

The Church and Its Widows—1 Timothy 5:3–16

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First Timothy 5:3–16 has long been problematical. Perhaps the biggest problem revolves around what seems to be an arbitrary age limit governing widows who can be “enrolled” (v. 9), and, as generally concluded, whom the church can therefore support.

The Ephesian church apparently had a disproportionate number of widows, even as some present-day churches have more than others. There were “widows indeed” who were “desolate,” having no family (vv. 3, 5, 16b). Some were widows who had children or grandchildren who could care for them. (vv. 4, 8, 16a.) There were some “widows indeed” who lived in “pleasure” (v. 6). Some widows were sixty years old and older, and some were “younger” (vv. 9, 11, 14). That Paul gave fourteen verses of text (about 12% of the epistle) to detailed instruction concerning the treatment of widows further indicates that this was a problem peculiar to Ephesus.

The opening statement, *Honor widows that are widows indeed*, is the main subject of the section. *Honor* is from *timao*, which means either payment of respect or of money due, or both. The context clearly indicates more than mere respect is meant (vv. 4, 8, 16). “Widows indeed” are to be supported. *Indeed* is the present participle *ontos*, denoting something that really or actually is. Verse 4 indicates that some who are widows *factually* (their husbands are dead) are not widows *practically* (because they have kindred to supply their needs). The first responsibility of support for the widow rests upon her physical family, the discharge of which pleases God (vv. 4, 8).

The “widow indeed,” however, is “desolate” (v. 5) of any kindred to support her. Such a widow was in truly dire circumstances until relatively modern times. There was no public welfare or Social Security system. Honorable female employment for gain was all but non-existent; hence the need for these detailed instructions regarding both the family and the church responsibilities regarding widows. The godly “widow indeed” had her hope set on God (v. 5). The perfect tense is here employed, indicating past completed action with present results—a long-standing mode of life. Because of this hope she prays, beseeching God for her needs. This is apparently a moral eulogy designed to commend such a desolate woman to the church’s support.

Not all desolate widows were so God-centered. Some gave themselves to pleasure, rendering themselves spiritually dead (v. 6). The sense of *pleasure* seems to be more of luxury than of immorality. It appears that there were some widows in Ephesus who, although bereft of family, were somehow able to live luxuriously. They were certainly exceptional cases. Such had not their trust in God, nor were they desolate. On both counts they were ineligible for church support.

The directions beginning in verse seven, if followed, would preserve the whole church, but especially the Ephesian widows, from reproach in these matters. In verse 9 we are introduced to the “enrolled” widows. *Enrolled* is from a military term referring to names set down in a register. Some have identified this enrollment with a supposed class of “deaconesses” in the early church, paralleling it with Romans 16:1 and 1 Timothy 3:11. Such an identity is highly suspect. If there had been an official class of deaconesses and if 1 Timothy 3:11 and 5:9–10 are referring to such, why does not the word *deaconess* appear in either passage? Further, aside from the question of deaconesses, the numerous dissimilarities between the women described in 1 Timothy 3:11 and 5:9–10 argues against a specific identification even between these passages. The enrolled widows seem to be a phenomenon peculiar to Ephesus; at least there is no mention of such an arrangement elsewhere in the New Testament.

An imposing history of good works is required, as well as a minimum age of sixty years, to qualify for the enrollment. Younger (than sixty) widows are prohibited from enrollment. Generally, the reason given is that they would not be able to live up to the demands of the enrollment. Because of their relative youth, their minds would more likely be distracted from their work to other things such as marriage and its attendant responsibilities. Paul is not teaching that marriage is incompatible with Christianity, but with the duties of enrollees. Later (v. 14) he urges the “younger widows” to marry. Neither is Paul teaching that an enrollee who marries incurs condemnation of God (v. 12). The word *krima* (“condemnation”) is used in reference to the judgment men pass on each other, as well as God's judgment (Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 360). The “first pledge” apparently refers to a vow – perhaps to serve the church without distraction for the remainder of life – a widow was required to make upon being enrolled. Whatever the case, marriage would mean turning aside from a prior commitment for an enrollee, bringing a degree of criticism upon such a one. Moreover, the less mature widows would be more likely to become idle busybodies than those over sixty. It would therefore be best for the younger widows to marry, involving themselves in responsibilities of

the home which would not leave them sufficient time to become gadabouts. Some younger widows had been enrolled and had already fallen prey to the vices mentioned in verse 13.

Verse 16 is a summary statement for the section. Again, it places the relief responsibility for widows first on the physical family, then on the spiritual (the congregation). But are the widows who can be supported and the enrolled widows identical? Does Paul teach that the church cannot relieve one who is 59 years old and desolate until another birthday, which she might not reach because of starvation? Consider the following:

1. "Widows indeed" are to be honored (supported) by the church if they have no kindred to care for them (vv. 3, 4, 16). Those eligible for this support are qualified by being "desolate, hoping in God, praying continually" (v. 5).
2. Paul said nothing concerning qualifications for support of the "enrolled widows"; their qualifications relate to the work and service of the enrollment (vv. 9-10). Notice that one had to be a "widow indeed" to be supported by the church, but one did not have to be a "widow indeed" to be enrolled.

I view verses 9-15 as supplemental to the main thrust of the section contained in verses 3-8 and verse 16. It is an assumed conclusion, not warranted by the context, that the Ephesian church supported only the enrolled widows of sixty years or older. Some who were enrolled may have been, and likely were, supported by the church, but the support was not limited to those who qualified for enrollment. The church was to support those who were "widows indeed, and desolate, trusteth in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day" (v. 5), regardless of age.

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