

The Husband of One Wife

For any group or institution to succeed, it must have good leadership. The church benefits from the most outstanding leadership, for our leader is Christ. But Christ has seen it fit and necessary for His church to have local leaders—“under-shepherds” to help guide and protect His flock. This role is of tremendous import, and the role of a shepherd elder can only be filled by those who are genuinely qualified. Thankfully, the Lord has provided us with a picture of a qualified elder. This picture is painted for us in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9.

In our last study, we saw that both lists begin with the foundational quality that a man must be “above reproach” or “blameless.” The remaining attributes spell out in greater detail what a man who is above reproach truly looks like. Both lists provide identical second qualifications. In 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6, both lists say that an overseer must be “the husband of one wife.”

Marriage is a sacred and divine institution. It dates back to the very beginning of time and is the first gift God gave to humanity for his well-being. It is only reasonable that the men who lead the Lord’s church should honor this sacred institution in their own lives.

Be that as it may, this quality has posed significant debate through the years. While this lesson won’t address every idea or answer every possible question, we will seek to understand this qualification, its purpose, and how we can tell if a man meets this standard.

Some Important Reminders

As we approach this qualification (and all the qualifications), we should keep some fundamental truths in mind.

1. The Holy Spirit gave the qualities of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 for a reason—to help us identify qualified men. These qualities enable us to know a man will be fit to lead the congregation. These are not arbitrary requirements designed to make becoming an elder difficult. They teach us something about the work of an elder. So as we interpret the meaning of a qualification, we should ask, “what does this show us about a man’s ability to lead the congregation?”
2. It is dangerous for the church to disregard or misinterpret the qualifications and thus appoint unqualified men. Unqualified leaders will pose a danger to the church.
3. While unqualified leadership is dangerous, having no leadership is also dangerous. The Lord wants His church to have leaders, and He expects the church to produce qualified men. Thus, if we misinterpret these qualities to the point that we disqualify qualified men, we are again on dangerous ground.
4. Each congregation and each man are unique. It is impossible to assign blanket answers to every question that might arise. Sometimes, congregations will have to deal with difficult situations and studiously, prayerfully, and humbly make the best decision they can. Each case will be unique and require diligent thought.

5. We must limit our scope to our congregation. Other congregations may appoint men we may deem unqualified, or they may not appoint men we would think qualified. We should not strive to get involved in other congregations' decisions, nor should we seek to make the same decisions as another congregation. We must study these qualities *together*; we must evaluate the men that might lead *our* congregation, and we must work to be *united in a decision* of appointing qualified men to shepherd our flock.
6. We must approach the qualifications *humbly*. While we should study them seriously and soberly, we should be careful about dogmatism that divides. We should be willing to study further for ourselves, discuss with others, and listen to others whenever there is disagreement.

With that foundation laid, let's consider the qualification of "the husband of one wife."

Does an Elder Have to be Married?

First, some ask if an elder must be married or if this qualification only applies to those who are. While marriage isn't required for one to be a Christian, and unmarried men can be godly leaders in the church in various aspects, I believe it safest and best to understand an elder should be married.

First Timothy 3:2 says, "an overseer *must be...*" Titus 1:6 says, "if anyone *is...*" We should not overlook the present tense. An elder has not just *been* a faithful husband; he currently *is* a faithful husband.

The role of an elder may often require the support of a godly wife. He will need support and strength. He will provide counseling. He will handle delicate matters. It would be best for him to have a godly wife by his side for all these reasons. We may not understand why God requires this, but we can certainly determine many reasons and benefits. To me, it seems unwise at best to disregard the idea that a man "must be" married to become an elder.

Reviewing the Text

Various Translations

The qualification we are considering is variously translated as follows:

"the husband of one wife" (ESV, NKJV, KJV, CSB, NASB, MEV, LEB, NET, RSV, ASV)

"faithful to his wife" (NIV, NLT)

"Married only once" (NRSV)

The Original

The original Greek literally translates to "one woman man." The Greek terms for woman/man can also mean "wife/husband," so you could also translate this literally as "one wife husband." It is helpful to note that Paul uses the identical phrase, just in reverse, to describe widows.

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband (1 Timothy 5:9, ESV)

We'll use the passage concerning widows to help us later.

The text is simple, yet in simplicity, there has arisen quite a bit of debate. So next, let's consider the various interpretations of this qualification.

Various Views of "Husband of One Wife"

An elder cannot be involved in Polygamy

Polygamy was practiced in many ancient cultures and is also practice in some today. While there were times when God allowed this practice (e.g., Jacob and David), it was never His design or will. As Jesus taught (cf. Mt. 19:3-9), from the beginning of time, God has designed marriage to be the union of one man and one woman, and that union is to last for life. Anything outside of this, unless clarified allowed by Scripture, is a deviation from God's plan. Under the New Testament, there is undoubtedly no allowance or authority for polygamy. This is true for all members of the church, including leaders.

While this qualification excludes a polygamist from the eldership, it is not best to interpret it as focusing on such. It is unlikely that Paul, inspired by the Spirit, was only trying to exclude polygamists.

First, while polygamy existed, it does not seem to have been prevalent in the church. While the church wrestled with immorality (cf. 1 Cor. 5-6), polygamy is not directly addressed. Early church writers seem to be clear in their stance against polygamy. Polygamy was practiced in Roman society but was not technically legal. In first-century Jewish culture, it was rare.

Also, polygamy was nearly always a scenario of a man having multiple wives, not a woman having multiple husbands. Thus, we might wonder why Paul gives the same qualification for widows in 1 Timothy 5:9. Women were rarely guilty of polygamy, so it would be strange indeed for Paul to need to address that concern.

Since the phrases are so similar, we should be able to learn from them. If it is illogical to view Paul's command to widows is primarily concerned with polygamy, then his command towards elders probably isn't focused on polygamy either.

Married Only Once

It's not hard to see why a literal rendering and understanding of the phrase "one woman man" has led many to believe Paul excludes men from the eldership who have been married more than once, no matter the reason. After all, a man who has remarried after a spouse's death has become, technically speaking, a two-wife husband instead of a one wife husband.

First, we should note that it is not sinful for a man or woman to remarry after a spouse dies. Romans 7:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 make it clear that a widow or widower is free to remarry.

So then we must ask, "what's the purpose of this qualification?" If this qualification excludes widowers who remarry, it becomes an arbitrary gatekeeper that doesn't teach us much about the man's ability to lead. If a man loses his wife to a car accident, disease, or other tragedy, what does that tell us about the man? Nothing! Such events are out of his control.

All the qualifications have to do with attributes within a man's control—that's why they teach us something about the man. Should a man be excluded for something outside of his control, such as the tragic death of a spouse? We certainly shouldn't do so lightly, and we shouldn't do so if there's a better interpretation of this qualification.

The qualifications of widows help here as well. As we noted, in 1 Timothy 5:9, for the church to support a widow, she must have been a "wife of one husband." There is no reason to treat these phrases differently. So, if a man cannot be an elder because he remarried after a spouse died, then a widow cannot be supported if she married after a spouse died. Is that what Paul was saying? It certainly doesn't seem so. In First Timothy 5:14, Paul says, "*So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.*"

Why would Paul advise younger widows to remarry if doing so would endanger their ability to be supported by the church if their second husband died? It seems clear that the meaning of "wife of one husband" means something more than "married only once" for widows. If that's true, then surely it means something more for elders too.

An Elder Cannot Have Been Divorced and Remarried

Some interpret "the husband of one wife" to mean a man can marry again after a spouse's death, but not if he has been divorced and remarried. Jesus emphasized the permanence of marriage when He said, "what therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mt. 19:6). But following that, Jesus provided the one exception regarding divorce. He says,

And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery. (Matthew 19:9, ESV)

Jesus prohibits divorce and remarriage, except when one spouse commits adultery. In such a case, Jesus allows the "innocent party" to divorce and remarry. If the Lord allows this, we should not prohibit it. But can a man in such a situation become an elder?

On the one hand, this may be the same as a man that lost a wife. Perhaps he had no control over the situation. Maybe he was not at fault in any way and was merely a victim. If he divorces his unfaithful wife and remarries, and goes on to lead a godly life as a godly husband in a successful marriage, perhaps we may determine he has proven to be a "one woman man."

On the other hand, cases of divorce always cause questions. While a man has no control over a spouse's death, can we say he has no control over his family life? In the case of infidelity, obviously, there were problems in the home. While adultery is never excusable, we might wonder, "were there other problems in the home that led to this?" With the questions that come along in such tragic cases, we might conclude that the man is innocent but might not be ultimately "blameless" in the sense an elder should be.

We should, of course, be incredibly careful. We do not want to disqualify men wrongly, nor do we wish to qualify men erroneously. If a man has been divorced and desires to be an elder, the man and the congregation should proceed prayerfully and carefully. There is no one-size-fits-all answer, and each case will need to be decided by the congregation.

An Elder Must Be Faithful to His Wife

Instead of being a simple numeric qualification, or even being an exclusion of those who've had marital issues, many interpret this qualification to mean a man is faithful to his wife.

This view is more in line with what we typically think when we say someone is a "one woman man." When we say that, we don't mean "he's only been married once." We mean he's a faithful husband. He does not cheat on his wife. I believe this gets closer to the idea, but I would expand it just a bit more.

An Elder Must Faithfully Fulfill His Role as a Husband

I certainly think the qualification "husband of one wife" means a man will be faithful to his wife. But I believe that means more than simple sexual fidelity. I think it describes the type of man he is in his marriage. After all, there have been men who have only been married to one woman and have never had an affair, but they weren't godly husbands. Perhaps they weren't providers. Maybe they weren't loving. Possibly they weren't leaders in the home. Yes, they were only married to one woman, and they were even faithful to her, but otherwise, they did not truly fulfill their role as a husband. Should such a man be an elder? No.

Let's consider this a bit further and consider how this helps us identify a man qualified to be an elder.

A Moral Qualification

Many have pointed out that this is the only "moral" qualification regarding elders. But this is the only moral qualification that is needed. When we look at an elder, we should see a man who lives in purity and morality; how better to see this than in the life of a faithful, loving husband.

No Christian should partake in immorality, but leaders must have proven such. If leaders are not moral men, they may have a negative influence on the congregation. Referring to a situation of immorality in Corinth, Paul says:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?
(1 Corinthians 5:6, ESV)

Nothing indicates the sinning brother in Corinth was a leader. So, if any immoral member poses a threat to a congregation's well-being, how much more danger does an immoral elder pose?

Also, few things damage one's reputation or the reputation of a congregation as much or as quickly as sexual immorality. When a church leader is caught living in immorality, it devastates his reputation, and often the reputation of the church.

Elders must be men that won't disgrace the church; who won't bring in evil influence to the church; and who can set an example of purity and morality for the church. We should expect such men to have proven their purity through a faithful and successful marriage.

A Matter of Faithfulness and Order

If you want to know something about a man, look at his home life. How does he treat his wife? How does he lead in the home? How does he obey God as the husband and head of a family? If a man is a failure in the home, should we expect him to succeed in leading the church?

That is not to say being a godly husband is easy. It takes a lifetime of work, commitment, humility, and growth. If a man has not worked towards being a godly husband, we should not entrust him to lead the church. If, however, he has proven such commitment and faithfulness at home, he may very well be the type of man capable of leading the church. The church is a spiritual family. The leaders of the church should be proven family-men.

A Leader

All Christian husbands are commanded to “love your wives, as Christ loved the church...” If this is true of all, it is especially true of elders.

Elders are men who should be examples to others. How can others look to an elder and his wife if it’s known and obvious they have a poor marriage? Maybe they are faithful to one another, but that doesn’t mean they have a successful, godly marriage.

Elders are to be counselors and guides. How can an elder counsel other married couples if he hasn’t given himself to be the husband he ought to be?

Conclusion

God does not want leaders to lead the church at the expense of their marriage or family. Many successful businessmen and women have gone far in and achieved greatness while leading corporations, academic institutions, and politics—all while failing miserably at their marriage. Often, their broken marriage is a direct result of the work-focus that makes them successful; this should never happen in the church. Thus, elders must be men who have proven to love their wives faithfully. Elders are men who have proven that whatever challenges they face and whatever work they must do, they will do so while also fulfilling their role of being a faithful and loving husband. A man who is willing to neglect his wife for any work, even the work of the church, is not fit to lead the Lord’s people.

On the other hand, when we see a man who has faithfully, loyally, and lovingly discharged his role as a husband over the years, then we see a special man. We find the paramount instruction to husbands in Ephesians 5:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. (Ephesians 5:22, 28-31, ESV)

When we see a man who has committed to loving his wife as Christ loved the church, we see a man who knows what faithfulness is. He is a man of ethics and morality. He is a man of love. The godly, Christian husband is a man who knows how to lead through serving. Indeed, such a man is the type of man we want leading the church.

Sermon by : Nate Bibens

