

HONOR TRUE WIDOWS: 1 TIMOTHY 5:3–16 WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES¹

by
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Paul's instructions in his first epistle to Timothy are an invaluable resource to believers. They serve as a superb foundation for knowing how the church is to be organized and to function. Paul's guidelines for overseers and deacons in chapter three are familiar to nearly all Christians as they consider who is qualified to serve in that capacity. The exhortations for Timothy's life and ministry in chapter four have often been used to challenge both new and experienced church leaders to fulfill the responsibility they have received from God. Paul's discussion concerning prayer in chapter two is a popular passage, both for church life and in discussions of God's will in regard to salvation. One's understanding of the role of women in the church depends heavily on the interpretation of Paul's teaching in 2:11–15. These concerns make certain passages in 1 Timothy well-known among contemporary believers.

One passage that receives less attention today is Paul's guidelines for widows in 5:3–16. Though not ignored by the church in the past, this section seems easily overlooked in modern culture. Perhaps current believers feel that the issue of widows is not as relevant for the contemporary church. This is especially surprising with the growing focus on social justice. Issues surrounding poverty, human trafficking, abortion, sexuality, and adoption/orphan care garner increasing attention, while issues surrounding widows, a group intricately tied to social justice matters in the Scriptures, are inexplicably missing from the discussion.³

¹I count it a privilege to have studied under Dr. Combs, Dr. Compton, and Dr. McCabe. I am thankful for the example they have provided along with the knowledge and skill they have imparted. They are men who have been able to blend scholarship with pastoral concern and intelligence with godliness. I am also extremely grateful for the opportunity to have served with them at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary where my appreciation for them has only increased. The genesis of this article was a remark Dr. Compton gave in the course "Greek Exegesis of 1 Timothy" as to the neglect of this passage in the modern church. Thus, I thought it fitting to offer it as a means of seeking to honor my professors for their service to Christ and his church.

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³One reason widows may receive little attention among evangelicals is that they receive little attention in society at large. "Unfortunately, despite the rapidly growing numbers of elderly women, their health needs have until recently received scant

This article will explore Paul's teaching concerning widows in 1 Timothy 5:3–16, the church's responsibility in that role, and the reason for his instruction with the goal of gaining insight into modern discussions of the church's role in social justice issues. In pursuing that goal, the passage will be considered in order to clarify precisely whom Paul is addressing and what his instructions are. Then, two background questions will be briefly discussed: whether or not Paul is establishing the office of widow for the church and what has created the need for Paul to provide this instruction. Finally, some implications for contemporary issues will be presented.

ANALYSIS OF THE PASSAGE

To understand Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 5:3–16, the historical context and literary contexts will be discussed, followed by an exegetical study of the passage.

Historical Context

The historical background of 1 Timothy cannot be constructed with absolute certainty, since it was written after the events recorded in Acts. It seems most likely that the Apostle Paul wrote this epistle sometime between his first and second imprisonments in Rome.⁴ Paul likely traveled to Ephesus and Colossae after being released from prison (Philem 22). Timothy may have met Paul in Ephesus, or perhaps somewhere along Paul's journey to Macedonia. Paul urged Timothy to remain in Ephesus in order to deal with the false teaching that had arisen there, while Paul hoped to return soon. Since he was delayed, he wrote this letter to Timothy to encourage him to deal with the false teaching and to provide direction and order for the church (1 Tim 1:3; 3:14–15). Though addressed specifically to Timothy, Paul also intended this letter to reinforce to the church in Ephesus that Timothy was acting as Paul's authorized representative (cf. 6:21).

Since Paul is writing to deal with the heresy in Ephesus, 1 Timothy is not simply a church manual. Thus, understanding the heresy is important for proper interpretation. Though it is not possible to determine every element of the false teaching, it is possible to get some understanding of it through Paul's statements in the epistle. Apparently, the false teachers had gained significant influence in the church, either by rising from within the church or serving as leaders of the church (1:18–20; 3:1–13; 5:17–25; cf. Acts 20:30).⁵ The actual false teaching

attention from either the feminist or human rights communities" (M. Cathleen Kaveny, "The Order of Widows: What the Early Church Can Teach Us about Older Women and Health Care," *Christian Bioethics*, 11 [April 2005]: 19).

⁴This paper assumes Pauline authorship of the epistle. For a thorough defense of this view, see Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 12–52.

⁵Thomas D. Lea, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, New American Commentary (Nashville:

included a faulty understanding of the Law (1:7–8); claims to superior knowledge (6:20–21); controversy over minutia, such as words, myths, and genealogies (1:4; 6:4); love for money (6:5); and unbiblical restrictions on marriage and dietary practices (4:3).⁶ Paul intended to counteract this teaching, though it is not necessary to see every passage as a direct antidote to the false teaching.

Literary Context

Since 1 Timothy is Paul's instruction for Timothy, it may be helpful to consider the structure of the book as a series of charges to Timothy.⁷ After the greeting (1:1–2), Paul gives his charge to Timothy concerning false teaching and sound doctrine by warning against the false teaching and pointing to his own ministry as consistent with true teaching (1:3–20). He then charges Timothy about matters in public worship, dealing with public prayer and with the roles of men and women in the assembly (2:1–15). Next, Paul moves into his guidelines for church officers, laying out the qualifications for overseers and deacons and finishing with a reminder of the importance of his instruction (3:1–16). In chapter four, Paul returns explicitly to the false teachers and points out how Timothy is to respond to this threat of false teaching by being faithful in sound teaching and godly conduct (4:1–16). Paul then moves to instructions for different members of the congregation (5:1–6:2). In the section immediately preceding the passage under consideration, Paul issues instructions about confronting various church members (5:1–2). He then addresses the care of widows in the church by explaining the description of true widows, the responsibility of the relatives and the church, and the instructions for younger widows (5:3–16). Paul transitions to his charge relating to elders and addresses their compensation, discipline, and ordination (5:17–25). He concludes this section by giving instructions for slaves in the church (6:1–2). Paul finishes with his final charge to Timothy, which addresses false teachers, greed, godly conduct, and the wealthy (6:3–21a). He then closes with a brief benediction (6:21b).

The change in subject to *Χήρας* (widows) and the use of the imperative *τίμα* (honor) mark the transition in 5:3 from Paul's directives regarding confrontation with a variety of groups to the need to honor widows. The appearance of *ὄντως χήρας/χήραις* at 5:3 and 5:16 mark the beginning and end of the section.⁸ The introduction of *πρεσβύτεροι*

Broadman & Holman, 1992), 42. Based on 2 Timothy 3:6–9, it may be that the women in Ephesus were particularly vulnerable to the false teaching. However, Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 2:9–15 and 5:3–16 do not necessarily point to that reality.

⁶The issue of marriage is of particular significance for the passage under discussion.

⁷The following structure is based largely on Homer Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles: Studies in I and II Timothy and Titus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 72–73.

⁸William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 277.

in verse 17 marks a transition to another section dealing with elders, though both sections are linked by the idea of *τιμῆς*.⁹

Exegetical Study

With the historical and literary context addressed, it is now possible to look more closely at the passage itself. Verse three provides the underlying principle for the passage. In verse four, Paul gives his initial instruction to the family of the widow. Paul lays out the first criteria for true widows in verses five and six, before returning to his instructions for the family of widows in verses seven and eight. In verse nine, Paul moves to his instruction to the church regarding widows. In verses nine and ten, he deals with enrolling older widows in the care of the church, while in verses eleven to fifteen he gives his instruction for younger widows. He concludes in verse sixteen with a final exhortation for believing women to care for their own relatives in order to free the church to care for true widows.

The Underlying Principle: Verse 3

Χήρας τίμα τὰς ὄντως χήρας.

Honor widows who are truly widows.¹⁰

Paul uses the second person singular imperative *τίμα*. Though it is directly addressed to Timothy, it is clearly intended to include the action of the church, as the plural verbs of verses four and seven and the reference to the church in verse sixteen reveal.¹¹ The command not only includes respect but also carries the idea of care and concern that would include financial support.¹² This is evident from Paul's commands to the relatives to provide for their family members (5:8), his concern that the church only provide for true widows rather than being burdened by others (5:16), and his use of the cognate *τιμῆς* to refer to monetary support of elders (5:17–18). The object of the verb is *χήρας*, which is clarified as *τὰς ὄντως χήρας*.¹³ What Paul means by that category is clarified

⁹George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 231.

¹⁰All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *English Standard Version*, 2001.

¹¹Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 215.

¹²“After all, within an honor and shame culture, to honor a person is not simply a verbal or mental act. The concrete and material implication is always an integral part of any act of honoring a person” (David W. Pao, “Let No One Despise Your Youth: Church and the World in the Pastoral Epistles,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57 [December 2014]: 753–54).

¹³It is possible that the term widow could be applied to an older woman who had never married, but not likely to a younger celibate woman since the term “virgin” would already cover them. See I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (London: T. & T. Clark,

as the passage progresses. Paul's concern in this passage is that true widows be cared for.

Initial Instruction for the Family: Verse 4

εἰ δέ τις χήρα τέκνα ἢ ἔκγονα ἔχει, μανθανέτωσαν πρῶτον τὸν ἴδιον οἶκον εὐσεβεῖν καὶ ἀμοιβὰς ἀποδιδόναι τοῖς προγόνοις· τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν ἀπόδεκτον ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ.

But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God.

Paul makes his first clarifying remark by contrasting the true widow of verse three with the widow with family in verse four. The δέ is adversative, signaling a contrast between widows who should be cared for by the church and those who should be cared for by their families.¹⁴ The εἰ and τις make a first class conditional inclusive phrase with the imperative μανθανέτωσαν forming the apodosis. The subject of the imperative is τέκνα ἢ ἔκγονα from the protasis.¹⁵ The infinitives εὐσεβεῖν and ἀποδιδόναι are both infinitives of complement modifying μανθανέτωσαν. The first infinitive points to the religious duty that believers have to care for their parents or grandparents with πρῶτον indicating the importance of this duty. The second infinitive explains further how the family members are to “show godliness”—by giving back to their parents. The γάρ shows that the reason believers should care for their widowed mothers or grandmothers is that it pleases God.¹⁶ Paul teaches that a widow with family members should be cared for by her family rather than by the church because the family members are to please God by fulfilling their religious duty to return payment to their parents/grandparents.¹⁷

First Criteria for True Widows: Verses 5–6

ἡ δὲ ὄντως χήρα καὶ μεμονωμένη ἤλπιεν ἐπὶ θεὸν καὶ προσμένει ταῖς δεήσεσιν καὶ ταῖς προσευχαῖς νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας, ἡ δὲ σπαταλῶσα ζῶσα τέθνηκεν.

1999), 578.

¹⁴Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 217.

¹⁵The use of the word εὐσεβεῖν, with its emphasis on service to God by honoring one's parents, reinforces the interpretation that the subject of the imperative is the children and grandchildren rather than the widows (Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 430).

¹⁶It may be pleasing in that it reflects the teaching of the fifth commandment (Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 586).

¹⁷The question of whether or not this passage addresses a widow with unbelieving family will be considered further below under the section “The Cause of the Problem.”

She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, 6 but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.

After dealing with the responsibility of the family to care for their widowed parent/grandparent, Paul returns to clarify further who falls into the category of those “who are truly widows” in verse three. The δὲ is adversative, contrasting the widows with family with those who are left alone (μεμονωμένη).¹⁸ This provides the first description of what a true widow is—she is someone who is not only without a husband but is also without any children or grandchildren. Since she has no family on which she can rely, she ἤλπικεν ἐπὶ θεὸν (has set her hope on God), which is the second description of a true widow. She demonstrates this hope through her prayers. The verb προσμένει combined with the genitives νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας (night and day) point to the constancy of her prayers, expressing her hope in God.¹⁹

The δὲ of verse six contrasts the godly and true widow with a different kind of widow. Two descriptions are given of this widow: σπαταλῶσα and ζῶσα τέθνηκεν. The first description, σπαταλῶσα, occurs only here and in James 5:5. It speaks of living for pleasure and self-indulgence.²⁰ The second description uses a concessive participle (ζῶσα) to point out that this widow may be alive physically but she is dead spiritually. Thus, true widows are not only those who are without family but are also those who demonstrate evidence of salvation through their dependence on God.

Further Instructions for Families of Widows: Verses 7–8

καὶ ταῦτα παράγγελλε, ἵνα ἀνεπίλημπτοι ᾧσιν. εἰ δὲ τις τῶν ἰδίων καὶ μάλιστα οἰκειῶν οὐ προνοεῖ, τὴν πίστιν ἤρνηται καὶ ἔστιν ἀπίστου χείρων.

Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

There is some debate regarding what ταῦτα refers to and who the subject of ᾧσιν is. The subject could be the widows in verse six in which

¹⁸Dan Wallace lists ἡ δὲ ὄντως χήρα καὶ μεμονωμένη as an example of the Granville Sharp Rule (*Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 275).

¹⁹Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 282.

²⁰It may also suggest that the widow has some financial means that enables her to be self-indulgent (Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 588). However, the primary emphasis here seems to be on the sinful lifestyle rather than wealth, since Paul does not address the issue of those who have wealth but are godly and merely possessing wealth does not cause a person to be spiritually dead.

case Timothy is to warn them about their behavior.²¹ However, it is more likely that the subject is the τέκνα and ἔκγονα from verse four and therefore that Timothy is to prescribe the directives of verse four. The widows have not been addressed to this point, so the only plural subject that has been given a directive is the children and grandchildren.²² As well, this makes more sense of their being ἀνεπίληπτοι and flows more naturally into verse eight.²³

The δέ in verse eight is adversative, contrasting those who care for their families and are ἀνεπίληπτοι with those who neglect that responsibility. The εἰ and τις once again form a conditional and inclusive phrase. The protasis is τῶν ἰδίων καὶ μάλιστα οἰκείων οὐ προνοεῖ (does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household). The verb προνοεῖ reinforces the idea that honor in verse three includes the idea of financial support. The two genitive objects form a plural Granville Sharp construction in which the second is a subset of the first.²⁴ A believer has a responsibility to care for his relatives in general and an even greater responsibility to care for those in his immediate family, as indicated by μάλιστα.²⁵ The apodosis provides two consequences for a failure to provide for one's family. The first is τὴν πίστιν ἕρνηται. Here, τὴν πίστιν refers to an objective faith or the body of apostolic doctrine that is denied by those who neglect this responsibility. The second consequence is ἔστιν ἀπίστου χείρων. Some argue that these phrases refer to a believer who is practically denying his profession and is worse than an unbeliever because he fails to do what unbelievers do.²⁶ However, it is better to see that Paul is teaching that those who neglect this responsibility show themselves to be unbelievers.²⁷ This better correlates with the teaching found elsewhere in Scripture that a key sign of embracing the gospel is helping fellow believers who are in need (Gal 6:6–10; Jas 1:27; 2:14–17; 1 John 3:17–19).²⁸

²¹Kent, *Pastoral Epistles*, 177; Lea, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 148.

²²Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 220

²³Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 284. Guthrie believes it encompasses both widows and their children (*Pastoral Epistles*, 101).

²⁴Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics*, 280–81.

²⁵Paul is clearly moving from a more general to a more specific group, though the exact identity of the two groups is disputed. The three most likely possibilities are moving from household members, including slaves, to blood relatives, from relatives outside of the home to those inside, or from general relatives to immediate family (Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006], 344). I prefer the third option, though it is difficult to determine which it is with certainty.

²⁶Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 285.

²⁷Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 221.

²⁸The specifics of how this relates to an unbeliever will be discussed further below under the heading “Cause of the Problem.”

Enrolling Widows in the Church: Verse 9–10

Χήρα καταλεγέσθω μὴ ἔλαττον ἐτῶν ἐξήκοντα γεγονυῖα, ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνή, ἐν ἔργοις καλοῖς μαρτυρουμένη, εἰ ἐτεκνοτρόφησεν, εἰ ἐξενοδόχησεν, εἰ ἀγίων πόδας ἔνιψεν, εἰ θλιβομένοις ἐπήρκεσεν, εἰ παντὶ ἔργῳ ἀγαθῷ ἐπηκολούθησεν.

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

Paul transitions from the families' responsibility to care for widows to the church's responsibility. He begins with the command to enroll true widows, further clarifying who those widows are. The command καταλεγέσθω refers to enlisting or enrolling someone, though "it does not specify the nature of the group into which the person is enrolled."²⁹ The following clauses provide the requirements for widows to be considered for this group. The first is that she be over sixty years of age (μὴ ἔλαττον ἐτῶν ἐξήκοντα γεγονυῖα). Paul's choice of this age appears somewhat arbitrary.³⁰ Roman law required women under age fifty to remarry.³¹ It is likely that Paul is reflecting a common idea that sixty is when a person entered a stage of life in which they were considered older and no longer able to work.³² Thus, it seems to be a practical limit to distinguish between younger widows who could still remarry or provide for themselves and older widows who would be unable to do so.³³

The second requirement regards a woman's faithfulness to her husband. The phrase ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνή (having been the wife of one husband) is the reverse of the qualification for overseers and deacons (3:2, 12). Some claim that this means the widow has not remarried since her husband's death.³⁴ However, the majority of commentators view it as describing the faithfulness of the widow to her husband while married—she was a "one-man woman." Otherwise, Paul's instructions for

²⁹Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 286.

³⁰It is common, however, to set somewhat arbitrary ages for a number of issues. As Winter notes, there is little reason for many countries to establish sixty or sixty-five as ages at which people can begin to receive a pension (Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 72, n. 50).

³¹Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 125.

³²Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 286–87.

³³Whether or not this was an unbending guideline is difficult to determine. At the least it is possible to say that the church may have supported widows who had genuine needs before they turned sixty but they would not commit themselves to regular and ongoing support.

³⁴Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 102. The ESV, NASB, and KJV seem to reflect this interpretation in their translation.

the younger widows to remarry in verse fourteen would preclude them from being enrolled if they lost their second husbands.³⁵

The third requirement is at the beginning of verse ten: ἐν ἔργοις καλοῖς μαρτυρουμένη (having a reputation for good works). Paul elaborates on what those good deeds are in the remainder of verse ten, though the listing is probably representative rather than exhaustive.³⁶ The first good work is εἰ ἐτεκνοτρόφησεν (if she has brought up children). There is no indication that these children were her own—they may have been orphans—but a childless woman would not be excluded from help any more than a man without children would be excluded from the office of overseer or deacon (3:4, 12). The widow would not need to be able to present the children she brought up as proof of fulfilling this requirement, for if the children were available and willing they—not the church—would have the responsibility to care for the widow (cf. 5:4, 7–8).³⁷

The next good work mentioned is εἰ ἐξενόδοχησεν (has shown hospitality). Hospitality was not simply required of overseers (3:2) but of all believers (Rom 12:13). The fact that these widows were in need of support from the church does not mean they were unable to show hospitality. Chrysostom pointed out that the widow of Zarephath displayed hospitality to Elijah though she did not even have enough for herself and her son (1 Kgs 17:7–16).³⁸

The third good work mentioned is εἰ ἀγίων πόδας ἔνιψεν (has washed the feet of the saints). This most likely refers to the humility of the widow and her willingness to serve others even in menial tasks. Though some point to this as support for foot washing as an ordinance, it more likely refers to actual works of service to others, perhaps including literally washing the feet of traveling believers. If it were a reference to an ordinance, it would then fail to serve as a distinguishing requirement.³⁹

The next good work is εἰ θλιβομένοις ἐπήρκεσεν (has cared for the afflicted). The affliction here does not necessarily refer to persecution but could include any kind of distress. Paul then concludes the list with a general statement: εἰ παντὶ ἔργῳ ἀγαθῷ ἐπηκολούθησεν (has devoted herself to every good work). This reinforces the representative nature of the list and emphasizes the godly character of the widow. Paul here

³⁵The suggestion that Paul is discussing two groups of widows—those who are to be cared for in vv. 3–8 and those who are to part of an official order of widows in vv. 9–15 will be discussed below under “Duties of an Order or Qualifications for Support.”

³⁶Lea, 1, 2 *Timothy, Titus*, 150.

³⁷Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 288.

³⁸Efthalia Makris Walsh, “Wealthy and Impoverished Widows in the Writings of St. John Chrysostom,” in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 179.

³⁹Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 224. The reasoning is that all believers would participate in the ordinances.

commands that widows who are over sixty, who have been faithful to their husbands, and who have demonstrated their commitment to godliness are to be supported by the church.⁴⁰

Instruction of Younger Widows: Verses 11–15

νεωτέρας δὲ χήρας παραιτοῦ· ὅταν γὰρ καταστηνιάσωσιν τοῦ Χριστοῦ, γαμεῖν θέλουσιν ἔχουσαι κρίμα ὅτι τὴν πρώτην πίστιν ἠθέτησαν· ἅμα δὲ καὶ ἀργαὶ μανθάνουσιν περιερχόμεναι τὰς οἰκίας, οὐ μόνον δὲ ἀργαὶ ἀλλὰ καὶ φλύαροι καὶ περιεργοί, λαλοῦσαι τὰ μὴ δέοντα. βούλομαι οὖν νεωτέρας γαμεῖν, τεκνογονεῖν, οἰκοδεσποτεῖν, μηδεμίαν ἀφορμὴν διδόναι τῷ ἀντικειμένῳ λοιδορίας χάριν· ἤδη γάρ τινες ἐξετράπησαν ὀπίσω τοῦ Σατανᾶ.

But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. For some have already strayed after Satan.

The δὲ is adversative, contrasting the widows who are to be enrolled with those who are not. This contrast is reinforced by Paul's strong command παραιτοῦ. The context shows that Timothy is to refuse to enroll these younger widows. Paul begins his explanation for why they are to be excluded from the list in the second part of verse eleven. The γὰρ is causal, with ὅταν introducing an indefinite temporal clause that serves as the first reason for their exclusion. The verb καταστηνιάσωσιν is only found here in the New Testament. It refers to being controlled by strong sensual desires. The genitive τοῦ Χριστοῦ is most likely one of opposition, though separation conveys basically the same meaning. The remainder of verse eleven and verse twelve provide the apodosis of the clause.

The result of being led in opposition to Christ is that the younger widow γαμεῖν θέλουσιν, with the result being ἔχουσαι κρίμα ὅτι τὴν πρώτην πίστιν ἠθέτησαν (so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith). The problem stems from understanding how a desire to marry could be in opposition to Christ and result in judgment/condemnation. The most common explanation is that the widows took a vow of celibacy upon enrollment as a widow, so their desire to marry breaks that vow. This view takes τὴν πρώτην πίστιν as a pledge. Since breaking a pledge would not seem to lead to actual condemnation, κρίμα is used here in the sense of censure.⁴¹ This view has several

⁴⁰Since Paul has already stated that the family has the primary responsibility to care for the widow, he does not reiterate that here. It is assumed that the widows who are to be enrolled do not have family.

⁴¹Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 226.

points to commend it: (1) It maintains consistency between references to marrying in verses eleven and fourteen; (2) it fits with Paul's solution to allow the younger widows to marry instead of taking a pledge of celibacy and being enrolled; and (3) the idea of a pledge of celibacy finds support in extra-biblical literature from after the second century. However, it does not seem to account for some of the harsh language in the passage. The link to verses six and fifteen seem to point to an unbeliever being discussed in the verse. It also reads later church practices into the text, since there is no explicit reference to a vow of celibacy in the passage.

A better interpretation is to see the desire to marry in verse eleven as a desire to marry that stems from an opposition to Christ, most likely a desire to marry an unbeliever (cf. 1 Cor 7:39).⁴² Since the woman in that culture was expected to abandon her gods for that of her husband, she may have been tempted to abandon her faith in order to marry someone "who would not marry her if she remained a Christian."⁴³ This view allows πίστιν to have its common usage in the Pastoral Epistles of faith.⁴⁴ It also incorporates better into the list of explicitly sinful behavior in verse 13 as an evidence of a self-indulgent lifestyle rather than one devoted to Christ, thus receiving God's condemnation.⁴⁵

Paul adds a second reason for refusing to enroll younger widows in verse thirteen. While they are turning away from Christ (ἅμα δὲ), they are also learning to be idle (καὶ ἀργαὶ μανθάνουσιν). The infinitive εἶναι must be supplied by ellipsis (cf. 5:4). Some claim that the way that these widows learn to be idle is by abusing their visitation opportunities (περιερχόμεναι τὰς οἰκίας), resulting in their being φλύαροι καὶ περίεργοι (gossips and busybodies).⁴⁶ However, that assumes they have been given visitation duties, which does not necessarily arise from the passage.⁴⁷ Rather, it is better to see the phrase περιερχόμεναι τὰς οἰκίας (going about from house to house) as the result of their idleness and not the cause.⁴⁸ Since they no longer have a husband or children to care for, they are not engaged in anything productive to utilize their time and

⁴²The fact that the desire to marry comes after the statement that they are drawn away from Christ supports the idea that this marriage is one with an unbeliever rather than a breaking of a vow to Christ, in which case it would make more sense for the order to be reversed—they desire to marry, and so are drawn away from Christ (Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 601).

⁴³Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 137.

⁴⁴Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 292.

⁴⁵The desire to marry is not sinful in itself, while the desire to marry for selfish reasons or to marry outside of the faith is sinful in itself.

⁴⁶Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 103–4.

⁴⁷For a further discussion about whether the passage prescribes duties or describes characteristics, see discussion below under "Duties of an Order or Qualifications for Support."

⁴⁸Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 293.

energy.⁴⁹ Thus, they find unproductive ways to fill their time by going around and engaging in unwholesome talk. The final phrase of the verse, λαλοῦσαι τὰ μὴ δεόντα, further explains the nature of their gossip.

Verse fourteen gives Paul's instructions for the younger widows to counter the temptations just mentioned. The οὖν is inferential, drawing a conclusion in light of the preceding dangers. βούλομαι signals not merely Paul's desire but expresses his apostolic instruction (cf. 1 Tim 2:8; Titus 3:8). The context shows that νεωτέρας is referring to younger widows. There are four infinitives that complement βούλομαι. The first is γαμεῖν.⁵⁰ Rather than having younger widows be enrolled to be cared for by the church, they are to marry.⁵¹ The next two infinitives, τεκνογονεῖν and οἰκοδεσποτεῖν, are both found only here in the New Testament. Both would be normally expected in a marriage, and would ensure that the widow does not fall into being ἀργαί.⁵² That, in turn, will ensure the final infinitive is true: μηδεμίαν ἀφορμὴν διδόναι τῷ ἀντικειμένῳ λοιδορίας χάριν (give the adversary no occasion for slander). It is unclear exactly who the adversary is, but whether it is speaking generically or of Satan himself, it is clear that Paul believes his prior instruction will remove any opportunity for λοιδορίας.

In verse fifteen, Paul indicates the urgency of his instruction: Some had already turned aside to follow Satan. "The ἤδη γάρ combination forcefully joins the temporal and the logical together and therefore gives greater urgency to Paul's warning."⁵³ Though Paul does not exactly state what following Satan entails, in the context it would fit as a reference to their turning from Christ to a sinful lifestyle. Some had already adopted a promiscuous lifestyle and were bringing reproach against the integrity of the Christian faith (cf. 5:14c).⁵⁴

From secular and legal literature of the time, it is evident that younger widows had a reputation for promiscuous behavior.⁵⁵ Apparently, there was a strong temptation for younger women to take advantage of the support they could get, allowing them to develop sinful

⁴⁹Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 602.

⁵⁰This marriage, as opposed to the one described in verse 11, would be a marriage to a believer.

⁵¹"It was expected in the ancient world that a widow would remarry. Augustus, in the *lex Papia Poppaea* of A.D. 9, actually legislated for this after a husband's death if the widow was still of child-bearing age, *i.e.* under fifty. The period during which she could remain a widow was finally set at two years. This was the legal position in the empire in the first century, even if it was not observed by all" (Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City*, 73).

⁵²The first three infinitives assume not only a desire to marry, have children, and manage the household but the ability and opportunity to do so (e.g., a willing candidate to marry, etc.)

⁵³Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 229.

⁵⁴Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 139.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 123–24.

lifestyles. “With the church caring for their physical needs, they had time to indulge themselves and live totally self-centered lives.”⁵⁶ In order to combat this threat to the lives of younger widows and to maintain purity of the church, Paul instructs that the younger widows should not be enrolled but should instead marry and manage their household.⁵⁷

Concluding Exhortation: Verse 16

εἴ τις πιστὴ ἔχει χήρας, ἐπαρκείτω αὐταῖς καὶ μὴ βαρεῖσθω ἡ ἐκκλησία, ἵνα ταῖς ὄντως χήραις ἐπαρκέσῃ.

If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are really widows.

Paul concludes this passage with a final exhortation to believing women to care for widows in their family so that the church’s limited resources could be used to care for the true widows who had no family. There is some confusion about Paul’s use of πιστὴ. Though some manuscripts have πιστὸς ἢ πιστὴ or simply πιστὸς, πιστὴ is supported by both external and internal considerations.⁵⁸ Paul could be referring to either young widows or wealthy widows (Acts 9:36–42). However, it is probably best to see this as any believing woman who has a relative who is a widow. The reason he addresses women instead of men is “because the woman in a household would bear the main burden of caring for a widow.”⁵⁹ Since χήρας is plural, it may refer to not only a widowed mother, but perhaps grandmother or mother-in-law as well.

The reason for the believing women to take this responsibility is explained in the remainder of the verse. βαρεῖσθω would include financial and temporal burdens that arise from caring for others. The church is not to be burdened with the care that the family members should

⁵⁶Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 290.

⁵⁷What about young widows who had no prospects for remarrying? “It is less likely that Paul was deliberately callous toward such cases than that he did not know of them in the Ephesian church. Or perhaps he assumes that since they are still young, they would be under the responsibility of their parents’ *oikos*” (Luke Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 2001], 276).

⁵⁸“While it is possible that πιστὸς ἢ was omitted accidentally through an oversight in copying, a majority of the Committee, observing that the shorter reading is somewhat better attested than the longer reading, regarded the latter as a natural expansion made by copyists who, in light of ver. 4, felt that a restriction of the principle of this verse to Christian women was unfair. The reading πιστὸς is confined to versions and may be merely translational in origin” (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament [Fourth Revised Edition]*, 2nd ed. [New York: United Bible Societies, 1994], 574–75).

⁵⁹Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 229.

take, because the church has the responsibility to care for widows who do not have family.

In this passage, Paul distinguishes between the responsibilities of family and the church in caring for widows. He also distinguishes between those who should be enrolled to receive help in the church and those who do not qualify. The younger widows should remarry and those who have family should be cared for by them so that the church can use its limited resources to care for godly widows who are older and have no family.

DUTIES OF AN ORDER OR QUALIFICATIONS FOR SUPPORT

A question that often arises in this passage is whether Paul is speaking of an order of widows in a church and listing their duties, or whether he is simply speaking of the qualifications of widows who will be added to a list of those who receive regular, ongoing support from the church. Those who see more of an emphasis on an order of widows in the church tend to view the list in verses nine and ten as laying out some of the duties a widow was to perform. This order of widows may not have included those needing support—as 5:3–8 speaks about—but those who could serve the church.⁶⁰ However, the church may have still supported them for their service.⁶¹ Upon entrance to this order, a woman would be required to take a pledge of singleness, which younger widows would be tempted to break.⁶² This interpretation softens Paul's exclusion of younger widows, since they are not excluded from support but from service in this order because of its pledge of singleness.

Though it is clear that by the third century widows were appointed to service in the church in order to minister to the afflicted and to pray⁶³, there is no indication that this was established when 1 Timothy was written.⁶⁴ Rather, the emphasis of the passage is on which widows should receive support from the church and which should not. The list in verses nine and ten are set forth as qualifications to be enrolled for support, not service.⁶⁵ The reason younger widows are excluded is because of the temptation they would face regarding marrying an

⁶⁰John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 132.

⁶¹Ibid., 135.

⁶²Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 230.

⁶³See Patricia Cox Miller, ed., *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 51–61.

⁶⁴It is dangerous to read back the ascetic tendencies of later times into the first century" (Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 578).

⁶⁵"While it is assumed that a godly woman would continue to do the same things after enrollment that she did before, this does not mean that this passage teaches duties. Paul is concerned not with duties but with the type of widow who should be enrolled" (Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 274).

unbeliever and becoming idle gossips and busybodies because they no longer need to work to support themselves. Paul does not address the issue of temporary support for other widows but lays out the qualifications for widows to receive regular and ongoing support.

CAUSE OF THE PROBLEM

Why does Paul take the time to restrict those that the church would support? Bassler proposes that the problem arose as a result of the women in early Christianity striving to gain a measure of freedom in sociological realms. The only way to be free from the authoritative rule of husbands and father in society was to choose a life of celibacy and service to the church.⁶⁶ A problem was created as a growing number of women chose this lifestyle, stretching the limits of the church's resources.⁶⁷ As well, the behavior of the women would have been considered inappropriate in larger society, so the author prescribes the characteristics that would have been approved by society to remove the offense of the widows who had already been enrolled and to limit their number.⁶⁸

This interpretation is typically tied to the view that Christianity's original structure was very egalitarian with 1 Timothy serving as an example of later Christians oppressing a rising order of powerful women in order to conform to a more traditional patriarchal society. As Johnson notes, this interpretation ignores the heart of the passage. "My disagreement with the feminist interpretation begins with its neglect of what appears to be the most obvious and central concern in the passage: the effort to balance the needs of the poor and the resources of the intentional community."⁶⁹

An understanding of the social setting in the first century provides a better explanation of Paul's instructions here. There were a large number of widows in that society, with estimates reaching as high as thirty percent of women in the ancient world.⁷⁰ Because of the high number of widows and their disadvantages in society, there were clear laws in those days that defined how widows were to be cared for. These laws related to the dowry that had been given to the husband at marriage. At the death of her husband a widow could choose one of two options:

If she had children, she could remain in her deceased husband's home. There she would be maintained by the new κύριος of the household,

⁶⁶Jouette M. Bassler, "The Widows' Tale: A Fresh Look at 1 Tim 5:3-16," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (March 1984): 23-24.

⁶⁷Ibid., 35-36.

⁶⁸Ibid., 38.

⁶⁹Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 271.

⁷⁰Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 124-25. Winter points out that the estimate is probably too high, but there is little doubt that widows did make up a significant portion of the population.

possibly her son. She could also return to her parents taking her dowry back to her family. The returning of that dowry meant the legal severance from her late husband's household.⁷¹

Whoever received the dowry then had an obligation to provide for the widow. In spite of the legal protection for widows, there were always some who fell through the cracks, and the church sought to care for them. However, it is not surprising that the church's willingness to support widows easily led some to neglect their responsibility to care for widows in their family.⁷² Thus, Paul needed to provide instruction to clarify which widows the church was responsible to support.⁷³

As well, the responsibility to care for widows living in one's household was a legal obligation because the individual had received the dowry. Thus, the professing believers who neglected that responsibility were sinning for two reasons: they neglected the command to honor their parents, and they were worse than an unbeliever because they failed to fulfill their legal obligation. This sheds further light on the issue of reproach in verse seven.⁷⁴ Unbelievers could have easily accused the church of hypocrisy if its members were ignoring their legal responsibilities.⁷⁵

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Does this passage have any contemporary significance? It has direct significance on the matter of caring for widows today. But it has additional significance in offering principles for broader issues for the church's social responsibilities.

Caring for Widows Today

Since Paul's teaching does not seem linked solely to local culture and since it parallels the practice of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 6), churches should take seriously the responsibility to care for true widows as described in this passage. Caring for widows will most likely be an increasing issue for churches.

Current statistical projections indicate that the health needs of elderly women will assume increasing importance during the first half of the twenty-first century. To put the matter bluntly, the future is elderly and

⁷¹Winter, "Providentia for the Widows of 1 Timothy 5:3-16," *Tyndale Bulletin* 39 (1988): 84.

⁷²Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City*, 70.

⁷³Winter, "Providentia for the Widows of 1 Timothy 5:3-16," 88.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 92-93.

⁷⁵If a Christian widow was in the household of an unbelieving family, they would have a legal obligation to care for her. However, since they may have rejected her from their household or may have neglected their duty, the church would most likely step in to provide support.

female. In 1900, one in twenty-five Americans was over the age of sixty-five. The U.S. Census Bureau (2004) projects that by the year 2030, *one in five* Americans will be over sixty-five, as the baby-boom generation moves from its middle years into old age.⁷⁶

Unmarried women will compose the largest group of this aging population. Additionally, they make up a disproportionate number of the elderly who struggle with poverty.

Grim U.S. statistics demonstrate the tenuousness of the bonds connecting elderly women to the broader community, which is largely due to two interrelated factors: lack of a supportive family structure, and lack of financial resources. First, while most elderly men are married, most elderly women are not. Because of the different life expectancies of men and women, as well as the tendency of women to marry older men, 74 percent of American men older than sixty-five still have living wives, while only 40 percent of women over that age still have husbands who are alive. Moreover, elderly women are far more likely than elderly men to live alone. According to the 1990 statistics, 80 percent of the 9.2 million elderly persons living by themselves are female. One out of three elderly women who are not institutionalized lives by herself. Second, elderly women are far more likely than their male counterparts to be poor or nearly poor. While women counted as 58 percent of elderly Americans in 1990, they comprised nearly 75 percent of the *impoverished* elderly. Nearly one in three elderly women had an income level less than 150 percent of the poverty level. Furthermore, among older women, poverty is disproportionately concentrated among those who live alone and members of minority groups.⁷⁷

Churches must be sensitive to these needs and make certain those in their congregations are being properly cared for.

One significant way for churches to help ensure widows are being cared for is by emphasizing the responsibility to care for one's relatives. Paul indicates that failing in this area calls one's salvation into question. Not only should believers take this responsibility seriously, but churches must recognize its importance.⁷⁸ Churches must teach their members the need to care for their families and should be willing to enact church discipline on members who neglect their responsibility towards their families.

Broader Implications

Beyond the specific issue of widow care, Paul's instructions here offer several implications for the church's social responsibilities. The passage points to the universal responsibility for believers to provide help, with a widow only to be enrolled if she had cared for the afflicted and "devoted herself to every good work." This assumes that believers are all

⁷⁶M. Cathleen Kaveny, "Order of Widows," 18.

⁷⁷Ibid, 24.

⁷⁸As the word honor indicates, this help goes beyond paying for health services to include personal care and interaction.

to be engaged in serving others—it is simply something Christians do.

Another implication is the reality of discrimination in the charity work of the church. Paul does not believe the church has the responsibility or ability to care for all widows, so he limits it to those who are truly in need, who are godly, and who have no other means of supporting themselves.⁷⁹ Churches do not have the responsibility to provide ongoing support to all who have needs but should practice discernment in this area.

The nature of the church's charity in this passage was purely internal. There is no indication that Paul encouraged the Ephesian church to see the reality of the social needs in Ephesus as an opportunity to reach out to unbelieving widows who had fallen through the cracks as a means of drawing them to Christ. Instead, the only evangelistic emphasis has to do with individuals demonstrating their blameless life.⁸⁰

There is also an indication of the damage of providing support for those who are capable of seeking it on their own. The younger widows had other avenues of pursuing support, and it was dangerous for them to rely on the largesse of the church because of the sinful habits that could develop. People were made to be industrious, and the church only harms them when they provide an avenue to have their needs met while neglecting that duty.⁸¹

Social work is also portrayed as largely private and focused. Caring for one's family "was the first step in godliness, for charity or benefactions began at home with one's own widows."⁸² While social issues that receive attention in our day are largely connected to global and popular matters, Christian charity is focused on meeting the often hidden needs that cross one's path.⁸³

The basis for Christian charity is human dignity and not societal value. The true widows in this passage offered little to the church in

⁷⁹Those with families are to seek support there first, and those who have either the ability to work or to remarry (i.e., younger widows) were instructed to do so.

⁸⁰"The manner of responsible care for the household's membership has a salutary effect on outsiders who find the virtuous widow 'blameless' (v. 7; see 3:2, 7), while the younger widow who remarries rather than rejecting Christ squelches the opponents slander (v. 14). This mixture of responsible care for insiders and conscientious regard for the opinion of outsiders (v. 10) is characteristic of Paul's household code, which reflects extraordinary sensitivity to people of all ages under the banner of God's desire to save everyone" (Robert W. Wall, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 127).

⁸¹It is also important to note that being industrious does not only mean work outside of the home but also includes caring for children, grandchildren, or elderly parents and grandparents.

⁸²Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City*, 77.

⁸³This may be why the issue of widow care receives little attention. People are drawn by promises of stopping the sex trade or caring for adorable little children, while spending a couple of hours visiting with an eighty-year old woman, helping a mother-in-law clean her house, or creating a place for one's grandmother to move in has less appeal.

matters of material or social capital.⁸⁴ The younger widows or widows with families would be more useful on a human plane, but God chooses the weak and despised things of the world.

Another implication from this passage is a distinction between responsibilities of the church *qua* church and responsibilities of individual believers. Many think it impossible to distinguish between the two, but Paul certainly seems to have two different categories in mind in this passage. Individual believers are called to tasks that the church is not to bear, and vice versa. Thus, the fact that an individual Christian is called to deal with a social issue does not mean the church bears the same responsibility. This is especially true in civil matters—those who took the dowry had a legal obligation to care for the widow while the church bore no such obligation.⁸⁵

A final implication is the necessity of recognizing priorities in regard to charity. Paul considers it more important to care for those in one's immediate family than to care for one's general relatives (v. 8). He also considers it more important for the church's resources to be used to help those who fall into the category of a true widow rather than any widow who had a need. Though the idea of prioritization is regularly ignored or even ridiculed, its biblical precedent must be noted. Churches should seek to practice biblical prioritization in meeting needs because they have limited resources.

CONCLUSION

First Timothy 5:3–16 deals with the important issue of honoring true widows. Caring for widows in one's family and household must be done by believers, especially believing women. Those who are true widows—who meet the qualifications given in the passage—must be cared for by the church. Paul is not discussing an official order of widows with their attendant duties but the qualifications for those who will receive support from the church. The cause of the problem was not the efforts of Christian women to move toward greater freedom in that culture. Instead, the church's willingness to help Christian widows who had fallen through the safety nets of society had led some in the church to neglect their obligation to care for widows in their family, and Paul calls them to take up their rightful responsibility to support their family members. Paul's instructions here stand as an important reminder to the churches to instruct their members to care for their families and to provide support for widows who meet the qualifications he provides. It further offers several implications that the church must consider for other areas of social responsibility.

⁸⁴“Paul urges his audience to ‘honor’ the widows (5:3), another group that falls outside of the apex of the traditional pyramid of power structure” (Pao, “Let No One Despise Your Youth,” 748).

⁸⁵Additionally, it seems that the only potential instance of charitable work with those outside the church was done by individual believers—the widows who showed hospitality or love for strangers.

