

Concerning Women's Ordination: Women's Ministry in the New Testament (Bishops, Presbyters, Deacons) or a Presbytera is not a "Priestess" (Part 2)



This is the second of two essays on women's ministry in the New Testament. In the previous essay, I addressed the question (1) "Did women exercise ministerial office in the New Testament period?"¹ In this essay, I address the two additional questions: (2) How does the New Testament address the question of female bishops or presbyters? (3) What are the contemporary hermeneutical implications of what the New Testament says about women in office?

As noted in previous essays, the New Testament says very little about the actual practices associated with the more permanent ministries which I have called "office." For example, the New Testament nowhere describes the ritual celebration of the Eucharist or indicates who presided at its celebration; nor does the New Testament ever use the word "priest" to refer to those who exercise office, both key concerns in Catholic discussions of ordained ministry.

Although the New Testament nowhere identifies by name a woman who exercised the role of presbyter or bishop, it does not mention by name any man with these titles either.

In addition (as I also pointed out), the New Testament terminology for office is fluid, and a number of titles are used: "co-worker," "apostle," "deacon," "teacher," "prophet," "leader." However, after the New Testament period, permanent ministry is particularly associated with the offices of overseer/bishop, elder/presbyter, and deacon. These offices are rarely mentioned in the New Testament. The book of Acts indicates that Paul and Barnabas appointed "elders" (πρεσβύτεροι, *presbyteroi*) "in each church" (Acts 14:23). As Paul concluded his third mission journey before returning to Jerusalem, he addressed the "elders" (πρεσβύτεροι, *presbyteroi*) of the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17). Paul counsels them to keep watch over the flock over whom the Holy Spirit has made them "overseers" (ἐπίσκοποι, *episkopoi*) in order to shepherd the church of God (v. 28). In chapter 15, Acts mentions "the elders" in conjunction with "the apostles" (Acts 15:4, 6, 22, 23). In Phil. 1:1, Paul greets the "saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi," along with the "overseers and deacons" (ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνους, *episkopois kai diakonois*). This is the only letter in which Paul specifically addresses these office holders by title. Again, there is nothing in these passages to indicate the sex of these office holders, and the only person specifically identified as a deacon by Paul is the female deacon, Phoebe (Rom. 16:1).

The only New Testament description of qualifications for the offices of overseer/bishop, elder/presbyter, and deacon occur in the pastoral epistles (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9); consequently, these are the crucial passages to examine in order to assess whether the New Testament addresses the question of female bishops or presbyters. Those who are opposed to women's ordination appeal to these passages as crucial for deciding the issue. The Anglican *Forward in Faith*

document *Consecrated Women?* states:

*By the time of the Pastoral Epistles, an ordained ministry with full authority has developed, and with these we see, in some places, the first beginnings of moniscopacy. We naturally stress the witness of the Scriptures that the ministry of presbyteroi and episkopoi is male. There is no evidence of, or endorsement for, the exercise of oversight or liturgical leadership by women: the opposite is the case.*²

In a footnote, the document appeals for biblical support to 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 as “possibly a special prohibition by St Paul of female presidency of the Eucharist,”³ as well as “1 Timothy 3: Titus 1:5ff., etc.”⁴ Beyond the mere reference, there is no actual exegesis of either 1 Timothy 3 or Titus 1. That these passages provide warrant for a male-only presbyterate and episcopacy is assumed to be self-evident. The strong statement “the opposite is the case” referring to “no evidence of, or endorsement for, the exercise of oversight or liturgical leadership by women” is, again, simply asserted. There could, of course, be no evidence for the exercise of liturgical leadership by men either, since the New Testament says nothing whatsoever about who presided at liturgical celebration, whether male or female. In my previous essay, I argued that there is indeed strong evidence that women in the New Testament church, held “office,” and thus exercised some sort of ecclesial oversight. The *Forward in Faith* statement is thus mere assertion without substantiation.

On the other hand, the Evangelical Complementarian Wayne Grudem at least makes an attempt at an argument based on the observation that 1 Timothy 3:2 states that the office of overseer “should be filled by someone who is the ‘husband of one wife.’ . . . It is evident that only a man can be a husband. . . . *anēr* . . . is the Greek term that specifically designates a male human being. This means elders [sic] had to

be men.”⁵ (Grudem’s argument will be addressed below.)

Job Descriptions or Moral Qualifications?

The pastoral epistles describe the qualifications for overseers/bishops, elders/presbyters, and deacons in two places. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 addresses qualifications for overseers (or bishops), 3:8-12 discusses deacons, and Titus 1:5-9 includes almost identical language concerning elders (or presbyters), who, in verse 7, are also referred to with the title of “overseer/bishop.” (Whether the offices of overseer/bishop and elder/presbyter are two distinct offices, or are rather simply different names for the same office is an issue of controversy that need not be addressed here.)⁶

The first thing to be noted is that these are not job descriptions, but moral qualifications for church office. New Testament scholar Ben Witherington notes that the focus is on “character description.” The main function of the passages is “to explain *how* a leader should behave, not *what* the leader’s full job description should look like.”⁷ The character description of the overseer/bishop contrasts five vices which the office holder should avoid with six virtues to pursue, in addition to demanding sexual fidelity in marriage. Paul is likely contrasting the moral behavior of overseers, elders, and male and female deacons with that of false teachers and unruly women described elsewhere in the pastoral epistles.⁸

Misleading Translation

So, first, the qualifications for church office in the pastoral epistles are moral qualifications, not job descriptions, and specifically not gender qualifications. Second, it is also important to note that the standard English translations of these passages are misleading, giving the impression that Paul is describing specifically male office

holders. In describing the office of overseer/bishop, Paul uses the generic τις (*tis*), properly translated as “whoever” or “anyone.” Paul affirms that “whoever (τις, *tis*) aspires to the office of bishop (ἐπίσκοπος, *episkopos*) desires a noble task” (1 Tim. 3:1-2, NRSV). The same word is used in Titus 1:6: “If anyone (τίς, *tis*) is blameless/irreproachable . . .” As Philip Payne asks, “Would Paul encourage women to desire an office, as these words do, if it were prohibited to them?”⁹

Unfortunately, by their introduction of male pronouns where there are none in the original Greek text, modern English translations give the misleading impression that Paul is claiming that church leaders must be male. The complementarian-leaning ESV translation introduces the male pronouns “he” or “his” ten times in 1 Tim. 3:1-7, while even the “inclusive language” translations of the NRSV and the revised NIV have eight and ten masculine pronouns respectively. In actuality, the Greek texts of 1 Tim. 3:1-12 and Titus 1:5-9 do not contain a single male pronoun.¹⁰

A more literal (but admittedly awkward) translation of 1 Timothy 3:1-6 would read as follows:

Trustworthy is the saying: Whoever [tis] aspires to [the office of] overseer/bishop desires a good work. It is necessary therefore that the overseer/bishop be without approach, a “one woman man” [literal translation], temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, apt at teaching, not an excessive drinker, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy; managing one’s own household well, having children in subjection with all gravity – but if someone [tis] does not know how to manage one’s own family, how would one care for God’s church? – not a recent convert, lest being puffed up, one become conceited and fall into the devil’s snare.

With the single exception of the three-word expression “one

woman man” (to be discussed below), nothing in the passage would indicate that the person being discussed for the office of overseer/bishop would be either a man or a woman.

Also significant are the close parallels between the language that Paul uses to describe the qualifications for the office of overseer/bishop and the language he uses to describe women. The language is so close that it cannot be coincidental. There are numerous verbal or conceptual parallels between overseer requirements and passages regarding women. Almost half of these passages use nearly identical terminology; others use synonymous expressions, while others forbid identical characteristics.¹¹ The following parallels are based on a chart created by Philip Payne¹²:

Overseer Description→Statements About Women→Pastoral Epistle Odds

1 Tim. 3:1 (καλοῦ ἔργου, *kalou ergou* “good work”)→ 5:10 (ἔργοις καλοῖς, *ergois kalois* “good works”)→8/14

3:2 (ἀνεπίλημπτον, *anepilēmpton* “irreproachable”)→ 5:7 (ἀνεπίλημπτοι, *anepilēmptoi* “irreproachable”)→3/14

3:2 (μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα, *mias gunaikos andra* “one woman man”)→ 5:9 (ένὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνή, *henos andros gunē* “one man woman”)→4/14

3:2 (νηφάλιον, *nēphalion* “temperate”)→ 3:11 (νηφαλίους, *nēphalious* “temperate”)→3/14

3:2 (σώφρονα, *sōphrona* “sober”)→ 2:9, 15 (σωφροσύνης, *sōphrosynēs* “sobriety,” “propriety”)→6/14

3:2 (κόσμιον, *kosmion* “orderly”)→ 2:9 (κοσμίῳ, *kosmiō*

“orderly”)->2/14

3:4 (σεμνότητος, *semnotētos* “gravity,” “respect”)-> 3:11 (σεμνάς, *semnas* “to be grave”)->6/14

3:6 (κρίμα, *krima* “judgment” to be avoided)-> 5:12 (κρίμα, *krima* “judgment” to be avoided)->2/14

3:7 (μαρτυρίαν καλὴν, *marturian kalēn* “good witness”)-> 5:10 (καλοῖς μαρτυρουμένη, *kalois marturoumenē* “witnessed” by “good” works) → 3/14

The repeated use of such identically-phrased language in reference to both the requirements for the office of overseer/bishop and in reference to women cannot be a coincidence. Payne calculates that the 36 lines of 1 Timothy explicitly about women (out of a total of 516 lines in the pastoral epistles) comes to approximately 1/14 of the pastoral epistles. The total number of times an expression appears in the pastoral epistles divided by 14 gives the odds of a random distribution in the pastoral epistles (the third column above). The probability of a random distribution of all these words and expressions occurring in the thirty-six lines of the pastoral epistles explicitly about women is the product of each of the separate odds for the appropriate columns, approximately six in one million.¹³ Regardless of the exact mathematical possibilities, the use of so much identical terminology both in the verses describing the requirements for the office of overseer/bishop and in the verses explicitly about women only makes sense if Paul deliberately described women using the identical vocabulary that he had used to describe overseers in 1 Timothy (as well as elders in Titus 1:6-9). Given that this is certainly the case, it cannot be that Paul understood the requirements for the office of overseer to exclude women – since they are the same

requirements! Rather, Paul seems deliberately to use identical language to describe the moral qualifications of overseers/bishops and elders and the expectations for women in the church. As noted above, the requirements are moral qualifications, character descriptions, not job descriptions, and they are not gender-specific.

A “One Woman Man”

What then about the three-word expression μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα, (*mias gunaikos andra*, literally “one woman man”) in verse two translated variously as “the husband of one wife” (KJV, ESV), “married only once” (NRSV), and “faithful to his wife” (NIV)? Does it mean (as Grudem claims) that office holders have to be male? There is disagreement about the meaning of the phrase “one woman man” and its female equivalent (1 Timothy 5:9). Both Grudem and Payne (who agree on almost nothing else) believe that it is an exclusion of polygamists (and likely adulterers).¹⁴ Witherington suggests that polygamy and polyrandry are probably unlikely, since these were rare practices in the Greco-Roman world. The emphasis is on the word “one,” not on “man” or “woman.”¹⁵ As noted above, the requirements of the office of overseer/bishop are primarily moral requirements: “[T]he strong sense in this passage is on being morally irreproachable. It is therefore far more likely that the phrase in question is dealing with behavior *within* marriage, which is, to say, being sexually faithful to one’s own wife, and so not engaging in any sort of extramarital infidelity.” A “one woman man,” indicates, then, someone who has been exclusively faithful to his wife. The close parallel to 5:9 (“one man woman”), which is nearly identical in language and form, indicates that both passages are dealing with the same issue – sexual fidelity in marriage.¹⁶

The passage does not imply that the person must necessarily be married and cannot be single. Nor do the following statements

about managing one's own household and one's children imply that the overseer/bishop necessarily has children. Paul simply assumes as a matter of course that the person would be married with a family, as would have been normal in first-century Mediterranean culture.¹⁷ John Chrysostom's *Homily* on 1 Tim 3:2 interprets the passage to mean not that there is a rule that the bishop must have a wife, but that he cannot have more than one.¹⁸ If the passage were to be pressed to imply a strict job description with minimum requirements, then the references to managing a household would mean that all bishops, presbyters, and deacons would need to be married home owners with at least two children old enough to be believers. If these were minimum requirements, then not even Paul, who was single and (since he exercised an itinerant ministry) did not own a home, would have qualified as an overseer or deacon.¹⁹

The phrase "one woman man" functions, then, as an exclusion (no adulterers), not as a minimum job requirement. Grudem recognizes correctly the exclusionary element when he acknowledges that the passage does not rule out single men as overseers,²⁰ but he is inconsistent in then insisting that the passage implies that the overseer must necessarily be a male. Payne points out that if the requirement is morally exclusionary, it does not prohibit women any more than the requirement prohibits unmarried men or married men who do not own homes or have children:

Since "one woman man" is a set phrase that functions as an exclusion, any claim that a single word of it ("man") also functions separately as a requirement must posit a double meaning. This is not warranted by the context. It is bad hermeneutics to isolate a single word ("man") from a set phrase ("one woman man") that functions as an exclusion (of polygamists and probably adulterous husbands) and to elevate that single word to the status of an independent requirement (that all overseers be men).²¹

The exclusion operates exactly in the same way that the parallel requirement in 1 Timothy 5:9 functions concerning widows, as a promotion of exclusive fidelity within marriage. Oddly, Grudem claims that the parallel in 5:9 concerning widows is “is not parallel, but precisely the opposite,” because “it assumes that the widow is a woman, and it assumes that the elder is a man!”²² To the contrary, a qualification for overseer that was “precisely the opposite” would read something like “a *many* man woman,” that is, an adulterer. Genesis 2:23 makes clear that woman is not *the opposite* of man, but *like* him as his “helper” or partner, “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” In both passages in 1 Timothy, the requirement is a moral restriction on both men and women that serves an identical function, the exclusion of adulterers and the promotion of fidelity in marriage.

Grudem makes a parallel argument based on Paul’s statement in verse 4 concerning household management: “. . . *the New Testament sees a close relationship between male leadership in the home and male leadership in the church.* Paul says that the candidate for the office of elder must manage his own household well.”²³ The *Forward in Faith* document *Consecrated Women?* makes a similar claim: “The bishop’s duty is, as described, to be the *paterfamilias* of God’s assembly . . . There is an obvious, although not explicit, logic here relating this monistic paternal episcopal ministry to the unity of the one *oikos* of the Father. One God, one bishop, one flock of the redeemed.”²⁴ Both confuse Paul’s accommodation to the normal social setting of the Mediterranean household with an endorsement of that setting as having a permanently normative status. Witherington points out that it is not surprising that there is significant overlap in what Paul writes about the overseer/bishop with the desirable character traits of non-ecclesial office holders in the contemporary Mediterranean culture. What is surprising, however, and should be given heavier weight is the way that Paul modifies common

norms, especially sexual norms, within a “christological and apostolic paradigm.” In contrast to the ancient Mediterranean “shame/honor” culture, which I have discussed at length in other essays, is the focus on servanthood. The overseer, elder, or deacon, is called to be humble and serve others, not to domineer over them.²⁵

In defending his claim that the passage implies male leadership, Grudem argues that Paul never uses the word προΐστημι (*proistēmi*) (1 Tim. 3:5) to speak of women managing or governing a household, but only men.²⁶ However, as Payne points out, Paul does use the even stronger word οἰκοδεσποτεῖν (*oikodespotein*, “to be house despots”) to describe younger widows in 1 Tim. 5:14, who are to marry and manage their homes. Moreover, no NT passage explicitly applies *proistēmi* to men either. In Rom. 12:8, the word is used in a list of gifts that could apply to either men or women, and Rom. 12:6-8 (like 1 Timothy 3:1-13) contains no specifically male pronouns. On the other hand, the *only* time the noun form is used in the NT, it describes a woman, Phoebe, who,

in Rom. 16:2, is called a προστάτις (*prostatis*), a “leader” or “patron.”²⁷

Women Deacons?

In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Paul provides a list of the requirements for deacons, which are the same kinds of moral or character requirements as those for overseers/bishops. As are overseers, deacons are to be “grave/honorable/above reproach” (σεμνοῦς, *semnous*) (3:8; cf. 3:4), not heavy drinkers of wine, not greedy (cf. 3:3). Significantly, as with overseers/bishops, deacons are to be “one woman men” who manage their children and household well (3:12; cf. 3:2, 4). Important for this discussion is 1 Timothy 3:11, a short statement in the middle of the qualifications for deacons, which reads: “Similarly,

women (γυναῖκας ὡσαύτως, *gunaikas ōsautōs*) [to be] grave/worthy of respect (σεμνάς, *semnas*), not slanderers (διαβόλους, *diabolous*), sober (νηφαλίους, *nēphaliους*), faithful in all things (πιστὰς ἐν πᾶσιν, *pistas en pasin*)” (my translation). As in 3:8 (“Deacons, likewise . . .”), the verse is introduced by the word “likewise” or “similarly” (ὡσαύτως, *ōsautōs*). This, along with the immediate context of the verse, indicates that the women discussed have some relationship to the office of deacon. Controversy concerns whether 1 Timothy 3:11 refers to female deacons or to deacons’ wives. Predictably, the complementarian-leaning ESV translates the passage: “Their wives likewise . . .,” while the NRSV and the NIV play it safe with the literal “Women likewise . . .” and “In the same way, the women . . .” (In footnotes, the NRSV and the NIV both list “wives of deacons” and “women deacons” as possible translations.)

Context and vocabulary indicate “women deacons” as the preferable translation. Witherington points out that, grammatically, the sentence is dependent on 3:2 and the word “must” (δεῖ, *dei*). As 3:8 with its description of deacons is tied to 3:2 by the word “likewise,” so 3:11 is then tied to 3:8 by an additional appearance of the word “likewise.” The passage would, then, seem to be a continued discussion of church functionaries, women deacons, not wives of deacons. If it is deacons’ wives, it is difficult to imagine Paul not first having made similar comments about overseers’ wives.²⁸

Payne provides additional grammatical and vocabulary indications that the passage must refer to women deacons. If Paul had intended to refer to “wives of deacons,” he would have added an expression such as “of deacons” or “their,” or “having wives” (cf. 3:4, “having children”). Because deacons had already been referred to, there would have been no additional need to supply the word “deacons” when referring to women. The word “likewise/similarly” would have been sufficient as it exactly parallels “deacons, similarly” in

verse 8. Each case of “similarly” indicates a church office provided by moral qualifications. Neither “deacons similarly” nor “women similarly” has a verb, but rather presuppose the continuation of “it is necessary for . . . to be” (δεῖ . . . εἶναι, *dei . . . einai*) from verse 2. The parallel verbal vocabulary and structure describing the qualifications for “deacons” and “women” also point to a description of office. Deacons (3:8) and women (deacons) (3:11) are required to be “worthy of respect” (σεμνοῦς, *semnous*; σεμνάς, *semnas*); “not double-tongued” (μὴ διλόγους, *dilogous*), “not slanderous: (μὴ διαβόλους, *diabolous*); “not addicted to much wine” (μὴ οἴνω πολλῷ προσέχοντας, *mē oinō pollō prosexontas*), “sober” (νηφαλίους, *nēphaliους*); not “fond of dishonest gain” (αἰσχροκερδεῖς, *aisxrokerdeis*), “faithful in all things” (πιστὰς ἐν πᾶσιν, *pistas en pasin*).²⁹

Finally, as pointed out in the previous essay, it is helpful to examine patristic interpretations of a passage, since the church fathers were native speakers of ancient Greek. As with the case of Phoebe being a deacon and Junia an apostle, so most patristic commentators interpret the passage to be referring to women deacons.³⁰

Given then, that verse 11 almost certainly refers to female deacons, this would also cast light on the expression “one woman man,” which appears again in v. 12, describing deacons. If “one woman man” and “managing one’s household” as character qualifications for deacons in verse 12 does not exclude the female deacons described in verse 11, then the identical vocabulary used to describe overseers/bishops in 3:2, 4 and elders in Titus 1:6 cannot exclude female overseers or elders. (We would also know from Rom. 16:1 that the “one woman man” qualification would not exclude female deacons since Phoebe is described as a διάκονος, *diakonos* of the church of Cenchrae.)³¹

Some, however (particularly complementarians), will appeal to Paul’s prohibition of women teaching or holding authority over

men in 1 Timothy 2:12. Would this not exclude women from exercising the office of overseer/bishop or elder/presbyter? I have already examined this passage at length, and I refer readers to that essay.³² Paul's use of the present tense verb form οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω (*ouk epitrepō*) ("I am not permitting") indicates that the exclusion is temporary, and is addressing a particular local situation involving false teachers. Paul's prohibition in 1 Tim. 2:12 might have something to do with Paul's not explicitly mentioning women overseers in 1 Tim. 3 in the same way that he had mentioned women deacons, but it would not be a permanent prohibition. If there is a tension in interpretation between 1 Tim. 2:12 and 1 Tim. 3, then 1 Tim. 2:12 should be interpreted in the light of 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1:6 rather than the reverse. A controverted interpretation of a single verse in 1 Tim. 2:12 should not override the normal meaning of τις (*tis*) ("everyone," "any one") in both 1 Tim. 3:1 and Titus 1:6. Moreover, if 1 Tim. 2:12 overrides the normal meaning of "anyone" to imply a permanent exclusion of women from office in the church, then the silencing of members of the circumcision party in Titus 1:10-11 would imply a similar permanent exclusion.³³

Finally, returning to a criticism raised in an earlier essay concerning the problem of "women priestesses,"³⁴ an objection sometimes raised by "Catholic" opponents of women's ordination is that an ordained woman would be a "priestess," and the Christian church does not have "priestesses," but "priests." However, as should be evident from this essay, Paul does not use the language of "priest" (ἱερεύς, *hierēus*) to refer to church office, but overseer/bishop (*episkopos*), elder/presbyter (*presbyteros*), and deacon (*diakonos*). The historical origins of the English word "priest" are as a translation of *presbyteros*, the ordinary Greek word for "elder." Paul does indeed use this word in reference to women in the pastoral epistles. In 1 Timothy 5:1, he writes "Do not rebuke an elder/older man (Πρεσβυτέρῳ, *presbyterō*), but exhort

him as a father, younger men as brothers, and female elders/older women (πρεσβυτέρας, *presbyteras*) as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with all purity." Within this context, Paul is probably not referring to church office, but simply using the ordinary Greek word that would have described older men and older women. However, the point is that the issue of the ordination of women to church office has nothing to do with women "priestesses." An ordained woman would be a female overseer/bishop, a female elder/presbyter (*presbytera*), or a female deacon.

Hermeneutics and the Regulative Principle

Finally, I turn to the issue of hermeneutics: What are the contemporary hermeneutical implications of what the New Testament says about women in office? In an earlier essay, I addressed the issue of hermeneutics, and distinguished it from exegesis.³⁵ In that essay, I followed some distinctions introduced by Anglican Divine Richard Hooker in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* over against Puritan objections to Anglican ecclesiology and liturgical practices. Specifically, the Puritans advocated a "regulative" principle of Biblical interpretation. Whatever was not specifically commanded in Scripture was prohibited. (Thus the Puritans rejected written liturgies, written prayers, lectionaries, liturgical calenders, vestments, hymn-singing that was not based on the Psalms, the exchange of wedding rings.) In contrast, Hooker embraced a permissive hermeneutic for the application of Scripture to contemporary practice. Whatever was not specifically forbidden by Scripture was allowed. Hooker also made helpful distinctions between natural law, revealed law, and positive law. Not all "positive laws" recorded in Scripture have permanent validity for all time and places. Particular positive laws in Scripture might have temporary application if their goal or purpose has been fulfilled; for example, the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament have been

fulfilled by the atoning work of Jesus Christ. At the same time, the goal or purpose of a positive law must be discerned in assessing how that goal might be fulfilled in a different setting or time than its original setting in Scripture. The church has the freedom to formulate its own positive law that might differ in its specifics from the positive law contained in Scripture if the church law fulfills the same goal.³⁶ Finally, Hooker made an extremely important observation concerning merely historical statements in Scripture which cannot simply be presumed to provide permanent warrant for later Christian practice: “When that which the word of God doth but deliver historically, we counter without any warrant as if it were legally meant, and so urge it further than we can prove it was intended, do we not add to the laws of God, and make them in number seem more than they are?”³⁷

How then might Hooker’s hermeneutical principles be applied in light of what the New Testament says about church office, and particularly about what Paul wrote in the pastoral epistles? There is a serious danger, I think, in a hermeneutical misapplication of historical precedent in Scripture. Both Evangelical complementarian and “Catholic” objections to women’s ordination seem to presume that the first-century church’s historical practice concerning what is assumed to be exclusively male exercise of church office provides a permanent warrant for later church practice.

I have argued in my previous essay that there is good historical warrant for the exercise of church office by women in the NT church, and, in this essay, that nothing of what Paul writes about the requirements for the offices of overseer/bishop, elder/presbyter, or deacon would exclude women from those offices. Even if I am mistaken, however, if there were no evidence of women holding office in the NT church, and if Paul’s requirements for office as described in the pastoral epistles indicates that the offices of overseer/bishop, elder/presbyter, and deacon were held only by

men, this in itself would not provide a necessary warrant for male-only leadership in later church practice.

The hermeneutical danger here is that against which Hooker warned, of confusing a merely historical practice with a warrant, of confusing the descriptive with the prescriptive. In the pastoral epistles, Paul was writing in and addressing the social setting of first-century Mediterranean culture. House churches were patterned along the lines of the Mediterranean household, and Paul would have assumed that the householder would be male, have children, and manage his household – although there would have been exceptions, such as Paul himself or “co-workers” of Paul, such as Priscilla and Aquila. At the same time, the requirements that Paul lists for the office of overseer, elder and deacon are *moral*; he provides no *prescriptive* job descriptions. Paul’s concern is that the overseer/elder be a good moral example both to the church and to the surrounding pagan culture, can manage the church well as he manages his own household, and is above reproach or scandal. However, nothing that Paul writes would exclude a woman from fulfilling the same functions. Indeed, that Paul refers to “anyone” (*tis*) when describing those eligible for these offices, uses no specifically male pronouns, and deliberately uses identical moral language to describe what he expects of women in his churches (including women deacons) that he demands of office-holders makes clear that there are no distinctive gender requirements for holding church office. There is nothing in what Paul writes in the pastoral epistles concerning the requirements for church office that would provide a *theological* warrant for excluding women from ordination, and, as Richard Hooker argued that the church in his own day had the freedom to use written liturgies, written prayers, lectionaries, liturgical calenders, vestments, hymn-singing that was not based on the Psalms, and exchange wedding rings (even though none of these were specifically commanded in Scripture), so the church in our own day, facing a vastly different cultural situation from

the household culture of the first-century Mediterranean world, should be willing and indeed eager to ordain as office holders those women who meet the kinds of moral character requirements for office on which Paul insisted in his own day, and in whose lives the church discerns evidence of divine vocation to church ministry.

1 “Concerning Women’s Ordination: Women’s Ministry in the New Testament (Office),” <http://willgwitt.org/theology/womens-ordination-office>.

2 Jonathan Baker, ed. *Consecrated Women? A Contribution to the Bishops Debate* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004), 61.

3 I address this passage in my essay “Concerning Women’s Ordination: Speaking and Teaching,” <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-speaking-and-teaching>. Needless to say, this passage says nothing about “female presidency of the Eucharist” because it says nothing about the Eucharist.

4 *Consecrated Women?*, 61, n.

5 Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 80. Although Grudem refers to “elders” (presbyters), the text reads *episkopos*, that is “overseer” or “bishop.”

6 For a recent argument that they were distinct offices, see Alistair C. Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office in the First Christian Communities* (Baker Academic, 2014).

7 Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians Volume 1: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 109, 243.

8 Witherington, 237, 241-242.

[9](#) Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 448.

[10](#) Payne, 445-448.

[11](#) Payne, 449.

[12](#) Payne, 450.

[13](#) Payne, 450-451.

[14](#) Grudem, 80; Payne, 445-446.

[15](#) Witherington, *Letters*, 109.

[16](#) Payne, 451 note.

[17](#) Witherington, *Letters*, 110, 237.

[18](#) “ This he does not lay down as a rule, as if he must not be without one, but as prohibiting his having more than one.” John Chrysostom, “Homily X, 1 Tim.3:1-4,” *Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus and Philemon: A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Philip Schaff, ed.(Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994); <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf113.v.iii.xi.html>.

[19](#) Payne, 446.

[20](#) Grudem, 80.

[21](#) Payne, 447; “If Grudem is permitted to dismember ‘one woman man’ and arbitrarily designate one word of it out of context as a new requirement, what is to keep one from isolating ‘one’s own house’ from ‘ruling one’s own house well’ (3:4-5) and designate home ownership as a new requirement for home owners?” Payne, 447

[22](#) Grudem, 256.

[23](#) Grudem, 80

[24](#) *Consecrated Women?*, 166

[25](#) Witherington, 114-115, 236.

[26](#) Grudem, 263, n. 107

[27](#) Payne, 452-453; See my previous essay, "Concerning Women's Ordination: Women's Ministry in the New Testament (Office)"; <http://willgwitt.org/theology/womens-ordination-office>.

[28](#) Witherington, 241.

[29](#) Payne, 454-459

[30](#) So, for example, John Chrysostom's homily on 1 Timothy 3:8-10: "Some have thought that this is said of women generally, but it is not so, for why should he introduce anything about women to interfere with his subject? He is speaking of those who hold the rank of Deaconesses." "Homily 11, 1 Timothy 3:8-10," *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 13, Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, Philipp Schaff, ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994); <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf113.v.iii.xii.html>. However, there was no distinction between the office of "deacon" and "deaconess" in the New Testament period. Paul would have been referring to women deacons.

[31](#) Payne, 448.

[32](#) See my essay "Concerning Women's Ordination: Speaking and Teaching"; <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-speaking-and-teaching>.

[33](#) Payne, 453.

[34](#) “Concerning Women’s Ordination: A Presbyteria is not a Priestess” (Part 1: Old Testament Priesthood); <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-a-presbyteria-is-not-a-priestess-part-1>.

[35](#) “Concerning Women’s Ordination: Hierarchy and Hermeneutics,” <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-hierarchy-and-hermeneutics>.

[36](#) Significantly, Hooker considers Paul’s instruction to Timothy concerning widows (1 Tim. 5:9) as precisely such an alterable measure in Scripture; Sykes, 93.

[37](#) Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 2 vols. (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1907), Book III. v. 1; cited in Stephen Sykes, “Richard Hooker and the Ordination of Women,” *Unashamed Anglicanism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 88.

Defeat, Shame, Memory: A Sermon

Lamentations 1:1-6

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Psalm 137

Luke 17:5-10



This morning’s lectionary readings contain two of the most difficult passages in all of Scripture. How does the

preacher respond to a passage in which the final verse reads “Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock”? (Ps. 137: 9). Certainly the preacher cannot suggest that this is an example to be emulated? “As we go forth this morning, let us remember these words from our Psalm: ‘Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and . . .’ Uh, Never mind. Let us stand and say the words of the Nicene Creed.” Turning to the Lamentations passage does not make things any easier. Lamentations is probably the most depressing book in the entire Bible. At least the book of Job has a happy ending! There are lots of thoughtful commentaries and theological reflections on the Book of Job. Not so much on Lamentations. Can you imagine someone saying to a seminary student on the day of graduation “Congratulations! I’d like you to give you this commentary on the book of Lamentations to help you with your ministry”?

When we come across passages like this in Scripture, I think it helps to remember that the Bible is not a book, but a collection of books. The Bible does not speak with a single voice, but with many voices. I think it also helps to remember that these are voices in a dialogue. Voices in Scripture ask questions to which sometimes we have to turn to other passages in Scripture to hear the answers. I think that reading the Bible in this way is preferable to the kind of static view that imagines Scripture as a kind of database of theological propositions all of which are speaking with a single voice and saying the same thing. I think it is also preferable to the opposite view that says that the Bible is full of contradictions and so we can pick and choose what we like. Neither approach gives us a clue as to how the church might derive theological or spiritual insight from passages like this morning’s readings.

So I would ask my listeners this morning to hear the morning’s lectionary readings as voices in a dialogue. I am going to focus on three readings: the Psalm, the Lamentations reading,

and the epistle reading from 2 Timothy. I would suggest that it is helpful to read each of these passages as asking the single question "Where is God?"

I also find it helpful to notice that there is a common pattern of themes in all three passages: defeat, shame, and remembering. I am going to use this three-fold pattern as a clue to hearing the dialogue between the voices in this morning's readings.

Biblical scholars sometimes have difficulty deciding the historical setting of a particular passage of Scripture: When and where was it written? There is no such problem with the Psalm and Lamentations passages. Both were clearly written some time after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and during the period of the Babylonian captivity, the exile of Judah sometime between 587 and 539 B.C. The Psalm was clearly written by a Jewish exile in Babylon itself: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept." (Ps. 137: 1) Lamentations was written by someone who was left behind in Jerusalem, but who did not go into exile: "How lonely sits the city that was full of people. . . . Judah has gone into exile because of affliction . . . From the daughter of Zion all her majesty has departed." (Lam. 1:1, 3, 6)

The Psalm passage describes a setting of defeat. The Psalmist is in captivity in a foreign land: "By the waters of Babylon, we sat down . . . How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps. 137:1, 4), This is a Psalm of lament, of which there are many in the Psalter, but it is not simply a lament, but a Psalm of absolute defeat. This is not just failure, but the worst kind of failure, absolute defeat by an enemy. This is ultimate failure because the defeat is irreversible. The Psalmist is one of those who has been force-marched from the city of Jerusalem to Babylon, a distance of about 500 miles, walked by foot. There is no going back. The Psalmist knows that he or she will never see home again.

The humility of the defeat is accompanied by shame, our second theme. The defeat is not simply devastating but shameful because it is accompanied by the kind of mocking that successful conquerors love to impose on those they have conquered: "For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormenters mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'" (Ps. 137:3) Put yourself in the place of this writer and imagine his or her sense of total helplessness and humiliation. Not only have you and everyone you know been defeated, but your enemy rubs salt into your wounds by reminding you not only that you have been defeated, but how all of your hopes have been crushed. You will never see your home again, but, hey, says your enemy, "Why don't you sing us one of those old songs that will remind you of that home you'll never see again?"

This leads to the third theme of remembrance. Remembering adds to the pain of defeat: "There we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion." (Ps. 137:1) But in spite of the pain, remembering is the only thing that still ties the Psalmist to his home, and so he forces himself to remember: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you!" (v. 5)

Finally, the theme of remembering comes up one more time as the Psalmist turns to prayer. "If I can remember Jerusalem," she prays, surely God should do the same. "Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, 'Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!'" (Ps. 137:7) And the Psalmist appeals to God for justice. One bad turn deserves another. What goes around comes around. Let's have some instant karma! "O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us." (v. 8) Finally, there is the chilling conclusion. Blessed is the one who kills your children in the same way that you killed ours. And we know from history that

the Babylonians were cruel. They did indeed kill men, women, and children in horrific ways.

From our safe setting, it is easy to be horrified by the Psalmist's prayer, but I think it is also important to remind ourselves that what we see in this Psalm is a kind of natural response to great injustice. When people are abused, when everything they have is taken away from them, they naturally respond with a plea for justice. If there is justice in the universe, such horrible injustice cannot be allowed to stand. The Psalmist is defeated, and he has no hope for his own future. But his answer to the question, "Where is God?," is that God is just, and a just God must punish the wicked by giving them what they deserve.

The same three themes appear in the Lamentations passage. Again, there is the theme of defeat by ruthless enemies "Judah has gone into exile . . . she dwells among the nations, but finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress." (Lam. 1:3) Throughout the passage, there are images of reversal: The city that was full of people is now lonely; the princess has become a slave; Jerusalem's friends have become her enemies. And there is again, the theme of the loss of children: "Her children have gone away, captives before the foe." (v. 5)

As in the Psalmist, there is the theme of shame in the presence of gloating by the enemy. Verses 7 and 8 read: "When her people fell into the hand of her foe, and there was none to help her, her foes gloated over her; they mocked at her downfall. . . . all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away." It is one thing to suffer in silence, but suffering is made worse when your enemies mock you, and even your friends who used to honor you, now turn their backs on you in disgust.

The theme of remembering appears again, but it is different in

Lamentations. On the one hand, there is the remembrance of better times: Verse 7 reads "Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and wandering all the precious things that were hers from days of old." Suffering is made worse because we remember when things were better. And, unlike Job which has a happy ending, the book of Lamentations ends with its own answer to the question "Where is God?" Does God remember? The last verses of Lamentations read "But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?" (Lam. 5:19-20) As with the Psalmist, the writer of Lamentations wants God to act, but what if he does not? "Restore us to yourself, O Lord that we may be restored! . . . unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us." (vs. 21-22) What if the answer to the question "Where is God?" is that God is gone? What if God is no longer with us at all?

However, even in the Old Testament, the dialogue does not end here. In Isaiah 40-66, there is an answer to the question "Where is God in exile?" It becomes clear that God does remember as he leads his people back to Jerusalem from exile, and he reminds his people to remember who they are and who he is: "Remember these things O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me." (Is. 44:21) After the exile, it becomes clear that God does remember, but the Psalmist and the writer of Lamentations did not live to see it. Nonetheless, even during the exile, through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the Lord had already given hope even to those in exile. Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31), and Ezekiel speaks of a time when God will breath life into dead bones (Ez. 37).

I turn now to the passage from 2 Timothy. It is easy to forget when we read this passage that it is written from a position of defeat because Paul's opening is so positive: "I thank God,

whom I serve," he writes to Timothy, "as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day." (2 Tim. 1:3) Paul writes, "I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy." (v. 4) But Paul too has been completely and absolutely defeated by his enemies. He writes from a prison cell. In verse 8, he describes himself as the Lord's "prisoner," and speaks of sharing in suffering. Paul's position becomes clear in verse 15. He has been abandoned by his friends: "You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me . . ." In his concluding paragraphs, Paul speaks of abandonment by a friend: "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." (2 Tim. 4:10) Paul writes that "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm. . . . he strongly opposed our message." (v. 14) Paul writes about his trial, "At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me." (v. 16) When Paul was on trial for his very life, those whom he thought were his friends abandoned him, possibly to die alone. He writes to Timothy "Do your best to come before winter," and "When you come, bring the cloak . . . and also the books, and above all the parchments." (vs. 13, 21) New Testament scholar James Dunn suggests that these might well be Paul's last written words. We imagine an old man, alone in a jail cell, shivering with cold, asking for Timothy to bring his cloak before winter so that he can keep himself warm, along with some reading material to help pass the time until the inevitable end.

These are circumstances that would discourage anyone, and the theme of shame appears again. The ancient Mediterranean world was a shame/honor culture, and to face imprisonment and death was certainly grounds for humiliation and shame. Even worse, these foolish Christians followed someone who had himself met his death in the most shameful and humiliating way, public execution by crucifixion. So Paul writes to Timothy, "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God." (2 Tim. 1:8) But there is a twist here;

Paul counters shame by actually encouraging Timothy to embrace the suffering that accompanies it.

We conclude with the final theme: the theme of remembrance. How does Paul, in his own situation of what by contemporary Mediterranean standards was his moment of greatest defeat, respond? By remembering. Paul writes to Timothy, "As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith . . ." (2 Tim. 1:4) He counsels Timothy to remember as well: "I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God . . ." (v. 6) And, finally, Paul himself remembers: "I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." (v. 12) In the midst of Paul's suffering, humiliation, and shame, he is able to experience joy and confidence because he remembers something about the God in whom he has believed. And what is it that Paul remembers? He remembers the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ. By the power of God, Paul writes, he "saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which has now been manifested through the appearance of our Savior Jesus Christ who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (vs. 8-10) In the midst of defeat by his enemies and abandonment by his friends, in the shame and the suffering of imprisonment, facing the prospect of approaching death, Paul is not ashamed, because he remembers that Jesus Christ's shameful death on a cross did not end with shame, but with the abolition of death itself.

One does not want to be superficial in comparing examples of suffering. However, if we situate Paul in the dialogue between our passages this morning, I think it plausible to claim that while Paul shared with the writers of the two OT passages an initial situation of defeat by enemies along with its accompanying shame, Paul's answer to the question "Where is

God?" is different because Paul remembers something different. The Psalmist remembers that God is just and so prays that the just God will enforce justice. The writer of Lamentations remembers that God reigns, and his throne is eternal. However, in light of the destruction of Jerusalem, there is concern that God perhaps no longer remembers his people.

What makes Paul's memory different is something that has happened, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cross provides its own paradoxical answer to the problem of defeat with its accompanying shame, and the question of memory that arises, "Where is God?" For the Romans, crucifixion was the worst shame and defeat possible for a human being. It was the most degrading punishment that they could imagine. And yet the resurrection of Jesus means that God in Christ has defeated even that most shameful and humiliating defeat. Where is God in the crucifixion of Jesus? The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ means that God is present even in the humiliating defeat of death. Jesus of Nazareth came to a Jewish nation that was in exile in its own land; the Romans had defeated and ruled over the Jewish people every bit as much as the Babylonians had defeated them earlier. And yet, in the crucifixion and resurrection of his Son Jesus, the God of Israel used the worst that this enemy conqueror could throw at him to utterly defeat death, the worst enemy of all. In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote: "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. 1:23-24) In this morning's passage, we read that our Savior Jesus Christ "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Tim. 1:10) This is what Paul remembered. Even though Paul was a prisoner, and eventually would die at the hands of the enemy conqueror, he did not lose hope, he was not ashamed, because he remembered this.

What then should we remember? We should remember that like

Israel in exile, and like Paul in prison, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, we are aliens who live in exile. As strangers in a culture that more and more has forgotten the God of Christian faith, we may discover that we have enemies, as Israel did and as did Paul. And those enemies may defeat us. But even if that kind of large scale defeat never happens, I can guarantee that at some point in our lives or in our ministries, we will encounter other kinds of suffering, and other disappointments. As Demas abandoned Paul, we may be abandoned even by those whom we love and care for. Even worse, we may discover to our own chagrin and shame, that we ourselves have abandoned or betrayed others. No serious Christian wants to be the kind of person who would lead someone to pray the kind of prayer for justice we read in today's Psalm passage. But we might be that person! It is in those moments of defeat and shame and guilt that we are called to remember the defeat and shame of the cross, and to remember that on the cross, God was with us in Christ, and he has defeated shame and death, and he has taken upon himself our guilt and shame, and the guilt even of our worst enemies who have defeated and shamed us. As Jesus forgave the enemies who crucified him, so we are free to forgive even as God in Christ has forgiven us when we were his enemies. In the cross of Christ, God is always with us, and he will never abandon us. Remember that and have hope.