

Groups of Widows

1 Timothy 5:3-16

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Paul's exhortations to Timothy in 1 Timothy chapter 5 involve charges concerning various groups within the church: First, he instructs Timothy on admonishing Christians of differing ages (vs. 1-2); second, he instructs him on the treatment of widows (vs. 3-16); and third, he gives Timothy some exhortations and instructions concerning the treatment of elders (vs. 17-25). This article will look at the second series of admonitions concerning widows.

One may find Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 5:3-16 somewhat confusing unless he realizes that the apostle is speaking of different groups of widows. Careful analysis of the text reveals five groups: [1] Widows indeed (vs. 3, 5, 16); [2] Widows with family to support them (vs. 4, 16); [3] Widows who give themselves to wanton pleasure (vs. 6); [4] Widows enrolled on the list (vs. 9, 10); and [5] Widows too young to be enrolled on the list (vs. 11, 14). Apostolic instruction concerning these five different groups seems to be organized into two areas of consideration: [1] The first three groups are considered in relationship to their need. Here Paul discusses whether or not the church should support them. [2] The last two groups are considered as to qualification for doing something for the church (they seem to indicate some aspect of service). Some widows should be included on a "list" and some excluded. Financial need does not seem to be the issue of this discussion. Here, what seems prominent in Paul's thinking is the widow's experience and reputation. We will now turn our attention to the five specific groups of widows as they are considered from these two general groupings.

Widows and Financial Need

a. Widows Indeed

Paul begins the entire discussion of widows with the statement, "Honor widows who are widows indeed" (vs. 3). The term "honor" must refer to financial support. The context seems to bear this out as Paul uses other terms that point us in the direction of financial assistance (see "make some return to their parents," vs. 4; "assist them," vs. 16; see also the use of "honor" in vs. 17 and Matt. 15:5,6). The expression, "widows indeed" is a kind of play on words since the term "widow" has to do with being deprived of husband and, perhaps, financial support. In using this expression, Paul is saying that here is a genuine widow... one who is desolate and truly without means of support.

Verse 5 further describes this first group of widows: "Now she who is a widow indeed, and who has been left alone has fixed her hope on God, and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day." These are widows who have no one but God to care for them. They are also spiritually minded women who trust in God.

In verse 16, the church is instructed to assist this first group of widows... "it may assist those who are widows indeed." Thus, a congregation of Christians is under obligation to help these widows who have no other means of support.

b. Widows With Family to Support Them

Paul notes that some widows within a congregation may not have personal support, but they have family who could assist them. "...but if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family, and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable to God" (vs. 4). Thus, a woman with family to help her is not considered to be a "widow indeed" and children and grandchildren have an obligation to help their Christian parents.

In verse 16, Paul states, "If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, let her assist them, and let not the church be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed." This

places a special obligation upon Christian women. "Dependent widows" could include more than immediate family. It might be that this believing woman is married to an unbelieving husband whose mother is a widow. It may refer to widows of servants in the household. Apparently, Paul is restricting the help given to widows by the church when there is possibility of help by individual Christians with some tie to the widow.

Verse 8 shows the seriousness of this family responsibility: "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever." "The faith" is a term used to refer to the system of beliefs that Christians follow (see for example, Jude 3) and is also a synonym for Christianity. Thus, one who refuses to take care of the widows in his family has turned his back on the basic Christian principles. Further, such a Christian is considered to be "worse than an unbeliever." Of course, unbelievers have not received the Christian teaching as have the Lord's disciples and they are unaware of Christ's example of love. Yet, many unbelievers often show great affection toward their families and see to all their needs. Even when unbelievers do not assist needy family members, which is bad, it is not as bad as having the true teaching and then denying those principles by neglecting one's family.

c. Widows Who Give Themselves to Wanton Pleasure

Verse 6 reads, "But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives." Here is a woman who is alive physically, but is spiritually dead because of her sinfulness. She is not considered to be a "widow indeed," and noticeably, Paul seems to make a point of not using the term widow in referring to her. Perhaps, this widow has tended to move toward ungodly behavior as a result of her newfound freedom from a husband. Whatever the reason, there have been two deaths in her case: her husband's and her own spiritual life. Obviously, Paul would not want the church supporting such a widow.

Widows Enrolled For Work

a. Widows Enrolled on the List

At verses 9 and 10 Paul turns his attention to those who should or should not be included on a list: "Let a widow be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work."

This "list" has been the object of considerable discussion. There are four primary views:

[1] The "list" refers to "widows indeed" who are entitled to financial support.

One would almost automatically make this assumption given the context of instructions for the church to help needy widows. However, if the list refers to those the church can support, then congregations would have to refuse many needy widows who did not meet the qualifications set down by the apostle. In other words, any widow below the age of 60 could not receive financial assistance. The list of qualifications in these verses seem to point us more to a consideration of work and service in behalf of the church rather than qualifying her to receive funds.

[2] The question of the "list" must be left unanswered.

A few commentators have despaired of trying to deduce the meaning and have simply left it up in the air. The claim is that there is insufficient information for making a correct interpretation.

[3] The "list" refers to the office of deaconess.

There is good evidence that there were women who served in an official capacity in the early church. Phoebe is referred to as a "deaconess" in Romans 16:1 (from the Greek term for "servant;" see marginal reading in NASV) and then there is the unusual statement found in the listing of deacon qualifications at 1 Timothy 3:11... "Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things." This has led many scholars to conclude that in the context of 1 Timothy 3, Paul was giving the qualities needed for both male and female deacons.

While we might ascribe to the belief that there was an official church role and function of specially selected women in the first century, we cannot conclude that Paul is specifically referring to that office in this word, "list." This would require a deaconess to be a widow, which seems to read more into the

various texts than is necessary. However, if this "list" refers to official service and work of the church, then we would conclude that these widows are certainly functioning in the capacity of deaconesses. While we may determine that some widows are deaconesses, we should not conclude that all deaconesses are widows.

[4] The "list" refers to widows who serve in an official capacity for the church. This seems to be the most likely possibility. As Paul did with elders and deacons in chapter 3, the giving of qualifications points us to some official designation and work being done by a limited number of Christian servants. The "list" may refer to a special group of deaconesses who consist entirely of widows. Their work may only be surmised from the list of qualifications, but certainly it must have been a kind of caring service that life's experiences equipped them to accomplish. Perhaps the earliest reference to this "list" and the closest to first century knowledge is to be found in the writings of Tertullian. Somewhere around 204 A.D., he referred to 1 Timothy 3:9 in his treatise, "On The Veiling of Virgins." He suggested concerning the work of these women: "...that their experienced training in all the affections may have rendered them capable of readily assisting all others with counsel and comfort."

There are eight expressions of what we have called "qualifications" for a widow to be included on this official "list":

(1) "not less than sixty years old" - This age limit must have been intended to safeguard against the possibility of remarrying (see verse 11 regarding younger widows).

(2) "having been the wife of one man" - This may refer to not having been put away in divorce. It does not mean that she could not be widowed more than once, therefore having more than one husband during her life. If Paul meant only one husband for all of her years, then his demand in verse 14 that younger widows remarry would forever eliminate their possibility of being on this "list." A younger widow remarrying would have done the very thing Paul wanted her to do, but then, when reaching the age of sixty and widowed a second time, she would be eliminated from being a part of those of the list. This seems illogical. The phrase, "wife of one man" or "one husband's wife" seems likely to refer to the fact that while she was married she was faithful to her husband and her marriage vows.

(3) "having a good reputation for good works" - Those who serve in an official and public capacity for the church (as in elders, deacons, and preachers) must have a good reputation in order to function smoothly within a community and so as not to bring reproach upon the church. Here, widows must be known for their "good works." This may suggest that the functioning of those on the "list" has to do with good works toward others. The next five qualifications all begin with the words, "if she has..." and seem to elaborate on this one qualification. In other words, this is a listing of the kind of good works for which she should have a good reputation.

(4) "if she has brought up children" - Rearing children is a responsibility that falls heaviest upon the mother. Here, a widow's moral standards would readily be displayed, which might be one reason for the qualification. This has also led some to argue against the "list" being financial support for "widows indeed," since a godly woman would likely raise children who would eagerly assist her in her widowhood.

(5) "if she has shown hospitality to strangers" - While a husband may receive guests by bringing them home, the wife must cook, see to the sleeping arrangements, and do all the work of hospitality. Her experience in this reflects her willingness to work in serving others, her generosity toward others, and her ability to handle responsibilities in caring for others.

(6) "if she has washed the saints' feet" - This first century custom was usually accomplished by the host or by a household servant. This aspect of her reputation would exhibit the servant attitude and the willingness to do the unpopular chores in caring for people.

(7) "if she has assisted those in distress" - Distress might come upon someone for a variety of reasons. In the first century, it might include those who were persecuted for their faith. Whatever the reason for the difficulty, the widow on the list must be known as one who has manifested the spirit of Christian love in helping others.

(8) "if she has devoted herself to every good work" - This may remind us of Dorcas (Acts 9:36f.) who was known for her many good works. One might ask of a widow being considered for the "list," "What is her track record of being involved in the good works of the local congregation?"

b. Younger Widows Not On The List

The final group of widows discussed are those who are less than fifty years of age. Paul charges Timothy to "refuse to put younger widows on the list" (vs. 11a). In verses 11b through 15, he discusses why he gives such an instruction.

First, Paul says, "...for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married." Now, Paul is not opposed to widows remarrying (see vs. 14 and 1 Cor. 7:39-40), but he is opposed to putting younger widows on the list of official servants because there is the likelihood that they will remarry. Obviously, those on the "list" are not to remarry, but to remain widows. Perhaps, the work these widows on the "list" are called to do demands their full attention. The normal desire to serve husband and family and the impulse of sexual desire would be too much of a distraction from the work of Christ.

Second, in verse 12 Paul writes, "...thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge." The word, "pledge" is literally the Greek term for "faith." Some have thought that the widow incurs condemnation because she marries outside the Lord. Thus, her desire for marriage takes priority over her faith in Christ. Of course, historically there have been widows who married unbelievers and were led away from faith in Christ. However, this conclusion, is based primarily on a misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 7:39-40. More likely, Paul's reference is to some sort of vow not to marry once enrolled on the list. Since younger women would have more desire to remarry, they might be tempted, once on the list, to break their pledge not to marry.

Third, in verse 13 Paul says, "And at the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention." Does this imply that those on the "list" would work from "house to house?" If they were serving by teaching, comforting, counselling, then their work would take them into the homes of brothers and sisters in the congregation. Younger women might be less disciplined than older widows and could become idle. By being placed in various homes, they would be given the opportunity for idle gossip and even neglect their purposes of serving. "Busybodies" do more harm than good by talking about things that are improper or that stir up trouble. Experience tells us that those who are actively involved in the work of the church receive a great deal of personal information about their fellow Christians. This information can easily be misused to the harm of many.

Fourth, in verse 14, Paul declares, "Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, have children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach." This conclusion regarding widows who are fifty-nine and younger is the result of the discussion of verses 11-13. Verse 15 indicates that Paul has witnessed some of the problems with the younger widows he just discussed: "...for some have already turned aside to follow Satan." In other words, some younger widows have already allowed their desires to get away from them and have followed Satan into sin. Paul sets forth these admonitions and requirements in order to safeguard the church and the younger widows.