

Can Single People Be Pastors?

Scripture: 1 Timothy 3

Code: BQ041113

the husband of one wife, (3:2b)

In spelling out specifically what it means to be above reproach, Paul lists qualities of the overseer's character.

The overseer or elder must first be above reproach in relation to women. He must be **the husband of one wife**. The Greek text literally reads "a one-woman man." Paul is not referring to a leader's marital status, as the absence of the definite article in the original indicates. Rather, the issue is his moral, sexual behavior. Many men married only once are not one-woman men. Many with one wife are unfaithful to that wife. While remaining married to one woman is commendable, it is no indication or guarantee of moral purity.

Some may wonder why Paul begins his list with this quality. He does so because it is in this area, above all others, where leaders seem most prone to fall. The failure to be a one-woman man has put more men out of the ministry than any other sin. It is thus a matter of grave concern.

Various interpretations have been offered that evade the meaning of this standard. Some have argued that its intent is to forbid polygamy. A man could not, however, even be a member of the church if he was a polygamist, let alone a leader. If that were all Paul meant, it would be an unnecessary prohibition. Further, polygamy was not an issue in Ephesus. It was uncommon in Roman society, in part because sexual encounters outside of marriage as well as divorces were easily obtainable. Nor was polygamy a feature of first-century Jewish society.

Others maintain that Paul here forbids remarriage after the death of a spouse. As already noted, however, this standard, like all the rest, refers to moral character, not marital status. Further, the Scriptures permit and honor second marriages under the proper circumstances. Paul expected younger widows to remarry and raise a family (1 Tim. 5:14), and widows could be described as one-man women (5:9). In 1 Corinthians 7:39 he wrote, "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."

Still others hold that this qualification excludes divorced men from spiritual leadership. That again ignores the fact that Paul is not here referring to marital status. Nor does the Bible forbid all remarriage after a divorce. In Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:9, our Lord permitted remarriage when a

divorce was caused by adultery. Paul gave a second occasion when remarriage is permitted, when the unbelieving spouse initiates the divorce (1 Cor. 7:15). While God hates all divorce (Mal. 2:16), He is gracious to the innocent party in those two situations. (For a complete exposition of the relevant passages on divorce, see *Matthew 1–7*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1985], and *1 Corinthians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1984.]) Since remarriage in and of itself is not a sin, it is not necessarily a blight on a man's character. If divorce resulted from a man's inability to lead his family (v. 5), however, then it is a disqualification.

Nor does Paul intend to exclude single men from the ministry. If that was his point here, he would have disqualified himself, since he was single (1 Cor. 7:8).

A one-woman man is a man devoted in his heart and mind to the woman who is his wife. He loves, desires, and thinks only of her. He maintains sexual purity in both his thought life and his conduct. That qualification was especially important in Ephesus, where sexual evil was rampant. Many, if not most, of the congregation had at one time or another fallen prey to sexual evil. If that was before a man came to Christ, it wasn't a problem (cf.. 2 Cor. 5:17). If it happened after his conversion, even before he assumed a leadership role, it was a problem. If it happened after he assumed a leadership role, it was a definite disqualification. Those same standards apply to men in positions of spiritual leadership today. Scripture makes clear that sexual sin is a reproach that never goes away. Proverbs 6:32–33 says of the adulterer, "The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; he who would destroy himself does it. Wounds and disgrace he will find, and his reproach will not be blotted out." Paul also indicates that failure to keep the body pure and controlled results in being disqualified for preaching (1 Cor. 9:27).

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