

## DIVORCE AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP.

The purpose of this section is to determine the meaning of the expression, “one-woman man” (*mias gunaikos andra*), as it applies to elders and deacons, in 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6. (Here we will speak only of elders, but the conclusions apply to deacons as well.) Here are five possible meanings of this phrase:

A. That it requires elders to be married.

1. Arguments against this view.

- a. Almost no scholars take this view. (This, of course, is not decisive.)
- b. The emphasis in the Greek is on ONE, not on HUSBAND.
- c. If Paul wanted to stress the necessity of marriage, there are ordinary Greek words for “married,” e.g., *gameo* in either the aorist participle (as 1 Cor 7:33) or the perfect participle (as 1 Cor 7:10).
- d. The very same expression (with the nouns reversed) is used in 1 Tim 5:9, “one-man woman”—yet Paul is speaking of *widows*, with no husbands.

2. These qualifications are written in a context where it is assumed that the average man will be married. The qualifications thus set forth what is expected of an elder on the *assumption* that he is married, without necessarily *requiring* marriage. I.e., the purpose of the statement is not to require marriage, but to specify a particular *attitude* toward marriage. “Assuming the candidates will be married men, they must be firmly committed to God’s eternal plan for marriage, in theory and practice” (Carl Ketcherside, quoted in Don DeWelt, *Paul’s Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 292f.).

B. That it forbids an elder to be or have been involved in polygamy.

1. Polygamy *did* exist in NT times among both pagans and Jews, but it was quite rare. Still, it is *possible* that this is the meaning here.

2. Arguments against this view.

- a. There is no evidence that polygamy was ever a problem in the church; there are no other references to it in the NT. There is no evidence that any polygamists were coming into the church. Thus a special prohibition here seems unnecessary.
- b. The parallel with 1 Tim 5:9 is against this, since polygamy on the part of a woman (polyandry) was practically unheard of anywhere.

3. Most scholars feel this is not the main point of the qualifications.

C. That it forbids an elder to be or have been remarried after his wife’s death.

1. This has been a common view in the church since early times, e.g., Origen.

2. Some think that this best fits the parallel thought in 1 Tim 5:9.
3. Arguments against this view.
  - a. It seems to spring from a negative view of marriage as such.
  - b. The NT suggests that remarriage after widowhood is not wrong or tainted in any way. Widows are counseled to remarry (but only to other Christians): 1 Tim 5:14; 1 Cor 7:39. (1 Tim 5:11-12 refers to marrying pagans and thus leaving one's first faith.)
  - c. Marriage itself is presented as a godly, positive state: Matt 19:4-6; Heb 13:4; 1 Tim 4:3.
  - d. "Was remarriage such a sin that, of all sexual requirements, it alone is here singled out?" (Lenski, NT Commentary on 1 Tim 3:2, p. 581).

D. That it forbids an elder to be or have been divorced.

1. Since certain circumstances do legitimize divorce (adultery by one's spouse, Matt 19:9; desertion by an unbelieving spouse, 1 Cor 7:15), and since therefore divorce and remarriage are not always wrong, what would be the basis of this prohibition for church leadership?
  - a. Either *sinful* involvement in a divorce, and thus a *moral* basis;
  - b. Or *innocent* involvement, and thus prohibition on the grounds of *expediency*.
    - 1) Sometimes a thing which is not wrong in itself is nevertheless not expedient, i.e., it may be undesirable because of circumstances beyond the control of the parties involved. See 1 Cor 6:12; 8:1-13; Rom 14:13-23; Lev 21:17-23.
    - 2) Thus there may be circumstances which in themselves do not involve sin and guilt, but which make it best for a man not to hold a church office. Divorce, even on a Biblical basis, is such a circumstance, according to this view.

2. Arguments against this view.

- a. If divorce is the main issue here, why is divorce itself not specifically mentioned? There are perfectly good Greek words available meaning "divorce": *apoloio* (Matt 5:31-32; 19:3, 7-9); *apostasion* (Matt 5:31; 19:7).
- b. Even if the problem here is divorce, the specific expression used seems to focus more on the fact of remarriage *after* divorce rather than the divorce itself (see the emphasis on "one"). Thus divorce itself would not be specifically excluded, but only remarriage—which would make a man the husband of *two* wives. If he remained unmarried after the divorce, he would still be the (former) husband of just one wife. We have already seen in the previous point, however, that there is no stigma attached to

remarriage as such.

c. The nature of Biblical marriage and divorce is such that a person is never truly married to more than one spouse at a time. If a person is married at all, it is to only one spouse at that time. So the requirement seems superfluous *unless* it is forbidding marriage to more than one spouse *ever*. But in this case it would be ruling out widowers who remarry as well as divorced persons who remarry. But again, this would mean that only remarriage is the disqualifying factor—a view that does not seem compatible with the Bible’s high view of marriage, as discussed in the previous point.

E. That it requires an elder to be thoroughly committed to God’s pattern for sexuality and marriage, both in his mind-set and in his life-style, whether he be single, married, widowed, divorced, or remarried.

1. The literal translation of the expression is “a ONE-woman man” or a “ONE-wife husband.” This is the actual word order, with the intended emphasis being on the word *one*.
2. Thus the elder must be a man who is an example of sexual purity and marital fidelity.
  - a. “The emphasis is on *one* wife’s husband, and the sense is that he have nothing to do with any other woman. He must be a man who cannot be taken hold of [the literal meaning of “above reproach”] on the score of sexual promiscuity or laxity.” “A man who is not strictly faithful to his one wife is debarred.” (Lenski, 580-81)
  - b. He must be a man of unquestioned morality, entirely true and faithful to his one and only wife. (Wm. Hendriksen, NT Commentary on 1 Tim 3:2, p. 121)
  - c. This understanding fits 1 Tim 5:9 very well, also.
3. This would not necessarily exclude those who had been divorced (and even remarried) *before* they became Christians for *whatever* reasons, and who have not fully embraced God’s will for their sexuality and marriage.
  - a. Sins related to divorce and remarriage are no worse than other pre-Christian sins and are just as forgiven as any others.
  - b. “The bulk of the membership from which the elders [in the early church] had to be chosen had come from paganism.” Few would have been free from the taint of sexual vice. (Lenski, 580).
4. Neither would this necessarily exclude the innocent party in a divorce *after* one has become a Christian. If the man has remained fully committed to God’s will for marriage, he is still a “one-woman man” despite the unfaithfulness of his wife.
5. If a man has been the *guilty* party in a post-conversion divorce, then he is excluded from office, at least until he has demonstrated true repentance and a firm commitment to the Biblical nature of marriage.

6. In all of this, the law of expediency would apply and may yield varying results in different places or even in different cases in the same place. There may be times and places in which it is best for even a Biblically-divorced man not to hold a church office. Expediency considers such things as these:
  - a. The attitude of the contemporary society toward divorce in general.
  - b. The need to uphold and to teach the Biblical ideal in the best possible way.
  - c. The responsibility to present no occasion for stumbling where weaker church members are concerned.
  - d. The congregation's attitude toward and acceptance of her leaders.