Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Divorce and Eldership
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 7:20-24, 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, Matthew 5:32; 19:9
Code: A376

Whenever the subject of divorce and remarriage is discussed, the inevitable question of whether a divorced and/or remarried man can ever serve as an elder follows closely behind. This discussion has lead to much confusion as well as a great deal of heartache for many individuals and churches. Multitudes of men who have desired the work and service of an elder have also encountered great opposition to that desire simply because of a previous divorce.

The opposition often comes from those who believe that regardless of any past circumstances, no one who has had a previous divorce is biblically qualified to serve as an elder. Yet on the other side of the spectrum, many today are advocating that we abandon all efforts to examine the nature of anyone's past marital status. They say we should appoint men to the eldership based on present-tense circumstances *alone*. Their argument follows that because divorce is so rampant in our society, affirming non-divorced men is becoming an even greater challenge.

In addition, increasing numbers of pastors are becoming divorced and yet are remaining in positions of elder/pastoral ministry! Alexander Strauch writes that this issue "was dramatically highlighted when a leading evangelical journal in America brought together five divorced pastors and asked them to share their feelings, experiences, and views on divorce and the ministry. The journal's staff published the forum because they believed the growing problem of divorce among ministers needed to be faced openly and honestly." Strauch went on to say that the article "claimed that a recent survey of divorce rates in the United States showed that pastors had the third highest divorce rate—exceeded only by that of medical doctors and policemen!" ("*A Biblical Style of Leadership?*" *Leadership 2*, Fall 1981, 119-29, cited in Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* [Littleton, Colo.: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1995], 67).

The ultimate answer to this question, of course, must come from the Word of God. But what does Scripture teach on the subject? What insights do we have from God's Word that could help us in this regard? Can a man who is divorced (or who is married to someone who has been divorced) ever serve at the highest level of spiritual leadership? These crucial questions must be answered if we are to maintain the true biblical standards of spiritual leadership.

First of all, those who oppose any divorced man serving as an elder almost universally do so on the basis of the apostle Paul's language in 1 Timothy 3:2. There Paul says that if a man is to serve as an elder, he must be the *"husband of one wife"* (this English translation comes from the Greek phrase,

mias gunaikos andra, which when literally translated means, a *"one-woman man,"* or a *"one-wife husband"*). There are generally four different ways this phrase has been understood:

- elders must be married
- elders must not be polygamists
- elders must have married only once in their life
- elders must be sexually pure and therefore totally committed to their wife (*biblical monogamy*)

The following will be an attempt to summarize the various views and a biblical response.

Must Be Married

Those who take the view that an elder is to be qualified only if he is married mis- understand Paul's intent in this passage. If this were Paul's meaning here, he would obviously be contradicting himself in what he wrote to the Corinthians (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:7-9, 32-35; see also Matthew 19:12). There, he states that it would be better if believers were to remain single *"even as I myself am"* (v. 7). He reiterates this in verse 8 when he says, *"But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I."*

Paul was not only an apostle, but also a pastor (he served for three years as the pastor at Ephesus, for instance), so he certainly could not be commanding Timothy to examine potential elders on the basis of what he himself was not qualified to undertake. Likewise, he also says to the Corinthians that as apostles, they had *"the right"* to *"take along"* (marry), a believing wife, *"even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas [Peter]"* (1 Corinthians 9:5). Even though he did not personally choose the option of marriage (or that he had in fact been married before but at the time of his statement, was speaking as a widower (as many would contend from 1 Corinthians 7:40), Paul could have served as an elder and yet have remained single.

To put it another way, if one of an elder's requisite qualifications is his marrying, then every single man would be automatically disqualified, including, of course, Jesus Himself! It is obvious that this view is not a serious consideration of what the phrase, *"one-woman man"* really means.

No Polygamy

The second possibility is that Paul intends to convey that no elder candidate is qualified if he has more than one wife at the same time (*polygamy*). This was certainly an issue in Paul's day, but it is unlikely that this is what he had in mind. The main reason is again the use of the specific phrase, *"one-woman man."*

Paul could have used a couple of different phrases to speak against polygamy if he had truly wanted to. For instance, he simply could have said, *"An overseer, then, must be above reproach, having no more than one wife,"* or *"having no more than one wife at a time."* This would have most assuredly dealt with any polygamy sins that were occurring at this time. Another reason Paul must have meant something else is that the phrase, *"one-woman man"* occurs three other times in the New Testament (1 Timothy 3:12; 1 Timothy 5:9; Titus 1:6), which by their usage help us conclude that polygamy was probably not in view.

In the 1 Timothy 5:9 passage, the phrase is used to speak of a widow and whether or not she is to receive some financial assistance from the church. Even though Paul uses the corresponding phrase, *"one-man woman,"* or *"one-husband wife,"* he is essentially speaking of the same kind of qualification and speaks to whether a female widow had demonstrated a faithfulness to her one husband (who is obviously now deceased).

We can conclude that because *polyandry* (a woman who would be having at least two husbands at the same time) was repugnant both to the Jews and Romans, Paul would have no real need to address this issue in the church. Therefore, if Paul used the corresponding phrase to refer to these polygamist men in 1 Timothy 3, he would be very confusing to his readers, and certainly should have been far more specific.

Only One Marriage

A third group of interpreters view this *"one-woman man"* phrase as meaning that a man could marry only once in his lifetime. This view also will often reflect the belief that once divorced, a man could never remarry, with some even going so far as to say that a widower could not remarry! As in the first view however, this plainly contradicts other passages of Scripture. First Corinthians 7:39 distinctly says, "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." Likewise, Romans 7:2 says, "The married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning her husband."

Nowhere in God's Word does it state that remarriage after the death of a spouse automatically renders a man no longer "above reproach." Indeed, Paul himself urges *young* widows (meaning those who were still in their prime childbearing years) to "get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach" (1 Timothy 5:14). Immorality being rampant in that pagan society, and with Christianity being so new, Paul was saying the best way to avoid a lasting reproach was to become married.

Finally, Paul even warns Timothy a chapter earlier that some false teachers were actually forbidding marriage (1 Timothy 4:3), and those men should be exposed. Surely, this *no-marriage view* in 1 Timothy 3:2 would need to be clarified since he condemns those false teachers only a chapter later! Lastly, it would also set up a very difficult double standard. Those outside the spiritual leadership of the church could marry or remarry, while those within leadership could not.

Marital Faithfulness

The fourth view says that Paul is simply emphasizing in this phrase, *"one-woman man,"* the concept of marital faithfulness to one's present spouse. This seems to be the most natural way to interpret the phrase. Strauch concludes,

…the phrase 'the husband of one wife' is meant to be a positive statement that expresses faithful, monogamous marriage. In English we would say, 'faithful and true to one woman' or 'a one-woman man.'…Negatively, the phrase prohibits all deviation from faithful, monogamous marriage. Thus, it would prohibit an elder from polygamy, concubinage, homosexuality, and/or any questionable sexual relationship. Positively, Scripture says the candidate for eldership should be a 'one-woman man,' meaning he has an exclusive relationship with one woman. Such a man is above reproach in his sexual and marital life (Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 192).

In other words, are you completely committed to the wife you now have? Is your love for her ever growing and do you serve and love her as Christ loves the church (Ephesians 5:25)? It is possible that if our English Bible translators had simply translated the phrase literally, much confusion could have been avoided. But since the phrase has been translated as *"the husband of one wife,"* it has evoked much needless debate and anguish.

Elder Qualification

The only remaining question regards the general question of whether a divorced man should *ever* serve as an elder, *even if he has proven to be a present and faithful husband to his wife.* This matter is covered in Paul's first qualification of 1 Timothy 3:2, "An overseer, then, must be *above reproach*." Being above reproach means that there is nothing for which one can be accused or blamed; those things which could render a man as being validly accused of sinful behavior. He must not have a chargeable character; that is, he has an impeccable reputation. He lives his life in such a way that no one can accuse him of scandalizing the body of Christ in any way. This is the kind of man that, even with his critics, can find no fault in his character.

Another very important reminder is this: we must remember that the qualifications as listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are ***present-tense*** qualifications. The main evaluation of a man's life must take

place in the present, not in the past. Does this automatically mean that a man's past actions have utterly no bearing on his present life? No. A man's past could, in fact, render him as reproachable in some way. What ways could this be true? A man could be disqualified if his past divorce has continuing implications. For instance, a man who has had a divorce in his past (whether it is his pre-Christian past or his Christian past), might be rendered reproachable in the eyes of the congregation *if the man's former spouse is in the same community as his local church, or in the same local church itself.* In some cases, this may mean he is not qualified to serve as an elder there. Another example is if his children from a previous marriage(s) are not believers or are a reproach to him in some way. This may also become a disqualifier.

It is most unlikely that any man who has had a divorce in his past, whether pre-Christian or post-Christian, will ***not*** be able to serve as an elder. Usually, there are circumstances which render him as not above reproach in the eyes of the church's leadership and/or the congregation. This does not mean that he cannot serve the Lord in the local church. It simply means that his service will by necessity be in a non-elder capacity. Indeed, he can serve in a variety of ways by God's design. ***It would seem to be an extremely rare occurrence for a man who has had a divorce, whether biblically allowed or not, to fulfill the role of elder in the local church.*** This is never intended to make anyone think that he, because of the fact of his divorce, is a second-class Christian, and that his divorce is a stigma which follows him forever. But at the same time, however, it is true that divorce oftentimes is a stigma, and it has tragically become a stigmatic reproach for many. God's grace can cover the sin, but the consequences sometimes do have lasting effects.

Finally, regardless of the specifics of any one situation, the general principle is this: Does he enjoy the complete and full affirmation of the leaders and people of his own congregation, and is he presently living out the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1? If a particular local church scrutinizes his life and ministry and sees nothing in his present character or past conduct that brings a reproach, he may, in God's good providence, serve as an elder in that place. Strauch gives wise words on this account:

What does 1 Timothy say about sexual and marital sins committed before a person's conversion to Christ? What about people who have legally divorced and remarried (assuming the local church allows for such)? What about the forgiveness and restoration of a fallen spiritual leader? These and many other painful and controversial questions are not answered directly here. They must be answered from the whole of Scripture's teaching on divorce and remarriage, forgiveness, grace, and restoration, as well as its teaching on leadership example and the full spectrum of elder qualifications.

All deviations from God's standard of marital behavior confuse and perplex us. Sin always confuses, distorts, and divides, so there will always be diverse opinions on questions such as these. This in no way, however, diminishes the local church's obligation to face these issues and make wise,

scripturally sound decisions. In all these heartbreaking situations, the honor of Jesus' name, faithfulness to His Word, and prayer are the supreme guides (Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 192-93).

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