

ELDERS STATEMENT ON “HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE”

When God spoke through the Apostle Paul concerning qualifications for church leaders, He gave clear guidelines for what He desires in these people. He desires leaders who will reflect His own character and give a proper testimony to the world and the church. The key concern for leaders outlined in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 is that they are spiritually mature!

By the grace of God, we who have trusted in Christ have been forgiven through His blood and changed into new creatures by the power of the Holy Spirit. None of us is proud of our previous life history before we knew Christ, and God has dealt with those things of which we might be ashamed. His forgiveness is in effect and our slates have been wiped clean. God is interested in our present and our future, and the qualifications for leadership apply in these time frames.

Salvaging personalities is God's specialty. He proved it with impetuous Peter, with Saul the murderer from Tarsus, and with Mary Magdalene. God does not dwell on past performance but on present and future potential. This should be kept in mind as we examine the qualifications of a leader being the "husband of one wife." (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6).

The Greek phrase for this qualification is *mias gunaikos andra*. Read literally, it would be "a one woman man." The stress and emphasis on this qualification is on the numerical adjective, *mias*, or "one."

As is sometimes the case, the exact meaning for this qualification is not absolutely clear. This is evidenced by the numerous interpretations given throughout the history of the church. Each one should be examined objectively and whichever alternative seems most reasonable in light of the evidence should be accepted. When the Scripture is not absolutely clear, we should bring to bear all the evidence we can in order to make a Spirit led decision.

One view about the meaning of this phrase is that Paul was prohibiting polygamy, or having more than one wife at a time. However, Paul was writing to Ephesus and Crete in the above passages, both of which were part of the Roman Empire and polygamy was forbidden by the Romans. Further, the same qualification is given for widows who could be put on a support list of the church (1 Timothy 5:9), and there is no report of any woman having more than one husband at a time in that culture.

Another view is that a man must be married in order to be an elder or deacon — that is, he could not be a single man. This seems far too stringent. For one thing, Paul himself was considered among a group of elders and was unmarried (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6). Further, Paul stressed that singleness was an optional (if not preferable) status for Christians so that they might serve the Lord with greater and undistracted devotion (1 Corinthians 7:7, 8, 17). It would hardly

seem consistent that, on the one hand he would commend singleness as an opportunity to serve Christ, and on the other prohibit a single person from serving in this significant spiritual role.

Another implication of this interpretation that appears unreasonable is that a man could faithfully serve as an elder or deacon for a number of years and then be disqualified if his wife died. This does not seem reasonable or compatible with other Scripture, since God explicitly gives His "okay" to remarry after the death of one's partner (Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39).

A third major interpretation is that a man who has had more than one wife is disqualified from being an elder or deacon. This would rule out remarried widowers or men who remarry after divorce. The former is unreasonable for the reasons stated in the previous paragraph. The latter interpretation could be a possibility. The emphasis of the qualification is on a "one woman man" and, since a man who leads should be blameless, (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 6), it is argued that a divorced and remarried man might be subject to blame and therefore disqualified. Those who take this position say that God's high standard for a lifelong marriage to only one woman should be exemplified by those in spiritual leadership. God forgives sin and can use men to serve Him who have been divorced and remarried, but they are automatically excluded from serving as elders and deacons simply because of their remarriage.

However, it seems that the best interpretation of this qualification is that elders, if married, should be totally devoted to and showing Christ-like love to only one woman, their wives, at this present time in their lives. This understanding seems to be the preferable reading for the following reasons:

First, although one might externally be married to only one woman, this does not necessarily qualify him to be an elder. He could be married but be unfaithful to his wife or not be loving her as Christ commands. In the culture at the time Paul wrote, there was rampant immorality. A respectable male citizen could have one wife who bore his children and managed the home and at the same time have one or more additional consorts, and furthermore, he could visit the temple prostitutes as a religious ritual. He might have had only one wife, but he was definitely not loyal to one woman. Obviously, Paul was not merely pointing to the external matrimonial bond to one woman as the qualification for an elder or deacon.

Second, because of the blatant immorality of Paul's day, many Christians, if not most, in Ephesus and Crete came out of immoral backgrounds. The emphasis Paul seems to be pressing here is a man's present status with his wife. All the other qualifications of elders and deacons also emphasize the present status of a man. In other words, just because a man had been at one time uncontrolled, or violent or a drunkard (cf. 1 Timothy 3:2-3), he is not disqualified from serving if he is no longer that way because of Christ's work in his life.

This leads to a third reason. The emphasis in Scripture is that Christ changes and redeems people. Those who are in Christ are forgiven and are new persons (2

Corinthians 5:17-21). When looking for qualified individuals to lead the church, we should look at his present spiritual maturity and character, not his former or external status. This is the overall emphasis in the context of all the qualifications listed for leaders. The major issue in this passage is character. It is our conclusion that what Paul is saying is that a man, if married, must be faithful and devoted to one woman and one woman only, his wife. He is one who is careful in all his relationships with the opposite sex. He does not allow physical or emotional interests to develop with any other women. If he is tempted to pursue another woman in his thought life, he resists that temptation. A married or single man that entertains lust in his heart becomes guilty of mental adultery (Matthew 5:27-28), which may not affect his marital status but it does affect his character. If a man indulges in this sin and does not deal with it by the Spirit's power, he is not a "one woman man," regardless of his marital status.

The Pharisees interpreted Scripture by the "letter of the law" as they understood it, rather than by the spirit of the law. We can inadvertently do the same.

A person's marital history should certainly be considered because it indicates patterns and tendencies that reflect a person's character in the past. But the past is history and judgment of a person's qualifications should be made on his present character and spiritual maturity. Through spiritual renewal, repentance and rededication of one's life to God/ the "one woman man" qualification can be restored, just as other qualifications can. Spiritual men are not those who have not sinned, but those who have been forgiven by the Lord, grown in grace and exhibit character maturity in their present lifestyle.

The most reasonable interpretation, then, is that a "one woman man" involves character rather than marital status alone. Therefore, a single or a widowed man could be considered for serving as an elder or deacon. A divorced man is not automatically excluded from being an elder or deacon if God has restored, equipped and called him. This interpretation in no way indicates that we advocate or condone divorce as an alternative to reconciliation in case of marital difficulty. The Scriptures say that God hates divorce just as He hates all other sins.

Practically, if a man who has been divorced is considered for one of these offices, the elders will thoroughly investigate the following matters with him:

1. The circumstances of his divorce. How recent was it? Did it occur before he was a believer? Did he initiate it?
2. His present attitude toward divorce and how he would counsel others facing the same circumstances.
3. His understanding of God's truth concerning marriage and divorce.
4. His present relationship with his wife.