

Introduction:

1. Regarding the qualifications for elders listed in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1, there are two which seem to have the widest range of opinions.
 - a. "Faithful children"
 - b. "Husband of one wife"
2. This week, we are going to be looking at the various interpretations and meanings given to the phrase "husband of one wife."
3. Then, we are going to look at what the phrase literally means, how it was used historically speaking, and what those mean when seeking to find the answer to "what does Paul mean by 'husband of one wife'?"

I. "It means that an elder cannot be a polygamist."

A. What is a polygamist?

1. A polygamist is someone who is married to more than one person at the same time.
2. Poly means multiple (more than one), "gamist" is from the Greek word for woman.
3. Many of the so-called "church fathers" (AD 100-300) believed that Paul was simply forbidding polygamy from the eldership.

B. Is this what Paul is trying to get across to us regarding elders?

1. All Christians are under the command to only have one spouse (I Corinthians 7:2).
 - a. Each man is to have his own wife (singular).
 - b. Every woman is to have her own husband (singular).
 - c. This is not a command that all must be married, but the ones who are married are banned from polygamy.
2. Elders are to be "blameless."
 - a. We discussed that all the qualifications for elders are basically the areas in which they are to be "blameless."
 - b. So, they are to be the most patient, the most hospitable, etc... of the congregation.
 - c. How exactly does someone get to be the man who is the "most married to only one person"?
 - d. You either ARE married to one person or you are not.

C. If Paul, as many within the Lord's church assert, wrote this only against polygamy, how does this separate the elder from any other Christian?

1. It is a sin, plain and simple, for someone to have multiple wives under the New Testament (I Corinthians 7:2).
2. Those in sexual unions with someone not their own wife (singular) were to be withdrawn from by the church (I Corinthians 5:1-ff).
3. No man would ever get to the point of being considered for elder if he was married to more than one woman, because he would have already been withdrawn from.
4. It would be like saying "an elder must not be a in a homosexual marriage."
 - a. This is, as one teacher of mine said, "a big bag of 'DUH'!"

5. If this is only against polygamy, then Paul is giving what, in effect, is a redundant qualification, because no Christian was allowed to be a polygamist in the first place.
 - D. If this is written against polygamy, then it becomes the ONLY qualification that does not refer to the character of the elder.
 1. Every other qualification refers to the elder's character.
 2. If it is against polygamy, then the first qualification refers to not a character trait, but instead a fact-check: is he married to two or more women, or just one?
 - E. While an elder cannot be a polygamist, it is not because of this qualification, but instead because no Christian can be a polygamist and get to heaven.
- II. "It means that an elder must have been married only once."
- A. This stance has been taken by many throughout the years.
 1. Wuest says it means "married only once."
 2. Alford says that it means must be married to his still-living wife, but then goes on to say, "How far such a prohibition is to be considered binding on us, now that the Christian life has entered into another and totally different phase is of course an open question for the present Christian at any time to deal with."
 - a. Don't you love that?
 - b. He says this is what it means, and then goes on to say, but that part of the Bible doesn't really apply to us today unless you think it does.
 3. Vincent says that it forbids a second marriage, but in the same paragraph says that Paul didn't write the book of I Timothy...
 4. Barnes says that it means **IF** a man is married, he is only to be married once.
 - a. That view means a man who has never been married still meets the qualification because it is an optional one (if you're not married, that qualification doesn't matter).
 - b. Paul said elders MUST meet these qualifications.
 - B. Some say Paul was intending to eliminate rampant divorces and remarriages.
 1. Again, let us point to Paul's command regarding how to treat any Christian who is involved in unscriptural sexual activity—withdraw from them (I Corinthians 5:1-ff).
 2. Jesus Himself said that anyone who divorced his wife for some reason other than fornication and then remarried was committing adultery.
 3. Adultery will send your soul to hell if not repented of.
 4. No man would be considered for the eldership if he unscripturally divorced and remarried because he would have been withdrawn from already.
 5. If Paul meant this to mean "married only once" and that being done to eliminate from consideration those Christians who were in unscriptural second marriages, he could have said "an elder must not be one of the men who you have already withdrawn from."
 6. Obviously a man who is unscripturally divorced and remarried is not even a faithful child of God and is not in fellowship with God or faithful Christians, let alone is he an elder candidate!

- C. If it means an elder can only be married once, then it means elders (and those aspiring to be elders) are not permitted to do what Jesus said was Scriptural to do: remarry after the death of a spouse (I Corinthians 7:39) or remarry after having a Scriptural divorce (Matthew 19:9 only forbids the guilty party from remarrying).
 - 1. Paul willingly gave up some of his liberties for the sake of weaker Christians.
 - 2. Does Paul now command that stronger Christians have no choice but to give up something they are permitted by Christ to do?
 - 3. A liberty is just that, something you are permitted to do.
 - 4. Paul would not command people forego their liberty, because that stops it from being a liberty.
 - D. One man whom I greatly respect said the following:
 - 1. If a man is married to his living wife, then he has one wife.
 - 2. If that wife dies, he no longer has a wife; therefore he has zero wives and is no longer "the husband of one wife."
 - 3. However, if he marries again, he's now got two wives and is not "the husband of one wife."
 - a. I greatly respect him, but his math skills leave something to be desired here.
 - b. If the man's wife no longer counts after she dies, how can she suddenly count again when he remarries?
 - c. And if this is the case, that means NO Christian can remarry after the death of a spouse (or after a Scriptural divorce) because they would then have two wives (which is forbidden by I Corinthians 7:2).
 - E. If it means "married only once" then it makes it (as before) the ONLY qualification given by Paul that has nothing to do with the man's character, but instead makes the qualification about the state of his marriage license.
- III. "It means 'one wife at a time'."
- A. Basically, this idea is that the elder must be married (Scripturally, of course) and his wife must still be living (whether she be his first, second, or third scriptural wife).
 - B. Many say that if a man's wife dies, he is no longer the present-tense husband of one wife, but once he remarries, he is again qualified as being "the husband of one wife."
 - 1. A preacher from the 1940's and 50's was asked, "if you were an elder, and your wife died, what would you do?"
 - a. The implication of the question was "would you step down or would you continue as an elder?"
 - b. The preacher's response showed what he believed on the subject.
 - c. He said, "I would hurry up and get married again as quick as I could."
 - 2. The verse regarding a woman no longer being bound to her husband after he dies is used in this regards to show that the marriage bond is broken by death, and thus he is no longer "the husband of one wife," because he is no longer a husband.
 - a. Notice that he is still called her "husband," even after he is dead.
 - C. If this qualification means "his wife must still be living," then it means it is not a qualification for the elder, but instead a qualification for his wife.

1. So, the very first qualification for blamelessness in an elder is that his wife hasn't died yet?
 2. Since these are areas of blamelessness, or areas in which the elder is to be the cream of the crop (the MOST patient, the MOST hospitable, etc...), that would mean the elder's wife must be the MOST not dead.
 3. Look, either someone is alive, or they are not alive...there are no levels in between.
- D. Basically, this view says "the man must be married, and scripturally so."
1. If a man is not scripturally married, he is to be withdrawn from (as per our earlier discussion).
 2. All Christians who are married must be married Scripturally, otherwise they are in adultery which will keep them out of heaven (Galatians 5:19-21).
 3. Such a person would never be under consideration for the eldership anyway.
 - a. You notice Paul never says "an elder must be a Christian" because non-Christians would never be under consideration anyway.
 - b. Paul didn't say, "an elder must not be a polygamist" because such people would never be under consideration for the eldership anyway (having been withdrawn from).
 - c. Paul didn't say, "an elder must not be someone unscripturally married," because such people would not have been under consideration anyway (having been withdrawn from).
- E. If this qualification means "one wife at a time" (another way of saying "not a polygamist, but still married"), then it is the ONLY qualification given that has nothing to do with the man's character, but instead is a qualification which only focuses on his marriage license and his wife's death certificate (or lack thereof).
- IV. So, if it does not mean "married only once," or "married Scripturally to one at a time," then what does it mean?
- A. The literal rendition.
1. Literally, the phrase "husband of one wife" is "a man of one woman" or "a one-woman man."
 - a. This necessitates that the elder must be a man, however...
 - 1) One commentator said "Rather, the decision on who to appoint should be based on the general principles laid down by the apostle as interpreted in the specific cultural context. In first century Ephesus and Crete women church leaders may have been inappropriate. That doesn't mean that the same applies in 21st century Europe and North America."
 - 2) The interesting thing is that this quote was found immediately after the man insisted the text itself required that an elder be a man, according to Paul.
 - b. This necessitates a man who has entered into marriage with a woman.
 - 1) Surprisingly, this is not universally believed.

- i. Denominational books and websites (and even some of our own goofball liberal brethren) have attempted to say that this just means “IF a man is married, then he must be the husband of one wife.”
 - ii. However, when the exact opposite phrase (wife of one husband) is used there is no mistaking that Paul means they MUST have been married (for it describes widows).
 - iii. If the phrase is conditional (IF he is married), then it is conditional when he uses it of the widows (IF they were married).
 - iv. Can you have a widow who was never married?
 - 2) Instead, Paul says an elder MUST be the husband of one wife.
 2. The word “the” is not found in the Greek, and oftentimes that word is left out when the character or nature of something is being emphasized.
 - a. You may have heard Jehovah’s Witnesses say that John 1:1 should be translated “and the word was a god” because the word “the” does not appear in front of “God” in the Greek there.
 - 1) Other than the fact that they ignore their supposed “rule” 5 other times in John 1 alone, they also ignore that oftentimes the word “the” is left out when it is describing the character or nature of something.
 - 2) John 1:1 says that the Word is God in His nature.
 - b. So, when Paul says that an elder must be “husband of one wife” he is emphasizing a character trait.
 - c. This eliminates from consideration any interpretation that would say the qualification depends on the state of his marriage certificate or whether or not his wife is alive.
 3. The elder must be (present tense) one with the character of being a one-woman man.
 - a. If a man ever stops having this characteristic, he is no longer qualified to be an elder.
- B. Historically speaking.
 1. According to Arndt and Gingrich (and other sources), this phrase “husband of one wife” as well as “wife of one husband” were found in 1st century tomb inscriptions (like our headstones).
 - a. Many times the phrase was used to describe someone whose spouse had died years—sometimes decades—before.
 - b. Yet the person was still called a “husband of one wife” or “one-woman man.”
 - c. It described the characteristic of the person.
 2. The meaning of the phrase “husband of one wife” did not mean “must have only married once and that wife still living.”

3. The meaning of the phrase wasn't "not a polygamist" (though that's part of it).
- C. Putting all of this together, what does "husband of one wife" mean?
1. If you described someone as a "one-woman man," what would you mean?
 - a. You would mean someone who is dedicated to his wife.
 - b. You would mean someone who treats his wife with love and respect.
 - c. You would mean someone who does not lust after other women.
 - d. The phrase was used the same way in the 1st century.
 2. Therefore, when Paul says "a one-woman man" (husband of one wife), he is saying the elder must be a dedicated, faithful husband.
 - a. You can be married to your first and only wife, but if you don't treat her right, you do NOT meet this qualification.
 - b. You can be married to your first and only wife, but if you look at pornography or lust after other women, you do NOT meet this qualification.
 - c. You can be married to your first and only wife, but if you do not fulfill your responsibilities to her, you are NOT qualified to be an elder.
 3. The elder MUST be a dedicated husband.
 - a. If he ever ceases to have this characteristic, then he is no longer qualified.
- V. Some questions which arise.
- A. If the man's wife dies, is he still qualified?
1. This qualification (like all the others) describes a CHARACTER attribute of the man.
 2. Does a man suddenly lose this characteristic if his wife dies?
 3. Remember that this exact phrase was used regularly in the first century to describe people who were widowed, but who had been (and were) still dedicated to their wife.
 4. So, the man is still qualified after the death of his wife, so long as he retains that characteristic.
 - a. He will not besmudge her name after she is gone.
 - b. He does not lust after other women.
 - c. He still loves her, even though she is gone.
- B. Is a man qualified if his wife dies and he then remarries?
1. Remarriage after a spouse's death is not a sin (I Corinthians 7:39).
 2. So it all depends on the man and his character.
 3. Strangely enough, what I am about to say may sound the exact opposite of what many believe, but hear me out.
 - a. Many teach that if a man's wife dies he is no longer qualified, but if he remarries, he is qualified again.
 - b. I put forth that the opposite is true.
 - c. If a man's wife dies, he is still qualified (so long as he has proven himself to be a dedicated husband), but when he remarries, he should step down until such time as he has proven himself to be a dedicated husband to the new wife.

- d. Proving that you are a dedicated husband is not something that happens overnight, but instead it is a long process.
 - e. For some people, it might take a few months, but for other people (who might have messed something up early in their married life) it might take years.
 - f. And if a man marries someone who is cantankerous and always causing trouble, he might begin to lose part of that characteristic of loving and respecting his wife.
4. So, if a man remarries, can he still be qualified?
- a. Yes, he can still be qualified so long as he has shown that he is still a dedicated and devoted husband to his wife.
- C. Can an elder who gets a scriptural divorce still serve?
- 1. This is a question that is full of questions.
 - a. What caused the wife to cheat on her him?
 - b. Was it something that he did/was doing?
 - c. Was it because he was not showing his dedication and devotion to her?
 - 2. A preacher I know who scripturally divorced his wife said to me, "95% of the time there is no such thing as an truly innocent party."
 - a. By this, he meant that most adultery stems from the spouse not getting the love, respect, and attention they deserve at home.
 - 1) Perhaps he does not treat her with respect.
 - 2) Perhaps they constantly fight (it takes two to fight).
 - b. It may not be an intended thing, but sometimes men are not devoted and dedicated to their wives like they should be (and vice versa).
 - c. That is not an excuse for the spouse to commit adultery, but much of the time there is plenty of well-placed blame to go around.
 - d. For what it's worth, this preacher and his wife reconciled and have been married for another 16 years.
 - 3. So, there are major questions to deal with in deciding if a scripturally divorced man was really the "one woman man" (dedicated husband) that he should have been.
 - 4. Technically, a scripturally divorced man COULD serve as an elder if he was a truly dedicated, devoted husband whose wife cheated on him anyway.
 - 5. Practically, it would be very unwise to make this man an elder because of the questions previously mentioned as well as the way he would be viewed by others.
 - a. Divorce still carries a stigma, especially among Christians, even if it is scriptural.
 - b. It is hard enough to convince people that a widower can still serve as an elder, but a divorced man?
 - c. Even if it was a completely scriptural divorce and the man was 100% free of any blame, the problems that would likely arise in the congregation would make allowing this person to remain an elder very unwise.

- d. In fact, when a divorce is filed/announced, the elder should step down so as not to be a distraction/detriment/reproach to the church.
6. It is extremely unwise to place a man in the eldership AFTER he has been divorced.
- D. Can a scripturally divorced and remarried man serve as an elder?
 1. If the question is "is it possible for someone scripturally divorced and scripturally remarried to serve as an elder?" then the answer is "yes, it is possible."
 2. It would be very unwise in many congregations.
 3. Also, there are many questions which would need to be raised.
 - a. Does the congregation know for sure the man was Scripturally divorced?
 - b. Has he proven himself to be a dedicated husband in this second marriage?
 4. But throughout all of this, the qualification is in the present tense.
 - a. He must now, with his second wife, be a one-woman man.
 - b. Imagine a man who was not a Christian, but was married and then his wife left him for another man.
 - 1) Now, years later, he becomes a Christian and realizes what a Christian husband is supposed to be like.
 - 2) He gets married (scripturally), and lives his life as a truly dedicated husband.
 - 3) He fits the qualification of "one-woman man."
 5. In some congregations, even having a scripturally divorced/remarried man as an elder would cause problems.
 - a. Because of this, it is unwise for such a man to serve, even though he might be qualified.
 - b. This is something that must be decided at the congregational level, because peace and unity are important.

Conclusion:

1. An elder must be a man who is a dedicated husband who loves and respects his wife.
2. Does this apply to you?
 - a. God gives his commands for all Christians to love their spouses (Ephesians 5:25, Titus 2:4).
 - b. You who are married, how do you treat your spouse?
 - c. Wives, do you submit to and obey your husband?
 - d. Husbands, do you respect and treasure your wife?
 - e. Do you show devotion to one another?
3. If you are not the person God wants you to be, showing dedication and devotion to your spouse, then why not repent and make it right with God now?