

What Is Meant by The Husband of One Wife Qualification for Pastors and Deacons?

By Craig Cochran

(All scripture quotations are from the ESV)

When we read this biblical qualification for pastors/elders/overseers, how should it be understood? Let's look at scripture. 1 Tim. 3:2 says "Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife," and likewise Tit. 1:6 says "if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife,...". This qualification for deacons is the same phrase in 1 Tim 3:12 which says "Let deacons each be the husband of one wife,...". The underlying phrase in Greek is *mias gynaikos andra* (one-woman-man or man of one woman). This phrase can be translated either as a husband of one wife (one-wife-husband) or a man of one woman (one-woman-man) depending on the context. There are no separate words in Greek between man and husband nor between woman and wife. As with any scripture the correct understanding must be found by looking at the whole of scripture because whatever this phrase means, it will be in agreement with the rest of scripture.

It has been shown that this phrase is nowhere used in the Roman or Greek-speaking world of the Apostle Paul's day.¹ It is very probable that Paul invented this phrase when he spoke on this topic as he did when he said in 2 Tim. 3:16 that all scripture "is breathed out by God" which is one Greek word. He also probably coined at least 2 new phrases in Eph. chapter two (*made us alive together with* as well as *raised us up with* each as one Greek word).

Cultural Background

As for the background of New Testament times, it is interesting to note what was considered adultery. For the Romans or Greeks, a married woman who had an affair with a married man (or not) was considered an adulteress. But a man married (or not) who had an affair with an unmarried woman was NOT considered adultery.² How unfair this seems to us! It was also common to have concubines, some openly and some in secret.³ Sowing wild oats in

¹ Notes on 1 Tim 3:2 of the *ESV Study Bible*, Pg 2,329 also see *The Husband Of One Wife* by Alexander Strauch Pg 1, 4 (<https://www.biblicaleldership.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/the-husband-of-one-wife.pdf>)

² *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary Volume 3 Romans to Philemon*, Pg 502

³ *Ibid* Pg 502

youth was expected.⁴ Sexual relations with prostitutes and slaves was considered part of normal life and was not illegal. And even having a mistress one would not be guilty of adultery!⁵ Also regarding this type of promiscuity, Andy Woods quotes Lenski saying: “There was the regular institution of the *hierduolo*, pagan temple prostitutes; the common custom of having hetaerae...girls from noncitizen families who were used by unmarried and by married men; and thus by these standard practices, all the rest of the vileness that formed the soil from which these grew.”⁶ The sexual promiscuity of the day was astounding!

In 1 Cor. 6:15-16, Paul would say: *Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.”* Prostitution was obviously a common thing. Paul said also to the Thess. in 1 Thess. 4:3-6: *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.* Sexual Immorality meant any kind of sexual deviation including adultery as is clear in this passage. But notice how the phrase “not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles...”, highlights the prevalence of sexual deviation. It has been shown that the inns of that time were used as brothels.⁷ Of course, this has always been to some degree or another and always will be. Paul would say in Eph. 5:3 that sexual immorality should not be mentioned among God’s people as if it was a common thing among the Gentiles!

Interestingly, Jesus in Rev. 2:14-15 talks about the temptation to sexual immorality tied to the eating of food sacrificed to idols in the church at Pergamum by saying: *“But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to*

⁴ Ibid Pg 502

⁵ Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible The Social And Literary Context 2002 pg 226-227 by David Instone-Brewer

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, Pg 580-581 as quoted Copyright © 2004 by Andy Woods, *The Meaning Of The Husband Of One Wife in 1 Timothy 3:2*, Pg 17 (<https://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/documents/articles/15/15.htm?x=x>)

*There is also some evidence given by S.M. Baugh that temple cult prostitution may not have been as prominent as some have thought but this does not change the incredible prevalence of sexual promiscuity that we absolutely know existed. Sexual immorality was also clearly connected to the eating of food offered to idols as Rev 2:14-15 (Pergamum) and Rev. 2:20-21 (Thyatira) show. See this article: *Cult Prostitution in New Testament Ephesus: A Reappraisal* by S.M. Baugh* (https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_ephesus_baugh.html)

⁷ The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, Second Edition, by Craig Keener 2014 Pg 606-607

put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” This teaching of Balaam in the Old Testament caused 24,000 people of Israel to die because of sexual immorality tied to the idolatry of the Moabites! (Num. 25:1-9; 31:16) Jesus is saying that this was the same issue here in the church at Pergamum. Another church in Thyatira heard similar words in Rev. 2:20-21: *“But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.”* It is interesting that at the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15, that the new Gentiles believers were told to abstain from sexual immorality and from things sacrificed to idols. (Acts 15:19-20,29) The practice of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:15 above) also seems to be the same issue of eating food offered to idols and sexual immorality.⁸ It seems that the two were closely associated in the pagan world of the New Testament times.

For All of Life?

A question that can be asked is, does a “husband of one wife” always mean for all life? What about the case where a man’s wife died and that man is a pastor? There has been a belief by some Christians that Paul meant for all of life meaning that they cannot remarry for any reason and still be qualified to be pastors.⁹ If he remarries, is he still the husband of one wife? Paul said in Rom. 7:1-3 and 1 Cor. 7:39 that to remarry after the death of a spouse is not sin. Therefore, he must still be the husband of one wife in that case.

Another question is, if a man who has had a divorce in his past qualified to be a pastor. Jesus said that there was an exception situation where a man who is divorced in the case where his wife had committed sexual immorality. He would not have sinned in that case. (Math. 5:32; 19:9). Paul also said that there was another exception where a man has not sinned in the case where he is abandoned by his wife in 1 Cor. 7:15 and a divorce is the result. Of course these exceptions could happen the other way around. There can be no blame to place on a man or woman whose spouse dies and then remarries or to the one whose spouse leaves him or her even though they had tried to make things work and then would remarry after being abandoned or having adultery committed against them. Even though there are exceptions in scripture to lifelong marriage, it was meant to be for life. That was Jesus’ point in Math. 19:4-6:

⁸ The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 4 1975, 1976 Pg 435-436

⁹ Copyright © 2004 by Andy Woods, *The Meaning Of The Husband Of One Wife in 1 Timothy 3:2*, Pg 5 (<https://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/documents/articles/15/15.htm?x=x>) 6 proponents of the view that remarriage for any reason even after the death of a wife disqualifies a man from pastoring.

He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." In view of these biblical exceptions, then Paul's phrase in 1 Tim. 3:2,8 & Tit. 1:6 cannot always mean "for all of life". If the phrase does not always mean "for all of life" then what does it mean?

The Type of Man He Must Be

There are situations where a man though not divorced has been known to be flirtatious with women other than his wife and even to be a womanizer. Since the phrase in question does not automatically mean for all of life, then the alternative must be the type of man he is to be. The emphasis in the phrase is on "one" as opposed to more than one. As has been shown it was very common for men in Greek society to have eyes for more than their one wife. Anytime a prostitute was involved Paul would see this as more than the one in the case of a man who was already married. The historian Josephus of New Testament times says that for the Jews to have more than one wife was not unheard of.¹⁰ A Roman law of 212 AD made marriage monogamous but made an exception for Jews! But then later in 285 AD Emperor Diocletian saw it necessary to take away the exception for the Jews!¹¹

Since the description of the other qualities of the Pastor are current characteristics then this phrase must also be a current characteristic. The phrase of 1 Tim. 3:2 can be translated as "Therefore it is necessary for an overseer to be blameless..." since the infinitive "to be" is used. It must be describing the type of man he should be that would be blameless regarding his sexuality! All the characteristics of a blameless man in this passage of 1 Tim. 3:2-7 are either negative or positive and since the Greek word for "not" is not present with the phrase in question, then this must also be a positive characteristic.

Jesus when speaking in the Sermon on The Mount in Mathew, said that what is evil starts in the heart. For example, he said that adultery starts in the heart with looking at a woman to lust for her in Mat. 5:27-28! Listen to this passage: "*You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery.*' *But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* He said murder starts in the

¹⁰ Flavius Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews," in The New Complete Works of Josephus, trans William Whiston (Edinburg, Scotland: William P. Nimmo, 1867; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997), 17:1.2 as quoted Copyright © 2004 by Andy Woods, *The Meaning Of The Husband Of One Wife in 1 Timothy 3:2*, Pg 5 (<https://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/documents/articles/15/15.htm?x=x>)

¹¹ *Marriage Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* by Jay E. Adams 1980 Pg 81

heart with hate. (Mat. 5:22-23) All evil starts in the heart according to Mat. 15:19! When evil does show itself in outward behavior, it has already been in the heart to start with! But blamelessness, also starts in the heart, for Jesus said in Mat. 23:26: “...*First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.*” Therefore, it stands to reason that Paul is describing an inner attitude expressed outwardly in life that is blameless. In other words, he should have eyes for one and no more. The Romans and the Greeks (and the Jews sometimes) had a proneness to more than one. But God’s man should recognize as Jesus said in Mat. 19:6, that what God has joined together, let not man separate. He recognizes that God gave him his one, meaning he sees her from God’s point of view that they are one. And therefore he should see from her point of view that to look anywhere else is unfaithfulness.

It is interesting that in New Testament times that there has been found tombstones that says of women that they were a one-man-woman in Latin and even in Greek!¹² This same phrase is used in 1 Tim. 5:9 about the type of widows who were to be supported by the church. So, could Paul be talking about a man that was not in Greek and Roman society ... God’s blameless-through-Jesus type of man?

In Conclusion

Since scripture gives us exceptions when divorce is not sin on the part of one in a marriage. And remarriage in the case of the death of a spouse is explicitly stated that it is not sin. Would these exceptions explain why he didn’t say “never divorced or “never remarried” but would use the phrase one-woman-man as the qualification for pastors? But divorce was never God’s plan because in Mat. 19:4-6 Jesus says a man and wife become one flesh. Kenneth Wuest says that the absence of the definite article here shows that what is meant is a description of the type of man required.¹³ We should allow scripture to say only what it is saying: not less and not more as Paul would ask – what does the scripture say? (Rom. 4:3, Gal. 4:30)

Regarding pastoral qualifications at this point, the death of a spouse does not disqualify a pastor. Neither should a divorce before conversion to Christ or one that is biblical to disqualify him in view of the whole of scripture. But what about an unbiblical divorce after conversion to Christ? Divorce is never God’s plan, but can a man later still be qualified to pastor if it happens after his conversion to Christ? Or if he is already in ministry, can he be restored to ministry following an unbiblical divorce? This is a serious issue with serious consequences in this case.

¹² Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible The Social And Literary Context 2002 pg 226-227 by David Instone-Brewer

¹³ *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament, Volume 3* 1973 pg 41 by Kenneth Wuest

There is no question that just such a man would have to step out of ministry because not only is he disqualified but he has lost the trust placed in him by the church. For a pastor to lead trust is always earned. Repentance toward God is the only appropriate course of action here for any follower of Christ. But if a man could be restored with trust placed in him, it would take a long time with the Lord working deeply in him. In this situation, it seems that it would be best if he was not looking for ministry at all. After much time and the Lord working deeply in such a man, if it could be seen by those who know him that he is faithful as a one-woman-man then maybe he could be restored to ministry. This affirmation would be best to come from various sources with a congregation that knows his past who would want as a body to call him into ministry.¹⁴

Of course, it must be stated that in the case of ordaining pastors or deacons care must be taken to listen to the Lord and not be in a hurry. Listen to the admonition from scripture at this point at 1 Tim. 5:22, 24-25: *“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure...The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.”* It is said of pastors that they should not be new believers in 1 Tim.3:6: *“He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.”* It is also stated that deacons should first be tested in 1 Tim. 3:10: *“And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.”*

Regarding deacons it is wrong to think like this: “We need to have a certain number of deacons.” And deacon ordination is not a reward to be given to a man just because he is a successful businessman. It is always better for the church to do nothing until someone is clearly qualified and only then make a move. Ordination for deacons is recognizing what God has already done in the lives of certain men making them servants of the church. The word deacon means servant. The church doesn’t make deacons rather God does! The scripture is quite clear that God makes pastors in Acts 20:28 which says this: *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”* Care must be given to recognize if pastors or deacons meet the qualifications listed in 1 Tim. 3:1-13 and Tit. 1:6-9. If they are called of God, then they will recognize that Jesus owns the church, and they exist and live to serve and care for the church! Ordaining someone who is not qualified to be a pastor or

¹⁴ 14 For a good discussion of application see the following 3 articles: *The Meaning of “The Husband of One Wife” in 1 Timothy 3* by Randy Alcorn Feb. 23, 2010 (<https://www.epm.org/resources/2010/Feb/23/meaning-husband-one-wife-1-timothy-3/>),

Also see John Piper’s article *Protect the Flock, Forgive the Fallen* (<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-sins-disqualify-a-pastor-for-life>)

deacon will cause problems (and has caused problems) because it goes against God's order and plan.

In talking about the qualification of the one-woman-man for pastors and deacons, care must be given to know the life of candidates. A divorce before conversion to Christ or a biblical divorce (because of one of the biblical exceptions) after conversion to Christ need not disqualify a man for public ministry. He must show that he is a one-woman-kind of man from that point on. But if there is an unbiblical divorce after conversion to Christ, then there should be questions about that person meeting the qualifications for service. He probably shouldn't be a candidate. Prayer is needed here, and the respect of the church and even unbelievers is important at this point. (1 Tim. 3:7)¹⁵

It is easy to only focus on the outward aspect of the phrase "the husband of one wife" (one-woman-man). But the focus of scripture is the inward which always and eventually includes the outward. This understanding of the phrase one-woman-man does not lower the standard rather it raises the standard because it goes to the heart of the matter! Men can think that they are faithful because they haven't divorced but faithfulness goes much deeper. Blamelessness and being beyond reproach, is something that only Jesus brings into the heart. Col. 1:22 says: "*he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,*"

It is without question that these positive and negative characteristics had not always been present in any man God calls to shepherd His people. But God works in his people to make them into what He desires. Paul would say about his own life after Jesus began his work in him, the following in 1 Tim. 1:12-15: *I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* Paul, who wrote the qualification that we are reading, knew that Jesus qualified him for service, but his humility is shown by acknowledging the kind of man he was before the grace of God came into and changed his life! May Jesus forever be praised! God's man, His pastor, and deacons must be blameless in this area—nothing less than a man of one woman!

¹⁵ *The New American Commentary Vol 34 1992 on husband of one wife in Titus 1:6 Pg 280-281*

**Scripture underlines are mine*

For Further Reading

- *Disqualified? What the Bible Says about Divorce, Remarriage, & Ministry* by Dave Miller 2021
- “A one woman man” By David Instone-Brewer 2015 (<https://www.premierchristianity.com/home/a-one-woman-man/1364.article>)
- *Can an elder be divorced (1 Tim 3:2)?* By Bill Mounce (<https://www.billmounce.com/monday-with-mounce/can-elder-be-divorced-1-tim-3-2>)
- *The Husband of One Wife* – Qualification for Elder by Robert L. Saucy (<https://www.biblebb.com/files/elder.htm>)