

Elder Qualification: The Husband of One Wife

I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6

We believe that Scripture provides specific guidelines for the qualifications of leaders in the local church. I Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 each state as a biblical requirement for those who hold the office of elder that they be “the husband of but one wife.” This is a passage that has been interpreted in many different ways by Bible-believing Christians, with significant consequences to individuals who have been divorced and are considering serving as an elder. We desire to accurately interpret this phrase and make appropriate decisions regarding the eligibility of divorced men for the position of elder.

The primary interpretations of this phrase are (1) an elder can only have been married once, (2) an elder can only have one wife at a time (i.e., polygamy is forbidden), (3) an elder can never have been divorced, (4) an elder must be married, and (5) an elder must be a one-woman man (i.e., faithful and loving in his commitment to his wife).

(1) We do not believe this phrase means that “an elder can only have been married once.” That interpretation seems to be contrary to Paul’s encouragement that widows remarry (e.g., I Corinthians 7:39; Romans 7:1-3), and we can safely assume that a man has the same right since death breaks the bond of marriage for both. To believe that this phrase means “and can only have been married once,” would also make this phrase the only one of these requirements (in I Tim. 3 and Titus 6) that is absolute (i.e., people possess temperance and self-control to various degrees).

(2) We do not believe this phrase means simply “An elder can only have one wife at a time.” This would be an extremely low standard indeed. Also, similar wording in I Timothy 5:9 would suggest that Paul was speaking to the possibility of a woman with multiple husbands, which would be very unlikely in that time and culture.

(3) We do not believe this phrase means, “An elder can never have been divorced,” although many hold this position. The original language does not refer to, or use the word for, divorce.

(4) We do not believe this phrase means “an elder must be married.” This would be inconsistent with Paul’s other teaching that it is good to remain single (I Corinthians 7:1-2).

(5) We do believe that this phrase means that an elder must be a one-woman man (i.e., faithful and loving in his commitment to his wife). This is consistent with the other qualifications in the list in that it is not absolute, but rather there will be room for growth, and relates to personal character, rather than to a condition. This interpretation also makes sense grammatically, as the words, “one woman” modify “man” to explain what kind of man. Finally, this interpretation is free from some of the problems that exist with the other interpretations (i.e., it does not contradict Paul’s other teachings regarding remarriage being good (I Cor. 7:25-28, 39), and remaining single being good (I Cor. 7:1-2)).

Consequently, we believe that a divorced man is not automatically disqualified from being an elder because of the “one woman man” language in I Timothy 3:2. However, we would generally be hesitant to have a divorced man become an elder at Mountain View for other reasons, including: Post-conversion divorce may be a sign of sin in the man’s life. Divorce may be an indication of a lack of love, patience, faithfulness, or other issues of character. Divorce may hinder a man’s ability as an elder to enforce biblical standards for marriage and admonish others in this important area of life as may be needed in the local church.

We also need to recognize that divorce may be an indication of difficulty meeting some of the other qualities noted in I Timothy 3, such as “above reproach,” “self-controlled,” and

“not quarrelsome.” However, it seems crucial at this juncture to make the following observation about all the other qualifications listed for elder in Scripture. That is, even though the apostle Paul says that an elder should not be “quarrelsome” or “violent,” does this mean that the man has never in his life been characterized by these words? Should we view these qualifications in the sense that the man never exhibited them, or should we interpret this passage to say that by God’s grace these qualities have been worked out of a man’s life to such a degree that he is now eligible to be examined for leadership? We believe the latter.

At Mountain View, we will not automatically disqualify all divorced men from serving as elders. We will consider each man’s situation, including (1) the circumstances of the divorce, (2) the timing of the divorce, (3) the effects of the divorce, and (4) his one-woman like character before deciding whether to ask him to serve in this capacity. Moreover, if a man is remarried we will also look into the timing of the remarriage and its connection, if any, to the divorce.

Although much of the focus of this paper is on divorce, we hasten to note that divorce is only one public example of how a man might be fulfilling this elder requirement. Certainly, infidelity and adultery, without divorce, would indicate that an individual has not been a “one-woman man.” Would we ever consider a person for elder who has been guilty of marital unfaithfulness (i.e. the physical act of adultery)? Probably not, however if we did so, we would consider issues such as (1) the timing of the adultery (see footnote #3), (2) the impact of the adultery, and (3) the measure of repentance and response of the one who committed adultery.

Our desire at Mountain View is to appoint elders who are blameless and above reproach (Titus 1:6; 1 Timothy 3:2), though, obviously, not perfect. We will be extremely cautious before allowing a divorced man to serve as an elder at MVCC for the above stated reasons, because above all we desire to choose elders who, if married, have solid marriages in which they clearly demonstrate faithfulness, love, and mutual respect. Likewise, we will be reluctant to appoint an elder whose marriage appears to be unhealthy or in need of major work by one or both parties. We want each elder, if married, to be a loving, faithful, and true “one woman man.”

The Elders of Mountain View Community Church
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