

The New Testament Pattern of Church Government

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Ecclesiology has always been an important issue in Baptist discussion. In fact, the argument has been made that this is the theological area in which Baptists have made the most important contribution, particularly in the area of requiring a regenerate church membership. The past few years have witnessed a veritable avalanche of publications in the area of ecclesiology, and especially the issue of church government, for the most part written by Baptist scholars.

Gerald Cowen has posed the question, “Who Rules the Church?” Zondervan published a 4 Views book entitled, *Who Runs the Church?* which includes a contribution by Paige Patterson. Chad Brand and Stan Norman, professors at Southern and New Orleans Seminary respectively, edited a similar volume, *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, with contributions by Daniel Akin and others. Both the *Midwestern Journal of Theology* and the *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* devoted recent issues to the subject. Southern Seminary student Ben Merkle contributed a published dissertation, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*. Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, has spoken out consistently on the topic of church government, most notably in his *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. The most recent contribution comes from Phil Newton, senior pastor at South Woods Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, and is entitled *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership*. If you thought “veritable avalanche” was an exaggeration, perhaps after this list of titles, all published within the last 5 years, you will agree that there have been few topics that have been the subject of more vigorous discussion in Baptist life than the issue of church government in general and of elders in particular.¹

¹ Gerald P. Cowen, *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003); Peter Toon et al., *Who*

It is clearly impossible for me in the short span of this lecture to do justice to the complexity of the topic and to consider adequately all the many pros and cons for the various positions on church government, elder rule, and so on, even within our Southern Baptist circles. Rather than deal with all the various exigencies and practical issues surrounding those matters, I propose to address the biblical data as a New Testament scholar who has recently had occasion to work through the Pastoral Epistles in my work on the forthcoming revised edition of the Expositor's Bible Commentary. While issues of application may change, the biblical data do not, and perhaps by revisiting scriptural teaching on the subject, we will be able to clarify our own thinking on some of these issues and find new common ground on this hotly debated matter.

Elders/Overseers

The area of church leadership is one area where the Pastoral Epistles quite clearly set forth paradigms for the church that reach beyond their original Ephesian or Cretan context. Even those who vigorously dispute that Paul's teaching on women's roles in the church in 1 Timothy 2:12-15 is normative for today regularly, though inconsistently, award binding status to the qualifications for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3.² In the following remarks we will deal with several disputed areas in recent discussions on the Pastorals' teaching on church government.

To begin with, it has been claimed by some that the church structure found in the Pastorals reflects the second-century pattern of a three-tiered ecclesiastical hierarchy involving a monarchical episcopate (e.g., Ignatius of Antioch). Yet closer scrutiny reveals that the Pastorals do not in fact conform to this model but rather display a synonymous usage of the terms "overseer" (*episkopos*) and "elder" (*presbyteros*) as referring to one and the same office (Titus 1:5, 7; cf. Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Clem. 44:1, 5; cf. Jerome, *Letter* 59).

With regard to specific terminology, 1 Timothy 3:1 uses the word *episkopē* (cf. Acts 1:20), denoting the "office of overseer" (cf. Luke

Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government (Counterpoints; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004); *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 2/1 (Fall 2003); *SBJT* 7/3 (Fall 2003); Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000); Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church* (Studies in Biblical Literature 57; New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005).

² On the interpretation of 1 Tim. 2:12-15, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds., *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

19:44; Acts 1:20; 1 Pet 2:12), while in 1 Timothy 3:2 *episkopos* is found, referring to the person holding such an office.³ In the LXX the term designates one in charge of an operation (Num 4:16); in Josephus it denotes an “overseer” (Antiq. 10.53; 12.254). The Qumran equivalent was the *mebaqqer* (1QS 6:12, 20; CD 9:18–19, 22; 13:6–7). Generally, *presbyteros* is Jewish in origin, signifying seniority, while *episkopos* is Greek, indicating a person’s superintending role. Presumably overseers constituted the “board of elders” (*presbyterion*) mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:14.⁴

The overseer (equivalent to pastor/elder) bears ultimate responsibility for the church before God (see 1 Tim 3:15; 5:17). According to the instructions on the role of women in the previous chapter (esp. 1 Tim 2:12), only men are eligible for this office. This is confirmed by the qualification *mias gynaikas andra* in 1 Timothy 3:2. But what does this phrase mean? What are the exegetical options for the respective positions, how strong is the supporting evidence for each of the views, and which option is the most plausible?

The Mias Gynaikas Andra Requirement

English translations as well as commentators differ considerably regarding the meaning of the phrase *mias gynaikas andra* in 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12.⁵

- (1) Does Paul here require church leaders to be married (excluding unmarried officeholders)?
- (2) Is he seeking to prohibit applicants who are divorced?
- (3) Does the requirement bar widowers who remarried from holding ecclesiastical office (NRSV)?

³ See Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 2:25. For *presbyteros*, see esp. 1 Tim. 5:1, 17, 19; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:1, 5; James 5:14; and the book of Acts.

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Letters to Paul’s Delegates. 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity International, 1996), 145.

⁵ The following treatment is partially indebted to Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Pastoral Epistles* (EBC 12; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). On the history of interpretation, see John Gorday, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ACCS 9; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 170–71 and 286–87. See also the survey in Ed Glasscock, “‘The Husband of One Wife’ Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” *BibSac* 140 (1983): 244–49 and 253–56. The range of translations spans the following: “the husband of one wife” (KJV, NKJV, NASB, HCSB, NET, ESV [footnote: Or a man of one woman]), which leaves the question of interpretation open; “husband of but one wife” (NIV), which suggests a prohibition against polygamy; “married only once” (NRSV [footnote: Or the husband of one wife]), a prohibition against remarriage after being widowed, the prevailing view of the Church fathers; and “faithful to his (one) wife” (NEB, NLT, TNIV), “devoted to (lit. a man of) one woman” (ISV), “committed to his wife” (The Message), which takes the expression as an idiom for marital faithfulness.

(4) Does the apostle speak out against polygamy (as is implied in the NIV)?

(5) Or is he requiring that an officeholder be faithful in marriage if he is (and assuming that he usually is) in fact married, as opposed to being unfaithful to his wife while being married to her, as would be the case if he had one or several extramarital affairs? (This was often the case in the ancient world in the form of concubinage.)

Virtually all of these positions are taken by at least certain translations and/or commentators.⁶ How can this difficult issue be satisfactorily resolved, and which interpretation is most likely in light of the meaning of the phrase and the ancient cultural background?

To begin with, first, it is unlikely that Paul, who himself was unmarried throughout most, if not all, his apostolic career (cf. 1 Cor. 7:8) and who elsewhere extols the advantages of singleness for kingdom service (1 Cor. 7:32-35), would exclude single men from holding ecclesiastical office. Also, if the apostle's intention had been to limit the holding of church offices to those who were married, he could have said so much more unequivocally (e.g., by listing as a requirement that overseers be "married," *gamos*). It is therefore highly probable that the present requirement simply assumes that most potentially qualified candidates would likely be married and hence addresses a man's conduct toward his wife in marriage.

Second, if it had been Paul's intent to exclude divorcees, one can once again think of more direct ways in which the apostle may have articulated this requirement (e.g., "not divorced"). At least on the face of it, this can at best be considered a possible inference (from the wording, "husband of *one* wife") rather than a direct statement. In fact, divorce is not mentioned anywhere in all of the Pastoral Epistles (neither is remarriage).

Third, it is also unlikely that Paul sought to prohibit widowers who remarried from church office (who, by a literal reading, would in that case have been married, not once, but twice). The apostle elsewhere encourages those who are widowed to remarry and adopts an entirely positive stance toward those who have lost their spouses.⁷ It would be

⁶ Cf. Glasscock, "The 'Husband of One Wife' Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2," *BSac* 140 (1983): 244-58, who notes that the third and fourth views (excluding remarried widowers, opposing polygamy) were commonly held among the church Fathers. The most common views today are the second and fifth views (excluding divorcees, requiring faithfulness in marriage). The first view (excluding unmarried candidates) is held by few.

⁷ Most biblical references are to widows, not widowers, remarrying, since it was far more common for women to lose their spouses than husbands their wives (cf., e.g., Rom. 7:2-3; 1 Cor. 7:39; 1 Tim. 5:14), but there is no good reason why Paul's encouragement for widows (especially younger ones) to remarry should not applied to widowers as well.

hard to understand why Paul would bar widowers who follow his advice and remarry from church office. This is true especially since many of these persons would be older, mature men who command respect and possess the life experience and spiritual seasoning to provide competent and distinguished leadership in the church (cf. Titus 2:2; 1 Pet. 5:5; see also 1 Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:17). In the case of widowers who remarry, remarriage does not imply any character flaw or moral failure on their part. Nor does the presence of a new wife constitute an obstacle to such a man's eligibility, since he would be no different from other married men who seek and hold church office. There seems therefore to be no biblical, theological, or even common sense reason why remarried widowers should be barred from church office.

Fourth, the theory that Paul sought to exclude polygamists from holding church office⁸ runs into the difficulty that polygamy was not widely practiced in the Greco-Roman world at the time.⁹ Considerably more likely is the possibility that the phrase *mias gynaikas andra* is geared toward barring men from holding church office who had one or several concubines, a widespread practice at that time.¹⁰ Apparently, neither the Greeks nor the Romans regarded these practices as adulterous or polygamous. For Paul, however, concubinage was essentially equivalent to polygamy, since sexual union results in a "one flesh" relationship (cf. 1 Cor. 6:16).

For this reason, fifth, "faithful husband" is probably the best way to capture the essence of the expression *mias gynaikas andra*.¹¹ That the phrase constitutes a reference to marital faithfulness is suggested by the parallel in 1 Timothy 5:9, where a widow eligible for church support is required to have been "faithful to her husband" (NIV = TNIV) and where the equivalent phrase "wife of one husband" is used (cf. 1 Cor. 7:2-5). In the latter instance, the phrase cannot indicate a prohibition of polyandry (being married to more than one husband at a time, which in any case

⁸ See the NIV rendering, "husband of *but* one wife" (note that there is no equivalent for "but" in the original; but see the change to "faithful to his wife" in the TNIV). See also John Calvin, *1 & 2 Timothy & Titus* (Wheaton, IL/Nottingham: Crossway, 1998; original ed. 1556, 1549), 54.

⁹ See, e.g., William D. Mounce, *The Pastoral Epistles* (WBC 46; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 171.

¹⁰ Cf. Steven M. Baugh, "Titus," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (ed. Clinton E. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 501-2.

¹¹ See esp. Sidney Page, "Marital Expectations of Church Leaders in the Pastoral Epistles," *JSNT* 50 (1993): 105-20, esp. 108-9 and 114, n. 27. For a discussion of the biblical teaching on marriage (including the husband's role), see Andreas J. Köstenberger (with David J. Jones), *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

was virtually non-existent in the ancient world) since it is made of a woman bereft of her husband. Moreover, it would hardly make sense for Paul first to encourage younger widows to get remarried and then disqualify them later on the grounds that they have (literally) been wives of more than one husband.¹² On a different note, the present requirement of marital faithfulness for church leaders (including deacons, 1 Tim. 3:12) is also consistent with the prohibition of adultery in the Decalogue (Exod. 20:14 = Deut. 5:18).¹³

If the above discussion is on target, therefore, it seems that the problem with the first four interpretations listed above is that they are based on a literalistic, if not rigid, reading of the phrase *mias gynaikas andros* as denoting *literally* marriage to only *one* woman *ever*: one as opposed to zero as in the case of single candidates for church office, or one as opposed to two or more wives, be it at the same time (polygamy) or consecutively (remarriage of widowers, divorcees). More likely, however, the phrase is to be understood *idiomatically* (designating “a one-wife-type-of-husband”), that is, as a term for marital faithfulness rather than as a literal enumeration of a certain number of marriages (one rather than zero or two or more) in which a candidate is required to be engaged.¹⁴

That this is in fact the case is further supported by inscriptional evidence regarding the Roman concept of a *univira*, that is, a “one husband”-type of wife.¹⁵ This term denoting marital fidelity was initially applied to living women in relation to their husbands and later became an epithet given by husbands to their deceased wives. This is attested by numerous extant literary references and tombstone inscriptions. Hence the first-century B.C. poet Catullus wrote, “[T]o live content with one

¹² See Page, “Marital Expectations,” 112; *contra* Gordon D. Fee, “Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of *Ad Hoc* Documents,” *JETS* 28 (1985): 150, who contends that the present passage “probably prohibits remarriage of widows/widowers.”

¹³ The present requirement contrasts with the Gnostic extremes of asceticism and sexual licentiousness. Marital fidelity was also held in high regard in the Greco-Roman world, so that this quality would commend a Christian office-holder to his pagan surroundings (cf. Page, “Marital Expectations,” 117-18).

¹⁴ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 227-28, concurs and notes that the phrase is equivalent to our phrase “having eyes for only one woman” (see also p. 313). Note that in all its occurrences, the expression “of one wife” or “of one husband” is put first in the original for emphasis (cf. 1 Tim. 3:2, 12; 5:9).

¹⁵ Cf. Marjorie Lightman and William Zeisel, “Univira: An Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society,” *Church History* 46 (1977): 19-32. “Uni” is Latin for “one,” “vir” means “husband,” and the female suffix “a” refers to a woman or wife, hence the meaning “one-husband-type-of woman or wife.”

man is for wives an honor of honors” (111). A Roman imperial inscription reads, “She lived fifty years and was satisfied with one husband” (*CIL* 6.5162). The late-first-century B.C. *Laudatio Turiae* records a husband saying about his wife, “Rare are marriages, so long lasting, and ended by death, not interrupted by divorce . . .”¹⁶

For these reasons we conclude that the Pauline *mias gynaikas andra* requirement is best understood as stipulating that candidates for church office (both elder and deacon) be faithful husbands (assuming that they are currently married). If this is correct, what, then, are the implications of this requirement for the church today? In the following discussion we will briefly consider the implications of this requirement for single, divorced, and remarried candidates for church leadership.

The first implication of the “faithful husband” requirement is that younger candidates who have yet to prove their ability to manage their own households well should ordinarily not be put in ultimate leadership positions in the church. While they may possess proper formal training as well as be both eager and otherwise qualified in terms of character and disposition, maturity and life experience are such an integral part of a church leader’s necessary equipment for his role that any diminishing of this requirement may come dangerously close to appointing a recent convert, which is discouraged in Scripture in the strongest terms (1 Tim. 3:6; cf. 5:22).

Second, it is utter folly for someone to provide qualified, capable leadership for the church while neglecting his duties in his own family, be it owing to busyness in ministry or to improper priorities. Even while serving as pastor or elder, it is therefore imperative that men serving in this function regularly evaluate themselves to see whether or not they are able to oversee the church while continuing to be able to adequately fulfill their natural duties as husband and father. Otherwise, it may well be said with Paul that those men beware, lest possibly, after having preached to others, they may themselves be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27).

Third, theologically, by linking the family so closely to the church, the New Testament presents the latter as the eschatological extension of the former. That which reaches all the way back to the divine creation of the first man and woman is seen to be further extended and explicated in the “household of God,” the church (cf. Eph. 5:31-32). Hence the requirements that an officeholder manage his own household well, and that he be faithful in marriage and keep his children under proper control, all form the indispensable prerequisite for his suitability for church office. Before he can lead the household of God, he must first show that

¹⁶ Cited in *ibid.*

he can properly discharge his leadership responsibilities in his own household.

But what shall we say about divorced men serving as pastor/elder or deacon? In light of the fairly stringent statements made by both Jesus and Paul regarding divorce and remarriage, and in view of the fact that serving as pastor, elder, or deacon in the local church is a high calling of considerable responsibility, should men who have undergone a divorce be barred from serving in roles of church leadership, specifically those of pastor/elder or deacon? In light of the high moral qualifications required for those serving in those offices, this would seem to be almost a foregone conclusion. How else would those in charge of the church model Christlikeness to the rest of the congregation?

In fact, for those who hold a “no divorce, no remarriage” position, the question of whether a divorced man can serve in church leadership does not even arise—divorce is never legitimate for any Christian, including those aspiring to positions of leadership in the church. As such, a divorcee certainly could not be considered a “faithful husband” or “above reproach.” For those open at least in principle to the possibility that divorce may be biblically legitimate in a limited number of circumstances (cf. Matt. 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:15), however, the issue is not quite as clear-cut. The major passages dealing with qualifications for leadership (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1) do not directly address this question, focusing instead on the requirement of a candidate’s faithfulness in a present marriage. The issue therefore turns to a significant extent on the question of what is meant by the requirement of being a *mias gynaikas anēr*.¹⁷

If, as has been argued, the expression means “faithful husband,” then it may be possible for men who experienced a divorce to fulfill this requirement if they are faithful to their wife in their present marriage. Hence, divorced (and remarried) men would not necessarily be excluded from consideration as pastors/elders or deacons, especially if, in keeping with the general principles of the majority view on marriage and divorce, the divorce was legitimate. If the divorce was illegitimate (i.e., not covered by the Matthean “exception clause” or the Pauline privilege), service as pastor/elder or deacon is ruled out, because that person has an illegitimate divorce in their past, whether they repented of this sin or not.¹⁸

¹⁷ See the discussion above.

¹⁸ See the treatment of Matt. 19:9 (marital unfaithfulness), 1 Cor. 7:15 (desertion by unbeliever), and Rom. 7:2-3 (death of a spouse) above. Regarding the question of whether or not men who underwent a biblically legitimate divorce could also be considered for church leadership positions if the divorce has taken place in the distant

Overall, people should generally not be held to a stricter standard just to be “safe” and “conservative.” If (and not all agree) both Jesus and Paul were willing to make an exception, we should be willing to follow their lead without fearing that a high view of marriage will thereby be compromised. Nevertheless, when coupled with the requirement that an overseer be “above reproach” (which includes community reputation), it may be best in many circumstances to weigh very carefully whether or not to appoint divorcees to the role of pastor/elder or deacon, especially when qualified candidates are available who did not undergo a divorce. This would seem to be the wisest course of action especially since there are many other avenues of service available to people in those kinds of circumstances apart from the highest ecclesiastical office.

Yet while the standard is one of *spiritual maturity* and *moral uprightness*, it is not that of *perfection*. In fact, the lists contain many attributes to which every Christian should aspire. To be sure, pastors ought to set an example of spiritual maturity, but their role is not to be conceived as representing Christ in such a way as to literally embody his own characteristics, be it in his unmarried state¹⁹ or in his lack of divorce or remarriage. More appropriately, those officeholders who are married ought to model Christ’s faithfulness to his spiritual bride, the Church, by being faithful to their wife (cf. Eph. 5:25-30). This is fully compatible with the above-presented view that Paul requires marital faithfulness of officeholders while leaving open the question of whether or not those who have undergone a divorce that is biblically permissible (if this is considered possible) are at least in principle eligible to serve.

Requirements Pertaining to Church Leaders’ Children

Paul’s epistles to Timothy and Titus both include not only the “faithful husband” requirement, but also a stipulation regarding the church leader’s children. To Timothy, the apostle writes that the candidate for office “must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive” (1 Tim. 3:4). In an argument from the lesser to the greater, Paul continues, “For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (1 Tim. 3:5). The requirement mentioned in the epistle to Titus seems to be even stricter, stipulating that a church leader’s “children are *believers* and not

past (especially if the person was not a believer at the time) and if the man’s present pattern (and proven track record) is that of marital faithfulness, see Page, “Marital Expectations,” 103-13.

¹⁹ There is little biblical support for the type of sacramental model advocated in the Roman Catholic Church which roots its celibacy requirement for the priestly office in the unmarried state of Jesus Christ himself during his incarnate ministry.

open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination” (Titus 1:6 ESV; NIV: “whose children are *faithful* and not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient”; TNIV: “whose children *believe*”). Again, Paul follows up with a reason: “For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach” (Titus 1:7).

The Greek word underlying the rendering “believers” is *pistos*, which can mean either “believing” (ESV, TNIV) or “faithful” (NIV). While “believing” admittedly is the word’s meaning in the majority of instances in the Pastorals, in the present case it is perhaps more likely that the expression means “faithful” in the sense of “obedient and submissive to their father’s orders” (cf. 1 Tim. 3:11; 2 Tim. 2:2, 13).²⁰ The meaning “believing” is rendered less likely here in light of the context and the parallel in 1 Timothy 3:4, not to mention the theological difficulties of accommodating the doctrine of election within the scope of such a requirement.

The fact that the other two instances of “wild” (*asōtias*) relate to orgies of drunkenness (Eph. 5:18; 1 Pet. 4:4; cf. Prov. 28:7 LXX) and the other two instances of “disobedient” (lit., “unsubdued,” *anypotakta*; cf. Heb. 2:8) to outright rebellion (1 Tim. 1:9; Titus 1:10) suggests that what is in view is not occasional disobedience but deep-seated rebellion against parental authority. Anyone who would be an elder in the church, which entails the exercise of authority over the congregation, must properly exercise authority at home, with his children responding in obedience and submission (whether or not they are spiritually regenerate). This is required if “God’s manager” (*oikonomos theou*; cf. 1 Cor. 4:1, 2; 1 Pet. 4:10) is to be blameless (cf. 1 Tim. 3:5, 15).²¹

Deacons

The second church office addressed in 1 Timothy 3 besides that of overseer/elder is that of deacon. Structurally, the presence of *hōsautōs* in 1 Timothy 3:8 and 11 (“likewise”/“in the same way”) suggests that qualifications are given for two other types of officeholders besides that of overseer (1 Tim 3:1-7). To put it differently, the framing device by which 1 Timothy 3:11 is sandwiched between 1 Tim 3:8-10 and 3:12-13 indicates that one large category is in mind, that of deacon, with Paul first addressing qualifications for male and then female office-holders,

²⁰ Cf. George W. Knight, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 290, followed by Peter Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and Its Environment* (WUNT 155; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2003), 181.

²¹ For a discussion of the biblical teaching on children and parenting see Chapter 7 and 8 in Köstenberger, *God, Marriage & Family*.

after which he briefly returns to male deacons and closes with a general statement pertaining to both. As mentioned, the two-tiered structure (elder/deacon) characteristic of 1 Timothy 3 is also evident from Philippians 1:1.

When comparing the qualifications for deacons with those for overseers, one notes the absence of terms related to teaching or ruling (most notably—“able to teach,” 1 Tim 3:2; see also 1 Tim 3:5b). This suggests that, in keeping with the designation “deacon” (from the Greek *diakonos*, “servant”) as over against “overseer,” deacons are not part of that group that bears ultimate responsibility for the church.²² At the same time, they, too, occupy a formal church office, for which they must meet certain requirements. While not part of the teaching/ruling body of the church, deacons nonetheless hold important leadership roles. This is most notably indicated by the similarity between the qualifications for overseers and deacons.²³ Although Paul does not spell out the precise realm of service for the office of deacon, one may surmise that this includes various kinds of practical help and administration, such as benevolence, finances, and physical maintenance.²⁴

According to 1 Timothy 3:8, deacons (cf. Phil 1:1; not mentioned in Titus), “likewise” (cf. 1 Tim 2:9; 3:11; Titus 2:3, 6), are to meet certain qualifications, whereby 1 Timothy 3:8-10 and 12 relate to male and 1 Timothy 3:11 to female office-holders. There is no consensus as to the proper translation of the Greek word *gynaikas* in 1 Timothy 3:11, which can mean either “woman” or “wife.” Since both meanings—“woman” (1 Tim 2:9, 10, 11, 12, 14) and “wife” (1 Tim 3:2, 12; 5:9; cf. Titus 1:6)—are found in the present epistle; context must decide.²⁵ Depending on one’s translation of this term, the office-holder in view is either a woman deacon or the wife of a deacon.

Translations are divided on this issue. In some cases, even the same translation committee has changed its view on the most likely rendering.

²² Cf. Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 167; contra I. H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 485.

²³ Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 90–91.

²⁴ Mounce contends that “Paul does not teach that the deacon is under the overseer. . . both overseer and deacon serve the church in different capacities” (*Pastoral Epistles*, 207). Yet overseers are in charge of the entire congregation (e.g. 1 Tim 5:17), which would seem to include deacons.

²⁵ A third possibility is favored by Robert M. Lewis, “The ‘Women’ of 1 Timothy 3:11,” *BSac* 136 (1979): 167-75, that of unmarried [single or widowed] female deacons’ assistants. Walter L. Liefeld, *1 & 2 Timothy/Titus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 134, conjectures that “at first the women who served as deacons were the wives of deacons.”

The NIV, for example, translates *gynaikas* with “their wives” (though note that “their” is not in the original), but the TNIV changes this to “women who are deacons,” that is, “women deacons” or “deaconesses” (cf. NIV footnote; see also Rom. 16:1). Some translations committed to a formal equivalence translation philosophy, such as the NASB and the HCSB, opt for the translation “women,” which has the virtue of being “literal” but is of little help in deciding the issue, since the question still remains which kinds of women are in view, wives of deacons or women deacons.

Time does not permit a full airing of all the arguments pro and con. I will limit myself to citing what I consider to be the most important exegetical factors that have a bearing on the issue. On the whole, it is my judgment that “women deacons” is to be preferred, for the following reasons:²⁶ (1) the absence of qualifications for overseers’ wives in 1 Timothy 3:1-7; (2) the phrase “in the same way” in 1 Timothy 3:11 indicating an office similar to the one previously mentioned (cf. 1 Tim 3:8); (3) the parallel sentence structure and similar characteristics in 1 Timothy 3:8 and 11 (including the lack of an article before “women”); and (4) the absence of qualifiers such as the possessive pronoun “their” in relation to *gynaikas* in the Greek.

The reason that Paul did not call these women “deaconesses” is that in his day the word *diakonos* was still used for males and females alike (plus the respective article to indicate gender); only later the term *diakonissa* was coined (*Apost. Const.* 8.19, 20, 28).²⁷ Phoebe is identified as a *diakonos* (note the masculine grammatical gender of the term) of the church at Cenchrea in Romans 16:1. Paul’s mention of women deacons would cohere well with his earlier prohibition of women serving in teaching or ruling functions over men (1 Tim 2:12) and his lack of mention of women elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Since being a deacon does not involve teaching or ruling, women as well as men would be eligible to serve in this capacity. The requirements for deaconesses are thus similar to those for male deacons.

It should be noted that in recent years the tide of opinion has significantly shifted toward the presence of women deacons in the early church. Until recently, most major translations took the reference in 1 Timothy 3:11 to be to the wives of deacons, as the following list illustrates:

²⁶ Cf. Jennifer H. Stiefel, “Women Deacons in 1 Timothy: A Linguistic and Literary Look at ‘Women Likewise . . .’ [1 Tim 3.11],” *NTS* 41 (1995): 442-57.

²⁷ See also the reference in Pliny the younger, who refers to two women “called deaconesses” (*ministrae*) in Bithynia under Trajan (*Epist.* 10.96.8; c. A.D. 115).

KJV = NKJV: “*their wives*”

NASB: “women”

NIV: “their wives” (footnote: or “deaconesses”)

NRSV: “women” (footnote: or “their wives” or “women deacons”)

NLT: “their wives” (footnote: or “the women deacons”)

Thus until recently no major translation unequivocally affirmed in the main text that 1 Timothy 3:11 may refer to women deacons. With the recent release of the TNIV this has now changed: as mentioned, its text says “women who are deacons.” Notably, too, the HCSB, by opting for the wording “women,” marks a cautious departure from the KJV traditional rendering of “*their wives*.”

To this turning of the tide with regard to women deacons should be added the fact that several major recent commentaries—written by complementarian scholars, no less—affirm that the reference to Phoebe as a *diakonos* in Romans 16:1 should be interpreted as her serving as a deaconess.²⁸

The implication for the church’s contemporary practice seems to be that it may be only a matter of time until more churches will allow women to serve in the role of deaconess (assuming a biblical definition of “deacon” as a non-teaching, non-ruling office). Already, several major churches pastored by those who are conservative on the issue of women pastors or elders have women deacons, including Grace Community Church (pastor John MacArthur) and Capitol Hill Baptist Church (pastor Mark Dever).

In any case, whether or not a church, or a given scholar, favors women deacons should not be made a litmus test for orthodoxy or conservatism, since, as mentioned, the issue cuts across the conservative/liberal divide and many pastors and scholars with impeccable credentials on the so-called “women’s issue” *both* limit the office of elder to men *and* open the office of deacon to men and women.

Personally, as one who favors deaconesses, but one who has spoken out strongly against women elders and pastors (see the Baker publication *Women in the Church*, now available in a second edition), I believe this is a good opportunity to show that we recognize the ministry of women just as we do the ministry of men and that we do not discriminate against women in ministry. The unfortunate consequence of limiting the office to wives of deacons is that this excludes unmarried women as well as

²⁸ See esp. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 786-87 and Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 913-14.

widows. This is unfortunate, since especially mature widows seem uniquely equipped to serve in such a role (cf. 1 Tim. 3:11; Titus 2:3-5).

Conclusion

The Pastorals reflect a two-tier structure of church government, with a plurality of pastors/elders/overseers in charge and with deacons (both male and female) fulfilling serving roles in the church. The “husband of one wife” requirement most likely refers to the stipulation that church leaders be faithful to their wives. If so, those candidates for pastor or elder who are divorced but whose divorce is biblically legitimate and covered by one of the exceptions stipulated in New Testament teaching would not necessarily be disqualified from serving.

I do not claim that these conclusions are the only ones possible from the New Testament data. Nor do I claim that I am necessarily right in all of my hermeneutical and exegetical judgments. There can be little disagreement, however, that the Pastorals are one of the most important New Testament writings for the practice of the contemporary church. The church must continue to wrestle with what Scripture teaches regarding church government, church leadership, and qualifications for leadership and commit itself to abide by what it understands the Scriptures to teach rather than personal preference or church tradition.²⁹

I would also urge an awareness of one’s own presuppositions and a willingness to revisit (or visit for the first time) the biblical data rather than following in the paths of one’s denominational forebears. It is with the Reformation commitment to *sola Scriptura*, with the scholarly spirit of *ad fontes*, and with the dictum, “In essentials, unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things, charity” that I offer this modest contribution to our study *and practice* of the Pastoral Epistles.

²⁹ See the unpublished paper by Randall L. Adkisson, “Women Serving in the Church? A biblical and historical look at women serving in the church with particular attention given to the history and interpretation of Southern Baptists.”