

THE CHRISTIAN LEADER'S WIFE

By Lavonne James McClish

Although very little in Scripture concerns “qualifications” as such for leaders’ wives, we certainly can find teachings that will be of great help to us. We are familiar with the admonitions to elders’ wives in Paul’s letter to Timothy. We are also familiar with 1 Timothy 3:11 that some think is addressed to “deaconesses,” and who will therefore argue that women can and do fill an “official” position in the church—the counterparts of deacons. Since women cannot meet the qualifications given for elders or deacons, it is much more reasonable to interpret these Scriptures as referring to the wives of elders and deacons (just as the earlier ones are not addressed to “elderesses,” but to the wives of elders. Some of us have known “elderesses” in past years, but God did not appoint them, and their behavior was not godly).

Paul lists the qualifications of elders as follows:

This is a true saying, if a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God? Not a novice, lest, being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into the reproach and the snare of the devil (1 Tim. 3:1–7).

Paul gave Titus a similar list:

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers (Tit. 1:5–9).

Titus 2 is devoted to various classes and groups of people in the church, some of whom are women. Paul does not say definitely that he is referring to leaders’ wives, but simply to older women and younger women in general.

The passage in 1 Timothy 3 goes on to instruct deacons as follows:

Likewise must the deacons be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless (3:8–10).

After inserting instructions to the women or the wives (v. 11; the Greek word, *gunaikos*, is translated both “women” and “wives,” depending on context), Paul continues the exhortations to the deacons in verses 12–13: “Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.” Now we go back to verse 11, which contains the sum-total of the qualifications directed at wives of **both** elders and deacons (as I believe Paul’s meaning to be): “Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things.”

As for preachers’ wives, if there is one word in the New Testament governing preachers’ wives in particular, I have yet to find it. About all the New Testament says about them is that Peter had a wife (Mark 1:30) and that Paul said he had a **right** to “lead about a wife” as did Cephas and the other apostles (1 Cor. 9:5). (So, Roman Catholic doctrine notwithstanding, preachers [“clergy”] and bishops are allowed to be married.)

Let us consider some of the “common-sense” attributes of good leaders, whether male or female. Perhaps number one (at least very high) on the list is knowledge. A mother must be prepared to answer difficult questions her children ask, from the time they speak their very first words and continuing perhaps for the rest of her life. Children will challenge their parents, and they can put us in uncomfortable positions. Occasionally we have to say, “Because I say so,” but that should only be in cases where they are incapable of understanding or are too hardheaded to accept our reasons.

Wives of leaders will frequently be called upon by others to answer questions and to teach other women and girls how to “be ready always to give answer for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (1 Pet. 3:15; cf. Col. 4:6).

Although men are commanded to be hospitable, their wives will carry out most of this duty. Showing hospitality is something that wives generally can do better than their husbands (but not always). There is no set standard for demonstrating hospitality, since we are vastly different in our abilities, personalities, tastes, available space and time, and financial resources, among many other differences we could list. We should never aspire to copy someone else, unless there are lessons that we can learn from that person that will be genuinely helpful to us in our growth and development.

All Christian leaders—men or women—must guard their influence and their reputations carefully. We must never use our liberty selfishly (1 Cor. 8:1–13). Sometimes

a thing may not in itself be sinful, but becomes sinful if it will cause another to stumble (notice: **stumble**—i.e., sin—not **grumble**).

I was teaching a ladies' class in Singapore many years ago, and was making this point, saying, "Although meat offered to idols is not a problem for us..." and as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I immediately realized my blunder. Right next to the Jurong church building there is a temple where sacrifices were offered to an idol on Sunday morning at the very time we were in worship with the Jurong Church! Those Christians might very well have had to deal with that question.

We would likely be surprised if we could know how many people are watching us and thinking that we are the personification of what a Christian is. Many a sinner has used "hypocrites in the church" as an excuse for not obeying God. While God will not accept this excuse from them, we will certainly not escape judgment if we "offend one of these little ones who believe..." (Mat. 18:6). Woe unto us if we bring shame and reproach on the body and bride of Christ! We must never give occasion to the enemies of God to blaspheme (1 Sam. 12:14). We can be forgiven of this sin, but it is all but impossible to undo the consequences and the damage brought on by our actions. The likelihood that we can eradicate the "bad taste" caused by our behavior is about the same as that of being able to catch all of the feathers, after slitting open a pillow in a brisk wind, and stuff them back into the pillow.

If we would be good leaders and good wives of leaders, we must not feel that we are too good to do any menial chore that needs to be done. Leadership is not about glory, honor, power, or prestige, but about labor, service, and humility. Jesus said that, unless we become as little children, we cannot inherit the kingdom of Christ (Mat. 18:1–5). He further said that, if we want to be great in His kingdom, we must become servants of all (Mat. 20:27; see also 10:24–25; 23:11; Mark 9:35; 10:44; Luke 17:7–9; John 13:16; 15:20). Women have at least as many opportunities to become truly great as men have, and the restrictions God has placed upon us will not hinder us in the least. We must be willing to stoop down and wash someone's dirty feet when necessary (as did the "widows indeed," 1 Tim. 5:1–10, and as Jesus did in the upper room with His apostles, John 13:3–16).

Do you remember when the mother of James and John petitioned Jesus to give her two sons the two most honorable positions in His kingdom (Mat. 20:20–24)? Jesus warned her that they would indeed be called upon to humble themselves and to suffer, just as He did, but only the Father could determine who should be thus honored. He then

rebuked all of the apostles for seeking exaltation and power (vv. 25–28). Seeking honor and glory is contrary to Christ's teaching and example.

CONCLUSION

Women are not subordinate because we are **inferior** to men in talent, intelligence, or any natural ability (except physical strength, 1 Pet. 3:7)). We **subordinate ourselves** because God has commanded us to; it is His will, and we must obey. After all, men as well as women in the church must submit themselves to the elders, but that in no way means that those who thus submit are inferior to those who oversee. In the same way, men and women alike must subordinate themselves to the "powers that be" (Rom. 13:1), and we know that we are not **inferior**, but perhaps even **superior**, to at least some of them!