

Bishop, Husband of One Wife, What does it Mean?

By Nancy Vyhmeister

It's time for the nominating committee to meet. New officers, including elders and deacons, must be selected. Brother Jones would make a good elder. I'd love to see Sister Smith as an elder too, but with Brother Concerned on the committee, just to suggest that would set off the fireworks!

Brother Jones is on his second marriage, and Sister Smith is a woman. Neither is the "husband of one wife"!

A study of the biblical material on the topic is in order. What did Paul mean by "husband of one wife"? What does [1 Timothy 3:2](#) mean today? Before noting the possible interpretations of the text, we need to consider the context of Paul's instructions to Timothy in the church of Ephesus.

The context

In [1 Timothy 3:1-14](#), Paul lays out for Timothy the qualifications of church leaders. In verses 1-7, he describes the episkopos, the overseer or bishop, who must be above reproach, especially in moral matters (verse 1). Verses 2-6 give the details of his godliness. Verses 8-13 speak of the deacons, concentrating again on character qualifications.

There seems to be a subgroup of the deacons: the "women" (verse 11). Some translations call these women "wives of the deacons," but the Greek does not specify this relationship. Quite possibly, these "women" were female deacons, such as Phoebe, mentioned in [Romans 16:1, 2](#). These church leaders were expected to display Christian virtues, which, according to the rest of the New Testament, are to be found also in common Christians.

This passage is parallel to [Titus 1:5-9](#), where Paul makes no mention of deacons, but calls the leader presbuteros, "elder," and episkopos, "overseer." Again, the qualifications are moral and spiritual, for the leader should be above reproach.

The text: "Husband of one wife"

The Greek of [1 Timothy 3:2](#) and [Titus 1:6](#) reads *mias gunaikos aner*, literally "of one woman man." Because the Greek uses one word for man or husband (*aner*) and one word for woman and wife (*gune*), the context must determine which word to choose.

Here the context warrants the translation "husband" and "wife." Interestingly, the phrase does not appear in Greek writings before the pastoral epistles, perhaps because the idea of a "one-woman man" was foreign to Greco-Roman thinking and practice.

A parallel phrase appears in [1 Timothy 5:9](#), in which a widow cannot be placed on the list of widows unless she is at least sixty and has been *henos andros gune*, "of one man woman."

Whether or not this meant that the widow occupied a leadership position similar to that of the church elder,¹ it is certain that the widows were considered church workers in later times.²

In any case, Paul's use of this phrase so near to the one about men suggests that it must be considered in the interpretation of the "husband of one wife."

Possible interpretations

Over the centuries, scholars and church people in general have come up with five basic interpretations, all of which have defenders today.

1. Not single. According to this position, a church elder could not be a single man. However, this interpretation fails to take into consideration that the opposite of the Greek *mias*, "one," is not "none." As far as we know, Paul was single. He suggested that single people could minister more effectively than those who were married ([1 Cor. 7:7, 8, 25-38](#)).

Jesus taught that some would be "eunuchs" because of the kingdom of heaven ([Matt. 19:12](#)). Finally, the widow in [1 Timothy 5:9](#) could not be a widow if she had been single.

2. Not polygamous. Some have interpreted that this passage means that the elder could not be polygamous, while the rest of church members could practice that form of marriage. While polygamy did exist among Jews, it was rare and not practiced outside of Palestine.

Herod the Great had nine wives, and some passages of the Mishnah presuppose polygamy,³ yet there are no polygamists in the New Testament.

Nor is polygamy condoned. Concubinage was common in the Greco-Roman world, but in the first century, monogamy was the only legal form of marriage in the empire.⁴

If the phrase referred to polygamy versus monogamy, the widow would need to have abstained from polyandry—which does not seem to have been known in the first century.

3. Not divorced. Some have understood that the elder could not be a divorced person. It would seem appropriate enough that a church leader should not have been divorced. The Bible clearly opposes divorce ([Matt. 5:31, 32; 19:3-12; 1 Cor. 7:10-14](#)). Yet divorce was common in the first century, among Jews as well as Romans.

Paul and even Christ taught that under certain circumstances divorce was appropriate ([Matt. 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:15](#)). Among Jews, one who had divorced was not forbidden to remarry.⁵ Because the rest of the qualifications of the elder are of a spiritual nature and refer to the present situation, a previous divorce, especially before conversion, could hardly have been in view. In the case of the widow, divorce is not envisioned.

4. Not remarried after becoming a widower. Several scholars, among them some Seventh-day Adventists, have maintained that a widower who remarries cannot be a church elder.⁶ This would

harmonize with Old Testament practice, which did not permit a priest to marry a widow ([Lev. 21:13-15](#)).

The laudatory remarks about the prophetess Anna ([Luke 2:36, 37](#)) would suggest that having been a widow for so many years was evidence of her piety. The same idea appears in [1 Corinthians 7:8](#), where Paul writes: “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do” (RSV). A few verses later he admits that a widow is free to remarry but would do better to remain single ([1 Cor. 7:40](#)).

While the last interpretation best fits the widow in [1 Timothy 5:9](#), it still presents problems.

In [1 Timothy 5:14](#), only a few verses after the mention of the “one-man woman,” Paul admonishes younger women to remarry. Thus, to follow Old Testament rules on the marriage of priests makes no sense, because ministry in the New Testament is never tied to those rules.

In the Roman world, remarriage after the death of a spouse was not only common but obligatory. Emperor Caesar Augustus ordered that all widows under fifty years of age should remarry within two years. Remarriage is never forbidden in the New Testament.

Forbidding bishops to remarry would seem similar to the advice of the false teachers who prohibited marriage ([1 Tim. 4:3](#)) and were reprimanded by Paul.

The analysis of these four positions leads to the conclusion that none of them is particularly convincing. We turn, then to a fifth option.

5. Marital faithfulness. Another, more plausible, interpretation is that the “one-woman man” is a faithful husband to the wife he has. In modern parlance, he’s a “one-woman kind of guy.” Likewise, the widow of [1 Timothy 5:9](#) would be considered worthy for having kept herself entirely for the one to whom she was married.

Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca.350–428) described a bishop as one “who marries one wife, lives with her prudently, keeps to her, and directs to her the desire of nature.”⁷ According to this interpretation, the bishop’s situation would not be dependent on what had happened to him in the past but would reflect his current way of life.

Several twentieth-century writers agree that marital faithfulness is the best interpretation of the text.

Craig Keener points out that Paul’s exhortation “would exclude from church leadership those who were taking marriage lightly, whether in seeking a wrongful divorce, committing adultery, or even neglecting their families for personal pursuits.”⁸ C. H. Dodd concurs with Theodore’s ancient definition and would bar from ministry those who are polygamous, have a concubine, or participate in promiscuous indulgence.⁹

The Sabbath School Bible study guide for the third quarter of 1993 takes the same position and quotes William Hendriksen as follows: “Accordingly, the meaning of our present passage ([1](#)

[Tim. 3:2](#)) is simply this, that an overseer or elder [and a deacon] must be a man of unquestioned morality, one who is entirely true and faithful to his one and only wife; one who, being married, does not in pagan fashion enter into an immoral relationship with another woman.”¹⁰

Because sexual activity outside of marriage is condemned throughout the New Testament, it would follow naturally that church leaders should, when it comes to these things, be examples to the believers and to their community. To be a “one-woman man” would fit perfectly into a lifestyle that could be copied by the faithful and admired by those not of the faith.

John Stott puts it this way: “The accredited overseers of the church, who are called to teach doctrine and exercise discipline, must themselves have an unblemished reputation in the area of sex and marriage.”¹¹

Conclusion

Clearly the elders at Ephesus were men—so we read in [Acts 20:17-38](#). Clearly Paul expected them to be “one-woman” men. They were to be faithful in their current marital relationship. Only in this way could they be blameless examples for the congregation.

Deacons, according to Paul’s instructions, were also to be “one woman” men. And there is little doubt that most deacons were male. However, Phoebe of Cenchrea is called a “deacon” (*diakonos*) in [Romans 16:1](#). Interesting epitaphs show that later women were called *diakonos* also.¹²

Total commitment to one’s spouse, loyalty to one’s marriage vows would make—in today’s language—a one spouse person. So, the Bible does not address the question of whether or not women should be elders. Both Brother Jones and Sister Smith fit or qualify for the office of bishop or elder. The nominating committee will surely see the point!

1 Craig Keener, “Husband of One Wife,” A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review 109 (1997): 8.

2 Mary T. Malone, “Women and Christianity,” vol. 1, The First Thousand Years (Ottawa: Novalis, 2000), 128- 131; Ute Eisen, Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 143-157.

3 Mishnah Yebamoth 1.4; 4.11; *Ketuboth* 10.1-6; Sotah 6.2; Gittin 3.1; Sanhedrin 2.4.

4 Sydney Page, “Marital Expectations of Church Leaders in the Pastoral Epistles,” Journal for the Study of the New Testament 50 (1993): 107, 108.

5 According to Mishnah Gittin 9.3: “Let this be from me your writ of divorce, letter of dismissal, and deed of liberation, that you may marry anyone you want.”

6 Samuele Bacchiocchi, *The Marriage Covenant: A Biblical Study on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1991), 198, 199.

7 Quoted by M. Dibelius and H. Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles, Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 52.

8 Keener, "Husband of One Wife," 16.

9 C. H. Dodd, "New Testament Translation Problems II," *Biblical Theology* 28 (1977): 115.

10 *Adult Sabbath School Lessons, Teachers' edition*, 3d quarter 1993, 58. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles: New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 1965), 121.

11 John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), 94.

12 Eisen, 158, 159.

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