

1 Timothy 5: Honor and Double Honor

Reviewing the Territory

- Among the kinds of people Paul has treated thus far are servants/ministers/deacons, overseers/bishops, teachers, prophets, and old men/elders.
- Paul's stated aim for this section of the letter (3:14-15) is to give instructions, in Paul's physical absence, for living as Christian community.
- Although Timothy is not himself an old man/elder, Paul commissions him specifically to teach this community (4:12-14).

The Old Men and the Old Women: 1 Timothy 5:1-8

- 5:1-2 are a translator's nightmare: is Paul talking in verse one about those holding an office called "elder" or old men in general? The former seems to fit better with 4:14, but then one must deal with 5:2. 5:2 on its own could make you enemies no matter how you translated it: women elders or old women? The words in 5:1 and 5:2 are identical grammatically except one has a masculine plural and the other a feminine plural ending. In passages that talk about elders governing congregations (e.g. Acts 14:23, 16:4, 20:17; Titus 1:6; James 5:14) the same word pops up. So tell me, punk. Do you feel lucky? Well? Do you?
- 5:3-8 make stipulations against treating women as "true widows" simply because their husbands have died. What disqualifies a woman most quickly from "true widowhood"?

The List: 1 Timothy 5:9-16

- A widow who goes "on the list" must be "of one man the woman" as an overseer in 3:2 must be "of one woman the man." Some have seen this parallel and the ensuing parallel lists of virtues as significant; others have seen coincidence.
- What do we make of Paul's treatment of marriage here after his treatment of the same in 4:1-4?
- The upshot of the passage seems to be verse 16: if a woman really has need, let the congregation help/pay that woman, not one who claims "widowhood" simply by virtue of having had a short-lived spouse.

Old Men and Their Place: 1 Timothy 5:17-22

- Again, the "widows who are true widows" and the "old men who are in the front" both deserve honor, according to Paul. As with 3:2, different interpreters assign different degrees of significance to this parallel.
- In verses 19-22, Paul advises a degree of reverence be given to these old men. What concrete ways of life does he prescribe?

Implications

- Whatever else we say, any disputes about the Bible should take place with full awareness of the Greek texts, the Roman contexts, and our own pretexts.
- Whatever else we say, we should avoid reductionist oppositions of "Bible" and "culture."
- Whatever else we say, we should be mindful that the Bible treats people not only as individuals but as participating in groups based on age and gender.
- Whatever else we say, we should continue to read the Bible carefully.