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# Introduction

There are many exciting and encouraging evidences of late that Jesus Christ is at work through his Spirit in his church. There is a recovery of biblical preaching. Churches are making membership more meaningful, which has led to the recovery of church discipline in many congregations. The gospel is being more clearly preached, and this has led not just to conversions but intentional discipleship of those new converts in local churches. No one can deny the explosion of fruitful mercy ministries in many churches that has led to a more proactive effort to care for the poor, adopt orphans, and seek to remedy the homeless, hurting, and oppressed. Truly the Lord continues to build his church, and these are but a few of the many signs of this unstoppable work.

There are, however, chinks in the armor of these encouraging recoveries. The recovery of biblical preaching in some churches is the result of a pragmatic approach to the church that might fade when the next fad arrives. Faithful gospel preaching in some circles appears to be a reaction

to the crushing effects of legalism in the church and quite possibly represents a swing that might squeeze out any rigorous pursuit of holiness in the next generation. This fresh emergence of intentional mercy ministry in the church has led, on the one hand, to a greater extent of care by God's people to orphans, the poor, and the oppressed. On the other hand, widows do not always receive the care that God expects his people to provide.

For some reason, a large portion of the evangelical church has missed the biblical warrant to care for widows, while still engaging in care for the fatherless and the poor. Even those who see widows as being among those whom God particularly calls his people to protect, provide for, and nurture still sometimes fail to make it a priority. In part, this neglect could stem from an inability to know how best to care for a widow. As a result, widows still remain largely overlooked and forgotten in the church. The aim of this book is to accomplish two goals: (1) to inform the reader of the biblical imperatives upon God's people for this task, and then (2) give practical helps on how pastors and church leaders can particularly minister to widows. But before going any further, an answer to the most obvious question about this issue is necessary—who is a widow?

### Compassion in a Fallen World

A widow is a married woman whose husband has died and who remains unmarried. In the Bible, mourning,

weeping, and a sense of desolation, disillusionment, bitterness, loneliness, and helplessness were often experienced by a widow following the death of her spouse. The loss of a husband was often a social and economic tragedy. Once the main source of her financial support was lost, the widow often fell into debt and poverty. Becoming a widow made her vulnerable. In the Bible, she was frequently placed alongside similar people in need such as the stranger (the landless immigrant) and the fatherless (e.g., Ex. 22:21–22; Deut. 24:17–21). Her plight could be aggravated further if she had no able-bodied children to help her work the land of her former husband. Because of all these changed circumstances, widows were often marginalized. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that in ancient Israel they were regarded as being in need of special protection.

We live in a fallen world where, sadly, death destroys earthly friendships and relationships. Few circumstances in life are more devastating than the death of a husband. Of course, a husband also experiences grief and feels acutely that sense of desolation arising from the loss of his best friend and closest companion—his wife. Thus we find, for example, that Abraham mourned and wept for his Sarah (Gen. 23:2). The Bible has comparatively little to say about living as a widower, however, and much more to say about being a widow. One reason for this distinction is the fact that a widower is not in the same vulnerable position as a widow.

When the Lord God first made this world, he made Adam and then formed Eve from the body of Adam. They became husband and wife, and as long as they continued in obedience to God, death did not threaten to separate them. Once they had sinned against God, however, death entered the created world. Adam was to live for 930 years (Gen. 5:5). Was Eve widowed? The Scriptures remain silent. Since the fall, however, widowhood has become a permanent reality in this world.

The Hebrew word translated “widow” is *almana*, and it occurs over fifty times in the Old Testament. The Greek word for widow is *chera*, which is used twenty-six times in the New Testament. It is vocabulary that belongs to this fallen world. In biblical times the terms for “widow” sometimes acquired the connotation of a person living in extreme poverty. While this was not always the case, widows were nevertheless prime targets for exploitation. It was because of this vulnerable state that God himself took steps to secure the protection of widows, commanding his people to show compassion and sensitivity toward them in their need.

Are widows as vulnerable today as they were in former days? Does the twenty-first-century church have any particular responsibilities toward widows, or does the passing of time and the inevitable changes in culture mean that such considerations are no longer relevant? The lot of widows in the Western world may have improved in many ways, but ongoing needs remain despite those improvements. Mean-

while, the plight of widows in other parts of the world continues with widows invariably exposed to suffering from neglect, abuse, and various forms of exploitation.

Every widow experiences grief and invariably feels overwhelmed by sorrow. The transition from being a wife to living as a widow (even if remarriage eventually takes place) is fraught with all kinds of problems. To come to terms with the new situation takes time and is often the occasion when widows most need a patient, listening ear, together with sympathy and wise, sensitive counsel. For example, many widows cry out, “Why me?” and, feeling intense anger and frustration, are ready to accuse God of unkindness. Others suddenly find themselves overwhelmed and swamped with decisions about everyday matters to do with the house or the car, which their husbands usually handled. Still others face the responsibilities of handling the finances with fear and trepidation, and sadly, some have to face the horror of discovering that their spouse did not leave the finances in good order.

Whether the church should cultivate a distinctive ministry to widows is not only to be determined by the sad experiences and trials of widows following the death of their husbands, but also by what God says in his Word. God is described as “a father of the fatherless, a defender of widows” (Ps. 68:5). That one verse alone alerts us to the fact that, as far as God is concerned, widows are the special object of his protection and care. It would seem reasonable to conclude therefore, that if widows are the concern of God in his holy habitation, then it would be a major failing

on the part of the church of Christ—not only her elders, but also her deacons, together with every member of the body of Christ—if they shrugged their shoulders and went on quietly with their own lives, ignoring the needs of widows.

The widow, the orphan, and the poor were covered by laws that protected them in other ancient Near Eastern cultures such as Sumer in Mesopotamia and later in the law code of Hammurabi in the eighteenth century BC. In Egypt, their protection was often the boast of the beneficent king. For example, Rameses III claimed that he had given special attention to securing justice for them.<sup>1</sup> When we look at the biblical texts dealing with the widow, the orphan, and the poor, however, God introduced another element. His concerns for them are embedded in sections of Scripture that deal with the covenant made between God, the sovereign Lord, and his people, Israel, both in the covenant law given at Sinai and at the renewal of the covenant before entering into the land of Canaan.

Religious and social ethics were closely bound together in the ancient world even among the pagan nations. Israel was unique as a nation, and we need to recognize that her social ethic stemmed directly from the Lord of the covenant, her Redeemer. In today's world the danger for the church is that she responds to the needs of the widow only on the basis of broad humanitarian aid. In the secularization of the Western world, religion has become divorced from social concerns and conduct. The Scriptures take us beyond mere humanitarian help, as we shall see in subsequent chapters.



Therefore, the purpose of chapters 1–10 (part 1) is to explore the duties of the church toward widows and provide a biblical mandate for churches to develop a specific ministry for widows, especially those within the household of faith. Furthermore, if widows are not to be deprived of the comfort that comes from knowing that their God is the God who really cares for them, then this part will also form the substance of what must be taught to them. The rest of the book, chapters 11–20 (part 2), provides hands-on counsel and practical advice on how to develop a ministry to widows in your congregation. Although this book is written with a ministry to widows specifically in mind, you will find much of what is written here can contribute in other ministries to hurting people. Additionally, these biblical and practical principles can be applied to the care of widowers (men whose wives have died) as well.

Furthermore, the authors are aware that the plight of a widow in many other nations, for example in the African continent and Indian subcontinent, is often far more distressing and severe than in the West. We have not attempted to address these situations in part 2. However, we would underline that the biblical principles outlined in part 1 are universal in their application.

Finally, our prayer is that this slim volume will lead to a more fruitful effort to minister God's grace to all the hurting and neglected people to whom God reveals his tender love and divine care through his redeemed people for his glory.