

Qualifications for Ministers in 1 Timothy 3:1–7

Philip B. Payne

© 2024 Payne Loving Trust. All rights reserved. You may distribute this study freely.

The author has a Ph.D. in New Testament from the University of Cambridge, England.

He was an Evangelical Free Church of America Missionary to Japan 1976–1984.

He has taught New Testament in Colleges of the University of Cambridge, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Gordon-Conwell, Bethel, and Fuller Theological Seminaries.

Adapted from *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023).

1 Timothy 3:1 Here is a trustworthy saying: Anyone who aspires to be in a position of ministry¹ in the church desires a good work. **2** A minister, therefore, must be exemplary, devoted to one spouse [if married], sober, self-controlled, worthy of respect, hospitable to everyone, a good teacher, **3** not a heavy drinker or a bully, but gentle, peaceable, not materialistic, **4** who takes good care of their own home, whose children [if they have any] are obedient and respectful **5** (for how can anyone who doesn't take care of their own home take care of God's church?), **6** not a new convert, so that they won't become conceited and fall into the devil's judgment. **7** A minister must also have a good reputation beyond the church, to avoid public humiliation and the devil's trap.

translation by Philip B. Payne

When Paul writes “anyone” in 1 Timothy 3:1, he uses the Greek expression *ei tis*. There are two instances in the New Testament where *ei tis* is explicitly qualified in a way that makes it clear that only men are in view:

1 Corinthians 7:12 “if anyone who is a brother has a wife ...”

1 Corinthians 7:36 “if anyone thinks he is behaving improperly to his betrothed virgin ...”

¹ This is often translated “office of bishop,” but that conveys a far more developed ecclesiastical structure than Paul's house churches. The translation “overseer” is better but does not convey Jesus's and Paul's overriding goal of servant ministry by church leaders that does not reflect worldly power structures.

There are three instances in the New Testament where *ei tis* is explicitly qualified in a way that makes it clear that only women are in view:

1 Corinthians 7:13 “if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever”

1 Timothy 5:4 “if anyone is a widow ...”

1 Timothy 5:16 “if any believing woman has relatives who are windows”

Following are all other instances of *ei tis* listed in Moulton and Geden’s *Concordance*² that refer to people. All apply to both men and women. Examples for which this is especially crucial theologically have an asterisk:

Matthew 16:24*; Mark 4:23*; 7:16* (MSS A D W etc.); 8:34*; 9:35*; Luke 9:23*; 14:26*; Romans 8:9*; 1 Corinthians 3:12, 17, 18; 8:2, 3; 10:27; 11:16, 34; 14:37, 38; 16:22; 2 Corinthians 2:5; 5:17*; 10:7; 11:20 (5x); Galatians 1:9; 6:3; Philippians 3:4; 2 Thessalonians 3:10, 14; 1 Timothy 3:1, 5; 5:8; 6:3; Titus 1:6; James 1:5*, 23, 26; 3:2; 1 Peter 4:11 (2x* “whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service ...”); 2 John 10; Revelation 11:5 (2x); 13:9, 10 (2x); 14:9, 11; 20:15*

Unless it is explicitly qualified to refer only to men or only to women, every occurrence of *ei tis* in the New Testament referring to people applies to women as well as to men. Consequently, unless it is explicitly qualified, *ei tis* is inclusive and gender-neutral. Any woman reading 1 Timothy 3:1 (and similarly, Titus 1:6) would naturally be encouraged to aspire to be in a position of ministry.

It would be misleading to use *ei tis* without qualification to describe a group limited to males. Furthermore, the preceding passage is about men and women. Greek readers would naturally assume that *ei tis* includes men and women. If Paul had intended to teach that only men should be ministers, he would have said something like, “Any *man* who aspires to be in a position of ministry desires a good work.” But Paul does not write “any man.” Paul writes “anyone” because Paul means “anyone”—man or woman. Nevertheless, of the sixty-two Bible translations on Biblegateway.com, twenty-one insert “man” plus a masculine pronoun (“he” or “him”), including the KJV and NASB, and twenty-three more insert one or more masculine pronouns, including the ESV and RSV. The CEV and CEB accurately reflect the Greek by having no “he,” “him,” or “his” in Paul’s qualifications for ministers in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and for

² W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, *A Concordance to the Greek New Testament according to the Texts of Westcott and Hort, Tischendorf and the English Revisers* (5th ed. revised by H. K. Moulton; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), 262–63

elders in Titus 1:5–9. Most translations, however, add many “he,” “him,” and “his” to these requirements.

What is left then to restrict women from becoming ministers? Well, the word for a “minister” in 3:2 is a masculine noun, but the word for “a position of ministry” in 3:1 is a feminine noun. Neither excludes either male or female ministers. It is simply Greek convention when groups of people are addressed to use masculine grammatical forms. Timothy Friberg counted between 7,500 and 8,000 grammatically masculine forms in the New Testament, approximately one per verse, that either must or could include women. Accordingly, merely the presence of one or more masculine nouns or adjectives cannot legitimately be used to exclude women from this text or any other passage about a group of people.

This leaves us with only one expression in this paragraph that some have interpreted to exclude women. Paul says that a minister must be a “man of one woman” (*mias gynaikos andra*). It is typically translated “faithful to his wife.” The closest English equivalent word is “monogamous,” which can refer to either men or women. The word here for “man” typically does mean “man,” though it can also mean “person.”³ Since here it is combined with “of one woman,” it naturally means “man.” That by itself, however, does not limit ministers to married men for three reasons.

First, Paul was a minister caring for many churches, but, like Jesus, he was single and encouraged both men and women to lead a single life of devotion to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:7–8, 32–35). Consequently, “man of one woman” must not require that all ministers be married men. It requires only that *if* a man is married, he must be faithful to his wife, as John Chrysostom explains.⁴

Second, it is common in both Hebrew and Greek for rules to address men with the assumption that the rule also applies to women. For example, in the ten commandments, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21; cf. Malachi 2:15) also applies to wives coveting their neighbor’s husband. Gordon Hugenberger writes, “In the absence of other constraints, norms that utilize male-oriented terminology ought to be construed in

³ BDAG 79, “someone, a person.”

⁴ *Homily 11 on 1 Timothy 3.*

general as including both sexes in their purview.”⁵ Accordingly, John Chrysostom writes regarding this phrase in 1 Timothy 3:12, “Deacons must be men of one woman. This is appropriate to say regarding women deacons also.”⁶ Even prominent “complementarian” scholars including Thomas Schreiner and Doug Moo acknowledge that “man of one woman” does not exclude women from a position of ministry.⁷

Third, “man of one woman” is an idiom. None of the three Greek words by itself means “faithful.” It is only the combination of the three words that together mean “faithful.” Those three words are a figure of speech, an idiom. They act like a noun. And like many Greek nouns,

⁵ G. H. Hugenberger, “Women in Church Office: Hermeneutics or Exegesis? A Survey of Approaches to 1 Timothy 2:8–15,” *JETS* 35/3 (1992): 341–60, at 360 n. 78.

⁶ Literal translation by Philip B. Payne from *Homily 11 on 1 Timothy 3: Διάκονοι ἕστωσαν μιᾶς γυναικος ἄνδρες. Ταῦτα και περι γυναικῶν διακόνων ἀρμόττει εἰρῆσθαι*. PG 62:545ff and <https://greekdownloads3.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/in-epistulam-i-ad-timotheum.pdf>.

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Philip Payne on Familiar Ground: A Review of Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters*,” *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Spring 2010), 33–46. Schreiner acknowledges, “The requirements for elders in 1 Tim 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9, including the statement that they are to be one-woman men, does not necessarily in and of itself preclude women from serving as elders” (35). Moo acknowledges that “man of one woman” need not exclude “unmarried men or females from the office. . . . It would be going too far to argue that the phrase clearly excludes women.” Douglas J. Moo, “The Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11–15: A Rejoinder,” *TJ* 2 NS (1981): 198–222, at 211. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 80, correctly argues that “man of one woman” is “not intended to rule out a single man (such as Jesus or Paul) from being an elder.” This necessarily entails that “man of one women” cannot describe *all* elders, which contradicts Grudem’s assertion on p. 263 n. 107 that “husband of one wife” is a necessary qualification for “each” deacon and that it excludes women. Grudem incorrectly adds “each” where there is no such word in the Greek of 1 Timothy 3:12.

it comes in masculine and feminine forms. Greek convention uses masculine forms when describing both men and women, as here.

But this idiom also comes in a feminine form. Paul uses this feminine form later in chapter 5 when describing which widows should receive assistance. First Timothy 5:9 requires that the widow must have been “faithful to her husband.” Paul uses the feminine form of the idiom, “woman of one man” (*henos andros gynē*), because “widows” are exclusively female.

So when Paul tells Timothy that ministers should be faithful people, he could choose either the masculine or feminine form of the idiom. There is no gender-neutral form of the idiom such as “spouse of one spouse.” Convention, however, required the masculine form of the idiom when referring to a group of people who might be either men or women. This convention was so strong that James Hope Moulton wrote, “The masculine is used in speaking of persons generally, even when women are meant: as in Acts 9³⁷ (λούσαντες), Mark 5³⁸ (κλαίοντας).”⁸ The feminine form was only used when the group is exclusively female. Consequently, the idiomatic phrase “man of one woman” *includes* men as potential ministers; it does not *exclude* women.

In summary, Paul begins these requirements with his thesis statement: “Anyone who aspires to be in a position of ministry in the church desires a good work.” This encourages women to aspire to be in a position of ministry in the church, and nothing else in this paragraph overrules that. None of the qualifications exclude women.

⁸ James Hope Moulton, *An Introduction to the Study of New Testament Greek* (5th ed. revised by Henry G. Meecham; London/Melbourne/New York/Cape Town/Toronto: Epworth, 1955), 109. The washing of a woman’s body (Tabitha, a.k.a. Dorcas in acts 9:37) would have been done by women. Women would typically have been weeping and wailing (in Mark 5:38 both are masculine participles).