

# Elder Qualification: The Husband of One Wife

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**(1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6)**

## Overview

The Scripture provides specific guidelines for the qualifications of leaders in the local church. 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 each state an elder should be the "husband of but one wife" or "a one-woman man." This passage has been interpreted in many different ways by Bible-believing Christians. It is necessary to accurately understand this phrase and make appropriate decisions regarding the eligibility of divorced men for the position of elder.

The primary interpretations of this phrase are:

- (1) an elder can only have been married once. This interpretation would prohibit both divorced and widowed men,
- (2) an elder can only have one wife at a time (i.e., polygamy is forbidden),
- (3) an elder can never have been divorced,
- (4) an elder must be married, and
- (5) an elder must be a one-woman man. The focus here is on a pattern of faithful and loving commitment to his wife.

## Exegetical Considerations

In 1 Timothy 3:2, Paul uses the phrase (μῑς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα). The most literal translated would be "a one-woman man." The following addresses each of the interpretations listed above:

- (1) The interpretation, "an elder can only have been married once," seems to be contrary to Paul's encouragement that widows remarry (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:39; Romans 7:1-3). One can safely assume that a man has the same right since death breaks the bond of marriage for both. It seems as though the freedom to remarry implies the freedom to hold an office in the church since this would not be an offense, but a proper course of action. To believe that this phrase means, "and can only have been married once," would make this phrase the only requirement that is absolute (i.e., people possess temperance and self-control to various degrees).
- (2) Option #2, "an elder can only have one wife at a time," would be an extremely low standard indeed and not keeping even with the social norms of the day much less biblical principles. Also, similar wording in 1 Timothy 5:9 would suggest that Paul was speaking to the possibility of a woman with multiple husbands, which would be very unlikely in that time and culture.

- (3) Although many respected exegetes hold the position as stated in option #3, “an elder can never have been divorced,” it does not seem to be the best interpretation. The original language does not refer to or use the word for divorce. However, it is fair to state that Paul nowhere uses the same term for divorce in the same way our Lord Jesus uses in the book of Matthew to speak of the dissolution of the covenant of marriage. It seems reasonable that if a divorce is allowed, then it should not be a prohibition in another application. A strong argument to the contrary is that leaders must meet a higher standard. Marriage is a picture of Christ's relationship to the church, so the leaders of the church should model a commitment to marriage. However, it is challenging to reconcile other problems with this view.
- (4) It is highly unlikely the phrase means "an elder must be married." This reading would be inconsistent with Paul's other teaching stating it is good to remain single (1 Corinthians 7:1-2). Paul, himself, would have been disqualified. Jesus would have been disqualified.
- (5) The preferred interpretation of this phrase is that an elder must be a one-woman man (i.e., faithful and loving in his commitment to his wife). This interpretation is consistent with the other qualifications in the list. It is not absolute, but instead, there will be room for growth. It also relates to personal character, rather than to an outward condition. This interpretation also makes sense grammatically, as the words, "one woman" modify "man" to explain what kind of man. This interpretation is free from some of the problems that exist with the other interpretations. It does not contradict Paul's other teachings regarding remarriage being good (1 Cor. 7:25-28, 39), and remaining single being good (1 Cor. 7:1-2). Finally, and perhaps most convincingly, this reading seems to coincide well with the application during the time of Paul. Men often had women servants, concubines, and even temple prostitutes as companions in addition to their wives.

## Considerations in Application

It is imperative to apply the truth of this passage with attention to a church's cultural context. Elders must defend their view without compromising the integrity of the leadership in the eyes of the congregation.

I believe that a divorced man is not automatically disqualified from being an elder because of the "one-woman man" language in 1 Timothy 3:2. However, we need to recognize that divorce may be an indication of difficulty meeting some of the other qualities noted in 1 Timothy 3, such as “above reproach,” “self-controlled,” and “not quarrelsome.” It seems crucial at this juncture to seek consistency in addressing all the qualifications listed for an elder in Scripture. Even though the apostle Paul says that an elder should not be “quarrelsome” or “violent,” does this mean that the man has never in his life been characterized by these terms? Should we view these qualifications in the sense that the man never exhibited them? It seems wiser to interpret this passage recognizing by God's grace he has matured and is now eligible to be examined for leadership.

A divorce in his past may hinder an elder's ability to enforce biblical standards for marriage. A divorce might impact his willingness to admonish others in this important area of life. Elders should practice care in the examination process as well as the situations he is asked to intervene in during his time as an elder.

I recommend that divorce not automatically disqualify a man from serving as an elder. The Church should consider each man's situation including:

- (1) the circumstances of the divorce,
- (2) the timing of the divorce,
- (3) the effects of the divorce, and
- (4) his one-woman like character before deciding whether to ask him to serve as a shepherding leader in Christ's church.