

Church Leadership
and the Issue of Divorce

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most polarizing issues facing the church today regarding the qualifications of its leaders is the matter of divorce. Depending on experience, theological presuppositions, and interpretive approach, scholars and pastors through the centuries have dogmatically defended contradictory positions. The purpose of this paper is to examine the qualifications of Elders and Deacons as they are outlined in 1 Timothy 3 to determine if a man, having been divorced, may serve as an elder or deacon.

BIBLICAL TEXT

1 It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.

2 An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

3 not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money.

4 He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity

5 (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?),

6 and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.

7 And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

8 Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain,

9 but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

10 These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.

11 Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.

12 Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.

13 For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.¹

¹ 1 Timothy 3:1-13, NASB. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the NASB, 95 Update.

OFFICES OF OVERSEER AND DEACON

The New Testament model for church leadership involves men serving in two distinct offices: Overseer/Elder/Pastor and Deacon. Both offices, in the list of qualifications, require that the office holder is the “husband of (only) one wife.” The contemporary questions surrounding the issue include: “What does this mean?” “Is it referring to one wife at a time, and therefore serving as a prohibition of polygamy?” “Is this a reference to divorce, and if so, are there allowances for divorce prior to conversion, in cases of abandonment, or in the case of sexual immorality?”

Several assumptions are made for the purpose of this paper. First, since the list of qualifications appear in the passage and are connected by the conjunction “*housoutos*” which is translated “likewise” in v.8, whatever is intended for one office is applicable to both offices.² Second, a hermeneutical presupposition of divine inspiration is employed; therefore, there must be agreement pertaining to the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy and those specified in Titus, as well as in other places in Scripture. Third, if a “literal” reading of this text is employed in one part of the qualifications, then the same approach must be applied elsewhere in the passage. Fourth, the words bishop, elder, and pastor refer to one biblical office and are used interchangeably in this paper.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*. electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Louw Nida 64.16. New York: United Bible societies, 1996, c1989. The word used in the Greek is (*Housoutos*), meaning a marker of similarity which approximates identity– “just as, in the same way, in like manner.” Its semantic range and usage indicates a similarity of relationship between the qualifications listed before and after the marker.

Some of the debate surrounding the qualifications of elders/deacons regarding marital status stem from English translation. Various translations of the phrase in v.2, *μὴ γυναικὸς ἄνδρα*, have been rendered: “the husband of one wife” (NASB, HCSB, KJV, NKJV, ASV, ESV, NET); “The husband of but one wife” (NIV); and “married only once” (NAB, NRSV). Literally the root words are *eis* (of one) *gune* (woman/wife) *aner* (man/husband). If the translation rendering were “man of one woman,” without respect to the institution of marriage, the controversy surrounding the qualification would cease to exist. In order to determine if the dominant English rendering is a valid translation, an examination of the semantic domains and other uses by the biblical author are appropriate.

The noun *gune* is used semantically in the Greek language referring to an adult female person (woman), a married woman (wife), or a newly married woman (bride).³ Context is the key translation factor to determine the appropriate English rendering. *Gune* is a feminine, singular, genitive noun, which is in agreement with the adjective *meis* (of one). The primary usage of the word in classical Greek as well as in the Septuagint and the New Testament is to denote a “woman,” unless context demands otherwise.⁴ Therefore the best rendering is “of one woman.”

The noun *aner* appears in the masculine singular accusative form without an article in this passage. It is semantically used to refer to: the general designation of a man; the

³ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), P. 208-09.

⁴ Kittel, Gerhard, Geoffrey, William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. s.v. “*gune*.” Electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976).

human species; when used as opposed to a woman; the husband; an adult male as opposed to a boy; and in reference to full manhood.⁵ Unless context demands otherwise, the best rendering is “a man.” As such, the translation “the husband of one wife” is not necessarily unwarranted; however, based on the semantic usage and since no definite article precedes “husband” in the original language, it is more accurate to render it “a man of one woman.”⁶

The literal translation “a man of one woman” or a “one woman (type of) man,” is not only more accurate, but is more consistent with the rendering elsewhere in 1 Timothy. *Gune* is used nine times in this epistle and is translated as: “**women** to adorn themselves” (2:9); “as is proper for **women**” (2:10); “A **woman** must quietly receive instruction” (2:11); “I do not allow a **woman** to teach” (2:12); “it was not Adam who was deceived, but the **woman** being deceived, fell into transgression.” (2:14)⁷; “**women** must likewise be dignified” (3:11). The choice to render *gune* as “wife” over “woman” in this epistle occurs only in the qualifications of Deacons and Overseers (3:2, 3:12), and in 5:9, “the wife of one man,” referring to the qualities of a widow eligible for church support. In this

⁵ Ibid., s.v. “*aner*.”

⁶ Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 491. Rogers prefers the translation, “a husband of one wife,” or “one-woman man.” He cites Robert L. Saucy for clarity noting that “this difficult phrase probably means that he is to have one wife at a time.” He further states that the phrase could mean that a man is “faithful to his one wife.” In either translation, the emphasis is on the man’s/husband’s fidelity to the woman/wife he is with.

⁷ This verse is particularly interesting since, unlike most of the other examples, this use of *gune* appears in close proximity to the “husband” Adam. Context would seem to demand the use of “wife” over “woman” in this context, if a consistent translation philosophy was employed.

case, there is a similarity of grammatical structure with that found in 3:2 and 3:12, except the reversal of the masculine and feminine noun. Here, however, the translator chose to translate *aner* as “man” rather than “husband” in this case. Consistency would seem to prefer the use of “husband” over “man” unless the choice is merely translator preference. The inconsistency employed indicates a pretextual approach or bias on the part of the translators.

CONTEXTUAL OBSERVATION

The context of the passage is such that it outlines qualities of those who should be appointed as Overseers and Deacons in Ephesus. A primary consideration in hermeneutics is to note the situation of the recipients of the Letter so that one may clarify the biblical principle to be applied in a contemporary setting. In 1:3, Paul notes that he left Timothy in Ephesus to “instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines.” Towner argued convincingly that considering the Epistle without interpreting it within its original context is unwarranted and may lead one to err in applying the principles communicated.⁸ The text states unequivocally that, in the mind of the biblical author, there is a present danger to the church presented by false teachers. In context, the qualities of the “righteous” leaders that Timothy is to select stand in contradistinction to those exhibited by the false teachers. The

⁸ Phillip Towner, *The Letters To Timothy and Titus*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), P.28, 70-71. Towner contended that the pastoral epistles should not be interpreted as general instruction on qualifications of all elders everywhere; rather, that the letters were written to a particular co-worker of Paul (Timothy and Titus) and that the content addressed certain contextual situations in each of the co-workers respective fields (Ephesus and Crete). Towner would not argue that the qualifications are not instructive, only that the context in which they are given must be considered when deriving the biblical principle that applies to the church today.

list of qualities in the Overseer begin and end with being above reproach (v.2) and having a good reputation with those outside the church (v.7). It is reasonable to conclude that some of the false teachers did not meet this criterion. Towner noted that there “was either an actual or anticipated leadership crisis, perhaps related to the activities of the false teachers.”⁹ Fee agreed relating that most of the characteristics noted are “outward, observable behavior” that are not necessarily “distinctively Christian.” Fee concluded, based on this observation, that Paul was instructing Timothy in this matter due to the conduct of the false teachers at Ephesus, because their conduct was “bringing the gospel into disrepute.”¹⁰

Daniel Akin, President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, noted that the qualifications in 1 Timothy are identifiers of the “consistent pattern of life of the Overseer.”¹¹ Akin continued, noting that “[a] bishop is also to be a ‘one-woman man’ (3:2; cf. Eph 5:33), and he has control of his children (3:4). Paul employs an important argument establishing the point that the family is the proving ground for leadership in the church (3:5).”¹² Paul’s argument for qualifications for Overseers in this section have little to do with the technical nature of marital status and everything to do with the consistently displayed character of the leader. These characteristics are indicators of the man’s

⁹ Towner, 239.

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 78.

¹¹ Daniel L. Akin, “The Single-Elder-Led Church: The Bible’s Witness to a Congregational/Single-Elder-Led Polity,” *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, eds. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 45-46.

¹² Ibid.

maturity and ability to lead in the church of God. As such, it is also probable that Paul desired for those who were observing the teachings of the “false teachers” to examine their pattern of life to see if they bore “fruit” of maturity, fidelity, and leadership before committing to their espoused doctrines.

John Hammett noted that “the key to understanding the meaning of these lists of character traits is remembering that one of the responsibilities of leaders is to set the example for the flock (1 Peter 5:3). The character required to be an elder is the character necessary to be an example to the flock.”¹³ Hammett continued, noting that the differences in the lists between 1 Timothy and Titus “imply that Paul was not trying in either list to be exhaustive, but giving a representative list of character traits an elder should embody.”¹⁴

Regarding the positions that previous divorce is a disqualifier or that remarriage after divorce is a disqualifier, Hammett noted:

All these interpretations...overlook the central point of the lists. The question that should be asked is this, ‘Can this person serve as an example to us in the area of marriage and family?’ While some would object that this approach avoids or undermines the literal interpretation of Scripture, literally, the passage says nothing about divorce at all. Had Paul wanted to exclude divorced persons, he simply could have said, “he must not be divorced.”¹⁵

¹³ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 166.

¹⁴ Ibid, 167.

¹⁵ Ibid., 168.

Lea and Griffin, note that if “Paul clearly meant to prohibit divorce, he could have said it unmistakably by using the Greek word for divorce (*apolyo*, cf. Matt 1:19).¹⁶ Further, Paul used two other Greek words to describe divorce in 1 Corinthians: *choridzo* (1 Cor 7:11; 7:15) and *aphiemi* (1 Cor 7:11; 7:13), indicating that he was not only aware of more direct ways of referring to divorce, but had chosen to use them when he desired to speak on the subject.

THEOLOGICAL OBSERVATION

To conclude from the list of qualifications of an Overseer and Deacon that Paul prohibits all divorced men from serving in either office, is to misunderstand Pauline theology. First, Paul considered all sin to be grievous to the heart of God, an affront to His character, and a humanly insurmountable obstacle to fellowship with God (cf. Rom 3:23, 6:23). Second, Paul understood a difference between the deeds of a man committed prior to salvation and the justifying work of God on the sinner’s behalf. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, NASB states:

9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,

10 nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

11 Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

No one argues that a “lost” man who was covetous or a drunkard and then was “saved” is disqualified from serving as a deacon or an elder.

¹⁶ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, s.v. “1 Timothy 3:2” *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New American Commentary, vol. 34, electronic ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001, c1992.) For additional references see also MT 5:32, 19:3, 19:9.

To assert that, according to Pauline theology, a man who in his pre-conversion state had committed sins such as these listed would be qualified to lead a church, but that the sin of divorce was somehow so egregious as to prevent service, misunderstands how Paul recognized his own pre-conversion sin. He stated in 1 Timothy 1:15 (NASB):

It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

In Paul's own estimation, if divorce was a disqualifying sin for service as an Overseer or Deacon, then he too was "more" disqualified as the "foremost of all" sinners. Yet, Paul assessed his justification before God as complete. He stated in 1 Corinthians 15: 9-10 (NASB):

9 For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

Paul's own self-assessment is not the only reference to his previous conduct and whether it was a disqualifier for his service as an Apostle. Acts 9: 13-16, NASB states:

13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem;

14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."

15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

INTERPRETIVE ISSUES

Since the issue of biblical interpretation, particularly in relation to verse 2 "one-woman man" is determined greatly by context, the context of this passage is critical. First,

those that have traditionally interpreted these words to preclude divorced men from serving as Overseers and Deacons typically appeal to literal interpretation. Consistency demands that, if this is the best approach, then one should consistently use a literal approach for the entire list. Since the literal rendering is “man of one woman” or “one-woman man,” then any man who has joined himself emotionally or physically to another woman is unsuitable for the office of Overseer or Deacon. Advocates of the “husband of one wife” position must also preclude any unmarried men from serving as Overseers or Deacons. The requirement in v.4 that the Overseer keep his “children” (Plural Neuter Noun) under control, eliminates those from serving who have less than two children. Further, it precludes service by any man who has a rebellious or unbelieving child. Certainly these arguments are beyond the measure of what is reasonable, but they are the “logical outworking” of a consistent hermeneutical approach applied to the verse. Hammett observed that according to this logic, Jesus and Paul would both be disqualified from serving in the local church today.¹⁷ Furthermore, Hammett noted that, if prior decisions culminating in divorce are disqualifiers for service as an Overseer or Deacon, then anyone who ever “got drunk while in college” was also permanently disqualified.¹⁸

The converse approach hermeneutically is also true. If one interprets the descriptive qualities listed in 1 Timothy as “present descriptives,” describing the general characteristics and traits of the candidate at present, then one also must conclude that possessing the trait of being a “one-woman man” in the present is the consistent interpretation.

¹⁷ Hammett, 168.

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

John Bisagno, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Houston, Texas noted that the interpretation that no man who was divorced could ever serve as a Deacon or Overseer was based, in large part, on tradition within the church community.¹⁹ This tradition began its development as early as the second century and may have reflected the “influence of an asceticism that led to clerical celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church.”²⁰ Clearly, the traditional interpretation has been rooted in Baptist thought for numbers of centuries. Commenting on the tradition, Bisagno wrote:

In my denomination and probably yours, traditions die hard. We hear sermons on the tradition of the elders and the immovability of the Pharisees whom Jesus criticized because they set tradition above truth, and we say “*Amen*.” But when our traditions are challenged, it can be most difficult for us.

I fear we have hurt many good men and lost potential service to the kingdom of God by clinging to this unbiblical position on divorce.

Far too often, unqualified deacons and other church leaders remain in office, while good and godly men who have proven their faithfulness to their wives for thirty or forty years are excluded from service. This should not be.²¹

One may wonder, at times, which tradition will be propagated in the church: The tradition of *Sola Scriptura*, as the authority for life and practice, or the traditional interpretation of theologians throughout the years on this text.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ John R. Bisagno, *Letters to Timothy: A Handbook for Pastors* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 28-29.

²⁰ Ralph Earle, ‘1 Timothy,’ *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 364.

²¹ Bisagno, 28-29.

A second consideration from a pastoral concern is the concern for family. In an age where the value of the family unit is greatly diminished, and some would seek to redefine family to mean “any committed people living together,” it is important to consider how to model family values as God’s plan for His creatures. The question is, however, “how does the characteristic of having not been divorced influence the family model?” Further, “isn’t ‘concern for the family unit’ the point of the Apostle Paul’s listing of this quality in the first place?” It is counterintuitive for the church to assert that a divorced man is unfit as an example of committed family living. Examples of pre-conversion divorces, victims of abandonment, and marriages to divorced persons abound. In each of these cases, a man could serve with no blemish on his character as a committed follower of Christ and leader in the church. It is an accepted belief that a man, who committed a sin as a believer, could be restored and become an example to others. This understanding of redemption, the power of God’s grace, and the glory of God’s sanctifying power is not limited to sins other than divorce.

CONCLUSION

The issues surfaced regarding the lists of character traits of Overseers and Deacons are varied, complex, and at times, divisive. The easy approach is to allow what has always been (tradition) to remain, trusting that wisdom exercised in previous generations or eras is “nearly inspired” and should stand without challenge. Were that the best approach, there would be no Protestant church today. Further, there would be no United States of America, and if there were, American citizens who were women or of a minority race would never vote. The fact is that tradition has never been the standard; rather, in times of

difficult decisions, the standard has been a return to objective truth, the Word of God, allowing it to inform and shape our actions.

The linguistic treatment of the quality “husband of one wife,” should be more accurately translated as “man of one woman” or “one-woman man.” The language currently employed to translate the Greek concept is inadequate to communicate the thrust of the author’s intent. The use of “husband” vs. “man” and “wife” vs. “woman” is determined by context. In this case, the context fails to support the use of “husband” or “wife.”

The particular choice of words in the 1 Timothy passage fails to conclusively support the interpretation that Paul was concerned with divorce. As demonstrated, Paul, as well as other New Testament writers, employed less obscure language in other passages when specifically referring to the matter of divorce. Therefore, the interpretation that this passage precludes divorced men from serving as Pastors and Deacons lacks clear biblical evidence.

The context of the specific passage indicates a concern with the character of the one who aspires to the office as it appears in the “present” time. Past actions are indicators of present or future performance, but are not the focus here. Paul’s greatest concern for those who Timothy (and Titus) were to appoint, was that they be men who were “above reproach” in the present time. This quality surpasses merely being married to the same woman for life.

The interpretative approach used by those who believe that divorce is, in itself, a permanent disqualifier based on a “literal reading of the text” is inconsistent in their

application of the approach. One cannot consistently require that a man not be divorced and allow a man who has never been married to be qualified using the same text.

A belief that divorce, in itself, is a disqualifier for service as a Pastor or Deacon is inconsistent with a biblical theology of grace. One cannot elevate the severity of one sin above another. Grace is not limited in its scope. All sins, from covetousness to idolatry to murder are forgivable. If a sin, any sin, is forgiven, then it is completely forgiven.

To assert that a Pastor or Deacon must model a godly family life and that this can only be accomplished by those who have never been divorced (even those who did so in a pre-conversion state or who were victims of abandonment) is illogical and a dangerous mischaracterization of the Scriptures. Christians cannot set a standard so low. One should not be considered a sterling example of godly family living solely because he has not been divorced.

The solution as to how to view these Scriptures in light of the qualifications of Deacons and Pastors begins with a change of terminology. First, the qualification lists should be viewed as qualities and not qualifications. A singular outburst of anger or past episode of drunkenness should no more disqualify a man than divorce. The overall character of the man and his being “above reproach” is the point of the instruction, not individual incidents of past conduct. One who seeks these offices should exhibit the traits listed in the lists.

One final consideration. Eliminating divorce as an understood “disqualifier” does not automatically qualify one who has been divorced. The position does two things. It places the quality back into the context of the overall character of the man, and it focuses

attention on the high view God has for the institution of family. A candidate who is divorced should undergo the same scrutiny as any other candidate, so that he will not prove to be an obstacle to the gospel.

Of great concern for the Apostle as he wrote this letter to his co-worker Timothy was the concern for the health of the church in Ephesus. The qualities that Paul listed, while not exhaustive, provide a foundation upon which any man may be examined. The heart of the Apostle, just as the heart of the Lord, is to insure that the gospel could go forth unimpeded and that those who served by leading exhibited the characteristics of those who had been changed by the power of God according to His grace.

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