

The Deacon and Divorce

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The Controversy Stated (“husband of one wife”)

1 Timothy 3:12

“Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.”

This phrase (“husbands of one wife”) is a controversy with man but it is not a controversy with God. I am about to walk on a bed of hot coals, but I need to walk on them and share with you what the Bible teaches about the marriage requirement for deacons and elders in assembly life (“the husband of one wife” - 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6). In this study, we will focus on the deacons since many churches struggle and split over this very issue. I have personally tried to help several churches resolve their differences concerning this matter of divorced deacons. But these same truths apply to elders.

Titus 1:5-6

“For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly”.

The phrase “husbands of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2) literally means “a one-wife man.” Now, it’s amazing to me how any one can miss one obvious point in this text. An officer in the church is to be a man! How can the requirement “husband of one wife” fit the description of a woman? The Bible is very clear on the matter that both deacons and elders are to be men. God never intended that women should serve as elders or deacons. The Bible condemns this practice and whenever a woman attempts to become an elder or deacon she steps out of her sphere of ministry and mocks her femininity and womanhood (see 1 Tim. 2:11-12). There were no women elders, bishops, or deacons in the New Testament church. Women did not hold office.

There are at least five different views that have been given throughout the years regarding the meaning of “husband of one wife.”

1. Roman Catholic View – This view suggests that the “one wife” is the Roman Catholic Church to which the bishop must consider himself married. This protects the Roman Catholic teaching for the celibacy of priests. There is no warrant for spiritualizing this part of the passage when every other term is understood in a literal sense. This is obviously reading something into the Bible that is not there! By the way, if Rome would allow her priests to be married maybe they would stop the molestation lawsuits! You say, “Preacher, I don’t like you.” That’s okay, the devil doesn’t like me either.

2. The polygamy view - This view suggests that the passage is prohibiting the practice of polygamy among deacons or elders. This view has a special appeal today since it gets those elders or deacons off the hook, which have been divorced. However, the problem of this view is that polygamy, at the time of writing, was actually forbidden in the Roman Empire. There is no evidence that any polygamists tried to enter the church. It is hardly expected that a special prohibition was needed to keep them from leadership. Polygamy was not a pressing issue.

1 Timothy 5:9

“Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man.”

You will note that the same reversed Greek expression occurs in relationship to widows (“the wife of one man”) who wanted to serve in the local church and be remunerated in some way for her services. Whatever one expression means (“the husband of one wife”), the other must mean (“the wife of one man”). If the husband of one wife means polygamy (many wives) then the wife of one husband means polyandry (many husbands).

It’s obvious that the reference to the widow would suggest that she had only one husband (who had died) and not many husbands. The same is true about the elder having only one wife. It is not suggested that he had many wives. Polygamy is not the issue. We must ask, were polyandrous widows (widows who had many husbands) so plentiful in the church that this

prohibition was needed? It's doubtful that polygamy and polyandry was practiced at all in the Roman Empire (1 Cor. 7:1-3 – "own wife" and "own husband").

3. The Remarriage of Widowers View – This view suggests that a bishop or deacon must marry only once, but if his wife dies, he may never marry again (the one wife in a lifetime view). This view prohibits a second marriage after the partner dies. The weakness of this view is that nowhere in all of the New Testament writing is marriage forbidden or morally questionable after the death of the spouse (1 Cor. 7:39). Paul actually advised younger widows to remarry (1 Tim. 5:15). Thus, if Titus 1:6 and 1 Tim. 3:2 prohibit widows (or widowers, as we say today for a men) from second marriage, if they wish to be an overseer, then 1 Tim. 5:19 prohibits widows from remarrying if they wish to be enrolled. But no such prohibition was made. We must not cast suspicion upon the holiness of a second marriage. Scripture nowhere denounces a second marriage when the partner dies.

4. The Exclusion of Unmarried View – This view and interpretation holds that "the husband of one wife" means that only married men are eligible for the office of a bishop or deacon. The obvious weakness of this view is that it forgets about what the adjective "one" is telling us. It's saying that a man is to have only one wife - not any wife! Furthermore, if this phrase means a person must be married to hold office, then it also means that he must have children but no such requirement is given in the qualifications for church office. Lastly, Paul himself held a position, as a church elder and was part of the group of elders who ordained Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14 with 2 Tim. 1:6), but there is no mention anywhere in the Scripture that Paul was married. In fact, just the opposite is said of Paul (1 Cor. 7:7-8, 17). Simply stated, church leaders and officers were not required to be married.

5. The Prohibition of Divorce View – This view holds that the phrase "husband of one wife" is a prohibition (restriction) of a man from holding office (pastor or deacon) if he has been divorced. It would also include any other form of marital infidelity in the person who has been chosen for the overseership position, such as adultery and flirting with other women. Actually, the better way to word this view is that a man had to live above

moral reproach in relationship to his one wife. This view points to marital faithfulness to the one wife that God has given him. An elder should have only been married once and been faithful to his wife.

I feel that this is the best and correct option or interpretation of this phrase “the husband of one wife” (a one wife man). It is the most common view held throughout church history. The man who is to hold office in the local church must have the qualification of being faithful to his one marriage partner. This would mean that he was not to be previously divorced nor is he to have had any record of marital infidelity in the past.

The Correct Interpretation

1 Timothy 3:12 once again says:

“Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.”

I believe the prohibition of divorce view (both before and after salvation) is the correct interpretation and understanding of this passage. A man cannot serve as a deacon if he has been previously divorced. Period. This view holds that the phrase “husband of one wife” is a prohibition (restriction) of a man from holding office if he has been divorced. It would also include any other form of marital infidelity in the person who has been chosen for the deacon position, such as adultery and flirting with other women.

Actually, the better way to word this view is that a man had to live above reproach in relationship to his one wife. This view points out that a man must have the record of keeping his marriage intact (no divorce) and also maintaining marital faithfulness to the one wife that God has given him. A deacon should only be married once and have the history of being sexually faithful to his wife. In both these ways he maintains the status of being the husband of only one wife. He has no record of divorce and he has obeyed God’s law by not committing adultery with another man’s wife (Exodus 20:14). This is the only possible way he can be a one-woman man. A one-woman-man is a man who has kept his marriage together and has no record of committing adultery and other sexual sins against his wife.

I believe this is the correct interpretation of this phrase “the husband of one wife” (a one wife man). As already stated, it is the most common view held throughout church history. The man who is to be a deacon must have the qualification of being faithful to his one marriage partner. This would mean that he was not to be previously divorced nor is he to have had any record of marital infidelity in the past. The phrase then prohibits a man from holding office if he is no longer “a one woman man” that has failed to keep his marriage together, through divorce or morally impure actions in his marriage relationship, both prior to and then during his office. In other words, when men were considered for this high office, there must be no record of divorce or other marital infidelity in the candidate, both before and then during his salvation experience.

Many will argue that this phrase “husband of one wife” has nothing to do with his previous marriage status in society or before he was saved. In other words, the phrase “husband of one wife” only means to remain faithful and pure to his present wife that he is now married to (this avoids the previous divorce issue). Many will argue that Paul was not calling into review a person’s preconversion days and life where he may have divorced his wife or been unfaithful to her.

Some suggest that Paul is saying that those who desire the position of a deacon must remain faithful to their present wife in every way. During their present marital status there is to be no divorce, no adultery, and no promiscuity. It’s also argued that the understanding of this phrase (“husband of one wife”) emphasizes only the character of the man rather than his past marital status. It’s then argued that there are divorced men who live above reproach in their present marriage. Of course, this is certainly true. Many divorced and remarried men live above reproach in their marriages setting a good example. We praise the Lord for this. Last, it’s also argued that when we keep a man from serving as a deacon because of a past divorce that we don’t forgive the man of his past life as a Christian should do (Eph. 4:32).

The Counteraction to Wrong Views

Let’s counteract the above arguments in several ways. First, Paul does not make any distinction between preconversion days (the day prior to his

salvation) or when a man is saved. Since Paul does not make this distinction, neither should we. We try to read into the text our own preconceived ideas when interpreting the passage this way. We must take what Paul says at face value – no marital unfaithfulness and divorce. Second, we must remember that even though a man has a good reputation with his present spouse (praise the Lord if he does) a man that has been divorced, remarried, and who has committed adultery in remarriage (Matt. 19:9) does have his character and reputation effected to some degree and must learn to live with the heartaches and consequences that go along with divorce.

Proverbs 6:32-33

“But whoso committeth adultery with a woman lacketh understanding: he that doeth it destroyeth his own soul. A wound and dishonour shall he get; and his reproach shall not be wiped away.”

Third, Paul viewed elsewhere that marriage, even between saved and unsaved partners, was serious and legitimate in God’s sight (1 Cor. 7:13-14). Divorce was to be avoided because the Christian spouse was a channel of God’s grace in the marriage and could have a spiritual impact upon the lives of other family members. It’s also interesting that Jesus gave His teaching on divorce and remarriage to unbelieving Pharisees as though it applied to them in their unsaved state (Matt. 19:3; Mark 10:2).

Apparently one lifelong marriage is God’s standard for society, not just for the church! Marriage was instituted in the context of creation, making it an ordinance that applies to all people, regardless of the presence or absence of faith, regardless of the presence or absence of salvation. Lastly, when a man it told that he cannot serve in the office of a deacon because of his past divorce the conclusion has nothing to do with the matter of Christian forgiveness. It has to do with the matter of obeying truth and doing what is right (Psalm 119:33-35, 60).

Careful Reflection on the Consequences of Sin

Many will use the smokescreen that we must forgive the past of people and not allow their past to hinder their present service for Christ in any way.

This sounds noble but God's thoughts and ways are not the same as our thoughts and ways (Isa. 55:8). Forgiving a drunkard of his past sins is one thing but the drunkard still may have to live with the consequences of his sins (cirrhosis of the liver). Forgiving a thief of his past sins is one thing but a thief still must face jail time for his sin. In other words, certain sins have consequences attached to them, which cannot be undone. Such was the case with David, His sin with Bathsheba was forgiven upon confession (2 Sam. 12:13; Ps. 51) but nevertheless he bore the consequences of his sin (2 Sam. 12:14-15).

Likewise, while divorce and remarriage are forgivable sins, they do have lifelong consequences. This is the case with marital infidelity and divorce. So, the issue is not about forgiveness but facing the consequences for your sins and doing what is right in connection with church officials. God instructs the church to judge the overall character of a man who wants to hold office as an elder or deacon. This is Biblical and right (1 Timothy 3:1-12; Titus 1:6-9). How can we determine if a man meets the qualifications for office if we don't judge his life and pattern of living? There is a place for righteous judgment (John 7:24) and it's needed today in the area of leadership qualifications. The church is only as pure as its leadership.

We must remember that divorce it not necessarily a greater sin than any other, but it is a more public sin. Public sin has public consequences.

Nathan's words to David in 2 Samuel 12:14 apply:

"Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die."

Disobedience disqualified Saul from kingship (1 Sam. 15:22-23). In a similar way, the violation of God's marriage standard disqualifies one from office in the local church. God has higher standards for spiritual leaders. Not all qualify to lead God's people nor do they qualify to hold a high office in the local church.

Cleansing and Forgiveness

There will always be those who suggest that the “no divorce” and marital faithfulness requirement for an elder puts divorced people on an island of spiritual isolation and that certain sins are not as forgivable as other sins. Well, the fact of the matter is this. The believer sinner has already been judicially cleansed and pardoned of all his sins (including divorce) before God’s sight (Col. 1:14; Eph. 1:7; Rom. 8:33-34) and every sin is forgivable within the context of the Christian life to restore fellowship with God and spiritual blessing to our lives (1 John 1:9). Forgiveness has nothing to do with this requirement for serving as a deacon or church officer. Don’t blur the issue. Paul was indirectly a murderer of many followers of Christ, but his sin was certainly forgivable. I’m so glad that God gives us a clean slate when we come to Him for salvation (1 Cor. 6:10-11).

God is not recalling any person’s sins! God is not reopening and rehashing the sins of a person’s past when He gives this qualification for a deacon. Nor is God trying to put a guilt trip on the lives of those who want to become deacons or elders. A divorced person’s sin is just as much forgiven and just as much forgotten as any other sin that any person has committed (Micah 7:19). Divorce is not an unpardonable sin. Jesus is the friend of all sinners (Luke 7:34) and He forgives then freely and forever of all sin (Heb. 8:12) But this is not the issue. It’s only a smokescreen to avoid the real issue of examining a man’s qualifications for a deacon position.

When the church examines the overall lifestyle of a person for office (his life, family, and marriage) they are not holding grudges against them or resurfacing any sins but doing what is right and expected. A simple acknowledgment that a person has been divorced does not cause God’s people to turn their nose up at any man or compare themselves with other Christians (2 Cor. 10:12) but to see whether or not a man is qualified for a high position in the local church.

Concluding Remarks

A deacon should only be married once and have the history of being sexually faithful to his wife. If a man has not been faithful to his wife and

marriage, or if a man has gone through a divorce severing his relationship with his wife, then he is disqualified to serve as deacon on this ground (1 Tim. 3:12). He is no longer a one-woman-man. The issue in the “one wife man” requirement is not given to isolate any sinner; it is not given to place a mark on certain sinners; it is given for the simple reason that God holds marriage on a much higher scale than man does! Marriage is a sacred institution. That’s why we should not enter into it lightly or unadvisedly and why we should not divorce and terminate our marriage. God still holds the marriage unit as something which is very precious in His sight. This means that God still hates divorce.

Malachi 2:16 says:

“For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away (divorce).”

Think of this. Paul knew from a practical standpoint that when men have been divorced or unfaithful to their wife that this would obviously create embarrassing situations for a deacon in a church. What if the minister’s divorced wife or some other mistress would come into the church? What if his children from a previous marriage or illegitimate children would come to light? These conditions would in one sense lay him open to reproach, it would violate the general qualification of blamelessness in the area of his marriage relationship (1 Tim. 3:8).

In general, the phrase “the husband of one wife” suggests marital faithfulness to his one and only wife – this excludes a man from the office of deacon when he has been divorced, committed adultery, and when he has known to have been a woman’s man (playboy) while being married. Even adultery without divorce would also exclude a man from office! A deacon must be devoted to his one wife and give her all the love and consideration that a wife deserves. He must live above reproach in regard to his married life, suffering no divorce, and he must live above reproach morally with the wife God gave to him.

It’s interesting to contemplate that although polygamy was illegal in the Roman Empire, it was not illegal for a married man to have more than one woman in his life. There were married men, particularly those who had

wealth, who would retain prostitutes out of the local temples and have their own special “slave girls” in their extended family and quarters. Their wife had to accept this situation or arrangement as part of the culture and had little choice. This was the so-called free-sex of raw paganism! This picture of the promiscuous pagan background from which the church members would have come, a pagan background which also included divorce for all kinds of reasons, would make the “husband of one wife” or one-woman man a very important requirement.

It’s rather obvious that previous living conditions, such as these, would cause all kinds of problems for a man who wanted to become an elder or deacon. So, Paul exhorts both Titus and Timothy to give this qualification. A man (deacon or elder) must be proven to be faithful to the one wife that God gave him. He is not to cheat on her, undermine her, or divorce her. He must be literally “a one-woman man” that has been committed to only one woman in both the past and present demonstrating marital fidelity to this woman. There was to be no record of divorce, remarriage after divorce, adultery, and sexual promiscuity. God has a higher standard for leaders than man does (Lev. 21:7).

In this phrase “the husband of one wife” (“a one woman man”) there is also an emphasis placed upon the positive characteristic of a faithful husband rather than simply upon the legal married status. This exalts this requirement. We might also remember that when a man is already holding office (when he actually takes on the position of a deacon) that there is nothing that builds a man’s reputation more significantly than being faithful to one woman - his wife. After all, if you can’t trust a man to be loyal to his wife while being a deacon, you couldn’t trust him in other areas of his life, particularly in the area of honesty and integrity.

A 104-year-old California man and his 96-year-old wife recently celebrated 80 years of marriage. She had been a 16-year-old "child bride" in a marriage the families had arranged. They had no dating period - no chance to "fall in love" by today's standards. So many things were against them. Yet they raised five children, survived the Great Depression, and lived to see a day when nearly half of all marriages end in divorce. How in the world did they do it? They did it the same way other members of their generation did it.

They stayed together on the basis of values that are different from those shared by most newlyweds today. For them, love meant commitment "till death us do part."

What happened to those old values? Have we found better ideals, better principles of relationships, deeper insights, and better understanding? If so, why do so many people live with the regret of broken marriages, broken homes, broken families, and broken promises?

The following unsigned letter, published by The Grand Rapids Press, expresses the pain and heartache of a broken home: "I'm going through a divorce, and it is no picnic. I have two children that I don't see often enough. I'm alone most of the time, and time is all I have. If you are married, live it up--but live it up with your spouse and not someone else's. The heartbreak of losing years of your life, your wife and your children nearly kills you. It is as if you have died." This man concluded his letter by saying, "I hope you never have the hurt I have had."

My aim in this study was to give the best interpretive option and understanding for deacons and elders who serve in church ministry. They should not have a history of divorce and marital faithfulness to their wife ("the husband of one wife" - 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6). Knowing the truth and applying it to leadership within the church will keep a church from possible divisions and maintain the integrity of church life and ministry.