

## Divorce And Eldership: An Exposition of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1\*

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There has been much discussion over the years as to qualifications of the office of bishop. Whereas the Bible does clearly lay out what the qualifications of the office are the difficulty comes in how one interprets these qualifications. For the purpose of this discussion we shall limit ourselves to searching for the proper interpretation of the phrase "the husband of one wife." This discussion further presupposes that the candidate in question meets all the other requirements of overseer and the appointment to the position of elder hinges upon the interpretation of the phrase "husband of one wife" in light of the circumstances that the potential elder is divorced. In simpler terms, we are seeking to answer the question does the Bible automatically disqualify a man from the office of eldership because he is divorced.

Firstly, let us set to rest some obvious fallacies regarding marriage and eldership. Certainly no one could rightfully argue that a man must be married in order to qualify as an elder. This verse is not saying that at all. The question is not can a single man or a widowed male serve as bishop. The prohibition is in regards to the number of wives a man can have (i.e. "one wife"). Christ of course was never married but as He is the perfect Son of God it is difficult to use Him as the model. However, the Apostle Paul (at least during the writing of some of his epistles) was not married and he served as elder and apostle in the Church. <sup>1</sup> This provides us with a Biblical example of an unmarried man serving but does not answer our question regarding divorce.

Much light on this issue can be gained by looking at the context and grammar of the verses. Let us consider the phrase "must be" (einai). This phrase is interpreted as "must be" but in the Greek reads "to be." This is present tense infinitive. The "ei+" denotes the second person form of the verb. Hence, the requirement is to the "man" who desires the office of bishop ["If a man desires the office of a bishop..." (v.1) (he) "must be..." (v.2)].

Paul then gives a list of requirements that such a man must meet. Firstly, he must be blameless. Secondly, the man must be the "husband of one wife." Paul continues with other requirements. For our purpose we will deal specifically with the phrase "must be...the husband of one wife."

There are those who say that this phrase disqualifies the divorced man from service. Consider the commentary of Warren Wiersbe on 1Timothy 3: 2.

"It means that a pastor must not be divorced and remarried...A pastor who has been divorced opens himself and the church to criticism from outsiders and it is not likely that people with marital difficulties would consult a man who could not keep his own marriage together. I see no reason why *dedicated*. Christians who have been divorced and remarried cannot serve in other offices in the church, but they are disqualified from being elders or deacons."<sup>2</sup>

I would disagree with Wiersbe on this point. But before we delve into the office of an elder, let us look at the issue of divorce from a Biblical perspective.

"A widow, or a divorced woman, or one who is profaned by harlotry, these he may not take; but rather he is to marry a virgin of his own people, so that he will not profane his offspring among his people, for I am the Lord who sanctifies him." Lev. 21: 14-15 [NASB]

Notice the burden of qualifications is upon the woman. It is she who must be taken in her virginity. No mention is made of the state of the priest (widowhood, divorce, etc.).

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he finds some indecency in her, and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for it is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God gives you an inheritance." Duet. 24:1-4 [NASB]

Notice, Moses is not establishing the conditions of divorce as much as he is talking about the conditions and prohibition against the remarriage of a woman who has been divorced and then espoused to another.

"It was said 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her certificate of divorce,' but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Matt. 5:31-32

Jesus is specifically addresses the traditional views of the Pharisees in light of the truth of the scripture and their flippant view of marriage. Here again the requirement is upon the previous marital status of the woman. Secondly, Christ gives the only justifiable reason for a man to divorce his wife (i.e., moral impurity). Do not misunderstand the purpose of my discussion. I am not trying to say that only the woman is accountable in remarriage but rather am merely giving a survey of scriptures on divorce to establish what the Bible says. Paul does address the issue of remarriage (at least as it applies to widows):

"But I say to the unmarried and to the widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." 1 Cor. 7: 8-9

The Apostle Paul shows that it is better for a widowed or single person to marry than to be distracted by their passions. But that is not all. Paul says that if an unbeliever leaves a believing spouse then the believer is "free." The free unbeliever is now in the same condition as the unmarried person as both now are single.

"But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that a brother has a wife who is an unbeliever,

and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by her husband, for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the unbelieving brother of the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace." 1 Cor. 7:12-16

Here Paul speaks of the freedom of the believer who has been abandoned by the unbeliever. By these comments it should be demonstrated that divorce and remarriage is not prohibited in the eyes of God if one of the above conditions are met: adultery or abandonment by the unbelieving party. This is not to say that divorce is "good" or acceptable in the eyes of God but does show that the non-sinners party is not punished for the sins of the adulterer or the abandoning unbeliever.

In light of these comments regarding divorce, let us now return to our original scripture regarding the elder. The question now becomes, is Paul referring to divorce in the passages of 1 Timothy and Titus? As divorce is never mentioned (nor is polygamy, for that matter) it would be eisegetical to attempt to apply either to this passage. The key seems to be in the verb previously mentioned: "must be" (e+inai). The present tense of the verb is the defining factor in all qualifications listed here. Consider the qualification "above reproach" ("blameless"). Would the Apostle Paul have been blameless? Remember, this is a man who murdered Christians in the past. Certainly, in the course of his life he was not without blame. But presently (i.e., after his conversion) he was above reproach. There was also a period of time immediately after his conversion in which Paul did not minister. Often in the contemporary Church a man is set aside for a period of time (say a year or two) in which his life is observed. Perhaps as a youth a man was a drunkard or a striker but after conversion has shown that the grace of God is evident in his life to keep him from open rebellious, grievous sins. So at the present time (post conversion) he is now blameless.

It is important to remember that the same hermeneutical standard must apply to each individual qualification in the passage. If a man can be forgiven of his previous sins and be accepted as an elder for one of the disqualifying factors in his past then there must be the same standard given to each and every disqualifying factor. For example, a young man spent his college years carousing and drinking. His philandering was publicly known. His drunkenness was legendary upon the campus. At the age of thirty he is converted. He now exhibits self-control and he currently meets all the requirements of an elder. Would he be disqualified on the basis of the fact that several years before his conversion he was a drunkard? There is no Biblical reason for him to be disqualified on the basis of his drunkenness years before his conversion. Old things have passed away and now all things are new. God has cast his sins as far as the east is from the west. The same standard must be applied to the matter of Biblical divorce and remarriage. More to the point at hand, Paul is not at all speaking to divorce here. Consider the comments of Dr. C. Matthew McMahon:

"The exegetical work alone on this passage does not allow the phrase 'husband of

one wife' translate into 'the man who has been married more than once.' This is not the intent of Paul, nor can it lawfully be read into the passage to refer to a past unless the principle is applied prudently to the rest of the qualifications as already stated, and we can now see this to be eisegetical. If Paul wanted to speak to divorced men, and exclude them from office, he would have used the word 'apostasion' which means writing or certificate of divorce," or the verb 'aphiemi' which means to 'leave' (1 Cor. 7:13), or the verb 'apolou' which means to 'put away' (Luke 16:18 and Mark 10:2). He used none of these, though he will use the verb *aphiemi* 3 times in 1 Corinthians concerning the lawful divorce of one who leaves as an unbeliever, which is dependent upon their leaving within the union because of their unbelief...The Analogy of Scripture teaches us that Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 do place limitations on those men who have been married more than once although 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 do not say anything about these limitations."<sup>3</sup>

If Paul is not referring to divorce or to remarriage in this passage, what then is he addressing in the phrase "husband of one wife"?

"This difficult expression (v.12; Titus 1:6; cf. 5:9) has been understood to prohibit polygamy, remarriage after divorce, or marital infidelity. Given the widespread immorality in the Greco-Roman world, the last would seem to fit Paul's focus best." <sup>4</sup>

"Lit. in Gr. a 'one woman man.' This says nothing about marriage or divorce...The issue is not the elder's marital status, but his moral and sexual purity...Some believe that Paul here excludes divorced men from church leadership. That again ignores the fact that this qualification does not deal with marital status. Nor does the Bible prohibit all remarriage after divorce...A 'one woman man' is one totally devoted to his wife, maintaining singular devotion, affection and sexual purity in both thought and deed." <sup>5</sup>

It might be helpful at this point to look at the phrase "husband of one wife" in the original Greek:

"husband" is the word ἀνὴρ- is a generic term that refers to a male (adult male in contrast to a boy).

"of one" is the word μία (the feminine of εἷς). εἷς is used to denote "one, singular" but specifically in contrast to "many." It carries the idea of exclusivity. Consider its use in John 11:52

"and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad."

The phrase "gather in to one" denotes that they will be singularly united and not divided.

“wife” is the word “γυνή which like ἀνὴρ is a generic term for female, but this term refers to a female of any age. Strong’s Concordance says “a woman of any age, whether a virgin, or married, or a widow.” So if we wanted to take a literal reading of the phrase it might read “the man of one woman.” Context and Canon help us to determine Paul is speaking about marriage. But the prohibition is not on the “number of marriages” but rather the exclusivity of the male’s relationship to the female. He must be a “one-woman man.” He must be faithful and committed to the wife he has. He must love her and this love is expressed in the exclusion to all other women.

Certainly there are some who would vehemently teach that a divorced man (whether remarried or not) is disqualified from the office of elder. However, there is nothing in the passage that indicates Paul is talking about divorce. Others would attempt to focus in on the word “one” and say that a man can only have “one” wife in his life and there for remarriage is prohibited. However, that is not at all Paul’s intention.

The construction of the phrase literally reads: “of one wife husband.” The point that Paul is making has nothing to do with divorce or remarriage but rather Paul is stressing that the man who would desire the office of elder must be a faithful husband- he is to be a “one-woman man.” He is not to have a reputation of philanderer or flirt. His actions should demonstrate that he loves his wife as Christ loves the church. He is a stable and faithful provider to his family and a loving, faithful husband to his wife. To try to say anything more would depart from the contextual flow, would be ungrammatical, unsupported by the Canon and would be superimposing personal presuppositions upon the text.

\* I am greatly indebted to the writings of Dr. C. Matthew McMahon on this topic.

1- Some scholars believe Paul to have been a member of the Sanhedrin and one of the qualifications for membership would have been marriage. Furthermore, it would be extremely unnatural for a Jewish man of Paul’s age and social stature to have been single. This then begs the question if Paul was once married, what happened to his wife? The possibilities are twofold: she either died or they were divorced. As scripture is silent on this issue so must we remain silent. Rather than speculate upon the status of Paul, we must instead search for our answer elsewhere in the scriptures.

2- *The Bible Exposition Commentary, New Testament Vol. 2*, Warren Wiersbe, Cook Communications Ministries, Colorado Springs, Co, 2001, p. 220. Space does not permit an exhaustive commentary on the comments of Wiersbe on this verse. Allow me to briefly point out two things. Firstly, Wiersbe mentions remarriage after divorce. Remarriage is a separate issue even to the person like Wiersbe who interprets this verse to be referring to divorce and is not mentioned in these verses. A literal reading (even though, I believe it to be an incorrect interpretation) would say that the divorced person would be the “husband of one wife” until he remarried. So even by interpreting this verse to be in reference to divorce, the issue of remarriage is a separate issue. Secondly, it is a grave flaw to assume that a person who is divorced would be ineffective as a consular to the married. In fact, would not this person be the most qualified to relate to those who are in marital trouble? None the less, I will demonstrate that Wiersbe and others are incorrect to say

this verse refers to divorce.

3- *A Brief Look at 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 in Respect to Remarried Men and the Ministry of Elder*, Dr. C. Matthew McMahon.

4- *The Reformation Study Bible*, Gen. Ed. R. C. Sproul, Ligonier Ministries, Orlando, FL, 2005, p. 1754 Paul's age and social stature to have been single. This then begs the question if Paul was once married, what happened to his wife? The possibilities are twofold: she either died or they were divorced. As scripture is silent on this issue so must we remain silent. Rather than speculate upon the status of Paul, we must instead search for our answer elsewhere in the scriptures. The less, I will demonstrate that Wiersbe and others are incorrect to say this verse refers to divorce.

5- *The MacArthur Study Bible*, John MacArthur, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006, p. 1833-1834