

A Closer Look at “Husband of One Wife” for Elders (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6) and Deacons (1 Tim. 3:12)

I. Various Translations

- A. Ambiguous/Literal: “the husband of one wife” (NASB, NAU, NJB, ESV, KJV, NKJV, RSV, Beck, Amplified)
- B. Emphasizing Number of Wives: “the husband of but one wife” (NIV, NIB), “must have only one wife” (LB, Williams, TEV [The Everyday Bible]), “with only one wife” (Phillips), “married only once” (NAB, NRS)
- C. Emphasizing Faithfulness in Marriage: “faithful to his one wife” (NEB), “faithful to his wife” (NLT), “committed to his wife” (The Message), “a one-wife kind of a man [that is, married only once]” (Wuest, brackets his)

II. Greek Nuances

- A. Literally, *μίας γυναικὸς ἄνδρα [ἀνήρ]* means “a one woman (wife) man (husband)” or “a man (husband) of one woman (wife).”
 1. “Woman” and “wife” are both possible translations of the same Greek word (*γυναικὸς*).
 2. “Man” and “husband” are both possible translations of the same Greek word (*ἄνδρα [ἀνήρ]*).
- B. The emphasis is upon the word “one” in the original.

III. Various Interpretations & Critiques

- A. Prohibition of Those Not Married to the Church (i.e., must be celibate)
 1. Strengths
 - a. The church is referred to as “the Bride of Christ” in Scripture.
 - b. Paul considered celibacy honorable (1 Cor. 7:37-38).
 2. Weaknesses
 - a. While the church is frequently called the “bride of Christ” in the NT, it is never referred to as the “wife of Christ.” The New Jerusalem is called the “wife of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:9).
 - b. Although celibacy is honorable, if it was necessary for church leadership then the requirements regarding the elder’s children and family management would have no meaning (1 Tim. 3:4-5; Tit. 1:6). Therefore, this view does not fit the context.
 - c. If Paul required the single lifestyle for church leadership, he would be excluding even some of the married apostles such as Peter.
 - d. “Marriage” to the church is a concept foreign to Scripture.
 - e. This view is even abandoned by most Roman Catholic commentators today.
- B. Prohibition of Single Men (i.e., must be married)
 1. Strengths
 - a. Married men have a broader range of experience due to family responsibilities and can probably relate to more church and relational problems than can single men.
 - b. “Husband” and “wife” seem to be better translations than “man” and “woman” since the following phrase concerns the candidate’s children.
 2. Weaknesses
 - a. Paul considered the single life preferable over the married life (1 Cor. 7:37-38).
 - b. The same logic for marriage as a requisite would have to be used for the qualification “having children...” This would disqualify married men without children.
 - c. If Paul forbade the single lifestyle for church leadership, he would be contradicting his own warning against false teachers who prohibited marriage (1 Tim. 4:3).
 - d. If Paul forbade the single lifestyle for church leadership, he would be contradicting his own lifestyle as a single man (1 Cor. 7:8).
 - e. The qualification reads, “husband of *one* wife,” not “husband of *a* wife.”

C. Prohibition of Polygamy or Concubines

1. Strengths

- a. One with two or more wives/mistresses can't be called a "husband of one wife"!
- b. Even men of God practiced polygamy in the OT times. God may be attaching a stricter rule here for leaders than that allowed in the OT.
- c. Men with concubines were a frequent NT practice.

2. Weaknesses

- a. Polygamy and promiscuity are banned of *all* Christians, so the requirement must mean more than this.
- b. There is no evidence that polygamy was practiced in the first century church. It was illegal by Roman, Greek, and Jewish law.

D. Prohibition of Remarried Widowers (Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 75-76)

1. Strengths

- a. Those who remarry following the death of a spouse may do so out of lack of self-control (1 Tim. 5:11-12).
- b. Remarried widowers have had two wives, not one.
- c. Most first and second century commentators taught this view as they saw remarriages as indicating lack of sexual self-restraint.
- d. Paul considered unmarried widows happier than remarried widows (1 Cor. 7:40).

2. Weaknesses

- a. A second marriage following a spouse's death does not have to imply lack of sexual self-restraint.
- b. Remarried widowers still only have one wife at the time of consideration regarding elder requirements.
- c. The practices of the church in the first few centuries are still subject to God's Word as their authority, and an ascetic bias prevailed during this time.
- d. Paul allowed remarriage after the death of a spouse (1 Cor. 7:39).

E. Prohibition of Divorced Men Who Remarry

1. Strengths

- a. Christ claimed that one who marries another while his first spouse is still living is an adulterer (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18). Similarly, Paul called a woman an adulteress if she is married to another man while her husband is living (Rom. 7:3).
- b. Paul commanded divorced believers to remain unmarried (1 Cor. 7:10-11).
- c. Divorce is a failure in one's most important arena (the home), and, though forgiven of the believer, is not the type of leadership example that the congregation should follow.
- d. Since the man who has never been married in the first place is called an adulterer for marrying a divorced woman (Luke 16:18), surely one who actually commits adultery himself cannot be deemed "above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6).

2. Weaknesses

- a. The emphasis in elder qualifications is on one's *present* traits, not his past. A man could have been a complete failure in a previous marriage but a success in the present one.
- b. The past divorce could have been largely or even entirely the wife's fault.
- c. The reference to married men being "adulterers" in the Greek describes an act, not an ongoing condition or state. The sin is forgiven and forgotten in God's book, so the church shouldn't hold against someone what God Himself does not hold against him—especially for one whose divorce occurred as an unbeliever.
- d. At the time of being considered for office, the candidate would have but one wife (i.e., he has only had "one wife at a time").

F. Husband Who is Faithful to His Wife

1. Strengths

- a. It sees “a one-woman kind of man” as indicative of his character at present.
- b. It interprets an ambiguous phrase generally, not attaching any more meaning to it than the mere words allow. Being a “one-woman man” denotes a man who is not sexually promiscuous, who has his thought life under control, who is not flirtatious, etc.

2. Weaknesses

- a. The “one-woman kind of man” view says nothing at all about moral faithfulness. The above interpretation is too general for a specific phrase mentioning the number of wives a man has had. If Paul had a general sense in mind, why did he not write, “morally pure” or “sexually upright” to clearly indicate moral integrity?
- b. None of the Church Fathers of the first two centuries interpreted the qualification this generally—and they were reading this in Greek as their first language.
- c. It is legitimate to disqualify a man for something he did in his past. Although every believer’s sin is forgiven, the consequences are often long lasting.

III. Conclusion

The ambiguous Greek for “husband of one wife” makes it a difficult qualification to understand. The primary question seems to be, “How stringent a standard did Paul mean by this phrase?”

In summary, six views of the “husband of one wife” clause exclude from the eldership one who is:

1. Married to the church (elders must be single)
2. Single (elders must be married)
3. Polygamous or entertaining concubines (immoral)
4. A remarried widower
5. A remarried divorcee
6. Not morally upright with and devoted to the wife he presently has

The last two views have the most to commend them. Chuck Swindoll holds to the last view: “Taken in its most basic sense, it means that an overseer, if married, must be married to only one woman (which excludes bigamy, polygamy, and homosexuality) and must be devoted to his wife (which excludes promiscuity and an unhealthy marriage).”¹

Yet even if the final view is correct, other issues regarding divorced men must be considered:

1. There is reason to question whether one who is divorced can be considered as “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6). Failure in marriage is failure in the most important relationship in life.
2. Can a divorced man be an example for the flock as “one who manages his own household well” (1 Tim. 3:4-5; cf. Tit. 1:6)? Paul also emphasized ability: “If a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?” (1 Tim. 5:5).
3. Depending upon views on divorce in society at large, some may doubt whether a divorced man could be described as “having a good reputation with those outside the church” (1 Tim. 3:7). Even if this failure has now been remedied, the effects from such a failure (e.g., broken home with children) generally last throughout one’s lifetime and become public knowledge.
4. The sticky question is whether one who marries a divorcee is disqualified on either or both of these texts: “... the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Luke 16:18), and whether one who marries a divorcee may be deemed “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2).

Therefore, although “husband of one wife” may emphasize only that a man must be a faithful husband if married, other qualifications may exclude from church leadership those divorced.

¹Charles R. Swindoll, *Excellence in Ministry* (Fullerton, CA; Insight for Living, 1985), 41.