

**THE MEANING OF “THE HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE”
IN 1 TIMOTHY 3:2**

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INTRODUCTION

It is important to correctly interpret the phrase “husband of one wife” in 1 Timothy 3:2. There are at least three reasons for desiring a correct interpretation. First of all, this phrase was obviously of great concern to Paul. It appears first on the list of qualities necessary for church leadership in both the Timothy and Titus letters (1 Tim 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). Second, how one interprets this phrase will greatly impact the lives and service of numerous Christians. Because statistics indicate that over fifty percent of non-Christian as well as Christian marriages end in divorce, how one interprets 1 Timothy 3:2 determines what role a divorcée can play in church leadership. Third, throughout church history, the Christian church has a tendency to overreact to the world’s immorality by making the phrase say more than what was originally intended. Thus, a balanced biblical inquiry into the phrase’s meaning is appropriate.

To this end, this paper will explore the eight main interpretations of the phrase “husband of one wife” found in 1 Timothy 3:2. These views will be surveyed in order from least to most persuasive. The strengths and weaknesses of each approach will be examined. A conclusion will then be reached regarding which interpretation is best supported by the biblical data. However, at the outset, it should be understood that the New Testament only applies the phrase “husband of one wife” to the offices of elder (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6) and deacon (1 Tim 3:12). Therefore, the conclusions reached here only pertain to the qualifications for elder or deacon and not to other realms of Christian service.

MARRIAGE TO THE CHURCH

The first view understands the phrase “husband of one wife” in 1 Timothy 3:2 as meaning married to the church. According to this view, the phrase simply communicates that a man must be dedicated to the work of the church in order to qualify as an elder. Thus, this view allegorizes the word “wife” in 1 Timothy 3:2 so that the word is understood as the wife of Christ or the church. Some of the impetus for this view no doubt comes from the fact that elsewhere, the church is alluded to as Christ’s bride (Eph 5:23). Oosterzee refers to this position in *Lange’s Commentary*.¹ However, this view is suspect because of its Roman Catholic origin. According to Kent, this view “is an obvious attempt to protect the Romish doctrine of celibacy for priests.”² If a bishop is considered married to the church, it remains unnecessary for him to be married to a literal wife. Thus, 1 Timothy 3:2 cannot be used to require priests to be married. Also, the view is suspect because of its reliance upon a dual hermeneutic. Why should the phrase “husband of one wife” be given an allegorical or spiritual interpretation while every other term on the list is given a literal interpretation?³

MARRIAGE IS MANDATORY

This view understands the phrase “husband of one wife” in 1 Timothy 3:2 as requiring all who aspire to the office of elder to be in the married state rather than the single state. Thus, this view disqualifies all unmarried men from the office of elder. Ironside appears to lean toward this view when he observes, “Then he is said to be the ‘husband of one wife.’ It is amazing to think that in one of our greatest religious systems they hold that a clergyman of any character must have no

1 J. Oosterzee, “The Two Epistles of Paul to Timothy,” in *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, ed. John Peter Lange, trans. Philip Schaff (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 8:38.

2 Homer Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 126.

3 Ibid.

wife. Scripture distinctly states that a bishop is to be ‘the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach.’”⁴

The idea here is that a man does not qualify as a husband of one wife if he has no wife. Much of the impetus for this view comes from 1 Timothy 3:4-5, which makes successfully managing one’s household well a prerequisite for managing God’s household as an elder. Thus, observing how a man manages the affairs of his own family helps determine whether he is capable of managing the affairs of the church. However, this determination cannot be made if he has no wife and children to manage. Thus, it is argued, that a man must be married in order to qualify as an elder.⁵ Support for this view is also found in the fact that it was actually the false teachers who were forbidding marriage (1 Tim 4:3). Thus, a prerequisite of marriage in order to qualify for eldership would be seen as an appropriate counter measure against the message of the false teachers. Furthermore, support for the view can be found in Paul’s admonition for widows to marry (1 Tim 2:15; 5:14).⁶

However, despite this view’s initial attractiveness, it contains some significant weaknesses. First, 1 Timothy 3:2 says “husband of one wife” rather than “husband of a wife.”⁷ This latter expression could have easily been stated in Greek through simple omission of the word *μίας*.⁸ Thus, Paul could have easily used the latter phrase if his only intention was to communicate the married state as a prerequisite for eldership. Second, this view misunderstands “one” or *μίας* as drawing a contrast between one and none rather than one and more.⁹ “The antithesis of *μίας* is not ‘none,’ but ‘two’ or ‘many.’”¹⁰ In other words, the view “does not properly represent the force of the adjective ‘one’ (*mias*) which is placed first. The overseer must be the husband of ‘one’ wife, not ‘many.’”¹¹

Third, the marriage as a prerequisite for eldership view seemingly contradicts other strands of Pauline thought. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:8, 25-33, Paul encouraged celibacy as a desired state. Thus, it seems inconsistent for Paul to then turn around and argue that a man must be married in order for him to occupy the office of elder.¹² However, it might be argued that Paul’s discussion of celibacy in the letter to the Corinthians should be culturally limited in that he only encouraged celibacy in order to avoid the “present distress” (1 Cor 7:26). Luck advocates such a view when he states, “This phrase directly refers to local conditions. The Corinthian Christians were facing difficult times of oppression and persecution.”¹³

4 Henry A. Ironside, *Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1967), 78.

5 Ed Glasscock, “The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140 (July-September 1983): 245.

6 Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 80.

7 Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 415; D. Edmond Hiebert, *First Timothy*, Moody Colportage Library Series (Chicago: Moody, 1957), 65.

8 Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 129.

9 Thomas L. Constable, “Notes on 1 Timothy,” online: www.soniclight.com, accessed 1 April 2004, 35.

10 Henry Parry Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul's First Epistle to Timothy*, Limited Classical Reprint Library Series (Longman, Green, and Co., 1897; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock and Klock Christian Publishers, 1978), 27.

11 Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 128-29.

12 Ibid.

13 G. Coleman Luck, *First Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody, 1958), 60.

On the other hand, it is entirely conceivable that the “present distress” should not be limited to the local situation in Corinth but rather refers to the experience of all believers.¹⁴ Paul warned that all godly people will experience persecution as a normal and natural part of the Christian experience (2 Tim 3:12). Also, in the upper room, Christ warned that all believers would suffer persecution (John 15:20). Calvin seems to have captured the proper understanding of “present distress” in his 1 Corinthians commentary. He explains:

There are some, however, that view the term *necessity* as referring to the age of the Apostle, which was undoubtedly, full of trouble to the pious: but he appears to me to have had it rather in view to express the disquietude with which the saints are incessantly harassed in the present life. I view it, therefore, as extending to all ages, and I understand it in this way, that the saints are often, in the world, driven hither and thither, and are exposed to many and various tempests, so that their condition appears to be unsuitable for marriage.¹⁵

Also, Paul used the same phrase *την ενεστωσαν αναγγην* in 1 Corinthians 7:26 in reference to his own personal distresses (2 Cor 6:4; 12:10; 1 Thess 3:7).

In sum, it would seem that 1 Corinthians 7:26 is germane to all believers living in hostile environments and 1 Corinthians 7:8, 25-33 expresses Paul’s view that celibacy is the optimal state in which to serve the Lord. Thus, Paul did not mandate marriage as a prerequisite for serving Christ. On the contrary, he saw the single state as advantageous. Therefore, this strand of Pauline thought is wholly irreconcilable with the notion that “husband of one wife” in 1 Timothy 3:2 requires marriage for eldership. Why would Paul mandates such a requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2 and then encourage singleness as the optimal lifestyle for Christian service (1 Cor 7:8, 25-33)?

Fourth, the marriage view suffers because marriage is not the only prerequisite required for eldership. Because management of his own children is used as a test to determine the candidate’s fitness for spiritual leadership (1 Tim 3:4-5), consistency causes the view to also require that the candidate for elder have children as well (1 Tim 3:4-5). However, most commentators would not go so far as to say that Paul required children and marriage in order to become an elder. According to Knight, “Probably he wrote in terms of the common situation, i.e., of being married and having children, and then spoke of what should be the case when this common situation exists in the officer’s life.”¹⁶ Constable similarly asserts, “...Paul assumed children in the home but did not require them...”¹⁷

It is also worth noting that Paul used the plural noun “children” in both 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12. This fact forces proponents of the marriage view to maintain that Paul not only required marriage and children to be an elder, but he also required that candidates for eldership have more than one child. Thus, this view excludes those from the office of elder who are married and yet only have one child. In other words, the mandatory marriage view requires a minimum of two children as a requirement for elders and deacons.¹⁸ In sum, consistent adherence to the hermeneutics of

14 Glasscock, “The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” 245-46.

15 John Calvin, “Commentary to the First Epistle to the Corinthians,” in *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. William Pringle. 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 20:253.

16 George Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 157.

17 Constable, 40; see also Thomas Lea and Hayne Griffin, *1, 2, Timothy, Titus*, New American Commentary Series (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 112; William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary Series (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 158, 177, 185.

18 Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 157.

marriage view proponents ends up placing more prerequisites on candidates for elder than most commentators are willing to acknowledge.

Fifth, the marriage view is also injured because it ends up excluding from eldership the writer and recipient of the Timothy epistle.¹⁹ If Paul meant that marriage was a requirement to become an elder, then Paul by definition excluded himself from that role due to the fact that there is no indication that he was married or had children. In fact, Paul spoke of the advantages of his own single state in 1 Corinthians 7:8.²⁰ According to Knight, “Paul, like Peter (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1), regarded himself as a fellow elder or bishop and wrote of his singleness and his apostolic ministry without regarding them as mutually exclusive (cf. 1 Cor 9:1ff., especially v. 5; see also 7:7, 8).”²¹ According to Kent, “...we have the example of Paul himself who was an elder (cf. I Tim. 4:14 with II Tim. 1:6, where Paul is one of the presbytery), and yet was unmarried.”²² Similar remarks could be made regarding the person to whom the letter was addressed. Timothy, the recipient of the letter, was functioning as the pastor of the church at Ephesus at the time the epistle was written. Yet according to the marriage view, Timothy should have been excluded from this position because he was most probably single and childless like Paul.

Sixth, the marriage view should be rejected because it places an undue emphasis upon a candidate’s married state while the text seems to emphasize more a person’s character. Most of the remaining qualities of an elder have to do with the candidate’s character. Thus, context dictates that the phrase “the husband of one wife” should be interpreted with this nuance as well.²³ Seventh, as will be discussed later, the English words “husband” and “wife” may not be the best translations of the Greek words *ανδρα* and *γυναικος*. Thus, the emphasis the marriage view places upon an elder’s marital state may be unfounded.²⁴ Finally, the marriage view is also deficient in that it lacks contemporary scholarly support. Kent observes this “writer was unable to find anyone holding this view, but some commentators mention it.”²⁵

MARRIED ONLY ONCE: WIDOWER CANNOT REMARRY

This view disqualifies from the office of elder those who remarry for any reason. Thus, this view excludes from eldership all widowers who remarry. This view boasts an impressive array of proponents including King,²⁶ Liddon,²⁷ Ryrie,²⁸ Wuest,²⁹ Plummer,³⁰ and Liftin.³¹ The logic of this view is that the man who remarries another after the death of his first spouse is no longer the

19 Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 80.

20 Of Paul’s marital status, Ryrie observes, “...it is difficult to prove he was married on the grounds that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, since Acts 26:10 does not necessarily indicate membership, and it is uncertain if marriage was a requirement for membership before A.D. 70.” See Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 416.

21 Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 157.

22 Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 129.

23 Glasscock, “The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” 246.

24 Ibid.

25 Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 126.

26 Guy King, *A Leader Led* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1962), 58.

27 Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul’s First Epistle to Timothy*, 26.

28 Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 416. Charles Ryrie, *You Mean the Bible Teaches That...* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 55.

29 Kenneth Wuest, *The Pastoral Epistles in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 53-55.

husband of one wife but actually the husband of two wives because he is still bound to his deceased spouse. Proponents of this position utilize a variety of arguments in an attempt to bolster their view.

First, except for the switch in genders, “the same kind of phrase is found in 1 Timothy 5:9 where it clearly means that the enrolled widow shall have been married only once.”³² At first glance this view appears to contradict a page like 1 Corinthians 7:39 which allows for a second marriage after the death of a spouse. However, advocates of this view maintain that no such contradiction exists because “the prohibition in 1 Timothy is in relation to the elders and deacons, where as the permission in 1 Corinthians is for laity in general.”³³ The idea here is that leadership often involves restrictions on liberties that others are free to enjoy.³⁴

Second, because the second marriage damages the portrait between Christ and His church (Eph 5:32), second marriages are considered inappropriate for elders. According to Liddon, “But since the *επισκοπος* must be *εγκρατης* (Tit. 1:8), he must have married only once. The pure ideal of marriage, as consisting in the complete and reciprocal surrender of two persons to each other...so as to form ‘one flesh’—the union which suggests the ideal of Christ and His church in Eph 5:32—is broken upon a second marriage.”³⁵ Third, proponents of the married only once view also attempt to strengthen their case by observing the importance Paul placed upon celibacy for widows. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:8, Paul urged widows to remain unmarried. Paul “also valued the spiritual benefits of celibacy (1 Cor. 7:37-38) even for those who had lost a mate (1 Tim. 5:3-14).”³⁶ Fourth, this view also fits well with the various pieces of inscriptional evidence praising women who were married “only once” and who remained “faithful” to that marriage after their spouse had died.³⁷

Fifth, the view is further strengthened upon observing that the early church frowned upon remarriage for any reason.³⁸ In the first century, second marriages were seen as acts of self-indulgence.³⁹ Also, the early church placed strict marital restrictions upon those seeking ordination. Tertullian and the Montanists interpreted 1 Timothy 3:2 as a prohibition on second marriages.⁴⁰ The *Apostolic Constitutions* permitted a married man to be ordained. However, if he were single when ordained, he was to continue in the single state all his life.⁴¹ Other portions of the *Apostolic Constitutions* and *Apostolic Canons* attempted to exclude remarried widowers from church office.⁴²

30 Alfred Plummer, “The Pastoral Epistles,” in *The Expositor's Bible*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (London: A.C. Armstrong & Son, 1903), 23:122-24.

31 Duane Liptin, “1 Timothy,” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 736-37.

32 Ryrie, *You Mean the Bible Teaches That...* 55; Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 416; Liptin, “1 Timothy,” 737.

33 Ryrie, *You Mean the Bible Teaches That...* 55.

34 Alan Nute, *A New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), 510.

35 Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul's First Epistle to Timothy*, 26.

36 Liptin, “1 Timothy,” 737.

37 Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 80.

38 Constable, 35.

39 Liptin, “1 Timothy,” 737.

40 E. K. Simpson, *The Pastoral Epistles* (London: Tyndale Press, 1954), 50.

41 Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 7:457; cited in Kent, *Pastoral Epistles*, 127.

42

One citation from the *Apostolic Canons* reads, “He who is involved in two marriages after his baptism, or he who has taken a concubine, cannot be an *episkopos*, or bishop.”⁴³

Sixth, it is also argued that remaining single after the death of a spouse exemplifies the fruit of the Holy and Spirit and dependence upon God. These characteristics in church leaders serve as good examples for the church of God.⁴⁴ According to Plummer, a second marriage is actually a sign of weakness.⁴⁵ Seventh, proponents of the view also contend that marrying again can actually increase domestic duties by giving a person a double family. Caring for two families rather than one obviously has the potential of interfering with an elder’s spiritual responsibilities. Plummer explains:

A second marriage, although perfectly lawful and in some cases advisable, was so far a sign of weakness; a double family would in many cases be a serious hindrance to work. The church could not afford to enlist any but its strongest men among its officers; and its officers must not be hampered more than other men with domestic cares.⁴⁶

Despite the merits of this one wife per lifetime view, it is plagued by serious difficulties. First, if Paul’s intention was to indicate being married only once was a prerequisite for becoming an elder, he could have simply said, “having been married only once.” Simple Greek expressions were available for Paul to use to communicate such an idea and yet Paul chose not to employ them. According to Grudem, *hapax gegamemenos* would be the Greek phrase used for the English expression “having been married only once.” The word “once” or *hapax* in addition to a perfect participle would convey “having been married only once and continuing in that state resulting in marriage.” An identical construction is found in Hebrews 10:2. A “similar construction is found in Heb 9:26. Related expressions with the aorist verb are found in Heb. 6:4; 9:28; and Jude 3.”⁴⁷ Paul could have also conveyed the idea of having been married only once by utilizing the perfect participle *ginomai* to state, “having been a husband of one wife.” A similar style is used in 1 Timothy 5:9. Grudem notes, “The force of the perfect participle *gegonuia* carries over from the previous phrase, and all the qualifications for enrolling widows in 1 Tim. 5:9-10 speak of past history in their lives.” However, the situation seems different in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 due to the fact that the present tense forms of *eimi* are employed. Thus, these verses can be translated “it is necessary for a bishop *to be* blameless, the husband of one wife.”⁴⁸ Because of these linguistic ambiguities associated with 1 Timothy 3:2, it is unfair to use this verse in order to place the harsh requirement of no remarriage upon an elder. “One should avoid the Pharisaical error of binding men with unnecessary and oppressive burdens (c.f. Matt. 23:1-4; Acts 15:10) and should seek to be gracious at every opportunity.”⁴⁹

Second, elsewhere Paul indicates that after the death of the first spouse, the marriage bond is legitimately broken thus allowing the surviving spouse to remarry (Rom 7:2-4; 1 Cor 7:39). Therefore, the surviving remarried spouse is no longer bound to the deceased. Rather, he is only

43 Quoted in William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 76.

44 Constable, 35.

45 Plummer, “The Pastoral Epistles,” 122-23.

46 Ibid.

47 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 917, n. 20.

48 Ibid.

49 Glasscock, “The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” 247.

bound to the spouse to whom he remarried and not the spouse who died. Thus, his new marriage does not violate the “husband of one wife” requirement.⁵⁰

Third, the view is difficult to harmonize with the fact that the husband of one wife requirement is the first moral requirement that Paul mentions for elders. “Was remarriage such a sin, that of all sexual requirements, it alone here is singled out?”⁵¹ Kent notes:

A further weakness of this view is the fact that this is the only moral requirement mentioned for overseers. Was this the greatest sexual sin? Was this the only one to be looked for in the candidate for eldership? Because of Scripture teaching on marriage after death of one partner, and the inherent improbability that this was the only moral item that mattered, this view is most unlikely.⁵²

Saucy similarly observes, “There is no hindrance placed upon remarriage either in the Old Testament or the New Testament. So also among the Greeks and Romans there was never any stigma attached to remarriage after the death of the first spouse.”⁵³ Although Paul mentions the husband of one wife requirement immediately as the first criterion for assessing the blamelessness of an elder, given Paul’s teaching on the permissibility of remarriage after a spouse’s death in Romans 7:2-4 in 1 Corinthians 7:39, it is difficult to imagine that remarriage was “the worst possible moral offense that would disqualify a man” from eldership.⁵⁴

Fourth, all of the other criteria for qualifying as an elder listed by Paul in 1 Tim 3 reflect the moral character of the candidate rather than his marital status. These two categories are not always the same. It is possible for a man to be unfaithful to his partner while being married only to her throughout his life. Therefore, the married only once view disrespects the over all context of the chapter by making the first piece of criterion emphasize something that the rest of the chapter is not emphasizing.⁵⁵ Besides, based upon Paul’s teaching in Romans 7:2-4 and 1 Corinthians 7:39, second marriages involving widowers who remarry are not immoral and therefore should not be equated with the list of immoral characteristics found in the rest of 1 Tim 3.

In addition to the view’s basic problems, most of the arguments used to support the married only once view can be easily rebutted. First, regarding the similar phraseology between 1 Timothy 3:2 and 1 Timothy 5:9, later on in chapter five, Paul actually advises widows to remarry (1 Tim 5:14). Why “would Paul then advise young widows to marry again if such was questionable, or would remove them from the possibility of special aid in their later years (5:14)?”⁵⁶ As has already been pointed out, except for the switch in sexes, virtually the same grammatical structure is used in 1 Timothy 5:9 that is used in 1 Timothy 3:2. Thus, logical consistency demands that if a widow’s remarriage does not prohibit her from receiving financial assistance from the church in her later years (1 Tim 5:9, 14), then a widower’s remarriage should also not prohibit him from occupying the office of elder (1 Tim 3:2).⁵⁷

50 Robert L. Saucy, “The Husband of One Wife,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 (July-September 1974): 230.

51 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), 581.

52 Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 128.

53 Saucy, “The Husband of One Wife,” 230.

54 Constable, 36.

55 John MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 104.

56 Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 128.

57 *Ibid*; Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, 581.

Second, regarding the argument that second marriages are inappropriate among spiritual leaders because they shatter the portrait between Christ and His church reflected in Christian marriages (Eph 5:32), this argument fails to consider the other instances in Scripture where Paul decrees that a marriage has been legally dissolved. On two occasions, Paul explains the death of a spouse dissolves a marriage thus allowing the surviving spouse to remarry (Rom 7:2-4; 1 Cor 7:39). Thus, because the prior marriage has been genuinely dissolved, widowers remarrying does not damage the portrait of the relationship between Christ and His church.

Third, the argument that Paul placed great emphasis upon celibacy for widows is difficult to harmonize with all of the biblical data. In 1 Corinthians 7:9, Paul advised those that are single to remarry. He also admonished widows to remarry (1 Tim 5:14) while still referring to them as wives as one-man women⁵⁸ and not barring them from receiving financial assistance in their later years (1 Tim 5:9).⁵⁹ In addition, Paul indicated that the death of a spouse invalidated a marriage thus allowing the existing spouse to remarry (Rom 7:2-4; 1 Cor 7:39). Knight best sums up the matter when he says, “it would be strange for the apostle of liberty, who considered widows and widowers ‘free to be married...’ (1 Cor. 7:39) and who used this principle of freedom to illustrate his teaching on the law (Rom 7:1-3), to deny this freedom to a potential church officer whose spouse had died.”⁶⁰

Fourth, appeals to early church interpretations are unpersuasive. It appears that the early church interpreted 1 Timothy 3:2 through the pre understanding of a false asceticism that arose early on.⁶¹ According to Kent, “To cast suspicion upon the holiness of a second marriage is to impugn what Scripture nowhere denies, and reflects the spirit of asceticism which arose early in the church and has plagued her for twenty centuries.”⁶² Grudem observes that statements found in the *Apostolic Constitutions* and *Apostolic Canons* “reflect not a biblical perspective but a false asceticism which held that celibacy in general was superior to marriage.”⁶³ Furthermore, arguments based upon tradition are not as persuasive as text-based arguments. The issue is not how the church has historically understood a given text but what does the text actually say. The tension between tradition and Scripture rehashes an ancient conflict that the reformers attempted to rectify through the slogan “sola scriptura.” If we were to base our interpretations of Scripture largely upon tradition, then we would be forced to throw out much of our theology, including dispensationalism and pretribulationism.

Fifth, the argument that second marriages are a sign of weakness and demonstrated a lack of dependence upon the Spirit is also without merit because the identical argument could be made regarding first marriages.⁶⁴ Glasscock asks, “if it is considered a weakness to marry a second wife, is it also out of weakness that one married his first wife?”⁶⁵ Sixth, the argument that second marriages create additional domestic responsibilities to be born by the spiritual leader can be argued the other way as well. One can also imagine a scenario where a second marriage alleviates the

58 MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, 105.

59 Saucy, “The Husband of One Wife,” 230.

60 Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 157-58.

61 Simpson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 50.

62 Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 128. For a historical survey explaining how this false philosophy impacted the church’s interpretation of 1 Tim 3:2, see Patrick Fairbairn, “On the Meaning of the Expression ‘Husband of One Wife,’ in 1 Tim III. 2, 12, Titus I. 6,” in *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874; reprint, Minneapolis: Kock & Kock, 1976), 420-27.

63 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 917, n. 21.

64 Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 128.

65 Glasscock, “The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” 247.

domestic responsibilities of an elder. Glasscock explains, “If one assumes that a widower cannot remarry because of the burden of a double family, what is to be said concerning the burden a widower has in caring for children without a mother? Is the widowed elder who cares for his work, his church, and his children at home not facing a greater burden if he is alone?”⁶⁶

MARRIED ONLY ONCE: NO PRECONVERSION DIVORCE

This view is a variation of the married only once theme described above. This view bars from the office of elder those who have been divorced for any reason but does not disqualify those who remarry after the death of a spouse. Some advocates of this point of view contend that the prohibition against divorce extends all the way back into the candidate’s pre conversion days. Thus, if someone is divorced for any reason even if they were not the culpable party in the divorce and even if the divorced took place before conversion, they are disqualified from ever occupying the office of elder. Kent advocates this view. He explains:

While it is true that the blood of Christ cleanses the vilest sinner, and all true converts can become members of local churches, not every member is qualified for holding the highest office. That is why the list of qualifications was necessary. Consequently, when men were to be considered for this high office, there must be no record of divorce or other marital infidelity in the candidate, even before his conversion. A very practical reason for this restriction is seen. Extremely embarrassing complications might occur in the church if the minister’s divorced wife, mistress, illegitimate children, or children of other marriages should come to light. Since such a condition would at least lay him open to reproach, it would violate the general qualification of blamelessness. There must be nothing in the life of the overseer which would prevent his ministering spiritually and helpfully to any and every person. Another reason why the moral (marriage) qualifications can reach back to the unsaved state is because this is God’s standard for all of society, not just for the church (Matt 19:8).⁶⁷

Kent gives two reasons for holding this view. First, the consequences of a person’s preconversion sins continue to follow him into his Christian life. Second, Christ’s marital standards govern all of creation rather than just the redeemed. Therefore, any person who experiences a preconversion divorce is no longer the “husband of one wife.” This problem is further compounded if the new convert remarries. Under such circumstances, not only is he bound to his preconversion wife but also he is bound to his post conversion wife. Thus, he is the husband of two wives rather than the husband of one wife.

However, the following reasons cause most interpreters to reject this view. First, this view ignores the over all context of 1 Tim 3, which emphasizes post conversion character rather than preconversion sins. “All the other qualifications listed by Paul refer to a man’s *present status*, not his entire past life. For example, 1 Timothy 3:1-7 does not mean ‘one who has *never been* violent’ but ‘one who is *not now* violent, but gentle.’ It does not mean ‘one who has *never been* a lover of money’ but ‘one who is *not now* a lover of money.’ It does not mean ‘one who has been above reproach his whole life’ but one who is now above reproach.” If we made these qualifications apply to one’s entire past life, then we would exclude from office almost everyone who became a Christian as an adult, for it is doubtful that any non-Christian could meet these qualifications.”⁶⁸

Second, like the previously discussed view, this view isolates 1 Timothy 3:2 from the rest of the qualifications. It places emphasis on marital status while the rest of the qualifications deal with

66 Ibid., 246-47.

67 Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 129-30.

68 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 917.

character. Third, barring preconversion divorcées from serving as elder would have significantly limited the pool of potential candidates the early church had to select from to fill the office of elder. Saucy makes the following observation regarding Christianity's first converts: "This picture of the background from which the church members would have come, which included divorce for all kinds of reasons, is substantiated by all sources."⁶⁹

Fourth, the view marginalizes the forgiveness of sin that a person receives when he comes to Christ. According to Glasscock:

Divorce and remarriage, when committed outside the provisions for them in the Bible, are sins; but like any other sins, they can be forgiven and the believer cleansed. Once a person has come to Christ, all sins are forgiven and to claim that so long as a man stays married to his second wife, he is still living in sin is to ignore God's provision of mercy, to degrade the power of Christ's work, and to overlook God's forgiveness... Further, it is inconsistent to allow a divorced and remarried man to become a member of a church on the grounds that his previous sins have been adequately paid for through Christ and yet forbid him a leadership role because of his *previous* sins (which Christ removed by His death)... Certainly one cannot attempt to make the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 apply to a man's life before he is saved. If God has forgiven him and made him a part of His church, why do Christians hold his past sins against him? When one is saved, *all* his sins are forgiven (Col. 2:13), he becomes a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), his body becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), he receives a new nature after God's own holiness (Eph. 4:24), he becomes a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17), and he becomes part of God's spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5) and royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9)... Paul states that even adulterers (as in divorce and remarriage) were washed... sanctified... justified (1 Cor 6:9-11)... For those concerned with the testimony of the church, let them consider which glorifies God more—that He takes an unworthy defiled human and makes him pure enough to become His servant (cf. 1 Tim. 1:12-16) or that though God forgives, He does not let a man's past sins be forgotten?... Is the church guilty of Peter's prejudice (Acts 10:9-16) so that God must also rebuke believers and say as He did to Peter, "What God has cleansed, no *longer* consider unholy"? It does not seem possible that by Paul's phrase in 1 Timothy 3:2 he intends to hold a man's preconversion sins against him.⁷⁰

MARRIED ONLY ONCE: NO POSTCONVERSION DIVORCE

This view is similar to the one described above except it bars those from the office of elder those who experience a post conversion divorce for any reason and remarry. While widowers and preconversion divorcées are not barred from the office of elder, postconversion divorcées are ineligible. Hanson⁷¹ and Wiersbe⁷² are proponents of this view. Several rationales are put forward to support this view.

One rationale is that a Christian who has been divorced and remarries is no longer the husband of one wife since he is now bound to his previous wife as well as his second wife. Another rationale has to do with practical difficulties divorced elders experience in fulfilling their ministerial

69 Saucy, "The Husband of One Wife," 237; See also Fairbairn, "On the Meaning of the Expression 'Husband of One Wife,' in 1 Tim III. 2, 12, Titus I. 6," 428.

70 Glasscock, "The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2," 252-53.

71 Anthony Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New Century Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 75, 78.

72 Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2 vols. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), 2:220.

duties. Wiersbe explains: “A pastor who has been divorced opens himself and the church to criticism from outsiders, and it is not likely that people with marital difficulties would consult a man who could not keep his own marriage together. I see no reason why *dedicated* Christians who have been divorced and remarried cannot serve in other offices in the church, but they are disqualified from being elders or deacons.”⁷³ Yet another rationale for this view is that divorce represents a failure in the home and therefore disqualifies a man from eldership on the basis of 1 Timothy 3:4-5. According to Liftin, “The reasoning behind this view is usually that divorce represents a failure in the home, so that even though a man may be forgiven for any sin involved, he remains permanently disqualified for leadership in the congregation.”⁷⁴

However, there are several problems with this view. First, there were easier and clearer ways for Paul to make his point if he were reacting against the problem of divorce and remarriage in 1 Timothy 3:2. In prohibiting certain behaviors for elders in 1 Timothy 3:3, Paul typically used μη with the phrase under consideration. For example, he used the phrase μη παροινον in prohibiting the abuse of wine. Similarly, he used the phrase μη πληχτην in prohibiting violence. Here, however, Paul does not use this same construction. Paul probably does not use the same construction in verse 2 because he was more concerned with a positive characteristic than he was with a negative prohibition.⁷⁵ This interpretation fits well with the rest of the items in verse 2, which also speak of positive characteristics rather than negative prohibitions.

Second, the view also suffers in that it ostracizes the “husband of one wife” requirement from its surrounding context. This view makes the “husband of one wife” requirement speak of a prior sin while the rest of the characteristics in chapter 3 pertain to a man’s present character at the time he is considered a candidate for the office of elder. According to Saucy:

In 1 Timothy 3:3, Paul states that the elder is not to be addicted to wine. Does this mean at no time in his previous life the prospective elder was ever drunk? The elder furthermore is not to be pugnacious or contentious. Does this mean that he has never in his life been characterized by these two words? Are these characteristics to be interpreted in the sense that they were never part of the man’s life or are they to be interpreted that by God’s grace they have been worked out of his life so that they are not now as he is being examined for eldership a part of his life? The answer appears obvious. In view of these considerations it seems difficult to make this one qualification concerning the marriage state to refer to the entire life...⁷⁶

Third, the view overlooks the fact that not all divorcées are morally culpable. Christ granted permission for people to divorce on the basis of adultery (Matt 5:32; 19:9). According to these verses, the existence of πορνεία in a marriage dissolves the marriage. Most would agree that the Greek word πορνεία used in these verses includes adultery.⁷⁷ Moreover, Paul granted the right to divorce on the basis of spousal abandonment (1 Cor 7:15, 39). Thus, adultery and abandonment terminate the previous marriage thus allowing remarriage.⁷⁸

73 Ibid., 220.

74 Liftin, “1 Timothy,” 736.

75 Glasscock, “The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” 251.

76 Saucy, “The Husband of One Wife,” 238.

77 Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 693.

78 It should be noted that this view is just one of several interpretation of these passages. Spatial limitations prevent me from examining all of the views. For a fuller treatment of all of the views see H. Wayne House, ed., *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

Sometimes the teaching of Paul in Romans 7:1-4 is interpreted to mean that only death dissolves a marriage. However, just as Christ's instructions concerning divorce in Mark and Luke must be augmented by Christ's instructions in Matthew, so also Paul's teaching on the subject of divorce must be qualified by the teaching of Christ. Moreover, in Romans 7:1-4, "Paul's purpose is not to teach on marriage and divorce, but rather he is using the general principle of the marriage relationship as an illustration of the believer's release from the law."⁷⁹ Perhaps Paul did not mention adultery in Romans 7:1-4 as another reason for marital dissolution because such a digression would have detracted from his main point, which is that believers are dead to the law. Murray explains:

It would detract from this emphasis to suggest what provisions may obtain for the person concerned when a new complex set of factors radically alters the conditions presupposed in the assertion of the obligation. To intimate the provisions for such an exceptional circumstance would defeat, or at any rate perplex, the precise emphasis of the apostle. This consideration should explain why there is no allusion in this text or context to the right of divorce and remarriage in the event of adultery on the part of the other spouse...⁸⁰

In sum, the man who is divorced on biblical grounds is not considered to have two wives because his prior marriage has been dissolved. Therefore, he meets the requirement of 1 Timothy 3:2.

A related question is whether the believer who is divorced and remarried on unbiblical grounds is automatically disqualified from eldership on the basis of 1 Timothy 3:2. Some maintain that use of the present tense in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 indicates that the one who marries an illegitimately divorced woman lives in a perpetual state of adultery. The present tense involves a continuous action. Interestingly, in Matthew 5:32a and Matthew 19:9, the illegitimately divorced woman is also depicted as committing adultery in the aorist passive infinitive. A similar combination of tenses is similarly used to depict adultery elsewhere. Both the aorist (Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; Jas 2:11) and present tenses (Luke 16:18; Rom 2:22; Jas 2:11) are used to depict adultery throughout the New Testament. Because of the use of both tenses, it seems that the typical understanding of the present tense as a continuous action is not applicable in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9. Moreover, grammarians have observed other uses of the present tense beyond continuous action such as the customary or gnomic use as well as the aoristic present. It is possible that these other categories could explain the present tense used with adultery in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9. Thus, the employment of the present tense in these passages does not automatically demonstrate the ongoing condition of the adulterer.⁸¹

Moreover, Scripture repeatedly warns that no practicing adulterer can be saved (1 Cor 6:9-10; Heb 13:4; Rev 21:8; 22:14-15). "In view of this truth, it would appear impossible to conceive of those who have sinfully entered a second marriage as being in a continual state of the sin of adultery, for clearly no one with this continual sin will be saved."⁸² In sum, although illegitimate divorce and remarriage is a sin, it can be forgiven like any other sin. Thus, the mere existence of illegitimate divorce and remarriage in a candidate's life should not in and of itself disqualify him from the office of elder due to a violation of 1 Timothy 3:2.

Furthermore, to argue that a believer who is illegitimately divorced and married is permanently barred from the office of elder is to once again to assign the husband of one wife

79 Saucy, "The Husband of One Wife," 233.

80 John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1976), 92.

81 Saucy, "The Husband of One Wife," 235-36.

82 *Ibid.*, 236.

requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2 a different sense than one finds in the rest of the qualities for elder in 1 Timothy 3. For example, when verse 3 says the candidate is not to be a drunkard, Paul does not mean that the candidate never had been intoxicated at any time during his Christian life. Rather, Paul means drunkenness is not to be part of the candidate's character at the time he is considered for the office. Similarly, when verse 3 says the candidate is not to be quarrelsome, Paul does not mean that the candidate must never have been in an argument at any time during his Christian life. Rather, Paul means quarrelsomeness is not to be part of the candidate's character at the time he is considered for the office. Also, when verse 3 says the candidate is not to be a lover of money, Paul does not mean that the candidate must never have been greedy at any time during his Christian life. Rather, Paul means greediness is not to be part of the candidate's character at the time he is considered for the office. By way of consistency, when verse 3 says the candidate is to be a husband of one wife, Paul does not mean that the candidate never had been illegitimately divorced and remarried at any time during his Christian life. Rather, Paul means fidelity is to be part of the candidate's character at the time he is considered for the office.

Under these guidelines, one can imagine a scenario where even a person who was illegitimately divorced and remarried as a Christian can qualify for the office of elder. Suppose an immature believer is illegitimately divorced and remarried. Then, an extended period of time passes. During this time the believer recognizes his sin, is forgiven by God, and continues to mature into Christ likeness through progressive sanctification. Such a person could still be considered a candidate for elder because his current character matches the fidelity requirement of 1 Timothy 3:2 at the time he is considered for the office. For the church to hold his illegitimate marriage against him would be the equivalent of holding other past sins against him that he committed in his spiritual infancy, such as greediness or quarrelsome behavior.

These truths need to be routinely emphasized in order to counter a legalistic mindset in the body of Christ that looks upon divorced people as second-class citizens who have committed the only unpardonable, unforgivable sin. Sadly, one writer refers to divorced believers as those being "a part of the garden of God—in the shadow."⁸³ Such a mentality is a far cry from what is found in the pages of the New Testament, which teaches that all believers are "sons of light" (Eph 5:8), are contributing ligaments to Christ's body (Eph 4:16), and have been given a spiritual gift for the common good of the church (1 Cor 12:7).⁸⁴

MONOGAMY

This view interprets 1 Timothy 3:2 as a disqualification of men from eldership who are married to more than one woman at a time. Such a restriction would bar bigamists as well as polygamists. The rationale behind the view is that a man who is married to multiple women is obviously not a husband of one wife. Hiebert⁸⁵ and Robertson⁸⁶ are advocates of this position. One of the arguments favoring the view is that "the emphasis on 'one' wife in the Greek text contrasts with more than one wife."⁸⁷ Another argument favoring the view is that "all the other qualifications listed by Paul refer to a man's *present status*, not his entire past life."⁸⁸

83 George W. Peters, *Divorce and Remarriage* (Chicago: Moody, 1970), 32.

84 Glasscock, "The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2," 248.

85 Hiebert, *First Timothy*, 65.

86 Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1933), 4:572.

87 Constable, 36.

88 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 917.

Yet another argument favoring the view is that it was a popular interpretation held by early commentators. For example, Chrysostom in A.D. 407 interpreted 1 Timothy 3:2 as a prohibition against polygamy.⁸⁹ Interestingly, Calvin referred to Chrysostom's view as the best interpretation of the text. According to Calvin:

The only true exposition, therefore, is that of Chrysostom, that in a bishop he expressly condemns polygamy, which at that time the Jews almost reckoned to be lawful. The corruption was borrowed by them partly from a sinful limitation of the fathers, (For they who read that Abraham, Jacob, David and others of the same class were married to more wives than one at the same time, thought that it was lawful for them also to do the same)...polygamy was exceedingly prevalent among them; and therefore with great propriety does Paul enjoin that a bishop should be free from this stain.⁹⁰

White sums up the popularity of the polygamy view among ancient commentators when he notes, "it must be conceded that the patristic commentators ...suppose that it is bigamy or polygamy that is here forbidden."⁹¹

Probably the primary rationale for the view is that polygamy was a common lifestyle in the first century world. Thus, understanding 1 Timothy 3:2 as a prohibition against polygamy best reflects the surrounding culture that the Bible was written in. As indicated in the preceding quote by Calvin, it is generally accepted that polygamy was practiced among the Jews of the ancient world. Jewish historian Josephus says, "For it is an ancestral custom of ours to have several wives at the same time."⁹² Elsewhere, Josephus lists the nine wives that were all simultaneously married to Herod.⁹³ Furthermore, the *Dialogue with Trypho* says, "it is possible for a Jew even now to have four or five wives."⁹⁴ "Rabbinic legislation also regulated inheritance customs and other aspects of polygamy."⁹⁵ Many commentators also believe that polygamy existed among the non Jewish Greek and Roman culture of the day as well.⁹⁶

However, the monogamy view also suffers various weaknesses. First, a similar linguistic structure that is used in 1 Timothy 3:2 is also used in 1 Timothy 5:9. This similarity makes the polygamy view untenable. Kent explains:

More help is found in the phrase of 1 Timothy 5:9 regarding widows as "a wife of one husband." This is the same Greek expression except for the switch of terms. Whatever one means, the other must mean. If 3:2 means polygamy, then 5:9 must mean polyandry. Yet is there any reason to suppose that the prevailing sexual sin of women

89 John Chrysostom, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, ..., on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. James Tweed (Oxford: J. Parker, 1843), 1 Tim 3:2.

90 John Calvin, "Commentaries on the First Epistle to Timothy," in *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. William Pringle. 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 21:77.

91 Newport White, "The First and Second Epistles to Timothy," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 4:112; See Fairbairn's discussion where he lists numerous ancient commentators holding to the polygamy view. Fairbairn, "On the Meaning of the Expression 'Husband of One Wife,' in 1 Tim III. 2, 12, Titus I. 6," 418-19.

92 Flavius Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews," in *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Edinburgh, Scotland: William P. Nimmo, 1867; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997), 17:1.2.

93 Ibid., 17:1.3.

94 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, rev. ed., *Fathers of the Church*, ed. Michael Slusser (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 201.

95 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 917. In footnote 23, Grudem lists the following sources of rabbinic legislation: *Yebamoth* 4:11; *Ketuboth* 10:1, 4, 5; *Sanhedrin* 2:4; *Kerithoth* 3:7; *Kiddushin* 2:7; *Bechoroth* 8:4.

was their having many husbands simultaneously? Were polyandrous women so plentiful that this was the one moral qualification to be considered? It is doubtful that polyandry was practiced at all during those years. Therefore, this viewpoint is rejected as not being the full explanation of the apostle's words.⁹⁷

Second, issuing a prohibition against polygamy for church leaders seems redundant. "A man could not, however, even be a member of a church if he was a polygamist, let alone a leader. If that were all Paul meant it would be an unnecessary obligation."⁹⁸ Third, this view, like some of the previously discussed views, disrespects the over all context of the verse 2. Why should "the husband of one wife" be interpreted as a negative prohibition against a certain type of sexual behavior when all the rest of the criteria in the verse speak of positive characteristics that the candidate is to possess? As previously mentioned, when Paul wants to prohibit a behavior throughout chapter 3, he uses the Greek word μη. Yet Paul does not use this word regarding the "husband of one wife" requirement in verse 2.

Moreover, some of the arguments used to support the view can be rebutted. First, while it is commonly accepted that polygamy was practiced among the Jews, it is debatable how widespread this practice was among the non Jewish Greek and Roman culture. Keener in his New Testament background commentary says, "Polygamy was not practiced in the Roman world outside of Palestine..."⁹⁹ MacArthur offers the following historical explanation for the lack of polygamy in Ephesus: "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."¹⁰⁰ Second, as mentioned earlier, all arguments based on tradition lack persuasiveness because the issue is not what the church has taught but the Scripture itself actually teaches.

MORAL HUSBAND

This view disqualifies any man from the office of elder who has been unfaithful to his wife. Thus, this view places the emphasis upon the positive characteristic of fidelity in the candidate rather than upon his legal married status. The moral husband view has several factors in its favor. First, this view harmonizes well with the context of the chapter, which deals with the candidate's character. Μίας γυναικος is in a genitive relationship with ανηρ. This genitival relationship is one of quality. Thus, the words "one woman" modify the word "man" by attributing to the man a specific type of character. On the other hand, some attempt to explain the genitival relationship between "one woman" and "man" as a genitive of possession or relationship. This understanding would cause the phrase to mean the man has or possesses the woman. However, the category genitive of possession or relationship is unlikely because the two nouns "woman" and "man" lack the article. Dana and Mantey explain:

96 Ibid., 917, n. 23; Fairbairn, "On the Meaning of the Expression 'Husband of One Wife,' in 1 Tim III. 2, 12, Titus I. 6," 428-30; Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 158.

97 Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 127.

98 MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, 104.

99 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1993), 612.

100 MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, 104; For examples of various commentators challenging the notion that polygamy was a widespread practice in the non Jewish first century world see Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 80; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 917; Fairbairn, "On the Meaning of the Expression 'Husband of One Wife,' in 1 Tim III. 2, 12, Titus I. 6," 428; Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 127; Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 416; idem, *You Mean the Bible Teaches That. . .* 55.

Sometimes with a noun which the context proves to be definite the article is not used. This places stress upon the qualitative aspect of the noun rather than its mere identity. An object of thought may be conceived of from two points of view: as to identity or quality. To convey the first point of view the Greek uses the article; for the second the anarthous construction is used.¹⁰¹

In sum, the genitival relationship between the two nouns “one woman” and “man” shows that the man is to have fidelity in his character. This construction harmonizes well with the rest of the attributes given in 1 Tim 3 that also depict the elder’s character.¹⁰²

Second, this view is reflected in the best translation of 1 Timothy 3:2. “Husband of one wife” is not the best rendering of the phrase *μίας γυναικος ανδρα*. A superior translation is “a man of one woman” or “a one-woman man.”¹⁰³ Third, Paul seems to use the similar term ‘wife of one man’ in the same way in 5:9 to describe a faithful wife.¹⁰⁴ As previously discussed, Paul cannot mean in 5:9 that widows have never been remarried. Why would he tell younger widows to remarry (5:14) if he knew that this might disqualify them from financial assistance in their later years? Paul’s point is that widows must have been faithful to their husbands to qualify for financial assistance. Paul uses the similar term “a man of one woman” in the same way in 1 Timothy 3:2.

Fourth, this view takes into consideration how Paul issues a prohibition elsewhere in the surrounding context. As previously discussed, when Paul wants to prohibit a certain behavior elsewhere in chapter three he utilizes the Greek word *μη*. Because *μη* is not found in 1 Timothy 3:2, Paul is not prohibiting something in this verse. Rather, he is emphasizing a positive attribute or character trait. Thus, the moral husband view best harmonizes with 1 Timothy 3:2 because the view emphasizes the positive characteristic of fidelity that an elder is to possess rather than negatively prohibiting a behavior. Therefore, the moral husband view fits well with the other six positive character attributes given in verse 2.¹⁰⁵

Fifth, the moral husband view fits well with the cultural context of the epistle. Ephesus was known for its promiscuity because of the prostitution taking place in the Temple of Diana. “In a culture where men frequently cohabitated with more than one woman, Paul needed it very clear that an elder in the church was to be a ‘one-wife man’—loyal to her alone.”¹⁰⁶ Sixth, according to Saucy, “in placing an emphasis upon the positive characteristic of a faithful husband rather than simply upon the legal married status, this understanding actually exalts the requirement.”¹⁰⁷ Saucy further explains:

While there are men who have been barred from eldership who on the basis of this interpretation should be permitted to occupy this position, there are others now serving as pastors or elders who under this understanding of being characteristically a one-woman man should be disqualified. Legally as far as their married state is concerned

101 H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1957), 149.

102 Glasscock, “The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” 249-51.

103 Ibid., 249.

104 Constable, 37.

105 Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, 581-82.

106 Gene Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 105.

107 Saucy, “The Husband of One Wife,” 239.

they are husbands of one wife, but their actions and attitudes demonstrate that they are not truly one-woman men.¹⁰⁸

On the other hand, the moral husband view is not without its criticisms. However, most of the criticisms raised against the view seem answerable. First, some contend that Paul could have simply said “faithful to one wife” if that is all he meant.¹⁰⁹ However, as previously discussed, the best translation of 1 Timothy 3:2 is “one-woman man.” In comparison to the other views, the moral husband view is most consistent with this translation. Second, it is possible to argue, “since God commanded all Christians to be morally pure Paul must have meant more than this here.”¹¹⁰ However, God also desired all Christians to possess all of the attributes given in 1 Timothy 3 as well. Yet these other characteristics still serve as valid criteria for disqualifying an elder. Similarly, although God expects all believers to be morally pure, the “one woman man” requirement still serves as a valid requirement that an elder is to possess. In sum, it appears that the moral husband view is the one that best takes into account all of the biblical data. However, there still remains two variations of the moral husband view that need to be addressed.

Faithful in the Past

The first variation of the moral husband view is that the candidate for elder must prove himself not only faithful to his wife in the present but in the past as well. When speaking of past faithfulness, proponents of this position mean that a candidate must have been faithful to his wife either all his life or since his conversion. Kent argues for faithfulness throughout the entire duration of all of the candidate’s life¹¹¹ while Saucy argues for faithfulness since conversion.¹¹² Several rationales are offered to buttress the faithful in the past position. First, “Paul must have had the man’s record of behavior in view since the other qualifications require that we take the past into consideration.”¹¹³ Second, because consequences follow sins, the church must take into account past sins that an elder committed.

However, the moral husband view that takes into account past unfaithfulness is problematic. Let us first respond to Kent’s view that says the church must take into account unfaithfulness committed prior to conversion. First, as discussed earlier, all of a man’s preconversion sins are forgiven when he becomes a Christians (1 Cor 6:9-11). Thus, for the church to take these sins into account is to marginalize the cleansing power of Christ’s blood. Second, if pre conversion unfaithfulness is to be taken into account, then virtually no one could ever qualify for elder. Making faithfulness a requirement applicable to unbelievers logically requires making all of the requirements given in 1 Tim 3 applicable to unbelievers as well. Certainly no unbeliever could meet all of the criteria given in this chapter. Most of the Ephesian converts were characterized by former lifestyles of sexual deviance. According to Lenski:

In those days...there were no seminary graduates awaiting calls. The bulk of the membership from which the elders had to be chosen had come from paganism...There was the regular institution of the *hierduoloi*, pagan temple prostitutes; the common custom of having *hetaerae*...girls from noncitizen families who were used by unmarried and by married men; and thus by these standard practices, all the rest of the vileness that

108 Ibid., 238-39.

109 Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul's First Epistle to Timothy*, 127.

110 Constable, 37.

111 Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 129-30.

112 Saucy, “The Husband of One Wife,” 229-40.

113 Constable, 38.

formed the soil from which these grew. Converts to the gospel did not at once step into perfect sexual purity.¹¹⁴

Thus, based upon this background, if the Ephesian church had insisted on faithfulness prior to conversion, it probably would have had no elders at all.

There are similar problems associated with Saucy's view that seeks to take into account a candidate's entire post conversion record. First, applying the "one-woman man" requirement to a candidate's entire post conversion record logically requires that all of the criteria given in chapter 3 also applies to a candidate's post conversion record. Thus, if a new believer evidences any greed or argumentativeness (1 Tim 3:3), then he is automatically barred from ever serving as an elder. Because such a standard is obviously unrealistic, the qualifications must pertain to the believer's present character at the time he is considered for the office of elder. Second, to hold believer's past unfaithfulness against him is to deny the possibility of progressive sanctification in his life.¹¹⁵ Even if a new believer is unfaithful to his wife, enough time could pass allowing the Lord to work in his life so that it is conceivable that infidelity is no longer part of his character at the time he is considered a candidate for elder.

Present Character of Fidelity

The second variation of the moral husband view is that "the man must be a faithful husband now even though he may have been unfaithful in the past."¹¹⁶ Proponents of this position include Guthrie,¹¹⁷ Hendricksen,¹¹⁸ Lenski,¹¹⁹ Getz,¹²⁰ and Fee.¹²¹ This view is ultimately the most attractive because it harmonizes well with the context of the passage. Smith observes that all of the criteria given in 1 Tim 3 pertain to the candidate's present condition.¹²² Thus, "this interpretation is consistent with the other qualifications for elders all of which deal with the man's present condition."¹²³

Despite the contextual support for this view, it is not without its detractors. However, much of the criticism leveled against the view is answerable. First, some argue that an honest determination of one's possession of the requisite characteristics cannot be satisfactorily accomplished unless the church is able to look at a candidate's total record. For example, how can the church determine if he manages his household well (1 Tim 3:4-5) unless the church can examine his entire domestic pattern rather than just his present circumstances?¹²⁴ In response, the church is

114 Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, 580-81.

115 Jay Smith, "Can Fallen Leaders Be Restored to Leadership?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (October-December 1994): 463.

116 Constable, 37.

117 Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series (London: Tyndale Press, 1964), 80.

118 William Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 121.

119 Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, 580-82.

120 Gene Getz, *The Measure of a Man* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1974), 28-30.

121 Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 80-81.

122 Smith, "Can Fallen Leaders Be Restored to Leadership?," 461-65, 78.

123 Constable, 37.

124 Constable, 37.

permitted to look at past events as long as they serve the purpose of determining what his present character is. However, the church steps beyond its biblical guidelines once it holds a past sin against a candidate regardless of his present character.

Second, others argue, “a presently faithful elder may have established a record of previous unfaithfulness that would make him a bad example as an elder.”¹²⁵ If the Ephesian church had taken this criticism seriously, they would have never selected any elders because most of the initial Ephesian converts came out of licentious backgrounds. Third, because consequences follow sins, others similarly fear that the church will suffer unneeded embarrassment if a candidate’s past unfaithfulness is not taken into account. However, once again, how would the early church have selected any elders if this had been Paul’s intent?

Fourth, others reject this view on the basis that it lowers the high standards for the office of elder. However, to this assertion, Saucy responds, “this argument assumes that the bars should be up in the first place. If bars have not been erected by the Word, we have no right to erect them. Removing previously erected bars, if this is the case in this position and if they are not demanded by Scripture, would not be wrong.”¹²⁶ By going beyond what Scripture says, even for the noble purpose of erecting a high moral standard for Christian leadership, believers become no different than the Pharisees who elevated human tradition above the Word of God (Mark 7:13). Christians must also keep in mind that God looks unfavorably upon those who add to His word (Rev 22:18-19).

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined various interpretations of the phrase “husband of one wife” found in 1 Timothy 3:2. After examining the merits and deficiencies of each approach, it was concluded that the best interpretation is to translate the phrase “a one woman man” and to view the phrase as requiring fidelity in the character of a candidate for the office of elder. Thus, this phrase does not deal with the candidate’s legal married status but rather pertains to fidelity as part of the candidate’s character at the time he is considered for the office. Although it is acceptable for the church to examine the candidate’s past sins in order to ascertain the content of his character, it is inappropriate for the church to use 1 Timothy 3:2 as a basis of holding a candidate’s past sins against him in isolation of his current character. The church can best maintain balance in this area by following Paul’s intent behind 1 Timothy 3:2 rather than by adding to what Paul said even for the noble purpose of maintaining high standards for church leadership.

125 Ibid.

126 Saucy, “The Husband of One Wife,” 239.

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