 34 and 35; that he is quoting the statements made by male leaders in the church at Corinth as a means of pointing out how ridiculous those statements are. The readers in Corinth would have been very familiar with the statements and recognised them instantly as what some of their leaders had been teaching (the contemporary English reader is deprived of both that knowledge and the punctuation that would help to understand Paul's intent in using these words in his argument).

Why do biblical scholars interpret these verses that way? First, it resolves the contradiction issue. Paul is not contradicting his own teaching (in this letter and in other New Testament letters.) He is calling out some leaders in Corinth who were contradicting his teachings!

Second, it solves the inaccuracy issue. Paul is not making an erroneous statement about the Old Testament Law. Such error is inconceivable from a man who was an expert in the Law (as Paul was) and also incompatible with the God-inspired nature of the New Testament letters.

Third, it is supported by the verses that follow. Verse 36 has two pointed questions (again, which are understood to be questions because there are no punctuation marks!) Literally the questions are: "Was it from you that the Word of God went forth? Has it come to you only?" These are rhetorical questions. The answer to these questions is, clearly, "No!" Paul is ridiculing these leaders for basing non-biblical teaching on their own authority as though they

alone spoke for God or exclusively heard from God. Paul then follows these rhetorical questions by making some clear statements in order to make sure that there is no confusion on what he is meaning. He says that if anyone really speaks for God or considers himself to be a spiritual person, he will acknowledge that what he (Paul) is saying is God's true orders (like letting women pray and prophesy in public worship services). Paul concludes by saying that a leader who doesn't acknowledge Paul's teachings as correct should no longer be recognised as an approved leader or teacher.

This interpretation of this passage not only clears up all the problems and harmonises it with the rest of the Bible, it makes it a powerful passage for allowing women to fully participate in worship by praying and speaking God's Word. And if you are wondering whether such forms of sarcasm are used in other places in the Bible consider the following passages of Scripture: Judges 10:14; 1 Kings 18:27; Job 38:4; Amos 4:4; 1 Corinthians 4:4, 2 Corinthians 12:13.

## **Objection #2: Eldership is restricted to men only**

This subject is often clouded by the fact that the term "elder" is used in various ways to describe various positions in the contemporary church. The term "elder" is used in the New Testament to designate a member of a team of senior leaders in a church who, collectively, had the authority to make decisions regarding the doctrinal accuracy and the moral purity of the church's constituency. They provided general oversight to the church and also equipped people to carry on the work of Christian ministry.

The reason some hold that women are excluded from eldership is because of statements made in the two "qualifications for eldership" passages of the Bible, found in Titus 1:6 and 1 Timothy 3:2. We will examine each qualification that is used to justify an exclusively male eldership. But quickly before we do that, it is important to be reminded about the nature of Scripture.

### The nature of the Bible

The Bible is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16-17). This means that God guided the human authors in such a way that, while their unique personalities, vocabulary and experiences colour their writing, what they said was fully true and was fully what God wanted to be said. The Bible is also situational. This means that it was not written as a generic manual to all humankind. Instead, it was written to specific people at particular times in history in order to

address specific circumstances or give direction to specific situations that were actually happening. This means there are distinct historical and cultural elements to all writings of the Bible. These need to be understood in order to interpret and apply it correctly.

This may be a surprise to some, but the Bible is not originally written to you. The Bible is a collection of writings - history, poetry, proverbs and letters – originally written to a number of different nations, people groups, churches and individuals. It was written to them. But the Bible was all written for you. We hear God speak through what He has spoken. He and His will is revealed to us in these situational writings. They become our guide to God, life and the after-life. When interpreting the Bible we must keep in mind the situational nature of the Scriptural writings.

Now we turn our attention to the specific objections to women serving on a senior leadership team as found in the qualification lists found in those two New Testament passages.

### **An elder must be the husband of one wife**

This objection to women in senior leadership is simple: Because a woman cannot be a “husband of one wife”, a woman cannot be an elder. Most gender restrictionists say this qualification excludes women and divorced men from eldership. This, we are told, is simply taking the words “at face value”.

Is this the right way to interpret this statement? If we take this qualifier at such “face value”, must we not also say that only married men can serve as senior leaders? And must we also not say that if a man’s wife died, he could never be an elder, because either he isn’t then married or, if he gets remarried, he is the husband of more than one wife? Yet the vast majority of gender restrictionists don’t hold these positions. They appear to be guilty of taking at face value what suits them, and then explaining away other things that are equally “face value”.

This qualifier for eldership was never intended to be a gender restriction nor a second marriage restriction. This is a polygamist restriction. Marriage is one man and one woman. Multiple, simultaneous marriages disqualified a person from senior leadership. Why was only polygamy, and not polyandry (a woman married to more than one man) mentioned? Because situationally, polyandry was not an issue. Polygamy was an issue. The Bible was written into situations that actually existed.



**The qualifiers are all stated in masculine terms (i.e., “he must this” and “he must that”)**

In English the masculine gender is used to refer to what is clearly supposed to be everyone regardless of gender. “If any man be in Christ...” we know means “if anyone be in Christ...”. It’s not gender specific. In English, our choice is either “he” or “she” when we mean all people.

But it’s even clearer in the Greek. The personal pronoun “he” (*autov*) is not used in these passages. It is supplied in some English translations in an effort to make the text more readable. This is an admirable goal, but it does cloud the gender issue.

### **An elder must be a man who manages his home well**

Some say this qualifier excludes women because, first, it is the man who is the head of the home and therefore the “manager”, and it says that “he” (or “the man” in some translations) must manage his home well.

As for the “he”, see the point above. The masculine third person personal pronoun is not used in the passage, it is supplied in some translations. Nor is the word “man”. The Greek word “*tiv*” is used, which means “a certain person”, not a specific gender.

The phrase can easily, and perhaps most legitimately, be translated “one must manage one’s own household well”. The argument cannot be made that a woman has no management role in the home. Case in point, reread the “virtuous woman” passage in Proverbs 31. In describing the many managerial/leadership tasks she undertook, it is said that she “watches over the affairs of her household”. She is a manager in every way!

### **One more thing...**

It is sometimes suggested that women can’t be elders because we have no example of a woman elder in the Bible. Again, we do have examples of women prophets, leaders,

deacons, apostles, evangelists and leaders! But not elders. Does this argument carry weight?

This line of thought does touch on an important aspect of interpreting the historical parts Bible correctly (those parts that record what people did). This aspect of interpretation can be phrased as a question:

“When the Bible records what someone did, is it intended to be *prescriptive* or *descriptive*? In other words, when the Bible describes something that someone or some group did, is that thing intended to be literally copied by all churches at all times and in all places? Or does it merely describe what those people did, which we can learn from but do not need to literally copy.

Here are some examples.

- The first church selected 7 deacons. Are churches required to have exactly 7 deacons?
- The early church met every day. Are we required to meet every day?
- The women in Corinth wore head coverings. Are women today required to wear hats?
- The men in Ephesus were to pray by lifting up their hands. Are men today required to lift their hands when they pray?
- Jesus didn't own a home. Are we to sell our homes and live without one?

No one believes that everything good people did that is described in the Bible is meant to be literally applied to all people today. There are principles to learn from what they did, but a literal application is not required.

So what about no women elders being described in the Bible? Is this prescriptive or descriptive? We would argue, especially in the light of all the other evidence, that it is descriptive, and not meant to be literally copied by all churches for all time and in all places. There are no gentile elders described in the Bible either, but we let non-Jews pastor (we assume based on the spread of the church that Gentiles did become elders, but it is an assumption). Why would we not make the same assumption for women? In fact, early church history (the generation after the generation of the apostles) recorded that a women eldership did arise in the church. This is what happens when the word of God takes root and

begins to work itself out in the life of His church and surrounding culture. Traditional, unnecessary cultural barriers and practices begin to erode and disappear.

What principle could we learn from this? That cultural conditions can be a practical factor in choosing elders. In some male-dominated cultures having women elders could be problematic enough that it would make it quite difficult for them to be able to serve as effectively and with joy (as the Bible commends). In some cultures a childless man or unmarried man or a man under a certain age might have the same problems. In some matriarchal cultures, men would have a problem serving effectively and joyfully!

Christianity was meant to be flexible enough that it could work itself into any culture and still express itself authentically and powerfully. In fact, by being contextualised in the culture it could influence that culture, and through conversion and education bring about Godly change to the essentials.